

The Life  
of John Baptist de La Salle,  
Founder of the Institute  
of the Brothers  
of the Christian Schools

A Biography in Three Books

Book One



Frontispiece from the 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*, an engraving by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger which is now lost. (Émile Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)

The Life of  
John Baptist de La Salle,  
Founder of the Institute  
of the Brothers  
of the Christian Schools

A Biography in Three Books

Book One

Jean-Baptiste Blain

Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC

Edited by Luke Salm, FSC

Lasallian Publications  
Christian Brothers Conference  
Landover, Maryland

# Lasallian Publications

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*The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the  
Brothers of the Christian Schools; A Biography in Three Books*  
is a translation of books one, two, and three of  
*La Vie de Jean-Baptiste de La Salle,*  
*Instituteur des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*  
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**Cover:** detail (reversed) of a portrait of John Baptist de La Salle, an engraving  
by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger, frontispiece, 1733 edition  
(Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)



The editor is pleased  
to dedicate this revised translation  
to Augustine Loes, FSC,  
in gratitude for  
a life-long association,  
crowned in the Buttimer Institute  
and Lasallian Publications  
by a collaborative search  
for the mind and heart of  
John Baptist de La Salle

## Lasallian Publications

Sponsored by Christian Brothers Conference (the Regional Conference of Christian Brothers of the United States of America and Toronto), Lasallian Publications will include nineteen volumes on the life, writings, and work of John Baptist de La Salle (1651–1719), Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and on the early history of the Brothers. These volumes will be presented in two series.

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*The Conduct of the Christian Schools.* Translated by F. de La Fontaine-rie and Richard Arnandez, FSC. Edited with notes by William Mann, FSC. Volume 6 (1996) of Lasallian Sources: The Complete Works of John Baptist de La Salle.

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*John Baptist de La Salle: Two Early Biographies.* Dom François-Élie Maillefer, OSB, and Brother Bernard, FSC. Original translations by William J. Quinn, FSC; revised translations with notes by Donald C. Mouton, FSC. Edited by Paul Grass, FSC. Volume 1 (1996) of Lasallian Resources: Biographies of John Baptist de La Salle by His Contemporaries.

*The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; A Biography in Three Books.* Jean-Baptiste Blain. Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC. Edited by Luke Salm, FSC. Volume 2 (2000) of Lasallian Resources: Biographies of John Baptist de La Salle by His Contemporaries. Book One, Book Two, and Book Three of the original work by Blain are published in separate bindings but with continuous pagination.

## **Lasallian Resources: Early Documents**

*John Baptist de La Salle: The Formative Years.* Luke Salm, FSC. Volume 1 (1989) of Lasallian Resources: Early Documents.

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## **Lasallian Resources: Current Lasallian Studies**

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*So Favored by Grace: Education in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle.* Edited by Lawrence J. Colhocker, FSC. Volume 2 (1991) of Lasallian Resources: Current Lasallian Studies.

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*Sacred Scripture in the Spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.* Luis Varela Martínez, FSC. Translated by Francis Vesel, FSC. Edited by Donald C. Mouton, FSC. Volume 5 (2000) of Lasallian Resources: Current Lasallian Studies.



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## FOREWORD

Almost immediately after the death of John Baptist de La Salle in 1719, the superiors of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, with a view to a biography, began to collect documents, including some in the Founder's own hand, and testimonies from the Brothers and those who knew him. Brother Timothée, the second Superior General, at first entrusted these materials to Brother Bernard, a man in his early twenties, to organize into a biography. The young Brother proved unequal to the task, and only a part of his work remains, and that only in manuscript form. Meanwhile, in 1723, the Founder's nephew, Dom François-Élie Maillefer, had completed his own version of the life of his uncle, and this likewise long remained unpublished.<sup>1</sup>

The first published biography of the Founder was the work of Canon Jean-Baptiste Blain, a friend from De La Salle's later years and at one time ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers in the archdiocese of Rouen. Commissioned by the Superior to write the official biography, Blain had at his disposal all of the documents that had been collected, as well as the manuscript of Bernard and a copy of Maillefer's work. Blain's biography was first published in Rouen in 1733, and it is the text of that first edition which is presented here in translation.

Jean-Baptiste Blain was born in 1674 at Rennes, in western France. After studies at the Jesuit College in Rennes, where Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort was a classmate, he entered the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris. Ordained in 1670, he was appointed a canon of the diocese of Noyon, where Claude-Maur d'Aubigné was soon to become bishop. When D'Aubigné became archbishop of Rouen in 1708, he brought Canon Blain with him to serve as his assistant in his pastoral visits.

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1. Bernard's and Maillefer's biographies are included in *John Baptist de La Salle: Two Early Biographies* (Landover: Lasallian Publications, 1996).

Among other pastoral responsibilities in the archdiocese of Rouen, Blain served as inspector of seminaries, pastor of the parish of Saint Patrice, superior of the minor seminary, counselor for several religious communities, and ecclesiastical superior for the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Ernemont, as well as for the Brothers of the Christian Schools. In addition to his life of De La Salle, Blain had also written, in 1722, the life of his friend, Grignon de Montfort, who had recently died. Blain himself died in 1751.

Blain's biography of De La Salle is recognized by historians as an authentic documentary source. For more than one hundred years, it was the only published biography of the Founder of the Christian Brothers in any language. It was not available in English until the Arnandez translation first appeared in offset form in 1985.

The modern reader will undoubtedly find Blain's style difficult at first. He is prone to repetition, digression, exaggeration, extended apologetics, and outmoded rhetorical devices, especially rhetorical questions and exclamations, with little concern for historical accuracy or sequence. He has no problem retelling the same story and placing it in several different historical contexts. He sometimes gets carried away with his subject and advances the narrative well beyond the period he is discussing. At the same time, he projects back into the lifetime of the Founder developments that occurred only after his death, such as the pursuit of papal approval, the vows of religion, and the Bull of Approbation. In the same vein, Blain's ardent anti-Jansenism colors his interpretation of events prior to the controversy generated by the publication in 1714 in France of the Bull *Unigenitus* condemning Jansenism.

In spite of these shortcomings, there is perhaps no better way to immerse oneself in the spirituality and mindset of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century than to read Blain's account. It must be remembered also that the biographer's primary purpose was to illuminate the life, the achievement, and the sanctity of John Baptist de La Salle, with a view perhaps to eventual canonization. The first step in the canonical process requires proof that the "servant of God," as the candidate is called, practiced virtue to a heroic degree. Accordingly, Blain illustrates and expands on the variety of the Founder's virtues in a way that would be effective in convincing the church tribunal in Rome that his practice was indeed heroic.

With a little patience, and perhaps some selective speed reading, the contemporary reader will find in Blain's work much that is indispensable for anyone wishing to understand John Baptist de La Salle, his times, and his educational vision. Blain was a contemporary and

friend of De La Salle and a witness and participant in many of the events reported. He knew and could interview many of the early Brothers. He had the written documents at hand and often quotes them verbatim; he can tell a good story and has an eye for significant detail. For these reasons, a well-produced and accurate English translation of Blain's classic text is long overdue.

The original text is in two quarto volumes, each divided into two books. Volume one begins with four pages, in large type, of a "Letter of Dedication" addressed to the Holy Child Jesus. In the original, this dedication is followed by the *Privilege du Roy*, a formal text constituting royal permission to publish and affording copyright protection. There follows what the author identifies as a *Discours*, that is, a discourse or treatise featuring a vigorous defense of the new communities of Brothers and Sisters teaching in the Christian and Gratuitous Schools, interspersed with historical sections detailing significant moments in the development of catechetics. Blain begins book one of his biography only on page 117 of the original volume one.

Since Blain's introductory material is excessively long, considerably outdated, largely rhetorical in nature, and not part of the life story of De La Salle, it has been omitted in this English volume devoted exclusively to the biography. But since there is much in Blain's introduction that is of historical interest, an English translation has been prepared and, it is hoped, will one day be available in a separate volume serving as an introduction to the main part of Blain's work.

Book one of Blain's biography covers the events in De La Salle's life from his birth to the distribution of his wealth to the poor. Book two, which covers the central portion of De La Salle's life, completes volume one of the original edition.

Volume two of the 1733 edition consists of book three, which concludes the biography proper, and book four, which Blain entitled *His Spirit, Sentiments, and Virtues*. For more than a century, book four has had an independent life in English translation; it has been published separately in a new translation with extensive editing and commentary by Brother Edwin Bannon.<sup>2</sup>

The three individually bound books that constitute the biography are presented here in content and style that are as close as possible to Blain's original. Occasionally, where useful, explanatory material is given in footnotes. In the initial printed edition, the paragraphs are quite long and dense; subheadings occur only in the margins. To

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2. *The Mind and Heart of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1998).



make for easier reading, the paragraphs in this edition have been broken up to some extent, and subheadings derived from the marginal notes in the original have been introduced here and there. In the 1733 edition, the table of contents (found at the back of each book) reproduces the extensive titles given at the head of each chapter. To be more helpful to the modern reader, this edition provides an abbreviated table of contents at the beginning of each of the three books.

Blain uses several devices when he is quoting. Sometimes quotations are set off by quotation marks; sometimes they are in italics. At other times, there are no quotation marks at all, yet he uses the form of direct (“he said,” and so forth), rather than of indirect, discourse. Internal evidence shows that many of these extended quotes may be reconstructed discourses or conversations. As an aid to interpretation, Blain’s usage is duplicated here—quotation marks and italics are preserved where Blain uses them; quotation marks are omitted where he omits them, even in direct discourse. As a rule, Blain does not cite in the text the source of biblical quotations; the few citations that are found in the margins will here be put in footnotes. It should also be noted that Blain is usually quoting from the Latin Vulgate or from a French translation of it that does not always correspond to modern translations based on the Hebrew text.

In the use of clerical titles, there is no exact correspondence between French and English usage. Thus the French use *Monsieur* or simply *M.* to designate both diocesan priests and lay gentlemen. The title *Abbé* was used both for the abbot of a monastery as well as for a diocesan priest. The French usage of *Père* to differentiate priest members of religious orders from diocesan priests is here retained. Once the identity of the persons in the narrative has been established, such titles are often omitted, and only the surname is used.

Blain, following French custom, almost never uses the given Christian name. Thus De La Salle is always *M. de La Salle*, the “pious Founder,” the “servant of God,” the “holy priest,” or some other title, never simply John Baptist. Christian names are also omitted here, except for the rare instances where Blain uses them. He relies on the context to identify the antecedents of the pronouns he uses extensively as the subjects of his sentences. That usage is preserved here.

It is hoped that these efforts to reproduce in English as much as possible of the style and the feel of Blain’s work will give English-speaking scholars more direct access to this invaluable source for Lasallian studies.

Luke Salm, FSC, editor  
15 May 1999

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This translation of the biography itself—books one, two, and three, bound individually—is the work of Richard Arnandez, FSC, of De La Salle Institute, Lafayette, Louisiana. Hilary Gilmartin, FSC, was the editor for the offset publication in 1985, with Richard Rush, FSC, as principal reader and Patrick Walsh, FSC, as proofreader. For this present edition, Fred Dillenberg, FSC, and Bernard Richard, FSC, rendered exceptional services in computerizing the text to facilitate the editing process. The preliminary editing was begun by Francis Huether, FSC; Luke Salm, FSC, completed the editing process. The initial stages of the publication process were set in motion by William Quaintance, FSC, at the time Director of Publications for the Christian Brothers Conference. Final copy editing and supervision of the publication have been in the capable hands of Paul Grass, FSC, who succeeds as Executive Director of Lasallian Publications. The editors are grateful to him and to the Brother Visitors, who constitute the Christian Brothers Conference, for their financial support, as also to the staff of Saint Mary's Press for the fine appearance of the finished product.

# BOOK ONE

LA VIE  
DE MONSIEUR  
JEAN-BAPTISTE  
DE LA SALLE,  
INSTITUTEUR  
DES FRERES DES ECOLES  
CHRETIENNES.

LIVRE PREMIER.

*Où Monsieur DE LA SALLE est représenté aux Enfants & aux jeunes Gens, comme un Modèle des Vertus de leur âge ; aux Clercs, comme un Miroir de l'Esprit Ecclésiastique ; aux Prêtres, comme une Image de la Sainteté Sacerdotale.*

*L'innocence & la pureté des mœurs de son premier âge & de sa jeunesse : Enfant Chrétien, Ecolier pieux, Clerc fervent, Prêtre zélé ; il est un Modèle de Vertus dans tous ces âges & dans tous ces états différens.*

CHAPITRE PREMIER.

*Sa Naissance, son Enfance & son Education.*

**R**EIMS en Champagne, Ville autrefois si féconde en Saints & en grands Hommes, a eu la gloire de donner dans ces derniers tems naissance à Monsieur D<sup>x</sup> LA SALLE. Son pere, d'une famille des plus distinguées, y remplissoit avec lumière & avec probité la Charge de Conseiller au Présidial ; Madame, sa mere issuë de la famille de Brouillet, encore plus recommandable par sa piété que par sa Noblesse, avoit soin de cultiver dans une éducation

# BOOK ONE

*In this book, Monsieur de La Salle is represented to children and young people as a model of the virtues appropriate to their age, to clerics as a reflection of the ecclesiastical spirit, and to priests as an image of sacerdotal holiness; the innocence and moral purity of his infancy and early years; a Christian child, a devout scholar, a fervent cleric, and a zealous priest, he is a model of virtue at each of these stages of his life and in all of these different occupations.*

## CHAPTER I

*His birth, childhood, and education.*

The city of Reims, in the province of Champagne, birthplace in the past of so many saints and other great persons, has been honored in more recent years by the birth of Monsieur de La Salle. His father, who belonged to a very distinguished family, occupied the position of councillor of the presidial court of the city and fulfilled his duties with probity and prudence. His mother was of the Brouillet family, noted even more for its piety than for its nobility. She took care to cultivate in a retired and edifying life those virtues which shrink from exposure to the world and run the risk of being compromised in it.

The subject of this biography was the eldest of the seven children with which this marriage was blessed. God took his full share, because from among the five boys and two girls, four consecrated themselves to his service. One daughter entered the convent of Saint-Étienne-les-Dames; one of the sons joined the Canons Regular of Saint-Généviève and eventually became prior of that monastery; two other

sons devoted their lives to the Church as diocesan priests, and both eventually served as members of the Chapter of Canons of the illustrious metropolitan church of Reims.

One of these latter was Monsieur de La Salle, born on 30 April 1651. He received baptism that same day, the godparents being Monsieur Jean Moët de Brouillet and his wife, Madame Perrette Lespagnol, maternal grandfather and grandmother. They gave him the name John Baptist, a prophetic one which seemed to foretell that this child would give the seventeenth century a striking example of an innocent and penitential life.

### His childhood bent

From the cradle he seemed to have been singled out by grace, which appeared determined to make of him one of its masterpieces. In him nothing childish could be observed. Young as he was, he showed no inclination to what usually appeals to children. He preferred serious occupations, and in all he did, he showed few of the preferences so marked in childhood.<sup>1</sup> His amusements, if such they can be called, were directed toward virtue, and piety—which in most of us is a late-maturing fruit of grace—appeared in him even before the use of reason. He was devout without mannerisms; he took pleasure in prayer and in reading good books.

His attraction to the ecclesiastical state appeared early, even in his pastimes. He enjoyed arranging chapels, decorating little altars, singing hymns, and imitating religious ceremonies. Other amusements meant little to him. Although he was born with a cheerful and good-natured disposition, he felt little inclination for the diversions usually preferred by children of his age. To please him, one had only to present to him some pious object or other connected with God and his Church. He showed this attitude very clearly one day when his father's house rang with mirth and festive rejoicing. Instead of taking part, he found in his heart no satisfaction in it. To ease the boredom he felt, he approached one of the adults present and asked her to read to him from the lives of the saints, declaring at the same time how little he was interested in the festivities that were going on.

From his earliest years, the parish church was, so to speak, his only interest. He enjoyed going there; his delight was there and nowhere else. His dearest friends were those who took him by the hand to lead him thither. Once he knew the way and was old enough to go

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1. Tobit 1:4.

out by himself, he used to request permission to pay visits to the church as a great favor, the only one that corresponded with his inclinations. To visit the church more often, he would steal away from his companions, turning aside from their games and sports. Abandoning their company, he would go, all alone, *to the Lord's temple to adore the Lord God of Israel.*<sup>2</sup>

Filled with respect and reverence for this holy place, he already showed that recollected air, that religious attitude, which later on made him so distinguished looking and so venerable when he approached the altar. Since it was neither curiosity nor light-mindedness that drew him to church, he occupied himself there with prayer and the thought of God. His modest appearance, which his youthfulness enhanced and which lent added charm to his natural beauty, drew all eyes to him. All those who observed him at such times thought he looked like a little saint. The sight inspired devotion in those who usually experienced little of it. The other worshipers, so agreeably surprised and edified to see so much piety in such a tender youth, might have said with admiration, *What, think you, shall this child be, for the hand of the Lord is with him?*<sup>3</sup>

### His attraction to God's service

Everything he saw in church charmed him; he liked all of it. Everything there impressed his mind and heart. He was never tired of seeing what went on; he wanted to learn about everything. His questions concerning all he beheld were pertinent, and he wanted instructive answers. If anyone brushed his queries aside or delayed to reply, his gracious manner insisted in such a pleasant way that it would be difficult for anyone to resist.

Although everything he witnessed in church charmed his heart, it was the celebration of holy Mass that attracted him most strongly and most obviously. This led him to want to learn how to serve Mass. Eager to acquire this sacred knowledge, he was in a hurry to receive the lessons he needed, which he quickly put into practice. He was not satisfied with being a mere spectator at Mass. He longed one day to be its minister. He delighted in serving holy Mass, and it was a painful sacrifice for him to have to miss doing so even for a single day.

To secure what he desired, he applied for admission among the altar boys, and he fulfilled his duties with such extraordinary grace and

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2. Tobit 1:5.

3. Luke 1:66.

fervor that those present were ashamed to see a child show a devotion which surpassed their own. The sentiment of religious awe required of those who approach the sacred mysteries, the grace which is part of the true clerical spirit, was given to him even at this early age to prepare him to acquit himself, later on, of the tremendous ministry to which he was called, with that depth of religious feeling and of piety which faith in God's presence inspires.

### His modesty and reverence in church

This respectful reverence always accompanied him when he entered holy places, and he inspired others with like sentiments. It was especially in the sanctuary that he seemed filled with this reverential awe. His attitude was so serious and devout that when later he was exercising his priestly functions, an observer might have thought him a seraph in human form. Never did he grow complacent at the altar, even though once he was ordained he approached it daily in order to celebrate the divine mysteries. Each day saw his preparation grow more thorough, his faith and his reverence, the sentiment of his own unworthiness, and his fervor and love grow more profound.

In him such desirable dispositions were not the slow and gradual result of reading the works of the ancient Fathers, of deep reflection on the sanctity of the priesthood, or of the sublimity of the mysteries accomplished on the altar. They were, rather, the advance effects of prevenient grace, which filled him with respect, reverence, and desire for everything pertaining to the priestly ministry as soon as the maturing of his mind allowed him to acquire a sufficient understanding of these things. When he served at the altar, he already appeared as what he would himself be, later on, when celebrating Mass: an angel, a true cherub. His visage shone with a chaste beauty. Because he shared the purity of the heavenly spirits, he seemed to have been given a reflection of their radiance and beauty.

### His dislike for secular amusements

Parents seem to live again in their children. Along with their blood, they usually share their own inclinations with those they bring into this world. Since it is natural for children to show the same likes and dislikes as their parents, when the opposite happens, everyone finds it rather strange. It was, therefore, surprising that as a child, De La Salle did not in the least inherit his father's fondness for music. He might have been so inclined had grace not inspired him with other



preferences. Perhaps grace suppressed this tendency in him from birth and turned his taste in a different direction, inspiring him with aversion for, and even fear of, a pleasure which, while innocent enough in appearance, can offer dangers and sometimes wounds the soul while flattering the ear.

The young De La Salle did not care to store up in his memory songs of which it is better to be ignorant than to know and which it is more appropriate and more difficult to forget than to learn. His was not the kind of character which would allow his sensitive soul to be exposed to the harmful impressions produced by those worldly airs which can only enervate the hearts of those who sing them or listen to them. His preference was for the chants of the Church. Since praising, blessing, and loving God was to be his eternal and unique occupation in heaven, he desired to have no other on this earth. Indeed, insofar as it depended on him, he had no other. From an early age, he became very assiduous in attending the Divine Office, and even before he became a canon—which happened early in his life—he had begun when still hardly more than a child to perform the functions of a canon.

His father, who was a deeply convinced Christian, was pleased to observe these natural dispositions for virtue in his son. Far from trying to oppose them, as worldly fathers sometimes do, he sought to cultivate them with care. Hoping to nourish them and cause them to develop, he often took the boy with him to church. Delighted to be able to satisfy his own religious duties and at the same time to favor his son's religious inclinations, he took pleasure in assisting at the Divine Office with him.

His mother, endowed with an even more sensitive piety, sought to sow the seeds of virtue in his youthful soul and had the satisfaction of seeing them germinate and grow beyond her fondest expectations. Thus his father and his mother, taking pains to train this young Samuel beneath their very eyes, had the joy of seeing him grow *in grace and in wisdom before God and men*, if I may be permitted to apply to him the words the Gospel uses when speaking of the child Jesus.

### His early studies

When the time came to start his formal education, he was placed in the hands of tutors capable of instructing him in human learning. After this, he was sent to the college of the University of Reims, where he spent the first years of his studies. There he showed himself a model for the other students and a subject of satisfaction for his teachers.

His progress in knowledge kept pace with his advancement in virtue, for he always considered it an essential duty to combine the two and never to separate study from his efforts to acquire piety.

In his case, application to course work did not, as so often happens, lead to a diminution in his spirit of devotion, nor did his devotion interfere with his application to study. Thus both God and his teachers were pleased with him, because he was always himself. Devout without being affected, cheerful without being frivolous or giddy, he made himself agreeable to all and won their affection. Wisdom, docility, and piety were the three guardians of his innocence and the three characteristic traits of his youth. These precious virtues, coupled with his gentle and gracious air, won for him the hearts of his teachers and the esteem and respect of his companions, who considered him as their model. He was indeed the paragon of students. We shall see him become the pattern of youthful clerics.

## CHAPTER II

### *His entry into the clerical state and his reception into the illustrious corps of the Canons of the Cathedral of Reims.*

Young De La Salle, like a new Samuel, seemed to have been born for the sacred ministry. He was made for the Church. Indeed his greatest ambition was to consecrate himself to her service. His vocation appeared evident in all his actions, inclinations, pastimes, and interests. Everything about him proclaimed that he was destined for the service of the altar. Even his childhood amusements pointed the same way. As he grew older, this call became more and more imperious. With time, it sounded so strong and clear that he felt he would have been resisting God's voice had he delayed any longer in asking for the tonsure.<sup>4</sup>

He counted on his parents' piety not to raise any objections to this, and in fact they did not. His vocation was written on his brow, so to speak, and had been from the cradle. It had become so obvious in all his behavior that to oppose it would have been to defy the will of heaven. If his parents had been allowed to choose the holocaust which they were called upon to offer God, they would no doubt have

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4. In giving the tonsure, the administering prelate clips a small piece of hair from the crown of the recipient's head, indicating that the recipient is entering the clerical state.

selected another of their children and would have kept the eldest, who is usually the most dearly beloved child, as being the first fruit of their conjugal love. But they did not heed the voice of nature. Grace claimed its full rights and decreed that the most worthy one would be dedicated to God. Nothing could have been more right and proper.

What joy filled his heart when he saw himself free to follow the desires which, ever since he could remember, had urged him to devote himself entirely to God! What happiness was his when he realized that he could enter a state which would enroll him officially in the service of the Church and make of him a man of God! Only souls like his, whom God leads by the hand, as it were, from their earliest years on the path of greater perfection, can understand and explain what he felt.

### He receives the tonsure

Young De La Salle's reception of the tonsure was no empty ceremony, no merely apparent renunciation of the world, no mere formality of consecration to God, as it is for so many others. His mouth uttered what his heart dictated when he said that he took God for his portion forever and that he desired no other inheritance. *God became the God of his heart*, as the Prophet says, the center of his affections, the sole object of his desires. Before long we shall see him fulfill this promise to the letter by separating himself entirely and solemnly from the world, by giving away all his possessions and becoming poor himself, by resigning his canonry. Let us not anticipate but rather proceed with the stages of his life by following the stages of grace.

Having become a cleric, John Baptist de La Salle seemed to be an entirely different person. His piety, modesty, and innocence of life seemed to acquire new luster once he donned the surplice and was enrolled in the service of the altar. Among the other young clerics, as among his schoolmates, he stood out as an inspiring model. He was a bright torch which the bishop had lighted and placed on a lampstand to give light to the church of Reims and eventually to the whole of France. The young cleric, seeing himself now as a man of God or at least under the obligation of becoming such, was resolved not to bear this title in vain. He exerted himself to deserve it. His more ardent zeal for his clerical functions, his more obvious attraction to the service of the altar, his more constant love for prayer, his edifying assiduity to the Divine Office—all these proved that he had indeed *laid aside the old man and put on the new, clothed in justice and holiness*, and that these sacred words, which the ordaining prelate had addressed

to him while giving him the tonsure and clothing him with the surplice, had proved truly effective and had found fulfillment in him through the working of the Holy Spirit. His delight in singing God's praises grew daily, and God provided him with an opportunity of satisfying this inclination as fully as possible and of performing as a duty what he had previously carried out by an instinct of grace.

He is appointed canon of Reims at the age of seventeen

On 9 July 1666, when he was around seventeen years old, he was appointed a canon of the metropolitan church of Reims, through the resignation of Monsieur Dozet, archdeacon of Champagne and chancellor of the University, and he took possession of his canonry the following year, on 17 January. His own grandfather, a man of rare piety who had taken upon himself the obligation of reciting the Divine Office daily, insisted on being his instructor and took great pleasure in teaching him how to recite it.

Thus the new canon was now in an important position—on his own, so to speak—at an age when young people only too frequently begin to use their liberty to the detriment of their souls. Born with an inexhaustible fund of pride in himself, man craves independence with all his might. Unceasingly, the young strive to throw off the yoke of their teachers, for they cannot endure either constraint or restrictions. To be their own masters, to be able to do what they want, to follow their own ideas, to act as they see fit, to give in to their inclinations and accede to those of others—such are the natural tendencies of human hearts.

Even those who profess a certain piety are more than willing to make it conform to their own lights and often combine it with their natural likings, innocent as these may be. We like to discover for ourselves the path we hope to follow on the road to heaven. We take pleasure in going only where we choose and in the manner we choose. This temptation is a subtle one; it is easy for a young man who is just beginning to breathe the intoxicating air of liberty to fall victim to it. When young people throw off the yoke of parental authority, they not infrequently reject at the same time the restraints of virtue and duty. Piety is often shipwrecked on this reef, because it has not had time to grow robust.

Seeing oneself a canon, one might think himself emancipated, independent, master of himself, and subject to no other rules than those which he might impose on himself. This is a false notion that many a young cleric might entertain regarding a canon's prebend, which is a

dangerous privilege that many think accompanies the canon's robes and which they feel they have a right to enjoy when they don the insignia. They feel no obligation of any kind. If they do assume some obligations, it is in an arbitrary manner. They tailor them according to their own whims or according to the example of their fellow canons. In this state of life, if a man does labor for the Church, he looks upon this as something optional for which he takes full credit and claims high merit. If he does some service to his neighbor or labors for the salvation of souls, he devotes himself to such work in proportion to his zeal but without making it in any sense obligatory and without applying to himself what Saint Paul said, *Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel!* If such a one prefers to do nothing and lets himself stagnate in ease and idleness, he still imagines that he has fulfilled all his duties and that neither God nor man has anything to reproach him with, so long as he has assiduously attended Divine Office according to the regulations of the chapter.

Still, every age and every state of life has its own special virtues, just as it has its special temptations. Modesty, piety, assiduity to the Divine Office, regularity, study, and a love of work are all virtues which eminently befit young canons and which we cannot too earnestly wish them to possess. Immodesty in church, lack of decorum, undignified manners, idleness, laziness—these are vices which they need to be on guard against more than do other clerics. To avoid succumbing to these failings, they must constantly take precautions not to follow the bad example which they may encounter. Our young canon knew how to protect himself against these dangers by observing with attention those among the canons who were capable of edifying him and of inspiring him with true devotion. He closed his eyes to those whose frivolous manners and lack of modesty might have exerted an evil influence on his own conduct. He profited by the good example he met and ignored the bad. Recollected and serious, he centered all his thoughts on the One whom he had come to praise and glorify. Sharing in the role of the angels, he emulated their modesty, reverence, and piety.

His state of life as a canon consecrated him to the public prayer of the Church. Consequently he strove to practice the virtues that his state requires: separation from the world, retirement, recollection, the cultivation of the interior life. Still, his studies did not suffer because of his new duties. He knew that a canonry, far from being a dispensation from further study, was on the contrary a powerful motive to study all the more. This obligation springs from the rank which canons occupy among the clergy, from the intentions of the Church

herself, and from the practice of the saintliest bishops. If the canons of the cathedral hold first rank in honor among the diocesan clergy, is it not right that they should also hold first place in learning and that they should be leaders not only because of their dignity but also because of their intellectual accomplishments? Such is certainly the mind of the Church, since she considers canons the top-ranking members of the diocesan clergy, the senate, as it were, and the bishop's official counselors. How can they carry out such honorable duties unless they possess uncommon learning?

He applies himself earnestly to his studies

For this reason, the Council of Trent urged that at least two-thirds of the members of cathedral chapters should be men holding doctoral degrees. Saint Charles, for instance, appointed none but doctors in theology to his cathedral chapter, and insofar as they were able, the most illustrious bishops followed his example in this. Only the learned should occupy the first place in a diocese, since only they are capable of rendering it truly outstanding service, of helping by their wise advice the prelates who so often are overburdened with thorny problems and who must decide such very difficult cases. Our young canon, then, went along with the spirit and intentions of the Church, and he pursued his studies with renewed ardor. In fact, he needed learning more than did many others, since Divine Providence destined him to be the Founder of a new congregation of men devoted to instructing the young and teaching Christian doctrine.

At the completion of his course in philosophy, De La Salle received, as was the custom, the degree of Master of Arts. This first step toward the doctorate, which was still a long way off, made him think of pursuing it at the fountainhead of the sciences, the University of Paris. Once he had made up his mind to study at the Sorbonne and to obtain there his licentiate and the doctor's cap, the question remained where he should live in order to succeed in the twofold goal he had set himself: to become a saint and a scholar.

As we all know, while study should help us to acquire virtue and piety, it is often the greatest enemy, the most dangerous obstacle, to progress in virtue. Self-love, which is so inclined to twist everything to its own advantage, is marvelously adept at using a passionate interest in study as a means of extinguishing fervor. Where, then, find a residence where the one would not cause prejudice to the other, where a great determination to acquire knowledge would be combined with an even greater concern for acquiring virtue? Where find a

suitable dwelling for young clerics, a school that had produced savants as well as saints, an academy where both piety and sound doctrine flourished? Such was the sort of place that the young canon was looking for and that his virtuous parents wanted for him.

### He enters the Seminary of Saint Sulpice

It did not take them long to find one. The Seminary of Saint Sulpice, distinguished by all these traits, could hardly have been unknown to them. Consequently, that was where he was sent. Never was there a house of studies where he would feel more at home. There he found the very source of the ecclesiastical spirit, a school of pure virtue where outstanding directors taught their disciples how to hasten after them on the path to perfection and did so more by their example than by their exhortations. There indeed he found himself where he had longed to be.

At this time, Monsieur Tronson headed the group of holy and learned priests who conducted the seminary. This admirable man, considered one of the oracles of the clergy of his day, possessed deep erudition along with rare and surprising insight. To these he had succeeded in joining a depth of humility and simplicity which was even more edifying. His external manner of living, which was very modest, cloaked a profound interior life and an extremely mortified existence. Always detached from his own interests and united with God, Tronson displayed nothing of his merely human traits to those who in great numbers came to consult him. Like an angel—without passion, without natural impulse, always perfectly calm—he found in heavenly wisdom the solutions to the thorniest difficulties and such wise counsels that they seemed dictated by the Holy Spirit. Many remarkable men throughout France, trained under this worthy superior, have given him an outstanding reputation through their conduct and the saintly lives they have led. Bishops, too, and others occupying the highest positions in the Church, after having been his disciples and his spiritual children, considered it a duty to honor him like a father and to follow his advice like that of an oracle.

Such was the superior of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice when the young canon of Reims entered it. God was leading him into paths of which at the moment he had no idea but which would bring him to accomplish the eternal designs of Providence by means as effective as they were simple. In his new residence, God allowed him to meet the greatest masters of the two-fold science he had come to seek. He found there the most powerful means of achieving his purpose and

the most striking examples to encourage him in his pursuit with the greatest ardor. God gave him new angels like Raphael to lead him by the hand to the heights of perfection.

The man whom Divine Providence had chosen to be his spiritual father was a real saint of the first rank, a seraph in a mortal body, a priest of truly apostolic zeal, a man who renewed in his person the austerities of the desert fathers along with their protracted interior prayer and their constant union with God. When I name him, those who knew him will avow that I have not exaggerated and will recognize in the portrait that I have traced the late Monsieur Boüin,<sup>5</sup> the well-known spiritual director of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. The visible signs of his eminent virtue led several of the great prelates who happened to be in the house when he died to beg eagerly for some of the instruments of penance with which he had martyred his body and to treasure them as relics.

Many other saintly souls were trained by that man of God. How many holy priests and fervent ministers did he prepare for the Church of Jesus Christ! How many evangelical laborers, such as Saint Paul described and whom the Church so desperately needs, did he send forth into the Father's vineyard! Under so eminent a master, what progress in virtue must such a disciple have made! Filled from his youth with the choicest blessings of heaven, enrolled in an institution where grace rained down abundantly on the souls of all who sought entry with pure intention and a sincere desire to give themselves to God, he lived in the company of a select group of young clerics of his own age, chosen from all over France, filled like him with fervor, and determined to pursue virtue even more than knowledge. In this school, where he was taught by the most accomplished ecclesiastics of the time, what giant steps in the path of holiness did he make, especially since he had come there with nothing else in mind!

### An exemplary young man in the seminary

From the start, he seemed to be endowed with a gentle nature. Far from drawing down on himself the least reproach or displeasing anyone, he showed himself extremely obliging to all. He set aside everything in his clothing and exterior deportment that might have suggested the airs and maxims of the world. In a word, he showed

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5. More often spelled Baüin. In fact, Baüin served as the Founder's spiritual director in a later period at Vaugirard. Baüin had not yet joined the Sulpicians when De La Salle was a seminarian.



himself very edifying and became the model of the house during the entire time he remained there.

His professors, however, did not fully realize how virtuous their disciple was until several years after he had left the seminary. When he came back to Paris as the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the heroic virtues which they saw him practice, especially his patience when he was disdained, contradicted, and vilified by some who had the ear of his ecclesiastical superiors, made them aware of the striking progress that their former student had made in virtue. Such was the testimony they gave about him at the seminary, where compliments are rare and pronounced only with truly ecclesiastical parsimony. Those familiar with the spirit of that holy institution know that the aim of those in charge of the place is to make people holy, not to canonize them ahead of time. If the testimony is short, it is certainly laudatory, and it deserves all the more consideration because the one who issued the statement was the successor of Monsieur Tronson, the late Monsieur Leschassier, a man of uncommon judgment, whose wisdom and eminent virtue were not infrequently praised even by his own worst enemies. This worthy superior spoke little but said much in few words, for all his words counted. Everything that fell from his lips was carefully weighed, full of good sense and of the Spirit of God.

The testimony of Leschassier agrees completely with the verdict of many other ecclesiastics living in various provinces of the kingdom who had lived with De La Salle while he was at the seminary. When they happened to meet some of the Brothers later on, they seldom failed to inquire how he was; they had not forgotten him. After praising him for his virtue, they usually concluded by saying that he had been the model for everyone at the seminary. Anyone who knows what a high degree of fervor reigned there in those days among the young clerics can appreciate the value of this testimony: that De La Salle was the model of all, even of the fervent, in an institution renowned for sanctity—truly, a short but eloquent testimonial!

What rich fruits of virtue would not such a good tree have brought forth, planted in such excellent soil and watered by the dew of heaven, at least if it had had time to plunge its roots deeply into the earth! We would have thought that God, who had brought him to Saint Sulpice and settled him there, would have let him remain for a number of years—time enough to be nourished and fortified—and that he would not have made him leave the place until, like so many others, he had won his licentiate and his doctorate and had acquired a full measure of the ecclesiastical spirit.

Such indeed was the desire of De La Salle himself and of his virtuous parents. But oh, the depths of the designs of God! The Most High decided otherwise. He had brought the young canon to Saint Sulpice only to give him a glimpse of what true virtue is, to inspire him with a taste for it, and to sow the seeds of such virtue in his tender heart. God reserved for himself the task of causing these seeds to germinate, of molding the young cleric in secret with his own hands, and of leading him to carry out his eternal decrees by paths sure and straight indeed but obscure, hidden, and unknown to all.

It sufficed for God's plans that De La Salle should spend only a year and a half in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. After that he had to leave to go back to the tumult of the world, where he would find himself taken up with family concerns. He would have to become the guardian of his brothers and sisters when the untimely death of his parents left them as orphans and entrusted them to his care. How incomprehensible are God's ways! It was by this meandering path, by this unlikely road which seemed to wander away from the goal toward which Providence had been directing him, that God would bring him where he wanted him. The deaths of his parents, which called him home from Saint Sulpice, caused him to leave the path of holiness by one gate but helped him re-enter it by another.

### CHAPTER III

*Death of his parents; he leaves the seminary; family duties; he advances in Holy Orders; his determination to seek perfection.*

As long as De La Salle remained at Saint Sulpice, he gave no thought to anything except advancing in virtue and profiting by the examples he saw around him to further his own sanctification. In that holy institution, he was fully occupied by the one thing necessary. Applying himself to study, he applied himself equally to striving after perfection; he made the one promote the other. He had no desire for erudition except insofar as it would make him more useful to the Church.

With ample time to think about his future in a seminary to which a young man goes only in order to give himself entirely to God, he took advantage of his solitude to reflect seriously on his obligations and duties, on the holiness required by his state, and on the perfection it calls for. After deliberating on the question of whether he should

definitively embrace the clerical state and bind himself to it with unbreakable bonds, he was preparing to do this when he learned of his mother's death, which had occurred on 20 July 1671.

This cruel blow for a heart as tender as his did not cause him to interrupt his studies, but it did lead him to delay for some time the pledging of himself to the clerical state. God allowed all this in order to make that resolve all the more solid and pure. De La Salle was to walk on the road to Calvary all the rest of his life, and his mother's death was the first link in the chain of tribulations which were multiplied day after day and ended only with his own death. Almost every day would bring its own sorrow, would be marked by a new cross. He was about to go back to the world, but only so that when he left it again, his departure would be noticed all the more. He returned to the world only to feel its thorns, to experience its nothingness, to despise its vanity, to conceive a greater horror for it, and to divorce himself from it totally, solemnly, and forever.

The death of his father obliges him to leave the Seminary of Saint Sulpice

The wound which the death of his mother had opened in his heart had not had time to heal fully when the news of the death of his father reopened it, making the hurt even deeper and more painful. His father's death occurred some nine months later, on 9 April 1672. It is not difficult to imagine what thoughts occupied this soul so attuned to noble sentiments and endowed with such a rich nature. What a depth of resignation to God's will must he not have needed to bear up under this new trial! No doubt he had to call upon all the reserves of virtue he possessed to endure such cruel losses with peace of heart. It took all the resources of grace that the Seminary of Saint Sulpice could provide in order to console him.

Fortunately, he was in a place where he found in his superiors and directors a tender charity, a fatherly heart, and unfailing kindness. Nevertheless, it soon became necessary for him to go back to Reims, and this need disturbed him more than anything else. Family business, domestic cares, and the responsibility for his orphaned brothers and sisters were calling him. These claims on him forced him to give up what he would have preferred to do. Anyone who possesses the ecclesiastical spirit and loves the sources whence it flows can readily understand the regret that this young cleric felt when he was obliged to interrupt the course of his studies, to leave a house where he felt so happy, and to lose simultaneously such powerful support and such

outstanding examples of clerical perfection. All his own plans were disrupted, but God's were not. Grace accompanied him wherever he went and led him to holiness by other means. He who had entered the seminary with such great joy on 18 October 1670 found himself obliged to say good-bye to it with a like regret on 19 April 1672.

De La Salle departed, however, penetrated with the ecclesiastical spirit, aglow with fervor, and already a perfect man or one who would not long delay in becoming such. "It can be said to the credit of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice," declared the spiritual sons of De La Salle, who so often heard him express his innermost thoughts on this subject and listened to the praise he lavished on this great institution, "that there he acquired the Spirit of God, that from Saint Sulpice he learned the virtues which all through his life shone forth in him with such luster. He always loved that training school for evangelical laborers and never spoke of it except with the warmest expressions of esteem and respect."

He gave proof of this when he returned to Paris to establish his Institute there. He opened his first school in the parish of Saint Sulpice, wishing to draw as near as possible to the place where he had received the first lessons in the true ecclesiastical spirit and where he might easily consult Messieurs Tronson, Bouin, and Leschassier, whose guidance he eagerly sought and whose counsels he considered as law.

He was only twenty-one when he found himself in charge of his father's house, the education of his brothers and sisters, and the affairs of the family. This was a heavy burden for him at this age, but his character was not the kind that makes burdens heavier by useless worry and anxiety. The will of God, which he adored in the action of Providence, helped a great deal to lighten his burden, for the divine will had always been the star which guided his decisions in the obscure night of worldly affairs. Amidst the storms and tempests which these affairs provoke, he kept his mind on an even keel and his heart at peace.

Having become his own master at this time, in possession of his paternal heritage and with the option of choosing a career in the world rather than in the clerical state, he was happy to have another chance to reaffirm his prior decision and to acquire new merit before God. He rejoiced in being free only in order to have the satisfaction of ratifying at a mature age, by assuming irrevocable commitments, the consecration to God which he had made in his youth. His heart had made that choice early in life; grace had inspired it; a very obvious vocation had determined it; nothing henceforth was capable of causing him to change his mind or to unsettle a resolve which his stay at Saint Sulpice had so powerfully confirmed.

Still, in a matter of such importance, he did not wish to follow his own lights exclusively. He had learned the lessons of Saint Sulpice too well to heed any other voice but that of obedience. In the seminary, he had noticed that most of the young clerics presented themselves for ordination only with fear and trembling and in tears and that they did so only after receiving from their superiors and directors the recommendation to go ahead. He knew that it was from the bishop or his representative that we should hear the words, *Friend, go up higher*.

### He places himself under the guidance of Monsieur Roland

He was fully accustomed to the Sulpician practice of not doing anything without permission and of sanctifying the least actions by performing them through obedience; therefore, he took care not to proceed on his own initiative in a matter of such supreme importance. Filled with these convictions but no longer being a seminarian, he looked about for a man endowed with the spirit of Saint Sulpice to become his spiritual director. He found one in Monsieur Roland,<sup>6</sup> a canon like himself and the theological preacher of the cathedral of Reims. This zealous canon, whose piety was as solid as it was enlightened, was involved in many good works; he did not limit himself to being present in the choir nor to the minimum of a canon's duties. He had great talent and made good use of it for the glory of God and the salvation of his neighbor. During his life he enjoyed an outstanding reputation in Reims, and after his death his memory was held in benediction, especially among the Sisters whose Community he founded under the patronage of the Child Jesus. These Sisters conducted Gratuitous Schools for girls in the various quarters of the city and also gave a Christian education to impoverished orphan girls.

Having chosen Roland to be his visible guardian angel, De La Salle abandoned himself completely to his direction. No doubt, in thus turning to the chapter's theological preacher, he had no idea of the designs of Providence in his regard. They were, however, beginning to make themselves felt, leading him by this choice into God's purposes in his regard. In fact, the spiritual son in a short time fell heir to the zeal that his spiritual father displayed and to the good works he directed. Furthermore, the educational enterprise of Monsieur Roland, excellent though it was, was only a rough sample of what Providence

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6. Nicolas Roland (1642–1678) was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 16 October 1994.

wished to bring into being through De La Salle, for the latter's zeal was not to be limited to the city of Reims but was destined to produce its effects throughout France.

*He will become great before the Lord*

Roland did not know all this either. If he had known what manner of man was this young canon whom God had sent him to direct and what destiny awaited him, he would have honored the master in his young disciple and would have considered himself a child, compared with this hero among men who was to make such giant strides in the path of evangelical perfection and to establish throughout France, despite all the antagonism of men and all the efforts of hell, the Christian and Gratuitous Schools.

Guided no doubt by some supernatural insight, Roland beheld in De La Salle the man who would succeed him in the direction of the undertaking he himself had begun. Because zeal for Christian doctrine was the director's overriding concern, he tried by all means to make his disciple share it. This was the usual subject of their frequent conversations. It was, then, under the direction of this excellent guide that De La Salle began to develop a taste for the instruction of young people. It was from the depths of the older canon's zeal that the younger canon developed his first enthusiasm for the Christian and Gratuitous Schools which fortunately he established throughout the kingdom.

He receives the four minor orders and the subdiaconate

Since Roland's virtue deserved De La Salle's total confidence, it also warranted his total obedience. Following the orders of his director, De La Salle delayed no longer in fixing himself definitively in the clerical state by assuming perpetual obligations. Because there were no ordinations in Reims just then, he was obliged to go elsewhere for the ceremony. First he went to Laon, then to Noyon, and finally to Cambrai, where the four "minor orders"<sup>7</sup> and the subdiaconate were conferred on him at Pentecost 1672.

What did Jesus Christ bring about in his heart on this momentous occasion? What treasures of grace did he bestow on such a pure and well-prepared soul? That is something we do not know. His memoirs

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7. In fact, the four "minor orders" of porter, lector, acolyte, and exorcist had been conferred on De La Salle four years earlier, in March 1668, by the bishop of Soissons in the palace of the archbishop of Reims.

do not tell us anything about a point of such importance. Still, if the man of God kept shrouded in deep silence all that the Holy Spirit wrought in his soul on that day, the rest of his life reveals clearly enough what happened. It shows us that this reception of sacred orders was not sterile in gifts from God and that the heroic virtues which he so often displayed later on were the fruits that flowed from it.

De La Salle always retained both the attraction for the Seminary of Saint Sulpice and the intention of returning there to complete his course of studies and to perfect his knowledge of ecclesiastical science. The further he progressed in virtue, the more he was attracted to that residence which provides so many edifying examples, so many means of sanctification, and so much help to attain it. However, the family affairs which kept him in Reims forced him to give up his pious desire and induced him to try to find the means of sanctifying himself in the place where Providence had put him.

To succeed in this, he turned his home into a sanctuary of retreat, study, and interior prayer—I was about to say, into a sort of seminary like Saint Sulpice—and he proceeded to receive from the School of Theology in Reims the degrees that Divine Providence had not allowed him to complete at the Sorbonne. A man of study and prayer, he divided his time between these two occupations, and if he withdrew a few moments from both, it was to devote them to good works. His life was like that of a fervent seminarian of Saint Sulpice and a constant preparation for the diaconate which, on the recommendation of his spiritual director, he received in Paris in 1676.

Without comparing our young deacon with the first of the Church's long line of saintly deacons, I venture to apply to him, with due proportion, the words that the Holy Spirit used in canonizing Saint Stephen: *He was filled with grace and the Holy Spirit*. The modesty, calm, and grace which all who met him observed in Monsieur de La Salle suggested this flattering comparison, and more than once when he ministered at the altar, when he was at prayer, or on other occasions, people might have thought, as people of the time thought of Stephen, that his face was like that of an angel.

## CHAPTER IV

*His preparation for the priesthood; the edifying manner  
in which he celebrates holy Mass.*

De La Salle had yet to receive the priesthood. To prepare himself for ordination, he renewed his efforts to achieve self-discipline and sought to increase his fervor, in order to measure up to the eminent dignity to which he aspired. More complete separation from the world, stricter regularity of life, closer vigilance over himself, more profound recollection, renewed application to study, modesty, devotion, greater assiduity to the canonical Office—such were the virtues which he felt called upon to practice during the two years remaining before his ordination to the priesthood. Could he do too much to prepare himself? Did not a responsibility, fearful even for the angels, and a dignity which those heavenly spirits might well find too weighty, call for the most intense preparation? Who can consider it without awe or come forward to receive it without a shiver of apprehension? One of the holiest priests of this century, the founder and the first superior of the Minor Seminary of Saint Sulpice, used to tell his disciples that they had to be blind when they presented themselves for ordination: either blind through sin and passion or blind through a childlike obedience in which rational analysis has no part.

The man who proposed this maxim<sup>8</sup> had exemplified it in his own life; he had put off his own ordination for many years on account of the most varied pretexts. In the end, only blind obedience succeeded in making him consent, and even then it was with tears, sighs, and groans. As he presented himself for ordination, he could not conceal his terror, much like a man being dragged to the torture, if I may so describe him.

De La Salle is ordained to the priesthood

De La Salle had been brought up with the same convictions and was filled with similar sentiments. He felt the same sort of hesitation and, if I dare say so, the holy and sacred horror with regard to an ordination which, while raising him to the pinnacle of the temple, also exposed him to the furious assaults of the wicked spirit and showed him

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8. A marginal note in the 1733 edition identifies this priest as Monsieur [Antoine] Brenier (the first superior of the Minor Seminary of Saint Sulpice).



the frightful abyss into which he might fall. In spite of all this, he had learned to obey, and obey he did, deferring to the one who took God's place in his regard and whose voice he could not contradict. He was ordained on Holy Saturday, 9 April 1678, at the age of twenty-seven, at the hands of his own archbishop in the metropolitan church of Reims, where he served as a canon. He put no interval between his ordination and his first Mass, because his entire life had been one long preparation for celebrating this awesome sacrifice, while every day for the previous two years, he had been trying to dispose himself for it with ever-renewed fervor. *He knew that every high priest is chosen from among his fellow men and made a representative of men in their dealings with God to offer gifts and sacrifices in expiation for sins.*

Having thus become a priest of the new covenant, De La Salle hastened to fulfill his ministry and to carry out his principal duty, which was to sacrifice the Divine Victim and to offer to God an immolated God. All his life he had felt such a great yearning for this divine function, such an attraction and so much zeal for it, that later on, he never failed to mount the altar to celebrate, except when it was impossible for him to do so. His religious awe, respect, and devotion toward this most august of all mysteries did not keep him away from it. Far from saying Mass only when he was obliged to do so, he looked on the offering of this sacrifice as the principal and essential function of his priesthood and as a daily obligation for himself.

At the same time, to make sure that he would celebrate with grace and benefit, he strove to live in a manner befitting his august functions and in a way which would make him worthy to repeat this sacrifice every day. His eagerness to say holy Mass was equaled only by his concern to say it well. If he made it a rule to celebrate every day, he made it another to do so with a devotion which was renewed daily. For fear that this frequent action might become contaminated with routine and that he might acquire a dangerous familiarity with the altar, he took care to keep the fire of divine charity and the flame of a living and active faith ever burning on the altar of his heart through a life of retreat, mortification, prayer, and recollection. By living in this fashion, he made himself worthy of drawing near to the altar every day.

He says his first Mass in the cathedral

In the cathedral, on the day after his ordination, he celebrated his first Mass with no special fanfare. He wanted it that way in the hope of

maintaining himself in total recollection, in union with God, under the fresh impressions of the grace of ordination, and in full attentiveness to the movements of the Holy Spirit. Such were the reasons which led him to dispense with any special ceremony which on such occasions can constitute a dangerous distraction that enfeebles devotion and turns the mind aside from the concentration required by an action which transcends all else.

What did he look like when saying Mass for the first time? No doubt like one of the seven blessed spirits who forever stand before the throne of God, if one of them were to descend to earth to offer Mass in the shape of a mortal man. Modesty, piety, reverence, and devotion revealed on his face and in all his exterior comportment the impressions made on his soul by the awesome mysteries he was celebrating. The sight would have been capable of inspiring faith in these mysteries even in the most obstinate heretics.

The air of sanctity which he wore on the occasion of his first Mass was not something that he forthwith lost. He never lost it. Its root was within him in the fund of grace and virtues he had acquired, while the presence of the Holy Spirit was its source. This attitude only grew stronger in him with every Mass he celebrated. If all his previous life had been one long preparation for his first Mass, this Mass was a preparation for the second, the second for the third, and so on. Today's Mass prepared him for tomorrow's. To revive faith in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and to feel sentiments of true devotion spring up in the heart, all a person needed to do was to watch the young priest offering sacrifice at the altar. People used to come to his Mass to be edified and touched in order to share in his piety. They were recollected, moved. They felt themselves changed when they witnessed the recollection, the deep respect, the majestic attitude which he displayed while exercising his sacred ministry. They waited for him when he left the altar, in order to profit by the graces which he had received during Mass.

When he had finished his thanksgiving, people laid hold of him, so to speak, as though fearing he might escape. Everyone wanted to consult him and to share the lights he had received. He was like Moses, who drew from his conversation with God a depth of understanding which extended to all who drew near to him. His youth created no obstacle to the confidence which his piety inspired, for even though he was just a young priest, he seemed already to be a saint.

His devotion in celebrating brings people to his Mass and to seek his advice

He possessed the Spirit of God. Everyone was sure of this, especially those who had assisted at his Mass. The result was that he was besieged by persons who came to him to receive from his lips the advice of the Holy Spirit. Like the Lawgiver of the Old Testament, he seemed to be the mildest of men after his periods of deep communing with God. He listened patiently, answered kindly, and seasoned all his words with a grace and unction which helped them penetrate hearts and made them effective for good. In all he said, he sowed the seeds of piety.

Everything he did was marked with the sign of charity. He dispelled people's doubts, resolved their difficulties, and gave them rules for their conduct. He adapted himself to varying personalities; he accommodated himself to differing dispositions; he put up with importunity and even favored the action of grace, despite the defects which usually oppose its action. He possessed the art of drawing souls to God, of finding the key to hearts, and of making divine love enter them. By all this he showed that a priest is never truly inexperienced when he is moved by the Spirit of God. God spoke through him because he spoke incessantly to God and only repeated to the faithful what God had taught him. Such a priest was truly fit to become an instrument of God's greatest designs, the mouthpiece for divine oracles. So he had become a man of God, responsible for human interests before God and of God's interests before the people. Taught by God alone, he knew what he had to announce to the faithful as coming from God. Pleasing to God as he was, he was what he had to be in order that God might listen to him when he pleaded for his fellow human beings.

It frequently happened, however, that when he left the altar after his colloquies with God, De La Salle was not able to begin dealing with people right away; he was so absorbed in the Creator he had just received that he could scarcely turn his attention to anyone or anything else. What a happy obstacle to charity toward one's neighbor! What a desirable impediment to communication with creatures! At such times, he seemed to be so filled with Jesus Christ, who dwelt within him, so recollected and so united with his Divine Guest present within his breast, that he could scarcely make use of his senses. He seemed immobile, his whole exterior seized with a sacred calm, while interiorly he was at liberty to enjoy the presence of his Beloved. A number of persons of high credibility witnessed this.

This sort of ecstasy arose from the captivity which he had imposed on his senses, from the strictness with which he treated his body, and from the habit he had acquired of seeing God alone in all things. He had become accustomed to this manner of living, thanks to his separation from the world, for he had cut off all contact with it, insofar as good manners and the requirements of his domestic obligations allowed. He loved to be alone and shunned appearing in public, but he was never less alone than when in solitude, because he was always with God. No one ever saw him different than his true self: recollected, modest, united to the sovereign Good. He was so quiet and unruffled amidst all the happenings of life that one might have thought that Divine Providence had arranged them all according to his wishes and desires. This death to the senses by which he lived made him all but insensible to the attractiveness of creatures; most sensible objects seemed to be invisible to him. He lived on earth as though he dwelt alone with God, happy to have forgotten all the rest. He was, in one sense, like those lifeless idols adored by the sacrilegious and foolish pagans, of whom the royal Prophet says, *They have eyes and see not, ears and hear not, tongues and speak not*. Or rather, he made use of these faculties only for what related to God. Those ironic words by which the Prophet mocked the gentile gods and underscored their nothingness portray in a most realistic way the attitude of our young priest and serve to reveal the depths of his interior life.

Not that Monsieur de La Salle was able to close his eyes and ears to everything surrounding him or that he lived like a savage, refusing to take part in polite social contacts. He did nothing singular or out of place. Like Jesus Christ, he lived as a man among men and occupied his place in society. But under these external appearances of an ordinary existence, he led another—an extraordinary—inner life, a supernatural, interior, and heavenly existence which maintained him in such great detachment from his senses, in such complete indifference to external things, in such sublime elevation above everything, that we can truly say that he saw without seeing and listened without hearing. Nothing of what he saw or heard made a deep impression on his soul or was able to penetrate the depths of his heart.

When standing at the altar, was he proof against the swarming distractions that even the most virtuous persons have so much trouble fighting off? Having won the mastery over his imagination, could he even constrain it to leave him in peace during the holy mysteries and not to disturb his repose in God? Yes! He himself mentions in his memoirs that he experienced neither the wanderings of a distracted mind nor the illusions of a vagabond imagination. This privilege is

certainly a very precious one, most extraordinary and unusual. What does God not do for those whom he has chosen to render him extraordinary services!

This saintly priest had such an elevated idea of his ministry that he venerated everything relating to it. He wanted everything used in church to be clean and decent. Full of respect for the sanctity of the sacred mysteries, he believed that whatever had any connection with them could not be too rich or magnificent. In this regard, he showed the prodigality proper to the saints. The disappointment he felt when he could not say Mass was equaled only by the satisfaction he felt when he did celebrate it. It took a very serious illness or a real disability to keep him from celebrating Mass, and when this occurred, the privation of not saying Mass made him suffer more than the illness itself. Sometimes he found within himself sufficient strength and courage to satisfy his ardent devotion. More than once, he was seen dragging himself or being led to the altar in order to celebrate Mass and to nourish himself with the bread of life.

He often experiences ecstasy when celebrating

After Communion he frequently fell into deep rapture, and it was in these elevations of his mind and heart to God that he learned to despise the world and acquired a fine disregard for its opinions. Such a lesson he sorely needed to learn, because the task God had in store for him and of which as yet he had no inkling required a man steeled against the attacks of human malignity. Since he was to experience opposition, snubs, scorn, and calumny, since he was destined to endure all that blackest envy can invent, all the poison distilled by evil tongues, all the mockery and malice that the human heart conceals, he needed it from the very beginning of his priestly career. The lofty idea he had of his sacerdotal functions and of the holiness that these require in those honored by this calling was so deeply impressed on his mind that he could not, without feeling wounded, behold other priests profaning their eminent dignity by leading a worldly life. He reproached them with their unbecoming conduct, and this sometimes drew down insults on him. His zeal in castigating these persons seemed exaggerated to worldly minded people.

On one occasion, when the young minister of the Lord gave proof of his zeal by censuring an ecclesiastic who was giving bad example, there was a storm of criticism and a good deal of gossip on the part of those idle people who make slander their habitual occupation and are never inclined to give a verdict in favor of true piety.

De La Salle had tried in every possible way and in the gentlest fashion to make this man realize what he was doing. When he saw that his charitable admonitions were without result, he finally drew the weapons of zeal and showed the delinquent that charity can also be stern. This, however, he did in secret in a personal conversation, as Jesus Christ ordains, for fear of embittering the guilty one and of scandalizing others. This secret rebuke having proved as unavailing as the previous admonitions, De La Salle judged that it was time to bring the matter into the open, so as to do away with an occasion of scandal for others if he could not convert the one giving scandal. He did not succeed in the conversion, but he met with success in removing the scandal. He reprimanded the incorrigible person publicly and with so much energy that the guilty man left Reims, preferring to change his residence rather than his way of living.

## CHAPTER V

*His director proposes that he exchange his canonry with a parish priest in the city of Reims; De La Salle obeys; his virtuous and blind submission on this occasion.*

Noting the progress that his disciple was making in perfection and his great docility to the suggestions made to him, Monsieur Roland resolved to take advantage of these dispositions for a special project he had in mind. The plan, however, did not meet with the success he had hoped for, because apparently the Holy Spirit had not inspired it. Providence prevented the realization of the plan through the opposition of the one person on whose approval success depended and who refused to give it his approbation. Here is what happened. This story shows in its true colors the state of soul of the young canon shortly after his ordination to the priesthood<sup>9</sup> and brings out the detachment, total indifference, submission, and spirit of sacrifice that characterized his life at this time.

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9. In fact, this proposal was made two years before De La Salle was ordained a priest. At the time, lack of priesthood was no obstacle to appointment as pastor of a parish.

Roland suggests that he exchange his canonry for a parish

Seeing his disciple *filled with grace and the Holy Spirit* and endowed with the talents needed in governing souls, along with the strength and courage required for success in the most difficult undertakings, the director thought that a parish would be a more appropriate position for him than a canon's stall and that as a parish priest he would be more useful to the Church than as a member of the cathedral chapter. In so thinking, he seemed to have misjudged or forgotten the scope of the vocation of a canon in the cathedral churches. These men make up the senate of the local church. As the bishop's primary advisers, they should be his first ministers, his most faithful cooperators, men at his disposal to labor under his eyes and by his orders, not in some corner of the diocese, not for the good of a single parish, not for the benefit of a single enterprise, but for the whole diocese, always *ready to undertake all sorts of good works*.<sup>10</sup>

Roland himself was forgetting that principle, since his role as a canon did not limit the exercise of his zeal. It set him free, rather, to undertake many activities and never prevented him from utilizing his talents for the conversion of souls, from spending himself in various enterprises, nor even from undertaking new ones for the greater utility of the Church. Could it have been that in proposing this plan, the theological preacher of the chapter had in view some advantage for his own recently founded Institute? Did he feel that De La Salle, as a parish priest, might be able to further its development more than De La Salle could do as a canon? Be that as it may, the director wished to see his disciple become the pastor of the parish of Saint Pierre in Reims. Hence he suggested to him the idea of exchanging his canonry for that parish. He must have felt quite sure of De La Salle's virtue to make a suggestion of this kind, because it could have been acceptable only to a man dead to everything and ready for any kind of sacrifice.

It is well known how people in general look upon a canonry in Reims and in most provincial cities. To obtain one is the aim of all those whose families destine them for the service of the Church and is the desire of their families as well. Most of the time, their ambitions stop there. A canon's prebend fulfills their highest hopes for an established position. Wealthy people and those of average virtue, who do not care to take a place among the ordinary clergy, feel honored on being offered a place among the canons of the principal churches.

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10. A marginal note in the 1733 edition cites Van-Eipen's dissertation, *De Institutio & Officiis Canonicorum*.

According to the spirit of the world, by proposing that De La Salle should leave his canonry in order to become a parish priest, Roland was suggesting that he come down a step or two in the ecclesiastical world and take a lower place, in order to give the higher spot to another. Could De La Salle have heard such a suggestion without being taken aback, unless he had overcome all sensitivity about points of honor?

### Difficulties with Roland's plan

Considerable opposition arose in connection with the director's plan. The parish of Saint Pierre in Reims was a very extensive one and required a man of mature years and experience, both of which De La Salle lacked. The burden seemed heavier than his youthful shoulders could carry. In addition, he still had the responsibility for his family affairs, for the education of his orphaned brothers and sisters, for the direction of his household. Should he forget the claims which had obliged him to give up a longer stay in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, which he loved so much and which it had cost him such a wrenching pain to leave? Could he combine his pastoral responsibilities with those of his guardianship?

Either Roland had never thought of all this or else he was inspired in a strange way. Of course, it often happens that the Spirit of God suggests various pious plans without intending them to be carried out in fact. Through God's inspiration, David conceived the desire of building him a temple, but by the mouth of Nathan the prophet, God put a stop to the execution of this design while approving it and blessing its originator. Saint Louis made a vow to lead his army to wrest the Holy Land from the power of the Muhammadans, yet his project failed, even though it had certainly been inspired by the Spirit of God.

Perhaps God, who not long afterward was going to demand that De La Salle sacrifice not only his canonry but all his other possessions as well, was using this proposal advanced by Roland to prepare him for total renunciation. God may also have wished to give others a remarkable example of zeal, detachment, Christian simplicity, and docility in the person of the young canon. It is even possible that in God's eternal designs, the worth of what De La Salle was prepared to do would merit for him the grace given him, later on, of leaving everything, like the Apostles, to follow Jesus Christ, poor, naked, and bereft of all.

The proposal made by his director found a willing reception in the heart of his disciple, who wanted only what God wanted; hence



it made no difference to him whether he was a canon or a parish priest. What mattered to him was the will of God, and convinced that the voice of God spoke to him in that of his spiritual father, he resolved to exchange his prebend for the parish of Saint Pierre in Reims. As soon as he heard Roland's suggestion, De La Salle accepted it without question and without rational analysis. To put it into execution immediately, he left at once for Paris, where his archbishop, Charles-Maurice Le Tellier, happened to be. We thus witness a remarkable example of detachment and of that spiritual childhood which opens the door to the kingdom of heaven and which Jesus Christ so strongly recommended to his disciples.

No doubt, all that was asked of the young canon was this act of consent. God beheld in this disposition of heart an excellent preparation for the great sacrifices that he would be inspired to make later on. After having tried him, like Abraham, and put his obedience, fidelity, detachment, and love to the test, the Lord was content and without refusing the sacrifice, postponed it by inspiring a superior authority to oppose it. Here is how this came about.

### The archbishop of Reims rejects the exchange

De La Salle's relatives, interested as they were in what concerned him while admiring the great virtue he showed, were alarmed over his decision and thought it their duty to prevent the plan from being carried out. They succeeded by appealing directly to the archbishop and thus caused the measures planned by the spiritual director and his disciple to fail. Archbishop Le Tellier, on learning of the plan, did not approve of it and refused to authorize the exchange. The two interested parties who had come seeking his consent were quite surprised when the prelate told each to remain in the calling which God had chosen for him. This directive from the mouth of the prelate was accepted by our canon as a directive from God himself, and he submitted to the voice of his higher superior with the same docility that had made him obey that of the lower. He had been willing to be a parish priest only because he thought that was what God was asking by the mouth of Monsieur Roland; he was no longer willing to be a parish priest as soon as Archbishop Le Tellier forbade it and told him to forget about it. Later on, he declared several times that he seemed to hear an inner voice which conformed to the external words of the archbishop, the one and the other saying that he was not called to be a parish priest.

The pastor of Saint Pierre, who had been very eager for the exchange to take place, was the one who seemed more disappointed.

He would have been less put out, or rather he would not have been annoyed at all, if his views had been as pure as those of De La Salle, and if, like him, he had been equally detached from his own personal interests. At all events, the faith, simplicity, and docility with which the young canon had laid his case before his superior, in whom he saw only Jesus Christ, no doubt drew down on them both the light of heaven. If we judge by what happened later on, we must agree that the archbishop was rightly inspired on this occasion, for if he had accepted the request presented to him, it is more than likely that De La Salle, burdened with the responsibility for a large parish, would never have thought of extending his zeal beyond its boundaries and would never have established his Institute.

By maintaining De La Salle at his place in the cathedral, the archbishop no doubt thought only of keeping there a priest of great merit who gave such fine example, a laborer capable of doing much work in his vineyard, a canon likely to render important services to the diocese. The archbishop realized very well that by allowing De La Salle to tie himself to a parish, he would have restricted the exercise of his talents and that by confining him to a single parish, he would indeed have deprived the rest of his diocese. This, as far as we can surmise, was all that the archbishop had in mind, but God's views extended much farther. His design was to withdraw the light from under the basket and to set it high on the mountain, since it was destined to shed its brilliance over all the kingdom. God planned to liberate a zeal which did not recognize any limits and which would have been unduly restricted to the city and to the diocese of Reims. On his return home, De La Salle applied himself once more to his duties as a canon and to preparing himself through continual study, retirement, and prayer to carry out to the fullest extent the vocation God had given him, by joining to the duty of chanting God's praises that of winning souls for him.

De La Salle applies himself to study and to the canonical Office

De La Salle knew that a canon who is also a priest and who possesses talent, health, and the consent of his bishop should, according to the intentions of the Church, be an apostolic worker. So he did not limit his activity merely to attending the canonical Office. He wanted to labor in the Lord's vineyard and to fulfill the functions proper to his priestly character. As a canon, he made it a duty to be assiduous in the choir and to go there in the name of all the faithful of the diocese to pay the homage due to the Divine Majesty. As a priest, he considered

himself an evangelical worker, a dispenser of the mysteries of Christ, a minister of the Church, a helper and co-worker of the bishop. He did not think that a canonry should become a privilege that would justify his remaining idle and unoccupied in the Father's vineyard.

In Monsieur Roland, his director, he found a model in this regard, for the chapter's theological preacher took care not to bury the talents given to him by the Lord, and he did not limit his zeal to occupying his place in the choir stalls at the cathedral. Roland saw good crying out to be done everywhere, and he hastened to undertake it. He lent himself to all kinds of good works, but his special interest was Christian and Gratuitous Schools. Before he died, he sought to communicate his interest to his beloved disciple. He even asked him to take charge of the schoolmistresses that he had succeeded in establishing in Reims.

I do not know whether I am putting the death of M. Roland in its proper place here, for the various memoirs on the life of De La Salle do not agree on this point, on the time when the plan arose for exchanging his canonry, which we have already mentioned, or on several other matters.<sup>11</sup> In writing the lives of those who have died in the odor of sanctity, however, the main consideration is to edify the reader by giving an account of their virtues. Even if we do not accurately keep track of when certain events took place, the precise dates of which we have not been able to verify, it will not prevent people from being edified.

What is certain is that not long after De La Salle was ordained and was obliged by his archbishop to retain his position as a canon, he lost his saintly director. This was, in the plan of Divine Providence, one means used to lead Monsieur de La Salle to his true path in life. The young canon became the successor of the chapter's theological preacher in his apostolic work and the heir of all his zeal. Starting with a very limited involvement, he went ahead as though blindly, without at all foreseeing his goal and without intending it, but led on by Divine Providence to found his Institute. Let us follow him in this journey as he proceeded, like Abraham, on the path marked out for him by God, without knowing where it would lead or where it would end.

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11. In fact, the offer of a parish took place two years before De La Salle's ordination and the death of Roland.

### Roland dies and leaves De La Salle in charge of his work

As we mentioned before, Monsieur Roland, De La Salle's director, a canon and the theological preacher of the cathedral of Reims, was a most zealous and virtuous priest and a tireless evangelical worker. To a solid and enlightened piety he joined an ardent, indefatigable, and hardworking zeal. His duties as theological preacher gave him the opportunity of exercising his zeal and of making use for the benefit of souls of the great oratorical talent heaven had given him. Such far-ranging zeal did not exhaust itself in his duties as a professor of theology, although this in itself was a demanding occupation. He went everywhere he was called; his words were effective, backed up as they were by his example. The harvest of this divine seed sprang up abundantly wherever he scattered it and watered it with his sweat.

But while it is true that the glory of God and the salvation of souls are the aims of all Gospel laborers, it is also true that nearly all of them are inspired to labor in a certain manner and find themselves especially attracted to certain types of work. Roland's overriding interest was the education of the young. The corrupt practices, defective education, and ignorance of the poorer classes moved him to tears and powerfully stimulated his zeal to find a remedy for them. What he was inspired to do about these problems in the city where he lived was to establish Christian and Gratuitous Schools. This was certainly an excellent cure for the evils he sought to eliminate, but it was not an easy one to apply. To establish Gratuitous Schools, he had to find the resources and funds to support them.

Nor was that all. He had to find teachers, both men and women, capable of instructing the young well and of bringing them up in piety through example as well as through their words. The problem was where to find such teachers, where to discover disinterested, zealous, and pious persons fit to carry out a task of this nature. To expect them to come down from heaven already prepared and ready to undertake this task successfully would have been to take pious illusions for realities. The Apostles themselves needed to be instructed by Jesus Christ before attempting to teach others. For three years, Our Lord had kept them close to him, in order to train them before sending them forth to preach his doctrine.

They were even told not to undertake their work until they had received the light and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, we cannot teach others what we have not learned ourselves. Since virtue is not given us at birth and since it is only at the cost of labor and great effort that we can acquire it, we need time, an appropriate place, and

capable instructors to help us to acquire it. We must be learners before we can pretend to teach; we must practice for a long time if we wish to teach with results. The solution to Roland's problem, then, was to establish communities, something like seminaries, where men and women would be instructed and prepared in view of bringing up the young in piety and teaching them Christian doctrine.

Roland's zeal led him to consider all these projects, but the grace to put them into execution was reserved for another. De La Salle was the Solomon who was to carry out the lofty plans made by David, his spiritual father, at least as regards the principal part of the enterprise, for he never undertook to provide Gratuitous Schools for girls. Père Barré,<sup>12</sup> a Minim filled with apostolic zeal, obedient to the Spirit of God, and active in word and deed, had already been inspired to become involved and so had succeeded in founding the Sisters of Providence for the education of girls. His creation has given rise to a great many others which have multiplied throughout France, but Roland was perhaps the first to know how to profit by the precedent and to establish a Community of school Sisters in Reims.

It was, however, only after his death and thanks to the efforts of De La Salle that Roland's group achieved full success. Toward the end of his life, this pious work which Roland considered so very necessary for the poor monopolized his concern, his effort, and his financial resources. This Society had scarcely made its appearance as the Sisters of the Child Jesus when God was pleased to call its founder to himself. On his deathbed, Roland's greatest concern was to beg De La Salle to take his place and to be a father to the pious women whom he was leaving behind and whom he had destined to carry out the education of poor orphan girls. It would seem that the director was enlightened by God and foresaw God's designs on his disciple, because he seems to have foretold that he would one day establish the Brothers of the Christian Schools, something Roland had always wanted to do but had not had time to set about it.

At these final moments, De La Salle was eager to gather up his spiritual father's pious reflections and to receive from his lips his last wishes. As usual, he felt neither reluctance nor eagerness in this matter. Wanting nothing special for himself, he willed whatever God might ask of him. The dying man could not sufficiently show his tender affection for this beloved spiritual son, nor could the latter adequately express his gratitude to his father in Jesus Christ. Docile to

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12. Père Nicolas Barré was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 7 March 1999.

Roland's requests as being the expression of God's will, he agreed to take on the responsibility both of executing the dying man's will and of looking after the Community of Sisters—which was still, so to speak, in its cradle—but without realizing where the hand of God was leading him.

The difficulties De La Salle faces in establishing Roland's work

Soon enough, however, De La Salle began to feel the weight of the burden he had assumed. Every step he took to provide for the survival of the new Institute brought him fresh difficulties and numerous obstacles. With regret he beheld all these new concerns added to the cares arising from his own domestic affairs, for they preoccupied his mind and took up part of the precious time he consecrated to study and prayer. He knew that a young priest who wishes to make himself useful to the Church needs time for both these things and that before devoting himself to his ministry, he must build up a solid foundation of virtue and knowledge. He knew that Jesus Christ himself had given his ministers the example of this wise use of time by spending the first thirty years of his life in obscurity, that Saint John the Baptist, obeying the inspiration of heaven, had also remained for thirty years in the desert preparing himself for the mission of precursor, and that he had not ventured to begin his career without an express order from God.

These two examples impressed De La Salle deeply and restrained him in the exercise of his zeal. They are indeed most striking and cannot be taken to heart too deeply by ecclesiastics of goodwill. Jesus Christ himself devoted only three years to his public life and his evangelical journeys, after spending all his earlier years on earth in silence and retirement. His precursor acted in like manner. What a lesson for those whose zeal outruns their prudence! What a reminder to sanctify oneself for a long time by retirement from the world, by prayer and the practice of virtue, before attempting to appear in public in order to sanctify others, before allowing oneself to breathe the polluted air of the world, so corrupt and so corrupting, which only too soon brings about the ruin of a virtue that has not been sufficiently consolidated. De La Salle also knew that the Apostles and disciples of the Lord were men of mature age and that before trying to convert the world, they had awaited in prayer and retirement the descent of the Holy Spirit and the outpouring of his light, his virtues, his strength, and all his other gifts. These outstanding examples, imitated down the centuries by all truly apostolic men, deeply impressed the young

canon. They inspired him with a holy fear and a prudent restraint, and they moderated the impetuosity of his zeal.

Not that he wished to extinguish his zeal or let it languish in a life of pure contemplation. He recalled Saint Augustine's words, *We are Christians for ourselves and priests for you*, and he did not doubt that he owed himself to the service of his neighbor and to the good of the Church. But he did not forget that he also needed to apply to himself the words of his Divine Master, *I sanctify myself in order to be able to sanctify you*. Such were the considerations which gave rise to his prudent concern and his spiritual uncertainty. It did not take him very long, however, to surmount them when he reflected that God's will had been indicated to him with sufficient clarity and had indeed become quite plain in the way Providence had arranged matters through the provisions made by his deceased friend.

Rising above his own preferences and filled with confidence in God, overcoming all his repugnance by a generous effort, and animated by a zeal which was enlightened by knowledge, he proceeded to honor the memory of the theological preacher and to demonstrate his gratitude to him by undertaking all the measures needed to bring his work to its full development and perfection. This called for much effort and the help of heaven, for new difficulties sprang up every day and grew more and more obstinate. One obstacle appeared after another. When the first was lifted, the devil caused new ones to arise, more thorny than the previous ones.

The saintly canon, who had learned his lessons at the feet of Jesus crucified, realized that all God's designs bear the mark of the cross and that those which meet with no opposition, succeed beyond our expectations, and never encounter persecution in the world are works that God looks upon with little favor. They cause little concern to the devil, who does not even bother to combat them. In addition, God planned to raise De La Salle to the cross of Calvary. By trying him out in these first crises, God wished to familiarize him with such crosses, to prepare him for greater ones, and to teach him, as he had taught another vessel of election, *what great things he must suffer for my name's sake* through the founding of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools for boys, the task for which Providence had chosen him.

I picture the young canon on this occasion like a youthful pilot responsible for guiding a vessel through a passage full of reefs, amidst the storm and tempest which threaten to engulf it at every moment. To consolidate this undertaking, which from its founding had tottered on the brink of ruin, he needed personal prestige, authority, influence, and human backing, none of which he possessed.

Lacking help from creatures, the common situation of those who labor for the most significant works, he turned to God as to his surest resource. Prayer was the star which set his course and directed him through the stormy night, so full of difficulties and obstacles, which the world threw in his path. To prayer, he joined serious thought and much hard work, for he was convinced that God wants us to do our share while working with Providence and that we join our efforts to the help that comes from God.

### Overcoming obstacles, De La Salle obtains letters patent for the Christian Schools for girls

To set the Sisters' Community on a solid footing, it was necessary to obtain the approbation of the city, the consent of the archbishop, and letters patent<sup>13</sup> from the king—not a very easy undertaking. The city fathers felt that Reims was already overburdened by the various religious communities which had grown quite numerous in recent years. They considered the establishment of a new one as an added burden and were therefore opposed to it. The royal court, wary of multiplying new religious institutes, did not seem much inclined to grant the letters patent. Finally, there was good reason to doubt whether the archbishop would show himself favorable. It would be necessary, therefore, to convince the magistrates, win over the prelate, and persuade him to ask for the letters patent. De La Salle set to work and succeeded in it.

His humble and gentle manners soon won the hearts of his fellow citizens. Because they were quite sure of the purity of his intentions and full of admiration for his virtue, they found it difficult to refuse a request which was aimed entirely at benefitting the children of the poor. De La Salle found it easy enough to make the city officials see that this new Community, unlike others, would prove an asset to the city, not a burden on it, since its sole aim was to care for poor orphan girls and to instruct children who otherwise would remain a prey to ignorance. These were social values which the Christian city ought to pursue by all means and which it could neglect only to its own great disadvantage. The new foundation also provided important benefits to religion. From the early years of the Church, Christianity had owed a large part of its success to the zeal of its pastors, who often taught school themselves or tried to multiply Christian

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13. Letters patent signed by the king conferred juridical status on corporate bodies, whether civil or ecclesiastical.



Schools where the children of the faithful, instructed in their faith and educated in piety, were strengthened and prepared even for martyrdom and where the children of pagans were made to see the error of their parents' religion and encouraged to give it up.

De La Salle could also base his request on the need to separate boys and girls in school, even at an early age, and on the dreadful improprieties that result when boys and girls are put together, even for religious instruction. Where no Christian women are available to give a Christian education and proper instruction to the girls, these latter are taught by men. Everyone knows what perils this arrangement presents. Modesty, decency, reserve, and propriety are all at risk, and the same virtues make it necessary to draw a veil of silence over the sad consequences that would follow. To deflect such perils, the Church has always promoted the establishment of Christian Schools where boys and girls are taught separately. At one time, the attitude of the Church was even more severe in this matter, and within church buildings themselves and in the presence of Jesus Christ, she separated the men from the women and did not permit them to mingle together, even in the place reserved for common prayer.

Our kings, too—Louis XV, happily reigning, and his grandfather, Louis XIV of happy memory—convinced of the dangers that arise when children of both sexes are taught together, approved measures forbidding this practice, as did several great prelates in their dioceses, confirming this policy by their edicts, as is seen in the second volume of the recent memorandum for the clergy under the title, *Schools*.

Without doubt, Monsieur de La Salle knew how to make use of these powerful arguments, which explained in part his own interest in the matter. He succeeded in giving them in the minds of his interlocutors all the weight that they had in his own. He dispelled objections, answered difficulties, did away with prejudices. His titles as a fellow citizen, as a relative, as a friend, as heir of Monsieur Roland's zeal no less than of his foundation, together with his encouraging and gracious pleas, were the means he used to sway the officials, so that they found it difficult to resist.

Still, his request might have gone unanswered if God himself had not come to his help by secret inspirations and had not seasoned with unction and grace the words of his servant, whose courteous manners disposed people to listen favorably when he spoke. The authorities finally gave in and granted his petition in due and legal form. This first victory won, another remained to be secured, but we must admit that it proved to be less difficult than the first one, since success in this case depended on his having obtained the city's consent. Once this

was assured, Archbishop Le Tellier was glad to give his own approval, and this in turn was a key help in obtaining the letters patent. The archbishop, in fact, was delighted that the city fathers had given their approval to a charitable work which he himself should have been the first to desire and want to establish, since it concerned him more than anyone else. Not satisfied with giving his approbation, he took it upon himself to obtain the letters patent personally. The matter was as good as settled, once Le Tellier took it into his hands. His standing at court was such that he had no qualms about asking for a favor of this sort. At this time, the greatest gifts were showered on him, often without his having sought them. A less influential prelate might have failed in this undertaking or else might have had to resort to infinite pains to get what he wanted, but as the brother of a minister who was most powerful at court, Archbishop Le Tellier did not need to take so many precautions. Once it was known that the brother of Monsieur de Louvois wanted something done, everyone hastened to fall in with his wishes.

Never did the archbishop of Reims make better use for the good of his diocese of the influence he wielded at court and of the favor he enjoyed with Louis XIV than on that occasion. The letters patent were granted as soon as they were requested and were then registered by Parliament at the expense of Archbishop Le Tellier, who hastened to send them to the one who had sought them so successfully. The archbishop did even more. Not only did he grant his protection to a work which he looked upon as his very own; he contributed to its development and provided out of his own funds for the establishment of a house which can rightly be called a sort of seminary for the training of Sisters for the schools. By his protection, favor, and financial contributions, this foundation got off to an excellent start. It soon reached a flourishing state and proved extremely useful to the public.

Thus, if this Community owes its origin to Monsieur Roland, it owes its progress to the diligent care of Monsieur de La Salle. Happy will these Sisters be if they always keep faithful to the spirit of their two founders and if they never turn aside from their early fervor. They have the honor of being the first daughters of De La Salle, the first through whom his zeal found definitive expression. Thus God was trying out his servant's abilities and preparing him, through the experience of establishing a house of teaching Sisters for Christian and Gratuitous Schools for girls, to become the founder of a new religious order of Brothers destined to exercise a similar holy and noble task for boys.

## CHAPTER VI

*The servant of God establishes rule and order in his home; worldly people begin to criticize him; he disregards censure and resolutely pursues perfection.*

Young as he was, De La Salle always liked to live by rule: regularity, a cherished virtue, governed all his conduct. He had seen this attitude exemplified at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice and from the first had profited by this manner of acting. In that abode of virtue, he had experienced for himself and witnessed in the lives of others what such fidelity to a rule leads to in purity of conduct, innocence of life, and solid virtue, especially when a rule is prudent and well tailored to human weakness. Regularity, he knew, must be universal, exact, and inspired by inner conviction. He had made it a strict duty for himself, both inside and outside the seminary, to be perfectly regular. In his home everything was done at its proper time: rising, vocal and interior prayer, meals, spiritual reading, other exercises of piety, and the various actions of the day, with the canonical Office as the center and prime regulator of all the rest.

At table he had good books read. The wonder of it is that the young canon, through his example and his appealing manners, had succeeded in persuading his three young brothers, who lived with him, to follow a lifestyle which resembled that of a seminary rather than that of a private home. Such a manner of living, so prayerful, so unworldly, and so well ordered, could not, of course, meet with the approval of worldly people. They forgave him for it only as long as they remained ignorant of it. When they got wind of it, their outcries, witticisms, and censure made it known to those who had not yet heard of it.

This awareness produced varying effects. What were these? Exactly the same as those which the lives of the saints and the Gospel itself have always produced: edification for some and scandal for others. When Saint Paul preached in the Areopagus, the majority of his hearers thought him a fool, a preacher of fables and new gods. The inspired minority believed him and profited by his words. Jesus Christ crucified was an occasion of scandal for the Jews and a topic of derision for the Gentiles, but for those whom the Holy Spirit enlightened, he was the power and the wisdom of God. All down the centuries, the saints, like their Divine Master, have been an object of scorn for the world, but for well-disposed souls, they were burning

lamps and flaming torches which not only showed the way to perfection but powerfully incited them to follow in the footsteps of the saints. Their virtues and example produced good fruit in many of those who witnessed them and often made saints of them.

Nothing is new under the sun. What is will be until the end of time. What we see now is what was from the beginning. Virtue, persecuted in the person of Abel from the very origin of the world, has continued to suffer ill-treatment of all the just, without exception, who came after him, and so will it continue to suffer in all those who will live until the end. Without wanting to do so, the world itself is the great maker of saints. In belittling their virtue, it purifies, strengthens, and perfects it, making it more worthy of God.

### Worldly people censure his behavior

As the world saw it, De La Salle was not living as a canon should. He was not bringing credit either on his chapter or on his family. As the guardian of his brothers and sisters, it seemed that he himself ought to have been put under a guardian. He had a good bit of money but did not know how to make proper use of it. He no longer bothered with respectable people, and respectable people no longer bothered with him. His house was open to all the riffraff and the poor, but relatives and friends found the door barred to them. If he did not want to have anything more to do with the world, why did he not leave it? If he had become so unsociable, why did he not go and live in the woods in solitude with the animals?

What a sight it was to see him play the role of a religious fanatic and hypocrite while assuming the air of a truly devout person! He was causing genuine devotion to be ill thought of; he brought down discredit on his sacerdotal character. Would he have been less a good canon and priest if he gave up these peculiar ways? So ran the world's comments, with more like them. For fear that he might not know what was being said, all this was said to his face. Everything he did was a crime. Everything about him was ridiculed. From head to toe, there was nothing his critics did not find fault with. They criticized his clothes, his hat, his collars, and a thousand other details.

The young canon profited by all that was said against him, so true is it, as Saint Paul says, *All things work together for the good of those who love God*. He examined himself while the world was examining him; he judged himself more severely than the world did. He acknowledged the judgments of others, whenever he believed them well founded. The world, so enlightened when it comes to seeing the

least defects of the devout and which never pardons them anything, helped him to discover within himself the faults hidden there. The severity of his critics led him to condemn these faults himself. The baseless reproaches leveled at him alerted him to other shortcomings which really existed but which the world itself could not see.

Thus society helped him to know himself better and to correct himself. It also taught him to bring his virtues to perfection and to give them all their merit. From this time on, he professed an even more open disdain for the world and divorced himself more completely from it. Without becoming ill-natured, he grew more solitary; without ceasing to be affable and gracious, he seemed more recollected and more given to the interior life. Instead of going to live with beasts a solitary life, as worldlings had said he should, he sought rather to live in the company of the angels or to converse with perfect men on earth. He was following the advice of the author of the *Imitation of Christ*, who says of priests, *Their conversation should not be with the vulgar and common ways of men but with angels in heaven and perfect men on earth.*<sup>14</sup>

His life grew more austere. He mortified his senses more rigorously; his hours of prayer grew more frequent and his vigils longer, his whole person more radiant with holiness. In a word, his care and concern for the nobler part of his nature concentrated all his efforts. He became so taken up with cultivating his inner life that he somewhat neglected external matters. Always neat and clean but eager to show outward evidence of poverty, he used only the most common clothes made of the coarsest type of cloth. Before long, Reims would see him wearing the same garb as the Brothers. To the regret of his friends and—if I may say so—to the shame of his relatives, he began to wear in public that disgraceful habit, which is the way people then and for a long time afterward regarded the habit of the Brothers. But God was now preparing De La Salle to found his Society of Brothers. He already had the grace to do so, but he still did not have a plan. The seed in his heart remained hidden, even to himself, until to his great astonishment he would see it rapidly grow into a large tree, spreading its branches everywhere and bringing forth fruit of salvation for the poor, whom the world looks upon as it does the beasts of the fields.

While waiting for this to happen, De La Salle needed to become familiar with the poor and to establish contact with them. He needed to become one of the poor so that he might enrich them. Hence, from

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14. Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, book 4, chap. 5.

this time on, he began to visit them assiduously and to bring them generous alms. The time left over from his studies, the Divine Office, and his other exercises of piety was devoted to helping and consoling the poor. They came to him, or he went to them. He spoke to them about God, instructed them, prepared them to receive the sacraments, encouraged them to practice patience. While relieving their needs by his charitable alms, he prepared their souls to welcome grace. When he left them, he left behind joy, relief, and true sentiments of piety.

One day his charity brought him to the bedside of a poor, sick woman. As he approached her, she vomited all over him. The incident undoubtedly filled the poor soul with confusion, but she saw De La Salle remain perfectly calm, cheerful, and gracious. Not only did he refrain from showing any displeasure; he chose to go home bearing the marks of his charity without removing the soiled and smelly surplice.

Young as he was, he began to think of sleep as an obstacle to perfection. For this reason, he gave his valet orders to awaken him at a fixed time and to insist that he wake up despite his somnolence, thus helping him to win the first battle of the day. This first skirmish against sleep was merely a prelude for others. Interior prayer was another battleground where De La Salle had to vanquish the same powerful enemy. While the fervent young canon put forth his best efforts at lifting his mind to God and uniting it with God in pure and unruffled contemplation, sleepiness often crept in on him and closed his eyes. When he awoke, he felt put out over his weakness and conceived a holy anger against himself. He reproached himself for his failure with all the vehemence that humility suggests to fervent souls.

But what remedy could he apply to this pleasant but treacherous need which overcomes our senses even when the soul wishes to detach itself from them in order to give itself to God? The solution he found was to put sharp pebbles on the kneeler of the prie-dieu where he knelt during prayer, so that the pain they caused him would keep him awake when drowsiness began to overcome him. By this kind of mortification, he learned how to overcome an enemy which caused him to do penance for his fault at the very moment when he committed it. Later on, he grew so accustomed to doing without sleep that he often spent whole nights in prayer, in writing his books, or in attending to pressing business concerning his Institute.

To this retrenchment of sleep he added more rigorous fasts, which became excessive during Holy Week. From Holy Thursday until Easter, he tried to eat nothing but broth made from herbs. Having been born with a rather delicate constitution, however, he found that

this privation was beyond his strength. It had such a debilitating effect on him that he was not able to retain anything he ate. For this reason, his spiritual director forbade him to continue this practice. His body, however, did not get much relief from this decision, because he merely replaced fasting by other mortifications, which without weakening him overmuch, left him only such strength as made them longer and harder to bear. We shall have more to say about his mortifications in treating of his virtues.

At that time, the young canon had not the least idea of establishing the Christian Schools nor the slightest inclination to do so. Still, all the decisions he was making were steps leading him to that end. Through events enmeshed with its designs, Divine Providence was bringing him to the accomplishment of God's will. To follow him on this path where God was leading him, we must recall the picture we painted earlier<sup>15</sup> of the disorders during recent centuries and the help which God afforded his Church in such evil times by raising up a number of illustrious persons remarkable for their holiness and learning and by founding a number of institutes consecrated to the instruction of the people.

Some of these groups concerned themselves with all sorts of persons: city dwellers and country folk, ecclesiastics and lay people. Only one group was still wanting: one devoted to the instruction of poor children who did not have the means to attend pay schools. The majority of such children remained in a deplorable ignorance of Christian doctrine and morals. Yet we see every day the evils caused in the world by this ignorance on the part of the common people, truly one of the worst disorders afflicting the Church.

Père Barré, the Minim whose holy life spread his reputation as a saint in Paris and wherever else he lived, was no doubt not the first to recognize this evil and to realize that it was the source of so many others, but he seems to have been the first person in France to seek a remedy for it and to have found one: the establishment of Christian and Gratuitous Schools. Such a remedy is effective, universal, and sovereign, the only one, in fact, that puts a stop to the disorders which breed on the ignorance and defective education of the children of the poor. But the establishment of Christian Schools presupposes the existence of other establishments devoted to the training of teachers of both sexes who wish to dedicate themselves to the instruction and sanctification of poor children.

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15. A marginal note in the 1733 edition cites chapter IV of the *Discours* which constitutes Blain's lengthy introduction to the biography proper.

Barré's zeal led him to undertake the creation of both these necessary establishments. In view of setting up separate schools for boys and girls, he conceived the project of organizing institutions, something like seminaries, destined to train future teachers who would provide Christian and gratuitous instruction of the children of the poor—a noble design indeed. If Père Barré was not alone in carrying it into effect, he at least deserves credit for having, before anyone else, thought out a plan and for attempting to fulfill it. He succeeded in part. He had the grace to conceive the scheme and to suggest it to others but not to execute it fully. In God's design, it was De La Salle who was to receive this grace, so true is it that *one plants and another waters, but God gives the increase*, and by his good pleasure, *he sends workers into the field to reap what others have sown*.

Part of Barré's work succeeds; part does not

Père Barré had established, at the same time, seminaries for schoolmasters and for schoolmistresses. The masters seemed to succeed rather well at first, but this success did not last. The teachers either never really assimilated the spirit of their vocation, or they lost it in a short time. Their fervor was like a straw fire which blazed up for a few moments and then died down. The first disciples of Père Barré were not much inclined to accept his lessons on abandonment to Divine Providence, on being satisfied with the strict necessities of life, and on not confusing their interests with God's purposes. Concerned about their future, they could not help thinking about tomorrow and sought to lay up a sufficiency for themselves so as to be sheltered from indigence. They deserted the schools which the good priest had founded, so that these fell into ruin. Because of this failure, he did not try the same plan again. True, several efforts were made to revive these schools later on but to no purpose. It would have taken candidates ready to enter into the spirit of their founder, a spirit of total disinterestedness and abandonment to Divine Providence. Such people were not at all forthcoming.

Monsieur Roland, of whom we have already spoken, filled with the zeal of Père Barré, did not despair of having better success with a project of his own in Reims. At least he would have made the attempt, but his death prevented it. In him the zealous Minim lost a faithful helper. For his consolation, however, Barré's second foundation—schools for girls—succeeded much better. Before dying, he had the happiness of seeing the blessings that God granted to his undertaking in Rouen and in Paris, where he had established schools to



train pious and zealous women for the instruction and sanctification of girls. This example given by Père Barré proved fruitful, for today the most outstanding prelates seek to establish in their dioceses similar communities working for the same end.

Barré's first attempt at founding an institute for male teachers did not succeed, but the endeavor was an idea that did not disappear entirely. To the human eye, it seemed to have failed, but not in the sight of God. If the project had not yet proved successful, it was because the man whom God had chosen to realize it had not yet appeared—so true is it that in vain does man build the house if God does not lay the foundation thereof. In vain do the sentinels keep watch if God does not protect the fortress.

The founder of the Daughters of Providence, Monsieur Roland, as well as other saintly persons, realized how important it was to do for the education of boys what had been done for that of girls. God certainly approved their plans, yet he did not allow them to carry these out. Why not? Because God had reserved the execution of this great work to De La Salle. Although the latter had not thought of that apostolate and had no desire at that time to devote himself to it, still, through God's free choice, he was to have the honor of creating it. The pioneers conceived the idea, wanted to bring it about, and neglected nothing to make it succeed; their goodwill deserved merit before God. Yet all they did came to nothing, because God did not act along with them. Here we have one of those mysteries of Divine Providence so frequently met with in the works of God; the outcome will be seen in what follows.

## CHAPTER VII

*The hidden paths by which Divine Providence imperceptibly brings De La Salle to carry out its designs through a man sent to Reims by Madame Maillefer to open Gratuitous Schools; a summary of the admirable life that this woman led after her conversion.*

Since it was Madame Maillefer<sup>16</sup> who began crystallizing the plans of Providence in the life of Monsieur de La Salle, we should look upon her as the first instrument God was pleased to make use of to bring the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools into existence. She deserved the honor of helping such a worthy enterprise see the light of day. Although in sending M. Nyel to Reims to open Gratuitous Schools she never thought of the possible consequences of her charitable initiative, it still remains true that her zeal envisaged the establishment of an institution devoted to Christian education. Thus she deserves to have a place in the history of the man who was to be the Founder of this great work, since she afforded him the first opportunity of taking a direct interest in it.

It is amazing that in the city of Rouen, which can boast of so many learned and brilliant men, no one as yet has thought of honoring her and of edifying the public by recounting the life story of a woman who for so many years gave that city such remarkable examples of heroic virtue. So that these examples may not all be buried in oblivion, we shall set down some of them here, thanks to the testimony of several persons still living who witnessed them along with her townsfolk.

### Early life of Madame Maillefer

Not a great deal is known of her life, but we do know that Madame Maillefer was converted when still quite young and before the death of her husband. She did not wait until age had furrowed her cheeks and warned her that the world was not for her nor she for it. Grace called her at a time when she was leading a brilliant existence, when she flattered the world as much as it adulated her. She was born in

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16. Blain consistently but erroneously calls her Madame *de* Maillefer. It was only after her death that her son acquired the right to use the *de*, conferring a kind of noble status. In this English edition, she is named without Blain's *de*.

Reims of a wealthy family. She married Pons Maillefer, controller of the city of Rouen,<sup>17</sup> where she took up her residence and lived until her death. In her everything tended to be extreme, both vices and virtues. Before her conversion, she carried vice to excess; after it, virtue. Tall, beautiful, statuesque, she had a noble air, a majestic carriage, an appearance which called for attention and drew all eyes to her. She might have been mistaken for a princess by the way she looked, and she omitted nothing in order to appear like one, so great and overbearing was her vanity.

Absorbed more than anyone else by her own person, she used every means to bewitch others. If she did not always succeed in doing so, it was perhaps because the exaggerated efforts she made to appear attractive put people on their guard against her. She was reputed to be the worldliest woman of the city. Always adorned like a goddess, magnificently dressed, appearing with pomp and ostentation, she would stop people in the street and stare them down, especially on feast days and Sundays while on her way to the noon Mass at Notre Dame. She went there more to show off and to make a display of her vanity before the eyes of high society, which likewise worshipped there, and more to find admirers than to adore God.

### Her worldly spirit

Her pride was satisfied, because everywhere she went, her ears were flattered by what people said about her. This brought great delight to her heart, so passionately concerned was she with her reputation. She thrilled when she heard the words whispered by those who happened to meet her, "Look! There goes that gorgeous Madame Maillefer!" Her extravagance knew no limits. Nothing was too elegant, too expensive, too beautiful for her. Eager to discover whatever could enhance her good looks and make her more attractive, she spared neither pains nor money to show herself a complete fashion model for all the latest styles, for the most expensive materials, the most fashionable and striking clothes, the rarest and costliest hair styles. Nature had endowed her with great beauty, but in her opinion, nature had not done enough for her. Regretting the charms she lacked more than appreciating those she enjoyed, she sought to make up for what she did not possess by constantly seeking to improve her appearance and by cultivating the laborious and fatiguing art of appearing day after day with new adornments and new clothes.

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17. Her husband, Pons Maillefer, was a draper, which accounts for her interest in clothes. It was her son who became the controller in Rouen.

Never was there a woman more totally enslaved by her body or one who worshiped her own person more devoutly. Her self-love, so ingenious in finding ways to satisfy itself, had suggested to her the idea of having a statue made to her measure. This was a kind of idol to her impressive appearance, shaped exactly like her; on it she could indulge her vanity. She used it to try on the various articles of clothing and other ornaments she planned to wear. She dressed it, arranged it as she herself wished to appear, and exhausted on it all the possible and imaginable refinements of her worldly spirit in the hope that they would show her off to better advantage.

For her own misfortune and also for that of others, she succeeded only too well. Naturally, she did not go to all this trouble in order to remain hidden but to show off everywhere and every day, whether at dances or the theater, at the opera or on outings, or in social gatherings.

Thus vanity led her captive everywhere she went and made a spectacle of her all over the city. She tried her hardest to appear as the only real beauty in Rouen and to eclipse all other women. It was no fault of hers if people did not pay her homage as though she were indeed a queen. She acted so much like one that her good friend, Madame Louvet, called her "My Queen," even after her conversion, to remind her of the grand and majestic air which she knew well how to put on and of the sumptuous attire she wore to enhance the effect.

Her laziness was on a par with her vanity. She never rose before eleven in the morning. She bragged about this by saying that such a long night's rest kept her ideas fresh. Winter and summer, she drank only iced drinks. Earth, sky, and sea contained nothing too exotic for her palate. In all the marketplaces, her servants sought out the choicest viands, the tastiest fruit for her table. Nothing was too expensive; as long as it was unusual and delicious, they bought it, whatever the price.

### Her harshness toward the poor

As we might expect, her lack of pity for the poor was on a par with her exquisite concern for her own body. The following occurrence, which is believed to have been the occasion for her conversion, gives us a sad yet striking example of her attitude toward the unfortunate. One day, a beggar—ill and obviously in an extremely wretched condition—came to her home hoping to find something to eat and a place to rest a little. The coachman, a pious and charitable man, filled with compassion for this miserable wretch, went to ask his mistress if

he could let the beggar in. Such an act of charity, so appropriate toward a person so much in need, did not appeal to a woman as worldly as she was, one who loved nobody but herself. We know how selfishness makes people cruel; it is the greatest enemy of real charity. A heart filled with pride and sensuality is a hard, unfeeling heart, inaccessible to pity for the poor.

With scorn and indignation, Madame Maillefer rejected the charitable request of her servant and told him to shut the door to the beggar, who merely wanted some place to rest. Because the coachman could not bring himself to do this, he let the man into the stable and did what he could to help him. What a surprise it was when next day he found the beggar dead on the miserable couch where he had lain! The news of this unfortunate occurrence spread throughout the house and did not take long to reach the mistress's ears. After venting her wrath on the charitable coachman and overwhelming him with a torrent of insults and abuse, she dismissed him immediately and told him never to come back. The other servants insisted that something must be done to remove the corpse. Finally, Madame Maillefer sent them a sheet in which to enshroud the body for burial.

That evening, however, she found that same sheet on a table. It seemed as though the beggar whom she had refused to welcome had turned down her gift so ungraciously given. As she unfolded the sheet, she recognized it. Thinking that the poor wretch who had died in her stable was still there and had not yet been buried, she fell into a rage and gave full rein to her exasperation. But the words died on her lips and her blood ran cold when she learned that the corpse had indeed been buried, wrapped in the same sheet, and that nobody had put the sheet on the table where she had found it. This was the moment God had been waiting for, when divine mercy, not justice, confronted her. Surprised, moved, frightened, she burst into sighs, groans, and sobs. On entering this hardened heart, grace softened it, melted it like wax brought near a raging fire. She had been a sinner; now she was a penitent. Such had Madame Maillefer been when she lived a worldly life; here is what she became once she resolved to change her life.

### Her conversion

Three vices had ruled her: vanity, laziness, and hard-heartedness toward the unfortunate. The three contrary virtues of humility, mortification, and charity for the poor now became her characteristics. Luxury and display in dress, preoccupation with finery, the desire of

showing off and attracting attention had been the passions which had nourished her vanity. Grace led her to resist these tendencies by assuming a careless, unkempt, and disheveled external appearance. She affected ridiculous mannerisms and foolish behavior, and she adopted the practice of a poor and retired life. Formerly her body had grown soft in laziness; previously she did not get up until the sun had almost reached its zenith. She could not find anything exquisite enough to satisfy her sensuality. Now the Spirit of God, to make amends for all this, was going to inspire her to practice forms of mortification which can scarcely be believed.

### Her love of abjection

Ultimately, to expiate her hard-heartedness toward the poor, Madame Maillefer resolved to spend the rest of her life serving them in the most humble and most disagreeable tasks that heroic charity can undertake. Grace always goes against nature. After grace initiated her conversion by the event which we have related, it urged her to make a prompt and striking break with the world and to expiate her love of ostentation by acts of public humiliation. Vanity had been her pet passion. Now love of abjection became her dominant attraction and led her to those pious exaggerations which we admire in the lives of the saints and which human judgment might be tempted to criticize, if the Spirit of God did not seem to have inspired them. Like Mary Magdalen, no sooner had Madame Maillefer resolved to change her life than she decided to show her disdain for the world. Understanding so well its emptiness, she thought of how she might expiate the vanity she had displayed in her past life. She wanted to make up for the scandal she had given by an apparent act of folly which would make the world think that in turning her back on it, she had taken leave of her senses.

One evening, she let herself be shut up in the church and spent the night there in prayer. Her husband sent out search parties for her but to no avail. The hunt only served to publicize her disappearance and to convince everybody that Madame Maillefer's new-found devotion was unsettling her reason. The world, which is too prone to judge unfavorably of devout persons, had ample matter to confirm it further in its opinions when it learned that without taking off her splendid dress, she had put on over it a serving maid's soiled apron made of cheap cloth. Thus accoutered, she attended High Mass one Sunday in her parish church. This action resulted in all the notoriety she expected, making her the laughingstock of the city.

Day after day, she became the butt of ridicule. After having for so long been a worldly woman, she soon acquired the reputation of being a ridiculous and bizarre fanatic. Her husband could not long remain ignorant of the happenings which were stirring up so much gossip in the city, and he had too much at stake not to oppose the pious exaggerations in the practice of humility to which he saw his wife inclined. Invoking his authority, he forbade her to indulge in such practices any more.

Her thirst for abjection was so strong that she needed this limitation placed on her. Constantly urged on by the Spirit of God to mortify her vanity still further by humiliations on a par with the faults she had previously committed, she seemed as eager to court disdain now as she had been to enjoy honors and glory.

Charity grew stronger day by day in her heart and gradually replaced self-love, demanding greater sacrifices for God than she had previously made for the world. Although we do not know too much about the details of her life immediately after her conversion and while she remained under her husband's authority, still—judging the beginning by what happened later—we know that like another Magdalen, when she turned aside from sinning, she became a great penitent. The moment she gave up vanity, she entered upon the path of perfection and made giant strides therein. Nothing held her back: not the world, not her body, not her friends. She courageously broke all these bonds and did so all at once. She did not seem to care what people might say or think about her. Never again did she worry about the world; she wished only to be despised by it. She thought of her body only to crucify it, of her vanity-filled life only to expiate it by sacrifices which made her self-love bleed. No more was she seen in worldly circles or at public amusements; she appeared only in church at the foot of the crucifix.

Rare and succulent viands were banished from her table. She cut back on all foolish and superfluous spending. The money thus saved was spent on the poor, for whom her present tenderness equaled her previous insensitivity toward their needs. After doing away with her luxurious way of life and her elegant table, she regulated her hours of sleep and condemned herself to rise every day at an early hour. Everything else in her life and in her person showed the sincerity of her conversion. She thenceforth led a strictly regulated life, a life of prayer and retirement—in a word, a truly Christian life.

At first, she forbade herself all fancy clothes, elaborate gowns, and showy adornments. Then, from simple attire she went to dresses that were very common, from these to ones which were shabby, and

then to garb that made her look ridiculous. In this way she pursued the spirit of vanity to its last refuge, and as long as she lived, she sought to mortify it in its slightest manifestations. Thus it would seem that the Spirit of God followed the example of the spirit of the world which had inspired her. God, as it were, took pleasure in presenting her to the public as a sort of curiosity. Nearly every month, she appeared in a different state of abasement, dressed in a fashion which she had concocted on purpose to draw down mockery on herself.

If while her husband lived she could not satisfy as fully as she would have liked this grace-inspired inclination, once he was dead, she felt free to follow it as far as she liked. Being the mistress of her person, her actions, and her wealth, she set no limits to her charity or to her humiliations and penances. We do not know exactly when she lost her husband nor the length of time they had lived together. It would seem that he was a true gentleman, for he and she together founded the school at Darnétal. Perhaps when she was converted, she converted him too; or perhaps—good Christian that he was—he had not been as worldly minded as she. Their only son married a girl from Reims and does not seem to have lived very long after his father's death.<sup>18</sup> His widow, who rivaled her mother-in-law in piety, lived in Reims as Madame Maillefer lived in Rouen: she served as a model for the city. Both of them, after giving outstanding examples of the most eminent virtue, were to die in an aura of sanctity.

When Madame Maillefer found herself freed from all the constraints which might have held her back on the path of perfection, she gave herself over without reserve to the inspiration of the Spirit, who powerfully incited her to practice humility, mortification, and charity. Loving a poor, abject, and despised life, a hidden and obscure existence, she gave an outstanding example of virtue during fifteen years and led a life which at first won for her the reputation of being mad but later that of being a saint.

After her husband's death, the first thing that she did to make herself look ridiculous was to have a dress prepared out of pieces of cloth of various colors. To be certain it came out the way she wanted, she called in a seamstress whom she knew, a virtuous woman, and having given her a whole basket full of strips and scraps of cloth, she asked her to sew them together and to make her a dress. Fearing that the woman might be confused by this request, she prevailed on her to stay in the house and in the room, under lock and key, until she had

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18. In fact, the son survived his father, who died in 1681, by twenty years.



finished. Madame Maillefer then took the key and, after making arrangements for all the needs of the seamstress, went off to spend the day in church and at the hospital, returning only at nightfall to free her prisoner. In order to have a complete costume to go with her new skirt, she had some blouses made of such coarse material that wearing them was like wearing a hair shirt. She obtained workmen's shoes which had no soles to them, coarse stockings all patched, and a sash like the rest. In those days, ladies wore velvet sashes lined with taffeta; hers was made of black cloth lined with whatever she could find.

When this costume satisfied the state of mind which had inspired it, she put it on and went to Notre Dame Cathedral to show herself off before the eyes of high society. How often had she not gone there to bedazzle everybody by the splendor of her apparel! This huge church, which at noon Mass on Sundays and feasts was filled by the laziest and worldliest people in Rouen, had been the stage where she had paraded her vanity. It was only right that it should now become the showplace for her ignominy. That was what she went looking for, on those same days and times, clad in such a way as to make her the laughingstock of all. She did not try to pass unperceived. The seats in the front of the church, which she had profaned by her pride and which she had purposely chosen so that everyone could see and admire her, were the ones she now occupied—kneeling, robed in her clownish attire, and carrying a big thorn branch on her shoulder.

It is easy to imagine the jeers she endured throughout the city by such shocking and unexpected behavior. They won for her the satisfaction of drinking deep of the chalice of humiliation that the Son of God had drunk, but still she never succeeded in quenching the thirst for contumely that she experienced. She longed to be mocked, despised, blamed, condemned, and she received what she wanted. Nothing else was talked about, and those who talked also laughed at her and made fun of her. If in the end the world grew tired of criticizing her, it was because people considered her to be out of her mind.

Her director, Monsieur de Tac, did not approve of all this extravagant behavior and ordered her to dress in a more conventional way. She obeyed but with the greatest reluctance. Her obedience lasted only as long as she did not recall her past vanity. When she remembered her former luxury, the splendid clothes, the pearl necklaces costing over 500 écus that she had worn to flatter the world and to please herself, she could no longer master her feelings. The reproaches of her conscience threw her into a holy fury against herself. Her

memory represented to her all this ostentation as a crime for which she could not forgive herself. To make amends to God, she would again go out in attire that was pitiful to behold.

Madame Maillefer went so far in her desire to disparage herself that to mortify the daintiness proper to her sex and state, she let her nails grow long and would not wash her hands even before eating, no matter how filthy they were as a result of the attentions she had been giving to the sick. Her poor seamstress felt her stomach turn and had to call upon all her virtue merely to look at the woman who, when she had followed the inclinations of nature, had been the most exquisitely turned out and the most meticulously clean person in the whole city and who now had become by choice and through yielding to grace the most repulsive creature one could meet.

She went through the streets accoutered as we have described, with her big thorn staff in one hand and an old book in the other, reciting the Penitential Psalms in a loud voice. That was how she would travel all the way to Darnétal, except that sometimes she carried a crucifix in her hand. Everywhere she showed herself a true penitent whose heart was contrite and humbled, one who found that every place and time were appropriate to bewail her sins. Her attitude, her gestures, all her exterior appearance, unkempt and disheveled, showed that she thought only of her shame at having offended God's infinite majesty and of how she might vindicate God's honor at the expense of her own.

When Madame Maillefer needed water, she went to fetch it from the public fountain and waited for her turn to draw what she wanted. Often enough, she replaced her black cloth sash by a scrap of carpet which she threw over her shoulder. When people said something to humiliate or insult her, she was happy and started reciting the *Te Deum* or the sacred canticle, *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*, with a joy which betokened her triumph over her self-esteem. She took pleasure in going to the marketplace to buy a quarter-pound of butter, which she brought back home wrapped in a cabbage leaf and lying on her outstretched hand in such a way that it could not pass unnoticed. She carried some sticks under the other arm. In doing this, her purpose was either to make people mock her or to seem poor and draw down upon herself, by appearing so poor, the disdain which always dogs the steps of poverty. This stratagem to win humiliations, however, did not always succeed as she hoped; in spite of herself, her noble bearing, commanding appearance, and majestic air set her off from the rest and made it clear to anyone who did not know her what sort of person she really was. Then she could no longer place limits on her

thirst for abasement. It had become an art which she possessed to perfection, for she never ceased practicing it.

Her days were filled with continual and successive humiliations; by that assiduous cultivation, she acquired such a habit of humility that she seemed to have grown familiar with contempt. Unceasingly occupied with finding ways of drawing down scorn on herself, she offered the world new reasons to make fun of her. Thus the days and years of her widowhood were marked by surprising traits of humility. In this connection, stories are told about her which seem exaggerated to those who know nothing of the way the Holy Spirit guides souls and the sublime paths to perfection into which he leads souls docile to him.

One day, when she had gone down to the marketplace, a fishwife recognized her and, pointing to her, cried out, "There she is, the one who used to give us such good business when she bought the finest and most expensive fish for her table." Touched and moved to compassion at the sight of the poor and ignominious appearance of a lady once so high and mighty in her splendid clothes and her rich apparel, the fishwife got up and presented Madame Maillefer with a small coin, which the latter gratefully accepted. Those who did not know who she was readily made the mistake of thinking that she was some beggar who needed alms and was looking for assistance. It happened occasionally that someone offered her something in charity, and such an alms she accepted as a gift very apt to mortify her self-love. One day, she received a coin as she stood among a group of poor people with whom she loved to mingle, trying to appear as one of them and thus to share the disgrace of beggary. She had to pay dearly for that tiny alms, because those with whom she stood, whether from envy or because they thought she had come there to compete with them for alms, began to insult her and added blows to their invectives. Because that was what she had come to seek, she accepted the ill-treatment with composure. Such a happening she considered a fortunate one.

Nor was that enough to satisfy the Holy Spirit, who took delight both in contradicting in every detail the vanity which had led her astray and in helping her make up for it entirely by causing her to endure the most cutting humiliations. Docile to the inspiration of grace, Madame Maillefer often knelt immobile on the stone floor of the church of Saint Nicaise in the contrite and humble posture and attitude of the publican, in a spot where everybody had to pass and where she was shoved and almost trampled upon. She allowed nothing to distract her. What did she not make use of to demean herself in

the eyes of the world and to cause the public to despise her! Her holy desire for humiliation made her betake herself here and there to reap the harvest of derision and the insults she could find in public. Her thirst for opprobrium gave her no rest and could be satisfied only when she saw herself the object of laughter and mockery.

She traversed the streets asking those whom she met to heap scorn and outrage on her. Sometimes she achieved her purpose by carrying a lighted lantern in broad daylight, so that people would think she was a lunatic, sometimes by walking in the mud, sometimes by appearing in public clad in soiled and filthy apparel, sometimes by wearing shoes, stockings, and skirts full of mud, which she did not allow anybody to remove, sometimes by prostrating herself before the wayside crosses, no matter how muddy the ground in front of them was, and by remaining there in prayer for a considerable time.

What did the faithful think? What could they think of a lady whom all had seen so radiantly beautiful, so sumptuously clad, so richly adorned? Of a lady who had studied so diligently the means of setting off to best advantage her figure and her lovely face? Of one who had followed the latest styles and used the most worldly adornments? She is insane; she has lost her mind; too much devotion has ruined her judgment—that was what everyone was saying. The very street urchins hooted after her and ran behind her yelling, “The crazy lady, the crazy lady!” They all laughed at her, because the sight of her provoked either embarrassment or pity. On such occasions, the lady seemed to be in her element. The world was giving her what she wanted, and she was satisfied. Those pious persons who remained her friends and who were not ashamed to be known as such remonstrated with her for wearing such bizarre and ridiculous attire and tried to tell her that in conscience she ought not to provide the public with so many motives to jeer at her and to give evil tongues an occasion to speak ill of true piety. She silenced them with the words, *We must do nothing to please the world; the wisdom of men is folly with God, and what seems like folly to men is wisdom before God.*

Her love for abjection brought her wherever she thought there might be any humiliation to be experienced and obliged her not only to mingle with the poor on the steps of the most frequented churches but also to pretend to be one of them, so that she could seem to be a beggar too and thus be exposed to the ignominy of begging. Consumed by the desire to be humiliated, she pretended to be the poorest of the poor. She searched herself for vermin, which she would feign to kill in order to be freed from their infestation. She would pull out of her clothing some old strip of cloth or a piece of filthy linen,

which she picked over carefully in the sight of all to get the lice out. The fact was that she was indeed overrun with lice, because she no longer wore underclothing and because she had begun to live in such close contact with the poor. After she finished her penitential practices, she would spend her time caring for the poor. How many other heroic deeds inspired by a humility which sought to earn the derision of men would not the story of her life have preserved for the edification of the faithful, if someone had only taken pains to gather all this information after her death!

She abandoned herself to her love of abjection with such wholehearted zest that her director, Monsieur de Tac, who had a reputation for deep spirituality and who gave public proof of this, was sometimes embarrassed by her and blushed on her account. He frequently reproached her for what she was doing, but the humble lady simply answered that she was only practicing what he had taught her, and she added that if he thought she was going too far in this matter, he should speak less vehemently about humility in the pulpit. She also asked him if what he preached was not to be practiced and whether she should refrain from seeking abjection when he tried to inspire her to desire it. "If the Holy Spirit makes me understand by your teaching," she said, "the hidden treasures contained in humiliations, must your lips forbid me to put into practice the lessons they give me? Either refrain from saying in your sermons what you do not want me to practice, or let me do what you tell me. If I must humble myself in order to become humble and if humility is necessary for salvation, do not hinder me in the exercise of a virtue that the Holy Spirit inspires me to practice in order to expiate my past vanity and to make up in public for the scandal I have given."

Finally, to complete the portrait of her humility, we must add that she became as attached to a hidden and obscure way of life as she had once been to a life of display and ostentation. She detested praise, shrank from it with horror, and avoided people who tried to praise her. One day she mentioned to Mademoiselle de Monville that she would like to live near her, and the latter told her that she would be delighted, as she hoped to profit by the virtuous example she would see. The humble Madame Maillefer was so upset by this gracious reply that rather than going to stay with Mademoiselle de Monville, she henceforth avoided her at all costs.

Because a similar compliment was paid her one day by some other pious persons whom she had gone to see, she never visited them again. "I intend," she had told them, "to rent a room in this neighborhood." "We would be delighted," they replied, "because you

would draw down God's blessing on the entire quarter." These words offended the humble servant of God to such a degree that she left immediately and never went back to see these persons. To be considered her friend, one had to feign to disdain her. Next to insults and ill-treatment, the greatest service a person could render her was to ignore and forget her, for she desired only to be unknown and hidden, even as the dead are in their tombs.

This holy and powerful inclination for scorn and for being forgotten was not a mere passing grace in her life. It was the habitual and dominant attraction of her heart, and it showed itself in her death even as it had during her life. In her last illness, she tried to hide the graces God was giving her, in order to veil her inner life under the appearance of a fatuous air and of a stolid silence which foiled all attempts at penetrating her secret. It was in vain that those near her tried to draw from her some signs of that eminent virtue which so often during her life she had betrayed, without willing to do so, and which had shone out so brightly amidst her apparent folly. She strove to let nothing appear in herself but what she wanted people to see: lack of understanding, defects, failure in virtue, real poverty, stupidity, and obtuseness regarding the things of God. So that after her death she might, even more than during her life, be forgotten and undistinguished among the unnamed poor, she wished to be buried among the paupers in the cemetery of Saint Nicaise, her parish church. However, since virtue, like fire, makes its presence felt, and the more we try to conceal it, the more it becomes manifest, so too the manner of her dying, as we shall see, furnished proof of her eminent sanctity.

### Her penance and charity

Humility was not the only virtue dear to her heart; poverty, penance, and charity also held sway over it. Because she cherished poverty even more than she had once sought luxury and splendor, she got rid of nearly everything she owned. Having become more considerate of the poor in proportion as she had once shown herself unfeeling in their regard, she thought of her possessions only when she remembered that she could use them to do good to the less fortunate. Once she became a widow, she really owned nothing as her own, nothing that she did not devote to works of mercy.

Everywhere and in everything, she showed signs of a holy spirit of poverty. Her dwelling, her dress, her food—all bore the imprint of this virtue. This is really not saying enough, for after the death of her husband, her lodging, furniture, clothes, and food were of such poor

quality that they could only inspire nausea. A miserable room was enough for her. She had two or three earthenware dishes, a little straw to sleep on, and a ragged blanket to keep her warm. All of it was pitiful to see and really good only to be thrown out on the trash heap. If someone had indeed pitched it all out the window, the poorest beggar in town would not have bothered to pick it up.

She preferred the company of the poor. Her ambition was to find a place among them, to resemble them, and to live like them. She succeeded, for she possessed the talent of appearing poor, thanks to her ingenious humility, and that of becoming poor, thanks to her liberal charity. She was as clever in disguising her alms as she was generous in bestowing them. Sometimes she would buy meat and bring it to the home of some poor people to have it cooked; then she would pretend to forget it there, or she would take some of the juice and mix it with water to constitute a sort of soup which she ate from a wooden bowl while standing in the street like a beggar, so that the passersby would think she was indeed a pauper being fed out of charity.

When she went to visit the school she had founded at Darnétal, her zeal made her go from house to house exhorting parents to send their children to catechism. She entered shops and urged the workers and customers to frequent the sacraments. Then she knelt down and showed them by her devout and recollected attitude how they should receive Communion.

The austere, poor, and simple life she led enabled her to use all her income for the benefit of the poor. As fast as money reached her hands, she spent it for the indigent. Her charity was tailored to fit their needs. Knowing as she did in detail what their sufferings were, she knew what she should do with her alms. Since the way she distributed her charity did not always satisfy the cupidity of bogus paupers, it happened not infrequently that her liberality was rewarded by insults. Once, a woman who was displeased because Madame Maillefer had not given her all the money she wanted to buy some wool tried to have her revenge by speaking of her in a satirical and derisive manner. But that was to do the servant of God a great favor, one for which she wished to show her gratitude. "I love you more than all the rest," she exclaimed and then gave that insolent person all the money she had asked for.

At that time, Mass was said every first Wednesday of the month in a chapel built on Mont Saint Catherine, where many people went to satisfy their devotion. Madame Maillefer's piety was even stronger. Every Wednesday she made this tiring pilgrimage. Sometimes she

spent whole hours in prayer, whatever the weather, kneeling at the door of this chapel when it was not open. When she visited the Carmelites, she heard all the Masses said in the chapel and left only at a late hour. She usually attended Matins in her parish church every Sunday and feast day, and during that time she seemed entirely taken up with the remembrance of her sins and consumed with a desire to offer God reparation for them, for she could be heard repeating the words, *Create a clean heart in me, O God! Cast me not far from you; turn aside your gaze from my sins.*

After her husband's death, her life was one long martyrdom of penance. She almost never warmed herself. She endured heat and cold and the other unpleasantness of the weather as though she had no body or had lost all feeling. At first she used heavy, common material for her chemises; then she gave up wearing them entirely, so that when she died, hardly any underclothing was found in her room. She went about barefooted, but it was not easy to notice this, for she wore shoes without the usual soles.

She was a robust person who enjoyed a good appetite, and it was fortunate that she did, for she ate things that an ordinary person could not even have looked at without nausea. What was her food like? Soup and vegetables which had been cooked for several days and in which maggots often teemed. Such food did not seem to bother her. She ate everything, seemingly with great gusto, whereas the people who sometimes watched could not bear the sight of such food. Sister Marie Anne and her companion from Darnétal had come to visit Madame Maillefer one day when there was no school. They began to straighten out her room, which was always very disorderly. What was their amazement when they found worms swimming around in her soup!

No doubt she had not reached such a degree of mortification without having done violence to herself in extraordinary ways. A woman born to opulence, raised delicately, as sensual as she was worldly, a worshiper of her own body, she must have had to undergo terrible struggles to overcome her sensuality and love of ease. The victories she had won over her fastidiousness must have been frequent and bloody ones for a body grown soft in indulgence. What sacrifices must it not have cost her nature, which had been accustomed to refusing itself nothing, before she could bring herself, not like the prodigal son to desire the leftovers thrown to pigs, but to eat what the worms had not consumed and even the worms themselves! Could she not say with Job and with as much reason as he, *What my soul could not have beheld without horror has become my food.*



Indeed, Madame Maillefer had more than one reason to live as she did. All the virtues grew stronger by her way of life. Poverty, charity for the poor, silence, recollection, and interior prayer all flourished, thanks to a lifestyle which required no servants and no lodging but her little room. All alone in this hole in the wall to which a shaky stairway led, she needed little time or effort to prepare her food. She had neither clothespress, trunk, nor any other furniture. She slept on a bit of straw on the floor or on an old carpenter's trestle. Her only valuable piece of furniture, according to the neighbors, was a book-case which supplied the materials for reading and for her prayers during part of the night.

Ordinarily, she spent her time either at the Cathedral of Notre Dame or at the hospital of the Madeleine, where, to expiate her former hardness of heart toward the poor, she rendered them the humblest and most mortifying services. This refuge of human misery and infirmity was the place she enjoyed the most. She stayed there much longer than in her house, where she merely spent the night and prayed in secret. Early in the morning, she would leave her room, whatever the weather, to take up again her round of pious and charitable activities.

She particularly liked to console and exhort the sick, especially the dying, and this she did with singular effectiveness. No one could hear her without being touched. The sick beggars, whom she loved most tenderly, especially seemed delighted to hear her and thought an angel was speaking to them when she exhorted them. If one of them mentioned that he needed a remedy to aid him, she tried at once to satisfy him, even going all across town to get it, if this was necessary, and it frequently was. If there were more sick people than usual, she spent the whole day caring for them. To have more time, she would bring her sorry lunch with her and eat it on the hospital steps. Nothing prevented her from going to serve the sick paupers. The only concession she ever made to herself was to buy a broom, so as to clear the snow from the streets when winter had made them all but impassable. This gave people another reason to laugh at her. But after treating her as a lunatic for fifteen years, people began to look upon her as a saint. After having for so long put her patience to the test, they began to see in her perseverance a proof of real holiness.

Toward the end of her life, she went to a sort of boarding house near Notre Dame to eat and drink, so that she could have more time to pray before the image of the Most Blessed Virgin on the altar of petitions. There she spent several hours every day. She also wanted to have more time to care for the sick and dying. Only at nightfall did

she return to her poor little room in the parish of Saint Nicaise, opposite the Gravelines.

The year 1693, so disastrous on account of the famine and pestilence which desolated France, furnished Madame Maillefer with the occasion of renewing her fervor. But the price she paid was her life. The hospital of the Madeleine was filled with people ill with purple fever, which was raging in Rouen as it was everywhere. The dead and dying provided a new field for heroic acts of charity on the part of the pious lady. Unconcerned and indifferent to the danger to which she was exposing herself and concerned only with relieving suffering, aiding those in their agony, and burying the dead, she ceased her zealous efforts only at nightfall. Weary and worn out, she often left the Madeleine only at ten at night, less to go for rest than to pray. In the practice of such heroic charity, she found the death which was its reward, and thus she crowned her holy life by a death truly precious in the eyes of the Lord.

While taking care of the sick and the dying, she contracted their illness. She felt herself grow violently ill and understood that her last hour had come. As ill herself as the patients she was caring for, she bade them farewell and declared that she would not see them any more, that she would not again have the consolation of relieving their sufferings or of burying the dead. She died, in fact, just a few days later in an ecstasy of love, stretched out on the floor in her poor room with arms outstretched and eyes raised to heaven. She closed her saintly life with the words, "My God, I am coming to you!" The superior of the hospital, who had come with a companion to assist her, went home as full of admiration for her death as she had been for her life. Monsieur Le Paon, later pastor of Saint Nicaise, who gave her the Last Sacraments, returned home so impressed and consoled that he could only exclaim, "What a beautiful death! What a happy death! Blessed are those who die as she did!"

Everyone wanted to have a souvenir of her, for the reputation of holiness which she had acquired made people consider as real relics whatever had belonged to her. That pious desire found little to satisfy itself with, however, for at her death the lady left no money, furniture, or clothes that could be divided. A few rags full of vermin, fit only to burn, were all she left behind. They did take snips of her hair, which were distributed widely and preserved carefully.

Such is the portrait of the celebrated Madame Maillefer, who in her day was so much spoken about, for good and for evil, in the city of Rouen. After having been the town scandal, she became its paragon of virtue; from being a notorious worldling, she became an

illustrious penitent. By many years spent in daily humiliations, in the practice of the most repugnant mortifications, in the constant exercise of the most heroic works of mercy, she expiated the early years of her life which had been given over to the most extravagant luxury, to an easy and sensual life, and to the satisfaction of her unbridled vanity.

She is still remembered in Rouen, where she died some forty years ago.<sup>19</sup> A large number of the faithful still live who remember seeing her. Some knew her, and several witnessed the facts which we have related here. Even today, many speak of her with amazement and sincere admiration. What we have related above is mostly the testimony of an aunt of Monsieur de Monville, a president of magistrates. She is Mademoiselle de Monville, now eighty-five years old, and she knew Madame Maillefer very well,<sup>20</sup> since both of them had the same spiritual director. There is also the testimony of Sister Marie Anne of Darnétal, whom Madame Maillefer sent to that village as a schoolmistress and who still lives there, and of various other persons who saw and knew her.

As Madame Maillefer was interested in all good works, she was one of the first to support the zeal of Père Barré when he began establishing Christian Schools. She founded one for girls in Darnétal, a large village close to Rouen, a commercial and manufacturing center with a considerable population. The success of that school encouraged the founding of similar ones elsewhere for the education of girls and the idea of such schools for boys as well.

This is the way Divine Providence led Monsieur de La Salle to carry out this design. Madame Maillefer was inspired to provide for the poor children in her native city of Reims the same benefits that she had afforded those at Darnétal. She therefore made arrangements with Monsieur Roland, whom she trusted implicitly and who shared her deep piety, to set about starting schools for boys there. It was not necessary to provide for the girls, since Roland as early as 1674 had founded for their instruction the Community of Sisters which we have already mentioned. The great good done for girls in this new establishment led Monsieur Roland and Madame Maillefer to entertain a great desire to establish something similar for boys. In 1673 the two of them had laid plans aimed at bringing this about, but these had been frustrated by Roland's death. The generous benefactress did not let his

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19. Madame Maillefer died in the plague of 1693–94. Blain was writing sometime before 1733.

20. Madame de Monville, forty-five years old when Madame Maillefer died, would have been about five years old in the period “before the conversion.”

death deter her. Hoping against hope, she resolved to revive the project which, although she did not suspect it, would give rise to the founding of the Brothers' Institute.

Since Roland could no longer help her, she was inspired to try to find someone else in Reims who might replace him. The enterprise was a delicate and difficult one. The opposition which the institution of the schools for girls had encountered in Reims made it clear that the project of something similar for boys would run into the same heavy weather. Consequently, to bring it off called for a man who was zealous and adroit, supple and persuasive. Madame Maillefer thought she had found such a man in Monsieur Adrien Nyel, a native of Laon, who at this time was about fifty-five years old. Nature had given him the talents needed for this sort of undertaking. Lively and restless by temperament, he was always ready to break new trails and to attempt new projects. Nor was he inexperienced in the type of work that Madame Maillefer thought he could successfully establish. He had begun in Rouen, where he had started some successful Gratuitous Schools for boys and had much to do with their growth. To provide for his living expenses and those of a fourteen-year-old boy who would accompany him to Reims, Madame Maillefer had undertaken to furnish them 100 écus a year and had given them a written promise to this effect.

With this assurance, Nyel left for Reims in 1679 with his young traveling companion. He had been properly rehearsed regarding the intentions of his benefactress and carried letters from her addressed to the Superior of the Sisters of the Child Jesus, who was aware of this project, which she had discussed with Roland when he was still alive. This Sister knew Nyel, for she had lived in Rouen and had served as the Superior of the Sisters of Providence there. Now she was directing the new Community founded by Monsieur Roland, to whom Père Barré had sent her.

Divine Providence, which controls events in order to bring about its own ends, saw to it that Monsieur de La Salle happened to be entering the Sisters' convent just as Nyel and his young companion arrived there. Providence intended to introduce to De La Salle this stranger who would be the instrument for the establishment of Christian and Gratuitous Schools for boys. Nothing, however, was further from De La Salle's thoughts. He would have been very much surprised had anyone told him that this stranger, so casually met, was an envoy from God sent to lead him to the accomplishment of God's eternal designs. On his side, Nyel had indeed come to open Christian and Gratuitous Schools, but his aims went no farther. He had not the

slightest suspicion that he was about to lay the foundation of a great edifice and to prepare the way for the establishment of a new religious order. I am not at all sure whether he would have consented to be a part of such an enterprise, if anyone had shown him the final outcome of his journey to Reims, for he personally had neither the inclination nor the grace for it. He was not really suited for an undertaking of this nature, as the sequel was to show. He was, then, merely the providential instrument for getting it started. Once it was under way, Nyel, who brought De La Salle into it, would move on, leaving him alone to carry out God's purposes.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Opening of Christian and Gratuitous Schools for boys in Reims.*

Monsieur Nyel had reached Reims and was still knocking at the door of the Sisters' convent when De La Salle also arrived there. They saw each other for the first time but did not speak, as people do who are not acquainted and who do not even surmise the relationship they will eventually establish with one another. Once admitted, Nyel, after the usual compliments, explained to the Superior the reason for his visit and gave her the letter Madame Maillefer had written.

De La Salle was not present at this meeting. On entering the house, he had let the stranger—of whose mission and its motive he had no inkling—free to confer with the Superior. What could she reply? True, Nyel was no stranger to her, but his project, although planned while Monsieur Roland was still alive, seemed to her something unusual and daring, and its success very problematical.

It was, however, not up to Sister to object or to give advice. The man who could resolve all difficulties was in the convent. Without knowing it, Nyel had met him at the door. He was the one who should be consulted and who could advise them. The Superior sent for De La Salle and begged him to give them the benefit of his counsel. Among the letters from Madame Maillefer which Nyel had brought with him, there was one addressed to Monsieur de La Salle, a relative of hers.<sup>21</sup> In this letter, she begged him to use his influence to

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21. They were distantly related by marriage. The Founder's great-grandfather and the grandmother of Madame Maillefer's husband were brother and sister. Also, her husband's Aunt Rose was married to the Founder's uncle, Simon de La Salle.

help Nyel and her to set up in Reims a foundation for the Christian and gratuitous education of poor boys. De La Salle read Madame Maillefer's letter and listened to Nyel explain his project. He realized how important and necessary it was and the advantages it would offer. He wanted it to succeed, but he foresaw the difficulties involved and the problems that would arise.

Roland's hopes would have been fulfilled to the highest extent if he had lived to see his project executed, but death had not allowed him to do so. Hence it was, so to speak, a sort of duty for De La Salle to promote the undertaking. He felt he owed this to the memory of his deceased friend, and the goodness of his heart did not permit him to refuse his cooperation. In addition, nobody was suggesting that he undertake the task himself, still less assume responsibility for it; things had not yet reached that point. If De La Salle had thought it would come to that, he would not have put a finger to it, such was his distaste, not for the work itself—which he considered excellent—but for becoming its promoter and leader.

De La Salle, not aware that he was assuming any special obligation, charitably offered to help Nyel in any way he could. He praised Nyel's zeal and applauded his initiative. Generously putting aside all human views and his own private opinion that there was not much chance for the plan to succeed, he offered to do what he could to resolve the initial difficulties. The first of these, which could have led to many others, was to find a suitable place for Nyel to stay while arranging for the opening of his school. This first step was a slippery one; too many precautions could not be taken to make it safe and to insure that it would not lead to a fiasco. Secrecy was no less necessary, for a plan that is publicized too early often fails to materialize.

It was, then, necessary to veil this project in silence. The least suspicion that might have been aroused would have sufficed to ruin it, especially in a town where there was so much prejudice against new establishments and where the ill feeling aroused over the Institute of School Sisters had as yet barely subsided. If it were noised abroad that Nyel had come as a schoolmaster for the purpose of opening Gratuitous Schools, he would have found every door closed against him—or rather, wide open to let him leave.

Now the instructions that Nyel had received from Madame Maillefer to lodge at her brother's house would have divulged the plan. De La Salle, enlightened by his usual prudence or perhaps by an illumination from on high, realized this possibility and advised against his staying with Madame Maillefer's brother. "In vain," he told Nyel, "would you have come so far to open Christian and Gratuitous Schools

in Reims if your steps took you to the house of the brother of your benefactress. If you go there, you declare your intentions, and if you do so, you will cause the entire project to fail. Will not your stay in that house lead everyone to guess why you have come?

"Your social rank, your state in life, and your type of work are entirely different from those of your host. People will ask what brings you to him and what can be the reason for your coming. They will talk about it and try to find out. The curious will investigate; the idle will gossip. Sooner or later, they will discover the truth or at least get an inkling of it. No matter how reserved you are, they will worm something out of you. They will follow you around and thus learn where you go. Once they find out your business here, they will block you at every turn. The past vouches for the future. Just recently, a well-known canon and theological preacher, respected and revered in the city, founded a society of women teachers for the schools, which was almost ruined before it really got started.

"So close to destruction was it that only the authority of Archbishop Le Tellier was able to save it. He had to throw all his influence into the balance, and even this was scarcely enough to offset the ill will of the city officials, still less to win them over and get them to agree. Do you think they will approve a second institution for boys? No doubt the poor people of the city need this foundation, but the interests of God and of the poor so often must take second place to politics. To make the latter give way to the former, the archbishop will have to exert all his influence again. Will he be willing to do this, to make use of it a second time, perhaps at the risk of failure?"

De La Salle invites Nyel to stay with him

These arguments were only too well founded and made Nyel realize the risk he would have run if he were to stay with Madame Maillefer's brother. But where could he go? What was he to do? That was what immediately disturbed him. But the charitable concern of De La Salle did not give him much time to worry about his problem or even to suffer perplexity over it. De La Salle offered Nyel the hospitality of his own house, a move which would forestall all the inconveniences already considered.

"Come," he said with a gracious air; "Stay with me. My home is a residence where parish priests from the country and other priests who are my friends often stay. It is just the place for you to reside, so as to veil your project from public scrutiny. You look somewhat like a parish priest from the country, and people will think that you are one

of them. Furthermore, I certainly have the right to offer the hospitality of my home to whomsoever I please. What the world may think about it is of no concern to me; the least of my worries is what people will say. In my house, quiet and unrecognized and without being a burden to anyone, you can easily spend a week or so. This will give you time for further consideration, for refining your plans and deciding on the best way of implementing them successfully. Once this time has elapsed, you can leave for Notre Dame de Liesse,<sup>22</sup> where your piety is calling you, and when you come back, you can attempt to open the schools."

The offer was too obliging and too convenient to be refused. Charmed by the young canon's charity and prudence, Nyel gratefully accepted his proposal. Neither of them could foresee what would come out of the arrangement. De La Salle did not realize that by helping Nyel carry out his plan, he was beginning to forge his own destiny, nor that by bringing this schoolmaster into his home, he would eventually transform it into a training school for those whom God planned to send him.

Agreeably surprised at finding a decent, commodious place to stay on his arrival in Reims, one which suited his projects well, and at having discovered a sponsor so zealous and so capable of furthering his plans, Nyel thought only of thanking God and of informing Madame Maillefer of his good fortune. Such a favorable turn of events seemed to both of them to presage well for the success of their venture. Madame Maillefer urged Nyel to go ahead and to neglect nothing to get the project off to a favorable start. In inviting Nyel to stay with him, De La Salle had thought he was merely providing lodging for a schoolteacher; that was all he meant to do. But it was not all that God had in mind, the God who had chosen him to become the founder of a new institute. God kept after him, through his secret inspirations, inciting him to take to heart the interests of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools and to put into effect all the measures needed to insure their success.

### Steps taken by De La Salle to introduce Gratuitous Schools for boys in Reims

Filled with many thoughts, the pious canon consulted God and examined in his presence how he should handle such a delicate matter.

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22. An ancient and celebrated shrine not far from Laon, Nyel's hometown. Later on, De La Salle and his Brothers would make pilgrimages there.



Fearing to make mistakes and not willing to rely only on his own ideas, he was inspired to seek enlightenment from those wiser than he. The first person he consulted was a close friend, Père Claude Bretagne, at this time prior of the Abbey of Saint Remy in Reims and later of Saint Germain in Paris, with which our saintly canon was closely connected. He did not, however, limit himself to one single adviser. To proceed with greater assurance and not wishing to neglect any precaution, he sought the advice of the most pious ecclesiastics in the city, those most capable of foreseeing the inconveniences to be avoided and of pointing out the most dangerous obstacles. So that they might deliberate in greater ease, he brought them together with Père Bretagne and held several meetings with them.

They discussed the means of getting the project started successfully. After a careful examination, it was agreed that De La Salle's proposal was the safest and indeed the only feasible one. "The best and perhaps the only way to get these Christian and Gratuitous Schools off to a good start," he said to them, "is to safeguard them from all opposition by placing them under the protection of a pastor zealous enough to assume responsibility for them, discreet enough to avoid publicity, and generous enough to support them. Since as pastor he has a right to provide for the religious instruction of his parishioners and since his position as pastor authorizes him to appoint teachers to instruct them in Christian doctrine, nobody would venture to interfere with him or with the schools."

This advice seemed wise and was applauded. The choice of a pastor to undertake this project was the next question, one even more difficult to settle, for if a bad choice were made, the whole enterprise would collapse. In such a matter, where it is easy to make a mistake, we often think someone to be wise, discreet, and well intentioned when he really is not such at all. People who have a reputation for these qualities without having really deserved it often show their deficiencies when the occasion puts them to the test. The matter was discussed, and it was agreed that the choice should go to one of four parish priests who seemed to enjoy the best reputation. But which one of these should be selected? Again, this was a knotty question. Finally, at De La Salle's suggestion, the majority of the group opted for the pastor of Saint Maurice, and the rest agreed that he should be chosen.

"The pastor of Saint Symphorien," said De La Salle of the first of the four pastors proposed, "would be the man we are looking for, if only he were well thought of by his superiors, but unfortunately they do not like him, and so we had better not consider him further. The

second man does not have much judgment. The third is the nephew and toady of the diocesan *officialis*, owes him everything he has become, and is devoted to him. It would take only a word from his uncle and benefactor, and he would send all of the schoolmasters away. We cannot pick him either.” This third man, however, was the candidate favored by Père Bretagne and the one he would have preferred, if the arguments advanced by De La Salle could have been contradicted. The choice finally fell on Monsieur Dorigny, the pastor of Saint Maurice. He was a man of sound judgment and firm in his decisions, the sort of person needed to resist the opposition which, it was feared, might come from the *Ecolâtre*,<sup>23</sup> who by reason of his position might oppose the opening of this school; in fact he tried to do so but in vain.

All those consulted were in agreement, so the only thing remaining was to find the right way to approach the parish priest of Saint Maurice. Of all those considered, he alone presented none of the drawbacks which were anticipated and was judged capable of carrying out the proposed plan. He was a man noted for his piety, zeal, and firmness in following through what he undertook. Since the first step was to make arrangements with him and coordinate measures to insure success, De La Salle was advised to contact him at once.

This mission he carried out with full success. As we can see, the special grace needed to do this work was already evident in him, and without his noticing it, this grace acted powerfully in all he did. He was the first to foresee difficulties, to find ways of avoiding obstacles, to suggest wise measures. Light from above taught him the direction which should be given to this undertaking, the people who should be approached, and the pastor best qualified to begin it. A single false move, a single precaution omitted, a single step too hasty or too long delayed might have caused the whole project to fail at its inception.

The pious canon, the one God had chosen to manage this enterprise, lost no time in getting it started. He called on Monsieur Dorigny, explained what was proposed, and informed him that the group had thought he was the priest best qualified to launch it. As it happened, he could not have found a more willing listener. No doubt, God himself had chosen the pastor of Saint Maurice for this role, for he had already inspired him with the idea of establishing in his parish a Gratuitous School taught by some ecclesiastic who would live with

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23. A diocesan superintendent of schools and protector of the teachers in the Little Schools, especially when their franchises would be threatened by competition from parish schools for the poor.

him. He was, therefore, agreeably surprised by the obliging offer De La Salle made to him concerning a foundation that he himself had been thinking of, that would be of great advantage to him, and that would cost him nothing.

“All we are asking you,” added De La Salle, “is to present yourself as the founder of this school and to lend it your name. Your parishioners are mostly poor people; it is your duty to provide instruction for them, since they cannot secure it for themselves. You will give it to them through Monsieur Nyel and his companion, whom we are proposing to you as teachers in your school. Take them in. If questions are asked, let it be understood that you are employing them to instruct the children of your parish.”

Such an advantageous proposal was accepted with joy and alacrity. The pastor did not really need to consider it for a long time, since it offered nothing but advantages for him. To facilitate the prompt start of the school, he offered to lodge the two schoolmasters in his house. This seemed to have been an inspiration from God, for it greatly contributed to the success of an undertaking which called for all possible precautions. Since the schoolmasters would live under the same roof as the pastor and take their meals at his table, it was only natural for people to consider them as his assistants, not men who were simply on loan, as it were, and whose expenses were paid by someone else.

### Opening of the school in the parish of Saint Maurice in 1679

De La Salle was not slow in agreeing to the offer made by Monsieur Dorigny and asked him whether he would be satisfied with the annual grant of 100 écus, which Madame Maillefer, though her name was not mentioned, would provide for the two teachers. The bargain was struck with great satisfaction on both sides. Thus the first Christian and Gratuitous School for boys was opened in Reims in the year 1679. Everything had turned out as De La Salle had hoped it would. There remained nothing more for him to do, or so he thought, but to thank God and to resume his duties as a good priest and canon. In this he was mistaken. For him a more demanding and laborious life was about to begin.

After witnessing the opening of the first school in Reims and thinking this was all God was asking of him, De La Salle withdrew from the scene. From time to time, however, Nyel visited him to consult him and to ask for various favors. The charitable canon was happy to oblige him but did not go any further. The two saw each other

occasionally but made no special plans for the future. They did not know how God intended to guide them to fulfill his own ends.

The two men were markedly different personalities. De La Salle was calm; great reflection marked all his acts. Nyel was energetic, enterprising, and a great enthusiast. Thus, his active zeal was just what was needed to stimulate that of De La Salle, more circumspect and more cautious. The one was to be for the other the stimulus needed to bring God's work into being. Thus does it please Divine Providence to endow men with varying traits of character, so that despite differences they can cooperate in the execution of the divine designs. The infinitely skillful divine hand can make use of the most unlikely instruments. God's enemies themselves cooperate in bringing about the divine purposes, and what they do to oppose them only helps to further their accomplishment. God delights in working with nothing and draws from it the most impressive results. God can make use of men and women of all ages and social ranks. God can use anyone—infirm, feeble-minded, abandoned by all—and produce through such a person the most remarkable effects.

As proof of this truth, we need only consider the choice of the Apostles to be the founders of the Church, the spread of the faith over all the world by men without influence, eloquence, or power, the founding of religious orders in spite of all the opposition of hell, the success of so many great enterprises that grew out of such humble beginnings. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that Monsieur Nyel, without ever suspecting it, should have given rise to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and that De La Salle, without wishing to do so, became its father. Here is the occasion used by Divine Providence for that purpose.

Madame de Croyères was a childless widow, wealthy and pious. She wished to found a school for boys in her own parish of Saint Jacques. Nyel learned of the woman's intentions, so conformable with his own, and did not fail to seize the opportunity thus presented to him to open another school. He visited Madame de Croyères, encouraged her in her worthy project, told her what he himself was doing, won her confidence, and urged her to carry out her pious design either through an act of donation or by a formal foundation. He then related to her all he had done in Rouen to establish Christian and Gratuitous Schools in that city and how well they had succeeded. He added that he had met with the same success in Reims, where he had come to found a school.

Finally, to secure the woman's complete trust, Nyel mentioned that he had the honor to be acquainted with De La Salle and named

him as the promoter and protector of his work in Reims. He suggested that she meet with the canon and succeeded in making her very eager to do so. He then offered to take charge of the new school, if she wished, and recommended De La Salle as the man most capable of executing her pious plans. Nyel's visit was not fruitless, since after having received confirmation from the good lady of her worthy project, he had made her desirous to discuss it with the young canon.

Realizing that his first attempts at approaching Madame de Croyères had succeeded, Nyel lost no time in contacting De La Salle on the same subject. He had come to know him well. Feeling that the past augured well for the future and counting on the charitable dispositions of his benefactor and protector, he did not doubt that the establishment of a Gratuitous School in the parish of Saint Jacques would appeal to his zeal as much as the one in the parish of Saint Maurice had done. The young canon, as prudent as he was zealous and attentive to seek the will of God in all circumstances, at first asked himself whether he should refuse or accept Nyel's suggestion. Always cautious on such occasions, he hesitated to get involved. His wariness was also mingled with a certain reluctance.

As he was interested in all kinds of good works, however, he felt obliged to lend his assistance to this one, too. It so evidently bore the marks of Divine Providence that he could not obstinately refuse to recognize them. He therefore acceded to the desire of the dying lady, who eagerly awaited his visit and was extremely happy to see him. Madame de Croyères opened her heart to him and explained how God had inspired her to plan a school in her parish. She begged him to attend to the matter so that the school might be opened immediately. She promised him, for the coming Easter, a sum of 500 livres for the living expenses of two teachers and a later capital gift of 10,000 livres, the interest on which—some 500 livres per year—would provide an annual subsidy. If this were not satisfactory, she promised either to give him property which would produce this much revenue or to add a codicil to her will obliging her heirs to pay a like sum to the schoolmasters every year. She left it up to him to decide which of these proposals suited him best.

Madame de Croyère's promise was duly carried out. At Easter, the 500 livres were promptly turned over to De La Salle. When the lady died some six weeks later, her death caused some change in the execution of her design. The 10,000 livres remained in the hands of her testamentary executor, who, however, never failed to pay the 500 livres to De La Salle as long as he remained in Reims and after he left, to the local superior of the Brothers. In this way, the heirs of Madame

de Croyères, to whom she had made known her desires, made it a duty to carry them out.

### Opening of the school in the parish of Saint Jacques

Thus the school in the Saint Jacques parish was opened without opposition in September of that same year, 1679. Nyel himself directed it and found other teachers for the school of Saint Maurice. As the number of students in the second school grew day by day, it became necessary to employ another teacher. Thus there were five teachers who lived with the pastor of Saint Maurice. Since he found it difficult to feed them for 50 écus each,<sup>24</sup> he requested 200 livres a year for each one, their lodging being extra. De La Salle agreed to be responsible for this supplementary sum as well as for the cost of their lodging. By accepting this obligation, the canon was little by little becoming further involved in the enterprise but without really considering his involvement or wishing to do so. As yet, he had nothing directly to do with the two schools that had been established, other than what his charity inspired him to do for all sorts of good works. Happy over the success that the new venture seemed to be achieving, he did not look any farther afield. He let Nyel take full charge of the teachers.

Although gifted with real piety, Nyel was not a man to assume responsibility for a Community. His coming and going, the projects he devised, and the visits he made kept him away too much and did not allow him to watch over his own house or remain quietly in it. No sooner had he started one school than he began dreaming of another. His zeal aimed at multiplying schools rather than at making them excellent ones. His superficial way of acting led to serious trouble. He was nearly always out of the house; as a result of his absences, the teachers became careless, and the students grew restless. Another problem which Nyel ought to have done something about was that each teacher taught in his own way, as his fancy suggested and his own taste preferred. This lack of uniform procedure in the schools, which were still in their infancy, interfered with the good results that might have been hoped for.

The light of the Holy Spirit had already made De La Salle notice all these drawbacks and had inspired him with the idea of trying to remedy them. God gave him the special grace needed for the work to which he called him; this grace grew within him day by day, almost in spite of himself, for he still had no intention whatever of taking

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24. An écu was the equivalent of three livres.

charge of the schools, much less of the schoolmasters. "I had thought," he wrote in a memoir which he composed later on to inform the Brothers about the means Divine Providence had used to establish their Institute, "that the care which I took of the schools and of the teachers would only be external, something which would not involve me any further than to provide for their subsistence and to see to it that they carried out their duties with piety and assiduity."

### De La Salle earns the doctorate and suffers a serious accident

This care for the schools which De La Salle assumed as an additional occupation, not really as part of his duties, still left him all the time he needed to acquire the high degree of knowledge and virtue which would be so necessary for him when the schools eventually became his only concern. He had secured the licentiate sometime before this; he now passed the examinations, sustained his theses, and fulfilled all the other requirements usual in the Reims theological faculty, as in that of Paris, but he still had not received the doctor's cap. This he finally did in 1681, at the age of thirty.

It was about this time that an accident happened to him which could have cost him his life. He was returning from the country on foot in extremely wretched weather. A heavy snow covered everything, obliterating every trace of the road, and a strong wind had swept the snow into the ditches. He lost his way and stumbled into a deep ravine. He had ample time to beg for God's help, because none was available from men. He would have called out in vain, because the weather prevented anyone from being abroad. Man and beast had sought shelter; the countryside was deserted.

After he struggled for a long time and vainly made a supreme effort to get out of the ditch, it seemed he could only recommend his soul to God and thus prepare to die. Death was indeed very near and seemed inevitable, for the more he struggled, the weaker he became. If he had become totally exhausted, he would have been buried under a blanket of snow. If he had spent the entire night there, sunrise would have found him dead. Was he helped by God in some sensible manner? No one can say; his humility never allowed him to say so. At least Divine Providence, which was watching over his life, succeeded in drawing him out of this abyss, without a visible miracle, by favoring the new efforts he made to get out.

He finally managed to escape, but the accident left him with a rupture caused by the violent efforts he had made to save his life. Later on, this injury helped him to remember the extreme danger from

which God had delivered him and the thanks he owed to God. The event gave him matter for profound meditation on the protection of God which he had enjoyed and new motives for serving God with greater fervor. He was so touched by this consideration that he never spoke of the incident except with great expressions of gratitude.

## CHAPTER IX

*In spite of the extreme reluctance which De La Salle feels in the depths of his soul to live with people so little polished as were the schoolmasters, his love for the good which could be done makes him decide to bring them closer to him, to supervise them, and finally to admit them to his own house.*

An undertaking never bears a more visible sign of being God's work than when it is marked with the cross—when everything in the world takes up arms to overthrow it, when all hell rises up to destroy it, when it is assailed on every side and seems within an inch of perishing yet does not succumb, or if it does falter, it rises again immediately and draws new strength from its fall; this is a sign that the hand of the Most High supports it and that it is God's work. A man of God never shows more clearly that his mission is from heaven than when he nourishes in his heart, like Jeremiah the prophet, a deep distrust for works that bring him public attention; when like Saint John the Baptist, he undertakes these works only if God orders him to do so; when to undertake them he needs to act in spite of his repugnance; when he must sacrifice his own tranquillity and reputation. In these traits, we can recognize a summary portrait of De La Salle and of his Institute. When his work was beginning, nothing but thunderbolts and tempests greeted it. On every side, it encountered nothing but violent and continual attacks, yet it subsisted. Although frequently poised on the slopes leading to destruction, it did not fall. If it seemed to suffer momentary eclipse, the next day saw it rise from the darkness.

When he began, De La Salle did not fully realize what he was involved in. He thought he was only lending a hand. As he became more deeply involved, his entire being revolted at the thought of the project which he was putting into operation. He yielded only when he felt he saw God's will clearly marked out for him. This obedience would call upon him to despoil himself of all his worldly goods, to



give up the comforts of life, and generally to accept the deprivation of everything that the human heart most cherishes.

Meanwhile, the world would give free rein to its criticism and calumnies against his work. His every move became a crime. He was scrutinized, examined, taken to task; nothing in him escaped malignant tongues. After giving all his actions a ridiculous interpretation, the public would not even allow him credit for good intentions. People called him ambitious, eager to win a name for himself in the world. He was, they said, ready to sacrifice his canonry, his patrimonial wealth, his family's interests, his relatives' good name, in order to purchase for himself the title of Founder. It is a glorious thing to appear as a saint, and that is what he was after. Such was the phantom he pursued with his broad-brimmed hat, his flat, thick-soled shoes, his external appearance so strange and uncouth. All this was what the world soon started saying about him.

Without waiting for the future to give the lie to these malicious tales by the remarkable examples of dependence, humility, and submission which he so often gave to his spiritual children, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, we can see how unjust these reproaches were simply by observing his dispositions at the time and the sacrifices he had to make. What worldlings call chance and what Christians call Divine Providence brought him into contact with Nyel and his companion. He did not know where God was leading him when God convinced him to take an interest in the schools. He found himself involved in caring for them but hardly realized his growing commitment; even less did he want to take charge. One step led to another. When he finally emerged on the path where Divine Providence had brought him blindfolded, God's will was made clear by those whom he consulted and whom he listened to as oracles of the Holy Spirit.

### De La Salle's repugnance for associating with the teachers

For fear that the reader may think that we are simply imagining these dispositions of his, let us listen to what he himself had to say. "It was," he declares in the memoir mentioned previously, "by these two events, namely by my meeting Monsieur Nyel and by the proposal made to me by this woman, that I began to take an interest in the schools for boys. Prior to this, I had never given them a thought. The suggestion, of course, had been made to me before. Several of Monsieur Roland's friends had tried to motivate me to accept, but the proposal had never made any impression on my mind, and I had never considered carrying it out.

“Indeed, if I had ever thought that the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project. For since, naturally speaking, I considered the men whom I was obliged to employ in the schools at the beginning as being inferior to my valet, the mere thought that I would have to live with them would have been insupportable to me. In fact, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted for two years. It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. God did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.” It was, then, entirely wrong for people to accuse him of ambition and of seeking in a lowly condition and a poor and austere life the means of exalting himself and of winning worldly honor.

Interest in the progress of the schools already established, however, was growing in De La Salle in proportion as he became more involved. The grace of leadership, which unknowingly he already had in their regard, afforded him much insight as to the best manner of conducting schools. The Spirit of God not only showed him the serious flaws in the schools already opened but likewise indicated to him the proper way to correct them. As we have said, one source of the trouble was the man who had promoted the entire undertaking. Nyel, while capable of founding a school, scarcely knew how to direct the teachers. He did not give adequate attention to what was going on in the house, and he did not insist enough on maintaining a schedule. He was not concerned to give the others an example of what was needed by way of domestic order, family spirit, manner of speaking, and an ordered life.

This was the primary source of the disorder. De La Salle could do little to correct it unless he was closer to the Brothers. It was necessary for him either to draw nearer to them or to bring them into closer contact with him. They needed to be gathered under one roof and under his eyes, if he were to direct them to any extent and establish among them a uniform and regular manner of life. This conviction led him to rent a house not far from his own home, where they could live and where he could visit them more often. To cut down on expenses, he had their meals prepared in his house and brought to them. Thus he induced them to adopt a less independent lifestyle. All this was done. The schoolmasters moved into the residence near that of De La

Salle at Christmas 1679. The dedicated canon urged them to live a more orderly life and prescribed some regulations for them to observe.

Although Nyel had no capacity for directing a Community, he was nonetheless eager to do good. Happy over what was being accomplished, he willingly supported the initiative by his example. He gladly agreed to the new regulations and was the first to conform to them. While his objectives and those of De La Salle were quite divergent, the two men agreed when it came to the means for making them succeed.

De La Salle wanted to bring some order into the manner of living of the teachers; Nyel dreamed only of opening new schools. The former, by having the teachers live near him, found it easier to guide them and was closer at hand to watch over them. The latter, being thus partly relieved of a vigilance which interfered with his activities, enjoyed greater liberty to indulge in his preferred occupations. He did just that, for no sooner was the transfer to the new house effected than he importuned De La Salle to let him open there a third school. When it opened, this new school soon became better disciplined and enrolled more pupils than either of the other two.

### He introduces regulations for the teachers

These first attempts at bringing some order into the undertaking, however, merely made the pious canon realize more acutely how sorely the schoolmasters needed direction and how much still remained to be done in this regard. The regulations, covering only a few points, simply showed how unsystematic the teachers remained in many other respects. Rising and retiring, interior prayer, holy Mass, and meals were assigned to fixed times, and these the men observed, but the rest of the time was theirs to dispose of. Masters of their actions as well as of their persons, they followed their own whims in everything when Nyel was absent. Each one's devotion or caprice decided when he received Communion. They went out every Sunday morning and on feast days, wherever they felt like going. In the house, as well as outside it, there was no obedience, no silence, no true community life.

Nyel's religious spirit, which ought to have made all these points the main object of his zeal, was preoccupied elsewhere. He made it his principal duty to be devoted to the school, to bring the students to High Mass on Sundays, to make new acquaintances, and to keep up with his old ones in view of winning people's favor for his projects

for new schools. He was almost never where he should have always been in order by his presence to create a spirit of community among the schoolmasters, a spirit of order, silence, regularity, and obedience. The result was that in spite of the efforts of the vigilant canon, disorder reigned in the house. De La Salle saw all this and deplored it, but what could he do to remedy the situation? Nyel was not a man who could be expected to make a vow to stay put. I doubt that this would have been possible for him with his restless, roving disposition. If the canon could have taken Nyel's place and made up for his absence, everything would have run more smoothly, but what chance was there that a canon would give up his position and his choir duties in order to assume responsibility as the superior in a house for schoolmasters? How could a man burdened with so many other obligations forsake them to govern a community of six men?

At any rate, De La Salle had plenty of time to think the matter over, for he had rented the house close to his for a year and a half. He therefore had leisure to consider the means by which he could eventually introduce more order and greater regularity among the schoolmasters. As neither his reflections nor the passage of time suggested any foolproof solution for the problem, he remained uncertain as to what he should do. He could see only two possibilities: lodge the teachers in his own home or continue renting the other building. He did not know which alternative to choose, and this uncertainty threw him into some perplexity.

He could not bring himself to let the schoolmasters continue to live as they pleased, with no order or standards of behavior, and consequently without true piety. He would have preferred to stop looking after them entirely. Himself a man who lived by rule, he wanted this same attitude to prevail wherever he went. As he could not live without order, he could not permit those under his care to live without a determined schedule. To invite these men into his house, to lodge them under the same roof, to associate with them, and to start living a common life with them created an arrangement that promised many difficulties. Nature grew alarmed over it, and within himself, De La Salle felt a great repugnance to adopt this course. His human reactions and his natural inclinations revolted at the very thought. He also foresaw that if he went through with it, he would have to contend with the opposition both of his colleagues in the cathedral chapter and of his relatives and friends.

The more he reflected, the less De La Salle felt able to come to a decision. It soon became necessary for him to seek a solution for his doubts in the advice of some person familiar with God's ways. Docile,

humble, ever on guard against his own judgment, he preferred to follow the guidance of others before acting. But whom could he consult on such a delicate matter? Was there in Reims a man sufficiently enlightened or courageous to advise him to do what was most perfect, whatever the cost to his own reputation and at the risk of provoking a thousand recriminations from an angry family and from an entire city up in arms?

### He consults Père Barré

Père Barré was, of all men, the one who on this occasion seemed the best qualified to give De La Salle advice according to the mind of God. An eloquent man, successful in his undertakings, well versed in the ways of the interior life, knowing more than most about Christian Schools, proof against all human views and fears, he had only the greater glory of God at heart. Those who listened to him felt inspired with a noble liberty to seek this glory at the expense of their self-love. He was the man whom the canon was inspired to consult. He was the originator and first founder of Christian and Gratuitous Schools in France. He possessed a special understanding of this subject. Moreover, he knew Monsieur Nyel; nobody was better qualified than he to give advice concerning him. Aware that as long as a man of Nyel's character remained in charge of the teachers, it was useless to expect to find among them order, regularity, or community spirit, he did not hesitate to urge De La Salle to take them into his home and live with them.

His advice was certainly wise, necessary, and inspired by heaven, but it was easier for him to give than for De La Salle to carry out. In following it, De La Salle had to expect that he would meet with perplexities insurmountable for anyone less courageous than he. He understood the obstacles thoroughly. His realization clashed with his conviction of how necessary it was to adopt the advice he had been given. This opposition led him to suspend his decision and to put off its execution.

### A difficult decision

On the one hand, the spiritual benefit for the teachers, the good done in their schools, and his own liking for order and regularity were powerful motives which impelled De La Salle and did not permit him to turn aside from such a desirable course of action. On the other hand, his aversion for associating with such uncultured people, the

distress he felt at having to live with men who for the most part lacked social polish, refinement of manner, good breeding, and the capacity of taking part not so much in an agreeable conversation as even in a rational one—all put his sensitivity to the torture and warned him not to go too fast in making up his mind.

This natural distaste he secretly felt was fortified by human reasons capable of making a deep impression on a man who belonged to a distinguished family and was a good brother and considerate relative. He had his three brothers living with him; it was his responsibility to look after their property, their education, and their guidance. What could justify sending them away from his home in order to replace them with schoolmasters? But to make them live a common life with these men was simply unreasonable from the human point of view. Still, he had to choose between these alternatives; neither one would be popular with anybody. There would follow a harvest of suffering and crosses to be borne by his family, who would be shocked and irritated by mixing together people of such divergent backgrounds. His relatives would not fail to consider it a dishonor and to reproach him with it as a crime.

The devil, who pleads nature's cause, added his voice to these clamors. What! the devil suggested to him, can you really want to lodge these peasants in your home and live with such scum?<sup>25</sup> What will people say? What will your family think? What will even your most pious friends feel about it? At least consult them before you undertake such a course of action, and listen to their advice, lest after acting rashly, you may have good reason to regret what you have done. If you will not heed them, at least consult your own weakness; have pity on yourself; do not take upon yourself a yoke too heavy and burdensome for your delicate constitution. Such were the considerations which nature suggested and the devil advanced and which were reinforced by the protests of human reason.

Before anything else, he needed to get his three brothers to agree to this plan, one which naturally was not likely to appeal overmuch to them. Consequently, to bring the project about with wisdom and due precaution, he had to temporize and to wait for the right occasion. All these considerations upset the canon's mind and prevented him from coming quickly to a final conclusion. Several months went by as he remained in uncertainty. Time, of course, did not solve the problem for him, and the trouble in the schools was getting worse. Undecided,

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25. In French *canaille*, the strongest insult a writer like Blain could have used.

wavering, he was awaiting God's own good time, trusting in one of those moves by Providence which, by causing projects to be born or to die, show us the way out of our indecision and, when we least think of it, disclose to us the path we must follow.

In the end, Divine Providence did show itself, and in so doing, it forced De La Salle to declare himself and to make up his mind. This is how it came about. The mayor and the councilmen of the city of Guise, having heard of the success achieved by the Gratuitous Schools in Reims, asked Nyel to establish a school in their town. This proposal, so conformable to his inclination, was a temptation for Nyel which, clothed by his imagination in the garb of God's will, did not take long to win his assent. While willingly yielding to this temptation, he convinced himself that he was only obeying God's orders. All the circumstances of time and place should have opened his eyes and made him see that in thus carrying out a premature project, there was more of nature than of grace involved, more natural impulsiveness than true desire to do God's will.

In vain did De La Salle try to show him the imprudence of such a step. He observed that Holy Week was not the proper time to make such a trip to Guise, still less to throw himself into all the coming and going required for the opening of a school. His absence would leave five or six teachers to their own devices, thus exposing them to greater disorder, and neither he nor they would be able to spend the holiest period of the year in the recollection, piety, and edification which it calls for. Furthermore, the proposal made to him was not a definite one; unless he let the idea mature, he would see it come to nothing, which is precisely what happened. De La Salle simply remarked that it was pointless to build up with one hand while tearing down with the other.

If Nyel cared to give the matter a moment's serious reflection, he would have agreed that by founding a school at Guise, he would destroy the ones he had established in Reims, since he had nobody there to carry on what he had started. Common sense itself spoke through the mouth of De La Salle, but Nyel would not listen. The prudent canon was wasting his breath on a man convinced he was right, one who could not see anything but God's will in what he himself wanted. The canon's remonstrances fell upon deaf ears. Nyel departed, and his going obliged De La Salle to resolve to invite the schoolmasters to come to his house for their meals.

Thus does God cause all that occurs to converge for the fulfillment of his plans. De La Salle was still hesitant and uncertain about what final decision to make with regard to the schoolmasters. Nyel's

departure, which left them at the mercy of their own whims and which left that work he had started only half established, should, it would seem, have indisposed De La Salle toward the whole business. On the contrary, it was this circumstance that began to attach him to it more closely than ever and to involve him more directly in it. Human prudence would have judged that Nyel's departure would be a blow to the newly founded schools, but in God's designs, it was necessary and helpful because it brought De La Salle closer and substituted him—the man destined to be the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools—for the man who, as regards that project, was simply an outsider.

## CHAPTER X

*Beginnings of life in common for De La Salle and the schoolmasters; the world is aroused; his family complains and objects to this new type of life.*

De La Salle had at last resolved to start living with the schoolmasters. How was he able to bring himself to take up a type of life which inspired him with such great repugnance? Would he have thought, just two short years before, that he would ever come to such a decision? True, he had only taken one step in their company, and for the moment, he did not intend to go any further, but this first step would lead to many others of which he still remained ignorant. He would perhaps have drawn back if he had foreseen how far he would later go. Divine Providence led him by the hand, as one leads a blind man. He will be surprised indeed one day when he finds himself in the midst of people he previously shrank from, yet with whom he will bind himself in a society lasting for his whole lifetime.

At first, De La Salle did not bring the masters to live in his house. He limited himself to inviting them to come for meals so that he could begin to regulate their actions. After morning interior prayer, they heard Mass at six o'clock; then they came to his house, which was close to theirs. They remained with him until the time for night prayer, after which they went back home to sleep. In the canon's house, there already existed a fixed regulation. Good books were read during meals, and prayers were recited at set times. Thus the presence of the schoolmasters did not call for any great changes in the daily routine.



At this point, the meals were served in the dining room, with individual portions for each, and a specific time was assigned for each action of the day. De La Salle took advantage of Nyel's absence, which lasted a week, to study the schoolmasters. Once he had them under his eyes, he did not take long to notice a number of minor disorders among them, brought about by the negligence of their Superior, who had not watched over them closely enough.

What he saw convinced the canon that a man who was a stranger in his own house—where he was seen less often than elsewhere on account of the visits he paid, his early departure each morning for school, and his late return each evening—was not the one to introduce order into an establishment nor to inspire his inferiors with stability. The schoolmasters, for their part, willingly conformed to regulations and seemed to show goodwill in observing them. Several displayed real piety and made the new Superior hope that they would advance in their prayer life. They seemed like new men ever since they had begun living in an orderly fashion and once obedience, by controlling their actions, also controlled their wills.

These first signs of the change which had come over them convinced the canon that he should indeed take charge of them himself and encourage them to keep on coming to his house so that they might live a more regular life. But being very wise, he proceeded slowly, to make sure he made no false step in so thorny a matter. In these circumstances, De La Salle had to study both the teachers' reactions to their new manner of living and those of his own brothers to these strangers, not to mention the repercussions in the public and among his relatives concerning this new Society.

Although he did not intend to let his family dictate to him, he did not want to irritate its members, and he did all he could to avoid clashing with them. While paying little attention to what the world said, he avoided, as far as he could, giving anyone grounds to criticize him. Though his brothers were not the rulers in his house, he did not want to displease them and would have been very happy had they shared his intentions. As for the teachers, it would have been useless to try to bind them by rules and obedience as long as their hearts did not consent thereto. Virtue is the result of grace and the cooperation of the human will. Unless the will is won over and surrenders itself to God, all external conformity is merely so much window dressing and hypocrisy.

These were the considerations that the zealous canon had to pay attention to and which he did consider carefully. He went ahead little by little and without rushing anything. He felt he had to humor all the

people involved and prepare them for what he planned to do. As he had not found any insurmountable opposition to his initial attempts, he decided not to push things any farther for the present and to have the masters continue after Nyel's return the lifestyle they had adopted while he was away. They had not yet had time to tire of it. Fervor that lasts for a week is not too rare. But would it hold up? Only experience would tell. To find out, De La Salle wanted to take more time.

De La Salle lodges the teachers in his home

If the schoolmasters were to grow weary of a regular life and show their distaste for it, De La Salle would not have to withdraw from any stance he had taken. He could renew the lease on the house he had secured for them, which was about to expire, or he could rent another one nearby which was available and then give over the direction of the teachers once again to Nyel and leave them to their own devices. Meantime, the schoolmasters continued from Easter to the feast of Saint John the Baptist to live the regular type of life they had begun. During this period, the canon had been closely observing them and saw, on the one hand, that the schoolmasters seemed to like this new sort of life but, on the other, that the instability of Nyel, who sought nothing but occasions for staying away, made it impossible to count on him. Hence De La Salle made up his mind to have the men come and live completely in his house. Accordingly, they moved in on the feast of Saint John the Baptist,<sup>26</sup> his patron, in the year 1681. Nyel, who really wanted what was best and who realized that thanks to this move, he himself would be freer than ever, came with them.

This step was decisive. It was bound to cause a good deal of excitement and much talk in the city and to provoke complaints and loud outcries from the family of the canon. De La Salle was prepared for all this. He expected that the world, which up to this time had held its fire, would certainly censure him now and that his relatives, closely observing his course of action and shocked by this latest decision, would no longer restrain their indignation. In fact, they did not.

On this occasion, the world expressed every disparaging remark that it could think of against good works in general and against those who devote themselves to them. With regard to this particular project and to its author, everybody expressed all the criticism, mockery, and ridicule that the world's false wisdom, its characteristic spirit, and its

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26. The feast of Saint John the Baptist, 24 June, and Christmas Eve, 24 December, were the traditional dates in France for initiating and terminating leases.

natural malignity suggested. The canon was called to answer for his behavior before as many tribunals as there were families in the city. Everyone investigated him and set himself up as a judge, and there were as many different sentences handed down as there were judges. But however diverse these verdicts were, in one respect they all agreed: De La Salle was guilty and should be condemned. Some people criticized him because of the sort of men he was associating with; others, because of the type of occupation he was going to take up. Several maintained that his reason had been affected and that too much piety had upset his mind. Among his friends, some reproached him with the bizarre nature of his conduct; others expressed pity and compassion for him through an all too human sentiment. Few approved of him; the most moderate contented themselves with admiring his zeal without venturing to judge him.

As for his relatives, the wisest among them or those who cared for him the most did not presume to address any reproaches to him but did let their silence speak their discontent. Others, less restrained, gave vent to their irritation by caustic invectives. They accused him of staining the honor of the family and of blotting the escutcheon by associating with people of such low standing. They said that he was not living up to his blood and that he besmirched it by having these strangers sit at his table. They declared that it was ridiculous for him not to make any distinction between them and his own brothers and to subject both to a type of life so much out of the ordinary and so unsuited to either group. Finally, they complained that he was driving away all the decent people from his house and that there was no longer any honor to be had in visiting him.

Having prepared himself for this sort of onslaught and having expected it, he made use only of silence and patience to defend himself. He let everyone say his piece, paid no attention, and went ahead with his plans. Although undecided and hesitant for so long, he had come to realize in his serious reflections what the decision that God had inspired would cost him. Having finally made up his mind, he remained steadfast. It may even be said that the tribulation he went through in coming to his resolution was the greatest trial he had to endure in this whole matter. His acceptance beforehand of all the sacrifices he would have to make obtained for him abundant grace to endure everything in peace and serenity of soul.

When people saw that De La Salle remained as firm as a rock in the midst of all the waves, crosscurrents, and storms which evil tongues had stirred up against him, they ultimately let him alone. They washed their hands of him, saying that he was a stubborn man

obstinately attached to his own opinion and that nothing would be gained by new attempts, even if inspired by zeal and even if more emphatic than the previous ones. Their next thought was to remove his brothers from his control. Had they been able to do so, they would have wished to put him under a guardian himself rather than let him be responsible for his brothers.

### His relatives send away two of his younger brothers

These three young fellows whom he was bringing up in the house and educating with true solicitude took their meals in the same dining room as the schoolmasters. The eldest of the three, deeply attached to Monsieur de La Salle, was a sincerely pious lad who willingly conformed to the same rules as the teachers, as far as his studies permitted. Seeing this, the relatives became angry and disdainful, and they resolved to withdraw the three brothers from the house. It was in vain that they tried to separate from Monsieur de La Salle the oldest of the three; his affection and devotion could not be overcome. It was different with the next lad. He listened to what his passionate brother-in-law told him and adopted his point of view. Little by little, he took a dislike for his tutor and benefactor. Discontented, this young man did not long delay in following the advice given him. He left the home of his brother the canon and went to that of his brother-in-law. His departure was soon followed by that of the youngest boy. At first, his relatives begged De La Salle to give his consent. When he refused, they had a meeting and decided to send the boy to Senlis in charge of the Canons Regular.

They did this to mortify the canon on a point which they knew he would feel most keenly, since it made him appear to be little concerned over the honor and the remonstrances of his own family. God was, however, directing all these events in view of the fulfillment of his designs. The relatives thought only of embarrassing De La Salle and of providing what they considered a better upbringing for his brothers. But God, by emptying the house, planned to afford his servant full liberty to follow his holy inspirations and to enable him to inaugurate the manner of living which needed to be established among the Brothers.

On this occasion, De La Salle seized the opportunity to leave his own home and to withdraw with the teachers to another house he had rented quite a distance from the cathedral. No doubt God had destined it to be the cradle of his Institute. It was there, in fact, that the Institute began. The house became the property of the Brothers in

1700, when De La Salle bought it with the money provided by three charitable persons. The Brothers of Reims still live there. It was while residing in this cradle of the Institute that he who was about to become its Father and Founder conceived the generous resolution to resign his canonry. This he did in 1683, as we shall soon see.

In this new locale, De La Salle felt himself perfectly free, and he busied himself only with organizing his little flock and giving it the form of a Community. He naturally took the lead as the Superior, but he was not yet the schoolmasters' confessor. It was important to choose a good confessor. Without the help of a good priest who would consolidate by his direction internally what the Superior was trying to build up externally, no success could be expected. When the confessor of a Community happens to be in opposition to the maxims and principles of a good Superior, he destroys what the other builds up. He sows cockle where good seed had been planted. Having several confessors is also to be avoided in communities, because it brings about diversity of opinions and divides minds and hearts. Unity being the soul of community, one of the main means of creating union in regular societies is to have a single confessor, in addition, of course, to the extraordinary confessors that the Church requires at stated times during the year.

De La Salle agrees to be the confessor for the teachers

On the basis of this principle, De La Salle tried to encourage all the schoolmasters to go to the same confessor. This they did, choosing the pastor of their parish. Although he was a very fine and capable man, he did not understand community life. Some of them grew disenchanted with him. Another confessor was selected, but they had to go a long distance to get to him and wait in line with the women at his confessional. This waiting sometimes took so long that they returned home only about eight or nine o'clock at night. The inconvenience was serious and needed to be dealt with. The problem could easily be resolved if De La Salle would only consent to hear the confessions of his disciples.

Several of them begged him to do so and even insisted in the hope of persuading him to give in. By invoking the arguments mentioned above, they tried to overcome his reluctance. They added great demonstrations of high regard for him and confidence in him. In fact, filled with esteem and respect for the virtuous canon who had taken charge of them, they did not want to separate their Superior from their confessor. De La Salle, however, was cautious and circumspect.

He feared complications and found it difficult to accede to their request. In truth, he did not see too many inconveniences in the idea at the moment, but he felt that they might be hidden and might come to light later on. For this reason, he preferred to put off the decision rather than make it too hastily. He therefore held off for a long time before giving in to their pressing requests.

Finally their perseverance obliged him to yield. Their good reasons impressed him. The more the spirit of regularity took possession of them, the more they felt the need of being guided by their father. De La Salle acceded to their pious desire. The example of those who had from the outset entrusted the care of their souls to him proved effective with regard to the others and encouraged them to show a similar confidence in their Superior. From that time forth, the Brothers never wanted anyone else but their holy Founder as their confessor. They would indeed have been hard to please, had a man so gentle, humble, charitable, and enlightened in the ways of God not been able to satisfy them. This unified spiritual direction did a great deal of good for them, because they all partook of the spirit of their father. They had the same maxims, the same vision, and the same patterns of thought. In a word, they had but one heart and one soul.

The humble canon, however, ever on guard against himself, had yielded only with some reluctance to the desire of his disciples, who wanted no other confessor. His diffidence in this matter obliged him to consult wise and enlightened persons and to beg the extraordinary confessors to tell him whether they felt there was any objection to his combining the duties of confessor with the office of Superior. None of them ever suggested that he give up his double role. On the contrary, all of them exhorted him not to divide these two functions which naturally ought to be joined.

Finding himself thus placed by Divine Providence at the head of the group of schoolmasters and fulfilling in their regard the double function of Superior and confessor, De La Salle put forth all his efforts to help them sanctify themselves. He lived among them as one of them, causing them to forget what he had been as completely as he himself seemed to forget it. Affable, gracious, kind, compassionate, and charitable, he won their hearts and made them surrender to him the key thereto, only so that he could open the door to Jesus Christ. Through a charity like that of Saint Paul, he made himself all things to all, to the extent of seeking to rid himself, amid these unpolished men, of the aura of refinement which nature and a noble education had given him. I would almost say that out of charity, he affected to become common with these commoners.

This adjustment required a heroic effort on his part, because nothing had inspired him with more repugnance for joining them than the rudeness of manners which might be the consequence of a plebeian origin and education. In him, words and actions were of one piece. If he gave the masters beautiful lessons about virtue, at the same time he afforded them even more striking examples of it. Since the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart, the first virtues which he sought to cultivate in their souls were those that he himself already possessed to a high degree: modesty, humility, interior spirit, mortification, regularity, docility, charity, forgetfulness of injuries, poverty, love of abjection, and patience—all virtues which would become the basis of the spiritual edifice he was going to build, the soul and the spirit of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Wishing to make his companions men of solid virtue and piety, he strove solely to bring them to God willingly, to attach them to God by the bonds of love, to make them truly interior Christians. In this endeavor, so conformable to his humility, he did not want to introduce anything by mere authority. He contented himself with inspiring them with his own spirit, and thus he gave them the satisfaction of thinking that they themselves had originated their new manner of life and their practices and that they were making their own laws for themselves. To lead them into the paths where he wanted to see them walk, he made use only of exhortation and example. Most of all, he practiced what he taught, and the shame of not imitating him obliged the least fervent ones to conform to his example.

The first teachers withdraw; new recruits replace them

It did not take long, however, for him to perceive that several of them were already relaxing their efforts in the pursuit of virtue and that perfection is not for everyone. Such a strictly regulated life appeared too constraining to some of the men who had lived so much more freely under Nyel in that nearby house.

Novelty, which at first is always attractive to some extent, had made them willing to try the new lifestyle during the initial months, but to keep on living this way seemed to several an uninviting prospect and beyond their modest virtue. The yoke of a life of retreat, silence, obedience, and regularity began to seem heavier and heavier, so that it overwhelmed those wills which were too sluggish and not sufficiently fortified in the practice of virtue. To keep on doing until death what they found so difficult now at the beginning seemed to them more than they could bear. They could see that no mitigation

was to be expected from a man like De La Salle and that on the contrary, since his own fervor grew day by day, it would demand that they follow in his footsteps or else endure the disgrace of not imitating him.

Thus several preferred to leave. It was not an easy decision for them to make, for on such occasions, the conscience struggles with the attraction of a more comfortable life and of greater liberty, but in the end they left. De La Salle was likewise obliged to dismiss some others who, while pious enough, did not have much aptitude for their work in the schools and had been employed mostly out of necessity. Thus he was obliged to replace nearly all his personnel in the space of six months. Only one or two of the original group remained with him. The new Institute's tomb seemed destined to be erected close by its cradle. Its failure seemed about to follow upon its launching. But he who calls back from the grave and gives life even to the dead did not delay in reviving this faltering Society by sending it new recruits who had the requisite talent for teaching, a basic piety, and a strong determination to become true disciples of De La Salle.

It was, then, toward the end of 1681 or the beginning of 1682 that the group began shaping up as a true Community. The good Monsieur Nyel, who remained with them until Christmas 1681, was agreeably surprised at the changes taking place beneath his eyes, delighted by the good order established among the men, and edified by their new mode of living, so regular and recollected. He loved all that was good and felt happy to see all that was being accomplished in the establishments he had started. It would seem that Nyel should have become part of the Community and taken up his abode with the others, but like a migratory bird which seems to want to visit the whole earth without stopping to rest anywhere, Nyel could not abide stability, could not give up his yen to keep on moving. His disposition made him as ready to wander from one place to another to establish schools as Saint Paul had been to found new churches.

By then a complete transformation in the work of the schools had taken place: a new house, new teachers, a new way of life, new spiritual direction. Jesus Christ could have said of it, *Behold, I make all things new* through my servant. It is not surprising that a vine so thoroughly renewed soon produced its flowers and spread abroad its agreeable fragrance. As we shall see, it soon progressed from the stage in which everyone made fun of it to that in which it acquired so solid a reputation that neighboring cities hastened to invite within their walls the disciples of the saintly canon.



## CHAPTER XI

*The foundation of Christian and Gratuitous Schools at Rethel, Guise, and Laon; circumstances which lead De La Salle to consider resigning his canonry and then his fortune in order to devote himself entirely to his work.*

The town of Rethel was the first which asked the devout canon for some of his new schoolmasters. Delighted by this request, Nyel would not have hesitated to say yes, but De La Salle, more circumspect, felt that it was not advisable to employ there men whom he had not yet had time to train properly. He knew what the saints say on this subject: that premature fruit is not good to eat and tastes bitter, that birds which attempt to leave the nest and fly before their wings are fully developed become the prey of hawks or fall to the ground, never to rise again, and that children born before term seldom live.

Convinced of all this, he preferred to lose the chance of making a new foundation rather than to expose his disciples, still insufficiently confirmed in virtue, to the danger of lapsing. Because his intentions were pure, he viewed with indifference the multiplication of establishments, unless they could be staffed by men of proven virtue. Thus the proposal from the magistrates of Rethel seemed to him a matter that called for careful consideration. He did not wish to hurry things, fearing that one of his novice teachers or a fresh recruit from his little Community might find his downfall in the very place where he was assigned to work for the sanctification of others.

With this in mind, De La Salle looked upon what he had begun to do for their training only as a first step in leading them to the perfection they needed to achieve. True, the young men he then had to work with seemed full of goodwill, but he realized that desire is a long way from performance, that a person's first efforts at acquiring virtue leave him a great distance from the habit of virtue. Moreover, the example of Jesus Christ, who spent three years training his disciples in his divine school and who did not want to expose their fragile virtue to the world until he had fortified it through the descent of the Holy Spirit and the infusion of his gifts, taught him to keep his men near him in a fervent novitiate for as long as possible and not to send them out to teach until they had made sufficient progress in holiness.

## Foundation at Rethel

These considerations restrained him. They convinced him that the best thing to do was to promise to send some of his subjects later on but at present to keep them with him to complete their training. At first, this is what he did. After some time, however, he could no longer act as he preferred. The Duke de Mazarin<sup>27</sup> so strongly seconded the request of the Rethel authorities, and the zealous pastor besought the Founder so insistently that he had to give in. When he could no longer in all courtesy delay the matter, he asked Nyel to take charge of the new foundation. The latter was always ready for such an adventure and was the best man in the world to negotiate the terms of a contract.

Again, Nyel did so successfully, getting the city to provide for the living expenses of two schoolmasters. The duke and the pastor also contributed, as did a certain Mademoiselle Bouralletti, who later left an annual sum of fifty livres for this school. These favorable circumstances led De La Salle to buy a house in Rethel some time later, intending to establish there a seminary for his Institute. As soon as Nyel reached the town, everything was settled on terms which still persist today. Because De La Salle found in the generosity of the city fathers, of the duke, and of the pastor all that he desired, he opened the Gratuitous School in 1682.

We cannot omit here two facts concerning this establishment which bring out the high degree of perfection which De La Salle had attained at this time. The Duke de Mazarin had conceived a high esteem for De La Salle and wished to know him better. He took pleasure in conversing with him and honored him by his visits. Some years after the founding of the school we have been speaking of, the nobleman, wishing to honor De La Salle's virtue, decided to add 200 livres a year to the Brothers' income, to be paid from the revenues of his estates. He proposed this to De La Salle, who accepted the offer with gratitude. The contract was drawn up but never signed. It was to have been signed the following day without fail, and it probably would have been, except for the intrigues of certain meddling people who disliked the good that was being done. They managed to make the duke change his mind, so that from one day to the next, he appeared like a different man.

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27. The duke's wife, source of the title, was a niece of Cardinal Mazarin. Saint Simon, the contemporary critic, has left an unflattering picture of the duke.

To De La Salle's great surprise, when he returned to visit the duke the following day to complete the details of the agreement, he found him cold and remote, even apparently anxious to make sport of him. The humble canon put up with the duke's unmerited reproaches and humiliating sarcasm without showing any lack of respect to him, but he would not compromise the honor of his own character. He firmly turned down certain onerous conditions which were proposed, and he refused with a firm reserve to go along with certain requests he felt were unbecoming. Finally, after he had in a modest tone and with a tranquil air explained away the quibbles aimed at voiding the contract already agreed upon, he took his departure, happy that he had reaped only contumely from an affair that had begun with words of praise and testimonials of high esteem for his person. He knew those who were to blame for this failure, but he never reproached them or allowed anyone to show them the least resentment for it.

The servant of God did well to accustom himself to affronts and to arm himself against raillery and insult, for the task he was undertaking would become a fruitful source of such trials. The rest of his life would be one long series of persecutions and humiliations of all kinds. Almost daily, as time went on, he saw storm clouds accumulate over his head. One often grew out of another, and the end of the first marked the beginning of the second. Thus these afflictions followed one another and created a tempest which lasted as long as he lived. The thunderclaps ceased to echo around him only when he rested in the grave. In all such events, however, the virtuous canon considered only the source from which they sprang. He always went back to their origin. Knowing that God was their author, however trying or disagreeable they might be, with love and submission he kissed the hand that sent them. A man who wanted only what God wanted and desired nothing outside of God's will, he was persuaded that apart from sin, nothing happens in this world save by God's command. Hence he remained indifferent to whatever occurred. The most mortifying turn of events always found him calm and resigned. No mishap, however disagreeable, ever robbed him of his peace or altered the evenness of his disposition. And yet, how many such experiences did he not have to face during his life while trying to bring his Institute into being! How many contradictions did he not suffer! What persecutions did the world and the devil not stir up against him! The reader will marvel at his trials as he reads this history.

This first establishment at Rethel provided the occasion for the initial acts of injustice which De La Salle suffered as the first proofs of

his disinterested attitude. Two of the wealthiest persons in that city had left him a considerable sum to help out with the foundation of the school. The donation had been made in the proper legal form, and he had already received the papers and other legal instruments, but the avaricious heirs contested the legacy. Even though they had received the lion's share of the inheritance, they begrudged him the small part allotted to him for good works. Because this legacy was intended for a pious cause, these heirs were determined not to give in. They did not need to take any pains to circumvent the judges and to prepare the documents needed for the lawsuit, because De La Salle himself decided in their favor and adjudged them the winners by withdrawing his claim. He preferred to lose the money rather than expose his peace of mind to the worries of a lawsuit and to the risk of wounding charity. This example of disinterestedness was as edifying as it is rare.

We shall relate at this point, as being in its natural place, another fact which is not clearly dated in the memoirs we are using. Whether through the light of his natural perspicacity or through an inspiration from on high, De La Salle foresaw that the enterprising Nyel, as quick to lose interest in the schools he had begun as to found new ones, would sooner or later leave all of them to him to look after when Nyel became tired of doing so himself. He felt, therefore, that he needed to provide for a sufficient number of teachers to staff the schools. How indeed could he maintain these existing establishments if he had nobody to replace Nyel whenever he went off, for like a meteor, he disappeared as suddenly as he reappeared? Nyel's procedures involved consequences that the devout canon feared. By assuming the responsibility for providing teachers when vacancies occurred, De La Salle would be taking on the management of the schools as well as the direction of the teachers. This meant undertaking a work which he indeed valued and loved but with which he wanted only to have a free and voluntary connection without any definite engagement or obligation. On the one hand, he feared that Nyel's schools would fail; on the other, he could foresee that if he did not have teachers ready to replace this man who dashed about from place to place, he would see deterioration swiftly follow the foundation of the schools.

In his perplexity, De La Salle decided to make a retreat in order to beg God for enlightenment and to discover his holy will. To make this retreat in deeper recollection and silence, he rented a small garden near the Augustinian church, next to the city ramparts. This spot was the first witness of his transports of fervor and his mortifications.

After giving his orders to his household and leaving word at the Community of Sisters entrusted to him by Monsieur Roland, he withdrew into solitude, letting his spirit plunge without distraction into interior prayer and practicing mortification without sparing his body. *Ah, declares the memoir which we are transcribing here, if the walls of the tiny room which he used as his cell could speak, what would they not tell us of the bloody disciplines and other pious excesses to which he yielded as a result of the spiritual inebriation which the "new wine" produces in those who begin to drink deep of it!* The blood which bespattered this little cell gave testimony to the holy cruelty with which De La Salle treated his flesh and to the sacrifices he made for God. There, at the start of a truly new life, he drew up an initial plan for the most sublime perfection he hoped to realize.

### Foundation at Guise

During this time, the founding of the Gratuitous Schools at Rethel made the people of Guise revive their project of having similar ones in their city. We mentioned above that their initial plan had fallen through because Nyel had wanted to go too fast and had not followed the advice of De La Salle. Now the request was made again, and the matter was satisfactorily arranged. The officials of the city provided a house for the teachers, and Mademoiselle de Guise endowed the Gratuitous Schools which opened that same year, 1682. Others were established in Château-Porcien in July of that year and in Laon at the end of the year.

The circumstances of this last foundation were as follows. The pastor of Saint Pierre-le-Vieux in that city, hearing of the great good produced by the Gratuitous Schools, felt that they could nowhere be of greater utility than in his parish, since the majority of his parishioners were poor. His eagerness to provide for their instruction and his desire to enrich with spiritual blessings those who were deprived of the gifts of fortune incited him to write to De La Salle, begging him for two of his disciples. Nyel was as enthusiastic for this new establishment as he had been for the previous ones. His impetuosity on this occasion, however, gave Divine Providence an opportunity to deliver De La Salle from a man who was certainly a good person in his own way but who was temperamentally incapable of adopting De La Salle's spirit or conforming to his manner of living.

## Foundation at Laon

At this time, Nyel was in Guise, where he had gone after remaining for six months in Rethel. From Guise he went to Laon, where he found everything in readiness for the opening of the schools. The city fathers, in fact, did not limit themselves to giving permission for the foundation; they furnished the schoolmasters with a residence and contributed to their maintenance. They were joined in their good work by Saint Martin's Abbey and by the pastor of Saint Pierre, who later became a canon of the cathedral and is still living. This foundation was made in 1683. The pastor took advantage of this opportunity to establish a solid friendship with De La Salle, in whom he felt an unbounded confidence and whose virtue he admired.<sup>28</sup> Nyel opened the school and remained there for two years—a long time for a man of his disposition.

It is not surprising that at the end of this time, Nyel took it into his head to return to Rouen. But how could he manage to do this? He had taken over the direction of the schools in Rethel, Guise, and Laon. To lay aside his obligations in an honorable way, he decided to place the three establishments under the care of De La Salle. For this reason, in 1685, he visited the canon in Reims and begged him most earnestly to accept his resignation as head of these schools. The pastor of Saint Pierre in Laon, who desired this solution as much as Nyel did, joined him in his request. At first, De La Salle was firm in his refusal; he did not give in until he saw that these schools would be abandoned by the man who had founded them.

## The teachers express concern about the future

While the pious canon busied himself entirely with the care of his little flock, Satan was devising ways of scattering his sheep a second time. Knowing full well, thanks to his profound malice and his long experience, that the greatest evil, like the greatest good, often begins in a tiny way, the devil thought up another scheme to cause this work to perish before it really got started; he foresaw that it would develop to his detriment and was beginning to fear the progress being made.

The way to succeed in this endeavor was for Satan to tempt the teachers to leave the Community by dangling before their eyes various

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28. The pastor was Pierre Guyart, who remained a life-long friend of the Founder. He will be mentioned often in the narrative, notably as a retreatant at Vaugirard and later as the recipient of a letter from Paris describing the difficulties between De La Salle and the diocesan authorities there.

marvelous prospects which the human spirit would tend to consider as unquestionable realities. He had already succeeded in this once before. By using similar enticements, he had managed to get nearly all the first companions of De La Salle to leave him. If he could only make the same device work a second time, he felt sure that he could destroy the infant Institute. Indeed, if the malice of Satan had achieved his aim, nobody could speak of the Institute today. It would have been wrecked by a second wholesale exodus of the teachers. The devil, therefore, put forth renewed efforts to sift these men—as Jesus Christ said, even as one sifts wheat—and to do so a second time, since he had succeeded so well before. But he did not use exactly the same strategy.

The first schoolmasters, accustomed to a free and easy life, had initially found the practice of obedience and the observance of a rule easy enough, but little by little, the devil had managed to enfeeble their wills and to extinguish by boredom and ennui the first sparks of fervor which had been enkindled in their hearts. The continual and uniform round of pious exercises had impressed them at first, but later, it seemed too constraining. Feeling their liberty too restricted and their senses too closely restrained, they dreamed only of throwing off a yoke which the evil spirit represented to them as destined to grow heavier, day by day, until it became intolerable.

But while the devil was busy, De La Salle, who had realized the potential problems faced by the teachers, did not remain idle. He did all that a man of God filled with zeal could do under such circumstances. It is easy to imagine what he felt in a situation of this kind. As a vigilant Superior and a tender father, he had told these men struggling in the grasp of temptation everything that the Spirit of God had suggested to him, hoping in this way to show them the true face of the temptation and how to overcome it. This charitable physician of souls had used every means at his disposal—kindness, exhortations, warnings, predictions about the future—in order to heal the wounds that the malice of the devil was inflicting on these simple souls. His concern over such regrettable developments did not allow him a moment's repose.

Seeing his sheep ready to take to their heels and to withdraw from the vigilance of their shepherd made his heart break. The schoolmasters, though, had made up their minds, and it was in vain that he spoke. His tears of fatherly tenderness were as useless as his friendly reproaches. Men capable of forgetting God could not be expected to remember the benefits they had received from De La Salle and the duties they had assumed in his regard. Men resolved to assert

their own will and to prefer their own freedom were not likely to consider as a wise counselor and a true friend a man who proposed to them nothing but the slavery of the Gospel.

Thus De La Salle witnessed their desertion after observing their disturbed lives. What anguish it caused him to see these first followers, like the prodigal son, leave his house and thereby tear themselves away from his arms! With sorrow he beheld the vessel on the point of foundering when he had just laid his hands on the tiller. Surely his reaction is not hard to understand. Amazed and almost disconcerted to find himself abandoned by all except one or two of the schoolmasters, he could have addressed them in the words of Christ, *Will you also go away?*

When the zealous canon had taken over this work for which he felt no natural inclination, he had in view nothing but the instruction of the poor and the good of the Church. It would seem that he should have had a right to expect better cooperation. Oh, the depths of God's judgments! God finds glory only when the divine will is carried out in submission to providential decrees. That is where we must seek it. Although we may be inspired to undertake great works to honor God, still these very often are permitted by Providence to end in difficulties and sometimes in ruin, or at least be on the brink of ruin, so that later on, they can be revived to the greater glory of God. It is God who permits death and gives back life, who leads down to death, and who calls back from the grave. A hundred times, at his death and after his resurrection, the little flock of Jesus Christ was dispersed, scattered, and on the slope leading to destruction. And a hundred times it revived with renewed vigor. Because all God's works pass through similar trials, it is no wonder that this one had to experience them as well.

Enlightened as to God's ways, De La Salle did not lose courage on this occasion. He gathered together the remnant of his little flock on which all his hopes rested. He spared no care, advice, exhortation, or acts of dedication to preserve these few from the bad example of those who had left. His efforts were not in vain; his tears themselves were soon wiped away. He had reason to praise and bless God when he saw a number of new recruits possessing talent, health, and goodwill come to repopulate his little Community and to replace the deserters. He set about forming a new group, more numerous than the previous one, which he was able to regulate even better than before. Having to work with new subjects only, he did not have to begin by correcting the defective attitudes that the free and easy existence under Nyel had caused the others to acquire. This time, he had the consolation of discovering that he was sowing the seed in good earth.



All he had to do was to warn his Brothers against their natural inconstancy, a weakness that the ones who had left had taught him to fear. Persuaded that the best means of making them staunch in their vocation was to strengthen them in virtue, he had put forth every effort to help them acquire it. The result corresponded with his labor, as his disciples made great progress in piety, thanks to his example and his teaching. He himself made even greater headway through his fidelity to grace and his docility in letting himself be led by the Spirit of God. He was one of those generous souls who, far from refusing anything, give God everything as soon as they are asked.

Still, in spite of all his care and vigilance, he could not protect his disciples from the most insidious of all temptations, the most cunning and subtle with which the evil spirit could bedazzle them, except by becoming an example of poverty himself and by seeking in a general renunciation of all his worldly goods an effective remedy against the deceits of the seducer. It was not love of liberty, the tedium of a constraining life, or distaste for exercises of piety that the devil used to cause trouble a second time among the zealous canon's little flock and to bring about yet another exodus. Now it was concern for their future and the fear of lacking the necessities of life some day.

These misgivings are found in all men who are not established in perfect confidence in God. This diffidence is like a hidden worm which attacks the best-disposed wills and makes them give up the loftiest ideals when pure charity has not taken possession of them. It was easy for the malevolent spirit to use this angle of approach and to take by surprise these men who were still novices in virtue. Certainly by assailing their hearts on this, their weakest point, he would have conquered them sooner or later, in spite of the prayers and remonstrances of De La Salle, if the Founder had not countered the ruse of the tempter by a heroic example of detachment and by embracing poverty voluntarily.

What led to this decision on his part was the rather curt answer he received from some of the schoolmasters who were strongly tempted to leave their state and to seek in another a surer refuge against poverty. Living on the bare necessities and without fixed incomes or revenues of their own, they could look forward only to an uncertain future, and their gnawing anxiety allowed them to see no resource to fall back on in their old age other than shameful beggary. The devil played upon their imaginations, exaggerating the motives for their concern and showing them vivid pictures of their future existence. If illness or incapacity were to overtake them, their lot would be the poorhouse. As a reward for all their work, as a compensation

for the youth and energy which they had lavished on a sterile and unrewarding task, they could expect, sooner or later, to be reduced to a state of penniless indigence in which they would not be guaranteed even a crust of bread for their declining years.

True, they said to one another as they discussed the harassing doubts which obsessed them, we can hope to find a sure haven from such poverty in the generosity of our father, as long as he lives. But when he dies, what then? As long as we put our trust in his charity, we shall find in his good heart and in his wealth a bulwark against beggary. But he may die tomorrow, and once he is gone, what will become of the schools he is supporting? What will become of us teachers, whom he provides for and whose father he is? Where can we go? What can we do when Monsieur de La Salle is no longer with us? Such were the questions which they asked one another and which the devil kept repeating to them so that they could not dismiss them from their thoughts. These concerns, ever present to their minds, admitted neither reply nor contradiction. A thousand fears arose which discouraged them, made them less enterprising in their work, and cast them into somber melancholy.

Their vigilant Superior, who kept watch over all the motions of their hearts and who read their most secret dispositions, did not take long to discover the source of the trouble which the wicked spirit kept stirring up day after day. To help the Brothers overcome their temptations, he joined prayers to tender exhortations in order to build up their confidence in God and their abandonment to Providence. But their souls remained insecure, like half-ruined houses which people try to prop up and which, standing thanks only to supports from without, continue to fall into decay. Thus the schoolmasters, scarcely recovered from their first bout of discouragement, fell back into it and kept eyeing the door.

#### A vain appeal to trust in Providence; the teachers respond

De La Salle sensed that his exhortations on confidence in God and abandonment to Providence were not effective but without knowing exactly the reason. These forthright peasants, strangers to subterfuge, did not leave him very long in the dark. They stated with utter frankness that their unrest was due to a lack of certainty and assurance concerning their status. They reminded him that there was nothing fixed or stable in their situation, that he himself could see that his project was suffering reversals. For their part, it would be a sorry thing for them to sacrifice their young manhood for a clientele that would

forget them, leaving them in their old age without any place to rest from their labors and forced to spend their last years and to end their days in dreary indigence.

In saying these things, they did not say everything. They had another reply to all the exhortations made by their Superior about abandonment to Providence. But they did not yet dare to articulate it, out of embarrassment and respect. Although there was truth in it, it would be impolite, and they feared to offend a man who had done so much good for them and who gave them no grounds for complaint. But these peasants, who had never cultivated the art of dissimulation, could not keep back forever the reply that they had on the tips of their tongues, an answer as straightforward as it was telling. Although not very courteous, it did have a ring of truth about it. Because of its apparent sincerity, it was able to produce all the effect that God intended it to have. However, they kept quiet for a few days. During this period when their tongues did not as yet reveal the workings of their minds, the wealthy canon kept insisting on confidence in God and exhorting them thereto by quoting the very words of the Gospel on full abandonment to the care of Providence.

“Men of little faith,” he said, “by your lack of trust you set limits to a Goodness that has no limits in itself. If that Goodness is indeed infinite, universal, and continual—as you do not doubt—it will always take care of you and never fail you. You seek assurance, but does not the Gospel provide it? The words of Jesus Christ are your insurance contract; there is no compact more reliable, because God has signed it with blood and has affixed to it the seal of infallible truth. Why then do you grow distrustful? If the positive promises of God cannot calm your uneasiness and your concern for the future, what is the point of looking for an investment that will produce a comparable income?”

“Consider the lilies of the field, for it is Jesus Christ himself who urges you to reflect on them and on the wild flowers of the countryside and to see how richly God has adorned them and made them beautiful. They lack nothing, yet Solomon himself in all his glory was less splendidly attired. Open your eyes and see the birds that fly through the air or the little animals which creep upon the ground: not a single one of them lacks what is needed. God provides for their necessities. Possessing neither cellars nor barns, they find everywhere the food that Providence has prepared for them. They do not sow or reap, yet they find their sustenance. The heavenly Father takes care of them. If his generous and kindly concern extends to even the least insects which men trample underfoot and even to the grass that dries out and serves as fuel for the fire, how can you believe, you men of

little faith, that he to whom you consecrate your labor will abandon you in your old age and leave you to finish in misery a life spent in his service?

"Therefore, stir up your trust in the Lord's infinite goodness, and honor God by leaving in the divine hands the care of your persons. Be not troubled about the present or disquieted about the future, but be concerned only about the moment you must now live. Do not let anticipation of tomorrow be a burden on the day that is passing. What you lack in the evening, the morrow will bring you, if you know how to hope in God. God will work miracles rather than let you suffer want. In addition to the words of Jesus Christ, I offer you as proof the universal experience of the saints. Providence performs miracles daily, and they cease only for those who have no trust."

Such words so full of truth might have been decisive if he who uttered them with such conviction had been as poor as he was virtuous. But the speaker was a wealthy canon. Because of a rich prebend and his own family fortune, he enjoyed a secure refuge against indigence, and so he lacked the grace to persuade others to forget their own interests entirely. It was easy for him to talk about perfect abandonment to Providence. He himself had nothing to worry about, and Providence had provided him abundantly, not only with the necessities of life but even with the superfluous. Before he could address others in this language of perfection, he had to come down to the level of those he was addressing.

Once he had divested himself of everything, his benefice and his family inheritance, and had given the example of total trust in Providence, his words would be heeded. They would prove effective if backed up by his example. Words can be resisted; specious arguments can contradict sound ones; miracles can be doubted or at least questioned. But example admits of no reply; it is a force which carries its own evidence within itself and forestalls all quibbles.

The devout canon's disciples felt high esteem and veneration for his virtue. The deeds of humility, mortification, recollection, and charity which they saw him perform every day had won for him their entire confidence. Still, he was a rich man. As long as from the shelter of his situation, so well provided for, he attempted to inspire them with courage to face old age, illness, infirmity, and the uncertainty inseparable from them, he could neither find much of a hearing nor expect them to aspire to the heroic degree of abandonment which they had not yet seen exemplified in his person. This dichotomy left the devil an opportunity to undermine the power of the canon's words in their souls. Satan kept reminding them that the one who was speaking so

eloquently of abandonment to Providence was a wealthy man and that if he were in the same condition as they, he might not talk quite so loftily of such high perfection. He might even be the first to want to make sure that he had something to eat in his later years.

Tired of simply thinking these thoughts, one day the schoolmasters summoned up their courage to the point of expressing their grievance and gave De La Salle one of those blunt, direct replies that the heart feels is unanswerable: "You speak with inspiration amidst your ease, for you lack nothing. You have a rich canonry and an equally fine inheritance; you enjoy security and protection against indigence. If our work fails, you risk nothing. The ruin of our enterprise would not affect you. We own nothing. We are men without possessions or income or even a trade to fall back on. Where can we go, and what can we do if the schools fail or if people tire of us? Destitution will be our only portion, and begging our only means to relieve it."

Although neither courteous nor gracious, this reply contained enough truth to penetrate an upright heart. De La Salle had not expected such a remark. Because unforeseen, it proved all the more effective. His self-love did not deceive him. The reproach of the schoolmasters was indeed ungracious, but he paid no attention to their manner and only weighed its veracity. His probity forced him to admit that they had been right in speaking to him thus. The Holy Spirit joined his voice to theirs and called to him even more clearly and vehemently in the depths of his heart.

He saw that he really had nothing to reply and that only giving up all his worldly goods would afford them a proof that his heart had spoken when his lips had uttered such beautiful thoughts about abandonment to Providence. He would have to couple actions with his words if he wished the words to prove effective. When he was as poor as his companions and in the same condition as they, he would have the grace to ask them to walk after him in the path of detachment from all things, forgetting all personal interests.

The remarks of the schoolmasters made De La Salle think seriously; they plunged him into much perplexity. On the one hand, to make himself as poor as they and to become by choice what they were by necessity, to resign his canonry and give away his family fortune in order to devote himself to a work which was still in its infancy and which he would have to undertake without any firm assurance of the results, was certainly a foolhardy choice in the eyes of human prudence. Even in the eyes of faith it deserved serious reflection.

On the other hand, if he remained rich and well provided for while dealing with men who were poor and lacking in resources, he

would have to refrain from speaking to them about disregarding the future, about not being concerned over the precautions the future calls for. He would have to give up his exhortations on abandonment to Providence, which would mean leaving his followers defenseless against the wiles of the evil one, who was attacking them precisely at this, the weak spot in their armor. Then what would become of his little flock? No doubt, Satan was going to disperse it again, and this second desertion would be a second victory for the tempter. If Satan managed to get this group of teachers to follow the example of their predecessors, his triumph would be complete. By smothering it in its cradle, he would have brought about the destruction of an undertaking which he had begun to fear. Such were the various considerations which occupied De La Salle and threw him into great perplexity. In the following chapter, we shall see how he magnanimously overcame these doubts, thanks to a generous resolution to give up all things, after the example of the Apostles, to resign his canonry, and to renounce his personal wealth in order to attach himself to Jesus Christ naked on the cross.

## CHAPTER XII

*De La Salle deliberates whether or not to resign his canonry; the reasons which lead him to this generous resolution; he makes his decision but does not carry it out until he has been authorized to do so by his spiritual director.*

The spirited and unadorned answer that the schoolmasters had given to their Superior was not one of those replies which disconcert a person momentarily and bring about only a passing disturbance in the mind. It impressed the canon so profoundly that it could not be effaced. The first effect it produced was to make him think deeply about the matter. After thought came deliberations and consultations. The final effect was the actual renunciation.

De La Salle consults Père Barré

The first idea which occurred to the pious canon was to use his inherited wealth to endow the schools. What better use could he make of it? His relatives were rich and did not need any legacies from him

to lead comfortable lives. *If you wish to be perfect*, said Jesus Christ, *Go; sell all that belongs to you; give it away.*

Give it away to whom? To our relatives? If they needed it, charity rightly understood would make this a duty, for charity requires order, and order gives first place among the poor to our needy relatives. Duly ordered charity would begin by distributing to our family the wealth renounced through a desire for perfection. But if relatives are well-to-do, must we give them the sums raised by the sale of our goods, as the Gospel advises? No. Such giving would only burden them with superfluous wealth which might prove an occasion of spiritual loss. It would simply be giving them a deposit which they would have to pass on to the poor who really ought to receive the alms from the original owner, for as Jesus Christ says, *Give it to the poor.* What a lesson for the century in which we live! The world does not want to hear such instructions. What outcries are raised by families which feel themselves robbed of whatever is given to the poor, to the Church, or to good works!

Still, the faithful practice of this counsel was common in the early Church. If we wish to condemn this manner of acting, we must challenge an infinite number of saints. If their example is not to be imitated today, we must conclude that the evangelical counsels are subject to the prescription of time. No one can deny, therefore, that the decision which De La Salle made at this time and which he carried out, in fact, by giving away his fortune to the poor finds its justification in the Gospel and in the examples left us by the saints.

If De La Salle destined his wealth for the endowment of Christian and Gratuitous Schools, he would have fulfilled all his aims: 1) his action would have been directed entirely to the spiritual advantage of the poor; 2) it would have reassured his disciples and made them proof against the temptation which troubled them and which, like a gnawing worm, was secretly undermining and weakening their vocation and their good dispositions; 3) it would have reduced them to silence, and thanks to his heroic example of detachment, it would have authorized him to give them lessons about perfection in regard to poverty and renunciation of all things; 4) it would effectively have deprived him of his goods and in so doing would have made him truly like his poor followers; 5) finally, it would not have forced him to change his state of life; he could still have remained a canon and at the same time Superior of the new Community.

Therefore, De La Salle's first thought was to divest himself of his patrimonial goods but not of his prebend. If the first transaction could not be accomplished without bringing down on his head a multitude

of hardships, the second involved even greater difficulties and inconveniences. Thus De La Salle at first did not consider it, but Divine Providence changed the order of his resolutions and led him to begin by resigning his canonry.

Père Barré was the instrument that the Holy Spirit employed to second by his counsels the sacred inspirations given the canon. This saintly Minim was the person who had previously established Christian and Gratuitous Schools. It was only natural to seek the advice of a man who enjoyed special grace in this matter. As was to be expected, Barré approved the canon's project, so pious and disinterested that it won his high praise and wholehearted backing. But De La Salle's design, while admirable in itself, was not sufficiently inclusive in the eyes of the saintly Minim. Because Barré wanted the Christian Schools to depend on nothing but Divine Providence itself, he had no use for endowments. He believed that the best and surest reliance was to abandon oneself to the care of our heavenly Father and that the Christian Schools would be compromised if they were endowed.

*Foxes have holes*, he said in this connection, quoting Our Lord. *The birds of the sky have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.* This is how Barré commented on those words: "Who are these foxes mentioned in the sacred text? They are the children of the world, who attach themselves to the goods of this earth. Who are the birds of the sky? The religious, who find refuge in their cells. But for schoolmasters and mistresses, whose vocation is to instruct the poor after the example of Jesus Christ, there is no other portion on this earth than that which fell to the Son of Man. Divine Providence must be the only foundation on which the Christian Schools are established. Any other does not suit them. This one is solid, and the schools themselves will remain stable so long as they have nothing else on which to rely."

Barré was not a man to tell the truth by halves. Speaking to De La Salle, he advised that having given away his patrimonial goods, he should resign his canonry, so that he might be able to devote himself entirely to this work which required his undivided attention and to provide his disciples with a model of total renunciation and perfect abandonment. The Superior would not draw down these graces on his followers until he had given them the example. Although such advice was certainly not very inviting, it came from on high and could not have been inspired by flesh and blood. God, its real author, disposed the heart of the virtuous canon to accept it interiorly by whispering to his heart the same advice that the saintly Minim was giving him exteriorly.



De La Salle, however, did not like to rush into things and did not wish to do anything without the advice of his regular spiritual director.<sup>29</sup> He let these projects of evangelical perfection mature and contented himself with watering them with his tears and nourishing by his prayers these precious seeds which had been sown in his soul. At first, the pious canon, deeply impressed by the advice given him by Père Barré, thought carefully about what he should do. He brought his reflections and considerations to the foot of the crucifix, asking God for his light and offering himself to God for the fulfillment of his designs. The more he pondered the divine will, the more it seemed necessary to make himself poor so as to become like his disciples.

The reasons that motivated De La Salle to resign his canonry

The following are the reasons which convinced him and which he kept repeating to himself:

“1) I have been reduced to silence. As long as I am not poor myself, I have no right to speak the language of perfection, as I once did on the subject of poverty. I cannot speak of abandonment to Providence, so long as I am comfortably insured against penury, nor about perfect confidence in God, if my sound investments leave me no reason for worry.

“2) If I remain what I am and the schoolmasters remain what they are, their temptation will persist, because its source will continue to be there. I will not be able to remedy it, because they will always find in my wealth an obvious and even plausible argument to justify their doubts about the present and their concerns for the future.

“3) Sooner or later, such a temptation, so justifiable in appearance, will not fail to produce the effect that the devil hopes it will achieve. The teachers, whether in a group or one by one, will forsake me, leaving my house empty for the second time and the schools without anyone capable of conducting them.

“4) This desertion will make a good deal of noise in the city. It will frighten off any who might have entertained the idea of becoming schoolmasters. Their vocation will wither; even before they enter, they will be seized by the same misgivings as those who have just left.

“5) Without a dependable staff of teachers, the schools will fail. In this case, the heirs of the foundations will claim the funds contributed for their maintenance.

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29. Most probably, this was Jacques Callou, vicar-general and superior of the diocesan seminary.

“6) Thus, little by little, the Institution of Christian and Gratuitous Schools will be buried beneath its ruins, and it will be useless ever to think of reviving it.

“7) Even supposing that all these results do not follow, must I—can I, even—act as the Superior of these schoolmasters without giving up my canonry? How can I combine my assiduous presence in the house, so as to be at their head during the exercises of piety and to keep watch over them, with attendance in the choir for the canonical Office? Are these two positions compatible? If not, I must give up one or the other.

“8) True, a canon’s prebend is not in itself an obstacle to good works, and sedulous attendance at the Office to chant God’s praises does not prevent him from rendering other services to the Church or from devoting himself to the salvation of souls. He can divide his time between these two noble functions and prove that a canon does not have to be idle outside the choir. He does not need to seek in this title a plausible pretext to leave the choir, only to enter upon a rest that lasts all day, to grow stout in sweet indolence, and to do no work in the Lord’s vineyard. But can I at the same time be a good canon and a faithful Superior of a Community which requires my presence constantly? If I fulfill the function of Superior properly, I will have to omit all the duties of a canon, since if I must always be in the house, I can never be in the choir. If these two duties cannot be reconciled, I must choose between them. Five or six hours a day spent in reciting the Divine Office would make too great an inroad on the assiduous presence which I owe to the house I direct.

“9) Now, in the choice I must make, what should be my determining consideration? What should tip the balance? The greater glory of God, the fuller service of the Church, my own higher perfection, and the salvation of souls: these are the ends I must propose to myself and the aims which must govern my choice. If I consider only these exalted motives, I must resign my canonry and devote myself to the care of the schools and to the training of the schoolmasters who direct them.

“10) Finally, since I no longer feel any attraction to the vocation of a canon, it would seem that it has already left me, even before I have given it up. This calling is no longer for me. While I entered it through the right gate, indeed, it seems to me that God is opening another door before me today so that I may leave it. The same voice that called me to it seems to be calling me elsewhere. I hear this in the depths of my conscience; this voice speaks when I consult my conscience. True, since the hand of God put me in the state in which

I now am, his hand must take me out of it. But is he not showing me clearly enough today another state that deserves the preference and toward which he is leading me by the hand?"

To tell the entire truth, De La Salle considered the function of canon in itself as one of the least significant in the Church. We state this only because he has said so in so many words in the memoir mentioned previously. He wanted to be fully a priest and to exercise all the priestly functions. He felt that he was burying the talents conferred on him at his ordination and letting lie idle the powers that he had received with the priestly character if he confined himself to the recitation of the Divine Office. Indeed, a canon who is a priest endowed with health, knowledge, talent, and edifying conduct but who limits himself to the simple duty of punctually assisting at the Office does not seem to fulfill all those obligations which the priesthood imposes on him. He leaves unproductive a part of the powers he received by the imposition of the bishop's hands for the good of the diocese where he resides. Should he refuse to help a diocese which provides for him and the prelate who governs it, if he can help?

If today the title of canon dispenses many from active ministry, it can be said that such was not always the case. If we go back to the beginning, we shall find that every priest was the bishop's helper, employed in ministry and dedicated to cultivation of the Lord's vineyard under the eyes of the bishop and at his direction. At the very least, we must admit that only those who lack either the necessary talents or the consent of the bishop are dispensed from active ministry.

De La Salle sensed that his zeal was hemmed in by the demands of the canonical state. The sacred desire he experienced to serve the Church felt itself too constrained. Without meaning to do so, his spiritual director himself had helped make him grow disenchanted with a state which did not provide the entire liberty he longed for, so that he might devote himself entirely to the sacerdotal ministry. His attendance in the choir forced him to be absent from his house often and for lengthy periods, yet his presence in the house was most necessary. His director did not wish to see his disciple, so long as he remained a good canon, neglect his duty as a vigilant Superior of his Community, but as we shall soon see, he strongly opposed the proposal that De La Salle submitted to him of resigning his canonry. He did not agree to this step until the evidence forced him to admit that it was necessary to make a choice between two incompatible roles.

All this time, the docile servant of God, who obeyed blindly and would not question the guidance that was given him, tried his best to combine these two duties and to fulfill the obligations arising from

them. He was present in the choir, as far as his duties permitted: namely, the instruction and guidance of his disciples, the running of the schools, and the necessary vigilance over a budding Community. He attended choir, however, with a secret desire to be more free and to be relieved of an occupation which, although sacred and angelic, took up so much of the time he wished to devote to an even more divine function. This longing had remained with him ever since M. Roland had suggested that he exchange his canonry for a parish, and it had not been extinguished by the fact that to obey his archbishop, he had to give up the idea. The decision of his superior had indicated God's will to him and had convinced him that he was not called either to be a parish priest or to remain a canon. Still, he persevered in this state and, as he himself says, awaited God's command to abandon it, not daring to leave of his own accord the place where the Lord had put him.

Thus God, who knows how to mold the human heart with unspeakable skill, disposed this heart for the divine designs in a gradual and natural manner. By the mysterious operation of grace, the desires of this man of God were brought into line with the divine will. I think that at this point, De La Salle was like a man who has stopped at a spot where various paths diverge. Uncertain as to which he should choose, he deliberates, consults, informs himself as to the way he should follow. God seems to show it to him clearly enough, but the saintly canon, confused as it were, still cannot see that there is really only one path that God is offering him. Persuaded in the depths of his being by a sort of supernatural instinct and by a secret intimation of the divine will that he was not called to remain a canon or to become a parish priest, he seemed determined to give himself to the development of this new work to which Divine Providence had brought him step by step without his realization, so that he might assume complete charge of it.

Finally, after much reflection in God's presence, after much prayer and consultation, it seemed evident to him, *toward the end of the year 1682*, as he himself writes, *that God was calling him to take charge of the schools, and since he had to be the first at all the exercises of the community, he could not assist at the Office as assiduously as his director required him to*. Convinced at last by all the reasons we have enumerated above, he made up his mind to resign his canonry. Even so, he found his spiritual director still unwilling to agree to this change. Such a resolve finds few who approve of it. It was too unusual and extraordinary for his director hastily to give it his consent. Prudence required that he spend much time examining the principle

from which this resolution stemmed, its true motive, and determining whether it was the hasty result of a passing excess of fervor or the mature fruit of grace and the action of the Holy Spirit.

We all need to test our motives and examine where they come from and where they lead. We must not accept all these inspirations uncritically if we do not wish to be guided by presumption, levity, and the evil one. Not all resolutions which bear the outward marks of perfection are inspired by God. A man's own spirit often suggests to him projects which he attributes to the Spirit of God. He risks being deluded if he does not scrutinize with prudent deliberation the extraordinary inspirations he conceives. The one in question here, which began when De La Salle renounced his canonry and ended when he gave up his wealth, at first glance seemed arrogant. In the eyes of human reason, the decision was a startling one.

A wise spiritual director, who does not seek his responses in his own special insights but takes as the guiding principle of his direction prudence enlightened by faith, could not immediately set the seal of his approval on this decision. Even had he been as enlightened as his penitent on this topic, wisdom would dictate that he should not give in to the first proposal but that he should wait until God's will made itself clear. A resolution which would amount to condemning oneself to the severest poverty, in order to launch a work whose success was still so uncertain and whose plan seemed so incredible to the eyes of the flesh, was indeed a strange and bold resolution.

In fact, it was heroic, provided the Spirit of God really had inspired it, but it would have been vain and rash if any other motive had been involved. For was it not indeed somewhat a tempting of God for De La Salle to leave a holy and secure state of life in order to undertake another which was uncertain, as yet ill formed, and exposed to a thousand contradictions, a single one of which would have sufficed to ruin it? And in this case, what would happen to the ex-canon? What further role could he play in the world after having failed as a founder?

Put to so severe a test, would his virtue not be in danger of succumbing? Would his fall not be proportionate to the heights he had reached, his failure as ill-starred as his elevation had been in vain? How often has not a secret but pervasive hypocrisy masked itself under a gaudy type of virtue? If his project were to fail, to what would he be reduced? No doubt to the direst want, for which of his relatives would feel inclined to provide for the necessities of a man who had become a pauper of his own free will, one who had given to the poor the wealth which he could have distributed among his own relatives?

If some such misfortune were to overtake him, a canon who insisted on becoming a schoolmaster, all he could do would be to try to earn his living by selling his labor as other men do and by setting a price on the lessons he would have tried in vain to make gratuitous and completely Christian.

After all, could De La Salle not save his soul in the state where Divine Providence had placed him? If he was so eager to attain perfection, what obstacle did he find thereto in being a canon? The edifying conduct he had thus far displayed was certainly a pledge of what his life in the future would be. Judging the future by the past, could he not promise himself that he would certainly contrive to sanctify himself without running the risk of illusion and of being deceived by a notion of perfection, dazzling indeed but false? If he was so eager to exercise his ministry for the service of the Church, could he not find enough activity to satisfy his zeal by following the example of Monsieur Roland in the confessional, in the spiritual direction of souls, in the government of the communities he was already in charge of, in preaching God's word from the pulpit, or in distributing this heavenly nourishment to the little ones by giving them simple catechetical instruction?

All these tasks he had already managed to combine with his duties as a canon. Since his vocation was not in doubt and he had entered the ecclesiastical state and the ranks of the canons of the cathedral through perfectly legitimate paths, since he fulfilled the obligations of his profession so punctually, what had he to fear? Why did he not remain peaceably what he was by his state and by God's calling: a good canon and a good priest?

### Opposition from his director, who finally yields

All these considerations were weighty and justified his director in making De La Salle put off carrying out his resolution. Foreseeing all the problems that would arise from such an extraordinary decision, the director was uneasy about its consequences. A step of this nature could hardly be taken without causing a good deal of unrest and gossip. It would generate much disturbance, and the criticism would eventually fall back on the director himself, for counselors usually have to share a large part of the blame that people visit on those under their direction. The world imagines that penitents hear nothing but the voice of their confessors and act only in accordance with their orders, although in practice this happens very seldom and only in the case of very docile souls, who are few indeed. The world, however,

blames everything on the director and never fails to hold him responsible for the actions, whether holy or ill advised, that his penitents carry out. The wave of slanderous criticism which De La Salle had stirred up when he brought the schoolmasters to stay in his house and had begun living with them had not completely subsided. It foreshadowed other onslaughts, even more furious, if he were to cease being a canon in order to become more like his followers.

Furthermore, in whose favor should he resign his canonry? This was another question which was bound to bring up more difficulties. The virtuous canon had a brother, Louis, who was an ecclesiastic, the only one of his family who had remained steadfast at his side, the one who shared his life with the schoolmasters in spite of the objections of the family. If the older brother did not leave his canonry to this deserving young man, what would people say? What outcries would fill the city from end to end? What would his outraged family not resort to? But a man who was already beginning to walk so courageously in the footsteps of the saints was hardly one to listen to the voice of flesh and blood or to confirm by his example the pernicious custom of treating the emoluments attached to the service of the Church as part of his family inheritance. Because all these difficulties were obvious, once again, it would certainly not be wise for De La Salle's director to give his immediate consent to the proposal made to him by his penitent regarding his resignation from the chapter.

Docile, humble, and obedient, De La Salle was therefore obliged to put off his project before coming to a final conclusion in a matter of such great importance to his purposes and his circumstances. The virtuous canon, who still felt strongly constrained by grace, was thus prevented by obedience from following its inspiration. Unwilling to have anything to reproach himself with, he remained resolved to adopt all possible means to discover God's will. On the one hand, he feared to resist the Holy Spirit and to silence his voice by listening to human reason; on the other hand, in his diffidence and modesty he dreaded to be deceived by mistaking for God's inspiration some phantom of his own imagination or some deceptive scheme originating in the evil spirit, who is so skillful in counterfeiting God's action.

To overcome this new perplexity, De La Salle found no better way than to consult the wisest and most enlightened persons in the kingdom. He made a trip to Paris, but instead of finding his difficulties resolved, he saw them compounded on account of the various opinions he received from those whom he consulted. Some encouraged him while others opposed the resolution he had formed of resigning his canonry.

On his return, he gave his director a detailed account of his consultations. These interviews only added to De La Salle's irresolution, because his director, seeing that his own opinion was shared by several of the enlightened priests who had been consulted, grew all the more convinced of the rightness of his position and even forbade his penitent to think any more of his generous design. Such advice, however, was beyond the capacity of the virtuous canon, for the thought followed him everywhere. The Holy Spirit, who inspired it, constantly recalled it to his mind and kept urging him to implement it. Under such inner compulsion, he kept coming back to the subject and with pious insistence begged his director to agree to his plan.

During the nine or ten months which this sort of debate lasted, every day seemed to bring to the pious canon a new motive for resigning his prebend, or perhaps the same reasons impressed him more strongly day after day. In mentioning them to his confessor, he tried to give them as much cogency in that priest's mind as they had assumed in his own. Finally, to secure a favorable decision, he joined with his own solicitations those of another ecclesiastic who was living with him and who pointed out with great clarity to the director the impossibility of reconciling the two functions that had the devout canon split in two. The director finally gave in to these arguments and to his penitent's desires, but only after long and serious examination.

I have almost forgotten to state that of all those whose advice De La Salle had sought, it was Père Barré who most strongly backed him in his resolve to renounce his canonry and give up his patrimony so that he might abandon himself exclusively to God's Providence, as he was urging those to do to whom he was affording such perfect lessons on this subject. Père Barré, a saintly religious, was one of those men who cannot abide mediocrity and who always incite those who consult them to aim at the most perfect, at least when they deal with souls as noble and magnanimous as that of the devout canon. We cannot too highly respect the admirable docility of the truly lofty soul of De La Salle, ever ready for total sacrifice. Without reasoning, without arguing, without objecting, he heeded the oracles which the Holy Spirit supplied him by the mouth of the holy religious, and he submitted respectfully.

Called like the Apostles to leave everything for Jesus Christ, his heart gave its consent as soon as this sacrifice was proposed to him. From that moment on, he tried to hasten its execution, insofar as obedience to his director of conscience allowed. What generosity, what faithfulness to grace, what devotedness to evangelical perfection! This canon cared for nothing; nothing could stop him, neither his wealth



nor the amenities of a comfortable life. He laid it all down with the promptness with which we might lay aside a useless piece of furniture or a heavy burden. He reminds me of the publican, Matthew, who at the first word spoken to him by Jesus Christ, arose and followed him, forgetting how rich he had been, happy and proud to be able to offer God the sacrifice of all he had and of all he was by generously exchanging his worldly goods for the poverty of Jesus Christ.

Could such a step, so distasteful to nature, have been due to ambition or to the desire to make a name for himself in the world? Such a motive is what unfair and prejudiced censors taxed him with at the time. If they had been willing to look into their hearts and to study their inclinations, they would have found that such resolutions can only come from on high and that to call such a proposal ambitious was to attribute to Beelzebub, the prince of demons, a miracle of grace and the prodigies that only the Holy Spirit of God can bring about in souls.

## CHAPTER XIII

*The steps De La Salle takes to resign his canonry, once his director agrees; the opposition he encounters and overcomes.*

Our devout canon, convinced that secrecy is the key to success in anyone's undertakings, neglected none of the precautions that prudence suggested in order to keep his project quiet. His care was in vain. Rumors began to spread throughout the city from house to house. A step of this kind could hardly be taken without giving rise to considerable comment. Since it was necessary to disclose it to certain persons and since it is impossible to count on complete discretion on the part of all, some indiscreet tongue always betrays the secret which its soul cannot keep to itself.

Worldly people discuss his proposal

Once De La Salle's proposal was known, it is easy to imagine how it was received by the public, what criticism it provoked from his fellow canons and friends, and how much disappointment it occasioned in the family of Monsieur de La Salle. A "sign of contradiction" like his Divine Master, on this occasion he had to experience reproaches, rash judgments, and mockery from all sorts of people. Worldly persons

concluded that he had lost his mind and had exhausted his psychic resistance by leading too retired a life and by his exaggeratedly mortified and unsocial behavior. They believed that his mind was enfeebled, that he wanted to raise himself up to unprecedented heights and launch into the empyrean, soaring above the usual flights of the perfect, in order to win a place for himself among the venerable founders of orders.

In the opinion of the worldly wise and of the politically minded, who claim to see into and to probe men's character in order to pronounce a definitive verdict on their actions, our canon, by giving up his state of life, was merely following his temperament, which led him to carry everything to the extreme. The irreligious, who easily find ways to pour scorn on everything and who love nothing better than to mock the devout, said that De La Salle, who was sanguine and impetuous by nature, was bored with staying quietly in a state of life in which he was happy in exercising his zeal only by singing the praises of God in a place where many simply rest and some even fall asleep in the darker recesses of the sanctuary.

The indifferent affirmed that this scheme was nothing but a passing fancy: he was letting himself be fascinated by the appeal of an extraordinary lifestyle; his desire for higher perfection was just an illusion. He listened to no one's advice and followed nothing but his own ideas. How could any director, they asked, be so compliant or so lacking in good judgment as to approve such an extravagant proposal? So spoke the world, and the pious canon let it speak on.

His fellow canons and his friends took a different tack but with the same end in view. While reproaching him in affectionate terms for wanting to leave their company, to renounce their friendship, to bid them a final adieu, they spoke to him at length about the state he was thinking of abandoning and about the one he intended to embrace. Each of them put forth all his rhetorical powers to paint in vivid colors all the advantages afforded by the first and all the drawbacks they could think of in the second. They omitted nothing in recounting details of the troubles, suffering, and contradictions he would have to face in the lowly state to which he seemed to feel such a strong attraction. His lot was indeed to be deplored. They felt sorry for him, and they added that they could not endure the thought that he was going to throw in his fate with such rustic people and condemn himself to lead a wretched existence like theirs and with them for the rest of his life.

Other friends, like those of Job, questioned him. Have you dishonored your character by some secret crime? Is it to expiate this that

you want to exile yourself from the company of decent people? If you wish to do penance, must you do it in a condition of sordid and wretched poverty? Can you prefer this to your present state without dishonoring it, without causing people to think ill of your fellow canons and of one of the most illustrious chapters in Christendom, because of your strange preference? Everyone, assuming the role of a prophet, made sure to tell him that he would not take long to repent of what he was about to do, that he would acknowledge his mistake as soon as he had committed it, but that perhaps it would then be too late to remedy it.

Since everybody was talking about the affair and wanted to have a say on the subject, even good people and the devout got involved in the debate and added their criticism to the verdict which the voice of the public pronounced against the virtuous canon. What, they inquired, does not the voice of the public reach his ears? Is he ignorant of all that is being said in the city? If he knows it, why does he not silence people by giving up his foolish project? Should his very piety not make it a duty for him to satisfy his family, which is so upset? To reconcile himself with his friends and relatives, who are displeased?

Why does he make everyone talk about him so much? Why give the irreligious an occasion to make fun of religion and to ridicule devotion? Has he reflected sufficiently on the importance of the step he proposes to take? If after some days he is unhappy with it, regrets it, and agrees with the public in condemning it, what an embarrassment it will be for him, what a blot on his reputation for piety! If he remains firm in his resolve (which he may well do, since he is so hard-headed), what a spectacle will he not offer the world when he, a canon, becomes a schoolteacher, when he places himself at the head of a band of beggars and becomes a tramp like them! In truth, is he not tempting God? Does he not realize it? Why does no one try to make him understand what he is doing? Is it possible that he alone can be blind to what is so plain to everyone else, that disregarding the future, he does not foresee the wretched lot he is preparing for himself and the miserable condition into which he is going to precipitate himself? The story of his life will teach posterity, at his expense, that we must be wise with sobriety and tailor our undertakings to fit our strength.

What could our compatriot be running after? others asked. Some sort of chimerical perfection? I thought he had more sense. He is letting himself be led astray by pious illusions. Just what is this work he is trying to start, if not pure delusion? How surprised and embarrassed will he not be, when he finally sees all his dreams fade into

nothingness! Can any other result be expected? Suppose that he does succeed in getting this plan off to a good start; does he possess enough influence and authority to ward off all the blows of misfortune and to bring his work to full development?

De La Salle lets the worldly talk go on but keeps silent

I would never end if I wished to set down everything that people said. We know well enough how worldlings can talk on such occasions. In a word, the virtuous canon had everybody against him. If he had chosen to defend himself, he would not have been able to furnish enough answers to the countless accusations made against his project. His only defense was to keep silent; as a rule, this is the sole weapon that the saints resort to in similar circumstances, the one authorized by the example of Jesus Christ himself. *Jesus remained silent; Jesus did not open his mouth* when they accused him and when everyone cast his vote to condemn him. On such delicate occasions, silence is the most eloquent apology. Sooner or later, it makes the public retract what it has said and modify its initial judgment, too hastily passed. This heroic silence is the sign of innocence and the most authentic testimonial to the presence of the Holy Spirit in a soul. The more difficult and rare it is to practice such silence, the greater the merit it wins.

This glorious silence was the only defense that De La Salle resorted to. I do not know if he was much hurt by everything said about him, but if he was, he did not let it appear. No doubt he could not help feeling the dissatisfaction and disappointment that his resolve occasioned among his relatives. While virtue opposes nature, it does not always suppress all natural feelings. A saint does not cease to be a human being. In fact, we can say that the saints are more human than the rest of us, in this sense. Because they have a better natural disposition, less self-love, and more real charity for their neighbor, they often possess more tender and sensitive hearts, and the depth of their feelings gives their sacrifices added value and greater merit.

De La Salle's relatives, disconcerted and alarmed by his resolve, joined their outcries to those of the public, hoping to make him change his mind and to oblige him to avoid giving them this new reason for discontent. It was all in vain; he had made his choice. Flesh and blood had not inspired him, and the Holy Spirit, who had suggested his choice, gave him the courage to carry it out. If I may apply to him this eulogy of the Protomartyr, the virtuous canon, *full of grace and strength*, resisted all the attacks directed against him. The Holy

Spirit dwelt in him; without making him insensible to the blows dealt him, the Spirit rendered him victorious over them.

We must not imagine that even though he seemed immovable on the outside, this generous servant of God was never interiorly disturbed when the demons joined forces with humans and launched desperate efforts to make him yield. More than once, he himself admitted to his disciples that at this time hell raised more storms against him than the world did and that he would not have been able to hold out against these furious attacks, if the hand of the Almighty had not been stretched out in his defense.

The devil, infinitely more clever than men in presenting to us with artful imposture the liveliest and most seductive images, tried his best to evoke in the canon's imagination the most somber pictures of the wretched state into which he was about to hurl himself, pictures which his friends had barely sketched. The darkest hues, applied by a supremely skillful and malignant hand, sketched such a horrible picture of the state he was about to embrace that it seemed to him that by entering it, he would be condemning himself, until death, to all the tortures of the damned and all the most terrible consequences of the direst penury.

It seems that the canon, already prepared to give up everything, could envision himself, a penniless beggar, at the head of a band of men, like himself, that an exaggerated sense of duty had led to imitate him. He saw himself the leader of a group of Brothers lacking any provision for the necessities of life other than the care of Providence and the charity of the public. He felt that along with them, he would be exposed to live in sordid poverty or to seek his bread in disgraceful beggary. Hunger, thirst, extreme heat and cold, ragged clothing, rejection, insults, infirmities and illnesses, and the endless cortege of misery and suffering—all these consequences of poverty would be his lot after he had renounced his parental inheritance and his ecclesiastical income.

In addition, if he alone remained poor and miserable, he alone would suffer, but he would have to endure everything, over and over again, for each of the Brothers he had to provide for, since as his spiritual sons, they would cause him as much heartbreak as a mother feels when she sees herself without bread or food and surrounded by her starving children.

In a word, the devil laid open before him the frightful prospect of destitution and showed him in its depths the abyss of degradation into which his indiscreet and rash decision was going to precipitate him, a gulf from which he would never be able to emerge and where

nobody would pity him. The father of lies, Satan, sought to convince him that after all, he would be the only one worthy of compassion, for the state which he was about to embrace was the natural lot of those whom he wished to emulate. Born poor and having always lived in that condition, if in the teaching profession they remain poor, they will simply remain what they were born to be. Hardened from infancy by indigence and brought up in poverty, accustomed to a life of hardships, they scarcely feel the sting of want, save when it reaches the extreme. They are used to doing without everything but the barest necessities; they can feast on short rations.

But you were brought up with such tender care! Nurtured on the best of everything, you have lived in the lap of luxury. You have never known what it is to be in want of anything. Your rich prebend and your sizable patrimony have provided you with all the amenities of life. To what despair will you not be reduced when, stripped of all your wealth, you find yourself destitute and in want of all? You will not dare turn to your former friends and relatives. They are all angry with you and will enjoy seeing you drink deeply of the bitter chalice of misery and misfortune which they were unable to prevent you from seeking in this new state of life which seems to charm you so.

What will our canon do now in his agitation, trouble, and uncertainty? Will he draw back? Will he dare to go ahead toward a state which holds out the promise of nothing but woe? Will the devil succeed in causing his imagination to influence his will through fear of impending calamity and despair? God forbid that he should erect on the ruins of his confidence in God a monument to human reason and to carnal prudence! The generous canon emerged victorious from this struggle, confirmed in his resolution to give self-love a new and even deeper wound and to strengthen his first resolution by a second one, still more heroic. The state he intends to embrace may indeed cast him into the bosom of destitution, but it will not deprive him of the usual means of relieving it. Public charity is the remedy that God has prepared for him, and begging is the voice which solicits charity. He determined to swallow the humiliation of beggary, if it should come to that.

*Well then*, he replied to the devil and to himself, *if worse comes to worst, the thing to do will be to go out and beg for alms. If we have to, we will do it.* What a resolve for a young canon, a man of noble birth, a well-known doctor, a minister of the altar, well provided for, thanks to income from the Church and his own patrimony! Such a heroic determination, so contrary to self-love and to natural pride, was the triumph of charity. After a temptation so bravely resisted and

after a victory so complete, our canon could no longer measure the progress he made in love and grace.

He goes to Paris to get the approval of his archbishop

Finally resolved to divest himself of everything in order to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, naked and poor, he went to Paris in July 1683 to meet with his archbishop and to request his permission to resign his canonry. He was unable to speak with him at that time, however, and a few days later, the archbishop returned to Reims.

During his brief sojourn in Paris, our virtuous canon met with Monsieur de La Barmondière, at the time pastor of Saint Sulpice, no doubt for the purpose of conferring with this saintly man on the resolution he had taken and to receive from his lips new encouragement in carrying it out. Saints like to meet with saints, and their greatest comfort is to see their projects, which worldlings oppose and condemn, approved and encouraged by God's friends. De La Salle mentions the fact but says nothing about what took place between them concerning his new Institute, for his humility never allowed him to reveal anything that might turn to his own praise. We shall not be far wrong, however, if we surmise that the saintly parish priest gave his fullest approval to a proposal which met with such universal condemnation by the world and that he warmly praised (a rare thing with him, as those who knew him can testify) a work which promised to give God so much glory and to procure such great benefits for the poor.

We can surmise this, basing ourselves on the outcome of the conversation. De La Barmondière, delighted to hear of the remarkable results that the new schools were achieving in Reims, hastened to request for his vast parish such a valuable asset, and he won from De La Salle the promise that he himself would come with two of his Brothers to open a school there. This agreement concluded to the mutual satisfaction of the two men, De La Salle left some of his belongings in Paris as a sort of pledge, hoping to return shortly and carry out his promise. But the fulfillment of this plan took longer than anyone expected. To De La Salle's great regret, he was only able to keep his promise six years later. Yet, in this way and under the aegis of this saintly parish priest, God was preparing an entry for the Christian Schools into the capital of the kingdom, the city which is, so to speak, the key to France, so that from there these schools might spread to all the other cities of France.

The virtuous canon was thus obliged to go back home to meet with his archbishop, whom he had hoped to find in Paris. He did not

delay in presenting himself at the archbishop's palace, but he found the doors shut. The prelate, aware of the designs of this priest whose zeal and disinterestedness were no secret to him, sought to temporize, to give him time to reflect further on the matter, and to prevail on De La Salle to set aside his resolve. He hoped that delay might cool his ardor and change his dispositions and that his own remonstrances, joined with those of relatives and friends, would make him give up this project which aroused so much antagonism on all sides.

Fundamentally, Archbishop Le Tellier felt great esteem for the young canon whose merit and virtue he had occasion to observe. He feared—not without reason—that the loss of this man to the cathedral might soon be followed by losing him to the diocese. So he did all he could to preserve for both a man of such rare worth. At first the prelate kept the doors of his palace closed to him and tried to discourage him by repeated rebuffs, fearing to hear from De La Salle's own lips the resolution which he hoped to change.

### The archbishop tries to dissuade him but finally agrees

When he finally had to listen to him, he told De La Salle that he himself agreed with the opinion of the public concerning the matter which he had come to discuss. He hoped to dissuade him from proceeding with the plan and to bring him to lay it aside. Not succeeding in this, he finally agreed to the desire of the virtuous canon. He did so with great regret and reluctance, although he did not show it, whether because he felt it was useless or because he did not wish to grieve him. After De La Salle had departed, the prelate spoke frankly in the presence of several persons, declaring how deeply he felt the loss of such an evangelical worker, the likes of whom was not to be found in the diocese of Reims.

He showed the same attitude a few years later, when the servant of God wanted to leave Reims and establish his Institute in Paris. At that time, De La Salle found all sorts of opposition on the part of his archbishop. The prelate moved heaven and earth to keep him in the diocese, not hesitating to make him the most alluring offers in the hope of preventing his departure. Archbishop Le Tellier even went so far as to promise to endow his Community if he would agree to limit his foundations to the diocese. The promise was attractive, but the servant of God could not accept it, because it would have hobbled his zeal and restricted the work he was doing for God, a work which he was inspired to spread throughout France. De La Salle, after expressing his most respectful thanks, refused a proposal which seemed so



advantageous. Because nothing but God's interests moved him, he seemed indifferent to human advantages. We have thought it proper to mention these facts at this point, getting somewhat ahead of our story, in order to justify the conduct which Archbishop Le Tellier first adopted toward the virtuous canon. He might have been accused of showing himself rather harsh, if the purpose he pursued was not made clear.

The archbishop had refused to see the virtuous canon only because of the genuine esteem he entertained for him and through fear of losing him. By refusing him an opportunity of explaining his design, he wanted to lead him to give it up. He might have succeeded, if De La Salle's plan had not been inspired by God. It is well known that delay and accumulated opposition end up by making people renounce the plans their minds form, as well as the undertakings they begin. But God's plans only grow stronger with time, and delay does not affect their maturation. Still, the prelate's conduct, the motives of which De La Salle did not know, led the canon to undertake further consultations, to submit his plan, which was so strongly opposed, to a new examination, and even to bring it before the judgment seat of people whom his excellency could not suspect of partiality.

So the question was laid before new judges. The president of the panel, so to speak, was M. Philbert, a man on whom Archbishop Le Tellier relied a great deal, one who enjoyed great influence at the chancery. He was a canon and a professor of theology at the seminary and, later on, became the school supervisor at the cathedral. Marvelous to relate, when the group heard De La Salle and considered his arguments, all of them agreed with his proposal and even advised him to move his undertaking to Paris, so as to avoid all the recriminations he would have to endure from his family in his native city and also in order to establish the work in the center of the kingdom, where it would be easier to recruit more candidates whom he could later dispatch all over the country.

It is true that undertakings inspired by God simply grow stronger through opposition. The plans of the Almighty cannot be foiled by schemes and opposition, as Gamaliel told the Jews. When God acts, everything else must yield, and everything must contribute to what he wishes to bring about. God sways the thoughts and wills of creatures and makes all speak the divine language, every tongue proclaiming what has been inspired. We see an example of this in the case of the false prophet Balaam, who—bribed to curse God's people—found his mouth filled not with words which came from his own spirit but with blessings which his heart rejected and disavowed.

This new consultation carried great weight with the archbishop and with the public. It had a profound influence on the humble canon himself, who was doing the consulting, for it completed the task of setting to rest all the doubts which human opposition might have caused to arise concerning the source of his resolution. It made it impossible for him to doubt any longer that the Holy Spirit was indeed its author, since he had won approval for it from people who naturally would have been expected to combat it. Eager to pursue his goal once more and to obtain the archbishop's approval for his resignation, he went back to see the prelate the day before M. Le Tellier was to leave again for Paris.

As the canon found the door still shut before him, he went to the cathedral to make a visit to an even greater Lord, to whose presence there were no doors, no barriers, no guards to stop him. At the foot of the altar, where he was free to pour out his heart, he remained in prayer for several hours. During this long supplication, surrendering to the transports of his fervor, he spent his time offering his desires to God, abandoning himself to the divine will, and beseeching God to carry them out without taking into consideration his own inclination or repugnance. He remained too long a time in this spiritual ecstasy, motionless and as though lifeless, not to be noticed by critical eyes. One of his acquaintances, one of those false sages so numerous in the world, maliciously pitying the supposedly wretched state of this man of God, said to another person who came by, *Pray for Monsieur de La Salle; he is losing his mind. You are right*, replied the other, wiser than the first. *He is indeed losing the mind of the world but filling himself with the mind of God.*

It would seem that during this long prayer, God once again whispered to the heart of the canon what the advisors had been inspired to recommend, and the Holy Spirit urged him to go back to the archbishop and once more ask for his approval. He did go back, and this time, the doors swung open before him. The prelate listened to him kindly. The humble canon, who saw the person of Jesus Christ in his archbishop and who, entirely indifferent to what he would decide, only awaited his orders to execute them, opened his heart to him with simplicity and straightforwardness.

After giving a complete and precise report on all he had done, he proposed both plans: to resign his canonry and to go to Paris to establish his work there in the place most favorable for insuring its success. Archbishop Le Tellier, already half convinced, merely asked him whether he had taken advice in a matter of such consequence. De La Salle replied that he had indeed consulted many people and

that his proposal had even won the approbation of Monsieur Philbert, the former superior of the Reims seminary. Philbert, a canon, was at that very time in choir, and the archbishop sent for him. He was somewhat taken aback by the question that Archbishop Le Tellier put to him in a casual tone of voice, inquiring whether he approved of his fellow canon's resignation. He answered neither yes nor no, but he adroitly evaded the question by saying, *Monsieur de La Salle has a brother to whom he could give his prebend. He can give it to anyone he likes*, replied the prelate; *I will accept his resignation*.

### Le Tellier's surprise at the choice of a successor

No sooner was this long-desired reply uttered than De La Salle seized upon it. Fearing perhaps that delay might bring about some hitch, he immediately wrote out his letter of resignation, which his spiritual director signed and sealed. He then begged the archbishop to insert the name of Monsieur Faubert as his successor. This was a young ecclesiastic who enjoyed a notable reputation in Reims at this time. His talent for preaching—which he employed with great success—combined with his strict regularity of life had won for him considerable renown. In a word, the pious canon did not know of anyone more distinguished in merit or more worthy of his choice. Faubert, however, was poor and of humble extraction, and for this reason, he was not highly thought of by those who judge men by the standards of the flesh.

If De La Salle had consulted his own personal feelings and those of nature, his canonry would not have left his family, because he had a brother who was already a cleric and eligible to replace him. But here was a man who, in a manner worthy of apostolic times and like Saint Paul, never heeded flesh and blood, who made up his mind not to listen to those who counseled that he favor his brother for fear of making a mistake in a matter of such moment. In order to avoid being duped by self-love and so that he might choose the worthiest candidate, he found that the safest procedure was to prefer a stranger whose merit he knew rather than a relative who might be less capable or of doubtful ability.

But how difficult it was for him to make such a choice when the time came to do it! To prefer a stranger who was poor and of lowly origin, enjoying little social prestige, to his own brother or to some other rich and noble citizen, he needed to overcome common prejudices. He had to set aside a pernicious custom authorized by many examples. He was obliged to surmount human respect, the interests of his family, and the outcries of the public. More than this, he had to

brave slanderous tongues, public blame, the reproaches of his fellow canons, the insults of his relatives, the scorn of the worldly wise, and the malicious comments of a multitude of dissatisfied people. Yet that is exactly what De La Salle did; nothing could move his heart, already fully dominated by grace.

Consequently, we may say that this choice, under the circumstances, was truly heroic and worthy of him, for he could expect it to be unwelcome not only at the palace of the archbishop but also in the chapter and in the city. It would surely provoke more bitterness and recrimination from his family. If he had wished to please people, all he had to do was to designate his brother as his successor or pick somebody else from among the wealthy and distinguished citizens of Reims. Such a choice would have restored his reputation among worldlings to some extent by making his resignation less unpalatable to them. But such considerations which might have moved a heart less docile to grace than his, such arguments which are so powerful over persons who act through human motives, found no entry into the mind of this priest, who listened to nothing but the Spirit of God.

Le Tellier tries in vain to dissuade De La Salle from his choice

The surprise the archbishop showed when he learned that the devout canon had designated as his successor a man who had nothing to distinguish him except his personal merit—preferring him to his own brother, to other relatives, or to the offspring of families which, at Reims as elsewhere, begin when a child is in his cradle to scheme to secure for him a prebend at the cathedral—did not disconcert him in the least and did not make him modify his first choice.

The archbishop, noting that the surprise he had shown did not seem to impress De La Salle, spoke to him in favor of his brother. Without wishing to dictate his choice, he tried to make him give the preference to his brother rather than to a total stranger. His entreaty was a strong one, especially in the presence of someone who looked upon his superiors only with the eyes of faith but who also knew when superiors were reacting on a merely human level and when they were speaking as the instruments of the Holy Spirit. Without entering into much discussion, De La Salle cut the prelate's insistence short by these simple words, *This is not the course I was advised to take*. This reply satisfied Archbishop Le Tellier, and he left the canon to his holy freedom of choice.

His brother, as it turned out, did not lose anything by this arrangement, because the refusal of De La Salle to pass on his canonry

to him secured for his brother another one which the same prelate conferred of his own free will, without even being asked to do so, as though to compensate for the supposed loss he had suffered by the resignation in favor of Monsieur Faubert. This explanation was given by the archbishop himself when he bestowed a canonry on the younger De La Salle a few years later: *I am offering you this gift to make reparation for the foolishness of Monsieur de La Salle, who gave his benefice to someone other than his own brother.*

It is true that the choice De La Salle made did not turn out as well as he had hoped. His successor—a poor, simple priest, very zealous and hardworking—was eager, once he became a wealthy canon, to enjoy like others an effortless life with ample repose, and he lost his zeal and his love for apostolic work. But De La Salle could not foresee the future; God alone keeps that for himself. He had based his choice not on what Faubert might become later on but on what he was at the time. When De La Salle chose him as his successor, this young ecclesiastic of the diocese of Reims was the man in the diocese who seemed to be doing the greatest good and who showed the most promise for the future. If eventually he did not fulfill those hopes and gave up walking in the path of discipline and edification in which he had set out, what happened to him is only what happens every day, what has happened at all times to an infinite number of others who, after beginning well, finish badly.

For a certain time, however, this priest did give his benefactor much satisfaction and joy on account of the choice he had made. At first, he followed in his footsteps, joined forces with him, and started a sort of junior seminary for young ecclesiastical students at the same time and in the same house where De La Salle began a similar program for the Brothers.

### De La Salle's anguish at Faubert's loss of fervor

In all probability, as long as the servant of God remained in Reims, Faubert profited by his presence. He did not begin to grow relaxed until he lost the support of De La Salle's instruction and example. The quiet and easy lifestyle he adopted after the first few years of his hard and painful existence eventually detached him from the good works he had undertaken earlier. It made him grow corpulent, the sign of a rich prebend. It lulled him to sleep in the bosom of repose. Finally, he became so stout and heavy that when he died, it took eight or ten men to carry his coffin. His death preceded by several years that of De La Salle, who experienced the chagrin of seeing his successor in

the chapter of Reims end up in relaxation after beginning his career in fervor.

If the servant of God had been able to foresee this—he mentioned the fact himself more than once—he would not have chosen Monsieur Faubert from among the parish priests, where he was doing excellent work and living as a worthy disciple of Jesus Christ and a fervent minister of the Church, in order to give him his place among the canons.

It is remarkable that the changes in their living habits seem to have ruined one man's health and shortened his days as the result of a soft and easy existence, while the extraordinary austerities and labors of the other seem to have built up his naturally frail constitution. De La Salle had been born to wealth and brought up in luxury; he might not have lived so long had he been less penitent and less austere. Faubert, who had been born in poverty, would probably have lived longer if his body, accustomed to hard work and abstemious living, had not grown flaccid and obese as a consequence of too much repose and indolence.

These details, which contain some important lessons, have been placed here, because if they had been related in different locations as the chronological order would require, the story would have lost some of its interest and utility. So now let us return to the account of De La Salle's resignation of his canonry.

Archbishop Le Tellier, observing the heroic virtues that De La Salle's sacrifice made plain to him, began to look with admiration on this priest whom he had treated with something resembling disdain. This prelate was not disposed to join in programs of extraordinary perfection and still less to authorize projects based on real poverty and perfect abandonment to Divine Providence. If the virtuous canon had explained that he intended to use his patrimonial goods to endow the schools and the income from his canonry to support them, this kind of language (which everybody can understand) would not have proved incomprehensible to Archbishop Le Tellier.

Such proposals would indeed have been very worthy ones, but they did not attain the sublimity of evangelical perfection. They would not have startled him but instead would have won his hearty approval. But for someone to wish to become poor after being rich, by his own free choice to move from enjoying all the amenities of life to a state in which even the necessities would be lacking, was a measure which to this rich and opulent lord seemed a pious illusion, one of those romantic and devotional fantasies more apt to excite hilarity than to be put into effect. In fact, when the canon had first broached

the matter, Le Tellier had laughed heartily. Did he hope by this to disconcert him and to deflate by his quips the perfervid imagination of his petitioner, led astray by too much devotion?

But when he saw that the carrying out of this evangelical resolution would begin by putting aside the strongest natural feelings and preferring a poor priest to a beloved brother, he finally realized that there still are in the Church some of those “new men” formed by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost to build up the infant Church—men who seek their treasure in poverty—and that De La Salle was one of them. Although he could not help showing his surprise, he surrendered the petitioner to the action of the Holy Spirit and gave him full liberty to follow the inspirations of God. That was all the pious canon had wanted. At last, he felt himself truly happy when he saw himself free to become poor and abject and to die to the world by giving up his rank as a canon.

He left the archbishop’s palace happier than when he had entered it. Upon his return home, he gathered all his disciples to share the good news with them. As he had desired, he had reached the summit of fortune on the Mount of Calvary, and his joy was so great that to thank heaven for the favor it had given him, he and his companions sang the *Te Deum*.

## CHAPTER XIV

*De La Salle remains firm in his decision to resign his canonry in favor of Monsieur Faubert, in spite of renewed appeals from his relatives, his colleagues, and his friends.*

The spiritual joy which the humble canon, now free to become poor and to lay aside his high rank, experienced on his departure from the archbishop’s palace was soon altered; he did not have much time to enjoy it. New opposition brought him renewed concern over this project which seemed compromised again just when he thought it was finally settled.

The news of the act of resignation, which he had signed and which had won the approval of the archbishop, spread from house to house, from mouth to mouth, as rapidly as such tidings usually spread as a consequence of the various passions which agitate those who are curious about such things. The resignation caused a great deal of uproar in the city and stirred up much dissatisfaction. One could hear

nothing but murmuring, complaints, and recriminations addressed to the devout source of all this agitation.

In order to stand by the heroic decision he had made, De La Salle on this occasion needed the fortitude inspired by the Holy Spirit, as did the early martyrs of the New Law. There was still time for him to change his mind, to recover his canonry, or to bestow it on someone more acceptable to the cathedral chapter than Monsieur Faubert, someone with higher standing at the archdiocesan chancery, someone more favorably regarded by the public and by his family.

What did people not do to make him go back on his decision! Pleas, exhortations, supplications, flattery, reproaches, threats, invectives—nothing was omitted. Each of his friends, relatives, and fellow canons made his own personal attempt to bring him around. They all spoke for the brother of the devout canon or, at least, for some other member of the family, and in case none of these would accept, for some other distinguished friend who would honor the chapter and join to the title of canon of the illustrious metropolitan church that of a son of Reims and one of its distinguished families. If all did not agree on the candidates they suggested, they all made it clear that Faubert was the wrong man. The members of the chapter did not consider him worthy to take his seat among them and become one of their renowned company. The family considered it an act of injustice to let a canonical prebend slip from its grasp and go to a stranger. Whether this stranger was deserving or not did not concern the world in the least. In its eyes and in the opinion of the family, he was not worthy to be a canon, because he had neither property nor pedigree.

There ensued a general agitation in the city against the decision. To convince De La Salle to retract it, leading persons assured him that he could not do anything more pleasing to his archbishop, who had such a high regard for him and who had given in to his proposal only with misgivings and reluctance. His fellow canons, they said, expected that he would afford them this mark of deference for a chapter which entertained a singular esteem for him and was attached to him, which considered him its glory and a man who spread abroad the good fragrance of Jesus Christ. It was represented to him that his best friends were asking for this favor in the name of all their fellow citizens, that this unanimous appeal from the entire city certainly sufficed to indicate where God's will lay, and that if he had any doubts, it would be easy to convince him by having all of them sign the petition they would present to him.

Finally, he was told that he really should not offer such an affront to a family which had always loved him and which did not deserve



that he should seem to disdain and despise it by seeking his successor outside its ranks. His family was large enough and religious enough to offer him many worthy candidates. It would certainly be disgraceful for the family and for himself if Monsieur Faubert were preferred to his own brother or to one of his other close relatives, if this stranger were to fill, in one of the most illustrious clerical bodies in all France, the position that he was vacating. It was easy for him to avoid all these vexations by simply remaining where and what he was, that this was undoubtedly the best solution, the one that everybody preferred. They added that he would adopt it, if he did not stubbornly wish to prove in his person that the most devout people are also the most hardheaded.

In the midst of all these onslaughts, De La Salle remained steadfast in a resolve which had already cost him such great sacrifices and which the Holy Spirit had built up and established on the ruins of his self-love and at the expense of his natural preferences. Calm amidst all these murmurs, reproaches, and complaints, he listened to the appeals of his friends with quiet politeness, feeling that they ran counter to those of heaven. He smiled to himself when he heard people impute to self-love, to secret ambition, to refined pride, and to stubbornness a decision over which nature in him had so long battled against grace. To execute it, he had begun by impressive sacrifices. More of the same lay in store for him every day he would live, more cruel renunciations which God alone would know about and of which De La Salle alone would be the victim. A decision made according to God's will at the expense of flesh and blood admitted neither regret nor uncertainty. A proposal so obviously marked by the finger of God, inspired by so many invitations and inner movements of the Holy Spirit, arrived at after so much deliberation and consultation, and finally authorized by the highest superior should certainly not be debated all over again. It was foolish for people to think that they could undermine or modify it. When his friends saw that their entreaties were useless and that De La Salle paid no attention to them, they let him alone and gave up their quest.

### The objections of the canons against Monsieur Faubert

The final efforts came from the chapter. That illustrious body, displeased at losing De La Salle, was even more so at seeing him replaced by Monsieur Faubert. Its members did all they could to keep the one and exclude the other. With this in view, they wrote to the archbishop to inform him how unacceptable to them the nomination

of Faubert was and how much it distressed them. They went on to give His Excellency to understand how ardently they desired to see one brother succeed to the other, thus excluding a man whose appointment they considered a disgrace for their whole company. The expedient they suggested to the prelate to obtain their aim was short and facile.

As the formal announcement had not yet been made, it was a simple matter for the archbishop to delay it and then to use his authority over a man who respected it so highly, in order to convince him either to keep his canonry or to confer it on someone else more acceptable to the chapter, the family, and the city. This is what they asked Archbishop Le Tellier to do. The latter, whose own opinion coincided fully with that of his chapter, adopted the suggestion. Joining his pleas to those of De La Salle's colleagues, he tried once more either to keep him in his place at the cathedral or to persuade him to give his place to his brother.

Monsieur Callou, the vicar-general and at this time superior of the seminary of Reims, was the man the archbishop thought to be best qualified to handle this affair and to draw from a heart closed to all human motives the Christian submission which he owed to the desires of his archbishop. This new trial was a subtle one, for neither personal interest nor emotion seemed to be the reason for it. Family and friends seemed no longer to be involved. Because the proposal was clothed in the trappings of the most venerable authority, it commanded respect. It attempted to make the servant of God scrupulous about not giving in to the recommendations of the archbishop, his first superior—recommendations brought to him by the most influential cleric in the diocese, a man who enjoyed the highest reputation for virtue and sound doctrine.

Vain attempts by the vicar-general to convince De La Salle to withdraw his resignation

What did the vicar-general not do to carry out his mission according to the archbishop's desires and those of the chapter, the family and the whole city! He omitted nothing to make the servant of God feel the power that his oratorical talent gave him to influence hearts—a talent which, it seems, he possessed to a high degree. After reminding him of all that might move him and presenting under new aspects and with added emphasis the arguments which so many other lips had sought to advance, he canonized them in some manner and confirmed them by invoking the highest authority. He said that he had

come on behalf of the archbishop to beg him to yield. He assured him that the desire of His Excellency was to see him back in the cathedral or at least to see him bestow the canonry on his brother. He could not, without causing his family some injury, hand over this dignity to someone who was neither his closest relative nor his heir; finally, since his own brother was both capable and virtuous, it would be a slur on him if a stranger were preferred to him.

Although Callou tried his best to make the Holy Spirit speak through his lips, it was the man only who spoke, albeit very ably. The Holy Spirit said nothing to De La Salle or, rather, spoke to him in the secret of his heart and confirmed him in his resolve. His reply, short and to the point, brought out once more his detachment from flesh and blood and showed that he would not listen to human considerations. "If my brother were not my brother," he answered, "I would find no difficulty in choosing him to succeed me, in order to satisfy the desires of the archbishop and give him the preference over the man I have named. But can I and should I yield to the voice of nature and to the solicitations which merely re-echo it?"

Such an answer reduced the superior of the Reims seminary to silence and dried up the source of his eloquence. Impressed, edified, and convinced, he changed his mind and approved the decision he had come to challenge. After letting the man in him speak, he let the Holy Spirit pronounce the verdict and ended by applauding the heroic resolution he had been unable to modify. *God forbid*, he added, *that I should advise you to do what everybody wants you to do. Carry out what the Spirit of God has inspired you to do. This advice, which is the contrary of what I came to tell you, is truly from God and the only suggestion you must listen to.* He ended by encouraging him to pursue his plan, another demonstration of how the Holy Spirit puts words into the mouth of anyone and causes even those tongues which were prepared to speak against the divine will now to declare it.

#### Monsieur Faubert takes possession of De La Salle's canonry

Monsieur Callou, better satisfied by seeing the servant of God immovably fixed in his heroic attitude than if he had caused him to change it as the public wished, congratulated him on his firmness and reported to the archbishop that he had not succeeded in his mission. De La Salle also wrote the prelate and candidly repeated in his letter the reply he had made, and he mentioned the approval he had won from the superior of the seminary, who had come hoping to get him to adopt a different course.

Seeing that there was no hope of prevailing and that the delay availed nothing, the archbishop issued the letters of approval for Faubert, who took possession of his canonry on 16 August 1683. De La Salle alone rejoiced over it. *Having emerged triumphant from the arduous contest which God had given him to endure*,<sup>30</sup> he was thus, at the age of thirty-three, relieved of a rich and honorable burden. He experienced more satisfaction over his resignation than others feel over accepting such positions after having for a long time desired and avidly sought them. He still possessed his patrimonial goods, but it would not take him long to give them up also, desirous as he was to make himself perfectly conformable to the One who, being infinitely rich, made himself poor for our sakes, eager to become in all things like unto his Brothers, exposed like them and with them to the necessities and cares of daily life with no other resource but Divine Providence.

Who can sufficiently admire the fortitude that the Spirit of God imparts to the souls whom God has fully taken possession of and occupied completely? What the world abhors, what nature shrinks from the most, becomes the object of their desires and of their holy longing. The privation of all things, the lack of necessities, and a state which condemns them to pain, toil, and abjection are what they aspire to. Such souls consider their fortune made when they are poor and despised. They have all they long for in this world when, deprived of its goods and pleasures, they keep only its woes and sufferings as their lot. Their heritage is the dowry of the cross; they want no other.

Thanks be given to God, who even in our day still sends us some of these generous people who walk with courage in the footsteps of the Apostles on the path trodden by the Man of Sorrows. Without having to go back to remote centuries, we find in our times followers of the Savior who possess the quintessence of his Spirit and who sigh after that which constitutes the greatest menace to the world and the flesh. In our century, De La Salle has given us an example of these new men, passionately attached to suffering, who seem to long for nothing except abjection, poverty, and the crucifixion of the flesh.

It is true that in speaking to hearts, God uses language very different from that of human beings. The most admirable trait in De La Salle is that at the very time when he was doing such great things for God, he was the only one who did not realize it. Deprived of his benefice, resolved to give away his patrimony, soon poorer than those

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30. Wisdom 10.

with whom he was associated, with no other resource than the generosity of our heavenly Father, in danger of lacking even the necessities of life, which he indeed often had to do without, and prepared to spend the rest of his life in a state of humiliation and suffering, he was convinced that he had done nothing for God as yet, had not even begun to work at the task of his own sanctification. Hence, as we shall see, he set about it with unbelievable fervor.

The servant of God, having relinquished his rank and assumed a station as low as his humility could wish for, found himself as free as the birds of the air to fly wherever the glory of God might require. His detachment from all worldly things and his perfect dedication to God's service were the two wings which lifted him above earth and bore him heavenward. They gave him the agility of pure spirits and a promptness equal to theirs, which carried him wherever it might please God to summon him.

### The reasons why De La Salle considers moving to Paris

The first thought that occurred to him after resigning his canonry was to proceed to Paris. M. Philbert had advised him to do this. He had practically promised M. de La Barmondière to come. Père Barré also ardently desired to see him make this move. Each of these three virtuous persons, whose authority De La Salle greatly respected, had different reasons for wanting him to establish his work in Paris.

Monsieur Philbert felt that this change of locale was necessary: first, to quiet the emotions, gossip, and dissatisfaction stirred up in Reims by the example of such virtue; second, to mollify the De La Salle family, irritated over the conduct of a relative who had shown so little concern about its honor and its interests; third, to give the chapter time to put aside its displeasure at him and its prejudice against the new canon, and finally, to allow the city to recover from the shock and gossip provoked by actions whose perfection it could not understand and against which so many had taken umbrage, depending on their own interests or the various passions which possessed them.

Monsieur de La Barmondière wished to see De La Salle come to Paris mainly for the good of his parish. He envied the city of Reims this treasure it possessed without realizing it. Père Barré looked at the matter with a wider vision. He wanted to see the servant of God in Paris only in order to withdraw this burning torch from Reims, where it remained as though hidden under a basket, and to manifest it in the capital, as though on the summit of a mountain, so that it might shine over the entire kingdom and shed rays of light everywhere.

All these arguments were powerful ones, and De La Salle's mind was duly impressed by them. It was indeed time for him to withdraw from the sight of his fellow citizens. Some were poorly disposed toward him; others were dissatisfied with his conduct. They bore in their hearts wounds which only his absence would gradually heal. In time they would pardon him for faults which heaven rewards with great merit.

Nevertheless, there are always some among the crowd of the dissatisfied who get over their prejudices and are honest enough to admit their mistakes, their lack of faith, and their want of virtue. In the future, these people would learn to recognize virtue in one who gave them such extraordinary proofs thereof. Later on, De La Salle would actually have more to fear from their approbation and praise than from their blame and censure. It would be more prudent to avoid, through a discreet withdrawal, this peril, more dangerous for his virtue than the most violent persecutions. Among the mass of ordinary Christians, there are always some who entertain aspirations toward the perfect life and try to attain it, and others who at least understand and esteem it. De La Salle, although blamed and condemned by the greater number, still had his admirers and his panegyrists, who willingly paid the tribute of praise that his sacrifices deserved. Such admiration is always a snare for truly virtuous persons. The humble former canon, now only a simple priest, was afraid of such attitudes. For this reason, he wanted to bury himself in Paris, where he would be protected from such a subtle temptation.

As a man of his word, De La Salle wanted to keep the promise he had made to the saintly pastor of Saint Sulpice: to take a few of his disciples with him and open one of his new kind of school in that parish, which was almost as large as a diocese. In fact, he was as anxious to satisfy the zeal of Père Barré as he was to give fuller scope to his own zeal by going to the capital, from which it would be easier to extend the benefits of his work throughout the kingdom. He felt that his canonry had been a sort of chain binding him and that Reims was like a prison where he remained confined; he needed to get away from the city, just as he had gotten out of the chapter, if he wanted to be truly free. There was thus no lack of reasons calling him to Paris, even making it a duty for him to go there.

Will he heed the call? Will he do so as soon as his zeal would like? No. He is a man of obedience, and he will not move until obedience sends him. All these arguments in favor of going were weighty, and all who invoked them enjoyed great authority over his mind, but obedience held even more sway over his heart. He goes when it tells

him to go; he comes when it tells him to come; he does what it orders when it commands him: do this. *I say to someone, go, and he goes; come, and he comes; do this, and he does it.* If his director did not add these orders to all the reasons given, they would have no impact on the Founder's mind.

De La Salle believed Monsieur Philbert to be a prudent counselor; the arguments he put forward seemed well founded and decisive. He considered Monsieur de La Barmondière and Père Barré as two saintly men, two of the greatest servants of God to be found in Paris. By the light of faith, however, he looked upon his director as Jesus Christ himself, as the organ and oracle of his desires. In this persuasion, he conformed to his director's views and obeyed him with childlike docility.

He often consulted enlightened persons, eminent for their virtue, but he did not adopt their advice unless his director approved it. In all things, he abided by his advice, preferring it not only to his own opinions but even to the views of persons of the most outstanding holiness. He was persuaded that when a diversity of judgments arose, he had to follow that of his visible angel. When his spiritual director spoke, he forgot everything the others said. This was the only way to remain in peace and to be sure of following God's will. If we cannot have blind confidence in our spiritual director, we should leave him. However, when after prayer we have made a judicious choice of a director, when freed from natural inclinations and worldly prejudices and the tendencies of our own heart, we find a director whose lively, pure faith seeks nothing but Jesus Christ and listens only to him, we must feel certain that we will hear God's voice from his mouth and must take his advice as our rule of life. De La Salle gives us a marvelous example of such docility.

He would have preferred to leave Reims and move to Paris; the advice of M. Philbert authorized him to do so. He had pledged his word to M. de La Barmondière, and the wishes of Père Barré drew him thither. He told all this to his spiritual director with the simplicity and candor of a novice. After opening his heart fully, he asked for advice. What would he do, if the advice happened to run counter to that of the other great servants of God and to his own personal preferences? He would obey the one who takes the place of Jesus Christ. To him he must sacrifice his own wishes and the wise counsels given to him. That was what he did.

His spiritual director advises against the move

His spiritual director's opinion ran counter to the opinions of Philbert, De La Barmondière, and Barré, and it was the only one which was followed, and rightly so. If we consider his director's reasons and compare them with those given above, we shall see that the director's position was indeed to be preferred. "Your new Institute is just starting," he said to De La Salle. "It is still in gestation, and it may be that it will not survive the move to Paris to be born. Nature itself requires that it should develop in the place where it was conceived before appearing in the light of day. You must give a plant time to draw nourishment from its native soil, to grow strong and to strike deep roots, before thinking of transplanting it, even to a more favorable location. If it is moved too soon, it dies. Your new Community is like a tender seedling which has barely sprung up in the soil of Reims. Before moving it to Paris, give it time to acquire consistency, to develop sufficiently in the place where it was born.

"If you want another comparison, consider this. When you wish to erect a building, you must dig deep to lay the foundation. As the edifice rises, it needs a skillful hand to control its progress. Your new Community is this spiritual structure which requires your presence. You are its architect, its Founder. If you go off to Paris to start building all over again on new foundations, you will simply ruin what you have established in Reims. It would take a miracle to prevent it from falling to pieces.

"You are perfectly right to call your little group a tiny flock. You have about fifteen men here, in Laon, in Guise, and in Rethel. If you take a few of them with you to Paris, you will divide and weaken the group. You will abandon to the wiles of the infernal wolf those whom you leave behind, for when you divide your men, some of them will be away from you. You cannot at the same time be in Paris and in Reims. While taking care of some, you will be neglecting others.

"Just as your presence will do them much good wherever you are, your absence will not fail to cause harm whenever you are absent. Disciples who are still novices in virtue absolutely need their master to teach them. Travelers just entering upon the ways of spirituality need a guide to show them the path. The ones whom you leave to themselves, no longer having you with them, will quickly fall away from the principles you have taught them and lose their way on a road where it is so easy to be misled."

In this way, his director made De La Salle realize how necessary his presence was in Reims by representing to him the harm that going



to Paris would do to his little Community, yet only half organized. He reminded him of the disappointments and worries he had to endure in order to bring it to the point where it now was and led him to admit that the schoolmasters still needed his care and watchfulness. As for the promise he had made to the pastor of Saint Sulpice to establish a school in his parish, the director praised his penitent's zealous desire to keep his word. "Such a promise, however," he observed, "binds you only if it is reasonable, possible, and advantageous to your Institute. So long as these conditions remain unfulfilled, your word cannot oblige you. You must make sure that in fulfilling it, you do not destroy what you have started in Reims by trying to establish yourself in Paris." Such reasons were too cogent to be rejected. It was not, however, their cogency that made De La Salle remain in Reims but his spirit of obedience. That was all he paid attention to. His conduct was ruled by nothing else, because he wished his management of the affairs of his Institute to be based on nothing else.

This verdict of his spiritual guide, which De La Salle did not allow himself to call into question, put an end to his reflections and inner debate. He wrote to De La Barmondière, explaining that it was impossible for him to carry out his promise at that time and begging him to be patient until Providence indicated that the right time had come, since it knows how to make everything contribute to the fulfillment of the divine designs. He also wrote to Monsieur Lespagnol, who had charge of the parish schools at Saint Sulpice, saying that he had been advised not to leave Reims and that it was not possible for him to go to Paris yet.

When Père Barré heard this news, he was greatly disappointed, for nobody more than he longed to see De La Salle establish one of his Christian Schools in Paris. He felt sure that from there they would not fail to spread all over the kingdom. This hope was what preoccupied the pious Minim exclusively and what gave constant exercise to his zeal. As a pioneer founder of Christian and Gratuitous Schools, Barré had at first planned to establish them for both boys and girls, but since his efforts in setting up schools for boys had not met with success, he had directed his energies entirely toward multiplying those for girls. He had done so all the more earnestly because mothers are the natural teachers of their children, and hence it was extremely important to give them the instruction they needed by a truly pious education. In this way, they would be able to educate their children and bring them up in a Christian manner.

No doubt this obligation applied to fathers also, but they usually pay scant attention to it, whether because, as a rule, they have much

less religious spirit and less inclination toward piety or because they spend their time working and return home exhausted. They are also less often at home, as they go out to find some type of relaxation. Barré had not given up the idea of schools for boys, however; he had only put it off, awaiting the favorable moment appointed by Divine Providence and hoping to attempt it again. He even convinced himself that the success he had achieved in his establishments for girls would eventually come to him in those for boys when God's good time came. Because he was growing old, he also feared, with reason, that death might cut short his expectations.

Thus when he saw De La Salle laboring with so much zeal at the same task and carrying it out like a truly apostolic man, giving up all things and practicing the most heroic virtue, he honored him as the man chosen by God for this task and did all he could to encourage him to come to Paris. In the Minim's opinion, Reims could not serve as the cradle of an Institute destined for universal diffusion. Paris was the only proper place for it, the only center which would permit it to attain real progress. When he lost hope of seeing him move to Paris, Barré was inconsolable and made no secret of his disappointment to all those who, like him, awaited such a great blessing. There is no doubt that the impression made on De La Salle's mind and heart by Père Barré, by his authority and the cogency of his arguments, by the renown of his sanctity, and by the depth of his insight concerning a task for which he had received the first inspiration and the first grace for executing it would have convinced De La Salle to go to Paris if obedience to his spiritual director had not kept him in Reims.

## CHAPTER XV

*With the approval of his spiritual director, De La Salle sells his patrimonial goods and distributes the proceeds to the poor.*

On the advice of his director, De La Salle remained in his native city and gave himself wholeheartedly to the work of which he now had full charge. True, its success, its progress, and its perfection were in God's hands, and he was nothing but God's instrument. Such instruments, however, must be fit for God's hands: men and women who are dead to themselves, who renounce their own views and live only according to God's, who act only as God gives them to act. De La Salle sought to achieve this state of perfect death to self. He tried in

every way to become truly God's man, capable of doing God's work. He directed his undivided application to his own sanctification and that of his disciples; he desired these goals to the exclusion of all else.

To walk with giant strides in the path of perfection, however, we must not be attached to anything. We must be detached from everything and filled with heroic courage to follow Jesus Christ. This was what the holy priest still had to do and what he was about to undertake with heroic generosity. He had broken the ties that held him back. His canonry no longer forced him to divide his time between the choir and his Community. His resignation had excluded him from worldly society by making him objectionable to the world and the world objectionable to him. Even so, he did not yet enjoy full liberty.

Although he no longer possessed an ecclesiastical benefice, De La Salle still owned his patrimonial goods. He felt that he possessed too much and that the time had come at last to get rid of the excess. As we mentioned previously, he had made up his mind about this action sometime before. The motives which led him to his decision were those given above. The counsel of Jesus Christ, who said, *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, and then come and follow me*, was his first and principal reason. Because he wanted to be perfect, his desire made it necessary for him to become poor in fact.

Renunciation is the first step leading to perfection. If we wish to follow Christ, we must run after him. But to run, we must carry no heavy burden, nothing to impede or weigh us down. The slightest excess would retard and eventually stop us. Since the burden of wealth is a grievous one, it is necessary to despoil ourselves of it in order to reach Jesus Christ. He himself goes on before us naked, stripped of all. In his company only the poor are found; with them a rich man could not associate.

The connection between poverty and perfection is so basic that Jesus Christ makes the one depend on the other. *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all you have, give it to the poor*, and when you have done that, *come, follow me*. He says that this selling and this giving away must precede the act of coming and following him. Voluntary poverty, which gives us wings to follow Christ, strongly attracted De La Salle. Drawn by its beauty, he wanted to espouse poverty, being assured that the treasures of grace and all spiritual goods are the rich dowry that it brings to those who embrace it for the love of God.

This first consideration had to do with his own perfection; the second referred to the Brothers. The desire for perfection could not take root in the hearts of the Brothers as long as solicitude for the

present and anxiety for the future preoccupied them. This temptation affected all of them and incited them to leave a house which offered no assurance for the future, in order to seek it elsewhere, mostly in vain and, often enough, at the risk of compromising their salvation. Their faith was not sufficiently strong to persuade them that abandonment to Divine Providence is a sure source of support and that there are no contracts, no deeds, no property rights that can so surely be counted on.

Their charity was not yet perfect enough to make them realize through daily experience that confidence in God is the key that unlocks all heaven's treasures. If the lessons given them on this subject by their father had still not convinced them, it was because his own conduct had not yet lent conviction to his words. He needed to give them such an example in his person in order to confirm them in their vocation and inspire them with a yearning for perfection.

Ultimately, his entire work was a work of Providence. Père Barré had wished to found his schools only on this infinitely solid foundation and to address himself only to souls who walked by pure faith. He had not even wanted to give his foundation any other name.<sup>31</sup> The saintly Minim had inspired De La Salle with the same attitude and had begged him not to seek for himself or for his disciples any other reliance but the arm of our heavenly Father. Grace made him realize that when his disciples saw him as poor by choice as they were by necessity, they would no longer hesitate to throw themselves, like him, upon the bosom of Providence. In a word, De La Salle wanted to be like his Brothers. After the example of Christ, he wished to become poor with the poor, so as to make them love their condition as poor men.

### De La Salle consults his director about his plan

These three considerations urged him, therefore, to divest himself of his patrimonial goods. As he did nothing except on the advice of his director, he mentioned this matter to him. After explaining the reasons that had led him to this determination, he besought him to give him the further merit of obedience in executing it. Here was another embarrassing decision for the director, another step for which people would blame him and for which the world would criticize him. However, De La Salle had already done so many unconventional things that by this time, people should have lost the habit of wondering

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31. Barré called the congregation he founded "Sisters of Providence."

about his conduct. Anything could be expected from a man of his character. The world itself, tired of censuring him, was somewhat prepared not to find anything more to criticize in what he did.

Perhaps the director realized that his spiritual son was truly a man of grace and acted only by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so that resisting his plans was really contradicting God's purposes. Perhaps he considered his disciple as a man inspired by heaven, one who could not be governed by the same principles as ordinary pious souls. Perhaps he himself was secretly inspired to approve a desire which was obviously most supernatural. Perhaps, finally, he himself was persuaded by the motives that actuated his penitent and agreed that he needed to join action to words, making himself like the schoolmasters and giving up all he possessed in order to help them become perfect men.

Whatever the reasons which persuaded the director to consent to De La Salle's request, he did consent. Although this last step De La Salle took was by far the most unusual, heroic, and unworldly action he ever performed, capable of bringing down on his director more criticism than the resignation of his canonry, it seemed to the director that he should consent to it more readily than he had to the former renunciation.

The fact is, however, that this new decision presented many more difficulties than did the former one. Such things simply were not done any more, and at best, it was not easy to carry it out, for opposition from the family usually prevents such projects from being executed. Why then did the world, which is usually so prone to protest against any extraordinary manifestation of religious spirit and which never approves heroic deeds of piety, raise less of an outcry when under the eyes of his whole family and those of the entire city, De La Salle planned to sell his possessions and distribute the proceeds to the poor, than it did when he resigned his canonry? Why did his family not object strenuously when it saw itself being despoiled of goods which its members rightfully could have expected to inherit? Why did they not try to stop him when, to their detriment, he was giving away his entire patrimony to the needy?

I find this very surprising; indeed, it is remarkable. After all, since church benefices do not belong to anyone as his personal possession and should not be handed down as legacies, why was there so much grumbling when De La Salle named as his successor someone who, he felt, was the best man qualified, even if he was not a relative? And why did the family not remonstrate when he sold his property and gave the money to the poor, to the detriment of his relatives? We can

only reflect that the world's complaints are as unjust as its judgments are illogical. Perhaps there was as much criticism of this second deed of De La Salle as of the first, but we do not know about it, for the memoirs do not mention it.

Perhaps also the fact that De La Salle distributed his wealth to the starving during a time of general calamity clearly showed that it was a striking act of charity, something so edifying and so public spirited that the most pitiless censors of his conduct found themselves reduced to silence. His relatives, equally reticent under the circumstances, kept quiet for fear of appearing too grasping at a time when widespread starvation would have made such complaints seem utterly disgraceful. They might have provoked violence if they had attempted to interfere with the generosity of a man who so opportunely came forward to assist the starving poor and tried to keep them alive at a time when famine threatened their existence.

It is a fact that De La Salle had resolved to divest himself of his fortune without deciding exactly what he would use it for. He had only two alternatives: either to give his money away entirely to any and all poor people who came along or to dedicate it to the benefit of those of whom he was especially in charge. These two possibilities presented themselves to his mind, backed by reasons of almost equal weight, so that at first he did not see clearly which option he should choose.

On the one hand, his schoolteachers were certainly poor. Indeed, they were the first needy people that Providence had sent to him, and they certainly deserved the preference, since they dedicated their lives to the instruction of the poor. What would be more natural than to secure for them a decent living and adequate subsistence? Did not the right order of charity demand that he provide for the material needs of those who were so necessary for the spiritual advantage of so many poor children? Since nature itself suggests to parents to leave their goods to their children (and civil law obliges them to do so), it was only natural for De La Salle, now that he was a father, to pass on to those whom God had given him as his spiritual children the fortune of which he wished to deprive himself.

### Balancing the options for the use of his wealth

Furthermore, his work needed support. When urgent necessities arose, they would require extraordinary assistance. Where would such help come from, if some public calamity occurred? The world, which opposed him and which felt only scorn for his followers, was hardly

disposed to help them. Nor could he expect to find in the homes of his relatives the help which was lacking in his own house. He had done too much to cause them embarrassment and even possible financial loss. In a sense, he had deprived them of their expectations. He could never hope to attract their attention to his troubles, still less to touch their hearts over the hardships of the state into which he had hurled himself in spite of them. The remedy for all these needs was in his hands. All he had to do was to use as an endowment for his work the wealth from which he sought to detach himself out of a desire for greater perfection.

Nothing could have been more appropriate. The schools, still in their infancy, would have been more solidly established. The teachers, eager for some kind of security, would have found it in this donation made in their favor. Their uneasiness would have been allayed, and their vocation rendered more solid. Since their condition of life and that of De La Salle had been exchanged, now that he had divested himself of his wealth in their favor, they would have opened their minds to the lessons of perfection he gave them. They would have at last found in his person a striking model of perfect disinterestedness and abandonment to Divine Providence. This solution was recommended by the example of Monsieur Roland and had the approval of several persons distinguished by their piety.

“Since you have made up your mind to divest yourself of your wealth,” he was told, “do it in favor of your Community. Piety and a sort of equity seem to make this a duty for you. Nobody can find fault with such a determination. Your work is still just beginning; if it is to subsist, it needs your money as much as it needs your direction. As a father, you have a duty to provide for your children’s subsistence and to give them the preference over strangers. Wisdom dictates this, and your kindheartedness can only agree. The worldly wise, who might be inclined to criticize you for laying aside your wealth, will have to admit that you are right in using it to consolidate your good works. The example of Monsieur Roland, whose advice you sought while he yet lived and whose memory you continue to venerate, should guide you in this. He endowed his schools for girls. Why not do the same for your schools for boys?” Apparently, this attitude had much to commend it. If De La Salle adopted it, he would lay to rest the concerns of the schoolmasters and would preserve his little flock from all disquiet about the future.

On the other hand, the ideal of total abandonment to Providence had remained deeply embedded in his mind ever since Père Barré had taught him such sublime lessons on this subject. He hesitated to

do anything which might give the lie to his own deepest sentiments on this score. To him it seemed more perfect to cast all his cares, whether for himself or for his men, into the heart of our heavenly Father and together with them to plunge into the abyss of his Providence, which never abandons any but those who fail to honor it by perfect trust. This was the maxim of the saintly Minim: *Endowed schools will founder*,<sup>32</sup> and he added that since there is nothing in this world more reliable than Providence, nothing could afford the schools a more stable foundation than to establish them on Providence—a very exalted maxim, certainly, and for that reason, not commonly accepted. The fact that it was so out of the ordinary might have made it appear questionable in practice, for that which is most perfect in theory is often open to resounding failure and dangerous illusions and is not always the surest course to follow in practice.

After prayer, he decides to give his wealth to the poor

De La Salle, as usual, was cautious. He feared yielding to illusions of his own devising and choosing the less-traveled road under the pretext of higher perfection. All these considerations disturbed his mind, so that he was not sure which alternative he should adopt. In his uncertainty, he sought at the feet of Jesus Christ the solution for his doubts. To allow full entry to the divine light, he felt that the best way was to set aside all personal preferences and to try to place himself in a state of total indifference to everything. Nothing else prepares the heart better to recognize and to carry out the will of God.

So he began by offering himself to God's good pleasure and by abandoning himself wholly and without reserve to him. After this, he ventured to explain his quandary to the Divine Majesty in terms something like these:

"My God, I do not know whether I should endow the schools or not. It is not up to me to establish communities; I do not even know how they should be established. You alone know this, and it is for you to do it in whatever way you please. I do not dare to establish or endow, because I do not know what you want. So I will not contribute in any way to endowing the schools. If you endow the schools, they will be well endowed; if you do not, they will be without endowment. I beseech you to make your holy will known to me."

It does not seem that this prayer, uttered in such total sincerity, was followed by any special enlightenment or that an instant revelation

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32. In the 1733 edition: *Les Écoles fondées seroient fondûes*.



of God's will disclosed to him just what he was supposed to do, but at least it was followed by a state of perfect resignation to God. The servant of God, at rest and immovable in the bosom of Providence, remained calm and unruffled in the future, even though he was often enough obliged to endure the most crucifying trials and to do without the necessities of life.

Eventually, God, whose guidance his servant observed carefully, brought about the right opportunity for him to carry out in the sight of his family and of the entire city the sale and distribution of his goods in such circumstances that none of his relatives tried to stop him and nobody dared to criticize him. As we have said, he had sought the approval to do so from his director, who at first was surprised by such a heroic decision and raised some objections in order to prevent its being carried out. Finally, however, he had agreed when he saw his disciple's humble dispositions with regard to himself and the great docility with which he submitted the project to him. This docility was indeed striking and sufficed to persuade De La Salle's visible guide that someone even more skillful than he was directing him in secret and that it was indeed the Holy Spirit who was guiding him. Although convinced that his plan was inspired by heaven, De La Salle did not dream of carrying it out save when obedience would allow him to do so. Here is a fact which illustrates his attitude.

After discussing with his director the resolution he had taken of divesting himself of his wealth and after asking for his approval, he added, *I will not do it, if you do not want me to. I will do it in whatever measure you desire; if you tell me to keep something—even only five sous—I will do so.* What language from a man of such high merit, a man whose heroic sacrifices had already begun to shed luster on his name! Would a well-brought-up child speak to his parents with more submissiveness? Such language indeed characterizes the fortunate children to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs, those whom we must come to resemble if we wish to enter it. It is the language of faith, humility, and obedience. It flows as from its source when it issues from the mouth of a man who sees all through the eyes of faith and recognizes Jesus Christ alone in his director, from a man who by reason of a basic distrust of self, seeks in his guide the knowledge of God's will and who, bringing to him a heart indifferent to all and disposed to carry out his orders, receives them with joy and obeys them blindly.

As a rule, grace-favored souls consult their directors with such saintly dispositions that they bring to them the light of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, the Spirit who communicates to the director and inspires him with the right answer. It happens often enough that

when such souls approach their director, he suddenly finds himself of a different opinion without understanding why or how. Moreover, the signs which prove that the Spirit of God speaks to these holy souls are unmistakable: perfect docility, deep humility, and the total submission of mind and heart with which they approach their spiritual guide. These qualities characterize the requests they make of him, show that they are moved by the Holy Spirit, and constitute irrefutable credentials to authenticate these heavenly inspirations.

What I am saying here was fully verified in the example I am relating. At first, De La Salle's director was not going to give his approval to the desire that was laid before him. The request he made to sell his goods and distribute them to the poor in a city where the principal officials and the leading citizens were his relatives was even less acceptable than that of resigning his canonry. Still, the director, who had not agreed to that step except after long and repeated entreaties, consented to this one with little hesitation. How did this happen? No doubt, the Holy Spirit inspired the director by placing the right words on De La Salle's lips and by giving proof to the director that his inspiration was genuine because of the humility, docility, and submissiveness of the person making the request.

#### His director gives his consent

In fact, De La Salle had hardly finished when his director felt himself completely convinced. To put his own conscience at rest, he gave his penitent permission to donate and to distribute his wealth to the poor, while leaving to him the risk of facing up to whatever might happen and to what people might say. Fortunately for both of them, the circumstances of the moment were favorable to this heroic deed and afforded the public an opportunity to express its admiration for it.

The year 1684 had brought with it great distress. Champagne felt the effects of a long famine which had afflicted nearly the entire kingdom. The poor from the countryside had come into the capital, hoping to find alms. Joining forces with those native to the city, they turned Reims into a vast almshouse. The majority of the population had resorted to begging, because both agricultural and manufacturing enterprises had to shut down on account of the severity of the winter and the exorbitant prices of everything. People who were up to then self-supporting converged on the homes of the wealthy, begging bread like the certified poor were accustomed to do without shame. The famine was so widespread and so cruel that even many well-to-do people could not make ends meet and ended in the ranks of the

beggars, without anything to eat but still not daring to beg. The cost of living was such that very soon people exhausted the savings accumulated during past years. Those who were not rich to begin with soon found themselves a prey to hunger and destitution. Religious communities, too, including some that were wealthy and richly endowed, did not escape the common hardships and were obliged to borrow money or sell property in order to provide for their needs.

The year of such great misfortune was also the year that provided De La Salle with extraordinary merit and afforded him opportunities for practicing outstanding virtue. It led him to exercise the most notable works of spiritual and corporal mercy in the city where he had been so shamefully ill used. Thus he experienced the pleasure that saints find so delightful, that of feeding several of his enemies and of taking his revenge on calumnious tongues by heroically charitable actions. When he was free to distribute it all to the poor, he finally realized what his wealth was truly worth. It is hard to tell which was sweeter to him: to have become poor himself or to be rich enough to be able to relieve the destitute. He gained the double merit of helping the needy while becoming one of them.

### The orderly manner of distribution

He did not, however, distribute his funds haphazardly or in a precipitous manner. As a man who did everything in a well-regulated way, he succeeded in introducing strict order into his charity. He made his funds last as long as the famine did and offered them only to cases of real need. To avoid making any mistakes and to respect a sort of equity even in the practice of charity, he determined that there were three classes of needy people whom he proposed to help.

The first group was the children in the schools. After their lessons were over, each one was given a portion of bread, which most of them received more eagerly than they did instruction.

The second group was composed of the poor who were ashamed to beg. To find them, he had to search them out, for they usually dissimulated their distress and, through misplaced pride, preferred to starve rather than to come forward and ask for help. The charitable priest did all he could to find such persons while keeping himself in the background, trying to assist them and at the same time to hide from them the kindly hand that brought them aid while respecting their feelings. When he could not remain unknown, what did he not do and say to spare their embarrassment by the signs of compassion and tenderness which accompanied his liberality?

The third group of needy people included those who gathered at his house. There he himself or, in his absence, one of the pious ecclesiastics who lived with him gave some simple instructions to these persons who as a rule need food for their souls even more than for their bodies and who generally show their interest in the former only through hope of receiving the latter. Seeing so many poverty-stricken persons of all kinds gathered together, the generous priest reflected on their spiritual needs in order to give them appropriate advice. By his pious remonstrances, prudent reproofs, and marks of the most tender compassion, he sought before ministering to their material wants, to heal the maladies of their souls, which most of them were unconcerned about, since they did not realize that they existed.

This distribution of food at the house took place every morning. De La Salle came to take charge of this right after he said Mass. He displayed such lively and obvious signs of faith and devotion that these dispositions were shared by those who beheld him. Jesus Christ became visible to him in the person of his suffering members. He knelt at their feet and offered them his alms with the signs of respect and joy which he would have exhibited if he had beheld and given help to Jesus Christ himself. He did even more. When he had become poor, in his turn, through assisting the poor, he took his share of the bread that was being distributed to them, as being one of them. He ate it kneeling in their midst with a satisfaction and joy which showed the pleasure he experienced in the practice of poverty joined with that of charity.

He carried this practice even further. Avidly seeking the merit of the most humiliating poverty, he wished to experience the shame of begging and the confusion of eating the bread for which he had begged from door to door. Humility—and also necessity in the end—made this an obligation for him. Having given away all he had and having become even poorer than those whom he had fed, he in turn sacrificed his self-love and went from house to house asking for alms. After several refusals, he received from a good woman a loaf of black bread, which out of respect he ate kneeling and with a joy impossible to describe.

After eating this bread given as an alms, De La Salle left on foot for Rethel to discuss with the Duke de Mazarin the proposed founding of a seminary for teachers for the villages of the duke's domains. When the two of them came back to Reims to confer on this matter with the archbishop and to ask for his approval, Archbishop Le Tellier rewarded the charity of the one and satisfied the humility of the other by telling them that they were a pair of idiots. *Pardon me, Your*

*Excellency*, replied the humble priest; *there is really only one idiot*. He meant that this epithet belonged to him alone and that the duke did not deserve it.

De La Salle had all the time he needed to exhaust his resources, which amounted to some 40,000 livres, since the famine lasted two years. A wealthy man when it began, he was poor when it ended. At last he saw himself in the state where he had longed to be. Happy to possess God and nothing but God, he could say with Saint Francis, that great lover of poverty, *God is everything for me*. If I have lost all for his sake, I find it all again in him. He alone suffices. De La Salle did, in fact, find again all he had given up, in him who is the source of all good. Divine Providence, to which he had abandoned all his interests and those of his little flock, always remembered him and his Brothers. They never lacked necessities, whereas these were lacking to a great many unfortunate people. Even the rich had a hard time insuring themselves against the consequences of this terrible famine.

Those who witnessed the pious generosity of the charitable priest were astounded and could hardly credit what they beheld with their own eyes: that there should still be a man on this earth ready to give away everything without keeping anything for himself, a man who showed no anxiety for himself and his own, a man who without thinking of the morrow, left all concern about it to God, doing so at a time when, day after day, the famine occasioned cruel apprehension to most people about what tomorrow would bring.

### The reproaches of the Brothers and De La Salle's response

Here was a man who forgot himself in circumstances when all others were thinking only of themselves and forgetting everyone else. Here was a man whose only concern was to feed and relieve the poor and to become poor himself at a time when there seemed to be scarcely one step between poverty and death. Here was a man whom his fellow citizens could not praise and admire sufficiently, the same one whom they had buried under their criticism and sarcasm. His own followers, who could observe him more closely and witness his total charity, could not help expressing their surprise to him.

Although two years of famine had gone by and a large number of other people had lacked the necessities of life, De La Salle's Community had always been provided for by the hand of their heavenly Father. Still, they were not without concern for the morrow. The state of poverty and of abandonment to Divine Providence that their father had embraced—and to which they had in some measure constrained

him by their reply to his instructions on this point—became, it seems, a fresh reason for disquiet on their part. From a man who had given away all he had, they could no longer expect the same assistance in times of need that they would have found when he possessed a rich canonry and his patrimony.

But that was the state in which the man of God awaited them. The moment was a favorable one for him to open their eyes and make them acknowledge the care Divine Providence had taken of them and to begin again his lessons on trust and abandonment to God which they had obliged him to interrupt until he made himself as poor as they. De La Salle, therefore, seized the favorable opportunity presented to him to make them realize how well God had taken care of them personally and supplied all their needs and to assure them, judging the future by the past, that they would never be in need of anything so long as they were faithful in serving and trying to please God.

“Do not forget, my dear Brothers,” he told them, “the sad times we have just come through. You have seen with your own eyes all the calamities that famine brings down upon the poor and all the ravages it can occasion to the fortunes of the rich. This whole city was like one vast hospice where the poor in their destitution gathered and spent the last days of a life which hunger would soon close. During all this time, when the wealthiest were not always sure of finding bread at any price—bread which had become as rare as it was expensive—what did you lack? Thanks be to God, although we have had neither money nor income, during these two terrible years we have lacked nothing. We owe no one anything in any of our houses, while some of our well-established neighbors have been ruined, despite their resources, since they have been obliged to sell their property and to borrow to keep alive.”

By thus making the miracles wrought by Divine Providence in their favor palpable to them, he finally taught them to abandon themselves to God's care. After this, the devil no longer succeeded in penetrating their Community and in sowing among them these doubts and misgivings so insulting to the goodness of God, who in bestowing life on all creatures, assumed the task of supplying their needs.

It was on this unshakable foundation that De La Salle began constructing his life work. More firmly convinced than ever that voluntary poverty is an insurance policy for all the necessities of life, he wanted no other sort of contract than the one that Jesus Christ offers us in the Gospel. On this point, he carried perfection to such a degree that he refused considerable sums which various persons offered him in

view of endowing the houses of the Brothers. *Our Brothers*, he said, *will survive as long as they are poor. They will lose the spirit of their vocation as soon as they start procuring for themselves the unnecessary commodities of life.*

What we have thus far related about De La Salle's life includes his childhood, his education, his entry into the clerical state, and his priestly ministry. By following him through the years, we have shown him as an example of innocence for children, of docility for students, of piety for young clerics, of regularity and fervor for canons, of zeal and religious spirit for priests. Now we shall see in him a model of the greatest perfection as he goes about organizing his Institute.

## END OF BOOK ONE

The index to the names of persons and places  
is located at the end of Book Three.



The Life  
of John Baptist de La Salle,  
Founder of the Institute  
of the Brothers  
of the Christian Schools

A Biography in Three Books

Book Two



Frontispiece from the 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*, an engraving by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger which is now lost. (Émile Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)

The Life of  
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Jean-Baptiste Blain

Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC

Edited by Luke Salm, FSC

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by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger, frontispiece, 1733 edition  
(Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)

The editor is pleased  
to dedicate this revised translation  
to Augustine Loes, FSC,  
in gratitude for  
a life-long association,  
crowned in the Buttimer Institute  
and Lasallian Publications  
by a collaborative search  
for the mind and heart of  
John Baptist de La Salle

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## BOOK TWO

LA VIE  
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JEAN-BAPTISTE  
DE LA SALLE,  
INSTITUTEUR  
DES FRERES DES ECOLES  
CHRETIENNES.

LIVRE SECOND.

*Où Monsieur DE LA SALLE est représenté comme l'Instituteur  
d'une Société nouvelle, très-utile & très-nécessaire à l'Eglise.*

**N**OUS n'avons jusqu'à présent regardé Monsieur De La Salle que comme un Particulier sur lequel le Ciel avoit de grands desseins, & qu'il préparoit par des graces choisies, & par la pratique des vertus les plus éminentes, à devenir l'instrument d'une œuvre qu'il destinoit par sa miséricorde à l'instruction, à l'éducation, & à la sanctification de la jeunesse la plus pauvre & la plus abandonnée. Maintenant nous l'allons envisager, en continuant l'histoire de sa Vie, comme Patriarche à la tête d'un Institut qu'il élève par l'inspiration du Saint-Esprit, qu'il cultive avec soin, & qu'il soutient par son courage & de continuelles exemples de sainteté. On peut juger de ce qu'il va faire, par ce qu'il a déjà fait. D'un homme qui a fait de si grands sacrifices, que peut-on attendre que des prodiges de grace & de vertu ?

CHAPITRE PREMIER.

*Dieu envoie à M. De La Salle de nouveaux sujets d'un vrai mérite : Les étranges violences qu'il se fait pour s'accoutumer à la nourriture de ses Disciples : Jusqu'où il porte en tout le reste l'esprit de Retraite, d'Oraison, & de Pénitence.*

**M**onsieur De La Salle dégradé, pour ainsi dire, & tombé de son rang, pauvre, sans crédit, sans amis, n'ayant à présenter à ceux qui vouloient le suivre, que la Croix de Jesus-Christ, n'avoit aussi à leur demander à eux-

## BOOK TWO

*In which Monsieur de La Salle is portrayed as the Founder of a new Society very useful and necessary for the Church.*

Up to now we have considered Monsieur de La Salle as an individual person, one on whom heaven had great designs, whom it prepared by choice graces and the practice of the most eminent virtues to establish a work which God, in his mercy, destined for the instruction, education, and sanctification of the poorest and most abandoned youth. As we continue with the story of his life, we come now to consider him as a patriarch at the head of an Institute which he created through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which he built up carefully and sustained by his courage and his continual example of holiness. By considering what he had already accomplished, we can form some idea of what he would proceed to do. From a man who had already made such tremendous sacrifices, what could be expected, if not prodigies of grace and virtue?

### CHAPTER I

*God sends De La Salle new recruits of high quality; how he had to force himself to get used to the food his disciples ate; to what heights he carried the spirit of retirement, interior prayer, and penance.*

Having given up his rank as canon, De La Salle had indeed come down in the world. He was now poor, without influence, with few friends. He had nothing to offer those who wished to follow him except the cross of Jesus Christ. He asked nothing of them as a condition for entering his house other than a willingness to embrace entire and perpetual abnegation.

Reduced to a state as lowly and poor as this, he should, it would seem, have remained alone to face his unenviable destiny, with no expectation that others would imitate his choice and come to swell the ranks of his little flock. So it might have turned out, in fact, if he had been led by merely human considerations in all that he had done. He would have remained buried in obscurity, along with so many other men whose names have disappeared—who, even during their lives, were scarcely known in the cities where they lived—or among those who had chosen their condition in life out of vanity, eccentricity, or secret hypocrisy.

But it is not thus with those worthy men whom the Spirit of God guides and in whom his love rules. God hides them in the secret of his face, only to sanctify them at his leisure, after which he brings them forth again before the world, to procure his glory and the salvation of souls. Then, having become capable of doing great things for God and for their neighbor, they do not remain forever in the obscurity they love and prefer. People come looking for them, and heaven inspires many others to join them in the path Christ trod.

This is what happened to De La Salle also. In a short time, his little flock was increased by several young men who were inspired to leave everything because of his example. Some of them were university students who gave up their studies and came to join him in spite of the objections of their parents and the frantic appeals from worldly people who did all they could to turn them away from him.

Convinced that they would be sufficiently educated once they had learned the lessons taught by Jesus crucified, they believed that the only thing they needed was to know Christian doctrine and to practice it to the letter so as to be able to teach it effectively. They felt that even though they were neither priests nor clerics, they could fulfill this ministry of teaching, which is most necessary and most useful for the poor and most sanctifying for those who undertake it with zeal and humility. They generously gave up the idea of receiving Holy Orders and the worldly hopes they might have entertained in a more prestigious calling than that of schoolmaster. As the flock grew, the house they occupied became too small, and it was necessary to lease a larger one. Such a house was found in the rue Neuve. Later on, as we have already mentioned, De La Salle bought this house, thanks to donations he received in view of this purchase. This residence has remained the property of the Brothers, and they rightly consider it to be the cradle of their Institute.

Some ecclesiastics noted for their piety lived there, at first, with De La Salle and the Brothers. One of these was Monsieur Faubert,

who was very close to his benefactor and who at this time seemed to wish to follow in his footsteps. In a spirit of holy emulation, just as De La Salle was training Brothers, Faubert undertook to train some poor students for the priesthood and to create a sort of ecclesiastical minor seminary in this same house. This mingling of people with different vocations could not last, however.

De La Salle soon realized the drawbacks inherent in the situation and decided that the two communities should separate, but how did he go about it? By a new example of humility and meekness, two virtues which he displayed in all he did, he parted from the man who was so deeply indebted to him, as Abraham departed from Lot, by yielding the place to him. Taking his own followers away from those of the new canon, he left the house to the latter and his group, and he moved to another, much smaller, building not very far away. There he lived with his Brothers in poverty, mortification, and regularity, which presented a picture of the sanctity practiced by other religious orders in their beginnings. However, the holy Founder could not remain very long in such a small residence which was too cramped and unhealthy and entirely unsuited for his plans. So he asked Faubert to give him back his house, and he and his little community once more took up their residence there at the beginning of 1685.

How did De La Salle live at this time? Will anyone believe us if we describe his manner of living? Are Christians today prepared to admit that a man of their time actually revived the fervor of the early centuries and gave in his person examples of penance, mortification, humility, obedience, retirement, and prayer like those we admire in the desert Fathers, in many a Bernard, many a Dominic or a Francis, and in the other great saints?

I shall only be telling the truth if I say that the great sacrifices and heroic acts of virtue related in the previous book are only an anticipation of those which will follow. For the joyful hours when the Holy Spirit makes his presence felt and when he communicates himself interiorly to souls are hours of spiritual exaltation and expansiveness. These souls, inebriated with divine love and with the sweetness of grace, feel that they have been delivered from their limitations, raised above human frailty, made capable of achieving anything, and fired with the desire of doing all and suffering all for God. They enjoy deep understanding of the precious insights into the most sublime perfection; they conceive ardent longings and feel themselves impelled to undertake the most heroic projects. Still, it sometimes happens that returning to their mortal condition and held down by the same hand which had lifted them so high, they no longer have wings to fly, and

so they remain earthbound, plodding along with the rest of the human race. In this situation, deprived of heavenly consolation, they no longer feel enough strength and courage to pursue what they had undertaken, and so they leave unfulfilled their plans of perfection, which are easy enough to devise in imagination but which cost nature so much to execute.

De La Salle was not one of those men whom God favors in vain and whom self-love, sooner or later, brings back to the ordinary ways. He had indeed done much for God and received much from him, and his way of using these new graces was to engage nature in still bloodier combats and to achieve over his flesh even more complete victories than those which he had won over the world.

Tenderly loved as a child, very dear to his parents, brought up with all the care that their special affection and attention could provide, nourished in the midst of abundance, behold him now in the depths of indigence, struggling with poverty, which can well be called the basic misery of life. Accustomed to choice food, habituated to the amenities of life, will he be able to get used to a manner of living which barely furnishes enough of what is needed, so as not to die, and which allows nature to live, only to make it suffer? He had condemned himself to a type of living which forbade him the use of fire and very nearly that of wine, of fresh linen, of all the better food-stuffs. Will he be able to accustom his nature to what inspires it with horror and the mere sight of which provokes nausea? Will he be able to harden his body to accept cruel and bloody disciplines, to spend nights in prayer, to take the repose he needs on a board laid on the bare ground? Will he be able to spend days at a time in a place which offers little more space than a tomb and gives him only enough room to practice mortifications? Will he be able to habitually wear hair shirts or chains of iron bearing prickly points and to appear before his fellow citizens only in a garb apt to make everyone laugh at his expense and to draw down on him the hoots of the street urchins and the whole populace?

Yes, he will do all this. We shall see him undertake new and more strenuous combats and win new victories over his delicate nature by the terrible violence he practiced toward himself, first by enduring the sight of what was set before him, next by forcing himself to eat it, and then (it makes me shudder to say it) by swallowing again, despite all his repugnance, what his too delicate stomach had rejected.

Those who know the Brothers can testify that even today their food is of the most frugal type, coarse and unappetizing. It was far



more so at the beginning of their Institute in Reims, in Paris, and in Rouen. Some forty years ago, I heard people in Paris who were familiar with their manner of living say that they lived as austere as the religious of La Trappe and that their food was even more mortifying than that served in that celebrated abode of penance. People called their house *the little Trappe*, and those who knew what went on claimed, with regard to the various forms of humiliation and mortification, that the Brothers rivaled those illustrious penitents who in our day have made a monastery of lower Normandy into a new Thebaid.

When De La Salle invited the schoolmasters into his home in 1681, he continued to live with his own brothers as he had done previously. When these left him, he did not modify his usual manner of living and did not change the type of food served at his table. Then, when he began to live with his disciples, although he banished from his table whatever might have satisfied sensuality, the food served was in no way unappetizing. But when he divested himself of all and became as poor as the paupers he took care of, he resolved to live like the poor and to eat as they did.

#### De La Salle's difficulty in adjusting to the food of the Brothers

This decision was the outcome of others he had already put into effect, but it was not the least painful one to nature; I dare say that it cost him more than all the earlier ones. To conform to it completely, he forbade his disciples to serve him any food different than theirs. They were very much put out by this; he could not have commanded them anything which would have put their obedience to a sterner test. What they knew about his delicate constitution and fastidious eating habits made them despair of ever seeing him grow accustomed to their coarse type of food, so they tried everything to make him rescind this order, the execution of which was as much a sacrifice for them as it was for him. But they found him inflexible on this subject and were therefore obliged to give in and serve him what the others ate, thus submitting to his will and affording satisfaction to his spirit of penance.

It was then that De La Salle, in the spirit of Saint Bernard, would go to the refectory as to a place of torment. He was never in greater distress than when it was time to eat. Nature, alarmed at the mere thought of what it would have to endure, caused him to shudder when they brought on the soup. There ensued for him a grievous struggle, an agonizing conflict, for on such occasions nature and grace lock in strenuous battle, and the latter does not emerge victorious

over the former save at the cost of a galling ordeal. The former canon was indeed a pitiable sight at these times. His stomach turned, and his hand trembled; when he put the spoon into the bowl, he could not withdraw it. What will he do? Will he obstinately insist on overcoming a repugnance which seems to bring on an agony and threatens to burst a blood vessel in his chest, because of the superhuman efforts he makes to force himself to eat? But can he yield to nature? And was it not time for him to make his body do penance for having been brought up in so fastidious a manner?

He did violence to his feelings and ate, but he could not keep the food down. His vomiting began when he saw and smelled the soup; when he tried to eat it, the heaving became so violent that he brought up blood. Prudence would have suggested that he stop trying, for on such occasions exaggerated efforts often lead to serious consequences. But if he yields, he is vanquished. This was what the Holy Spirit whispered to this generous soul, secretly reproaching him with cowardice and with listening too readily to the siren voice of his sensual flesh and the perfidious counsels of what Holy Writ calls animal prudence. With new courage, he returns to the struggle. To win a total victory over himself, he forces himself to swallow again what he had thrown up, and this repeatedly. Before him I do not know of anyone who had ever given such an example of mortification. This torture, which lasted all through this first meal, continued for several more days. Everything they brought him—salted meat, coarse vegetables, and other dishes of the plainest kind of food—made him vomit.

### A long fast brings victory over his sensitive appetite

Distressed at not seeming able to overcome his repugnance and at having to start over again each day the same struggle against such long-standing delicacy as regards food, De La Salle had recourse to hunger to insure a certain victory. This remedy seemed worse than the disease and was in itself a major penance, but it must have proved effective, because devouring hunger teaches us to eat anything and provides an appetizing sauce for the most insipid and revolting food. A hungry body refuses nothing; everything seems good to it, and it consumes with pleasure what it would have turned from in horror when it was well and copiously fed. A strict fast, lasting for several days, wrought this sort of miracle on an overly delicate body, the miracle that De La Salle expected and which he had not been able to merit by the unusual acts of violence he had practiced. This long fast gave him appetite enough and taught his rebellious body to eat with

pleasure what he had not even been able to look at before. Food which had provoked nausea appeared appetizing to a body which lost its delicacy of taste only when it found itself deprived of all nourishment.

If the struggle was a hard one, the victory was complete, for the triumph he won over his flesh lasted all his life. His body was so well tamed, so perfectly mortified, that it seemed to be dead indeed in this regard, with no feeling, no inclination, and no repugnance for the most loathsome-tasting dishes. Years later, in 1693, when he was in Paris with some of the Brothers and living in extreme poverty, he and they were obliged to eat bread and other food which the most mortified persons could hardly have endured to look at. He ate it with no apparent repugnance.

He failed to distinguish between the dishes of vilest taste and those most savory. He ate both without seeming to pay any attention and rose from table to say grace without knowing what he had eaten. This became quite obvious one day when the good Brother cook inadvertently served De La Salle and the Brothers nothing but a portion of stewed absinthe leaves. All the rest were aware of the mistake and thought they were going to be poisoned—everybody, that is, except De La Salle. All left the dish untouched after tasting it, convinced that it was some kind of noxious herb. They preferred to leave the table as hungry as when they had sat down, to eat nothing rather than, as they thought, risk certain death.

De La Salle, who ate his entire portion, was very much surprised when his disciples told him what the children of the prophets said to Eliseus: *There is death in the pot!* They were all concerned and eager to find out what they had been served, but after investigating, they discovered that it was not poison but absinthe. If this new food did not provide them much nourishment, at least it served to divert them for a while.

In the end, the story and the false notion that they had at first conceived, after serving as a topic of conversation during recreation, became a matter for edification as they praised the mortification shown by their father. I almost forgot to mention that the Brothers did not miss the opportunity of practicing mortification, too, in connection with this meal, because their Superior had the dish served up to them the next day. Some were still unwilling to taste it the second time around, but eventually they were obliged to do so, for it kept coming back until they ate it.

Indeed, the examples that De La Salle gave them on this score, as on all others, were of daily occurrence; each day brought on a new

kind. When at table, whether he was distracted or attentive, he ate what was set before him without ever asking for what might be missing, without even showing by the least sign that anything was, in fact, missing. So it sometimes happened that he ate without having anything to drink, or he ate his portion without any bread or his bread without anything else, and he even ate things which were not meant to be eaten.

### Abandonment without reserve to penance and prayer

This exceptional degree of mortification of the taste enables us to judge De La Salle's mortification in everything else. None of the senses of his body remained without its special suffering; I was about to say its martyrdom. He himself became his own executioner, exercising on himself all the different sorts of austerities which Holy Scripture canonizes and which the saints practiced. Enveloped in a hairshirt, wearing a copper belt provided with sharp points, or wearing both of them, he doffed his penitential instruments only to use others even more cruel and harsh. I am speaking of his practice of scourging himself to blood. With whips made of iron, bearing pointed rosettes on the tips of the lashes, he tore his flesh pitilessly. The spots that appeared on the floor where his blood ran down or on the walls of the cell where he scourged himself betrayed silently, without his knowing it, to all the Brothers the saintly cruelty he exercised toward his body. "He treated his body too rigorously," said a member of his family to a Brother who is still living, "and like Saint Francis, he will be obliged to ask its pardon when he dies for all the suffering he inflicted on it during his life. He made himself a tyrant over his body, yet he had been brought up with extreme tenderness; no child was ever so delicately reared. Those who know this are the more surprised to see him revive in his person the penances practiced by saints such as Macarius, Jerome, and other famous penitents among the anchorites."

His children pitied their father and took pains to hunt out his instruments of penance and to remove them from his reach, thus sparing him, at least for a few days, the torments he suffered and giving his body a little respite. In this way, they managed to take from him, without his noticing it, six of his disciplines, all of which bore marks of his fervor, being stained with his blood. Did his body, so ill treated during the day, so exhausted by labor and worn out by austerities, get any chance to rebuild its strength somewhat by resting during the night? No doubt his body would have longed for such repose, but De

La Salle did not give it any, for he spent a good part of the night in prayer, and when necessity obliged him to pay to sleep the tribute which nature owes it, he reclined on the floor or slept in a chair. He used no other bed. If he could not rest comfortably there, he could not sleep for very long either, because the bell which called the Brothers to rise at 4 A.M. found him fully dressed, and so it became his rule to start his interior prayer at once, thus anticipating his disciples in this holy exercise. In fact, interior prayer which really never came to an end could hardly be said to begin. Almost all the day, in addition to the night, was consecrated to prayer and contemplation. He went from one to the other by a series of exercises which, under different names, seemed to be nothing but a continual interior prayer.

Leaving aside at such times everything which could have brought him into society and living as solitary a life in his native city as an anchorite in the desert or in his cave, he made himself invisible, as it were. He delighted in retirement, because this promoted his union with God. Indeed, his main concern was to cultivate this union and to avoid as far as possible all visits, whether paid or received, so as not to let his dealings with men interrupt his communing with God. In spite of his efforts, however, some of his old friends came by to distract him from his application to God. While gently chiding him for having become so unsociable, they told him that he seemed to have forgotten that we are born to live in society and that there existed in Reims other people besides himself. However distasteful it may have been for him to lay aside his preoccupation with God in order to converse with people, he did not show it by an external sign. No cloud flitted over his countenance, revealing the deep boredom he felt at not being left alone with his sovereign Good. His cheerful, serene, and gracious attitude made his presence agreeable, and his dignified manners—gentle, polite, and affable—were proof that solitude had not made an ill-tempered recluse of him or deprived his company of the charm and interest it had possessed when he was a canon.

As his Institute was still in its infancy, his greatest concern, indeed his sole preoccupation, was to water it with his tears, to cement its foundations with blood drawn from his veins by his rigorous disciplines, to buttress it by the penances he performed, and through his fervent prayers to draw down on it God's choicest and most abundant graces.

To make his supplications even more effective, the saintly Founder used to offer them at the tomb of Saint Remy. At the feet of this illustrious archbishop of Reims, rightly called the Apostle of France, he often spent not only a good part of the day but entire

nights, begging heaven, through the intercession of the saint who baptized the first king of the Franks, to show itself favorable to his undertaking and to bestow on himself and his followers that abundance of grace which fortifies the virtues and merits of those thus bedewed. To be able to pour out his heart all the more easily in the presence of God and to lay before the throne of God's majesty his prayers and entreaties at the very tomb of Saint Remy, he had won over the assistant sacristan of the church and persuaded him to lock him up in the sanctuary at night.

Thus he had full liberty to pray and to satisfy his devotion in a spot which favored it. He ended one day and started the next one by interior prayer. The saintly Founder, so happy at the feet of the holy patron of Reims and beneath the eyes of Jesus Christ, spent entire nights in the continual exercise of contemplation and prayer. So long as he remained in the city, he made it a rule for himself to devote to this pious practice the Friday and Saturday nights of each week, after spending most of the day there also. On these days, he went back home only for a short time, in order to keep in touch with what was going on there and to take some little food. Then he hastened to return to the feet of the Apostle of France to ask for his intercession before God and to prostrate himself once more before Jesus Christ.

In the silence of night, he made up for the shortness of his days, which did not suffice for his prayer. Alone, with no witnesses, what did he do? What did he say? Did he join penance to his prayer and vigils? Did he take the discipline with a fervor which the very holiness of the place would augment? Judgment day, which will make manifest the merits of the man whose story we are relating, will reveal it all to us. The tomb of Saint Remy was the refuge to which De La Salle never failed to return whenever some new storm arose to menace his foundation. In addition to the days and times mentioned, he often repaired thither on other occasions, earnestly seeking by his prayers and tears to dissipate the tempests and to turn aside the lightning bolts, conjuring the saint to offer his prayers before God's throne.

This great attraction for complete solitude and unceasing contemplation brought him, sometime later, to the retreat house of the Discalced Carmelite Fathers at Louviers, a few miles from Rouen. Everyone knows that these great promoters of the retired and contemplative life have certain houses, remote from the world, which they call *deserts*, because they live there like the solitaries of old in their hermitages in perpetual silence and in contemplation which is interrupted only by the absolutely necessary demands of human frailty. This spot, so suitable for communing with God, seemed like a paradise to

a man who wanted to cultivate society and union with God alone, but he could not stay there long. Unforeseen events recalled him to Reims and, as we shall see later on, forced him to leave, albeit with great regret, a delightful solitude.

We can say unhesitatingly that his great longing for interior prayer and the vehement desire he entertained to be alone with God made him almost indifferent to other concerns. The greatest displeasure he could experience was to observe and to be observed. Because of this, in spite of the remarks of his friends who reproached him with becoming unsociable, he tried as much as he could to remain alone, in solitude, hoping to avoid being known by anyone other than his Beloved. However, he had not been called to live the life of Magdalene exclusively but to live that of Martha as well, a life which held in store so much labor for him. To prepare him to undergo the asperities of this active life, heaven allowed him to enjoy the gentleness of contemplation. It was with much regret that he found himself obliged to cut short his prolonged prayer in order to devote more time to the affairs of his Community, which became more numerous after Nyel abandoned the schools he had taken charge of. At first, De La Salle had planned to limit himself to supervising only the schools in Reims. That was enough for him; he did not care to extend his obligations any further. Humility inspired him in this, but charity—which knows no limits—obliged him to let his zeal reach out to the other schools outside the city, to leave God for God's work, and to deprive himself of the solace of the interior life in order to procure the greater glory of his Lord.

Divine Providence, which was leading the Founder as though by the hand and whose directions he followed blindly, had made it impossible for him to refuse to take over the direction of the schools in Rethel, Guise, and Laon. These schools which Nyel had established also came under his control. In this way, divine wisdom showed that God had sent Nyel to Reims only to bring De La Salle into the orbit of God's designs. God wished to entrust the execution of these designs to no one but to him, since the earlier worker was not fitted for the task. Indeed, the direction of these three schools was too much for a man already advanced in years. Moreover, when Nyel had left Rouen, he had not planned on staying away forever; he hoped to be buried there.

To be able to follow his inclination with a good conscience, Nyel had vainly besought De La Salle on more than one occasion to take over the schools in question. Although the latter had repeatedly refused, Nyel kept insisting, and he presented new and more pressing

arguments to win his friend's consent. His age and the fact that it was impossible for him to provide these three establishments with the manpower needed were the reasons he advanced or, rather, the pretexts under which he dissimulated his longing to go back to Rouen. He did not, however, succeed in convincing De La Salle, who continued to say no, as we have mentioned before. Since he was getting nowhere by his pleas, Nyel made up his mind to abandon the schools to Providence and to go home to Rouen, where he died two years later, as we shall mention in the proper place.

No doubt Nyel foresaw what was bound to happen: necessity would force De La Salle's hand, and his charity would not permit him to turn a deaf ear to the needs of the poor nor to allow the schools to close. That was indeed what happened. Nyel's departure proved more effective than his presence and his importunities had been, and by abandoning the three schools, he obliged De La Salle to assume charge of them. The Founder could not turn down the new solicitations addressed to him by his dear friend, the parish priest of Saint Pierre in Laon, who implored him not to let these establishments close and not to shut his ears to the voice of Divine Providence, which seemed to be telling him plainly that God was sending him this new opportunity for doing good and that these schools had merely been prepared for him by Nyel's hands.

## CHAPTER II

*De La Salle calls together his principal disciples; they make an eighteen-day retreat during which he discusses with them all the matters which needed to be regulated; he listens to their opinions and follows them, not wishing to decide anything of his own volition.*

Now in charge of a number of schoolmasters in various towns, De La Salle thought the time had come to gather them into a small body and to adopt a uniform lifestyle. Although the Founder had succeeded in introducing a certain number of regulations, his followers did not yet make up a true Society. All of them dressed differently, some better than others. Each one taught as he thought best. All were free to leave the group and remained only as long as they pleased. They had no vows, no binding commitments. They depended on no one and owed obedience to no one. They were easy to call together, but as yet they



did not constitute what could be called *the body of a community*. For a Community is a body composed of several members having a Superior at its head. As its leader, he should animate it and give inspiration to the inferiors, who should live in dependence on him and not have any outlook different from that which he communicates to them. This subordination is the bond which preserves all the members in union, and obedience is the nerve center which keeps them all in order. The Spirit of God is the soul which should give life to this body, and the rule is the guiding force which should govern all its members' actions. As yet, the saintly priest's flock showed none of these characteristics.

To change the group of schoolmasters into a regular Community, what was required was to give them a special garb, rules and constitutions, and to establish among them perfect uniformity in all things in conformity with their vocation. It was necessary to inspire all of them with the same spirit, attitudes, dispositions, and views so as to make of them a society having but one heart and one soul, like the early Christians who, in forming the primitive Church, gave to the centuries which followed a model of what a perfect community should be. To succeed in doing all this, De La Salle thought that he should not impose any of his personal preferences. In his humility, he did not think that what needed to be done should come from him. Although destined to be the father of a new family made up of men who looked on everything only with his eyes, although inspired by God in his designs and enlightened by the graces which he received in his protracted communing with God, he grew more and more humbly distrustful of self. He would have considered questionable anything that might have been decided by his own choice. Dead to all natural considerations and to self-will, he wished to be nothing but the instrument of God, to act only through his impulse, and to follow his inspirations exclusively.

He convokes an assembly of twelve of his principal disciples

In this disposition of self-effacement, the humble Founder called together his principal disciples, twelve in number, and met with them to confer on the means of giving some form to their new establishment, of insuring some stability among the members, and of attaching them to their state. This was certainly a matter of supreme importance which called for serious reflection or, rather, for enlightenment from on high. To secure these advantages, the fervent Superior proposed that they all make a retreat, a suggestion which was warmly welcomed. It began on Ascension Eve in 1684 and was to continue until

Pentecost, but in fact it was prolonged until the feast of the Most Holy Trinity.<sup>1</sup>

De La Salle began by a very pointed talk in which he informed his followers of the reasons why he had called them together and why he had suggested that they make this retreat. He gave them to understand that the order existing in the house at the time should make them consider the means of maintaining it. Regularity, he declared, is the soul of a community, and this presupposes wise regulations which ought to be tried out before being definitely prescribed, so that being accustomed to the yoke, the members might find it bearable when it was made obligatory. He insisted that the way to insure that the rules would be observed later on was to practice them first on a trial basis. These laws, which experience would have shown to be practicable, would now not appear onerous. By adopting such a prudent procedure, he said, when the time comes, you will not find anything in the new rules which you are not accustomed to. "Your heart will recognize your own work in the legislation which will be laid down, and the details it prescribes will seem agreeable to you because you yourselves will have been the lawgivers. Now that you have reached the point where I wished to lead you and I can testify to your fervor and pious dispositions, I wish to undertake measures with you to stabilize your state of life, to strengthen you in your vocation, to consolidate your union with one another, and to begin building the edifice of which you are the foundation stones."

He then reminded them of the ideas and suggestions which they themselves had often put forward, namely, of binding themselves to their vocation by vows. It was up to them, he said, to consider whether the time had come to impose on themselves such blessed chains which, while restraining their liberty, would bind them to God. He asked them whether, after remaining up to the present unattached to their vocation and free to come or go, they now felt that they should join themselves to it by some type of vow. He concluded by saying that on this point, as on all the rest, he wanted them to feel entirely free to declare how they felt and even freer to do whatever they wished. All he planned to do was to listen to them and to follow whatever the majority might decide. What he did recommend to them was to pray much and by a fervent retreat to place themselves in a position to know God's will.

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1. Following Maillefer, scholars today prefer 1686 as the probable date.

### Topics treated by the assembly

During this lengthy session of prayer and meditation, the Brothers had ample time to call upon the Holy Spirit and to prepare their hearts for his inspirations. In silence and recollection, each one had leisure to make himself attentive to the voice of God and to heed his intimations. Each one was also free to speak out and to express his thoughts and sentiments. De La Salle did not try to lead in one direction or another nor to suggest to them his own views or insinuate his own ideas. He let them be free to think and to say whatever they liked. No doubt the best thing for them, and the simplest, would have been to ask him to speak first and then to accept, like docile children, the heavenly illuminations granted to their father. A man such as he, filled with grace, was a mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit; his words were oracles for them. Perhaps they did this; perhaps they objected that they were his children and begged him to govern them like a father and to lay down laws for them without consulting their opinions or inquiring after their preferences. But how could they overcome his humility on this point, which allowed him only the right of listening, of asking for their opinions, and of going along with the majority?

Not that he failed to assist them with his insights or to redress their opinions when these were neither correct nor judicious, but he did this in such a way that his own self-love found no satisfaction in doing so, and their liberty of offering their advice and defending their opinions was not at all interfered with. The only right he claimed for himself was to speak much to God, begging God to address himself to this college of his twelve principal disciples and to make his holy will known through their mouths with such clarity that De La Salle himself would have no other choice than to subscribe to these ideas inspired by the Spirit of God.

We cannot mention here all the topics discussed during this assembly, nor can we list all the decisions made. We do know, however, that agreement was reached on certain regulations and that the adoption of a distinctive garb, the choice of a name for the association of schoolmasters, the food they were to eat, and the project of making vows were all taken under consideration.

The first question, concerning rules and constitutions, would have been premature if it had been decided at this point, because only time lets such projects mature and makes it possible to find the right solutions. The finest regulations in theory are not always the best in practice. It is easy to lay down obligations for ourselves but less easy to fulfill them with perfect fidelity. Prudence suggests that it is

wise to try out the yoke we wish to impose on ourselves and to take time to determine whether this yoke is supportable and whether we can undertake to bear it definitively with the help of grace. Outside of revelation, nothing but experience can teach people all they need to know about the responsibilities they may wish to assume.

Experience alone would enable them to assess the commitments they would wish to enter into, help them to come to a decision about the ties by which they would want to be bound, and make clear the price to be paid for the laws by which they would subject their liberty. Without such experience, they would either presume too much on God's help or rely too much on their own strength. It is in order to try out what God wishes to do in us and what we can do with his help that the Church prescribes a novitiate lasting at least one year for all those who desire to enter religious life, before she allows them to bind themselves by vows. This wise mother wants people to try out everything and to attempt first to lift the weight they propose to shoulder, to see whether they have strength enough to carry it. In the same spirit, she orders that nothing shall be kept hidden or disguised from the postulants concerning what is done in the religious house, that they be given the book of rules and constitutions to read, and that in addition to the normal austerities, other humiliations and mortifications be added during the novitiate so that the novices may know from their own experience what they will be binding themselves to for the rest of their lives.

In the same way, De La Salle was in no hurry to give regulations to the Brothers, regulations which are more easily prescribed than carried out. Wisdom told him that it is best not to establish statutes too soon, lest experience, the great mistress of good government, might force him to revoke them. He preferred to have the rules practiced for a long time before promulgating them definitively rather than published without a prior period of testing. He was persuaded that rules which remain a dead letter are soon abrogated by nonuse or by obvious violation. In a word, by having the Brothers live it first, he established little by little the sort of life he hoped to see observed by them, thanks to wise rules.

As a result, when the time came later on to draw up definitive rules, all he did was to set down in writing the usages which were being observed. In this way, the old traditions became the new laws. By submitting to them, the Brothers were only obliging themselves to what they had always practiced. And so, in this first assembly, the only question concerning the schedule was to agree on what was already in use and on some other points which needed to be introduced and

which have been hallowed by practice. The rest of this matter was left to Divine Providence.

The second topic on which the assembly deliberated was the question of food. Custom had already regulated this in a way that safeguarded the principle and practice of mortification, but lest relaxation might in time bring in the use of more fancy food, this was specifically forbidden. All fowl and other more costly kinds of meat were proscribed. Only the cheapest cuts of coarse and ordinary meat were sanctioned. On abstinence days, only vegetables and cooked greens were allowed, without much seasoning. Fish was not permitted either, except for the kind whose cheapness and low quality made it common in the diet of the poorest people. In a word, everything served at table was to conform with the spirit of poverty and penance which the Community professed. In addition, it was stipulated that this food, which afforded so little satisfaction to the appetite, should be doled out in small quantities.

The third topic seemed the most urgent, but the assembly still failed to reach a decision on it. Up to this time, the schoolmasters had worn in the house the clothes they had brought with them. No modifications had been introduced, except that they all wore a small collar. Exteriorly, therefore, they had remained looking like ordinary laymen; no special sign distinguished the members of the new Community from other lay people. De La Salle had recognized this lacuna for some time and had been looking for a way of remedying it, but he did not wish to make any decision on his own initiative. He left it to the council of twelve to decide, but when they considered it, they could not agree on what form the habit should take. De La Salle himself was not entirely sure either. The more he thought about the question, the more convinced he became that a change had to be made, but he felt less certain about how to go about it. As the group also remained quite undecided on this point, nothing was concluded, and they left it to the prudence of their father to resolve the issue at the time he thought proper.

If the subject of vows did not seem to call for any immediate action, it was still basically of the greatest importance. For it is really not all that difficult to select a habit of a color and shape which fit a given profession or to abide by the choice once made. But vows have consequences which need to be carefully examined. The ideal of perfection inspires them, but often enough, thoughtlessness has more to do with the decision to pronounce them than deep and well-regulated devotion. If it were as easy to fulfill them exactly as it is to assume the obligations they impose, it would be impossible to recommend

the taking of vows too warmly, but experience shows only too clearly that vows made without serious reflection and through indiscreet zeal are often poorly observed, and Satan warps these means of perfection into elements of disorder and chains by which he drags souls to their perdition.

So the wise Superior called for a discussion on the following points: 1) Should they make vows? 2) If so, which ones? 3) How long should they last: a year? several years? for life? Without hinting at his own opinion, he invited the Brothers to consider these questions. He had strong reasons for not wanting them to make the vow of chastity just yet, but he preferred not to explain his position until they had their say.

The fervor of these first Brothers was great. Their ardor for perfection would have incited them to make perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but De La Salle, more enlightened and experienced than they, would not move so fast. He feared lest his children, by trying to run too quickly on the path to heaven, might meet with some stumbling block and fall. He apprehended that indiscreet fervor might carry them too far, might induce them to embrace the counsels of perfection too hastily, or that a secret presumption might lie at the root of their eagerness. For in theory—and for devout people who merely speculate—nothing is more beautiful than the evangelical counsels. Those who aspire to perfection without wishing to pay the price find them admirable. But only those who fulfill them to the letter know what this practice costs our feeble nature, which has to put forth such desperate efforts to rise above itself even when sustained by grace. So De La Salle, foreseeing what might happen, advised his men not to let themselves be carried away by imprudent enthusiasm, and he suggested that they delay a decision in order to let the proposal concerning perpetual vows come to maturity.

True, his disciples based their desires on plausible reasons. Since they wished to follow Jesus, naked and despoiled of all things, and to enter into the society of the children of Calvary, was it not proper, since they had no goods to divest themselves of, that they should root out of their hearts the last fibers of cupidity by renouncing all desire of possessing and all proprietorship? Why not oblige themselves to be, through grace and for the love of God, what they already were by nature: poor and penniless? Why not add the merit of the vow of poverty to the practice of the virtue? What danger could the vow run among men who loved poverty and cherished it even as Jesus Christ did? Furthermore, since they were in fact living the deepest poverty, had this not familiarized them with all its unpleasant aspects? What,

other than additional merit, could the vow of poverty add to the rigors of the life they led every day with so much joy?

As for the vow of chastity, they had been inclined to make it even before they entered the Community, since most of them had planned on it by envisioning the ecclesiastical state or some other condition incompatible with marriage. Their hearts desired to belong entirely to God, longed to be faithful to him, and swore him inviolable attachment with the help of his grace. The vow of chastity, far from increasing the difficulty of observing the celibacy which they had chosen through virtue, would on the contrary make it easier, thanks to the graces which it would win for them.

As for the vow of obedience, the most perfect of the three, only self-willed people find it difficult. Whoever has renounced self-will possesses a docile and tractable heart which desires nothing but submission. It was to obey, they said, and not to do our own will, which we have followed only too often to our own detriment and confusion in the world, that we entered this house. The vow will only strengthen the resolution we have taken of doing in all things the will of God while renouncing all attachment to our own.

### The Brothers in the assembly make their vows

They also observed that the past had taught them about the future and that the experience of the first schoolmasters had instructed them, since these men had gone back to the world, where their salvation was in peril. They had also learned from their own experience when they were tempted to leave the Society under the pretext that they did not find there any assurance for their future. They remarked that the natural inconstancy of human minds and the mutability of the human heart need to be firmly anchored and, as it were, nailed to what is good through the binding force of vows.

All these arguments were sound. They could not but please De La Salle, who rejoiced to see these neophytes of his Institute display so much goodwill and enthusiasm for perfection. But the time had not yet arrived for allowing them to reach out quite so far. Before they could pretend to this, grace needed the time and the opportunity to strengthen their wills in the search for good, to draw the line between superficial and solid virtue, to distinguish between the subjects who under similar outward appearances hid very different interior dispositions, and, finally, to prepare them to assume obligations whose merit depends entirely on the manner in which they are carried out. The man of God upheld this opinion with such solid arguments that all

the Brothers acknowledged that he was right, and while waiting for the day when in God's plans they could make perpetual vows, they agreed for the moment to limit them to three years.

At the same time, they decided that all of them would gather again in Reims a year later, at Pentecost in 1685, and that each one would then be free to make perpetual vows. This proposal, however, was again deferred and was not finally carried out until several years later. For the time being, it was settled that they would make vows for three years, and after interior prayer, De La Salle drew up the formula which has been in use ever since. Each copied it in his own hand, so as to pronounce the vows after the Founder, and what they then did was repeated each year until 1694, at which time the vows of the Brothers assumed a slightly different form, as we shall relate below.

De La Salle began the ceremony on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, which is the great feast of the Community. What a joy it was for him to consecrate by his vow the choice he had made of obedience! True, he was still in possession of his freedom, and since he was a priest and the Superior of the group, it did not seem fitting for him to step down from his position to obey Brothers who were laymen, to obey his own inferiors, to obey men who lacked both learning and interior lights and who needed his advice and direction so sorely. But where does perfect virtue stop? Where others see an impossibility, virtue finds everything easy. The perfectly obedient man shall sing of victory. Besides, it was only right that De La Salle should crown all the heroic sacrifices he had already made by sacrificing his will and that he should join to all the merit already acquired that of a vow of obedience. But how could he practice it? That was a mystery which his humility would soon find a way of piercing: by stepping down from his position as Superior and placing one of his disciples above him, at whose feet he would throw himself in total submission. So, in view of this secret design, still hidden in his heart, he added the vow of obedience to the vow of poverty and to that of the chastity associated with Holy Orders. In this way, he found the secret of losing his life entirely, according to Our Lord's words, and of fulfilling to the greatest extent the ideal of Gospel abnegation.

After De La Salle, the twelve Brothers likewise pronounced the same vows for three years; the following year, 1685, eight of them renewed their vows. The four others were invited, but they did not choose to appear at the ceremony. They had changed their minds, and they also changed their state by leaving the house. If this scandalous departure of four of the twelve principal members, who were the hope and the foundation stones of the new Institute, was a cause



of tears and affliction for the servant of God, it afforded him and the others who remained a salutary lesson. This desertion made them conscious of their own weakness and taught them how little they should rely on their own virtue. It showed them how wise their father's conduct had been in not permitting them to pronounce perpetual vows and in insisting that they take a whole year to prepare themselves for so doing. Finally, they realized how much confidence and openness they should show toward a man who was obviously inspired by heaven and who seemed to have received from God special lights as to how they should be guided.

The other members of the Community also needed to be made more stable and firm in their vocation. The discussion centered around the links by which they should be attached to it. Each of the twelve set forth his own opinion. There were those who thought it would be best to allow them to make the vow of chastity; some wanting it to be perpetual, but others were opposed. There were those who wished to add to the vow of chastity that of obedience, either perpetual or temporary. De La Salle listened to what they had to say, and after weighing the arguments pro and con, he decided that it was best not to be in too great a hurry about proposing a vow of chastity to subjects who had not been in the house long enough or who had not yet given proof of true constancy in virtue. He felt that to settle them in their vocation, it would suffice to let them bind themselves by a simple annual vow of obedience; this vow, renewed every year, would attach them to the Institute as long as their goodwill perdured. If this grew weaker or disappeared altogether and tepidity and negligence undermined their vocation, instead of trying to keep them, it was better, after trying by every possible means to bring them back to their early fervor, to let them go so as to rid the Community of their presence. Everybody agreed to this; the sovereign respect they felt for their worthy Superior won over their assent and submitted their reason to him as soon as he had expressed his opinion. They used their freedom to reflect and to express their opinions only when he did not reveal his own and when his humility obliged him not to express his own views.

So, in accordance with this decision, all the recent arrivals in the house, together with all those who, it was felt, were not yet completely reliable, made the vow of obedience for one year. This they continued to renew every year on the feast of the Holy Trinity.

## CHAPTER III

*De La Salle gives his disciples a new and distinctive habit; why and how this came about; he has them assume the name of Brothers of the Christian Schools; the humiliations that this new garb procured for him and his followers; he teaches school himself; persecutions he had to endure on this account.*

The matter of dress remained undecided and was left to the prudence of the virtuous Founder. It was settled during the ensuing winter in the following circumstances. The weather became extremely cold, and the poor schoolmasters, thinly clad, suffered a great deal from the rigor of the season. The mayor of the city felt sorry for them, and one day when he met De La Salle on the street, he expressed his pity for them and advised him to give them some capotes, which would keep them warm and protect them from the inclemency of the weather. This article of clothing, called capote at Reims, was very commonly used at this time in that part of the country. The advice struck the pious Founder as judicious, and considering it to have come from on high through the mouth of one of the chief magistrates of the city, he adopted this garment for his disciples.

The only change he made in the capotes commonly used in Champagne at this time, which were made of all kinds of cloth and in all sorts of colors, was that he had them sewn out of coarse woolen material, dyed black, and lengthened until they reached down to about eight inches from the ground. Thus the capote could be worn over the habit like a sort of overcoat to protect the wearers from the cold and the bad weather.

This idea suggested another: to change the habitual garb which the schoolmasters wore. Up to that time, they had kept the secular clothes which they had worn in the world, clothing of all types and colors. Nothing was less fitting for people belonging to one and the same Community. The virtuous Founder succeeded in introducing a uniform garment by having it correspond to the capote, that is, by designing a cassock made of the same black material, somewhat the same as clerics used to wear, and similar to that which several religious groups still use. It was closed in front by metallic hooks and eyes. This modest uniform, which by its shape and its lack of adornment distinguishes the Brothers from other lay people, from ecclesiastics, and from all other religious, has become their special habit and is still worn by them today.

This new type of dress, which at first impressed people by its unusual appearance and which shocked so many, is in fact the most fitting that we could imagine for their state. Anyone who considers the matter attentively will agree that it is appropriate to their persons, their employment, and their character. Made of black material of the commonest kind, it bespeaks simplicity, modesty, and poverty. Its length, similar to that of ecclesiastical dress, distinguishes the Brothers from lay people. It reminds them to behave with circumspection and with gravity, reserve, and recollection, as well as to eschew the manners of the world.

This habit, moreover, deserving of veneration because of its form, inspires respect in the youngsters whom the Brothers teach and makes these children—stubborn, obstinate, and troublesome as they are—show consideration, attention, and even fear which otherwise they would not be inclined to feel. A short cloak of whatever color would not make the same impression on them; before long, they would prove unmanageable and unbearable to the Brothers if they did not find in the external appearance of the clothing of the Brothers and in their gravity and silence a barrier against that undue familiarity which breeds contempt.

This habit is also a constant reminder for the Brothers themselves. Its black color tells them that they should be dead to the world; by its coarse quality and lack of style, it stresses that they have embraced a state of abjection, poverty, and mortification; its very shape proclaims that they are consecrated to God and must live for God alone. This habit is a helpful and restraining influence when passions seek to show themselves. It is a severe monitor which reproves them for those faults inconsistent with their state of life; it is a sign which reveals to the public, in the places they frequent and in the actions they perform there, whether they are behaving properly, visiting inappropriate spots, using unbecoming language, allowing themselves to indulge in frivolous conduct likely to dishonor their profession. In a word, De La Salle was indeed rightly inspired in giving to his disciples this sort of habit, for no other would have suited them so well. Any other would afford them less protection from the seductions and dangers met with in the world.

It is true that this new dress was not, at the start, to everybody's liking and that later on it met with a great many critics. It is also true that its unusual and extraordinary shape brought down on the Brothers in all the localities where they eventually wore it a great deal of mockery, scorn, insults, and affronts. But a man as eager for humiliations as the pious Founder did not allow himself to be moved by all

this. He knew that the habits of most religious orders had occasioned the same sort of treatment at the beginning. Church history had taught him how the garb worn by the hermits and monks had been found shocking by the wise and by the lovers of this world, and by heretical emperors as well, especially the Iconoclasts and their followers.

He was well aware of the inhospitable treatment meted out to the first Franciscans when they appeared dressed in sackcloth and girt with a cord. He had read about the cruel treatment that this habit had provoked in Germany when the first twenty of the Saint's disciples entered that country. Children threw stones at them. The dregs of the populace chased them wherever they went. They were beaten and treated shamefully. People took malicious pleasure in dragging them around by their cinctures, pulling off their hoods, and tearing their sacks to pieces. Nor had he forgotten how the appearance and the dress of the Capuchin Fathers had appeared ridiculous to the worldly when they first beheld these new religious. The world would have been even more surprised had it known the motive which led these holy men to choose the habit they wore, which was, in fact, to arouse its mockery. Indeed, the first authors of this holy reform movement, filled with the spirit of their seraphic Father Saint Francis and like him eager for ignominy, had purposely chosen brown-colored sackcloth, worn in Italy by convicts, in order to show their contempt for the world and to draw down its scorn on themselves.

De La Salle had all these striking examples before him, and he invoked them to make his disciples esteem and love their new habit as the true livery of Jesus Christ, the Man of Sorrows. He wanted them to consider ill-treatment as the best way of sharing in the lot of the Crucified and to respect the habit that procured such ignominy for them. By the same token, the new habit became precious in his own eyes and worthy of envy. As we shall soon see, he donned it himself, so as to share along with his children in the various kinds of humiliations with which the world honored this habit while thinking it was discrediting it. The world was indeed shocked as soon as this habit appeared before its eyes. The worldly wise and even some sincerely good people could not find it to their liking. What did not both groups say to the pious Founder to get him to change it? If he had heeded all the advice given him on this subject, at this time and later, he would not have had time for anything but listening to childish remarks proper to women's chatter.

The Founder was obliged, however, to pay attention to the remonstrances made to him on this topic, some years later, by a person

of distinguished merit who invoked all sorts of arguments to induce him to modify the new habit. No doubt the servant of God's humility would have caused him to yield to the authority and insights of this person whom he respected highly and to modify the habit according to his wishes, if the proposals of the critics regarding the shape and makeup of the habit had not tended to make it more elegant and more to the taste of the public, thus causing those who wore it to be in greater danger of losing their spirit of simplicity and of contempt for the world.

Fearing, then, and with much reason that the change in the exterior would affect the interior and that the "old man" would find satisfaction at the expense of the "new man" in a habit that appealed to worldly people, De La Salle remained inflexible, all the more so since the only reasons brought forward in favor of the change were based on mere convenience. Such arguments could not stand up against those arising from the nature of the thing itself and from the undesirable consequences a change would have had. In fact, the habit that the person in question wanted the Brothers to wear would have at once violated the simplicity, poverty, and humility of which these "new men" made profession. Along with concern for propriety, it would have opened the door to vanity, self-love, and love of the world. For the less those who wore the habit were agreeable to the eyes of the world, the more appropriate it was to distance them from it. God's servants should not try to please God's enemy. Once this desire insinuates itself into a heart, it soon extinguishes the desire to please the Creator.

For men whose whole ambition was to conform themselves to Jesus Christ, it was a blessing to wear such an ignominious garb which resembled that which the soldiers put upon the shoulders of Jesus Christ in derision. Of course, since De La Salle remained firm on this occasion and replied that he could not bring himself to yield to reasons of mere propriety and to set aside the serious motives which had led him to give to the habit of his Institute the form which was so sharply criticized, he was treated as a stubborn dolt, a man who followed nothing but his own ideas. As he had expected this reaction, he let people talk but changed nothing.

Fearing lest the authority or the considerable number of those who did not like the habit as it was might impress the Brothers who wore it, he wrote a memorandum to explain and justify their style of dress. In it he set forth his reasons and the motives for his refusal so cogently and in such a Christian manner that he won back to his point of view those who seemed to be the most strongly opposed to it.

### A new name: Brothers of the Christian Schools

The adoption of the new garb brought about a modification in the name of the Community. The name "Brothers" was the one that fitted them best, so they chose it, leaving the name schoolmasters to those who perform this function for pay. Humility and charity suggested giving up that name; it had not even been fitting for men who professed to run schools only so that Jesus Christ might reign in them and so that they might teach Christian doctrine gratuitously. If the name schoolmasters had been acceptable up to this time in a house where uniformity of lifestyle and equality in all things had not yet bound the subjects together and where some of them were still vacillating in their vocation, it was no longer proper now that they had joined together to form a single body. Consequently, the name Brothers truly belonged to them, a name which nature gives to children who share the same blood and the same father on earth and which in religion describes those who have the same Spirit and the same Father in heaven.

In this way, the name Brothers of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools became thenceforth the official name of the children of De La Salle. From now on, we shall call them by no other. This appellation is the correct one because it includes the definition of their state and indicates the mission proper to their vocation. This name reminds them that the charity which gave birth to their Institute must be its soul and life, that it should govern all their deliberations and animate all their projects, that it should inspire all their decisions, rule all their undertakings, govern all their words and deeds. This name teaches them the excellence of the duty they have assumed, the dignity of their state, and the holiness proper to their profession. It tells them that as Brothers they owe each other mutual proofs of tender but spiritual friendship and that considering themselves as the elder brothers of the children who come to be taught by them, they should exercise this ministry of charity with truly loving hearts.

The capote and the soutane made of cheap, coarse material called for shoes and hats of the same style, thus making up an accoutrement characterized by perfect poverty and appropriate for men who had given up all attempts to please the world. In those days, people wore large, broad-brimmed hats, but those which the pious Founder had made for the Brothers showed even wider brims than those in general use. His idea was to make the Brothers look different from worldly people in every respect, to allow them nothing resembling what the world admired, and to arouse between them and the

world so deep an antagonism that they would not even think of becoming reconciled with it. To provide them with footgear in keeping with their headgear, he had shoes made with a thick double sole, like those worn by farmers or by those engaged in heavy labor.

Such an outfit produced the effect that De La Salle expected it would. He aimed at setting up such a contrast between his children and the children of the world that neither group would ever want to have anything to do with the other. He hoped to accustom the Brothers to the outcries and insults of the populace, which, as a rule, rewards them for their labor only by affronts. He wanted to see them established in that tranquillity of soul which is normally found only in the depths of true humility and in perfect death to self. This goal could quickly be reached by the practice of mildness, patience, bearing wrongs meekly, and the other virtues which—every step they took through the streets clad in their new garb—gave them occasion to practice. Hardly had they set foot outside their house, when critical and ill-intentioned eyes fastened upon them with derision. Evil tongues launched poisoned darts to wound them, and everybody on the street, from inside and outside the houses, came forth to meet them or waited until they passed, in order to cover them with contempt and derision.

People pointed the finger of scorn at them. They were escorted with raucous cries amidst scenes of near riot. They were mimicked in public, and whoever invented some new outrage upon them thought he had done something very clever indeed. Jeers and hoots accompanied them wherever they went. Passersby stopped in the streets to take part in the taunts hurled at them. Artisans left their tasks unfinished in their shops to join in the merriment. Street urchins made up a new game: following the Brothers and yelling after them. The mob found pleasure in covering them with abuse; everybody enjoyed playing tricks on them and laughing at their expense.

The same farce began anew day every day. When the Brothers walked to and from school, they were accompanied there and back with vilification. They were lucky when they got off so easily; often they were spattered with mud and pursued by those who threw stones at them until they reached the door of their house. In addition to their clothes that the rabble considered ridiculous, those among the Brothers—and there were many of them—who adopted a simple air and unpretentious manners got more than their share of derision. They could all rejoice at being true men of sorrows and at having found their treasure in the company of him who was overwhelmed with opprobrium.

Their lot was that of the Apostles, and they underwent the same kind of treatment. They could say with Saint Paul, *We are looked upon as the offscouring of the world*; we are rejected like filthy scum on stagnant water or on the frothy sea, like the filth and excrement of the earth. The world rose up in wrath against these new-type men and even more so against their manner of living, showing only harshness, rigor, and animosity toward them. Let us say instead that the devil feared this new company of evangelical workers that the Father was sending out to cultivate the most neglected corner of his vineyard, and so he poured out all his fury and rage against these men. It was he who set poisoned tongues to wagging, vomiting all sorts of injuries against them. He it was who put into wicked hands the stones that bruised them and which would have pleased the throwers all the more if they had caused painful wounds.

The poor Brothers, whose long-suffering was put to the test every day, really needed heroic patience in order not to succumb to the protracted persecution they endured. The mini-war which the world had declared on them did not last for only a few days; it went on for years. All during this time, these heroes of Christian patience had to endure from their fellow citizens the same kind of torments that the first Christians suffered from the pagans, with the exception of prison and torture. Insults, ignominy, injury, ill-treatment—nothing was spared them. Even those who favored the establishment of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools and who lauded this work as it deserved declared themselves against the Brothers and treated them like enemies. Everything about them shocked these people: their lifestyle, their garb, their simplicity and modesty, the silence they observed in the streets.

What kind of people are these? they asked in mockery. Where do they come from? What race gave them birth? Who ever saw anything like this? They seem to have emerged from the tomb; they are dressed like scarecrows. No one can tell whether they have eyes or tongues. They never speak. They never open their eyes. Do they have tongues? They will end up forgetting how to speak! Why have eyes and not use them? Why did God give us sight, if not to see where we are going? These Brothers are like the idols spoken of by the royal Prophet: they have mouths, but they speak not; they have ears, but these are deaf; they have eyes, but they keep them shut all the time; they have hands, but they remain motionless. Only their feet keep moving, bearing from place to place these strange statues who would seem lifeless if they did not show at least this sign of life. This was how the world-wise made fun of those who had become fools for Christ's sake.



De La Salle did not need to envy his disciples this sort of treatment, because he received the lion's share of such outrages and abuse. The father was being persecuted in his children, the master humiliated in his disciples. He was the main actor whom the public brought out on stage to make sport of and to laugh at his expense. It was he whom the worldly wise thought they saw humiliated when they beheld his Brothers surrounded, jeered at, and derided by an insolent mob of ruffians. All the blows aimed at them were felt by him, and the insults heaped on them rebounded onto him.

Nor was this all. Outraged every day in the year and almost at every hour of the day in the person of his children, he was personally insulted more often and more outrageously than any of his followers. When he left the house, as soon as he had taken a few steps, he ran into carpers, people who lay in wait to affront him. They always had their taunts ready, and they seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of these on hand to hurl at him. They railed at him over the state he had given up, over that which he had embraced, over his eccentric manner of living, over the supposed extravagance of his behavior and his dress. The imaginary dishonor he was bringing down on the chapter of which he had been a member and on his family, one of the most highly respected in the city, the supposed wrong he had done to his brother by not leaving him a benefice to which his birth seemed to give him a right—all were crimes which people had not forgotten. They were still fresh in people's minds, and the wounds they had left in certain hearts were still bleeding. All thought they had a right to blame what he was now doing, because of what he had done, and to find fault with the new examples of virtue he was giving, even as they had criticized the previous ones, characterizing them as imprudence, weak-mindedness, singularity, hypocrisy, stubbornness, ambition, and exaggeration.

The remarkable thing is that these ungrateful people who during the recent cruel famine had eaten his bread and had profited by his distribution of his fortune, these same hungry people whom he had fed with so much charity, had already forgotten their benefactor and his kindness and could not seem to find any other way of thanking him than by vilifying him. Some addressed cutting reproaches to him; others overwhelmed him with invective. Sometimes he was exposed in the streets to physical violence from people who had no veneration for his virtue, no respect for his priestly character, no consideration for his rank. More than once, stones were thrown at him. We say nothing of what he had to suffer from his relatives and former friends, who were among the most notable people in the city. It is easy to

imagine how they treated one whom they considered as an enemy of the family, an unreliable relative, a man who had embarrassed them and degraded himself by his extraordinary and bizarre behavior.

### De La Salle takes on the role of schoolmaster

What rubbed raw the wounds in their hearts and incited them to criticize De La Salle even more bitterly was the new token of humility which he began giving and which he continued with the same generosity. We can even say that his family and his worldly friends were more humiliated by this than he was himself and that they felt extreme confusion over a step which the whole city found utterly ridiculous and out of place. Here is what happened.

Some of De La Salle's disciples were most eager to walk in his footsteps and to keep pace with him in his progress toward perfection. But not having received as much grace as he, they soon exhausted their strength, and excessive austerities and exaggerated fervor led to their death. These unexpected losses caused problems in the schools, because the positions of these dead Brothers were not filled. De La Salle tried to replace them as soon as possible, but since he did not have enough candidates ready to fill the shortages, he resolved to do so himself and began to teach school in the Saint Jacques parish. To do this properly, he felt he should wear the Brothers' habit. So he exchanged his long clerical mantle for one of their capotes. He put on the wide-brimmed hat and the thick-soled shoes which made up the customary dress of the Brothers. Thus outfitted, he went to teach school. When the world saw him thus disguised, so to speak, wearing a capote with long sleeves, made of the coarsest and cheapest material, and a soutane of the same cloth underneath, we can easily imagine the guffaws his appearance provoked in the city, the ribald cries of the street urchins, the hoots that issued from the assembled rabble delighted at this opportunity of satisfying its innate meanness.

On this occasion, nothing was spared to cover him with confusion and to satisfy his taste for abjection. He drank deep at the chalice of ignominy and tasted every sort of humiliation. Not once, not twice, nor thrice did the virtuous Superior choose to expose himself to such outrageous treatment. He had plenty of time to grow used to it throughout the several months during which he left his house, twice a day, to go to give an example of humility by teaching school. In addition, he would have felt that he was failing in his duty had he omitted any of the teacher's least responsibilities. So, to fulfill them to the

letter without leaving out anything, he proceeded, just like an ordinary Brother, to lead his pupils to holy Mass every day, and on Sundays and feasts, he accompanied them to High Mass and Vespers in the parish church. He remained standing at the head of the group with a modest, recollected, and devout attitude which filled all right-thinking people with admiration. They were indeed surprised to see a doctor, former canon, distinguished gentleman, and person of such high merit playing the role of schoolmaster, accepting the unpleasantness it involved, and carrying out the lowliest duties connected with it. They could not sufficiently praise the Almighty, who—when it so pleases him—can effect such marvelous changes in hearts and such great prodigies of grace.

Most humiliating for the pious Founder was the fact that to go to discharge his task as a teacher, he had to pass beneath the eyes of some who had once been his friends and had now become his enemies, censors, and critics. Far from trying to avoid this by timid evasion or by shrinking from these encounters which nature recoiled from, De La Salle showed himself with humble magnanimity in the habit of a Brother of the Christian Schools, thus braving the gaze of his family and of the illustrious chapter of the metropolitan church when he went to exercise his functions as teacher. He continued acting thus with the same constancy even as he had begun, and he discontinued this humiliating practice only when another Brother could take his place at the Saint Jacques school.

All during this time, torrents of humiliations from many directions swept over the humble priest. It seems that God took pleasure in fulfilling his desires and in satisfying his servant's noble thirst for derision. For although De La Salle went forth himself to meet these trials and did everything to draw them down upon himself, a good many others befell him from unexpected sources, trials which proved very hard to bear.

We must not disguise the truth. The fact is that his disciples, although fervent, were not at this time very adept at their task. Among them there existed no uniform method of acting in class, no definite rules about the manner of conducting a school. Their goodwill was considered a sufficient title to put them in charge of a class. Without having been properly trained for this very difficult function, these young Brothers were sent to perform it without methods, skills, or sufficient aptitudes. In those early years, De La Salle had not yet been able to set up a novitiate to try out the vocation of his candidates, to correct their defects, to reform their tendencies and character, to shape their manners and attitudes—in a word, to impart to them the

spirit of their state and prepare them for the mission they aspired to. The fervor which reigned in the house made up for this, in a way, for upon entering, they received an initial infusion of this spirit. All those who presented themselves were admitted; they came because they had been struck by the examples of piety and patience given by De La Salle and the Brothers. They sought admission to a house which offered them only a hard, poor, laborious life and a penitential existence. The public rewarded them only with mockery and insults for the gratuitous instruction given to the young. It was hardly probable that anything but the Spirit of God could bring to such a Community young men who had nothing to hope for but rigorous penance within it and the ill-treatment of the world outside of it. All that was asked of them was to show goodwill and common sense.

Once they had been accepted and had followed the regulations of the house for a few days, they were sent to teach, assigned to a class to exercise a mission which they knew little or nothing about. Each one struggled along as well as he could, which ordinarily meant rather poorly. By their not having had any apprenticeship, it was scarcely possible for them to succeed in such a demanding task in which they themselves were still tyros. Since they had no rules to guide them in teaching nor any principles to show them how to act, they taught haphazardly; this, of course, meant much trouble and fatigue for these Brothers themselves and little progress in learning for the students. As a result, the two main elements of Christian education, namely, instruction and an effective method for imparting it, were not being achieved.

To teach reading, writing, arithmetic, and Christian doctrine effectively, one needs to have learned all this perfectly; to know it perfectly, one should have learned it from good teachers within the Community. This was what was lacking at that time. The art of sound classroom procedure is more difficult than we might think. It calls for natural ability, a method, silence, mildness combined with gravity, calm, great patience, and above all, much prudence. This art has its own rules and is acquired mainly by experience. Men who were ignorant of these rules and who had not had time to procure the experience needed could hardly teach successfully.

Furthermore, discipline is very necessary, especially in schools attended mostly by the children of the lower classes. It holds the rebellious in check, incites the slothful, masters the defiant, overawes the disorderly, curbs the playful and inattentive. It is required to bridle the insubordination of youngsters who lack a proper upbringing. Such discipline is a duty for schoolmasters, but it is very difficult to exercise

toward lads who are vicious, gross, badly brought up, and display all the defects of the low social level from which they spring.

Correction and punishment must be meted out with due measure, at the proper time, and in the right way. Too much discipline or not enough, punishment administered at the wrong time (too soon or too late) or inflicted with passion and without regard for the proprieties—these are all mistakes which must be avoided. Any lack of circumspection or the slightest imprudence changes the remedy into a poison. Much self-control is called for, as well as much consideration for the students. The Brother must possess complete control over his own passions to be able to correct at the right time and in the right way, to be neither too soft nor too harsh toward the young who have strayed from duty's path and who can be so exasperating at times. He must never show caprice in this matter, still less uncontrolled temper. To govern a classroom properly, he must constantly renounce his natural feelings and not follow his inclinations in any way. He would have to be more than human to deal with those who themselves are barely human. It would take a noble spirit to manage these boys who show nothing but bad spirit. Faith and reason alone should rule in a Christian School; they should lead to the constant practice of humility, patience, mildness, and prudence. If there is any failure on this point in a school, the result will immediately appear in the form of unrest among students.

It is not difficult to understand, therefore, that these young Brothers—brash and hotheaded even though fervent and sincerely pious, untrained or unprepared to keep a class in order and silence, perhaps themselves not very well versed in reading and writing—soon made mistakes which led to more disorder and trouble. When some of the teachers lost face by such faults, the troublemakers among the students defied them and paid no more attention to their punishments than to their lessons. Then the really resentful pupils, who enjoy nothing more than to catch their teachers in some fault, to disconcert or to disturb them in order to make fun of them and laugh at their expense, never failed to profit by every chance they got to stir up disorder, confusion, and upheaval as soon as these teachers provided them with the least occasion for doing so. Moreover, these troublemakers, angered rather than corrected by the just punishments warranted by their bad conduct, only sought to avenge themselves on the teachers by spreading false and exaggerated accounts by insinuations and complete fabrications which they concocted and related at home, either to excuse themselves in the eyes of their parents or to arouse the indignation of the parents against the Brothers.

### Outrage of the parents against De La Salle and his Brothers

Some of these lads remained defiant, incorrigible, and uncontrollable; the Brothers were at a loss as to what to do with them or how to bring them to do their duty and make them behave. At times, perhaps, the Brothers went beyond the limits of just chastisement; as we have said, it is difficult on such occasions to keep to the happy medium. At any rate, De La Salle had to bear the blame for the faults of both boys and Brothers. Some parents, showing even less sense than their children whom they had so badly raised, instead of restraining them by wise correction, encouraged their evil dispositions. They came to complain bitterly to De La Salle about the punishments inflicted by the Brothers; they made him the scapegoat on whom they cast their reproaches, invectives, and insults.

Thus the only innocent person in the whole business was condemned as though he alone had been guilty, and he had to suffer for the indiscreet zeal of his disciples as well as for the disorderly conduct of the students. He had to endure the anger of the parents who came to him uttering bitter recriminations as though to take revenge on him for the supposed ill-treatment inflicted on their children in the schools. On these occasions, the most reasonable ones limited themselves to complaints and reproaches while the most violent did not stop short at outrages and threats of violence, the irritated parents being joined by the rabble which is always ready to stir up trouble and to proffer insults.

These scenes took place at the door of the Brothers' house and were of frequent occurrence. When he emerged, De La Salle was seldom able to avoid being the object of these complaints and their victim as well. The hoots of the populace began when he appeared on the doorstep and followed him as he went along. During the eight years he remained in Reims, this ignominious escort frequently gathered around him when he left the house and when he returned. Patience put to such a long and trying test was indeed calculated to make a saint of him. So many persecutions and humiliations, so courageously endured, prepared for and deserved the graces which the Institute needed. The pious Founder was sowing in tears; today he reaps in joy. He needed invincible fortitude in order not to yield to such furious and incessant attacks, and God granted this to him. With a less heroic degree of virtue, he would have succumbed and abandoned the whole enterprise, but a soul is capable of all things when God's arm upholds it and his spirit fills it. If it must struggle at every step, it wins victories at each moment. The temple of charity is built

upon the ruins of self-love. Love for contempt and abjection and a salutary detestation of self keep pride in chains along with all the other vices and passions and erect in the human heart a trophy to the pure love of God.

Even prudent and well-intentioned persons thought that De La Salle carried his zeal too far and that he was risking his own safety too much. Who would ever have thought, they asked, that a man of his rank would have brought himself so low, would have come down to such a wretched state? On his part, he let them talk, and he thought only of how he might do more good. He listened calmly to the advice and remonstrances offered him, but he promptly forgot both. He silenced within his heart what his own feelings might have suggested, in order to hand himself over to the spirit of the cross. After replacing a Brother at the Saint Jacques school, he returned to his retired mode of living and once again took up his exercises of prayer in the little cubicle which he had selected and which was scarcely big enough to hold him. There he spent the days and part of the nights in contemplation. He left it only to be present at the community exercises, and he enjoyed being there so much that he could hardly tear himself away to go to take some nourishment.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Fervor of the first Brothers of the Institute.*

Although De La Salle strove to keep his austerities and penances hidden from others, he could not conceal them from those who lived in the same house with him. His children observed their father so as to imitate him, and they felt a holy ardor to follow in his footsteps in the most arduous path of perfection. Their eyes, attentive to all his actions, studied him everywhere and were fastened on him, as on their model, in order to copy him. Although he was clever enough to veil some of his penances from these household sleuths, they were skillful enough on their part to discover many of them.

The daily examples of virtue which they beheld in him made it clear to them that there were many others which he tried to keep hidden. The pious Founder's heart, so filled with divine love, was strongly inclined to the practice of penance and mortification. He could not conceal this tendency from his disciples; indeed, he made it obvious to them that he did not spare his flesh and sought to crucify it in all

things. From what they saw him do, they could conjecture what he might be practicing in secret. The acts of mortification which good example obliged him to perform in public hinted, at least in part, at those which his humility made him shroud in secrecy. The result was a pious curiosity on the part of the Brothers to discover these penances, and a noble emulation led them to imitate them. The Brothers could follow De La Salle by the traces of his blood which he left behind, and they managed to find the cruel instruments of penance he used to torment his body. These examples completed what his instructions had begun and persuaded them to become like him in the practice of penance and prayer.

In this new Community, there was talk only of heaven and of the way to attain it, only of perfection and the means of reaching it, only of the virtues and how to make them pure and heroic, only of divine love and what must be done to acquire it. The language spoken there was entirely different from the conversation heard in the world. Among the Brothers, there reigned the pursuit of humiliation, self-abnegation, flight from the world, and silence, recollection, interior spirit, the life of retirement and solitude, the love of crosses and of suffering. To know Jesus Christ and him crucified, to model themselves after him and express his life in their own persons, to bear about always the dying of Jesus in their bodies—thus it was enough for them to become living portraits and perfect images of Christ; they cared to know nothing else.

Such was the ambition of these early Brothers. In this they made all their search for knowledge consist. In their company, a worldly person, a child of the old Adam, would have felt as though in a strange land; he would have been entirely different from them, and his aspirations would have been altogether alien from theirs. He would not have understood their talk, would not have been able to make himself understood by them. Judging by their ways, their language, and their manner of living, he would have taken them for men from another planet or for men come down from heaven.

The father had enkindled such an ardent fire among his children that they could not be satisfied by limiting themselves to the practice of ordinary fervor, any more than he could. They aspired only after God, longed only to suffer for God, to crucify their bodies, and to make themselves like unto the Man of Sorrows. Enthusiastic over the practice of penance, they begged for permission to engage in it, even to the point of importunity; they were satisfied only when all their requests were granted. They never had enough; to content them, their Superior had to permit them to use disciplines, hairshirts, and iron



chains as much as they wished. The only jealousy among them was directed to the one who happened to have more of these instruments to use. De La Salle, who was not backward in this matter himself, easily gave in to their desires. If he tried to put limits on their fervor, he put none on his, and thus he became for them the object of a noble emulation or of a holy despair.

They had, in fact, no reason to complain too much about him on this score, for his own attraction for austerity made him liberal in granting them permissions in this matter. He even gave in to them too much, as we shall see. What he might be reproached with is to have allowed them to exercise on their bodies some of the holy cruelties that he practiced on his. These travelers with De La Salle in the desert of this world, filled with the heavenly ardor he had imparted to them, ran with all their might in the footsteps of their father, following the radiance of his virtues on the path to perfection. Unwearied in practicing penance, they requested permission for even more. Once they had done one thing, they begged to be allowed to try another. Each in turn came asking for these favors, and they found that their turn took too long to arrive. Before and after meals, in the morning after prayer, in the evening after the examen, at one time or another, the Brothers surrounded their teacher and importuned him with pressing earnestness to allow them to perform some new humiliation or fresh act of austerity.

The Brothers were greatly disappointed that they could not give free rein to the impetuosity of their desires but had to restrain themselves within the limits set by strict obedience. Since these fervent religious wanted nothing but God, their intention was pure. Neither self-love nor self-will had anything to do with the mortifications which they longed to practice, for the spirit of obedience ruled over the spirit of penance. These truly obedient men would have thought that they were doing penance for the devil and not for God had they indulged in any austerities not sanctioned by obedience. The vehemence of their desire to crucify their flesh was measured by their eagerness in asking their Superior to give them the merit of obedience. As we said, they had little trouble in convincing him or in securing permission for the frequent use of disciplines, hairshirts, iron chains, and other instruments for making the body suffer.

Various kinds of humiliation were also highly prized by them; there are none that the Spirit of God did not inspire them to try. Wherever they happened to meet De La Salle, if they had committed some fault, they threw themselves at his feet and asked for a penance. They revealed all their defects to him and requested permission to

manifest them to others. Whatever could cause them the most embarrassment was the first thing they revealed. Whatever could lead others to think less highly of them was what they most eagerly wished to publicize. They seemed to take pleasure in declaring openly to all what could dishonor them in the eyes of others, and the public was not slow in showering them with opprobrium and infamy. The people who were so assiduous in insulting the Brothers when they appeared in public sorely disappointed them when they failed to do so. The Brothers felt that contempt was due them and that they were treated justly when they were reviled as the offscouring of the world, when people threw stones at them, when they were spattered with mud. In the house, each one rivaled with the other to take on the lowliest and most unpleasant tasks which nature found least attractive. The only time they ever quarreled was when it was a question of vying in humility and of seizing opportunities to do things that self-love finds most mortifying and pride hard to bear. They argued only when occasions arose to contend with each other in humility and to profit by chances to perform actions which most sensibly mortified self-love and pride. To be brief, this new Community was a school of virtue and of perfection where each one strove with the others in noble emulation. No one gave or received anything but striking examples of fervor, charity, humility, mortification, silence, recollection, obedience, patience, zeal for the salvation of their neighbor, love for their vocation, and concern for the instruction and sanctification of poor children. However, it is true that a number of these fervent disciples of De La Salle, by wanting to follow their father too closely, were the first to go to their graves.

Carried away by the power of his example, the Brothers overcame him by their insistence, and all of them together let themselves be swept away by the tidal wave of fervor which led them to certain excesses in the matter of penance. De La Salle should have restrained them and used the bridle of obedience to hold back these men who were on fire with enthusiasm, who let the vivacity of their desires spur them on. But how could he have done this? He was the first to surrender to this attraction. In this matter, he himself was the most culpable of all. He did not feel himself justified or even willing to reproach them for a fault which he loved. If both father and children, setting no limits to their maceration, committed a fault, it was a fault which they did not wish to correct. They could not have brought themselves to make up for it, save for practicing even greater penances than those which they were reproached for. But we must admit that they went too far in this matter; it is a fault which can indeed be

imputed to them. Which of the saints does not deserve the same reproach? All of them have sinned in this manner, and none of them has been willing to acknowledge and confess this crime. If some of them, like Saint Francis, recognized as much on their deathbeds and begged pardon of their bodies for having treated them too severely, they never did so until it was too late to admit their culpability, too late to correct themselves. After all, God may have wished to raise up in these later centuries the spirit of penance which characterized the first days of the Church, to help us remember that this spirit is the spirit of primitive Christianity and the spirit of the Gospel and to show that any spirituality which waters it down, disguises, or modifies it is a false and deceptive type of spirituality.

The intense fervor and the harsh life result in many deaths

The fact is that at the Trappist monastery, at Septfonds and elsewhere in France, we have seen in our day the ancient practices of austerity revived by men who, because of their physical constitution, would not have been thought capable of enduring the vigils, fasting, and other maceration of the flesh so commonly practiced of old in the deserts and at the beginning of religious orders. Yet these men carried these mortifications almost to the same lengths as did those heroes of former times. In the seven or eight years from 1681 to 1688, when De La Salle left Reims to go to establish schools in Paris, he lost over six of the fifteen Brothers who composed the Institute at its beginning in the schools of Reims, Laon, Guise, and Rethel. All these men died prematurely before reaching the age of thirty. There were others whose health was ruined and who had to seek help outside the Community. From 1688 up to his own death in 1719, De La Salle had to deplore the demise of at least forty-five more Brothers, and he experienced the joy of sending them on ahead of him into paradise. Of these, only eight or nine were over thirty years old.

A house as poor, austere, and mortified as that of the Brothers was indeed apt to become a cemetery for the bodies and to people heaven with the souls of those who dwelt in it. Human reason was not listened to there, still less the voice of mitigation or relaxation. The young men allowed themselves to be carried away by the pious excesses of their devotion, and they condemned as cowardice or sensuality any respite that nature cried out for. All of them, encouraged by the words of their guide and inspired by his example, made superhuman efforts to follow in his footsteps and to yield to the attractions of grace. Thus, in a short while, they undermined and ruined

their health, whether by following their ardent desires, by the intensity of their application to the interior life, by the practice of unrelenting mortification, or by the immoderate use they made of disciplines and other instruments of penance combined with their daily round of exhausting work in the schools.

In seeking to follow their Founder, the Brothers did not pay attention to the fact that he did not walk, did not even run, but flew in the narrow and thorny path leading to heaven. He was a man especially favored by grace, a true Benjamin, to whom the new Joseph, our Savior, gave a tenfold portion when distributing the gifts of grace. His measure of it was full, abundant, overflowing. The great sacrifices he had made for God, the astonishing violence he had offered his nature, and the heroic deeds of humility, renunciation, and charity toward the poor had opened for him the floodgates of God's benedictions. We can say that his lot was to receive the grace of victory and that—thanks to it and with its help—everything became not only possible for him but feasible and easy. The amazing thing is that the penance he practiced, which exceeded what any of the Brothers did, far from ruining his health, seemed to fortify it and make his constitution more robust. In seeking to imitate him, they should have consulted their capability, but this they failed to do. Vying with a spiritual giant, they reached their limits in a short time, but at least they had the consolation of having done all they could to resemble him, and they died like saints after living like great penitents.

### Exemplary death of Brother Jean-François

Brother Jean-François<sup>2</sup> was the one who led the way to heaven. A good job in the city had amply provided for his needs, and we can say that when he left it behind, he was leaving much in the eyes of him who gauges the merit of our actions only according to the share that our hearts take in them. When he resigned his position, he abandoned more than the Apostles did when they followed Jesus Christ. They were only poor fishermen who had nothing to forsake but their nets, but since they renounced them with all their hearts, their sacrifice had great value in the eyes of Jesus Christ, who addressed to them the highest praise and promised them the richest rewards. In

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2. For information and documentation on the life of Brother Jean-François and the approximately 250 Brothers who joined the Institute during De La Salle's lifetime, see Augustine Loes, *The First De La Salle Brothers; 1681–1719* (Landover: Lasallian Publications, 1999).

addition, as Saint Jerome and Saint Gregory observe, Our Lord's disciples left much in leaving behind the little they possessed, because they also gave up the desire of owning anything. It was this attitude, so agreeable to him who takes into consideration the sentiments of the heart, which merited so many graces for Brother Jean-François. What won him over to God and led him to enter the new Community was the example of the lives of the Brothers. Impressed by their piety, fervor, and patience, he realized that the one who directed them was indeed a great servant of God, and he conceived a holy desire of putting himself under his guidance and of belonging to his Community. He lived only a short time after this, but the manner in which he lived has left his memory in benediction. His days were indeed full, and his great concern was to give them all their entire measure of merit. A deep interior spirit characterized his piety. Always recollected, attentive to God's holy presence, vigilant over all the movements of his soul, careful to suppress all useless thoughts and irrelevant affections, watchful to eliminate the slightest movements of his passions and vices, on the alert to mortify his natural inclinations and his self-will, Jean-François let nothing enter his heart but that which was from God and for God. Exclusively occupied in cultivating the interior life, he so badly weakened the exterior man that after eighteen months of community living, he reached the end of his days. But as Holy Scripture says, he had lived a long time since he had lived with great fervor. His days, so full of merit, counted for years before the Lord. *Explevit tempora multa*. He did not need to live any longer, since he had reached the goal to which a long life should lead: perfect charity.

The power that this virtue exercised over his soul showed itself during the severe illness which, in 1684, brought him to the grave within a few days. The delirium resulting from the high fever which consumed him and which preceded his death for some days was not marked by any extravagance, any irregular movements, or any ill-considered words. I can even affirm that this delirium was edifying, mirroring as it did his beautiful soul. It revealed the deep impressions that divine love had made in it. Dare I say it? His delirium was like a sort of ecstasy during which his heart was filled only with a longing for heaven and with transports of love for God. These words—*Oh beautiful eternity! How lovely is thy dwelling place, Oh Lord! Oh love, love, love! We shall go to see love, love, love!*—these words, I say, were constantly on his lips. He repeated them often in a pleasant voice with all the strength he had left, and he expired as he finished pronouncing them. His death was as saintly as his life had been.

## Holy death of Brother Bourlette; his eminent virtue

Brother Bourlette was the second of these martyrs of penance. Excessive fervor soon brought him to the tomb. He was a native of Reims, the son of respectable parents, adequately provided with all the goods of fortune. Dear to his family, he lacked nothing in a home where affection reigned. The future smiled on him; everything seemed to offer him pleasing prospects, as the world judges. His family inheritance promised him the means of establishing himself and the hope of being very happy in the world. Touched by God's grace, he lifted his eyes to a higher goal in heaven. Whatever was mortal seemed to him unworthy of an immortal soul. His family home held no charm for him, because he felt too much at ease there. The Brothers' house—where everything was lacking and on entering which he might have said that he was shutting his body up in a prison, consigning his senses to torture and his will to entombment—appeared to him as truly the house of God and the gate of heaven.

On what occasion, for what reason and purpose, did he join the Brothers? How? He entered without the knowledge of his parents. He remained deaf to their pleas and entreaties and persevered in spite of their tears and constant efforts to make him leave. The eminent virtue of De La Salle and of his disciples had given rise to his vocation. The desire of walking in the straight path which leads to paradise was the motive which drew him to a house which he considered as the narrow door giving entrance into heaven. He lived there like an angel and died there like a saint.

What surprised him at first, touched him, and won him over to God was De La Salle's unconquerable patience and that of his children. As a citizen of Reims, he could not be ignorant of who this man was whom he saw so poor, reduced to such circumstances, so heartily despised by all. Comparing the original status of the servant of God, a situation of wealth and honor, with the second that he had willingly embraced, a state of poverty, mortification, and ignominy, Bourlette could not sufficiently admire the action of grace in human hearts. He was constantly amazed at seeing a man who had given up so much, who had become so vile in the world's eyes, yet happy and full of joy over the fortunate exchange he had made by giving up his wealth for poverty and his comfortable life for one that crucified the flesh.

What struck him most was to see this man of God made a sight for the vile rabble that mocked him, some of whom seemed to be saying to the others, *Ecce homo; Behold the man!* Behold him, this

canon, this doctor, this scion of a great family, who has become a schoolmaster! That is the role he has taken up. Let him live with it, because he now owns nothing; he is as poor as those whom he teaches. Isn't he a sight! Clad in that outfit, dressed in a capote, with those heavy shoes and that hat with the wide brim hanging over his shoulders! What credit does he now bring to his city, his family, his former colleagues in the cathedral chapter? What brilliant part does he now play in the world? Can he have lost his reason? He must have, for he only shows himself as one who is dead and who cares nothing about what anybody does to him!

The young man, who had one day seen De La Salle reduced to being the plaything of the people, saw some of his disciples treated in the same way the next. The insolent riffraff that gathered around them sought to amuse themselves at their expense. He saw that they were insulted with impunity, that they allowed their tormentors full liberty to mock them, to tug on their clothes, to shove them rudely, to splash them with mud, to strike them, chase them, and throw stones at them. And amidst all this, they did not seem to be upset, nor did they let a single word of indignation, not a sign of impatience, escape their lips. This edified him extremely—these quiet, modest, mild, and peaceable men surrounded by a pack of unruly children who, as Scripture says, ran after them like wild dogs, barking and seeking an opportunity to harass them. These truly patient men, in the midst of this fanatical mob which drew near to them only to strike them, seemed to him men formed in the school of Calvary and modeled after Jesus Christ, their exemplar. When all was said and done, he thought, they deserved envy rather than pity.

The admiration Bourlette conceived for the Brothers inspired him with the desire of becoming like them, so that after drinking of this same chalice on earth with them, he might be found worthy of a place in their company in heaven. Once he had made this generous resolution, he carried it out without letting his parents know. Desolate and afflicted, they were filled with consternation when they found out the truth. They hastened to come to deliver him from a house which, as the world judges, devoured its inhabitants and was the object of so much public hatred and persecution.

The more they loved this child of theirs, the more they wept to see him in a place so horrible in the eyes of the world. If death had taken him from them, they would probably not have shed as many tears at his grave as they now did. They felt disgraced because their son was among the Brothers. To wipe away this stain from their family honor, there was nothing they did not try in order to make him

leave. But they might have been speaking to a deaf and blind person; he seemed not to see their tears or to hear their sighs. Their lamentations and complaints found him and left him as immovable as a cliff battered by the waves, which is immovable by the ocean tide breaking over its base. When this generous youth entered the house, he could have said with Saint Paul, *I no longer listened to flesh and blood*. His eagerness to belong entirely to Jesus Christ made him forget that he had any parents; when they came to tempt him to abandon his vocation, he seemed not to recognize them any more. His heart secretly told them what his lips, out of respect, dared not utter: *I know you not*. "I no longer recognize you as my father and mother when you try to tear me away from the bosom of my heavenly Father." Thus armed with the sword of the Gospel, he accomplished this separation, painful as it was to nature, and gave up parents who loved him tenderly.

Perfect charity, that Gospel pearl which must be bought at the price of renouncing all else, that refined gold which makes its possessor so rich and which demands the greatest sacrifices, was the reward given to this virtuous young man for what he had just done. Indeed, it seems that the love of God, which costs even generous hearts so much, was bestowed on him on the threshold of the house when he came to beg entry there. From that moment on, his heart was so fully inflamed with love that it no longer beat save for God. It can be said that this sacred love pursued him everywhere and overwhelmed him. Its assaults were impetuous and continual, so that he seemed at all times to be in ecstasy and out of touch with his surroundings, especially during interior prayer and thanksgiving after Holy Communion. At such times, he seemed to experience convulsive movements or to be seized by a violent fever which caused his limbs to tremble. When he was warned and reproved because of this singular behavior, he seemed quite surprised, because he alone was ignorant of what all the others could see.

Furthermore, to judge correctly the ardor of his love, we should measure it by his attraction for humiliations. A sincere desire for self-abasement gave his love for God the genuine authentication it needed to certify its reality. The latter can always be suspected as regards its genuineness or its purity when the former is not present to vouch for it, for nothing so evidently proves that self-love has been eradicated than a strong yearning for humiliations. Any other sign might be questioned; no other can guarantee the presence of the pure love of God in a soul. Only he should be numbered among the perfect who displays love for the cross as the effective proof of his love for God.



By this standard, Brother Bourlette deserves a place among the perfect, since no other inclination appeared so strongly in him than his desire for self-abasement. His entire ambition was to lower himself in the estimation of men and to forfeit their good opinion of him. If his spirit of obedience had not been stronger than his thirst for humiliation, he might have been seen pretending to be insane so as to excite the rabble and the street urchins to throw stones at him and splatter him with mud. On more than one occasion, De La Salle had to call on all his firmness and authority to restrain him within the limits of prudence. This lover of contempt insistently begged permission to run about in the streets of his native city and under the eyes of his parents, friends, and fellow citizens, clad in a red pourpoint<sup>3</sup> and wearing a woolen cap on his head, hoping to force people to treat him as the demented were treated and to look upon him as such.

His parents, heartbroken at having lost him and at seeing him in a house with such a reputation, kept returning to urge him to leave it. Because they did not cease importuning and wearying him with their tears, reproaches, caresses, and other signs of tenderness—weapons so often victorious even over the most inflexible hearts—De La Salle sent him to Rethel to get him away from them, hoping by thus separating him from them to put him out of reach of the importunities. But what does natural love not inspire? His father and mother, whether from nearby or from far off, did not slacken their efforts. Like bears robbed of their cub, they hastened to the place to which their son had been exiled in the hope of protecting him from their pursuits. At Rethel, as at Reims, they besieged him with cries, lamentations, and reproaches without succeeding in causing their own emotion to gain his heart. In vain did they weep and appear inconsolable before him. In vain did they mingle tears with their pleas and reproaches with their caresses; they found him ever the same: unmoved by their tears, their cries, and the heartbreak of those who had given him life. Entirely enrapt in God, he let grace in his heart overcome nature. As a victim on that interior altar, he offered to the heavenly Father his own natural love, the sorrow he was causing his parents, and that which they caused him. Relating this new temptation to De La Salle in a letter, he said, *My parents came to see me and asked if I was not at last ready to be converted. I told them that I was converted already.* I do not know whether it was for the purpose of keeping Brother Bourlette's residence a secret from his parents, but at all events, he was changed again, from Rethel to Laon; however, nothing was gained by it.

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3. A pourpoint was a sort of sweater or blouse with puffed-out sleeves.

When his father found out where his son had gone, he lost no time in proceeding thither and in trying to induce him to leave a state where he could not bear to see him. Once again, the son, dry-eyed, saw the tears flow unchecked from his father's eyes. How many sobs and wails beat against his ears without being able to reach his heart? What new testimonials of affection did he not receive? What bitter reproaches was he not obliged to listen to on the part of the grieving old man, sunk in consternation and almost in despair? These importunities which assailed him with such fury did not, however, succeed in breaking down his resolution. They merely served to steel him in his vocation and to sanctify him by giving him repeated opportunities to renew the greatest natural sacrifice he could make.

The reward of all this constancy was not long in coming. Whether God wished to grant him his crown without further delay after he had withstood so many combats or whether his great fervor shortened his life, the fact is that after about two years of a truly saintly life, he met with a happy death. If charity was not its sole cause, it certainly seems to have been the occasion that brought it about. Here is what happened.

When Brother Bourlette's companion fell ill, the generous young Brother undertook to care for him while keeping the two classes in session and doing the work of three men. Fervor never thinks anything is too much; when doing too much, it still accuses itself of slackness. The parish priest, still living today as a canon of the cathedral, came to visit the Brothers. He loved Brother Bourlette on account of his extraordinary piety and found him overburdened and in danger of succumbing under the load of all the work he was doing. He suggested giving the students a week or two of vacation, but the humble Brother said that in conscience he could not do this without a written order from De La Salle. The charitable pastor, foreseeing the results of this misplaced fervor and ill-founded scruple about obedience, was rather displeased by the Brother's resolve. To make him realize that the situation was more than he could handle, he asked him how, all by himself, he could teach two separate classes containing such a large number of students while still taking care of the sick Brother. *Monsieur*, replied Brother Bourlette, *I keep my right foot in one class, my left foot in the other; my mind is with the sick Brother, and my heart is in heaven.* This reply amazed the pious parish priest but left him with nothing more to say. He departed edified and full of admiration.

A few days later, the sick Brother was well enough to handle his class once more, but Brother Bourlette was obliged to leave his and

go to bed. A continual and raging fever carried him off in the year 1686, in spite of the doctors and the medicines, for they failed either to give him any relief or to prolong his life. The entire parish, indeed the entire city, displayed overwhelming grief. His death was a great loss, and people honored him as a saint. During several years, pilgrims frequently visited his grave to honor him and pray to him. Many persons came to offer their prayers there and to invoke the pious young Brother. His tranquillity of soul and his modesty, which were so obvious in all his external behavior, had won for him the nickname of Brother Modesty. People called him by no other, and by thus designating him, they thought they had characterized his virtue and given him deserved praise.

#### Death of Brother Maurice; his characteristic virtue

Brother Maurice, another native of Reims, was the third of De La Salle's children to enjoy his reward in heaven. His happy death occurred in Reims on 1 May 1687. He was born of a very distinguished family and paid it even more honor by his great piety than he had received from it by his birth. No sooner had he joined the Brothers than all looked upon him as their model. Everything in him spoke of God and turned people to God, inspiring devotion in their hearts. This good Brother seemed to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ; in his person he provided others with a striking image of Our Lord during his life on this earth. Even in his silence, his example spoke, and he instructed others by giving to each of his actions its fullest perfection. Thus, all through his life and especially at its conclusion, we might apply to him, in due proportion, this magnificent commendation that the people gave to Jesus Christ himself: *He has done all things well.*

This was true especially of his interior prayer. The recollected posture he maintained, the religious spirit which seemed to envelop him, and the great devotion which his face manifested made him resemble a seraph. All during this holy exercise, he remained so interiorly occupied, so taken up with God, that he seemed to be in heaven. He was so oblivious of all sense impressions that he was not tempted to satisfy them even in the least. In him, nature no longer dared to manifest its preferences; however timidly they appeared, he immediately contradicted them, mortified them, and pursued them until he had entirely destroyed them.

Natural inclination and self-will enjoyed even less liberty in his life. The mere mention of such things inspired him with horror, and it can be said that he had succeeded in exterminating them in himself.

Perfect obedience, which Saint John Climacus calls the tomb of self-will, was the virtue which seemed to predominate in this Brother. It led his Superior to show him a sort of special predilection. De La Salle had a particular love for this perfectly obedient Brother and preferred him to serve his Mass. Brother Maurice served Mass with so much modesty and piety that those present might have thought they beheld an angel serving a seraph at the altar.

His delicate constitution could not long survive the austere and mortified life which the Brothers led. Regretfully, they could see that he was growing weaker and becoming tubercular. Once the malady declared itself, it made rapid progress. The fire of divine love which consumed him interiorly contributed even more than the hard and penitential life he led to weakening and ulcerating his lungs. Nor should anyone be surprised at this. When this little Community began, grace was poured out so obviously and in such abundance on its members, as well as on its leader, that although none of them had gone through the exercises of the novitiate—which was not established until 1691—the Brothers in a short time became what they needed to be: spiritual men.

Brother Maurice was one of those most in need of a bridle, rather than a spur, as he advanced on the way to God. His fervor carried him away, and he took neither his health nor his strength into consideration. It is not surprising that he soon found himself exhausted, and the end was not slow in coming. This good Brother, like the others, forgot that he had a body, and while trying to live as though he were a pure spirit, he failed to realize that our infirm and mortal flesh has its exigencies. He hastened toward the end common to us all and found a tomb in the house which he had recently entered.

De La Salle, disconsolate over the prospect of losing such a valuable recruit, tried everything to re-establish his health and that of another Brother who was suffering from the same malady. The doctor who examined them felt that the only measure that could prolong their lives was for them to leave a house which gave everything to the spirit and nothing to the body. He judged that the company and example of De La Salle and of the Brothers were eminently calculated to make saints but not to cure the sick. Indeed, the fervor of the father and that of his children increased day by day, and the more it grew, the less attention was paid among them to the body and its needs. The spirit of grace strove with the spirit of the flesh, above all, and sought only to curb it.

The ordinary physician of the community, Doctor Dubois, believed that a house where nature found only martyrdom would soon

become the grave of these two Brothers if they remained there, and therefore he gave them no other advice than to leave it if they wished to recover from their illness and shorten their agony. This advice was not to the liking of Brother Maurice. Fearing that by leaving the Community he might lose the spirit of grace he had received when he entered it, he resolved to stay there and die. The sacrifice of a premature death seemed to him less bitter than to leave a community where the spirit of God reigned and where the happiness his soul enjoyed surpassed the torments that his body endured.

De La Salle, charmed by this generous resolve, consented to it with joy, and it was for him a source of great happiness to keep with him for six more months such a perfect example of patience, humility, obedience, resignation, and fervor. Although a prey to great sufferings, the young man sought to assuage them only by continual recourse to God and aspirations toward heaven, which held the object of all his desires. His edifying death took place on the last day of April 1687; he was twenty-two years old. The other Brother who also suffered from tuberculosis did not show a similar determination. He immediately accepted the offer to return home but soon repented of having done so. His family home, which deprived him of such great examples of virtue, did not restore his health. He died there three months after leaving the Brothers, filled with bitter remorse over having abandoned the land of the saints. On his deathbed, when he saw his poor mother weeping over him, his regret at not being any longer under the guidance of De La Salle and in the company of the Brothers became even more cruel and hard to bear. *Ah*, he replied to his disconsolate mother, *you break my heart. If I had remained among the Brothers, instead of bearing wails, I would be listening to nothing but prayers.*

The other Brothers who went to make up the new colony that the house of the Brothers established in heaven were all like those we have just spoken of. They also died in Reims at an early age with great resignation to God's will and evident signs of the joy they felt at offering the sacrifice of their lives to God and at leaving this earth to go to heaven. The parish priest who gave them the last sacraments was in constant admiration as he saw these young Brothers so indifferent toward life and so ready for the journey to eternity. That was the testimony he gave one day to the father and to his children in the presence of several ecclesiastics who seemed to be finding fault with De La Salle for sending such young Brothers into the classroom. "I do not know," he told them, "whom I should admire most, De La Salle or his Brothers. I have already assisted a number of them on their

deathbeds and given them the last sacraments. They amazed me; I have never seen anybody, even octogenarians, die with as much courage and resignation as these young Brothers.” His words carried conviction, because he was an elderly man who had been engaged in the pastoral ministry for some thirty years.

De La Salle spared no pains to afford relief to his sick Brothers and to help them recover their health, but when it pleased God to call one of them, his calm and joyful attitude showed that he felt sure of their happiness. He knew them through and through; nothing within them was hidden from him. He was persuaded, without any special revelation but merely on the basis of faith, that such pure souls and hearts so devoted to God had certainly been taken up into union with the sovereign Good and had already entered into the possession of their last end, or at least they were not to be separated therefrom for very long. This good father was happy at having such children. At their death, he shed no tears but refrained from sighs and lamentations, whether he was present or whether news of their deaths was brought to him. Thanksgiving was the only tribute the Founder owed them, and this he paid without delay. *Let us give thanks to God*, he would say, *since one more of our Brothers has gone to heaven.*

## CHAPTER V

*New signs of fervor in De La Salle; he conceives the idea of giving up his position as Superior and having a Brother replace him; through a pious artifice, he wins the consent of the Brothers; he gives admirable examples of humility and obedience after he resigns his office; having been reinstated in his rightful position by the vicars-general, he gives himself over to his attraction for penance.*

Before De La Salle had to take charge of the schools outside Reims, he was able to enjoy at will the delights of solitude and of repose in God. Freed from distracting cares or multiple concerns, he could concentrate on recollection without being disturbed or obliged to leave his solitude in order to occupy himself with business affairs which, no matter how holy, are always a burden to interior souls, because they withdraw them from union with God. The community house in Reims was for him a true desert, where he successfully hid himself

and remained unavailable to everyone except the Brothers. He left the house and appeared in public only to seek the world's scorn.

The fervor that reigned in the house kept all of the Brothers faithful to their duties. The deep silence, inner recollection, and perfect obedience that they displayed afforded him much leisure time to devote to interior prayer and liberty to think only of God. In fact, his fervent disciples had a secret Superior in their hearts who directed them in all they did, and on the outside, they had a rule which governed all their actions and every step they took. Consequently, De La Salle found that the management of the house was not a source of distraction for him. All he needed to do was to preside over the Brothers' exercises of piety, once they came home from school. When they left for class again, their absence once more gave him the opportunity to occupy himself with God in silence and solitude in the depths of his heart. Thus, in one way or another, he kept up his conversation with God. His manner of praying varied, but it was continual. Hidden in his tiny cell, he emerged from it only to be present at the community exercises, and he left these only to plunge once again into contemplation.

But when the number of schools and of Brothers increased, problems and administrative details requiring the Founder's attention likewise multiplied and demanded a part of the time he had hitherto devoted to God alone. How he regretted having to mingle Martha's cares with Mary's repose! What annoyance he experienced at having to interrupt his intimate union with the sovereign Good! But God's will is the only law that pure souls recognize. They seek his will, not their own satisfaction. With that attitude, De La Salle willingly gave up God for God's sake and gladly deprived himself of those delights with which the Divine Spouse favors holy souls when they walk alone with him, in order to devote himself to his duties and to go where the divine will called him. Still, he was careful to accord to the duties of his state only the time that was strictly necessary. He spent all the rest in interior prayer and never wasted any of it in dealing with creatures.

Miserly with his time, he used it wisely in order to occupy as much of it as possible in prayer. For this reason, he kept himself even more secluded than before and made it a duty for himself to live on this earth as though alone there with God, forgetting that other men even existed. In vain did those who had not completely dropped their former relationships with him reproach him with having become too unsociable or indifferent in their regard. In vain did some souls truly beloved by God, who alone amidst all the scorn heaped on him had kept on paying him his just due and esteeming him at his proper

worth, seek to approach him and to profit by his lights. De La Salle remained inflexible in his resolve to see nobody and to admit no visitors to see him, following this rule given by the author of *The Imitation of Christ*: *The greatest saints avoided, as much as they could, the company of men and chose to think only of God in secret.*<sup>4</sup> Still, as we mentioned before, when he was taken by surprise or when, in spite of himself, he was obliged to come forth to show that he was still among the living, he was found to be what he had always been by character and education: polite and gracious, exemplifying the joy of the saints on his countenance.

It was thus that the abbot of Saint Thierry met him one day. The abbey, belonging to the Order of Saint Benedict, lies about two leagues from Reims. The accounts he had heard all over Champagne about De La Salle and his new Institute stirred the abbot's curiosity and brought him to Reims to see whether everything he had heard about the man of God was true and whether his own experience would not gainsay at least some of it. When he reached the Brothers' house with all his retinue, the noise of his arrival made De La Salle aware of his visitor, and he came down at once to receive him. On seeing him, the abbot recognized him for what he had always been: pleasant and courteous as usual but clothed very differently. After looking him over from head to foot, he took him by the arm and with a laugh asked him, *Is this how a man of your character should be dressed?* De La Salle's reply was a smile and a courtly bow. That was the only answer he ever gave to such remarks. After a long conversation with him, the abbot left filled with admiration and esteem for a man whose worth the city of Reims refused to recognize, just as it failed to realize how lucky it was to have him as a native son and to number him among its inhabitants.

No matter how carefully our hermit strove to avoid people, he could not entirely escape their unforeseen visits. The canons of the cathedral, whether in order to be edified or to satisfy their curiosity and to see with their own eyes what their former companion looked like now among his disciples, frequently came to call on him, much to his displeasure but much to their own edification and profit. They beheld with their own eyes a member of their company reviving those great examples of humility, poverty, mortification, detachment, recollection, and other virtues which the Christians of these later centuries admire in those of the first. Whatever they had expected, they could not complain that his piety had made him less polished or

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4. Book 1, chap. 20.



more indifferent to them. They found in him the same good heart, the same courtesy, and the same display of friendship. He did not even show the ennui they occasioned him by thus coming to distract him.

He seeks solitude with the Carmelites some distance from Rouen

Yet his displeasure was considerable, and it was perhaps to avoid it that he thought of going to make a retreat in one of the retreat houses belonging to the Carmelite Fathers. He did this in 1686 in such great secrecy that not even his children knew where he was. The only precaution he took to make sure he could be called back, if something out of the ordinary happened during his absence, was to inform the Brother whom he left in charge of the house in Reims where to write to him. He left him an address, but even this did not reveal his secret, because it was an indirect one which did not indicate how a letter posted to an abbess in Rouen would eventually reach him.

This precaution De La Salle took was wise, because in fact it became necessary to call him back soon on account of the illness of the two Brothers in Laon, which happened about this time. As soon as the Brother who was taking De La Salle's place in Reims heard of this, he set out to visit the two stricken men who needed his help and presence. However, in spite of his diligence, he did not get there soon enough and had barely time to see one of them die after having received the last anointing. This made him resolve to inform De La Salle at once and to let him know that his presence was absolutely necessary for his little flock.

He abandons his solitude to visit a sick Brother at Laon

For the improvised hermit, this was bad news indeed, because it made him give up his retreat in a delightful spot where nothing interrupted his communing with God and because it informed him of the death of one of his best subjects and the serious illness of another. De La Salle did not let this news upset him; the most annoying and unforeseen incidents found him and left him perfectly calm. He was, nevertheless, obliged to leave right away for Laon, and everyone was much surprised to see him arrive there only three days after getting the news. All were even more surprised to see him obey the call of a young Brother of twenty-four so promptly and at the cost of so much fatigue.

After consulting about what should be done, he gave the students vacation for two months. Then, without giving any rest to his

body, worn out and exhausted from the fatigue of such a painful journey, he set out for Reims accompanied by the Brother who had sent for him. They walked on through the night, as he usually did. De La Salle ate nothing but a crust of bread and drank a glass of wine before midnight in a village four leagues from Reims. When they reached the city early in the morning, he immediately sent to bed the Brother who had accompanied him, while he himself went to pray. The fact is that interior prayer had more attraction for him than sleep, and since it was time for the community to engage in it, he could not deny himself this gratification. To his soul he granted the repose which it sought, without paying attention to his body, so weary from such a long trip made at night, on foot, and almost fasting. His body was only asking for justice when it pleaded for a few hours' sleep.

If the repose he found in interior prayer was so delightful for De La Salle, the satisfaction he found in true obedience was no less appealing. He had made a vow of obedience, as we mentioned previously, and had done so with a firm determination to carry it out for the sake of good example to be given to the Brothers as well as for his personal spiritual advantage. But how could he put this vow into practice? His position as the Superior gave him the right to command, thus placing obedience beyond his reach. Hence, to put his vow into practice and to satisfy his humility, he needed to give up his position and lay aside his authority as Superior. But who could take his place? Whom could he choose as the new Superior? Whom could he obey without demeaning his priestly character? The Community included no other priest. Most of the Brothers were men of little learning or education. Was it fitting that a priest, a doctor, a former canon, a director, and a Superior should step aside and place over himself a simple Brother lacking any qualifications or special attainments?

Christian humility leads people to seek the depths of abasement, but could he place himself at the feet of a layman clad in a black robe and ask him for permissions without abasing his sacerdotal character, without discrediting his ministry, without dishonoring his person? Something in this manner of acting seemed somehow improper. Would it not have been carrying humility too far and listening to his own inclinations at the expense of wisdom and prudence? De La Salle could hardly have been ignorant of this. This difficulty had given him pause, and it took him a long time to try to resolve it.

After all, perfect virtue does not lay much store by such reasoning. Faith alone guides it and leads it blindly on the path trodden by Jesus Christ. A higher illumination teaches it that it cannot do better than to heed the lessons given us by divine wisdom and to follow his

example. In the Man-God kneeling before Saint Peter, the Apostles, and even Judas, washing their feet and wiping them with his own hands and kissing them with his sacred lips, the humble Superior found the solution for his dilemma. The more he contemplated the life and death of Jesus, the more he felt he should reproach himself with having listened to human reasoning. Everything he read in the Gospel, in the life of the Lord of the universe, gave examples of submission and dependence. There is not one of the Lord's mysteries that does not afford us some instance of a particular kind of obedience. Subject to the laws of nature, he remained for nine months in his mother's womb, without trying to hasten the moment of his birth. Submission to the orders of the Emperor Augustus brought him to Bethlehem, where he was born. Although his condition as the Son of God, his title as Savior, the purity of his conception, and the privileges of his birth exempted him from the shameful and painful rite of circumcision, Jesus made it a duty to endure its rigor and abasement. The same spirit of obedience to the Law brought him to the temple to be offered to God. All we know of the first thirty years of his life is that he was subject to Mary and Joseph. And he ended his life as he had begun it, by obedience, of which he gave us a perfect example on the cross.

In all these instances of obedience practiced by God, the humble Superior found the solution to his difficulties, and he reproached himself for having deluded himself by listening to arguments of mere human propriety which the Gospel does not approve of and which the example of Christ refutes. His longing for retirement and pure uninterrupted prayer, added to his desire of humbling himself and of obeying, led him to divest himself of his title as Superior. As the number of Brothers increased, along with that of the schools, his cares and occupations were multiplied, thus robbing him of part of the time that his heart wished to devote fully to communing with God. If he became a mere private individual again, he would find it easy to give himself up unreservedly to a life of humiliation, of abnegation of his own will, and of thinking only of God, thus beginning on earth the life proper to heaven, where our sole activity will be to contemplate and to love the sovereign Beauty.

In order to bring the Brothers to accept his resignation, the Founder needed reasons. What reasons could he invoke? Here again he found himself in difficulty. If he gave his true motives, he would have betrayed his humility; if he tried to invent specious ones, he would have betrayed the truth. What could he do? Not wishing to offend against either virtue, he focused on all the appearances which

might be taken for sound arguments by men not especially gifted with discernment. He tried to show them that the best interests of the Community required that someone else take over its direction. His efforts were not in vain, for he succeeded in winning them over to his proposal. So plausibly did he put forth his unconvincing reasons that these good Brothers were either really persuaded, did not dare to contradict him, or did not want to disappoint him, and so they finally agreed to what he proposed.

In addition, the humble Superior, in view of getting his disciples to go along with what he wanted, had taken all the necessary dispositions to make his withdrawal seem to be God's will. Such behavior should not surprise us. If self-love is very clever at deceiving others, humility is no less ingenious in advancing its own ends. The most effective means he could use to make all the Brothers accept his abdication was to gather them together and to explain to them the reasons for his resignation. Then he had them meditate on this before God. Next he asked them to express their opinion and artfully insinuated his own, in such a way that they might feel that the force of the argument compelled them to follow it. He did not ask for a vote until he saw they were won over. In addition, to give their decision even greater weight, it should be arrived at during a retreat, because at such times reason guided by faith is more clearly enlightened. God's will is perceived more plainly, and grace is more abundantly given.

He persuades the Brothers to elect one of their own as Superior

Hence, after calling his disciples together and beginning a retreat with them, he explained what he had in mind and addressed them in a touching exhortation, bordering on the pathetic, to sway them all the more. He left out nothing that could add to the weight of his arguments, which really were no more convincing than the humility that inspired them.

He reminded them that the additional number of schools had also increased his administrative concerns and required men capable of directing these schools properly. All alone, he could no longer face up to so much business; hearing the Brothers' confessions and directing their consciences were important matters quite sufficient to take up all his time. Among their number, there were several outstanding Brothers who were wise, prudent, virtuous, and capable of assuming the responsibility of governing the Community. It was, therefore, incumbent on them to choose someone to take his place, since the good of the Institute required that it be led by one of them.

He added that it was necessary at least to try out this scheme and that the time for doing so had come and should not be passed up. Sooner or later, it would become necessary to take this step, since he himself would not live forever, and it was preferable to do while he still lived what would become absolutely necessary after his death. The new Superior could acquire experience under the Founder's eyes and be advised by him. He offered to act as the coadjutor or vicar of the newly elected man and to initiate him into his new functions so as to make it easier for him to exercise them. Nature itself, he insisted, made it plain that every society should be ruled by one who was like the other members and that Brothers should obey a Brother; having him, a priest, at their head constituted an anomaly. It was in every way preferable that they should have a Superior like themselves. Finally, he felt himself called to a life of retirement and detachment from creatures; he noted that he could not reconcile his duty of attending to so much business with his application to interior prayer and the cultivation of the interior life. The Founder wished to get them used to doing without him and to accustom them to obey another Brother.

All these seemed like excellent arguments inspired by humility but exclusively aimed at favoring De La Salle's virtue and at giving him more liberty to put himself in the lowest place. Under careful scrutiny, however, they appeared more fictitious than real. Once stripped of their ostensible plausibility, their hollowness became obvious. Indeed, if the Brothers had taken up each of the contentions that their humble Superior so artfully advanced, they could have used them to convince him that the best interests of the Institute demanded that he remain in the position he occupied and that if they listened to the pleading of his humility, they would inflict on the Community a wound that his charity would seek to spare it.

They could have told him that he was their father and they his children and that such reciprocal relationships cannot be nullified. Nature itself required that he should be their Superior and they his inferiors. The head should rule over the body, as we can see by the place that nature itself assigns to it. Order would be subverted if the feet were set where the head ought to be, and vice versa. He could conclude from this example that his humility was going to introduce disorder into the Community if he was ever seen at the feet of a Brother, taking orders from him and obeying him. They could have observed that since he was their shepherd, it was his duty to lead his sheep; it would be ridiculous for a sheep to conduct the shepherd; consequently, they could not accept his humble request without exposing their little Community to certain ruin.

Since it was his work, only his hand which had begun it could bring it to its full development according to the normal order of Providence. De La Salle was their Founder, guide, father, and patriarch. As such, he had the charisms needed to govern them; these were gifts granted to him personally which could not be shared with another.

These reflections were powerful and impressive arguments which demolished the specious ones that De La Salle tried to put forward. He himself would have been the first to recognize their cogency, if his humility had not prevented him from doing so. Comparing the one set of motives with the other, he could not have even considered resigning, and it should have been easy for him to conclude that charity should prevail over his attraction for interior prayer and a life of dependence. Be that as it may, either the Brothers did not entertain the reflections, or, if any of them did, they did not venture to bring them forward. All of them were much surprised when their father revealed his project to them; they fell silent and apparently gave up the use of their reason. Perhaps on this occasion they did not possess sufficient understanding, or else they failed to show enough resoluteness.

Whatever the reality, the Brothers took under consideration a proposal which they should have turned down with respectful but humble insistence. Since De La Salle was so eager to practice obedience, they should all have acted together and commanded him to stay in his place while leaving them in theirs. This was the only pledge they should have exacted from him in the name of the obedience he wanted to exercise, but this they did not do. All these good Brothers, extremely edified by this new proof of virtue that De La Salle was giving them, consented to his abdication and resolved to choose another Superior, thus giving to one of the children the authority belonging to the father and making the father depend on the child. They agreed to put the head in the place of the feet and to choose a member to govern the head, to put a simple Brother above a priest and a priest at the feet of a Brother, to make the confessor and director subordinate to his penitent, and to establish the penitent as the guide of his director and the censor of his confessor. They allowed themselves to be convinced by reasons that nothing but their Founder's humility made plausible. It is true that he went about it in such a way as to make them believe what he said and go along with what he wanted, for he told them, in the end, that they should no longer think of him. By showing them how necessary it was for them to choose another Superior, he really made it an obligation for them to do so.

### The election of Brother L'Heureux

He got what he wanted. An election was held, and the choice fell on Brother Henri L'Heureux. This selection was much to the liking of De La Salle and met with his full approval and commendation. Brother Henri L'Heureux possessed notable qualities; it was he whom De La Salle had hoped to see in his place and whom he would have picked as his successor. He was wise, moderate, humble, and solidly virtuous. He seemed indeed capable of governing the little Community at any time other than at its beginning, when the father who had founded it was still living. If De La Salle had no longer been in this world, Brother Henri was the one best qualified to replace him, but the Institute at this time was like an edifice barely rising out of the ground. Its builder was necessary to construct it properly and establish it firmly. Any other hand was not the one that God had chosen to erect it and bring it to its completion.

The many qualities of the new Superior won for him as much esteem and confidence as the Brothers could have displayed toward anyone other than their beloved father. De La Salle was the first to show Brother Henri proper marks of respect, submission, and dependence. He immediately forgot who he was and acted only according to the orders of the new Superior. He showed himself scrupulously exact in paying him the reverence due from an inferior, so much so, that he became a real source of confusion for Brother Henri while winning for himself the admiration of the Community.

### Admirable obedience of De La Salle to the new Superior

Entirely happy, De La Salle finally saw himself fully free to yield to his humility everything it asked for. Each day was marked by fresh examples of submission and dependence. In the lives of the saints, which contain so many instances of this sort of conduct, we can hardly find anything that he failed to practice. He proceeded from an act of humility to one of obedience, and if anyone had followed him throughout the day, he would have seen him making an uninterrupted series of them. In fact, I do not know whether in observing him attentively, we could have surprised him not actually exercising either interior prayer, penance, humility, or obedience. Morning and evening, on entering or on leaving the refectory, he accused himself of his faults in the posture and with the devotion of a humble penitent, and the faults he reproached himself with were, if I may so call them, sins of edification.

Whatever was most lowly, most demeaning, most distasteful in the household chores was what he preferred, and he managed to choose these tasks or to have them assigned to him. Sweeping, washing dishes, carrying out the garbage, and cleaning the toilets were the occupations he sought out. In his eyes, none seemed beneath his dignity. He did not have only one Superior; all the Brothers became such for him, once he himself had given up that role. His will would not have had enough masters to suit it if he had to obey only one. To make sure that it was held captive under the yoke of unremitting obedience, he deferred to as many individual superiors as there were Brothers in charge of this or that service. Looking on all of them in the same way, he went to the kitchen or elsewhere not to offer his services to whoever was in charge but to seek orders and formally ask whether anyone had any commands to give him. The most docile child never showed more perfect obedience. The most attentive servant never displayed more marks of dependence. The most fervent novice never seemed more on guard against his own will or more prompt to sacrifice it than did the servant of God.

He had become through grace what children are because of their age. Simple, candid, unquestioning, unreasoning, he made use of his mind only to subject it to the opinions of others. Timid and hesitant, he did not presume to take a step except under the direction of Brother Henri L'Heureux. Like a child who examines his mother's countenance to discern what pleases or displeases her, he fastened his gaze on the face of his Superior to fathom his intentions and did not wait until the Superior had indicated his intent by a positive command. Having become a humble servant through virtue, he sought nothing except to learn and to accomplish the will of the master to whom he had subjected himself. The Superior's orders were the rule of his actions; his words became laws. To do this or that, to act or to remain at repose, to begin something and not to finish it—all was the same to him. Indifferent to everything, he was always ready to do what he was told.

Having become a novice through choice, De La Salle hastened along the path of perfection as though he were just beginning to walk therein. To make sure that he did not perform any actions that would not lead him to God, he based them all on the solid rock of obedience. For him, it was not enough to be the most punctual at the first sound of the bell, the most assiduous at all the regular observances, the most faithful in carrying out the common regulations. He wanted to be given special commands covering all he was to say or do. What a source of edification it was for the Brothers to see this holy priest,



this doctor, this former canon, their father, Founder, and Superior, their confessor and spiritual director, throwing himself at every moment and for the slightest motive at the feet of Brother Henri to confess his faults, accuse his least failings, and ask for a penance! What a surprise for those who witnessed all this to see a man of such surpassing merit constantly asking permissions for the least things and doing so on his knees in the attitude of a criminal and with the submission of a child!

Brother Henri L'Heureux, who witnessed actions of this sort all day long, could not get used to them. Embarrassed at seeing at his feet the man whom he honored as his father in God and revered as a saint, he felt like Saint John the Baptist when he was obliged to baptize Jesus Christ. Ashamed at having to give permissions to the one from whom he should have asked them, he remained abashed and did not know what he should say or do, so disconcerted was he. On the one hand, he feared to chagrin his good father by not letting him humble himself as he wished; on the other, he simply could not bring himself to give orders to the one who really had the right to command. More than once, he begged De La Salle to spare him the embarrassment he felt in seeing him so often at his feet asking for permissions from one who, on entering the house, had become his disciple and his dependent.

In his turn, De La Salle begged him not to deprive him of the merit of obedience which was due to him and which he was so happy to practice. The two of them became an example of humility and edification for the entire Community. The Brothers were deeply touched by seeing De La Salle so often prostrate before Brother Henri, accusing himself of his faults, asking for penances and permissions for the least things, and behaving in all respects as though he had never enjoyed any authority in the house, as though he had never left the state of dependence and inferiority. But they were also much edified when they saw Brother Henri humiliated over the humiliation of De La Salle, distraught at being his Superior, saddened over having to command him, and never forgetting who the humble suppliant really was or who he himself was.

The virtuous Brother made use of his authority only on one occasion, when De La Salle carried his love for abjection too far. He felt obliged to invoke his rights over him and to stop him from carrying out an extravagance to which his zeal for self-abasement was leading him. Here is what happened, as told by one of the earliest disciples of the pious Founder. "Among the many edifying things that De La Salle performed when he was out of office, I was the eyewitness of one

which impressed me deeply, although I was only fifteen years of age at the time. As we were beginning recreation one day, someone told the Superior that one of the toilets was very untidy and that he needed someone to help him clean it up. At once, De La Salle offered to go, and throwing himself on his knees, he asked permission to do so with the simplicity of a child. Carried away by his eagerness and without having heard correctly the respectful refusal of the Superior, he hastened to gather some straw in order to carry out a task which he longed to accomplish and in which he feared someone else might forestall him and thus rob him of the merit of abasing himself.

"In all this, the humble and obedient Founder had allowed himself to be deceived, had mistaken one word for another. Brother L'Heureux had told him *that would not be right*, but in his eagerness, he thought he heard him say *that would be all right*, and so he had hurried off in all good faith to perform an act of humility which he thought had been authorized by obedience. He had actually begun when Brother L'Heureux, hastening after him, remembered that he was the Superior and that as such he should make use of his authority to set some limits to the pious Founder's eagerness to humble himself. He caught hold of him by the soutane and pulled him away. Thus he gave him a chance to prefer obedience to humiliations, even external ones. Nor was this all. The young Superior, hoping to bridle to some extent this impetuous inclination which led De La Salle to undertake all forms of self-abasement, made bold to tell him that he had not permitted him to do anything of the sort and that he was acting against obedience. At those words, the humble priest fell on his knees in front of everybody, accused himself of temerity and willfulness, and besought Brother L'Heureux to give him a penance for it."

No matter how much the wise young Superior begged his venerated father to act toward him as a father toward his son—or at least as his equal—he never did succeed in convincing him. He never managed to persuade him to give up in the slightest degree his yearning for complete dependence. He exhibited this inclination not only inside the house and before the Brothers but outside, too, and in the presence of visitors, he made it a point of obligation. He did not blush to appear as an inferior and to ask for permissions as faithfully as any novice. He spoke to no one and received no visits without permission. Before going to the parlor, he always asked if Brother Superior's leave had been obtained, and if visitors happened to meet him when he had not been able to obtain this, he would not converse with them until an express permission, which he himself often went to ask for, unsealed his lips.

The vicars-general restore De La Salle to the primary position

It was this scrupulous and exact fidelity to the rules and to obedience that betrayed De La Salle and made his humility known. The fact that he had been replaced as Superior had been kept a secret within the Community. Nobody on the outside knew about it, and the rare contacts between the public and the Brothers made it easy to keep it confidential. The mystery might have been preserved much longer if De La Salle had not given it away himself, thanks to his simplicity and eagerness to obey. One day, several distinguished persons, friends of his, came to visit and met him unexpectedly. They attempted to strike up a conversation, but he remained silent, except to say that he could not talk to them without permission from his Superior. These persons, greatly surprised at this, were dumbfounded in their turn and looked at each other in amazement. Meanwhile, De La Salle went to ask for the needed authorization. When he came back, his friends began by expressing their astonishment and then their reproaches; they roundly condemned such behavior and blamed a humility which in their opinion gravely infringed against prudence and contradicted his priestly character and all his other qualifications. A simple Brother placed over a priest, a doctor, a former canon? The Founder, father, director, and confessor of the little Community at the feet of one of his children, one of his penitents, seemed to them a disorder that called for a remedy, a monstrosity in the area of government.

These persons could not keep to themselves what had happened, and they broadcast the news throughout the city. The unusual nature of the fact made tongues wag; everyone had some comment to make. The news spread from mouth to mouth and finally came to the ears of the ecclesiastical authorities, who approved of it no more than did anyone else. They had the right and duty to re-establish order in the bosom of the little Community by putting the Founder back in his rightful position and the members in their due rank of subordination. So they came to the house and obliged De La Salle, to his great regret, to take up again his role as Superior, and they had Brother Henri L'Heureux resume his subordinate place, much to his satisfaction. This good Brother considered this the most fortunate day of his life, but it was a sad one for the humble Founder. The one was as happy as the other was displeased over what had transpired. De La Salle lived, as though in his nature, in an atmosphere of lowliness and obedience. His heart was at peace and enjoyed the repose promised to the humble and to those who practice perfect obedience. Never had he been happier; never had time gone by so swiftly. Brother

Henri, however, on leaving the role of Superior, left behind him an unnatural condition where his father's humility had kept him in constant embarrassment. He felt abashed and confused on seeing him prostrate at his feet, and he longed for nothing more than to return to his rightful state of dependence.

The humble Superior was thus obliged to reassume the leadership of his Community, a position that in his heart of hearts he had never wanted and had given up with so much joy. But although he reassumed his rightful position, he did not for all that renounce the right to obey and to humble himself. He merely found another way to do it. At any rate, this example of the noble longing to abase himself and to renounce his own will was an extremely valuable lesson for the young Community and proved very helpful to the Brothers. They all felt filled with a like ardor and ran in the path blazed for them by their mentor toward the goal of true humility and perfect obedience.

How great was the joy of the children on seeing their father, despite his humility, once again occupying the first place! How they longed to obey him blindly, since by his example even more eloquently than by his words, he had taught them the value of obedience! With what zeal they cast themselves at his feet to beg of him in suppliant posture not to spare them and to inflict on them severe penances to expiate faults which they had learned from his own lips how to exaggerate, to confess, and to chastise unrelentingly! Brother Henri L'Heureux, in particular, could not sufficiently thank God for having dealt appropriately with De La Salle and with himself: with himself by relieving him from office and putting him back in the ranks, with De La Salle by lifting him out of the lowly condition he had wanted to assume and by obliging him to take the headship again. Everybody rejoiced in the Lord and blessed him for what he had done. They were so impressed by the examples of virtue that they had seen in their father that they could speak of nothing else. They brought these edifying topics of conversation with them everywhere they went during recreation. This was what they usually talked about; it formed the common topic of their reflections.

De La Salle suspected what was going on; he was on the lookout to get proof of it. His suspicions made him ingenious, and he found means, without being perceived, of hearing what the Brothers were saying. He had not been eavesdropping very long when he heard them talking about him. If they had been relating the unfavorable things that he thought of himself, he would have been delighted that his disciples were treating him as he thought he deserved, but they were recounting only edifying details; they praised him, and each one

added something to top what the other said. The instances of humility, obedience, and mortification they had witnessed kept coming to the fore, and each speaker drew from them conclusions from which all could profit. De La Salle suffered keenly from this sort of talk, which embarrassed him very much, for he saw that his efforts to induce the Brothers to entertain a low opinion of him had been in vain. He was most disappointed at having failed so signally, and it is hard to say how much these flattering conversations alarmed and dismayed his humility. Upset over this—as a saint would be—he found it difficult to control his humility-inspired displeasure and reproached those who thus praised him, and after exaggerating the seriousness of this so-called fault, he promised to forgive them only on condition that from then on, they would forget entirely about this episode.

He makes it a rule not to speak of any living person

Nor was this all; he wished, so to speak, to push vengeance to the extreme and sought for some means of causing his disciples to entertain scruples if they were ever tempted to speak well of him again. He felt he could not rely on them in this matter. He knew that although he tried to make their fault appear very serious, they were not too remorseful over it and would most likely fall into it again. To make sure they overcame this defect, edifying as it was and a fault which only his humility could perceive, he resolved to make it a rule for them *never to speak during recreation of any living person in particular*. We can easily imagine how disappointed his children were when they heard this prohibition. This rule seemed to be a very severe penance; in their eyes, if they had sinned, the punishment was far more grievous than the fault deserved. They had to accept it, however, and submit to it. In the long run, however, irked by having to shroud everything concerning him in silence—which in reality made it more difficult for them to progress in virtue, since nothing stimulates fervor more than eyewitness accounts of examples of heroic virtue—they begged their Superior to lighten this burden which they found intolerable. In the end, he was obliged to modify this rule, so pleasing to his humility but so galling to his disciples, and he added to the rule these words: *except to speak well of them*.

This instance of humility, I dare say, is one that will not be paralleled in the life of any other saintly person. It takes a very humble soul indeed not to be touched by praise; it takes an even humbler one to be unable to abide praise and instead to reject it with distaste, but does it not take a supremely humble person to grow angry at his

panegyrists, to treat their encomiums as crimes, to punish them for this, and to reduce them to silence as though they were enemies?

### Examples of mortification and penance

Some time after the humble Superior had once again taken up his duties, he ordered a Brother, as a penance, to eat his supper kneeling in the middle of the refectory. As the delinquent seemed reluctant to obey, De La Salle became indignant with the indignation of the saints. To repair the scandal given, he determined that he would act as though he were the guilty party and perform the penance he had assigned. So he rose from his place, went and knelt next to the Brother, took his spoon and began to eat the soup as he had prescribed that the other should do. The Brother, confused and contrite, wanted to take back the spoon from De La Salle's hand. The latter refused to let him have it. Hoping to inspire him with disgust and to get his Superior to leave him alone to finish his penance, the Brother put his hand into the bowl and began to scoop up the soup in that manner. He thought that De La Salle would not eat anymore after this, but he was mistaken. His Superior, who in the past had forced himself to perform such unusual actions to overcome his natural fastidiousness, had so perfectly succeeded in this that it no longer seemed to bother him at all.

Quite simply and without showing any sign of repugnance, he kept on eating the soup, although the Brother's gross action should have made it disgusting for him. The clumsy Brother joined imprudence to his lack of manners. Ashamed at seeing his Superior gaining merit, thanks to the new occasion he had furnished him of mortifying himself, he decided to prevent him from continuing by taking the bowl away, but the awkward movement he made only spilled the soup all over the floor. The opportunity was too precious to be wasted, thought De La Salle; he resolved to carry mortification as far as possible, so he sopped up as much of it as he could and ate it with apparent pleasure. The Brother wanted to imitate him, and so the two of them managed to clean up what had been spilled and ate it with relish. It was thus that the fervent Superior undertook to make up for the faults of his disciples. The slightest delay in obeying was considered a transgression which could not remain unpunished. To expiate such offenses, he condemned himself to bear the penalty and thus taught all those under him that true obedience is prompt and does not admit of any delay.

De La Salle's fervor constantly increased. Re-established in his position of authority, the only satisfaction he derived from it was that he

now could freely do as much penance as he liked and be accountable to no one on this score. The Brother who slept in the same room with him saw that he spent part of the night in interior prayer and then stretched himself out on a door that lay in an alcove and served as his resting place. There he took his scant measure of repose, with no mattress, pillow, sheets, or blankets.

This same Brother, who later became the Director of the house, affirms that his Superior spent all of Holy Week fasting. From Palm Sunday to Easter, he abstained from all nourishment except for a piece of bread and a little water on Holy Thursday after the ceremonies. He was not in the habit of drinking wine, and it was rarely served in the house at Reims, the city in all of France where wine is most abundant and of the best quality. He spent this entire Holy Week in prayer and contemplation in his room, which he left only to celebrate Mass. This cell was so bare and scantily furnished that he did not even have a chair to sit on. When he could no longer remain on his knees, he was obliged to sit on the side of a sorry-looking bare bed, the only piece of furniture in the room. The Brother observing his Superior's excessive abstinence from food did all he could to induce him to mitigate it but without success. Perhaps De La Salle himself regretted this on Easter Sunday, for when he arrived with the others for dinner in the refectory, his stomach could not tolerate any food and rejected whatever he tried to swallow. Thus the obstinate faster had to do penance for having fasted so rigorously. The Brother did not miss the opportunity of observing that this new indisposition was the consequence of his long fast and of respectfully reproaching him with having carried it too far.

De La Salle was not convinced; he claimed that his upset stomach was caused by the fact that the cook had made the soup in a pot not properly tinned. If such had been the case, all of the Brothers who ate the same food would have been similarly affected, but none of them experienced any difficulty. This is what the Brother took the liberty of telling his Superior, but the latter replied only with his usual smile. Whenever anyone alluded to his mortifications or his other virtues, he would smile and change the subject.

## CHAPTER VI

*De La Salle does not give up his plan to return to the lowest place and to walk again in the way of pure obedience; his virtue becomes known and earns for him a great reputation; several persons beg him to act as their spiritual director; he accepts only a few, and soon manages to send them elsewhere; he undergoes new persecutions; Divine Providence furnishes him with the opportunity of establishing a second community for country schoolmasters and a third for young postulants.*

Although De La Salle had been obliged by the vicars-general to resume his position at the head of the Brothers' Community, he occupied it with regret and continued to feel an irresistible attraction for the last place which constantly drew him to return to it, but this had been definitely vetoed by the ecclesiastical authorities. They were almost scandalized on seeing him subject to a Brother lacking in clerical status, and while they privately admired his humility, they reproached him with having carried its practice too far, and in public they appeared to condemn the lengths to which this rarest of virtues had led him.

De La Salle began to realize that their main objection was not insurmountable. With a little ingenuity, he thought he could find a way once more to resign his position as Superior without meriting the just reproach they had made for subjecting his person and his priestly character to a layman. Humility can be resourceful, and it is difficult to block up all the byways that lead to abjection and scorn. Fertile in expedients to open for itself the door to dependence and obedience, when one avenue is shut, humility finds another.

What then did De La Salle do to find a refuge where he might disappear from the sight of men after abandoning his role as Superior and where he might live in a state of eternal dependence? He could neither degrade himself nor efface the sacerdotal character he bore, but he could raise one of the Brothers to this sublime dignity, set him at his right hand, and finally place him over himself. Nobody would have any objection.

It was certainly an ingenious expedient. It answered all the objections previously made. Once one priest was ready to replace another priest in the government of the Brothers, his status as a priest



would enable him to succeed to all of the prerogatives of De La Salle, whose sacerdotal character would no longer be degraded if he were to sit at the feet of a fellow priest. Ordination, by conferring on this man the same powers that he himself possessed, would make him capable of exercising all of his predecessor's functions. De La Salle could find no more appropriate means, therefore, of making way for someone else and of doing so with full regard for the proprieties, while avoiding all the reproaches previously levelled at him, than by preparing for ordination the Brother who had been chosen as his successor. Such was the determination he reached, but this solution, so carefully thought out, involved certain difficulties.

Brother Henri L'Heureux possessed solid virtue, eminent piety, and great prudence. He was altogether a deserving person, but he had not gone very far in his studies and knew Latin only imperfectly. Since he had to learn it, De La Salle undertook to teach it to him and succeeded admirably. This Brother had a quick mind and much capacity for learning, so that less than two years later, he was ready to undertake the study of theology. He did, in fact, study it with such success that he surprised the other members of his class. Up to this point, the scheme of the humble Superior was proceeding just as he wished, but God had other plans and brought the project of his servant to nothing, just when he thought it was about to succeed. God called Brother L'Heureux from this world when De La Salle was on the point of presenting him for ordination, as we shall relate in a moment.

### The death of Brother L'Heureux changes the Founder's plans

This unexpected death occasioned serious disruption in the servant of God's plans and led him to rethink the whole matter very seriously. In his original concept for the organization of his Institute, he had thought of having a priest in each of the principal houses to act as the confessor of the Brothers and to say Mass for them. Brother Henri L'Heureux would have been the first entrusted with the ministry of priestly functions within the congregation, and the holy Superior, who in his heart of hearts had already chosen him as his own successor, was only waiting for the proper time to put him in office.

Everything seemed to favor this hope. The Brother had all the qualities of body and mind he needed. Young, hardworking, gifted with a robust constitution—one might have thought that he would live forever, if man were not a mortal being. Prudent, wise, endowed with good judgment and sufficient learning, filled with zeal and the

spirit of his state, he was entirely capable of causing the holy Founder, who loved him so much, to live again in his person. De La Salle loved and honored him and entertained the fondest hopes for him. Could he be insensible at the loss of such an excellent subject? Hardly, especially as he had not had time to prepare himself for this blow. Hence he felt it all the more keenly.

Never had the Brothers known him to be so deeply moved, so distraught, so shocked as he was on this occasion. Up to then, they had never seen him lose his equanimity. Ever the master of himself, he ruled his soul in patience. The saddest events seemed unable to penetrate the depths of his soul and were never reflected on his countenance by the slightest trace of disquiet or chagrin. But on this occasion, his emotions and his grief clearly appeared—but only for a quarter of an hour, at most. After this brief space of time, the Founder recovered his usual attitude of peace and serenity, thanks to his entire submission to God's will and to a total abandonment of his desires to those of Providence.

Furthermore, considering that the action of Providence on this occasion constituted a sign warning him not to think any longer of raising some of the Brothers to the priesthood, the Founder gave up the idea entirely. This decision, which was inspired from on high, became such a solidly anchored conviction in his mind that he made it a law for his followers, an express rule, that the path to the sanctuary would remain forever barred to them, and he definitively forbade them to aspire to Holy Orders.

As careful as De La Salle was to concentrate on his own work and not to deal with outsiders any more than he had to, he had not been able to refuse his ministrations to a number of persons who had recourse to him. Thus he added to the direction of the community of orphan girls the spiritual guidance of a number of women distinguished by their piety. From time to time, they came to visit him at the Brothers' house and gave him an account of their consciences. They were very glad to receive his wise advice, but they went back home disappointed at not having been able to obtain his blessing, even though they had humbly begged for it, throwing themselves on their knees on the threshold of his door and entreating him to grant them this favor so much in keeping with his priestly character. They never succeeded in convincing him to do so. All his life, his disciples themselves found him stubbornly unwilling to grant them this favor which he considered to be a sign of superiority. One of them, whom he was sending to Rome, threw himself at his feet as he was leaving and asked for his blessing. He begged him insistently to afford him

this final consolation, but De La Salle merely made the sign of the cross on his forehead. As long as he lived, he never wanted to do more than this. As for the ladies, he told them that he gave his blessing only from the altar.

As time went on, the fierce persecutions that hell aroused against the servant of God did not lead to a notable increase among his penitents and other devout clients. Few people were eager to put themselves under the direction of a man so ill spoken of in the world. As we know, the cycle of fashion applies to spiritual directors as to everything else. As long as a director is in vogue, he enjoys a following, but when his reputation suffers an eclipse, his followers melt away, and he loses his credit. In the long run, however, real holiness is made manifest; it shines out with new brilliance like light that dissipates the fog that shrouded it. This is what happened to the servant of God.

#### Reims finally gives De La Salle's virtue its just due

His virtue, which had met with so many critics, finally found admirers and panegyrists. Awareness of his extraordinary acts of humility finally spread, obliging his enemies and those who had accused him of ambition to admit that the only thing he sought was a state of dependence and contempt. From then on, people began to realize what an exalted level of holiness he had reached. Men of the highest distinction, among others, the Duke de Mazarin, sedulously cultivated his friendship. Every time he came to Reims, this noble lord never failed to come to visit him. A large number of people wanted him as their spiritual director. Pious persons once again began to call on him in the hope of being admitted among his penitents. This he tried to avoid as much as possible, and only after much urging did he finally accept a small number of persons to direct.

He admitted them only after subjecting them to various trials which put their self-love to the test. Among those who had seemed most eager to become one of his spiritual daughters was a certain religious who must have been inspired by God in this, since she was sadly in need of reforming her life. This Sister had a certain amount of goodwill, but she was attached to many trifles which keep the heart of a spouse of Christ closed to his divine love and cause the loss of many graces. Involved in a multitude of vain amusements and attached to little nothings which prevented her from progressing in the path of perfection that she had undertaken to pursue, she realized that she was too weak to break the chains that bound her and did not

have the courage to divest herself of these superfluities. The hand of De La Salle was what she needed to deliver her from herself and from all the silly baubles which held her heart captive. In his charity, he undertook to help her. The first thing he did was to ask her what Jesus had asked the leper: *Do you wish to be cured?* Do you really want me to be your director? Do you choose me for your guide and your visible guardian angel? Will you, through the eyes of faith, look upon me as Jesus Christ himself? Are you ready to obey me as you would him?

The nun naturally protested that she would indeed do so. Then he told her that the first act of obedience he required of her, the condition on which he agreed to guide her, was for her to bring him all the useless little objects she had accumulated in her room. It was a painful demand. This religious had quantities of knickknacks and various curious and dainty things which she loved, and the sacrifice must have been a bitter one. Nevertheless, she obeyed, and after removing from her cell all that was superfluous, she set fire to the lot by the orders and under the eyes of her new director.

It was under such conditions that the servant of God agreed to become a director of souls. He made them purchase this favor by stern sacrifices that were keenly felt. He did not try to amuse people by lengthy discourses but made them get down right away to practical consequences. He made them learn by experience that true devotion only needs direction to find its way to Jesus Christ more surely and promptly by means of obedience and sacrifice.

Although he undertook the direction of just a small number of choice souls, among whom was his own sister, De La Salle still thought he had too many. He therefore sought to rid himself of this burden and soon succeeded in doing so. As we know, the spiritual direction of pious women takes a great deal of time, and no matter what precautions a priest may employ to avoid wasting time, they still manage to consume a lot of it. Women are marvelously adept at saying little in many words, and when we are willing to listen to them, they always find a great deal to say. As a rule, they are not happy with a director unless he lets them talk their fill and unless he does the same. Few of them are looking for good advice in a few words. It rarely happens that a man who is sparing of his time and very busy is much sought after by pious women, who, having much free time, are very clever at keeping their confessor occupied for long periods and are more curious to learn new things about virtue than eager to practice what they already know.

De La Salle's days were too short as it was, and he had to economize his time in order to devote all his spare moments to interior

prayer and to the duties of his position. Consequently, he was not too pleased by visits which, under the pretext of spiritual direction, robbed him of part of his precious leisure. Convinced that as a rule, there was little to be gained and much time to be lost in directing pious women and having learned from experience that he spent more time counseling one of them than several Brothers, he concluded that he should leave this ministry to people who feel some inclination to it, who have more time to devote to it, and who have nothing better to do.

Another drawback to being a spiritual guide for women and one that turned De La Salle away from it was that they came to the Brothers' house. While they did not go any farther than the parlor, they still appeared in a place where he preferred not to see them. He wished to teach his disciples to keep their distance from women and felt that this could not be carried too far. He was afraid to familiarize them with women by letting them come to the house. It is true that the ones who came were most edifying and showed by their solid virtue how effective the servant of God's direction was. But he knew that the fair sex is dangerous, both by its vices and by its virtues, that even modesty and piety can be a snare for devout eyes, and that for sincerely virtuous men, a saintly woman is almost as much to be avoided as an immoral one, since she inspires more esteem and thus gives rise to a sense of security which exposes one to be taken by surprise and tempted.

The best means that the wise Superior found to preserve his disciples from this danger was to make it impossible for them to encounter or even to see these persons. By declining to accept the charitable ministry which led them to seek his house, he did not cause them any major inconvenience. If those who lost him as their director could not have found a better one among a thousand, at least they did have the consolation of finding many others always eager to receive them and to take up where De La Salle had left off. He did not, however, brusquely dismiss these followers. If all the sheep had begun to complain of their shepherd at once, they would have created too great an outcry and might have moved him to compassion. But he let them go one at a time, at appropriate moments, and on different occasions. Thus their complaints were too muted to be widely heard.

Moreover, new persecutions—which it seems should be dated back to this period—hastened the dropping of some and the desertion of others. Such is the world, which never leaves the saints in peace for long. Irreconcilable enemy of virtue that it is, it always finds some new quarrel to pick with those who practice perfection, and if

sometimes it appears to have signed a peace treaty with them, it soon violates the pact and recommences hostilities.

New persecution because of disciplinary practices in the schools

What lay behind the new campaign against the holy Founder and his disciples seems to have been the disciplining of some of the students. There is perhaps no place on earth where youngsters were meaner, more stubborn, and more good-for-nothing than Reims at this particular time. They were born with no redeeming traits and were sheltered by the ill temper of their parents. Raised in the paternal home, they saw nothing but bad example, heard only language capable of instilling poison into their hearts, and were abandoned to ignorance and the vicious inclinations of their nature. They had recourse to the protection of their parents' anger against the deserved corrections inflicted on them by the Brothers, and they were clever enough to profit by this.

These little idols, adored by their fathers and mothers, were sure that at their first cry they would find refuge in the hearts of their parents. They thought that they should be honored at school as at home and that people should be pleased with watching them talk, laugh, fool around, make monkeyshines, and play tricks in church before the altar. Even during the celebration of the holy sacrifice of the Mass, they acted as if they had the right to flaunt their lack of piety. All the decent citizens of Reims bewailed this situation but did not dare to complain in front of the parents, for fear of arousing this uncouth rabble which returns a torrent of abuse for the least word of reproach.

The evil was serious and was getting worse. It even seemed impossible to remedy it, since those who should have corrected it were the very ones who permitted it through a blind love for their children. Since they did nothing, it was up to the Brothers to try. Responsible for educating these hardheaded young rascals, the Brothers had to attempt by punishment to curb their evil conduct and their lack of piety. This was what was expected of their zeal, and right-thinking people made them understand that it was their duty. But when they tried to fulfill it, how the little scamps howled! How they aroused the anger of their parents! The devil got into the act, since it was he who had the most to lose through the success of the Gratuitous Schools.

Above all else, this enemy of all that is good hated these new establishments, for he could already foresee all the good they would produce, and he feared their progress. The Christian education that the children received in the new schools struck at the roots of the evil

and corrected the defects stemming from poor upbringing. It made them realize that their souls were immortal, that life is short, that the moment of death is uncertain. The fear of God entered these young hearts by slow degrees and bridled their passions which, even though hardly awakened, were already straining at the leash. By learning how to serve God, to render to him morning and evening the duties that religion inspires, to attend services in church respectfully, to hear Mass with piety, and to prepare for the sacraments, they seemed to be full-fledged Christians when they were barely beyond their childhood years, and they gave their parents and teachers reason to hope that the seeds sown in their hearts through the instructions they had received would spring up in due time and produce much fruit. These excellent results were already appearing, and that was why the devil was so eager to sow cockle amidst the wheat and to choke the good grain under an invasion of weeds.

Satan believed that the incorrigible students would be of help to him in his scheme. These boys, refractory to any sort of discipline, revolted against flogging and other forms of chastisement. It was impossible to apply any type of punishment to them without causing a huge uproar. At first, the Brothers made use of all the means of correction which usually prove effective on characters that are not totally depraved. Charitable warnings, kindness mingled with severity, had been resorted to in vain. Then came threats, but the boys only laughed at these. Mild measures having had no great effect, in order to prevent an outbreak of disorder in the schools and chaos among the students, it became necessary to turn to more vigorous means, to appeal to authority and to menaces, and, finally, to make use of corporal punishment, following the advice of the Wise Man, who warns those in charge of educating children that they must not hesitate to correct them, for if they are chastised with rods, they will not die from it; on the contrary, their souls can be delivered from hell by this means.

Physical correction, which followed the threats that had been so often made in vain, proved effective with those whose character was not completely untamable. But these boys had always done just as they pleased; from the cradle onward, they had been their own masters and lived as their desires suggested under the eyes of parents too uncaring and indifferent to try to restrain them. Instead of profiting by this correction, they became embittered, and all of them together stirred up in their families a movement of revolt which eventually turned into a public and general condemnation of the Brothers.

To bring this about, these young rebels exaggerated the punishments inflicted on them at school. But this was enough for parents

who were beyond appeals to either faith or reason. Their fury knew no bounds. Instead of approving and backing up by their own authority the wise corrections given in the schools, instead of obliging these graceless scamps to beg pardon of their teachers and to make amends for the scandal they had given, they encouraged the mutiny. They decried the Brothers as sadists and hurled all sorts of vile imprecations at them. They took up stones to throw at them and pursued them through the streets. They incited children to run behind the Brothers and spatter them with mud, to gather together and hoot at them, and thus take vengeance by all sorts of outrages for the wise correction given them.

The Brothers were already used to such scenes of public abuse and merely gave new proofs of their humility, mildness, and patience, following the example of their Divine Master. They did not open their lips, save to bless those who screamed out insults against them and assailed them with curses. No threatening or impatient words escaped them addressed to those who maltreated them, and they willingly did penance for these wicked children who needed it so badly.

De La Salle, of course, received the lion's share of this ill-treatment. As the originator of these Gratuitous Schools, he was blamed for everything that had happened in them. He should have kept better watch over them and thus forestalled the imprudent acts which gave rise to these complaints. It was up to him to mitigate the penances imposed and to teach the Brothers the secret of keeping to the golden mean which makes correction effective. In a word, De La Salle was the one really to blame, and he alone should bear the consequences of the disorder that was taking place. What did he think of all this himself? He thought what the others thought. Condemned by the public, he condemned himself to drink the chalice of confusion presented to him wherever he appeared, even in his house in the person of his disciples. God allowed this harassment because it merited the great blessings which the Christian Schools were to bring about in Reims. As long as De La Salle remained in Reims, he had to contend with opposition and was exposed to ill-treatment day after day, until 1688, when he went to Paris to try to open a school there.

Once he left for Paris, things changed completely in Reims. The city calmed down and modified its attitude toward the Brothers. It would seem that at this point all the devils who had fomented the difficulties and troubles left Reims with him and followed him to Paris, to carry on there what they had begun in the capital of Champagne. De La Salle, if I may use the language of the Apostle, had received the privilege not only of believing in Jesus Christ and of making him



known but also of suffering for him everywhere. It was his role to prepare the way for the success of the Christian Schools by practicing limitless patience and perfect humility. The schools in Reims, the first objects of his charity and the first theater of his crosses and humiliations, were also the first to be abundantly blessed by heaven, for after his departure, the seed he had sown with so many tears sprang up into a rich harvest, and the Brothers whom he left behind him were able to reap a hundredfold. The boys of the city, brought up by such good masters, seemed transformed. They came to school regularly, were attentive to the instructions of the Brothers, and were docile to their reprimands. They showed themselves open to piety and inclined to virtue. This transformation was slow in coming, of course, but it was profound and lasting. It still endures, and there is every reason to hope it will be permanent.

#### He undertakes a long trip to visit a sick Brother

During this period of continual opposition, which at almost every moment provided the servant of God with opportunities for practicing patience, humility, and mortification, Divine Providence afforded him an occasion for displaying these virtues through a remarkable act of charity. In 1687, the first of the Brothers who taught in the school at Guise fell desperately ill and received the last sacraments. The physicians despaired of the Brother's life and gave him up for lost. The Brother was waiting only for the moment to give his soul back to its Maker in peace. Before embarking on this journey to eternity, the dying man expressed a vehement desire to see his good father. This longing experienced by the sick Brother was a pious and legitimate one, but it was not easy to satisfy, as Guise lies eighteen leagues from Reims, and such a trip required time.

To try to satisfy the patient's wishes, it was decided to send someone to Laon, which is about halfway between Guise and Reims, with a letter addressed to the Brothers telling them about the situation and asking them to send someone to the Superior to let him know of the sick Brother's desire. The first messenger reached Laon about four in the afternoon. Brother N., who is still living and who composed one of the memoranda used in writing this history, immediately left Laon for Reims, reaching there the next day around noon. With equal concern, De La Salle set out in the company of the same Brother at one o'clock.

In spite of the extreme midsummer heat, De La Salle wore his heavy capote, which he used all the time he remained in Reims and

only gave up in Paris on the orders of his ecclesiastical superiors. He also had on a soutane made of the same heavy, coarse material, which he never took off and which he merely lifted up halfway to his knees with his shabby woolen cincture when he went on foot. He also wore a hairshirt, as he usually did, which pained him so much that he could hardly bend over, as someone observed, when he dropped his handkerchief and had to stoop to pick it up. In spite of all this penitential accoutrement, he covered seven leagues under a broiling sun. He might have rid himself of the heavy burden of his capote, at least, by letting his young companion carry it, but he was not the kind of man who sought to make things easier for himself, still less to do so at the expense of someone else.

During this painful journey, his blood pressure rose so much that he bled profusely from the nose, but the only relief he sought was in prayer. During the whole trip, he did nothing but sigh and raise his eyes to heaven. That was where his heart's desires lay and where he promised his overburdened body to let it rest from its sufferings and fatigue. When oncoming night made it necessary for them to halt at a village, he said the rosary aloud with the young Brother who accompanied him. After taking some rest in a very rustic inn, he left at three the next morning.

He did not reach Laon quickly, even though it was only three leagues farther down the road; he took a long time to recite his breviary and to practice other devotions as they walked. From time to time, he would stop and kneel before a tree to pour out his soul before God and enter into a deeper union with him. Perhaps, too, the fatigue and exhaustion he felt after the efforts of the previous day made it impossible for him to go on. The first thing he did on arriving was to hasten to celebrate Mass. The Brothers at Laon, unknown to him, got a horse ready for him while he was celebrating. On horseback, he did not take too long to reach Guise. The sick Brother was dying, but on seeing his good father, who embraced him tenderly, he seemed to revive. He even exclaimed that he was cured, and in fact, a few days later, he was out of danger, completely recovered and ready to go back to his class.

At this time, De La Salle was about thirty-six years old. He seemed to think that his youth and vigor gave him the right to load his body with all the austerities it could possibly bear, so his fervor knew no limits. The amazing thing is that he did not succumb or shorten his life by the practice of penance beyond all measure.

### Country pastors ask for Brothers; reasons for the refusal

It was about this time also that Divine Providence opened up for De La Salle a vast field for the exercise of his zeal without leading him away from the purpose of his Institute. The Founder's reputation for holiness and that of his disciples extended far and wide. The good accomplished in the Christian Schools became known in towns and villages throughout the area around Reims and aroused the zeal of the parish priests. Many of them eagerly sought to have some Brothers to take charge of the Christian education and instruction of young boys, so often left to themselves, a prey to ignorance.

These zealous pastors were looking for a remedy to an evil which the servant of God, too, had been concerned about for a long time. He desired even more than they did to cure a malady which was becoming fatal for the majority of the rural poor, but the more he thought over the problem, the less could he discern a means of solving it. No doubt the Founder's disciples could do as much good in the villages as they did in the towns and cities. They might even have found it easier, since they would have met with more docility among the children and less opposition from their parents. But where could one find in a small village the resources needed to defray the living expenses of two Brothers? The most sincerely disposed parish priest, even with the help of his parishioners, would not as a rule have been able to provide such funds.

Moreover, if a second Brother might have been necessary in the larger parishes, he would have been superfluous in the smaller ones. Consequently, if De La Salle had agreed to furnish teachers for the villages, he would have had to consent to send only one Brother, a thing that the pious Founder could not bring himself to do. He saw too many drawbacks in such a measure. It seemed clear to him that the danger of perversion or at least of relaxation would inevitably threaten these isolated Brothers, left to themselves with no companions, no good example, and practically no moral support in these little villages. This was why De La Salle made it a rule never to send a Brother alone to any school. Never did he consent to break this resolution. In spite of his great desire to cooperate with these country parish priests, he could not, however, accede to their requests. To all he replied that he had made it an inviolable rule never to assign a Brother alone to any such mission.

Zeal is ingenious and always tries to find a way. Difficulties only make it more resourceful, and by trying various expedients, it finally hits on one that succeeds. When these virtuous parish priests realized

that they could not obtain any of De La Salle's disciples, they did not give up hope of getting some of his students, at least, or teachers trained by him. To succeed in this, all they needed to do was to choose among the young men in their villages those who seemed the most well behaved, the most pious, and the most gifted for studies and send them to the new academy of the Brothers, where they would be taught and trained. This the pastors did. Each priest selected from among the young men in his flock the one whom grace seemed to have pointed out by endowing him with the qualities needed to become a leader for the rest. They sent these young men to the holy Founder to be brought up under his guidance. Soon the house was filled with them, for the zealous Superior, delighted at the thought that these candidates could do the work of the Brothers in their respective villages and bring with them not only instruction but the seeds of virtue and piety as well, received them all with open arms and established for them a sort of seminary, separate from the Brothers' community.

#### De La Salle opens a center to train country schoolteachers

There were about thirty young men in this new community. They had their own special schedule and their own particular exercises. They were taught reading, writing, Gregorian chant, and everything else pertinent to the profession they wished to exercise. Definite times were assigned to interior prayer, vocal prayer, spiritual reading, and all the other practices of Christian piety. A carefully selected Brother had charge of this new section and directed it under the eyes and following the advice of De La Salle. This extra work also entailed added expense which had to be met by the servant of God. For when the parish priests sent him these young aspiring teachers to train, they did not undertake to pay him anything for his efforts. They expected him to do everything out of pure charity and to provide for the material wants of those who were sent to him for spiritual formation. Their expectations were not disappointed. He who feeds the birds of the air and nourishes with so much goodness the ravens and their brood which cry out to him extended his providential care over a man who had abandoned himself entirely to him and did not permit those whom he had directed to him to lack anything.

De La Salle did not labor in vain in cultivating this new field that God had given him. When sowing the seeds of piety in these hearts, he did not sow in infertile ground. His pains and his charity were rewarded when he beheld the Lord's blessings follow these young

teachers on their return to their villages. There they did an immense amount of good and spread the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ by their example, piety, zeal, and determination to fulfill in most exemplary fashion the duties of their profession. At the same time, they spread the reputation of the new Institute, and by the witness of their upright lives, they indicated what sort of house it was where a group of young peasants had so quickly learned new ways and taken on a new spirit, emerging therefrom as fervent Christians all on fire to go home and teach Christian doctrine to children.

Differing from the Brothers exteriorly—especially in their dress, since all of them wore secular clothes and were not distinguished from other laymen except by their special collar and their shorter hair—they resembled them interiorly by their modesty and recollection. Several of them indeed did not wish to leave a house where they had found the Spirit of God and enjoyed the happiness of serving him. They begged the pious Founder to admit them into the Brothers' Community, and this he granted them. In this way, De La Salle gathered the first fruits of the seeds he had sown. The other trainees, who went back to those who had sent them, never forgot either the house where they had for the first time received the spirit of grace or him who had welcomed them with so much kindness. They considered De La Salle a father and always preserved filial sentiments toward him.

This creation, as necessary as it was desirable, did not continue as prosperously as its beginning might have augured. Once he who was its support was no longer present, it soon fell into ruin. De La Salle had hardly left Reims for Paris when this seminary folded up. The servant of God, who understood its usefulness better than anyone else, several times attempted to re-establish it. Toward 1700, it seemed that he was going to succeed in founding a similar one in the parish of Saint Hippolyte in Paris, but after an auspicious beginning, it, too, was ruined, thanks to the ambition and cupidity of the Brother placed in charge of it.

This initiative, which the servant of God was so anxious to launch, may yet see fulfillment. Full of their father's spirit, De La Salle's children inherited his zeal with regard to this good work, and they hope to revive it some day at their important establishment at Saint Yon, near Rouen.

### A center for young postulants wishing to become Brothers

A third community, different than the other two, was also created in De La Salle's house about this time. It was made up of a number of boys, fourteen or fifteen years old, whom the Spirit of God had inspired with the desire of joining the new Institute. The only obstacle preventing their acceptance was their youth. The wise Superior had, on the one hand, his doubts about them on this score and feared lest such youthful recruits might bring a childish, schoolboy spirit into his Community. On the other hand, these youngsters showed much goodwill and a firmness of resolution beyond their years. They were absolutely determined to be the children of the one whom they had chosen as their father. Without allowing his refusal to dampen their enthusiasm, they kept knocking at the door until it was finally opened to them. Their constancy impressed the man of God favorably and led him to hope that they would remain steadfast in a state of life which they had sought to embrace with such perseverance.

The Founder's wisdom suggested that he put them to a test. He made of them a special group and assigned to them religious exercises, proper to their age, which might nourish their vocation, prepare them for fulfilling the mission of the Brothers, and help them grow in piety and in virtue. Since their age did not allow them to bear the full burden of the common rule, he gave them an easier one, better adapted to their capacity, which helped them cultivate true devotion and the spirit of prayer without inducing distaste and boredom through too lengthy, too serious, and too demanding a program of spiritual exercises. These tender plants needed to be treated with care, discretion, and caution, so as to mature intellectually, cultivate judgment, and prepare to advance to the Community of Brothers.

It was with these conditions and precautions that the prudent Superior admitted these boys. He assigned them to a wing of the building separate from the quarters of the country schoolmasters and of the Brothers. The kitchen communicated with the three separate dining rooms. This young community depended for its subsistence on the same source as did the other two: Divine Providence and De La Salle's charity were their only resources. He had to find in the treasure house of his heavenly Father the means of supporting them, not that this caused him any concern. The One for whose love he had sacrificed everything was more than able to provide for all these needs and to furnish what was necessary for all those God sent to him.

De La Salle did not change anything in the dress of these young men. Each one wore what he had brought with him. The only thing

common to all of them which distinguished them from outsiders was the collar they wore and their short hair. Their lifestyle was quite different than that of the country schoolmasters and constituted a sort of introduction to and imitation of that of the Brothers. At the appointed hour, they learned reading, writing, and arithmetic. The rest of the time they spent in exercises of piety appropriate for their age. Every day they recited the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin and said the rosary. They made an examen twice a day and also devoted themselves to spiritual reading and interior prayer under the guidance of one of the most pious and capable Brothers. As a rule, they went to Communion every week. In short, their lives were organized more or less like those of the novices today. The wise Superior chose those who, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, seemed to have the best dispositions and brought them over to the Brothers' section, gave them the habit, and sent them to teach.

This sort of junior seminary for these lads, which took the place of a training center and novitiate for the Institute, was a place which the servant of God delighted in visiting. When time permitted, he enjoyed assisting at their exercises of piety and addressing exhortations to them. On Christmas Day, he joined them in consecrating himself to the Child Jesus and showed them how to do the same. The first time he did this, his devotion appeared so manifest and especially lively that all of these youths were deeply impressed. To insure that this pious ceremony would speak to their hearts and inspire their devotion, De La Salle caused a figure of the Divine Infant to be placed in their oratory. Each one knelt in turn to make his act of consecration before it. The pious Founder began, and prostrate at the feet of the sacred image, he read his consecration aloud with as much faith, reverence, and devotion as he would have shown if he had seen the Divine Infant with his own eyes.

Imitating him, everyone came in turn to recite the consecration with a fervor which was the counterpart of that of De La Salle. Nothing was more edifying than to see these boys, at an age when they are at their liveliest and most exuberant, betray their youth only by their fresh countenances without allowing it to appear at all in their behavior. So recollected and modest did they appear in their house that they might have been mistaken for religious, already mature in virtue, moving about within their cloister. Outside of the house, anyone who happened to meet them might have thought that they were hermits of old, who seemed to make no use of their senses when they left their caves. In fact, they had eyes without seeing and ears without hearing, and they behaved in the midst of the world like

strangers who pass through a place without caring to look at anyone. I myself saw this in Paris when they used to serve Mass at the church of Saint Sulpice.

This little community survived for about two years in Reims after De La Salle departed for Paris. Once established in the capital, he thought it best to bring them there to have them under his supervision, and he gave the Brothers' habit to a few of those who belonged to the group at that time. At the request of Monsieur Baudran, pastor of Saint Sulpice, several others were assigned to serve Mass at the parish church. They spent the entire morning in this holiest of functions. They arrived at the sacristy in the morning and left only at noon to return to the Brothers' house, where they slept and had their meals. In this situation where they were so much exposed to distractions, people could see them kneeling in profound silence and seemingly absorbed in prayer. One after the other they would go, clad in their violet cassocks, to serve the priests at the altar, and when they returned with them to the sacristy, they once more took their places kneeling and continued their prayer, which seemed to last all morning. Nothing was more edifying, and those who beheld them were filled with admiration.

It was in this occupation, however, that they found their downfall. These boys were withdrawn from their normal environment when they were taken out of the house, and although the service required of them was indeed a noble one, it was not part of their vocation. Thus it came about that in an environment which involved certain dangers and where not all of those whom they served at the altar were always models of piety, they gradually fell away from virtue.

De La Salle understood full well the perils which threatened these young men and the temptations to which they were exposed, but he was not in a position to decide. Those on whom he depended or on whom he chose to depend—whom he absolutely needed at this time—made it an obligation for him to let the program continue. This frustrating situation lasted for some time, but he was finally able to bring it to an end. After withdrawing from parish service the boys who served Mass, he sent home those whose fervor had faded away or who were not considered apt for his Institute, and he admitted to the Institute the others who had preserved the spirit and grace of their calling.

Thus, before leaving for Paris, whither we shall soon follow him, De La Salle found himself during the last years he remained in Reims at the head of three different communities, all of which tended to the same end but by different means.



## CHAPTER VII

*De La Salle learns of the death of Nyel and has prayers offered for him; he leaves Reims for Paris; the cross follows him there and becomes the foundation for his new establishment.*

Nyel, who had played a part in the founding of the new Institute in Reims, whither Madame Maillefer had sent him, had gone back to Rouen, as we mentioned, after abandoning all the establishments he had created. By this desertion, he had obliged De La Salle to take charge of them all. Nyel rejoiced at having been the first worker whom Divine Providence had used to lay the foundations of the edifice of the Christian Schools which De La Salle had proceeded to build up so courageously, and he could say with the saintly old man Simeon, *Lord, let your servant depart in peace*. There is no more for me to do in this land of exile, since my eyes have seen the one whom you have chosen to accomplish your designs for the foundation of the Gratuitous Schools, which were always the objects of my zeal. Now I seek nothing other than to close my eyes in death. Nyel did, in fact, pass away where he had wanted to retire, in Rouen on 31 May 1687.

De La Salle seemed deeply touched on learning the news, and on various occasions he expressed his sense of loss over this demise. Without delay, he asked for prayers, both public and private, for the eternal repose of the deceased. In addition, to honor his memory, he had the chapel of the Sisters of the Child Jesus draped in black, and he himself sang a solemn Requiem Mass, attended by all his disciples, together with their students, brought thither with much order and modesty.

In this way, Divine Providence took care to honor the memory of a virtuous layman, fired with zeal for imparting Christian doctrine, who had spent his life and taken infinite pains to teach it with perfect disinterestedness for the benefit of the poorest and most neglected children. It seems that God in his goodness, by choosing Nyel to be the first promoter of the Brothers' Institute, wanted to have his name gratefully remembered and to make clear how agreeable the labor of this good Christian man was to him and how useful to the Church. Nyel is rightly mentioned in this history. We have seen how he brought about the founding of the Institute. For this reason, the Brothers are under obligation to him and should revere his name and his memory.

De La Salle certainly did so. He owed Nyel this in justice, for I dare say that nobody in the world ever rendered him a more valuable service. Was he not the man whom God made use of to open to De La Salle the path leading to the highest sanctity? If this simple layman had not begun founding Christian and Gratuitous Schools, if he had not set the pious canon on the road to being concerned about them and getting them established, De La Salle most likely would never have made those extraordinary sacrifices related above. The pious canon would have remained what he was. He would have answered God's call and fulfilled the duties of his vocation; he would have continued living like a saint, even as he had begun. But there are many degrees in sanctity, and he probably would not have attained the one he finally did achieve.

#### De La Salle grieves at the death of Père Barré

The death of Nyel affords us an opportunity of also mentioning the death of Père Barré, which had occurred a year earlier, on 13 May 1686. The loss of this great religious was keenly felt by De La Salle. The two of them were moved by the same attraction and felt the same aspirations. Christian instruction and education for the young, abandoned to their unfortunate lot, was the goal pursued by the zeal of these two saintly men. Eager to establish Christian and Gratuitous Schools for poor boys and girls—the only remedy for their deep ignorance and their faulty upbringing—Barré and Nyel undertook projects which could succeed only through the death of their self-love. This common aim brought them together, but they differed in their respective manner of achieving it. Père Barré had received a special grace for founding schools for girls; he did not have it for schools for boys. That was reserved for De La Salle; such was his special charism.

The zeal of the pious Minim had, in fact, addressed itself to both aspects of the problem. More than once, he tried to establish schools for boys, but he never succeeded, because this gift had not been given to him. When he saw that it had been granted to De La Salle, far from experiencing any jealousy, he felt extremely happy. He rejoiced exceedingly when he beheld with his own eyes the man chosen by God to carry out an enterprise which he himself had so much at heart. All Père Barré longed for was to see the servant of God in Paris, laboring for the benefit of that great city and of the entire kingdom. In order to draw him there, he had invoked all of the authority he could exercise over his thinking. De La Salle, who considered the holy religious as a mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit and a man inspired by God

in everything that had to do with Christian education, would have conformed himself with his desires, heeded his call, and left for Paris at once if his spiritual director had not made him stay in Reims. If the saintly Minim did not experience the joy of seeing De La Salle at work in Paris during his own lifetime, he had it from heaven two years after he passed away. De La Salle's foundation was the object of his zeal until his last breath, and he joyfully saw the end of his life approaching when he learned of the rapid progress the work was making.

After all, if before men the saintly Minim cannot claim the glory for this foundation, he certainly deserves the merit for it before God. It was he who first conceived the idea of such schools, drew up plans for them, and actually started founding them. Nor is this all. Barré encouraged De La Salle to begin his Institute, guided him in the undertaking, supported him amid the difficulties and opposition which he at first encountered, and gave him the heroic advice to rid himself of his canonry and family wealth and distribute everything to the poor. Thus De Salle founded his Institute on nothing but Gospel poverty and the abandonment of himself and his followers to Divine Providence. In short, it was Barré who implanted in the holy Founder's soul the seeds of that sublime perfection that we admire. In God's sight, the holy Minim is the first creator of Christian Schools for the two sexes. He himself labored at establishing one kind and succeeded admirably. He inspired the other, guided the hand that laid its foundations, traced the plan, and contributed by his advice to the success of the enterprise. Finally, we can say that Barré left to De La Salle, as to his heir, the heritage of his spirit and of his charism.

Barré and De La Salle were two souls that Divine Providence drew together to work for the accomplishment of its designs. It led each of them by a different route to the same end; it brought them to the same goal by two different paths. Both died in the odor of sanctity, the one in Paris and the other in Rouen. The first of the two was a man remarkable for his works and his words, a great imitator of his holy Founder, Saint Francis de Paolo. Like him, he left his mark on various localities in France through the influence of his charity, zeal, humility, penance, and heavenly wisdom. The time has now come for us to observe the second of these two men begin a new phase of his career, in Paris, a phase sown with thorns and brambles, a true Way of the Cross.

Obedience alone had kept the holy Founder in Reims. His director insisted that his presence was needed there while the work was just beginning; hence his director opposed his departure, as we have seen. Nevertheless, his heart was in Paris, where Père Barré ardently

longed to see him establish his Community. The good of the Institute itself required this. Only its presence in the capital could make it known and help it spread throughout the kingdom. The city of Reims, where it had seen the light of day, would have become its tomb if it had not moved out. There the Institute could not have lived under its own laws, for it would have been subject to those that successive ecclesiastical superiors might have wanted to impose on it. Its constitution would have changed as often as these prelates replaced one another, and thus it would never have reached the stage of a fixed and definitive establishment.

Much less could it have dreamed of becoming a congregation, of asking Rome for recognition as a religious family by the approval of its rules and for authorization to make the three vows of religion. The head of the Institute, dependent on local ecclesiastical superiors who might not always have agreed with him, would have been subject to their caprices. He might have seen the subordination of his inferiors altered and his own authority weakened. His faith itself, along with that of the entire Community, might have suffered according to the mentalities of the different prelates and the diversity of their sentiments.<sup>5</sup>

Even if all these drawbacks had not been likely, the city of Reims, which had been the cradle of the Institute, could not have served as its proper environment when it began to grow. Only in the capital could it discover the contacts, protection, and assistance it needed. De La Salle was convinced of all this, but he waited for the hour marked out by Providence, whose humble servant he was. Not wishing to advance or to retard the appointed time, he remained tranquil, ready to leave at the first sign God gave him. With this in view, he had made all the necessary arrangements in the house so that everything would proceed as usual in his absence, without any disturbance.

This projected move, which De La Salle did not try to keep secret, eventually came to the ears of his archbishop, who by this time realized what a treasure he possessed and began to fear lest he might lose it. He had always loved this priest who had shown himself so submissive to his orders in all things and had sought approval for all his undertakings. True, he did not fully subscribe to the principles which inspired the heroic sacrifices De La Salle had made, and he considered as verging on folly the sublime wisdom of a man who gave up all his possessions, titles, and the amenities of life to make himself a victim of poverty and of the misery resulting from it. Still,

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5. A veiled reference to bishops who were partial to Jansenism.

having given his consent to all this, he really could not criticize what he had permitted.

Archbishop Le Tellier, born to a fortune which provided him with immense revenues more like those of a king than of a private individual, never had a chance to learn by experience how to rely on the resources of Divine Providence, nor had he tasted the joy that an austere life affords. If he showed some initial irritation toward a man who was calling the priesthood back to its primitive poverty and giving the world examples of humility, detachment, and such other virtues—to find a parallel for which we must go back to the remotest centuries—he had time to change his mind and to realize that this priest, shorn of all his wealth, had been right to place his confidence in God and to rely on the treasury of Providence. To take care of the needs of his three communities, God furnished him greater resources than he could ever have found in his canonry, his personal fortune, and his family.

### The offer of Archbishop Le Tellier and its refusal

This prelate, who knew the art of governing and was an excellent judge of men's merits, rated De La Salle according to his work. Le Tellier could see the Community that the servant of God had gathered around him. He admired the progress it was making, and he hoped to use it for the benefit of his diocese. To do this, he sought to restrict the zeal of the Founder to the limits of the diocese and to keep him there himself. With this in mind, he felt that the surest way to attach him to the diocese of Reims was to appeal to the best interests of his Institute and to open to him the archiepiscopal purse to endow the Institute, expand it, and propagate it to every corner of the diocese, under the express condition that it would not go elsewhere.

If the offer was generous, the refusal was even more so, for the glory of God and the benefit of the Church would have suffered as a consequence of the archbishop's great liberality. The offer, however, was unable to touch a heart indifferent to everything that was not of God. Still, De La Salle needed arguments to motivate a refusal of this kind, some solid principle with which to back it up. Archbishop Le Tellier was a man who possessed good judgment. He was not an enemy of the greater good, nor was he so blindly attached to the interest of his particular diocese as to want to procure it at the expense of the general good. He seemed satisfied when De La Salle explained to him the true motives of his refusal and reminded the prelate of the obligation he felt to keep the promise made to De La Barmondière to establish a school in the parish of Saint Sulpice.

There was, moreover, another reason for the move, which De La Salle hinted at but did not mention: he was anxious to leave the city of his birth, where his family lived. A place which was beginning to change its attitude toward him—and where he no longer met with contempt—no longer attracted him. He even feared that if he stayed he might begin to be treated with honor and might end up with a reputation for holiness. Finally, under the eyes of his relatives, friends, and fellow citizens, he did not feel fully at liberty to give his zeal and his other virtues as much scope as he desired.

### De La Salle and his Brothers again invited to Paris

While the Spirit of God suggested all these thoughts to him, it was also preparing the way for him to move to Paris. Monsieur de La Barmondière, recalling what De La Salle had told him, again longed to see the promise fulfilled. Monsieur Compagnon, who had charge of the Saint Sulpice schools, desired it even more ardently. He had taken over this position from Monsieur Lespagnol, who had resigned when—with no help other than a young boy to manage a school with over two hundred pupils—he felt crushed by the burden. Desperate for help, he wrote to De La Salle in July 1687 and asked him to send him a Brother. The wise Superior was in a quandary over the reply he should make, for on the one hand, he had always made it a rule never to send a Brother alone on a mission. So important did he consider this principle that to be faithful to it, he had turned down several proposals to open schools in Champagne, as we have seen. On the other hand, the good of his Institute summoned him to Paris, and this call might open to him the gates of the capital.

Hesitant as to what he should do, he sent an inconclusive reply which betrayed his indecision. Compagnon, dissatisfied with this, left for Reims to talk with De La Salle in person and to urge him to send someone. Unfortunately for him, his journey proved useless, because the Founder was absent when Compagnon got to Reims, and he did not have time to await De La Salle's return. Divine Providence had arranged things in this way in order to bring about a firmer agreement, because it was with the parish priest himself, not with the man in charge of the Saint Sulpice parish schools, that the prudent Superior wished to arrange matters.

When De La Salle came back to Reims, he heard of Compagnon's visit and of its purpose. He did not wish to draw any conclusions of his own. His humility, which constantly led him to mistrust his own judgment and insights, obliged him to submit the matter to a tribunal

other than his own for judgment. There the difficulty was examined and the conclusion was reached to keep to the inviolable rule not to send any Brother out on a mission all by himself and to refuse even the most tempting offers unless two Brothers could be assigned to the project. Consequently, the pious Founder wrote to the head of the Saint Sulpice schools, saying that he would be satisfied if the parish priest consented to receive two Brothers and himself along with them. This condition was entirely agreeable to Compagnon, who disliked the responsibility he bore. It was to his advantage to see that De La Barmondière agreed to it, and in this he succeeded with little trouble. All he had to do was to show this saintly man where the real benefit was, in order to persuade him to embrace it.

Compagnon then wrote on behalf of the parish priest, telling De La Salle to come: he and the two Brothers would be welcome. The affair seemed to be taking a favorable turn, and De La Salle saw with pleasure that Divine Providence was opening for him the path to bring him to Paris. He did not, however, feel that the gate had been swung wide enough or that he should hurry the matter along. After all, it was only Compagnon who had written and made the arrangements. This did not suffice. He might be going too fast, pushing things too much, or perhaps ascribing to De La Barmondière what he really had not said, a thing that happens only too often with people who are overeager about something. They think they have heard what they really have not, and they lend their own convictions to those in whom they desire to see them.

De La Salle wished to receive a positive word from the pastor himself. To obtain this, he replied that his young brother Louis was about to set out for the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. He would make the arrangements and take all the measures needed to conclude them. So indeed it came about.

The seminarian came to an agreement with Compagnon and told him to let De La Salle know when he was expected in Paris. This was what Compagnon wanted, or so it would seem, yet this man who had at first been in so much of a hurry appeared to lose his sense of urgency at this point. Two months went by without sending any word to the Founder, who was waiting for it. After this lapse of time, when Compagnon did not see either De La Salle or the Brothers show up, as though astonished at the delay, he asked Louis for an explanation. Louis told him that his brother would not set out until he was called and told when he should come. This was obviously something the pastor, not Compagnon, should have attended to. The latter, thinking that a mere letter from himself would be sufficient assurance and that

it would bring De La Salle and the Brothers to Paris without delay, wrote to him at once.

The servant of God, who wanted and was waiting for an explicit order from the parish priest, did not move. When De La Barmondière learned why De La Salle delayed, he was much edified. The pastor was a great believer in the virtue of obedience. In his own career, he had given outstanding examples of it and was delighted to discover that there were still on earth men like himself who let all their steps be guided by this virtue. He commissioned Monsieur Baudran, in whose favor he was soon to resign his position as pastor, to inform De La Salle in his name that he and the two Brothers should come.

### Residence in Saint Sulpice; disorder in the school

Once he received this order, the Founder took his two disciples and set out for Paris to begin this long-desired foundation, one which was to cause him all sorts of trouble even to the end of his life. He arrived there with two Brothers on the eve of Saint Mathias day<sup>6</sup> in 1688. The saintly parish priest of Saint Sulpice welcomed them warmly and had them take up their lodging in the school building, where De La Barmondière, who was a great advocate of manual training, had set up a hosiery factory to furnish a trade to the poor children. Compagnon, who lived in the community of priests that officiated in the parish, took care to arrange for the Brothers' meals and introduced them to the young boy who had been his assistant teacher and to the man who ran the stocking factory, both of whom were lodged and took their meals in the same place.

The establishment was truly a bedlam where disorder and confusion reigned. There was no sign of any rule, of any kind of discipline or method so essential when dealing with a large number of students. The doors were open from 5 to 10 A.M. and from 1 to 4 P.M. The children came and went as they pleased. Nothing began or ended at a fixed time. Everything took place as chance or caprice dictated. Classes began sometimes at one hour, sometimes at another. Today they ended a little earlier, tomorrow they might end later. Catechism was rarely taught and never according to any system. Outside class time, the pupils gathered in the courtyard and played cards or dice. This gave rise to bad conduct, for it is well known how gambling arouses the passions and to what excesses it leads. On work days, the children missed Mass. No one ever thought of having them practice this

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6. On 24, or possible 25, February; 1688 was a leap year.



greatest of religious duties, although De La Barmondière was eager that they should do so. There was no piety among the students, no good behavior in this assemblage of rowdy boys that was run by people who had no piety themselves.

As soon as De La Salle came into this situation, he could not help noting all this disorder and secretly bewailing it. He realized the evil clearly but could not see how to remedy it. The institution was in sad need of reform, but to bring this about, a great deal of effort would be required. When, how, and by what means could he improve things? That was what embarrassed him. His first glimpse of the place showed him the crosses awaiting him, but he kept silent and ordered the Brothers to do likewise. They were to meddle in no way but do their job, close their eyes to all the rest, abandon the future to Divine Providence, and allow God to choose the right time to bring order to a place where none existed and where it was so sorely needed.

He practiced to the letter what he urged the Brothers to do. All of them seemed deaf, blind, and dumb in a situation where the best thing to do for the time being was to shut their eyes so as to remain at peace amidst the disorder. Nevertheless, after a few days of rest, the two Brothers began to work along with the young boy who had been employed previously to teach the youngsters. To make their efforts more effective, they divided the school population into three classes and gave them lessons on a level with their age and their ability. This first attempt at organization, which did not create any difficulties, attracted so many new students that the two Brothers were overworked. One of them even fell ill and remained so exhausted that he was no longer able to do anything. This empty place was soon filled. De La Salle had not forgotten a function which he had already practiced. The Superior who once before had taken a Brother's place in Reims now did the same in Paris. It was only fair that Paris should not have to envy Reims such an example of humility and that both should behold a priest, doctor, and former canon of one of the most illustrious metropolitan churches in France become a schoolmaster.

The presence of De La Salle was enough to make Compagnon confront the disorder in the school. He was not in a position to attend to this himself, since he did not remain much at the school, and even if he had lived there, he did not feel that he had the ability to introduce and maintain strict discipline among the many students who needed it so badly. This was an art which he knew nothing about, and even if he did, he was probably not the sort of man who was ready to accept with due patience and longanimity the unpleasantness it entailed. The simplest and best thing he could have done,

which he finally did do, was to ask De La Salle to replace him and to take charge of the establishment. But the humble Superior could read in the heart of the man who was making him such a flattering offer a secret unwillingness to give up his position and an inclination to take back his proposal.

After seeking advice on the matter, De La Salle turned down the suggestion in the most Christian and modest manner possible. He again ordered the Brothers not to concern themselves with anything except teaching their classes. The Brothers, however, began to grow tired of the disorder which led to all sorts of inconveniences for them. They were accustomed to a definite series of exercises which followed each other. They grew disenchanted at having to be the helpless spectators of the anarchy which added to their own work and which they could see no end to. Their virtue, thus put to the test, began to give way. To bolster it, they needed both the example of their Superior, who saw all that was going on yet did not complain, and the exhortations urging patience that he addressed to them. He encouraged them not to let these thorny beginnings discourage them; he led them to hope that time would eventually bring more order to these chaotic classes, lessen the annoyances they suffered, and smooth out the difficulties they experienced. He knew the remedy that needed to be applied, but he did not want to forestall the hour marked out by Providence.

In the meantime, he contented himself with visiting the classes, being present in the schoolyard, teaching the children Christian doctrine, and trying to win them over through his mildness: suggesting modesty to them by his presence and his love for what was right by his words. The seeds of virtue he thus sowed in these young souls did not take long to spring up and promised good results. Little by little, the children became more docile, and their behavior improved. The director of the school noticed it, and this slight change made him realize what a wiser line of conduct and a definite regulation might do to ameliorate the situation in the school.

The pastor comes to visit the school and sees the disorder

Things went on in this way until the beginning of April, at which time the parish priest came to visit the school, accompanied by one of his priests, named Monsieur Metais. This saintly pastor, while governing such a vast parish where problems abounded, lived an austere life and displayed as much regularity of conduct as the most fervent ecclesiastic in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. He himself was one of the

most notable members of this congregation. He loved order and was zealous about regulations. Consequently, he was badly impressed by the lack of discipline he noted in an institution which needed it so badly. He realized quite well that it was useless to gather so many children together at such great expense in order to teach them their religion, prepare them to earn a living, and bring them up in the fear of God, as long as there was not more discipline among them. He felt that most of them might be better off at home, with no concern for their education, rather than gathered in such an unruly mob. At home they would learn less about evil and would not witness so much bad example.

These reflections led the pastor to conclude that he should either close the school entirely or introduce firmer discipline among the students and make order and regularity reign. After thinking seriously about how he could correct the evil, he realized that he had the solution to the problem at hand in the person of De La Salle. The latter possessed to perfection the art of running a school well. God, who had destined him for this type of work, had given him the talent to do it right. He had communicated this talent to the Brothers, so that they fulfilled the task with ease. The only reason why De La Barmondière had the Brothers come to Paris was that his parish might share in the blessings that accompanied their labors. To obtain these blessings, all he needed to do was to leave them alone to run the school, and this the zealous parish priest of Saint Sulpice resolved to do. He begged De La Salle to take charge, and when the Founder pointed out that two Brothers could not cope with all the work to be done, the pastor consented to have others come, as many as might be needed, and agreed to pay each of them a salary of 250 livres.

Compagnon, who was in charge of the school, was present and suffered no little mortification from what he heard, and he was very hurt when he was invited not to concern himself any more with anything referring to the school. This order wounded him deeply, and De La Salle had to bear the consequences of it. We shall see to what lengths Compagnon was led by resentment and jealousy. The Founder, entirely submissive to the orders of the parish priest, consented, although with reluctance, to do what was required of him, for he could easily foresee the problems that would arise on the part of Compagnon and his two associates.

Understanding perfectly well what caused the unrest in the school, De La Salle knew that he would never get the classes organized as he wished and establish proper order in them as long as the hosiery workshop remained in operation as it was. This institution

was the apple of the pastor's eye. He was full of zeal in this matter and believed it to be extremely important to train young people to work, thus avoiding idleness, the mother of all vices. The time had not yet come, therefore, to speak about doing away with the shop program. It would be necessary to await the right moment and, in the meantime, to keep it going.

### De La Salle introduces order; Compagnon becomes jealous

Placed in charge of running both the house and the school, De La Salle, as was his wont, had recourse primarily to prayer and meditation so as to carry out successfully the mission entrusted to him. Resolved to introduce order in everything and everywhere, he adopted all the measures that wisdom suggested in order to succeed in his endeavor without making much ado or provoking comments. Since the Brothers should be models of conformity to rule, it was only right to begin the reorganization of the school with them. Their example alone might suffice to reform the student body. Consequently, the pious Founder's first care was to live with the Brothers in Paris just as he had done in Reims. Nothing was changed in their way of life: the same exercises, the same regularity, the same spirit of recollection, silence, retirement, prayer, mortification, and obedience.

Next, he undertook to schedule the time for all the school activities so that each one began at a fixed hour and lasted a definite time. The first rule that had to be enforced concerned entering and leaving the building at a precise time. Once this was decided, the door was opened and closed regularly at that exact hour, so that the students were obliged to be punctual and to show themselves faithful to their duty. The lazy ones who came late found the door shut and could not get in, and the mischief makers who wanted to run off when they pleased found themselves locked in and could not get out.

The praiseworthy practice of hearing Mass every day was introduced and became a fixed rule of the Christian Schools and a new and edifying spectacle for Paris. Hundreds of children, boisterous by character, playful and irreverent, lacking piety and respect for the holy place, could be seen walking two by two in order, each in his proper place with silence and modesty, preceded and followed by the Brothers, all going to attend the awesome sacrifice of the altar with piety and reverence. Nor was the catechism lesson forgotten or neglected. Its length, the time when it was taught, and the manner of teaching it were all regulated. This holy practice, which is what distinguishes Christian and Gratuitous Schools from ordinary pay schools, seemed

so essential to Barré and to De La Salle that both of them obliged their teachers to teach catechism every day. The periods for teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, and spelling were also precisely determined so that the children had enough time to learn these matters well without ever getting bored.

The rest of the day was devoted to manual training but in such a way as to sanctify it, for prayer was joined to labor. This did not yet suffice, for these boys, living subject to no restraints, had grown licentious and had become addicted to gambling. There was no hope that these young plants would ever produce good fruit as long as they were affected by this vice. This dreadful passion acted like a cancer in them, dried up the sap of good instructions, and corrupted the depths of their hearts. It was necessary to attempt everything to cure it, and this De La Salle and the Brothers proceeded to do. Finally, since the end of their Institute is to bring up in innocence and in the service of God these neglected children who lack instruction and education, they gave free rein to their zeal and sought to uproot the vices and evil inclinations found in these young souls and to plant therein piety along with the fear and love of God.

The schools of Saint Sulpice soon seemed to be running so well that the enemy of the human race was frightened and hastened to put a stop to this good work. He thought it would be easy for him to succeed, since he had at his disposal three persons who were all the more apt to serve him because their interests coincided with his and their passions fell in with his evil schemes. Two of the three were not happy over the new regulations, and the third considered them as a slur on his honor. It was he who guided the intrigue which aimed at closing down the knitting shop, the activity which he thought was the mainspring that actuated the zeal of M. de La Barmondière for the school. Convinced that the saintly parish priest, who was so keen on manual training, would be displeased with any teachers who failed to promote it, Compagnon used all his cleverness to bring his wicked project to a satisfactory conclusion. The undertaking, however, must not be too rushed; he had to await the moment when it could be tried with certainty of success. So he slyly sought to gain time; meanwhile, to prepare his vengeance, he contented himself with showing by his gloomy silence what he felt in the depths of his soul and with provoking complaints and murmurs.

We shall see by this example that passion is blind and that jealousy, above all, seldom delivers a blow which does not ricochet off the cowardly heart that indulges in it. If Compagnon had paid attention to his own reputation, he would no doubt have realized that it

was going to suffer as much as that of De La Salle. It was he who had shown himself so eager to bring the servant of God from Reims to Paris, had gone to Reims to beg him to come, had convinced the parish priest to invite him, had been so glad to give De La Salle the direction of the schools, and had urged him, in the presence of De La Barmondière, to assume control of the establishment. Nobody was more interested than he in the success of the schools placed under De La Salle's direction. The honor or dishonor deserved by the one would infallibly reflect on the other. If he had thought about it a little, he would have seen that he was working against himself by plotting against the holy Founder. But where envy rules, faith and reason have to remain silent. This odious vice, which finds satisfaction only in causing trouble, often enough at its own expense, thought it had perceived in the slackening off of the work in the knitting shop a pretext to satisfy itself.

The students were spending more time in their school activities, in prayer, catechism, and attending Mass, and consequently could not devote as many hours as before to manual training. The man in charge of the shop thought he was losing money. As less work was turned out, his profits diminished. Convinced that all these new arrangements were harming his interests, he grew impatient over these losses. At first, he did not dare to make too much of a fuss over it or to give vent to overly loud complaints which would have revealed his secret dissatisfaction. De La Barmondière was not a man before whom passion dared to show itself too openly, so he had to dissimulate. In order to cause trouble cleverly and in such a way as to convince the holy old parish priest, he did not complain about the new regulations as such but about the diminution of work.

The ploy was ingenious because it aimed only indirectly at the object that he really had in view. It seemed that De La Barmondière's verdict would certainly condemn the actions of De La Salle and that being displeased over the lessened amount of work given to the children, he would insist that the new arrangements be canceled, thus bringing everything back to where it had stood before. The scheme, however, did not succeed as its authors expected. The pastor did not show himself as sympathetic to their complaints as they had hoped. If the manual training did not run quite as well as before, the classes were proceeding much better, the children were being taught, and their behavior improved considerably, so the gains balanced out the loss; the one more than compensated for the other. Thus the saintly parish priest, who wanted to see the greatest good done, did not seem too much disturbed over what was, after all, a minor matter.

The plotters felt this and decided to take steps to arouse deeper concern on his part. They thought that if the work in the knitting shop stopped entirely, this would have the effect they had vainly hoped to secure by stressing the slowdown of the operation, and they thought that De La Barmondière would finally make up his mind to withdraw the direction of the institution from a man who could not make the shop function. Nothing was more contrary to the interests of the Christian Schools than this scheme inspired by pure malice. It should have succeeded according to the desires of its authors, but God, who makes those who dig the pit fall into it themselves and takes pleasure in foiling the projects of the wicked, made this plot turn against the one who had planned it. Rafrond, the foreman of the knitting shop, thought that by quitting he would force it to close down and thus oblige De La Salle to call him back in order to make it run again. This was how he and Compagnon, who secretly incited him, expected to place the pastor in a difficult situation and to make him accept their terms, the first of which was to send De La Salle and the Brothers back to Reims.

They were both disappointed, and Rafrond was led into ruin by his own malice. At first, he spoke of quitting. Then he did quit, in fact, but it turned out so much the worse for him, because he found neither any other work nor anyone who cared to employ him. The shop closed down; De La Barmondière did not seem to mind. Then De La Salle thought of reopening it and having it function successfully without causing any disturbance to the classes, and in this he succeeded. Rafrond, abandoned to his unfortunate lot, was the one whom the servant of God made use of to insure the success of his new project. With the parish priest's approval, he gave Rafrond a sum of money to teach one of the Brothers how to knit hose and how to run the whole manual training program. In three weeks' time, the Brother had learned all that the teacher could teach, making his services superfluous. Thus the malicious intriguer was the first to pay for his evil intentions. The Brother took charge of the program, along with another whom De La Salle called from Reims and who already knew how to knit hose. The two of them were able to combine the work program with the running of the classes and the other activities. Indeed, the shop program proceeded even better than before and brought in more profit, because the children were less distracted and more enthusiastic about their work and applied themselves to it more diligently. The class work and the exercises of piety no longer suffered from it, because silence and order economized a great deal of time which previously had been wasted in playing and in useless talk.

## CHAPTER VIII

*The head of the Saint Sulpice schools calumniates De La Salle in a gathering of the Ladies of Charity; the pastor is deceived and is on the verge of sending De La Salle back to Reims with his Brothers, but God changes his heart just as the pious Founder was taking his leave; justice is finally done; Monsieur Baudran, the successor of De La Barmondière as pastor of Saint Sulpice, establishes a second school in the parish, which gives rise to a lawsuit that the pious Founder wins against the Masters of the Little Schools.*

Monsieur Compagnon was not discouraged by the collapse of the intrigue he had fomented. Even though he was not recognized as its author, his conscience made him feel the shame for it, while Rafrond bore the consequences. Compagnon's jealousy was not ready to admit defeat. Real ill will, which the spirit of envy knows so well how to utilize, finds a ready tool in calumny. It was an odious and abominable tool, but as no other was available, he had to have recourse to it or else resign himself to seeing with equanimity the control of the institution in the hands of a man whom he would have wished to see far removed from it.

Everything now was in order in the school; the manual work proceeded smoothly, as did the teaching. Piety itself was being cultivated little by little, and everything contributed to the repute of the Superior who was in charge. Hence there was no way to attack him, save through slander. Because the presence of De La Salle would have sufficed to dissipate this, Compagnon hesitated and thought it wiser to profit by his absence to make the lies sound more plausible. He might have carried them from house to house, but then they would have taken a good while to reach the ears of the parish priest. So it seemed more expedient to make them public and by choosing a favorable moment to divulge the calumny, to give it the credit of several different voices.

A meeting of the Ladies of Charity which took place about this time at the pastor's residence seemed to Compagnon an ideal forum in which to speak and to be listened to. If it proved possible to convince the pious persons who attended this meeting, it was certain that their number and their reputation would carry De La Barmondière along with them in their accusations against De La Salle. Such a favorable opportunity was not allowed to pass by. The impostor had



taken pains to clothe his fabrications in a garb of seeming plausibility and to give them all the appearance of truth. He succeeded in putting them forward with so much skill and cleverness that nobody dreamed of suspecting falsehood, still less of attributing the tale to the envy and resentment of the one who related it.

We do not know what the malicious accusation actually was, but we do know that it produced all the effect that its author expected. It was believed, and what was most amazing, De La Barmondière himself remained convinced of it. It is a fact that the most upright people are often the least on guard against being deceived. Not knowing what resentment, passion, and jealousy are, they cannot imagine that these vices may move the tongues of those whose hearts they cannot see. The saintly parish priest of Saint Sulpice, a lover of simplicity, candor, good faith, and truth, could not even suspect that these virtues were being betrayed by a man who was trusted by himself and by many other persons of distinguished merit, so he let himself be persuaded. This was not the first time that one saint, by persecuting another saint, helped add to the other's crown.

The calumny had plenty of time to spread and to meet with acceptance, and from July to September, its author enjoyed the malicious pleasure of adding more details calculated to win for it even wider belief. Compagnon saw all his desires about to be fulfilled, and to savor a more complete triumph, he went about the school spreading the word that the Brothers and their Superior were going to be sent home and showing how happy he felt over this. He had brought the parish priest to that point.

It was not difficult for De La Salle to notice the changed attitude. De La Barmondière showed himself cold, even rude, by his calculated indifference, giving him to understand that he would do well to leave of his own accord and not wait for the disgrace of being dismissed. In fact, De La Barmondière, wishing to spare him this ultimate humiliation, made this very suggestion to him through Monsieur Baudran, the spiritual director of the one so persecuted though innocent. Baudran gave De La Salle to understand that since the pastor was apparently not satisfied with him, prudence suggested that he take advantage of the imminent vacation period and go back to Reims. He added that he himself was ready to go with him to the parish priest so that he could bid him farewell.

The Founder, who sought nothing but God and who in all things abandoned himself to the care of Providence, agreed. I do not know what sort of impression this farewell made on De La Barmondière, but once he listened to him, he was no longer in such a hurry to send

him and the Brothers away. He appeared pensive and after conferring with Baudran about the matter, remained quite undecided as to what he should do. He told De La Salle that he would think over the question further. "He will think about it for three more years, at least, without changing anything," Baudran told De La Salle when he returned. "So remain as you are, in peace." This was what De La Salle resolved to do. Calm in the midst of all this agitation, not knowing one night whether he would sleep in the same house the next, he remained at rest in the arms of Divine Providence, ready for whatever might happen.

Meanwhile, Compagnon did not remain idle. His mind kept trying to invent new ways to blacken the pious Superior's reputation and to dispose De La Barmondière against him and the Brothers. He spied on all they did, tried to read their intentions, and scrutinized their conduct. Nothing about them was innocent. His passion made a crime of everything, and without apprising them of it, he continually cited them before the tribunal of the parish priest or that of the community of priests who served in the parish, renewing his accusations against them and hoping to force them to leave Paris. This tissue of calumnies which he presented as proof constituted his whole case against the unjustly accused Brothers, and the renewed zeal he displayed for the good of the school served to verify his hypocrisy. In fact, emulation combined with evil intentions made him active and vigilant, eager to rival De La Salle and to appear more capable than he was of directing the school and inspiring the students with piety.

De La Barmondière liked to see the children attend the early Mass, so one way of currying favor with him was to make the students show up at church early in the morning to be present at his Mass. To get them to do this, the scheming Compagnon did not spare cajolements, caresses, or rewards, and he bought the cooperation of the children by his calculated liberalities. To secure funds for this purpose, he persuaded certain pious persons to turn over to him the money they wished to donate to charity and to let him decide how these sums were to be spent. For the same purpose, he laid his hands on the loaves of bread which were offered at the seminary and brought them to school, so that he could distribute them to the boys he wished to favor. He did this in the sight of the other pupils, in order to get more of them to come to the early Mass, and he gave them to understand that if they wished to share in his largesse, they should rally around him and not around the newly arrived Brothers.

De La Salle's defense is silence; his enemy is confounded

Unruffled, De La Salle beheld all that was being done against him and defended himself only by his silence and patience. It would have been easy for him to oblige all the children to put in an appearance at the early Mass and to have them conducted there by the Brothers. Even without making this a rule, he would have managed to get them all to come willingly and voluntarily, but this would have been too human a manner of acting. He would have been inspired by purely human motives, and a saint finds this repugnant. Far from doing anything of the sort, he forbade the Brothers to do or to say anything special or out of the ordinary to win over the children and to get them to come to the early Mass. "You should urge them to go," he told them, "and recommend that they do so out of regard for God and for their salvation, and let it go at that."

In vain had the man responsible for the schools exhausted all the wiles suggested by ill will in order to defame the servant of God. When he opened a door through which he hoped to expel De La Salle from the institution, he really provided the one through which he himself would be ejected in disgrace. Was it not just that he should be caught in the web of intrigue which he had spun and that he should experience the truth of the saying, *Calumniators will never prosper on the earth*? Here is what finally happened. In order to put an end to the conflicts existing between the persons he had entrusted with the direction of the school, De La Barmondière asked Monsieur Janson, who later became an archbishop, to probe the matter for him, to find out the cause of the trouble, and to discover who was at the bottom of all the dissension. Accordingly, the pious priest came to investigate, and it did not take him long to find out who was innocent. The order and regularity which he observed in the school seemed to him an element favoring the one who directed it. The children were polite, busy, orderly; the Brothers were silent, modest, recollected.

All this spoke volumes in favor of the accused and without many words, but with a power superior to human eloquence, it demonstrated that he was in the right and that he had been the victim of calumny. The virtuous priest, not wishing to allow himself to be led astray by first impressions, returned to the house several times and was always similarly edified by what he saw. What he admired most was that De La Salle and the Brothers did not say a word to clear themselves of the imputations spread against them. He beheld men who remained calm, leaving to Providence the care of clearing their names, and whose only defense was silence.

In such circumstances, silence is both a mark of genuine and perfect virtue and a convincing apology for innocence. But how many victories must we have achieved over self-love before we can make it remain silent and not give way to recriminations! How deeply must a heart have yielded to the Holy Spirit not to seem perturbed over unjust judgments made against it! Janson was even more edified—upon urging De La Salle to defend himself and to end his silence with regard to his declared enemy, who no longer observed any measure in attacking him—when he heard him say that since he was not in charge of Compagnon's behavior, he had neither examined it nor judged it. The virtuous priest finally understood what manner of man this was about whose conduct he had been asked to inquire, when he told him that "the only favor he requested was that the defects observed in his conduct might be pointed out to him and that he might be given the advice he needed to correct them."

This humble attitude made the investigator understand where passion lay, and where virtue. He realized what sort of man this was whose virtue had been so long put to the test by odious calumnies, who yet did not want to open his mouth to complain about the author of these tales. He therefore lost no time in doing him justice and in opening the eyes of De La Barmondière. Monsieur Janson declared to the pastor the high esteem he himself had conceived for a man who remained so unruffled with regard to those who were the enemies of peace, a man who answered nothing to the lies and impositions which had been so freely heaped upon him.

The saintly parish priest, now better informed, returned to his earlier feelings toward the Brothers and their Superior. He began taking steps to protect him from these annoyances and make it possible for him to run the school without opposition or further interference. Since De La Barmondière resigned his position as parish priest just about this time, it fell to his successor, Monsieur Baudran, to carry out this project. The task could not have been entrusted to more capable hands, because Baudran was the spiritual director of the innocent victim of all these slanderous tales, and better than anyone else, he knew his eminent virtue. In order to act with full deliberation, he took all the time he needed to familiarize himself with the turmoil that agitated the school. Baudran assumed charge of the parish in January 1689 and spent the year examining Compagnon's conduct in detail. When the examination showed him that this ecclesiastic was good for nothing except for introducing disorder and dissension into a house where such good order now reigned, he waited only until an opportunity arose for getting him out of the way as honorably as possible.

This came about soon afterward, when the priest in charge of the altar boys of the parish died. At Christmas of that same year, Compagnon was given charge of their training.

Delivered from an enemy who had shown himself so implacable and dangerous, De La Salle exhibited no outward sign of joy. He never sought to revenge himself on him for all the evil he had suffered, except by doing him all sorts of favors. He used the period of peace given to him to restore to his house all the fervor and to the school all the discipline he wished to see in them. Although eager to establish good order in the classrooms, the Founder had not enjoyed full authority to introduce all the pious practices that he wished to see established there. The time had finally come to do this and have them accepted. He made good use of it.

This increase of order and discipline in the Saint Sulpice school caused a considerable influx of new pupils. Children came streaming in, so that soon the classrooms were no longer large enough to accommodate them. The boys were growing used to the regulations and became more docile, more attentive, more religious, and the change in them showed what good a Christian School can do when it is well conducted. The servant of God himself was gratified at the blessings God poured out on his labors and did not cease to bless him and thank him for them. The new parish priest was no less pleased when he came to visit the classes. Seeing the good done, he could not restrain his joy, and he felt a stronger determination to support and multiply the schools. At this time, he resolved to open a new school in the rue du Bac, near the Pont Royal. He suggested this to De La Salle, who was happy to go along with the idea. In fact, it was he who had first thought of this foundation and had mentioned it to De La Barmondière, but the idea had not been pursued at that time. This new school was opened early in 1690. Baudran was delighted, for he soon saw it filled with students and producing all the good results he had hoped for.

He emerges victorious from persecution by the schoolmasters

De La Salle had thought that he would enjoy a period of peace and that it would last for a while; he could not foresee anything that might disturb it. He hoped to profit by this season of tranquillity and use it to consolidate his work, but he was mistaken. The Founder did not realize how much alarm his Institute was causing in hell nor how many stumbling blocks of all sorts the prince of this world would try to throw into his path. In truth, the old serpent, so clever at fomenting

evil and in thwarting all endeavors which aim at the glory of God, exhausted against this one all the resources of his malignant ingenuity. He had just stirred up dissensions within the school. No sooner had these been allayed than he began to promote attacks from without. For a dangerous and hidden enemy, he was about to substitute another in the shape of an entire corporation which would wage open warfare.

The recent past had brought De La Salle conflict with internal enemies. The coming years would be marked by external hostilities. The former pastor of Saint Sulpice had sided with his enemies; the new parish priest will attack him in a more dangerous and painful fashion. And the beginnings of all these troubles were only the preludes to others more vast, the first stirring of a persistent opposition which would endure as long as his life.

Jealousy had just made the servant of God feel the sting of a tongue as sharp as that of a serpent; now self-interest was going to induce the Corporation of Paris Schoolmasters to take up arms against the Christian Schools. These mercenary pedagogues, who lived thanks to their teaching and whose pens provided them with a livelihood, were dismayed by the success and progress achieved by the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. They imagined they could already see their own establishments shut down as a result of the founding of the former. Those schoolmasters who taught in the neighborhood of the parish schools began to see their revenues dropping, and it was natural for them to feel concern lest the Brothers' classes should be filled with children previously enrolled in theirs.

A perfervid and hypersensitive imagination made them think that in a short time they would find themselves alone in empty classrooms and that they would have to endure the confusion of seeing their schools deserted while those of the Brothers flourished. What a bitter pill it was to see themselves supplanted by these newcomers who would certainly reduce them and their families to the poorhouse by changing into a work of charity what had hitherto been a lucrative profession! Must we, they asked, let ourselves be ruined by these interlopers who, under the name of Brothers, have come to destroy our profession? Was it not obvious that the Gratuitous Schools would empty those where fees were charged and that parents, who are willing to spend money on everything for their children except for their education, would bring them, one and all, to these teachers who taught out of charity?

These ill-founded arguments caused much emotion among all the schoolmasters of Paris, and without examining how much was false in

all of this, they followed the impression created by their passions, inflamed by their prejudices. If they had been willing to calm down and consider the purpose of the Gratuitous Schools objectively, they would have recognized that these schools are open only to the poor who have no means of paying for an education. Because such children were in no position to enrich their teachers, they had always been neglected. There never had been any great effort made to bring them into the Little Schools or those of the writing masters. Men who sell their services expect nothing from people who have nothing to give them in return; they are more apt to drive the poor away from their establishments than to invite them in. What then did the schoolmasters have to fear from the new teachers who welcomed to their schools only the youngsters who often lacked bread as much as they lacked instruction? Should they not rather have been grateful to the Brothers for taking charge of a whole category of children whom the world calls scum?

But, the schoolmasters replied, the richer children are also admitted along with the poor, and thus we suffer a loss when they go to the Charity Schools to be instructed gratuitously. This was the only objection with any substance that the masters could make to the Brothers. It was, however, not difficult to refute. To send one's child to a school which caters expressly to the destitute is to declare oneself poor. Now if even the poorest people are reluctant to admit their penury, would well-to-do people try to pass for beggars? Do we not know how pride revolts against everything that smacks of destitution? It simply passes belief that parents able to pay for their children's education would go to beg for it from Charity Schools.

Furthermore, it not infrequently happens that people who seem comfortably situated are not really such. Had the schoolmasters verified the financial status of the children who left them to go to the Brothers' schools? How many are the children in these schools who need someone to give them food rather than to ask them for money! Again, nothing in this world is exempt from drawbacks. If a few well-off parents did send their children to the Brothers' schools, they did so at the expense of their self-respect. Abuses can crop up everywhere; it is not possible to prevent all of them. Certainly, the Brothers had no business asking their pupils to prove that they were indeed poor. By enrolling them in these schools, their families publicly admitted as much. The admission was well known; consequently, no one could deny their claim of being poor.

Finally, even supposing that a few well-to-do children did find their way into the Christian Schools among the poor, no great harm

would be done. On the contrary, it would be a disgraceful and disastrous thing to abandon a whole class of children to ignorance and a vicious way of life by expelling the Brothers. After all, the schoolmasters, too, are part of the general public, which has the highest interest in the establishment of Christian and Gratuitous Schools. The multiplication of these schools is of such capital importance for church and state that those who are members of both these societies should not hesitate to sacrifice a minor advantage of theirs to procure this great benefit for the public at large.

The Parisian schoolmasters, therefore, were needlessly alarmed over the establishment of the Christian Schools. They failed to reflect that these schools were filled with children who would not have been admitted to their own establishments, since they were unable to pay for the instruction given there. They fancied that they saw financial ruin staring them in the face and that their families would be reduced to beggary unless they hastened to have expelled from the city these men who did not charge anything for teaching the poor. Moreover, they were encouraged in their attitude by the person in charge of the Saint Sulpice schools, of whom mention has already been made.

Since through his slanders and his secret intrigues he had not been able to have De La Salle and the Brothers sent away from a position to which he himself had called them, Compagnon thought he could achieve his ends by stirring up and encouraging the schoolmasters. Without losing time, they had recourse to legal and to direct action. First, they caused everything in the schools to be seized; then they subpoenaed the Brothers and their Superior and filed suit against them on the pretext that they were violating the Corporation's privileges and that without any right to do so, they were taking it upon themselves to teach school. The first hearing was held before the tribunal of the Precentor,<sup>7</sup> and a sentence was handed down in favor of the schoolmasters and against the Christian and Gratuitous Schools.

This incident came close to disrupting the plans of the holy Founder completely and might have stifled his work at its inception. The distaste De La Salle felt for lawsuits tied his hands. He would have preferred to abandon the entire enterprise, if he could have done so without betraying God's cause. He could not bring himself to go to court, and he seriously considered yielding to the complaints of his adversaries. It was, however, pointed out to De La Salle that his cause

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7. The Precentor (*Écolâtre* or *Grand Chantre* in French), a sort of Diocesan Supervisor of Schools, was the official protector of the "Little Schools" to defend their rights and privileges.



was also the cause of all the poor children and of the public. Their rights, too, were involved, not merely his. After taking charge of the instruction of these poor, miserable, and ignorant boys, could he, without falling into cowardice and pusillanimity, let them return to their first state of ignorance and lack of education? The same charity which had made him renounce everything in order to found a society of Brothers dedicated to the Christian and gratuitous instruction of the needy would be wounded if he failed to defend their rights. It demanded that he make himself their advocate after being their educator. He should have foreseen that these greedy men would not fail to look with jealous eyes on the Christian Schools he was setting up, would sound the alarm and cry out to high heaven; foreseeing this, he should not have expected them to give up their attacks and come to terms with men whom they considered their rivals.

After all, an unjust lawsuit was merely one more cross. A man who had already borne so many others should not refuse this one if Providence placed it on his shoulders. Finally, his spiritual director told him it was his duty in conscience to uphold God's cause, which was also that of the poor. This made him give in. Convinced that this was God's will, he pursued the case, appealed against the first sentence, and in a short time the matter was concluded in his favor. It is true that the public was on his side. The good that the Christian and Gratuitous Schools were doing was obvious and worked in his favor. Everybody realized that the poor were the only ones who had anything to fear from losing this lawsuit which affected them so closely. It was clear that closing the Christian Schools would have been to give victory to these unjust passions at the expense of religion and charity.

I almost forgot to mention that De La Salle also owed his success in this case to prayer and to the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin. To obtain the protection of the holy Mother of God in this affair, he brought the Brothers to the shrine of Our Lady of Virtues, a much frequented place of pilgrimage, two leagues from Paris. He celebrated Mass there, and all the Brothers received Communion. Almost the entire morning was spent in prayer; they remained at the shrine for three hours. The day ended as it had begun, in silence, prayer, and recollection. Some crusts of bread were the only nourishment that they consumed during this exhausting day-long journey. As for their Superior, he came home fasting and ate nothing until evening.

### Difficulty over the habit of the Brothers

As soon as De La Salle found himself rid of this ticklish affair, he was caught up in another—the first in that long series of crosses which he had to shoulder as long as he stayed in the parish of Saint Sulpice. Enemies and rivals of his work had just invoked the law against him. No sooner had he obtained a favorable sentence than friends and protectors of his Institute launched another campaign against him. In the earlier instance, he had been cited before a tribunal where the judges were not on the side of his accusers; he was heard, his arguments were listened to, and he won his case. In the more recent matter, he was summoned before a tribunal which was favorable to him personally but opposed to his spirit and his convictions. Here he found that his judge was the very one who wanted the Brothers to change their habit.

The pious Founder, who had received inspiration and graces concerning the government of his Community which the prominent men who opposed him had not, foresaw the consequences of such a change and resisted it. However highly he regarded the authority of the person who was promoting the change, he felt that it was supremely important to withstand it and to back up his opposition by solid reasons. All those who came to know the subject of this controversy agreed with his arguments and adopted his opinion, but this did not prevent him from suffering for his victory through a drying up of charitable donations and through his being accorded a reputation as a stubborn and pigheaded man.

We must state things as they are. The person whom he had to contradict was a man who enjoyed great esteem in Paris and was well thought of. The Brothers' habit, at the time so unusual and which drew down on them the raillery of the common people and the derision of the worldly, he found displeasing. He was afraid that this lack of respect for the Brothers personally might extend to their ministry. His zeal for the Christian and Gratuitous Schools, which were beginning to produce their benefits in his parish, made him eager not to let them be compromised by the disfavor shown to the teachers on account of the unusual type of garb they wore, garb which no one liked.

This great man, whose merits equalled his reputation, felt—as did many other persons—that De La Salle should not remain so inflexible about modifying external details which did not really affect the interior. Since the habit does not make the monk, the Founder should not have been so set on the Brothers' garb, which attracted attention by its outlandish appearance and only made people laugh at and ridicule

those who wore it. Baudran, as pastor of the parish where the Christian Schools were located, as their protector and benefactor, and as the spiritual director of the servant of God, felt that he had a right to impose this change and to demand this act of submission and condescension from De La Salle. He wanted the Brothers to adopt the long ecclesiastical mantle and habit. If he was alone in favoring this particular solution to the problem, the public in general agreed with him in clamoring for a change of some kind. People at large, however, were ignorant of the weighty reasons which had led De La Salle to give to the Brothers' habit the appearance it possessed. These reasons are so cogent that they convince anyone who reads them with an open mind.

Thinking, no doubt, that Baudran, who desired only what was best, who loved De La Salle and was genuinely interested in his work, would understand his reasons and accept them, the servant of God took up his pen once more to state fully and clearly the reasons which had induced him to give the Brothers their special habit. He drew up a memorandum on the subject.<sup>8</sup> This document seemed to be so logically thought out and so strongly worded that the person to whom the holy Founder showed it and whose advice he sought urged him to remain firm on this point. It is true that De La Salle does not tell us the identity of this person whom he consulted, saying only that he was considered very wise. But by this laudatory epithet, he really indicated the celebrated superior of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, Monsieur Tronson, whose prudence was widely acknowledged throughout France.

It was to Tronson that De La Salle had recourse in all his major difficulties, considering him as a source of enlightenment and as a man who had the reputation of being one of the oracles of the French clergy. Since De La Salle had been one of his students and had the good fortune of being under his guidance while at the seminary and since Tronson combined great depth of knowledge and penetration of mind with a high degree of humility and virtue, it was only natural for him to ask his advice. As long as Tronson lived, he did in fact turn to him for counsel and often went to discuss matters with him at the seminary at Issy, where Tronson then lived. When De La Salle could not secure the advice of this enlightened man, he would consult Monsieur Boüin, then director of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, whose holiness was recognized by all those who dealt with him.

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8. The manuscript of this document in the Founder's own hand is in the archives of the Institute in Rome.

In this way, the Founder, whose unfailing rule was obedience, in his moments of doubt sought from the greatest servants of God an indication of God's will for him. Once this had been pointed out to him, he remained immovable. His principle was to listen only to voices which he had consulted in a spirit of faith and which he had come to recognize as the indicators of God's good pleasure. What added to his difficulty on this occasion was that he had to go against the wishes of his superior, both as parish priest and as his spiritual director, the man who was the protector of his work. This apparent lack of submission was, of course, described as hardheadedness and stubbornness. The servant of God was treated as a person who thought he was always right and would never give in, one who had to have his own way, regardless. He was told as much to his face, amid bitter reproaches. Fortunately for him, he had the wisest persons he could consult on his side. Of course, when Baudran became his adversary, he could really no longer demand that De La Salle should conform to his every wish, nor could he expect his opinions to prevail with a man who did not feel that the point at issue really belonged to the sphere of confession or spiritual direction.

We should also observe that the form of the Brothers' garb had been settled for a number of years already. If people did not fully approve of it as yet, they had at least begun to get used to it. Changing it now would only have given rise to more talk. Furthermore, it was not appropriate to come back on this matter and to start discussing the habit all over again, since this could have gone on indefinitely, and all the parish priests who already had schools taught by the Brothers or who would have opened them later might have put forward their own proposals concerning the Brothers' habit and rule. In short, in all the opposition that the two great men we have mentioned caused De La Salle, the servant of God acted only in accordance with the advice given him by the wisest counselors he could find. With De La Barmondière, he did nothing save on the advice of Baudran. With Baudran, he acted only on the recommendations of Tronson. Without this guidance, he had not taken a step and had done nothing of himself. This is what the virtuous Superior of the Brothers himself declares in the autographed memorandum he has left us on the subject.

While he was thus being crucified exteriorly, he also had to endure more frustration, this time on the part of the two Brothers whom he had brought with him from Reims and whom he had specially chosen to be his collaborators in founding the establishment in the capital. It seemed that he could not have picked two better helpers, for both these young men had received from God great aptitudes for

their mission. At first, De La Salle had no reason to regret the preference he had given these two for this undertaking, for they labored with zeal and shared all his toil. They witnessed his patience, his humility, his silence and moderation amidst calumny and contradiction, and at first they seemed to imitate him. They were associated with him in his sufferings and pains, and they shared the chalice with him. But how great is human frailty! These two disciples, apparently so deeply attached to him, so like their father and so worthy of him, began after two years to rebel against his austere ways and became his persecutors within the Community.

The wicked spirit, who knows all the defects of the human heart, could discern in these men a great deal of secret ambition and of that hidden pride which seeks the first place and feels it is being treated unjustly when that place is given to another. As jealousy is the usual cause that gives rise to presumption and unmasks it, Satan decided to attack these two Brothers by this means. What was the servant of God's surprise on seeing his two closest collaborators creating difficulties for him and instigating discord in the house when he placed a third man over them. As we mentioned before, the good order that reigned in the schools had increased the number of students. Two Brothers could not cope with the task, so De La Salle had sent for two more from Reims to share the labor and help the pioneers gather in the harvest. One of them, as talented for teaching as the first two, was superior to them in piety, and so he was chosen by the pious Founder to assume the leadership of the group.

The pride smoldering in the hearts of the first two Brothers flared up on this occasion. Their self-love was deeply wounded when they saw themselves placed in a position subordinate to this latecomer in a school where they had already labored with so much success and shared their father's humiliations and sufferings. Jealousy, which is always aroused by any preference shown to others and which considers their merits as a personal affront, embittered them against their Superior and led them to revolt. The first of the two, after having sorely tried his father's virtue, left the house, wounding De La Salle's heart cruelly. De La Salle, who loved this wayward son deeply, wept over his departure, as the father in the Gospel wept over the prodigal.

This Brother had great abilities. He would have been irreproachable if to his remarkable qualities of body and mind, and also to the gifts of grace and virtue, he had been able to join humility. His loss was a severe blow to the recently established Community. Obviously, when a flock is very small, the loss even of a single sheep is hard for the shepherd to bear, especially when the one he loses is of such high

quality. So the virtuous Founder was extremely distressed over the disturbance this event caused and over the departure of this Brother. In addition to the scandal he gave to the other Brothers, his leaving could not have occurred at a less opportune time for the new establishment in Paris. No other teacher was so useful for this school, which was beginning to enjoy a good reputation. Tall, well-proportioned, and a skilled penman, he achieved excellent results with the boys, was zealous for their instruction, and was pious and irreproachable in his conduct. He would be remembered today among the most outstanding Brothers if he had been able to overcome his pride.

The second defector would have been entirely like the first if his pride had not led him even further. Although he did not leave the Society just then, he made his patient Superior pay a high price for the two or three years he still remained. It would seem that the only reason he did stay was to be a source of torment and that the devil kept him in the Community only to put the pious Founder's virtue to the test. This arrogant and hot-tempered individual, after having caused his father a thousand kinds of trouble, carried his insolence and disrespect to the point of raising a violent and sacrilegious hand against him to strike him. The devil, as I have said, to whom he had yielded the control of his soul, did not let him leave the Community until he had first sullied his conscience with this crime. Once it had been consummated, he incited him to withdraw, in 1691. What great services this unfortunate man could have continued to render to the Christian Schools, for which God had given him such talent, if he had not allowed the spirit of pride to enter his soul! But what good are natural gifts and talents? They can only lead to the loss of the soul which is not humble.

The departure of the first Brother, which happened rather unexpectedly, left a vacancy on the staff of the Paris schools which had to be filled without delay. Apparently, Reims could not provide a teacher of equal ability at this time, or else the transfer would have occasioned too much disturbance in the schools of Laon, Guise, and Rethel if it had been necessary to choose someone among the Brothers teaching there to send to Paris. So for several months, the deserter's place would have remained empty if De La Salle himself had not stepped into the breach. He replaced the Brothers everywhere he happened to be and was delighted to show them how much he esteemed and honored their work, since he considered it a pleasure, an honor, and a duty to fill this role when occasion offered.

## CHAPTER IX

*De La Salle falls mortally ill but recovers; he goes to Reims and finds on his return that Brother L'Heureux has died; the impression this event made on him and the regulations this inspires him to adopt for his Community.*

De La Salle's virtue, purified by so many different crosses, was put to a fresh test toward the end of 1690. He fell ill and almost died. This furnished him a new occasion for exhibiting his heroic virtue. The illness began from sheer exhaustion on his part. By not taking better care of himself, he made it worse, so that there was fear for his very life. This general weakness with which the malady started was caused by the extreme harshness he displayed in regard to his body. As we recall everything said above about his vigils and fasts, the fatiguing trips he took on foot, his stern and frequent use of the discipline, the poor and unappetizing food he ate after forcing himself to get used to it, his habit of sleeping completely clothed and stretched out on a board or on the bare ground, his almost constant use of hair shirts, chains, and pointed iron barbs—in short, his constant effort to mortify his senses, we will be surprised only that the servant of God did not succumb sooner to the load of so much austerity and that illness should have so long spared a frame ruined to this extent by penance. But sickness finally overtook him and threw the Brothers into alarm because it seemed to threaten his life.

This new Job owed his children an example of virtue in illness which he had not yet given them. The devil may have imagined that De La Salle did not deserve a place among the perfect, since he had not yet endured the trials of ill health. In fact, this wicked spirit whose malice is consummate, who knows the human heart so perfectly and the weak points at which it can be attacked most successfully, knew that of all the various kinds of struggle, the one from which a man who is too tender toward his body finds it most difficult to emerge victorious is the trial of sickness. This test prostrates even the most vigorous souls. Man is attached to his body more than to anything else, for it is part of his very nature. It does not take such a very exalted degree of virtue for a man to remain indifferent when he sees himself despoiled of his wealth or even when he loses his children and everything else that he possesses outside of himself. Job, that perfect man whom God himself praised, did not deserve these expressions of esteem, according to Satan, until he had undergone the test

of ill health. Perfect as Job was, the malicious spirit expected that his heart, which was proof against all other temptations, would succumb to this one.

It must be admitted that a mortal illness could not have befallen the pious Founder at a more critical time for his work, for it constituted a real crisis for his Community. If he had died, it would most likely have perished with him. The servant of God had finally opened in Paris the establishment that Père Barré had so greatly wanted him to start. In the process of founding it, De La Salle had already undergone all kinds of unusual difficulties. The foundation was flourishing in the midst of thorns; it prospered amidst crosses and held out great promise for the future. But the success of this work seemed, according to the ordinary ways of Providence, to be conditioned by his life. If he died, it would fail. This was the double sacrifice which God seemed to ask of him, and it was so that he could offer God this double holocaust with all possible merit that God brought the Founder to death's door.

#### He falls ill during a journey on foot from Paris to Reims

A man who paid more attention to his health than De La Salle did might have foreseen this illness and avoided it, for the exhaustion he suffered should have warned him that his constitution was weakening and that he could no longer bear the overwhelming burden of labors and austerities which he had been carrying for so long. If he had lightened the burden somewhat and provided his body with some rest and decent food, his strength might have been restored, and his health would not have broken down entirely. We know that saints never feel any pity for their body. They are never severe enough toward it, in their opinion, and far from regretting having treated it with too much rigor, they accuse themselves rather of showing it too much consideration and of listening to its complaints too readily. If this pious harshness is indeed a fault, we must admit that the hero of our history is as guilty of it as anyone ever was and that he cannot be blameless. Instead of heeding the muted lamentations of a body which complained of its weakness and of its failing strength, De La Salle, in addition to his usual austerities, undertook a journey on foot from Paris to Reims, where business connected with the Institute called him.

The physical collapse that overtook De La Salle there did not take long to declare itself. He had no doubt felt some premonitions of it during the trip, but his courage disregarded them until he arrived. After taking care of the business at hand as quickly as possible, he



planned on returning to Paris immediately. He wished to disregard his malady, but it was too serious. He could no longer dissemble; he was forced to yield to the violence of the attack and take to his bed. This decision by a man who never listened to his aches and pains gave everyone to understand that the illness must be really serious and made everyone fearful of its progress. What fright seized upon his little flock on seeing its shepherd laid low! What alarm overwhelmed his children when they beheld their father, who was so necessary to his family, obliged to remain in bed! This portended nothing good, as we can well imagine. The tears of joy that his return had drawn from their eyes were now changed into tears of sorrow, and they began to regret the joy his presence in Reims had afforded them. They would have preferred to know that he was still in Paris but in good health.

In the midst of their consternation, the example of his courage, peace, and serenity reassured the Brothers. They thought they could read on his countenance that this illness was not going to be fatal, that they should take hold of themselves, and that the best remedy they could offer him was continual prayer that his health be restored. Each resolved to do violence to heaven and to beg God to give back to them the master who was so necessary, the father whom they loved so dearly. At the same time, they neglected none of the other remedies for him. These were simple enough, for all he really needed was to afford his exhausted body some genuine rest and decent food. The difficulty was to find such food in a house where everything was lacking. True, he still had at Reims a family that was wealthy, quite capable of furnishing him with the necessary relief, but he had forgotten them, and they him. His relatives had washed their hands of him ever since he had gone to share the lives of the poor schoolmasters and especially since he had given away his patrimony to the poor and resigned his canonry to a stranger rather than to his own brother.

In addition, since he had begun wearing the Brothers' habit, he was a source of embarrassment to his relatives, just as they were to him; no help could be expected from them. His only resource was Divine Providence, which never failed him. His children provided for his needs with every possible care and tenderness, and the divine goodness gave them all the help that their father needed to restore his health. Nevertheless, a man who considered himself a stranger in his native city grew weary of so much attention and longed to get away from it. All the relief lavished on his body seemed to offend his fervor. This tender care seemed burdensome to him, and if he could not help making use of it, he did so with a sobriety which mortified his senses and in such a way that his flesh could not feel very satisfied.

He refuses to allow his grandmother to visit him in bed

This first bout of illness was marked by an outstanding example of regularity given by the servant of God. His grandmother, who was still living, had always loved him tenderly. This good woman was alarmed on hearing of his failing health, so she hastened to the Brothers' house and was on her way to his room to visit him. She did not imagine that her sex would create any difficulty or hinder her from visiting her grandson, and she felt that her title of grandmother gave her a right which might properly be refused to other women. In addition, the Community of the Brothers was not yet a recognized religious community; it had no special privileges nor any canonical status which would have absolutely excluded all women. Even if it was proper to exclude others from the sickroom, it did not seem right to extend this prohibition to a grandmother. Nevertheless, by an order from her grandson, she was stopped at the door of the parlor and advised to wait for him there. The sick man, making a considerable effort to overcome his weakness, gathered together the little strength he had left, got up from bed, dressed, and came down to receive her.

The worthy lady was much surprised at this and seemed offended that she had not found a welcome from her grandson warmer than any other woman would have received. She found it hard to accept a refusal which seemed to disregard her maternal quality. So De La Salle had to listen to some reproaches from her at first. "What objection can there be," she asked, "for a mother to enter her child's room? Doesn't nature itself give her this right? What evil consequences could possibly flow from such a visit? Are you not failing to return my affection when I have come here only to show you my tender concern? Must I attribute your conduct to indifference or to lack of feeling? You call it an example of regularity, but is not your conduct itself irregular? At least ought it not to be considered a mere scruple?"

To justify his conduct, the servant of God appealed to the rule he had made forbidding women to enter the house and to the obligation he felt he was under of upholding this rule by his own example. "There is indeed no objection to your coming to see me when I am sick," he told her, "but I can give an outstanding example by not permitting this liberty between us. In the future, no Brother can ever have anything to say if the door of his room is barred to women, even to his near relatives, when he remembers that my own grandmother did not have the privilege of visiting me when I was sick, save in the parlor." De La Salle then tried to make light of his illness and conversed with his grandmother as he would have done had he been well.

He returns to Paris and falls ill again

No sooner did he think himself somewhat better than he decided to leave for Paris. A longer sojourn in a city which no longer treated him with scorn had no interest for him. The desire to leave his native city, where his family resided, and his impatience to take up once again his regular lifestyle and to give free rein to his penchant for austerity urged him to leave Reims. So he did, setting out for Paris against the advice of his doctors. He would meet in that city a new bout of sickness. He arrived there so exhausted and so ill that he had to go to bed as soon as he reached the house. The malady grew worse, even though he kept to his bed, and after some six weeks, he suffered a retention of urine which brought him to death's door.

This new spell of ill health induced in the community at Paris the same reaction that the previous one had provoked in Reims: consternation among the Brothers. They were all frightened of losing their dear Superior, the soul and support of their Institute. But accustomed to expect consolation and help from Divine Providence alone, they turned to God in constant prayer and agreed to carry on gentle but holy violence toward their merciful Father, so as to oblige him to give back to them the one who took his place in their regard on earth and who, as such, was their sole support.

What power this pure, ardent, and unanimous prayer has on God's heart! Rarely does it present itself before the throne of the Divine Majesty without being heard. The prayer of the Brothers, so much like that of the early Church for Saint Peter, constantly implored divine mercy to give back to their bereaved family its leader and guide. It was powerful enough to obtain this grace.

Monsieur Helvétius, a Dutch doctor who was quite famous in Paris at this time, proposed a remedy, but he warned that it would involve either the cure or the death of the patient. Consequently, he told the Brothers to have the patient receive Holy Viaticum before the remedy was applied, to draw down God's blessing on the operation and to safeguard the sick man against all the risks involved. Monsieur Baudran, the pastor of Saint Sulpice, came with much pomp and solemnity in a procession made up of several priests from the community and Seminary of Saint Sulpice, all wearing their surplices and with candles in their hands.

A large number of persons of all social ranks accompanied the Blessed Sacrament, either to honor the pious patient or to have an opportunity of seeing a saint on his deathbed. The doctor himself also wished to be present, in order to share in the general edification.

Around the patient's bed, the Brothers wept like children about to lose their father and showed by their sobs and cries what a deep wound the loss of so beloved and necessary a person would make in their hearts. So great was their distress that the parish priest thought that charity made it a duty for him to comfort them in the presence of their pious Founder and to comfort him as well by promising that he would be a father to them. As this great man was naturally eloquent and spoke impromptu with grace and ease, he used all his talent in giving courage by his words filled with tenderness to the hearts of the poor Brothers, who were bewailing their lot and already considered themselves orphans.

The only legacy that these poor children could expect from a father poorer than they was his blessing and a few words of edification. The humility of De La Salle was forced to grant them this favor, under orders from Baudran, his parish priest and spiritual director. The sick man was so weak that he could only pronounce these words that his heart had so often inspired him to utter, but he pronounced them with all the love and tenderness of a father: *I recommend to you perfect union and perfect obedience*. He would not have been able to give them his blessing, if a charitable hand had not upheld his. Having thus made his testament, the only one he could make, and seated on his bed wearing the stole and surplice, he received his Creator with that same attitude of faith, reverence, and devotion which he never lost.

The great Physician of souls gave his blessing to the corporeal remedies which were so hazardous that they could have led either to health or to death. Helvétius, who took a deep interest in his patient, did not leave his side. He remained with him after the departure of the parish priest, anxiously waiting to see if the remedy would take effect, and he wavered between hope and fear for a considerable time. But finally he was reassured when he saw with joy, in the free flow of urine, the good effect of his remedy. Within a few days, the recovering patient was able to take some food, and he quickly regained his health. As soon as the humble invalid felt a little strength returning, he used it to give a new proof of his humility. This virtue, which dislikes imposing burdens on anyone, made him endure with impatience the anxiety and the extra care his illness had occasioned for the Brothers.

A public hospital was the place where his heart longed to be and where he asked to be sent. This last refuge of human misery was the lodging for which he envied other poor people. The spirit of poverty made him desire to go there; the spirit of humility made it a duty for

him, and the spirit of charity made him eager to go. The Founder begged his disciples to have him brought to the charity ward and thus be rid of him. Excusing himself for the trouble he was causing them, he urged them to unburden themselves of it and of him and begged them as a favor to find a place for him in the asylum open to all the poor. That, of course, was the very reason why the Brothers could not bring themselves to agree to what he wanted. Never would they have entrusted to the hands of strangers the care of an invalid so dear to them. They looked after him as sedulously as good children can do for a dear father, and they provided for all his needs, insofar as their extreme poverty permitted.

During these two spells of illness—or rather this one protracted malady—De La Salle showed no anxiety over the future of his Institute, which his death threatened with imminent ruin, no desire to live, no alarm over what would happen to his beloved children. All he sought to do was to keep himself united with Jesus Christ, to share his sufferings in peace, to maintain his heart detached and in total indifference as regards living or dying, to abandon himself to God's hands, to resign himself completely to his holy will, to offer himself as a sacrifice to his greatness and majesty, and to assume the dispositions of a willing victim awaiting with tranquil submission the divine hand which was to immolate him.

The pious Founder, having been delivered most unexpectedly from the dangers and agonies of a death which had come so close to him, thought only of consecrating to the glory of God and to the progress of his Institute, with renewed zeal and redoubled fervor, the life that God had given back to him. Once he recovered from his illness, the first thing he did was to forget all about it. He had just found out by experience that his body was not made of steel and needed proper care, even more than most, but this experience did not make him much more indulgent toward himself than formerly. As always, he was the only one on whom he took no pity and whom he continued to mistreat.

### The death of Brother L'Heureux and its consequences

A second journey to Reims, where his presence was needed, furnished him with the occasion of offering God a new sacrifice, perhaps the most painful of his whole life. We know how attached earthly fathers are to their children and how much they suffer on losing those who hold first place in their hearts. Spiritual fathers suffer no less when God takes away from them those among their children whose

virtue makes them doubly dear and on whom they had founded high hopes. De La Salle had just offered God the sacrifice of his own life. God had been satisfied with the dispositions of his heart and in his goodness had given him back to his fledgling Institute which had no other visible support.

In his place, however, God wanted another victim, a choice one, the best that the little flock could provide. This victim was Brother L'Heureux, of whom we have already spoken at length. Among the Founder's children, no one else was more worthy to replace him in God's sight. By designating him as his successor, De La Salle had preferred him to all the rest; the Brothers had ratified this choice by electing him to be their Superior in the place of their father. He thus occupied in the hearts of all the first place. He seemed to be the Founder's right arm; he was considered the only one capable of replacing him in his absence and of making him live again after his death. For this reason, he was the victim most agreeable to God and the one whose death would cost De La Salle the most.

God chose him and took him away by a premature death at a time and in circumstances which added to the pangs that wrenched the heart of De La Salle, a new Abraham, who so loved this new Isaac and counted on him to insure his spiritual posterity. As we mentioned previously, the servant of God had called this Brother to Paris to have him ordained. When he left for Reims, the Founder appointed him Director of the house. He expected to find him there on his return and to present him in person for ordination. Such was the plan the pious Founder had in mind, but in God's designs, Brother L'Heureux was to die a simple Brother and to disrupt by his death the projects of De La Salle.

No sooner had De La Salle reached Reims than a letter arrived informing him that the Brother had fallen ill. Another told him that the case was serious; a third declared that the doctors had given up hope. The unperturbed Superior, who had left his Isaac in perfect health, did not pay too much attention to these missives that apprised him of this illness. He did not think it could be too serious or that there was any real danger. He felt that the Brothers in Paris were needlessly alarmed and should not have tried to make him share their panic. He still did not believe there was anything amiss until a final letter arrived telling him that the sick man was dying and accusing him of disregarding the previous communications.

At this, the good father, as though awakening from a deep sleep, reproached himself for his incredulity, realized the danger in which his spiritual son lay, and understood with a pang that he indeed might

lose him. Although the sickness had not seemed too serious at the beginning, it quickly turned into a fatal malady with no time to forestall its course. He set out at once for Paris and made as much haste as possible. Apparently, the illness had started with a slight fever which suddenly rose and brought on delirium. Death intervened so rapidly that the dying man barely had time to receive the last sacraments. Brother L'Heureux had been buried for two days when De La Salle reached Paris around midnight.

This was the first thing he learned when he entered the house. The news broke his heart. Never in his whole life did it receive a deeper wound. The first onslaught of sorrow made him shed tears, but getting control of himself, he appeared to be ashamed of this weakness and reproached himself for it. This first movement of human grief was followed by a deeply religious reaction and resignation to God's holy will. He adored the eternal designs and declared on the spot that the sudden demise of Brother L'Heureux was a warning from heaven indicating that the Institute should not include priests among its members. Ever since this event, the Founder remained more firmly convinced than ever that his Community should be based entirely on simplicity and humility and that it would be destroyed if the priesthood ever were introduced into it.

By distinguishing some members from the others, the priesthood would produce inequality among the Brothers and cause division. Their exalted rank would oblige them to apply themselves to higher studies and would give them more knowledge of doctrine than the role of a schoolteacher requires. With this more advanced learning than the rest of the Brothers, they would succumb to vanity, curiosity, singularity, controversy, attachment to their studies, dispensations from the Rule, ambition, and the desire to exercise the more brilliant functions of the sacred ministry. All these defects would not take long to breed others: distaste for the mission of the teaching Brother in a Gratuitous School, boredom in this laborious and tiresome occupation, and finally envy and jealousy. In a word, the Brothers chosen and given preference to enter the sanctuary and ascend the altar would not be slow to put themselves above the others, to dominate them, to become disillusioned with their vocation, and to lose its spirit and the grace of their state, and they would lead others astray as well.

Would such priests be humble enough to confine themselves to the limitations of a vocation which has nothing flamboyant about it in the world's eyes, nothing to flatter self-love? Would they restrict themselves to the role of the schoolmaster and to the useful and necessary function of teaching catechism simply without trying to display their

talents? Those who thought they possessed special abilities would be tempted to exhibit these to the world, to leave the classroom, and to start preaching from the pulpits to win worldly acclaim. The flattering desire to join the reputation of a spiritual director to that of a popular preacher would make them want to be confessors as well as preachers. And would the preacher, the director, be willing to leave the pulpit and the confessional to come back to the classroom? Would a large crowd of hearers belonging to the best society or a following of distinguished and devout women not make these priest-Brothers devote themselves to these eye-catching functions? Would they not be tempted to prefer those sermons which build reputations and the other glorious functions of the priesthood to the instruction of poor and unprepossessing children?

It must be admitted, therefore, that the priestly state is not compatible with that of a teaching Brother and that De La Salle was rightly inspired when he forbade his followers to aspire to the sanctuary. Nothing could be wiser; hence, nothing can be more necessary than the rule he made that closes this door to them. There is perhaps no other which affects the Brothers' state more directly and which is more important for them to observe if they wish to preserve the spirit and grace of their vocation. The death of Brother L'Heureux, which was the occasion for this rule, seems—if we consider all the circumstances—to have been a sign of the divine will on this point. All the Brothers should keep this in mind and let this remembrance help them put aside all temptations to study for the priesthood, if the thought ever came to them.

De La Salle felt that this point was so important that he took the precaution of forbidding the Brothers to learn Latin and of enjoining on those who knew Latin not to make use of it under any pretext, so as to put everybody on the same footing and to maintain them all in the spirit of simplicity and humility which should characterize them. This rule is the guardian of the others, the strong outer wall which defends the fortress.

Experience has shown, in fact, that the Brothers who know Latin or who have some acquaintance with philosophy and theology are not, as a rule, those who succeed best in the Institute and that several of them failed to persevere because they never acquired the spirit of simplicity and humility that their vocation calls for. Instead, allowing themselves to be led astray by vain dreams, they wanted to play the role of professors rather than learn how to carry out the ordinary duties of their state well, something which is not as easy as we might imagine.



There have been, however, several Brothers who put aside what they had learned in their higher studies and attached themselves only to knowing Jesus Christ and him crucified, to imitating his hidden and obscure life, to making themselves humble and obedient like him. Such men, who had truly acquired the spirit of their state, preserved simplicity and humility and carried out their task as teachers with great blessings from heaven. Brother L'Heureux was one of these. After finishing his seminary studies, he still seemed the same as before: simple, humble, regular, mortified, obedient—indeed, a model of all these virtues. After his death, Monsieur Baudran gave him a solemn funeral, the details of which he arranged himself. The parish priest of Saint Sulpice wished by this token of generosity to draw attention to these men whom the world took pleasure in vilifying and making fun of and to provide a striking proof of the esteem he felt for the new Institute.

#### Characteristic virtue of Brother L'Heureux

This virtuous Brother whose death was so deeply regretted by his Superior had deserved a special place in his heart and the universal esteem of all his Brothers, who respected and loved him as a living and breathing copy of De La Salle. In those early days of joyous ardor in the Institute, this Brother was the leader of the most fervent. He distinguished himself by the practice of the purest virtues. Humility was the one he cultivated the most and of which he gave the most outstanding examples. As he had been one of De La Salle's earliest recruits, he was also one of those who shared from the beginning the insults and humiliations that befell him. He had plenty of occasions to drink deep with De La Salle from the chalice of opprobrium with which the entire population of Reims rewarded the efforts of these new apostolic workers during the first eight or ten years that they labored in that city.

Brother L'Heureux, far from growing disenchanted with such a humiliating vocation, succeeded in drawing from it all the profit which it provided for his soul. He had learned at the feet of Jesus crucified that scorn and insults were precious graces like those bestowed on the greatest saints. So he applied himself to welcome them with eagerness, following the example of De La Salle. This worthy son of such a father had become so much like him that the Brothers thought they beheld the one in the other when the humility of De La Salle forced them to choose Brother L'Heureux to replace him as the Superior. This son occupying the place of his father, this simple Brother

raised above the priest, never forgot who he was nor who the humble former Superior was whom he saw at his feet. Obligated to command the one whom he should have served and whom he wanted to obey, he tried to do so in the spirit and with the humility displayed by Saint Joseph when he saw Jesus and Mary conforming to his orders.

Embarrassed at seeing De La Salle so dependent on him, he humbled himself and was overwhelmed by confusion, the more the holy priest submitted to his direction. In addition to his rare humility which won all hearts, Brother L'Heureux displayed other excellent gifts. He possessed an agile and penetrating mind and a talent for speaking well. To this he joined great mortification of all his senses, a deep attraction for prayer, and a thirst for obedience, the fruit of his profound humility. These last two virtues showed themselves very obviously when the vicars-general came to the community to depose him and to put De La Salle back in his rightful place. No moment had ever seemed so sweet to this humble Brother as that in which he saw his beloved father restored to his position as Superior. He eagerly profited by his return to the ranks, which he had so much desired, and he took up again his former practices of humility and obedience so readily that he seemed to wish to rival the examples De La Salle had just given to them all.

These two virtues proved useful to him in the study of Latin, philosophy, and theology which he then undertook on the orders of his Superior. They merited for him such brilliant and profound insights that he won sincere admiration at the theology school of the Canons Regular of Saint Denis at Reims. When questioned or when someone challenged him, he seemed hesitant and thoughtful at first; the words came out of his mouth with difficulty. He delayed replying, which occasionally provoked impatience on the part of his fellow students, who laughed at him and sometimes called him a big ox. But once he began to speak, he did so with such ease and his replies were so penetrating that the others were obliged to consider as an eagle the one they had mocked as a big ox.

In all this, he followed the principle he had been taught by De La Salle, which was not to answer hastily but to think out his replies before letting them reach his lips and not to let them strike the ears of hearers until he had offered them to God in his heart. It was his faithfulness to this practice which made him so slow to speak and afterward obtained for him from God the ability to speak with elegance and ease. Besides, his love for study never dried up his spirit of interior prayer and mortification. Knowledge did not puff up his heart. He made use of it only to keep himself smaller and smaller in his own

eyes, more submissive to his Superior's orders, more humble with regard to his Brothers.

The time he had to devote to study did not at all affect his punctuality at the community exercises. His regularity on this point could not have been more exemplary. Those seeing him among the first at community exercises might have thought that he had nothing else to do but to be present at the first sound of the bell. But as knowledge is not acquired by intuition and since only assiduous effort can gain it for us, he borrowed from his night's repose the time he would not take away from the exercises of piety. The loss of such a remarkable subject deserved all the regret that the holy Founder felt over it. It was indeed a great loss which could only be felt very keenly by him whose main concern was the progress of the work whose success seemed to require a long life for Brother L'Heureux.

## CHAPTER X

*Steps taken by De La Salle to prevent his Institute from crumbling and to organize it better; he makes a vow with two of the Brothers never to give up the work; he resolves to establish a novitiate; the opposition he encounters to this project, which he overcomes by prayer and penance; the fervor that reigned in this house of training.*

We have seen previously all that De La Salle did and suffered at the beginning of his work. For almost fifteen years, he had been laboring at this thorny task, this garden watered with his sweat and tears and nourished with the blood of his veins through his cruel disciplines and other mortifications. And yet, his undertaking was making only slow progress. Each time he got ready to lay a new stone during the construction of this edifice, he found new obstacles, and while with loving hands he built it up with so much effort, other hands, evil intentioned and actuated by malice, destroyed and tore down what he had built.

When the holy Founder came to Paris, in addition to Brothers in the schools of Laon, Guise, and Rethel, he had left behind in Reims a community composed of three different sections in which there were about fifty persons. Within two or three years, this tripartite community had all but disappeared. The seminary for country schoolmasters,

which he had launched so successfully and which was full of fervor when he left for Paris, lost its main support when it lost him. It fell apart almost at once. True, the young men trained there did a great deal of good, but what they accomplished only made more regrettable the disappearance of such a useful and promising foundation.

The junior novitiate for the Brothers did not meet with any better fate. These boys who were being trained from the age of thirteen or fourteen were the seed that would spring up and yield a hundredfold, a harvest that the Community of Brothers would reap in due course. In a short time, however, this fruitful source of new recruits dried up under the very eyes of their wise Superior. De La Salle had summoned them to Paris so as to have them near him—as we mentioned earlier—to train them himself and to make of them at Paris what they had been at Reims, that is, a well-cultivated and fertile seedbed of future Brothers. But he was obliged by Baudran and by Sadourni, the sacristan of the parish of Saint Sulpice, to send them to the church to serve Mass. Here they met their downfall. They no longer had activities capable of nourishing their piety, and they also found opportunities for distractions which, little by little, caused their religious spirit to grow cold.

Finally, De La Salle had left behind in Reims a community of sixteen Brothers, not counting the two he took with him to Paris. But that same year, 1688, eight of these Brothers left the community, on account of the Brother whom he had appointed Director over them, a harsh and indiscreet man. To make matters worse, during four long years, that is from 1688 to 1692, these empty places were not filled, and only one new recruit joined to replace the deserters. Who can at this point fail to wonder at the incomprehensible designs of God with regard to his servants? At times, he is pleased to bless their labors; at other times, to strike them with sterility. Sometimes he lends a hand in what they are doing, and the work prospers and yields fruit to their hearts' desire. At other times, he withdraws his hand, and then, like Saint Peter, they labor much but accomplish little or nothing.

Such was the disconcerting prospect facing the Founder at the end of 1690. After so many sacrifices, so much labor and trouble, after so many crosses and persecutions, after so much apparent success, he was back where he had been ten years earlier, with only a handful of Brothers. His undertaking had not made much progress, and he could fear that it would eventually die out. No doubt he felt much perplexity, as we can surmise by reason of the vow we shall mention shortly. He saw himself almost alone, abandoned, lacking resources. He had just come back from death's door, and it seemed that the kind

of life he led, which he did not wish to mitigate, would not last too long. Brother L'Heureux, on whom he had relied, was dead, and no one else seemed capable of replacing him. Several of the Brothers still with him were ill or exhausted by their work. The others needed some sort of spiritual renewal, since they had fallen off considerably from their first fervor. All these discouraging prospects gave him ample reason to doubt the future of his Institute, which as yet did not have any definite constitution or a truly solid foundation.

After prolonged thought about the means for consolidating an edifice which threatened to collapse even as he was trying to erect it, he was inspired: 1) to associate with himself two Brothers whom he considered the most apt to sustain the fledgling Community and to bind them with him by an irrevocable bond to pursue the establishment of the Institute; 2) to establish somewhere near Paris a house where the sick and convalescent Brothers could go to recover their health; 3) to gather all his Brothers there during vacation and to have them make a retreat in order to help them recover, along with their first fervor, the spirit and grace of their state; with all of them needing his advice, direction, and attention, he wished to bring them together under his wing, so to speak, as the mother hen does with her chicks, so as to afford them spiritual rejuvenation and bring them back to their early charity; 4) to establish a novitiate for the training of candidates. All this was eventually accomplished as he desired but at the price of what anxiety and opposition, as we shall see.

### De La Salle and two Brothers vow to maintain the Institute

His first concern, in view of the uncertain future, was to make sure that the Institute would possess at least two Brothers capable of maintaining it in case he himself should die. He needed zealous, courageous men unwaveringly attached to their vocation. Even so, he feared that discouraged by the difficulties and obstacles they would encounter, disheartened by the contradiction and opposition they would have to endure, they might lose heart and abandon an enterprise which had as many enemies as there were demons in hell and almost as many as there are people on this earth. Hence he thought it proper to oblige them to this by inspiring them to make, along with him, a vow in the following terms:

“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 efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools in the manner

which will seem to us most agreeable to you and most advantageous to the said Society.

“And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest; I, Nicolas Wiart [sic], and I, Gabriel Drolin, from now on and forever, until the last surviving one of us or unto 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 if we were obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone.

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

“Done on this twenty-first day of November, feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 1691. In testimony of which we have signed.”

This group of three men was for the Institute the triple bond or cord spoken of by the Holy Spirit which is not easily broken and which is capable of drawing everything along with it. The three associates felt an equal ardor to bind themselves to each other and to confirm it by a vow of never abandoning the Community, of persevering in it until death, and of sacrificing themselves to uphold it, perpetuate it, make it live on, and finally, down to the last survivor, take charge of all its interests. They were inspired to make this vow, which they pronounced kneeling, one after the other, at a time when it seemed most unlikely that the Institute could, in fact, survive. This frail little bark, which had already undergone so many and such furious tempests, seemed about to founder. Always on the brink of catastrophe, it was preparing a means to escape shipwreck and to reach safety, thanks to the indissoluble union and the unconquerable confidence of its leader and its two principal members.

The commitment of these two Brothers whom De La Salle considered as the pillars of his tottering Institute was the only resource on which he then based his confidence. If death overtook him before he had finished consolidating his work, he was entrusting to the zeal of these two principal followers the care of completing what he had begun. He was not altogether fortunate in his choice, for one of the two later became a new Judas, as we shall relate. Forgetting both the vow he had made and the father whom he was bound to obey, he created a division in the Society and abandoned it.

As for Brother Gabriel Drolin, he remained faithful to his promise, attached to his vocation, and inseparably united with his virtuous

Superior. Nothing in the world was able to withdraw him from his holy state—not isolation, not the offer of benefices, not the furious assaults that the Community underwent during his absence, not the desertion of a great many Brothers, not the civil death of De La Salle. I call “civil death” De La Salle’s flight from Paris and his going into hiding in order to escape the fury of his persecutors. This good Brother Gabriel Drolin, the dean of the entire Institute, is now some seventy-two years old. He has returned from Rome, where he had been sent and where he spent twenty-six years in obedience to the orders of De La Salle, and he now resides in Avignon. As he had completed his ecclesiastical studies and been admitted to the tonsure before entering the new Institute, he was capable of receiving a benefice and of fulfilling other clerical functions, but his virtue, although several times put to the test on this point, always emerged victorious. Faithful to the promise he had made to the Most Holy Trinity, Brother Gabriel preferred to remain an obscure servant in the house of the Lord rather than to leave it and take his place among those who enjoyed benefices or occupied more distinguished positions. We shall have occasion farther on to speak about him at greater length.

De La Salle plans to open a novitiate, but the pastor objects

Once De La Salle had made sure, as far as he could, that his Community would not be entirely orphaned if it pleased God to call him home, his next concern was to try to find, at Issy or at Vaugirard, some lodgings or a house where he could send the Brothers with impaired health, for he perceived that several of them had reached a state of exhaustion which could have had serious consequences. Their frugal nourishment, joined to the work they did in the schools and to their deep interior life, contributed a great deal to this situation. The Brothers needed rest and, in particular, fresh air, because the house they occupied in Paris was small and had no garden. It did not afford enough fresh air to men who spent their days in absorbing spiritual exercises or in classrooms made very stuffy because of overcrowding.

After looking quite a while, he finally found a house on the outskirts of Vaugirard which seemed to be just what he needed. It stood apart, offered plenty of open space and fresh air, and was unpretentious enough—all the qualities he thought desirable. It is this modest residence that the Brothers can consider as the second cradle of their Institute. Here it renewed its strength and recovered its early fervor. Here the novitiate was launched. Here the generous practice of humility, poverty, obedience, mortification, and penance rivaled that

found in the heroic days of other religious orders. No wonder that the devil, who was perturbed by all this, did everything he could to prevent the founding of the novitiate.

De La Salle's first thought, after having sent the ailing Brothers from Paris to Vaugirard, was to gather there all those who had joined the Society in the last three or four years and to try to renew them spiritually by means of a good retreat. Vacation time made this possible without interfering in any way with the work of the schools. He could bring his men together and counter the falling off in their early fervor by a series of spiritual exercises and by his own example. This he did. The first result he aimed at was to make known to these neophytes, in private and in public by his burning exhortations inspired by the Spirit of God, how far they had fallen from their first charity and how much they needed a good novitiate to stir up the heavenly flame which was burning so low in their hearts. Indeed, they had become superficial, relaxed, and tepid. An eight-day or ten-day retreat was not sufficient to cause them to recover the true interior spirit of recollection, interior prayer, mortification, humility, and obedience which they had never perfectly acquired or which they had at least partially lost. All such a retreat could accomplish was to prepare them to reacquire these virtues and to inspire them with a sincere desire of doing so.

As we know, grace—like nature—does not achieve a perfect work except by degrees. As a rule, both of them take a long time to form a person. The stages of life follow one another, and the transitions from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to youth are necessary before a person becomes perfectly mature. The same rule holds true in the spiritual order. A virtue that we are beginning to acquire demands much time and constant exercise before it becomes perfect. The holy Founder, who wished to lead his disciples to this goal, felt therefore that he could do nothing more useful than to keep them with him as long as possible in order to complete their formation by all the exercises of the interior life. Fortunately, he had at his disposal some of the young men who had studied at the seminary for country schoolmasters in Reims. They agreed to replace the Brothers who remained with him at Vaugirard. Thanks to their cooperation, all the schools in Paris, Reims, Laon, and elsewhere were able to operate normally, and the novitiate was opened on 8 October 1691.

This plan succeeded as well as De La Salle had hoped. By the end of the year, all the Brothers whom he had kept with him to work at reforming their lives seemed to have become other men. The servant of God beheld them such as he had desired to see them: leading



interior, recollected, mortified, and penitent lives and practicing blind obedience and submission. When he sent them away, he told them to write every month to give him an account of their interior dispositions and to receive his advice. He considered this regular account of their consciences as the support of the regularity of the Brothers in the schools; he recommended it earnestly and was very exact in answering their letters. His own letters, filled with piety and unction, helped to keep up the fervor of those who were far from him, and by calling them all back to the novitiate each year during the vacation period, he succeeded in renewing them in the spirit and grace of their state.

Thus, whether absent or present, he kept watch over the Brothers, guided them, directed their consciences, and by obliging them to give him a faithful account of all the details of their behavior, he kept them in perpetual dependence and perfect regularity. In this way, he succeeded in making them remain novices wherever they were, and so they lived in their communities as they had at Vaugirard, to which they returned every year to reinvigorate in themselves the grace of their vocation and which they left full of zeal, eager to carry out their mission and after having sanctified themselves, to sanctify the students entrusted to their care in the schools. The holy Founder, without limiting his activity to all these points, made a visit at least once a year to each of the schools and to the Brothers who taught in them, and he examined the progress being made by Brothers and students alike.

This first effort at establishing a sort of training center made it plain how necessary it was to set up a regular novitiate and to have all the postulants go through it before admitting them to the Society, in order to test their vocation and give them a solid grounding in virtue. The favorable results he had gathered from his recent efforts showed him what an abundant harvest he would reap from such an institution.

The devil himself was terrified at the thought and employed all his wiles to thwart the proposal. It was, in fact, strenuously opposed by the very man who should have furthered it. De La Salle might have gone ahead with what he had begun, keeping quiet about it and not informing Monsieur Baudran. If he had acted thus, he would not have encountered an adversary in his protector. But a man who sought nothing but God's will in everything and abandoned all his projects to the desires of Providence was incapable of devious behavior, artifices, or disguise. Candor, simplicity, and purity of intention characterized him, and these qualities did not allow him to undertake anything without the advice and approbation of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, whom he considered as his superior.

De La Salle therefore felt obliged to ask for the pastor's permission to open his novitiate, but he was unable to gain a hearing. As we know, not all virtuous men think alike, and often enough they oppose one another's projects when the will of God is not obvious. I do not know what led Baudran to refuse his consent to De La Salle's wishes. Perhaps he feared that this new venture, in all likelihood, would grow day by day and might involve added expenses as the number of candidates increased and that this would add to his own financial responsibilities. Perhaps he secretly wanted to circumscribe the zeal and labors of the Brothers within the boundaries of his own vast parish, as Le Tellier, the archbishop of Reims, had wished to limit them to his diocese. Perhaps he foresaw that times were getting harder and that he would not be able to show himself as generous as he would wish in providing for the number of postulants who would join the Community. Be this as it may, nobody really knows why Baudran, a man of such genuine zeal and charity, a firm friend of De La Salle and the protector of his work, would not go along with the proposed novitiate. All we know is that he vetoed the project and forbade De La Salle even to think of it.

This order put the servant of God in a very difficult situation. On the one hand, he entertained deep veneration for the pastor of Saint Sulpice. He considered the latter's words as laws which he respected. He knew he was sincerely interested in what was good, a friend of all pious works, and the main supporter of his foundation. He felt sure that Baudran's intentions were of the best and that he possessed deep insight and profound virtue. On the other hand, he also realized that opening a novitiate was absolutely necessary; it was impossible for his work to prosper without it. The desertion of several of his disciples, the relaxation into which others had fallen, the superficiality and lack of interior life exhibited by the more recent arrivals, the irresolution and hesitation that most of them showed regarding their vocation—all stemmed from the same source: the fact that they had not made a true novitiate.

Furthermore, have not all religious institutes established a period of testing for those who seek to join? Has the Church herself not prescribed this for all religious orders? Where and how can the candidates be tested and trained, if not in a novitiate? Without it, how can we judge the genuineness of their call? How can their character and dispositions be gauged? What guarantee can we have of their perseverance, if we have not taken the time to examine them during a sufficiently long period of probation? How else can they be induced to set aside the spirit of the world and to acquire the Spirit of God? How

can they purify their consciences by a good general confession and acquire a strong desire of doing penance and of expiating their sins, of healing the wounds of their souls, and of correcting their evil habits? How can they arm themselves against their natural inclinations or learn how to combat their passions and to mortify the flesh, if no one tries to train them in this spiritual combat? When and where will they learn how to live in recollection, become interior men, love solitude, silence, and interior prayer, submit their judgment and will to the yoke of obedience, lose all taste for the world's pleasures, attach themselves to piety, cultivate virtue, and make their sanctification their primary concern, if not in a good novitiate?

Sending Brothers out to teach without having for a long time trained them to understand themselves, the world, and the devil is like sending workers out to labor in the vineyard without tools, like sending soldiers into battle without weapons to face the foe. What good can a Brother do in the classroom if he is not firmly grounded in virtue? If he has not sanctified himself, how can he labor at the sanctification of others? As the Holy Spirit asks, how can he be good and useful for them if he is not such for himself? What ability to teach lessons in virtue can that man have who does not give the example thereof? Piety is taught by deed rather than by word, and even though children are not too enlightened, they trust their eyes more than their ears in this matter. Men called to be teachers in the Christian Schools should be a light and a fire for those whom they educate—light to instruct, fire to warm, light to point out the beauty of virtue and the hideousness of vice, fire to devour and consume all love for sin and to enkindle the love of God. It was to all those who are called to teach Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ said, *You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth.*

Since the Brothers share this exalted vocation, can they ever be too holy? And how can they become holy if in a good novitiate they do not make the acquisition of perfection their unique study? De La Salle was fully convinced of these truths; hence, he ardently longed to establish a novitiate and felt that the delay in setting up this citadel of his Institute would spell the ruin of his Community. He had just witnessed the marvelous results produced in the Brothers at Vaugirard by a year spent in the exercises of the interior life. He had only too much experience of the evils that the lack of proper formation had produced among his followers. Finally, the Community had lost men who had joined without quite knowing what they had come for or who were not really settled in their vocation, and others whom God was really calling could not see any gate that provided an entry to the

Community. It was, therefore, absolutely necessary to open such a gate by founding a novitiate and to show them where to come, a place to put them to the test, to train them, and to sanctify them.

De La Salle's fasting, penance, and prayer to win over Baudran

When he saw that he could not prevail upon Baudran, De La Salle had recourse to prayer and fasting, to vigils and renewed penances. For about a year while this opposition lasted, he fasted daily and prayed almost all night in a retired room. He ceased praying only when sleep closed his eyes in spite of himself and robbed him of the use of his senses. Overcome, he slipped to the floor and rested there. Lying on this stone floor resulted in his contracting a serious case of rheumatism which almost deprived him of the use of his limbs. There the Brothers found him, all but frozen, when they came looking for him in the morning. The concern they felt for his health emboldened them to remonstrate with him over the danger of paralysis or something worse to which he was being exposed by thus sleeping in such a spot, and they begged him not to give them any further reason for worry.

He yielded to their pleas, and it was at their insistence that he discontinued this sort of penance. His use of other corporal macerations, such as bloody disciplines, hairshirts, and iron chains, only increased, and he did not diminish these practices until he found no further opposition on the part of the parish priest to the creation of the novitiate. He had plenty of time to pray and do penance, because Baudran did not give in very soon to his wishes. The pastor even sent word to him, by one of the Brothers, to give up these austerities and prayers and to stop trying to contradict the orders of God, because it was not the divine will that there should be a novitiate. But sometime later, Baudran abandoned the struggle and was obliged to yield to the power of the servant of God's prayers. To avoid all the difficulties which might be raised against it, De La Salle took the precaution of securing from Monsieur de Harlay, archbishop of Paris, the permissions necessary to formalize the community in the house he intended to occupy.

Victorious with God's help, De La Salle desired nothing more than to remain in his dear Bethlehem. This is the name deserved by a house where solitude and poverty made it resemble the stable where Jesus was born. In fact, it was as bare and as poor as the Infant Savior's cave. A few benches to sit on, a few straw pallets laid on the floor, were all the furnishings available. Open to the elements, the

house did not shelter its inhabitants from wind, snow, or rain. Windows and doors were out of joint; windowpanes were broken, and the holes in the walls of the house, which had been unoccupied for some time and which nobody thought of repairing, made it a real abode of penance.

Those who lived there slept on wretched straw pallets with a small bolster stuffed with oat straw. These pallets were laid on planks extended between sawhorses; they had no mattresses, no curtains. A single thin blanket and sheets of the coarsest cloth completed the sparse furnishings. Sleeping almost in the open air, in winter the Brothers endured all the rigors of the season. Those who were near the windows were drenched by rain or covered with snow in winter-time. The others froze, too, since they could not warm themselves, because the wind entered from every side. When they awoke, they found that their breath had congealed on the sheets, making them as stiff as boards. They got out of bed as cold as when they had retired.

#### *Austerity of life in the novitiate*

Only De La Salle had the privilege of having some warmth during the night. His bed was no better than that of the others nor placed in a more convenient spot, since it was near a window. The whole house contained only one or two mattresses, which were reserved for the sick. They had given one to the servant of God, but he would not use it. The Brothers were careful to place it on his pallet. He was equally careful to remove it when he got ready to go to bed, and the next morning they could see it lying on the floor by his bed. Thus nobody could conceive of how he kept warm during the night, exposed as he was like the others to the freezing drafts. In order to sound him out, the Brothers who slept in the same room, amazed because he seemed not to mind the cold, decided one day to complain that they could not get warm all night, exposed to drafts as they were, and got up as cold as when they went to bed. De La Salle seemed surprised when they told him this and declared that on going to bed, he felt as cold as the bed itself but that little by little he grew warmer. He added further that he never felt cold during the night.

Changing their underclothing was another painful mortification in this house. Every Saturday evening throughout the winter, each person found on his pallet a clean undershirt which was frozen stiff, for it could not be dried out. The undershirt had to be taken as it was, and during the night, it merely thawed out rather than dried. During the day, it was another source of mortification to have to wear a damp

undershirt and to dry it out by body heat. For more than one person, this penance must have lasted until the following night, since a half-frozen body could not generate enough heat to dry out a damp undershirt in so short a time. This penance continued all through the winter. During the day, they had no fire; during the night, they could not get warm. The only way these penitents could warm themselves up a bit was by using the discipline.

In fact, they used it constantly, and hairshirts were also common. The example of their Superior made them eager to do this. Although he had for so long been torturing his own body, he had not yet succeeded in satisfying his anger and vengeance toward it. His holy compulsion for tormenting it seemed to grow rather than diminish with time. It is certainly remarkable that De La Salle should have been able to hold out for so long against the rigors of such austerity. He never tired of lacerating his flesh and of bloodying the cruel disciplines, armed with pointed rosettes, that he used on himself. One day, while De La Salle was with some others in the garden, a Brother who was sweeping the room where De La Salle slept found one of these instruments of penance. Wrapped in a piece of paper, it was still covered with fresh blood.

With such a model, the Brothers, stung by a noble emulation, made giant strides in the way of penance. Because they wanted to become men of sorrows, they practiced different kinds of mortification to make the body suffer. Only obedience placed limits to their ardor, and what did they not do to win a favorable reply to their pleas? De La Salle needed all his firmness to restrain them, all his patience to endure their importunities in this regard. In truth, this great penitent was not too reluctant to grant them these permissions; he showed himself generous in this matter. After night prayer, the Brothers surrounded him. One asked permission to take the discipline; another wanted to remain in interior prayer until eleven or twelve o'clock; some wanted to sleep on the bare floor, while others wished to practice some other kind of mortification.

Thus in the entire house, there was scarcely a corner that was not reserved for some particular type of penance. Each one chose a spot where he could chastise his body without interference and with full liberty. The blows of the disciplines resounded in every direction, but the ears which heard them were used to this sound and paid no attention. And yet, even apart from all these austerities, the lifestyle followed in this house was in itself a severe form of penance. The entire day was devoted to exercises of piety as constraining as they were laborious; these kept all the dwellers in the place closely applied to

God. They recited very slowly, while standing, the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin. At various times, they made a total of three hours of interior prayer, always on their knees. There were two hours of spiritual reading, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. The rest of the time was taken up by similar exercises of piety or of mortification.

The repasts were what one would expect, given the poverty of the house and the rigorous spirit of penance that reigned in it. Water was all that the Brothers drank. No cooking ever took place there during the seven years the novitiate occupied the building. Every day someone brought in a hamper from the Brothers' residence in the rue Princesse the ration of bread, the soup, and the plain, unappetizing dishes which were all they had to eat. It was quite a concession that they condescended to warm these provisions up a bit before serving them. Who can believe it? The leftovers from the community of the priests of Saint Sulpice and from a couple of other poor religious houses in Paris provided nourishment for De La Salle and his novices; the only thing extra they ever got was tripe and ox feet. As I said before, people accustomed to decent meals could not have endured the sight of such food, so repulsive was it even to behold, or else they would have thought they were practicing great mortification by simply looking at it. Nothing but keen hunger or the habit of self-denial could have enabled anyone to find any satisfaction in such meals.

However, by making them wait a good while every now and then for this food, Divine Providence took care to make it more palatable to those who had to eat it. Since the provisions were brought from a considerable distance, rain, bad weather, muddy roads, and other circumstances sometimes delayed the Brother who was delivering them. It even happened that he was robbed on the way. Thieves would lie in wait for him as he passed, and several times they did him the favor of relieving him of his burden. As they were probably even hungrier than the Brothers—for this happened only during periods of widespread famine—they were overjoyed at thus finding a dinner all prepared. Although the food was not of the highest quality, their hunger proved an excellent sauce and made them pronounce everything delicious.

When the Brother in charge of fetching the provisions for the novices arrived at the house, terrified, and gave the news to De La Salle, the latter replied with a smile, *God be blessed!* Then he gently begged the Brother to go back to Paris to try to find enough food for another meal, which constituted dinner and supper together and which, as we can easily understand, did not seem at all tasteless to

men whose appetites had been sharpened by the keen country air and the day-long activities they had engaged in. The admirable part of it all was that De La Salle and his novices thought they were too well provided for and that most of them deprived themselves of part or all of their meager portions. All of them lived on alms such as the poorest of the poor come begging for at the doors of rich houses. The Brothers in Paris, as I have said, would go and ask for the leftovers from the tables of various communities and out of charity sent these to the novices at Vaugirard.

The custom of making the accusation of faults before dinner and supper led to another which grew out of the first and proved no less mortifying. The ordinary penance given at such times was to take the discipline in some private place. And so, it often happened that while the others were in the refectory, about half of the Brothers were performing this painful exercise. As a rule, there were always some who began the meal with this penitential hors d'œuvre, and the feature which the most mortified ones considered the best part of it all was that they often had time to enjoy this prelude at length. It might happen that the pious Superior, distracted and overlooking the ones who were not present because they were taking the discipline, forgot to send someone to tell those continuing this penance to stop. Thus he gave them ample time to inflict more punishment on themselves, for these humble penitents, who would not have dared to take a discipline in hand except through obedience, awaited word from their Superior to stop using it, and while waiting, they continued to scourge themselves vigorously.

Still, it generally happened, even though a bit late, that some Brother, noticing those who were absent, ventured to remind the Superior of those who were doing penance and had him call them back. Then one mortification was followed by another that completed the first. Because the period allotted to the meal had partially elapsed when the penitents returned to the refectory, they had to leave along with the others after taking only part of their food and so had only half a dinner or supper. As they were never sent back to finish their meal, they had the advantage of joining fasting to the discipline or whatever other kind of mortification they practiced. Those to whom this happened appeared the most satisfied and showed the most elation during recreation. Far from complaining—like those of whom the Prophet speaks—when they were not filled, they rejoiced over their good fortune and were delighted at having been able to punish their bodies at leisure and to leave them fasting, after whipping them like animals that one can goad onward only by beating them and while



regretting the scanty food given them, because they seem undeserving of it.

The fervor that reigned in this novitiate was indeed extraordinary, so much so, that to satisfy the novices, penances were not parsimoniously handed out. The most difficult ones were those which they accepted with the greatest joy. Most of them, to oblige their Superior to treat them with the utmost rigor, exaggerated their faults, and when he did not impose on them penances as severe as they desired, they threw themselves at his feet to implore him to be more stern and to punish them himself for their cowardice and tepidity. Others, following the maxim of Saint Francis de Sales, asked for nothing but accepted with joy mortifications which they had not chosen: eating nothing but a crust of bread, drinking only a swallow of water, remaining on their knees in the middle of the courtyard during almost all the time of dinner or supper or next to a window when curiosity had induced them to glance through it as they passed. These, too, would come back to the refectory only toward the end of the meal, yet they said grace after meals with the others for food which they had left virtually untouched. In a word, in this training school for the virtues, the novices sought to practice all of them; they concentrated all their ambition on running along the narrow and thorny path of perfection.

#### Unusual poverty of this novitiate

By the poverty of the house and the meals, we can judge that of their apparel. People who lived only on leftovers given to them in charity and who—if I may apply to them the words of the Gospel—were glad, *like whelps, to lick up the crumbs fallen from the master's table*, were also clad like beggars. The most miserable paupers would not have stooped to pick up anything belonging to the Brothers or to their Superior. To tell the truth, their external appearance was that of paupers. I am convinced that if the stockings, shoes, robes, capotes, and hats worn by the Brothers, along with all the rest of the furnishings of the community, had been dumped out into the street, they might have drawn pitying glances from passersby, but no one would have extended a hand to pick them up.

All their clothes together would have amounted only to a bundle of vermin-infested rags, fit only to be thrown on the refuse heap. If we had inspected these novices, one after the other, from head to foot, we would have felt either horror or commiseration. Not one wore shoes, hat, robe, or other garment that could not have been classified as useless or fit only to be thrown away. Old, worn-out

shoes which hardly held together, faded and torn stockings, robes and capotes patched and mended with various strips of differently colored cloth, and old hats with holes in the brim, all spotted and soiled, made the individual Brothers look like scarecrows. That provoked pity and made the lot of them resemble a troop of wretches whose profession alone distinguished them from tramps, whom nothing but compassion could make respectable to those capable of feeling compassion.

De La Salle, as poor as the rest and resembling them in all things, covered his shabby soutane only by a capote which was no better and which was green with age. He wore a hat with a wide brim which flapped down on his shoulders. When they all sallied forth to go to a nearby chapel where De La Salle said Mass and gave them Communion, they looked like a troop of paupers leaving the poor-house or men arriving from another planet. They resembled the Gabaonites, who deceived Joshua and made him believe by the worn condition of their clothes and the disarray of their accoutrement that they were strangers arriving from a distant land. These Brothers remind us of those heroic men who, looked upon as the offscouring of this world, served God in hunger, thirst, and nakedness. They were all so pitifully clad that when they had to go to the parish church to make their Easter duty or to attend Mass on the feast of the patron, Saint Lambert, it took them two or three days to get ready and to dress themselves so as to appear in public without offending decency. No matter what pains they took to avoid shocking people who had no use for the holy virtue of poverty, so despised and detested in the world, they still attracted the attention of the least attentive and most indifferent people, drawing down on themselves the scorn of the former and the compassion of the latter. To make matters worse, the lice which generally accompany extreme poverty aroused the indignation and contempt of all and kept people at a distance from them, so that even in church they were shunned and isolated.

Most admirable of all, these men who had become poor by choice considered poverty as a treasure and seemed more satisfied than Solomon in all his glory. Their leader, after exchanging the riches of Egypt for the poverty of Jesus Christ, had succeeded in making them appreciate by his example and his words the hidden manna which he discovered in destitution. The proof of how satisfied their hearts were and of how lovingly Divine Providence watched over the little flock is the fact that not one of them fell sick from such rigorous living and extreme poverty during the seven years that the novitiate remained at Vaugirard. Oh truly fortunate village, sanctified by the

presence first of Olier and then of De La Salle! De La Salle can be called Olier's spiritual son, since he was trained in his seminary and there acquired his spirit. These were two of the holiest persons that Paris possessed during the past century. Fortunate indeed is the village that had the honor of being the cradle both of the famous Seminary of Saint Sulpice, source of so many saintly ecclesiastics, and of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools.

It seems that Divine Providence, which takes care to oppose the most exalted examples of virtue to the vilest scandals, of heroic sanctity to the outpouring of sin, was pleased to bring all these holy people capable of sanctifying and edifying it to this town which was so badly reputed on account of the disorders and debauchery that occurred there. Indeed, wherever the disciples of De La Salle went, people thought they saw a different race of men having nothing in common with ordinary mortals but the earth they inhabited. Seeing young men in the flower of their age walking silently through the streets of Paris, as recollected as though they had been at the foot of the crucifix, attentive to God's presence, not distracted by the uproar of the tumultuous city, as deaf to the sounds that struck the ears of the other passersby as to the insults offered them, we might have thought that they were dead men risen from the tomb who had come to visit the living without wishing to associate with them. As for me, when I saw De La Salle accompanied by his followers at this time, I thought I beheld Saint Francis with the early friars who went abroad to edify others and who thought they had preached enough when they merely appeared in public.

## CHAPTER XI

*Continuation of the same topic; the fervor that reigned in the novitiate at Vaugirard.*

The divine fire enkindled in the novitiate of Vaugirard helped to revive the fervor of all the Brothers in the Institute. The generous ones found there a new increase of charity, and those who had let their first ardor cool somewhat returned there to purchase with their blood and at the price of the most painful mortifications that pure gold which is beyond all price and makes its possessor sovereignly rich. I would be only telling the truth if I declared that De La Salle's ingenious zeal for the sanctification of his children found the means to

make all the Brothers become novices once again and to keep them such for the entire period during which the novitiate remained under his direction at Vaugirard or in Paris. How did he do this? Each week, he called all the Brothers teaching in the Paris schools back to the novitiate, and every year during the vacation period, he summoned those employed in the Reims area. He had them all take their places among the novices and follow the novitiate regulations. In this way, the fervor of the Vaugirard novitiate spread to all the Brothers; every Brother was a novice and remained such all his life.

Those from Paris, being the nearest at hand, spent half of their time at Vaugirard. They returned there not only during vacation but on Wednesday and Saturday evenings and on the eves of feasts, and they went back home on Friday and Monday mornings. They slept on straw pallets laid on the floor. During the time they spent in this holy house, nothing distinguished them from the novices. All devoted themselves to the same exercises. The older Brothers could be discerned only by their greater fervor. They served as models for the more recent recruits and incited them to the practice of mortification and penance by furnishing them with more striking examples of these virtues. The inconvenience of coming and going between Paris and Vaugirard so often, in winter and summer, of covering this long distance in mud or snow, in heat or cold, never made them less willing to come to take refuge again underneath their father's wings in this house where mortification reigned. No matter what condition they were in when they arrived, soaked by rain or snow, muddy or sweaty, once they reached the house, they did not grant themselves the satisfaction of resting a while, of cleaning up, of warming themselves, or of drying out their clothes. They immediately proceeded to join the exercise then in progress, as though they had just risen, fresh and rested, from a comfortable bed.

On these occasions, the spirit of mortification was ready to replace the little satisfactions that natural instinct might have desired in a place so lacking in anything of the kind, for if the Brothers had heeded the desires of the flesh, always eager for rest, they would have vainly sought any means of satisfying themselves in a house where everything of this sort was wanting. There was practically no furniture, only what was absolutely necessary for the bare support of life. They could not find there either chairs to sit on, clothes to change into, or even fire for the ordinary necessities of life.

The only time they made any fire at Vaugirard was to warm up the food brought in from Paris. The rest of the time, no matter how severe the weather might be or how cold it got, no fire was ever seen.

The poor Brothers, frozen as they were, had no other means of thawing themselves out other than the warmth of charity or the rays of the sun when the weather warmed up again in summer, or, as I have already mentioned, the use of the discipline.

They could have said with truth that the place they lived in was the house where everything was lacking. To find any contentment there, one had to leave his body at the door on entering. Only men who forgot that they possessed a frail body or who remembered it only to maltreat it could get used to living in a house where nature was crucified while the spirit rejoiced. Consequently, fervor was necessary to sustain human frailty, and for this reason, those who did not possess it could not remain very long, as we shall soon see. But at all events, as Saint Teresa says, *Where there is less nature, there is more grace*. God communicates himself to the soul that scarcely holds to its body any more and, although still joined to it, forgets it and rises above its desires. The abundance of the divine gifts and consolations the soul receives is measured by the courage it shows in renouncing itself. In these academies of virtue, the most mortified people are always the happiest. The Brothers who came from Paris to Vaugirard, often with so much difficulty, weary after their class work, their long walk, and the novitiate exercises, were happy when a laborious day was followed by an uncomfortable night which provided them with another opportunity for mortification on account of the damp beds, where they nearly froze during winter in this house where fire was forbidden.

Holiness attracts new recruits; many leave, but some remain

These new inhabitants of the building at Vaugirard, whom their Superior kept hidden with him in silence and obscurity and who were never seen outside the house except when they went to church, still could not avoid the eyes of passersby and of people who lived in the village. Their unusual manner of living and their outlandish garb pointed them out sufficiently and made them known soon enough. The extraordinary character of their virtue impressed everyone, and either from curiosity or from a desire of being associated with them, people wanted to see them at close range and to enter into conversation with these men who seemed to have broken with the world entirely. As we know, holiness sooner or later pierces the veils in which it shrouds itself and, in spite of itself, sheds its light abroad. Grace makes use of the attraction it exercises to charm those who are called to live holy lives. The sight of the saints inspires a desire for holiness,

and contact with them is a powerful means of acquiring it. After keeping them hidden within the secret of his face, as Scripture expresses it, God reveals the saints to those whom he wishes to make like unto them, and when he does this, he inspires such persons to be joined to them. This is what happened in the present instance.

When they saw De La Salle at the head of his disciples, people might have thought that they were seeing the famous Trappist abbey transported to the outskirts of the capital or that a colony of those holy penitents had come to edify the great city and teach it that these later times had witnessed a revival of the poverty, humility, penitential spirit, and life of prayer which had characterized the first centuries of the Church. Candidates, moved by God and struck by the saintly life of the Brothers, asked to be admitted the very year after the house was opened. On 1 November 1692, De La Salle gave the habit to five novices and one serving Brother. Later, he had to make a selection among the many who presented themselves. This was not difficult to do and did not take long. Those who proposed to enter into this Community which could rightly be called the Community of Martyrs of poverty and penance could not remain in it without a generous determination to embrace both these virtues.

Those whom curiosity or destitution had led thither were punished once they entered, for the company, the lifestyle, and the example of these crucified men seemed unbearable to them. The penance and mortification practiced there, which nothing but grace based on a solid vocation could make anyone accept willingly, frightened them and quite soon obliged them to ask that the door be opened to let them out of a place which they considered as a prison for culpable criminals, self-condemned to a life sentence of the poorest and most austere existence. If human respect held them back for a few days, this time seemed like months and years to them, and they longed to be delivered from a captivity which tortured their senses, their bodies, and their very souls.

De La Salle, without any prior investigation or selection, admitted all who presented themselves. He felt sure that the kind of life led in the house was like a strong and impetuous wind which, while letting the good grain fall into the granary, would winnow the grain from the straw and the cockle. He was right. Among those who came without a real vocation and an efficacious desire of giving themselves to God, the strongest and most resolute could not make up their minds to stay more than a week or ten days at most. When they finally left, they did not fail to sound the alarm and to broadcast everywhere that one had to be his own murderer in order to live with the Brothers. They also

asserted that if anyone had a secret enemy, he should sing the praises of the Community to the man on whom he wished to take revenge and thereby inspire him with the desire of entering so that he could have the malicious pleasure of seeing the other leave, as he himself had done, after making him expiate the pleasure of satisfying his vain curiosity by a week or so of imprisonment.

The famine which raged in 1693 and 1694 brought in other young men who had nothing to eat and who were looking for some way to survive. These, too, did not remain very long. The rigorous penance repelled those whom hunger had induced to enter, and they preferred to take their chances with starvation outside rather than remain and have food at the expense of their bodies. Others, led by the Spirit of God, were impressed by the good example they found. These soon gave proof of a strong vocation. The happiness that shone on their faces betrayed the fervor that filled them, as did the willingness they showed to lead a crucified life. Thus the house was like that great net in which all sorts of fish, good and bad, were caught, but the heavenly Master did not delay in sorting out the good and rejecting the others. At most, one or two out of a dozen finally remained. Yet this little company of choice souls eventually reached the number of thirty-five who persevered with unconquerable courage in a house which was a center for poverty, penance, humiliation, and mortification.

Only two of those who remained were really poor

What made God's action appear most obvious was that among this number, only two were really poor lads. The others came from comfortable homes and could have lived at ease by remaining there, but good example and fervor made them enjoy living in a house which offered them nothing but contradiction to nature and rejection by the world. This abundant grace, which made the water spring out of the rock, which transformed the bitter waters of mortification for these true Israelites, was the reward won by the generous sacrifices De La Salle had made of his canonry and his family wealth. *Ever since I gave up everything*, he himself often said, *I have never met a single candidate tempted to leave us on the grounds that our Community was not endowed.* These are the concluding words in his memorandum which we have used up to this point since beginning this second book.

The vocation of these young men must indeed have been very firm to make them persevere in such a crucified state as this. Grace must have been abundantly poured out on all these postulants who

requested their admission to such a poverty-stricken place where even bread was often lacking. We shall soon see, in fact, to what extremities De La Salle and his flock were reduced in 1693 and 1694. During this period of famine, they were spared none of its hardships; it was a miracle of Providence that they managed to escape starvation. No doubt nothing but their extraordinary fervor could have made these young men remain in a house where the general scarcity was more keenly felt than elsewhere, especially since if they had left the Community and gone home, they would have enjoyed everything they needed.

How did De La Salle manage to provide for all those who presented themselves and whom he admitted without hesitation during these tragic times? A Brother who is still living—who witnessed what went on and has related it all to us—recalls that out of every dozen candidates, only two or three remained; hence there must have been three or four hundred who entered, since thirty-five persevered. That they survived at all was indeed a miracle of Providence. Prodigies of this sort are performed by God for those who abandon everything for him and have left everything for Jesus Christ. As everybody was welcome in this humble house and since it was open to all the poor, they came flocking in with confidence. It cost nothing to enter, and if after staying awhile, anyone wanted to leave, he did so as freely as he had entered.

Sometimes the novitiate served as a refuge for people who had nowhere to go or as temporary lodging for others who were looking for something better. Among these were some priests from afar who remained as long as they liked, with the possibility of saying Mass every day, of rising later than the Brothers, and of going out to attend to their business. Except for a half carafe of wine which De La Salle had served to them at each meal, their food was the same as that of the Brothers. Such a poor and penitential house had nothing better to offer. Nevertheless, this free guesthouse, so near Paris, was convenient for those who had business in the city; thus there were usually two or three of them in residence. When De La Salle had to go to Reims, one or the other of these priests celebrated Mass for the Brothers in his stead.

### De La Salle gathers the school Brothers to the novitiate

When vacation time came, the zealous Superior made haste to procure for the Brothers of Reims, Laon, Guise, and Rethel the benefits that the novitiate afforded by calling them all to this blessed house to



be renewed in the spirit and grace of their vocation. Their stay began with a ten-day retreat, but in fact the entire month of September was a long retreat. De La Salle led them in the exercises and inspired them even more by his example than by his words, filled as they were with unction and the Spirit of God. Thus, this good father had the satisfaction of seeing his children come together every year—from thirty, forty, or fifty leagues away—to throw themselves into his arms, eager to learn from him all the lessons he wished to teach them. They vied with one another in listening to his instructions, seeking his advice, submitting to his reproofs, and profiting by his example.

During this month, he sought to do for these Brothers what he had done during the year for the ones who lived in Paris: namely, to show himself a tender father, a vigilant shepherd, an enlightened Superior, a charitable director, a skillful and experienced physician of souls. He enlightened them by his insights, read the depths of their hearts, laid bare the roots of their vices and passions, teaching them how to overcome these, and filled them with the courage and strength needed to win daily victories over themselves. These virtuous Brothers did not receive these graces in vain; like the laborers called late to the master's vineyard, they strove to catch up with those who had begun earlier, and by redoubling their fervor, they tried to make as much progress in virtue during this one month as the others had achieved in the course of the preceding year.

Such noble emulation could produce only excellent results; while stimulating the fervor of both groups, it also increased their humility. The early arrivals, ashamed to see the latecomers so far advanced on the narrow path which leads to life, strove to equal and to surpass them. The latter, confused at seeing themselves outstripped, accused themselves of slackness and tepidity and made strenuous efforts not to be outdone in the race where every step costs so much to nature and where no progress is possible save by doing violence to oneself.

The little house at Vaugirard was so full that only the attic remained available to lodge the Brothers who came from far away, nor was it wealthy enough to provide each of them with a pallet. The only way to accommodate them all was to have them sleep in this attic, after the fashion of domestic animals in barns, on one big heap of straw.

Here is an instance of the fervor characteristic of these Brothers from the provinces. One of them had arrived, like the others, on foot. Although very weary, he did not seek repose, save in the exercises of piety which he followed all the rest of the day. Then, noting the different penances practiced during supper, he reproached himself with

his remissness. Feeling ashamed of himself and filled with the holy anger which he saw everyone in the house giving vent to against the flesh, he could not consent to go to bed without making his body feel the effects thereof. Impatient, unwilling to wait until the next day to carry out his share of penance—which was, as he could see, of daily occurrence in the house—he found it difficult to wait until after night prayer to ask for the permission which he felt ashamed for having delayed so long in asking. Once he had obtained it, he was even more embarrassed, because he had either lost his discipline on the way or had left it behind in the community from which he had come.

In those days, the Brothers, like valiant soldiers who always go about armed, invariably brought this instrument of penance along with them wherever they went. So this Brother, now that the time had come for him to engage his domestic enemy in bloody combat, resembled a warrior without weapons. Unwilling to withdraw from the fray or delay his attack for a moment, he had to appeal to another Brother's charity and borrow his discipline. He wielded it so vigorously that when he returned it, it was stained with his blood. Its owner could feel that it was moist and later saw that his own hand was bloodied. The next day he showed De La Salle the proof of the fervor of the newly arrived Brother. He thought the holy Founder would be impressed, but De La Salle, who was accustomed to such things and whose own instruments of penance were dyed with his blood every day, was surprised at the Brother's astonishment and made him understand this by a smile and a shrug of his shoulders.

The way the Brothers from the schools spent the vacation of 1691 at Vaugirard became the rule followed in subsequent years. As long as the novitiate remained there—a period of seven years—all the Brothers gathered from everywhere by De La Salle's order, and they renewed their fervor by a retreat of ten days plus a month spent following the novitiate exercises. It was here, as we related previously, that a dish of absinthe was served to them. The cook, seeing that the garden was full of this plant and thinking that it was edible and might in a pinch replace some other vegetable, went ahead and served it, a fact which proves both his own ignorance and the poverty of the house. Mortification had reached such lengths that no one would have taken the liberty of removing the flies which fell into the soup or into the portions served. Nothing rebuffed these mortified men after witnessing the examples that their Superior gave on this point, for he ate his soup, even though it was full of flies, without seeming to notice them. When one day he saw one of the Brothers removing the insects from his bowl, he made him a sign not to be so fastidious.

Although life in the house at Vaugirard was most austere, De La Salle found it a real earthly paradise, a place in which he took delight, because there he was able to give free rein to his fervor and to yield himself, without restraint, to the spirit of penance and prayer. Concerned with nothing but his own perfection, he pursued this goal in the constant search for and practice of abnegation and death to self. He taught nothing that he did not first carry out. There was nothing humiliating, nothing austere, and nothing repugnant to nature of which he did not give the others a continual example. The meanest duties, the most toilsome chores, and the most mortifying practices he tried out first before inspiring others to embrace them.

In addition, he was the man who did everything in this little Community, filling the roles of Superior, Director of Novices, Bursar, and Procurator. True, this latter function in a house which lived solely on alms and where there was nothing to defend against thieves or swindlers did not call for a great deal of effort. The task of providing for the needs of the Brothers did not take much from his hours of recollection and prayer, nor even from his hours of rest. It often happened that he did not hear the alarm go off, even though he had it near him, for his humility had also led him to take on the duty of awakening the community, and during several months, he added this responsibility to all the others he fulfilled in the house. He went to bed very late, and his sleep was short, so it is not surprising that he slept heavily and that at times the alarm was not loud enough to awaken him. When this happened, he made public penance for it and condemned himself to remain on his knees during dinner, with only a dry crust of bread to eat, after accusing himself in the refectory of his supposed fault and humbly asking pardon of each Brother, kneeling in the posture of a criminal.

While De La Salle was at Vaugirard, a certain nobleman dwelt in the neighborhood, a man of great virtue who led a very retired life in a sort of solitude near the observatory. This was the Count du Charmel. He used to spend a part of each year at the Trappist monastery, especially during Lent, and devoted the rest of his time to all sorts of good works. His daily schedule included long periods of interior prayer and, although a secular, he exemplified for the world the recollection of those famous religious whose example he went to observe and whose penance he emulated. It might have seemed that a monk from La Trappe had left his solitude and come in the person of this gentleman to the neighborhood of Paris in order to edify the public and to proclaim to men that he belonged to that illustrious monastery. These two great servants of God, each totally preoccupied with

his own life and with pleasing the Lord while remaining forgotten by men, lived close by each other without knowing anything of one another.

One day, three Brothers who were on a journey were brought to the chateau of the Count du Charmel by the local parish priest. This meeting apprised him of the fact that his neighbors in the village on the outskirts of Paris were a community whose lifestyle could be considered a worthy rival of the penitential and mortified existence proper to the monks of La Trappe. He also learned that De La Salle was from the same part of the country as himself: since the chateau of the Count du Charmel, in the diocese of Soissons, was only nine leagues from Reims.

When the three Brothers came through the village, they asked for hospitality at the house of the parish priest. The latter was even more surprised at the modesty shown by these young men, at their piety and decorum, than he was at the unusual dress they wore; he wished to share his astonishment with the local aristocrat. Upon hearing the description the pastor gave of the virtue of his guests, the count was eager to see and to speak with them. He inquired after their manner of living and the purpose of their Institute. Everything he learned impressed him most favorably, and what he observed in these three young Brothers edified him so much that he wished to offer hospitality in the future to all the Brothers who might pass through the village. He even urged them to ask De La Salle on his behalf to choose his chateau as the regular lodging place of the Brothers and to send all those who might be travelling in the vicinity to stay with him.

### The Count du Charmel visits Vaugirard

The sight of these Brothers, whom he welcomed and entertained with so much charity after making interior prayer with them in his chapel, inspired him with a strong desire to know their Superior. On his next trip to Paris, he did not fail to stop to see the man whom God had made use of to establish a work so useful to the Church, and as a pledge of his esteem and affection, he presented him with a richly decorated antependium and matching chasuble. In time, he and the servant of God became fast friends, a relationship which ended only at the count's death. De La Salle himself entertained a singular esteem for this pious nobleman, and to sum up his high regard for him, he used to say that he was a man whose prayer was uninterrupted.

Monsieur Bouïn, the celebrated spiritual director whose eminent virtue shed such luster on the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, also came

from time to time to visit the Bethlehem of Vaugirard and to converse with its Superior, but before asking for him, he was always careful to inquire whether he might be at prayer or engaged in some exercise which required his presence. If such was the case, he did not allow anyone to inform De La Salle of his arrival but contented himself with asking after his health. This was an example of the punctuality and the faithfulness in observing little details shown in all things by this great master of the spiritual life. If he was told that De La Salle could easily leave off what he was doing, he would go into the garden and, kneeling, would wait there for his disciple, for it was he whom the pious Founder had chosen as his spiritual director to succeed Monsieur Tronson. As the community of Brothers at Vaugirard was not far from the country house belonging to the Minor Seminary of Saint Sulpice, which is located in the neighborhood, De La Salle himself sometimes went there to consult Boüin, the superior of this establishment, who had replaced Monsieur Bernier, who then resided at Angers.

I am referring here to the vacation of 1695, a blessed period when the seminarians could see one saint coming to consult another, ask for his advice, and conform to it with respect. When De La Salle entered the junior seminary house, he made the presence of God felt there, so deeply did he himself seem penetrated by it. He impressed those who did not know him by the aura of grace and virtue which always seemed to hover over his face. Those who had never seen him before said to each other, "Who is the venerable priest who looks so much like a saint?" Boüin sometimes told them that this was a former canon of Reims, who had given up everything to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles. The father showed much esteem and respect for the virtues of his spiritual son. When some of the young ecclesiastics waxed eloquent on the subject of the poverty, the penance, and the recollection of De La Salle while others praised the humble and mortified life embraced by him and his disciples, Boüin gave them to understand that what he himself admired most was his perfect abandonment to Divine Providence and his unreserved resignation to God's good pleasure. He added—to give them an idea of the degree of perfection which the Founder of the Christian Schools had attained—that De La Salle was prepared to see the ruin of his work with unflinching gaze and that he had set himself in a state of total indifference and remained completely abandoned to God's holy will regarding this supremely sensitive matter.

Once during the same vacation period, the ecclesiastics of the Minor Seminary of Saint Sulpice and the Brothers saw their two superiors officiate, one after the other celebrating the sacred mysteries.

This was on the feast of Saint Lambert, the patron of the Vaugirard parish. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed. Boüin had brought his community there to attend Mass, and De La Salle had done the same with his group. Never was there a devotional spectacle more striking and more edifying than to see at the altar these two holy priests of the New Law renewing in an unbloody manner the sacrifice of the cross. The mere sight of them inspired the onlookers with faith, respect, recollection, and devotion. They seemed so filled with these sentiments themselves that an observer might have supposed that they saw Jesus Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament with their own eyes. Both held themselves before him in total annihilation and in that sacred awe which Saint John in the Apocalypse ascribes to the twenty-four ancients and to the four living creatures prostrate before God's throne.

Boüin celebrated holy Mass first and gave Communion to his seminarians, doing this with an extraordinary air of sanctity. He might have been taken to be one of the seven highest spirits who stand closest to God and are consumed with love before his eyes. It did not seem possible that there could be on earth another mortal holier than he was, more filled with God and his holy love. Nevertheless, I dare say that De La Salle, who celebrated Mass after him and gave Communion to his followers in his turn, appeared even superior and more distinguished in the order of grace. In truth, anyone beholding these two saintly priests might have thought he saw two seraphim, but the latter seemed to betray on his countenance a greater elevation before God and a more eminent sharing in his holiness. No one should be surprised at this. The life De La Salle led at Vaugirard was a real martyrdom, a true crucifixion of his flesh, as we have abundantly shown. All his senses were in captivity; scarcely one member of his body remained without its own special torment.

And yet, it pleased God to add to so much voluntary suffering certain physical ailments even harder to bear, and most astonishing, the remedy to which the former canon of Reims had recourse was more painful than the illness itself and constituted a new form of torture.

### De La Salle endures a cruel remedy for his rheumatism

The reader will recall that during a whole year the servant of God had spent most of his nights praying and doing penance and that the repose he did take was on a stone floor. He there contracted a severe case of rheumatism which later on afforded him ample occasion for practicing patience. After suffering violent pain for a considerable

time, he eventually found himself unable to move his arms, his legs, indeed, his whole body. Remarkably enough, the illness grew less severe on Sunday, and the incapacity for celebrating Mass which he had suffered from all week diminished. On Sundays he had himself brought to the chapel, and he dragged himself to the altar as well as he could with the help of the Brothers. They held him upright so he could say Mass. Every step cost him as much suffering as if he were walking barefoot upon a carpet of thorns, but his joy at being able to celebrate Mass made him disregard his pains. Once he stood at the altar, his own fervor and divine grace upheld him, and surmounting his natural weakness, he forgot his pains and remembered only the sacrifice he was offering to God. Then, happy at having immolated the Divine Victim and been nourished with his body, he gladly returned to his bed of suffering.

Still, this malady, although it won great merit for the Founder, would have made him incapable of serving his Community if it had lasted indefinitely, so he sought some remedy for it. I do not know who the doctor was who proposed the therapy which only a saint would have accepted. It was one of those cures which nobody would want to experiment with on his own body and which he would recommend only to an enemy. But De La Salle considered his body his greatest enemy. There is nothing to wonder at if he seized this opportunity to add a new species of torment to so many others which he had inflicted on his flesh. Here is what they did.

They laid him on a sort of wooden grate; underneath him they placed two big iron pots full of hot coals. On these they strewed branches of juniper so that the hot, penetrating smoke might enter the pores of his body, thus provoking a sweat that would draw out the rheumatic humors or consume them while fortifying the nerves and the other parts of the body. In addition, while one side of the patient's naked body lay exposed to the burning heat, he was covered by blankets and quilts to concentrate all the warmth in his members. In this new form of torture, neither side of his body had reason to envy the other.

The servant of God suffered in every part of his frame; none of his members could escape. The little room where this operation was carried out was heated up so much by the burning coals that it soon resembled an oven, so filled with smoke that it was difficult to breathe. The Brother who was taking care of the sick man did not dare complain. Having before his eyes a spectacle of patience that impressed him so much, he could not even think of his own discomfort. Seeing De La Salle stretched out on this sort of gridiron, he could not

help recalling Saint Lawrence, who had been roasted over a slow fire, and he judged by the generosity of the holy priest what strength charity must have imparted to the young deacon martyr to enable him to endure this cruellest of all tortures. The Brother was curious to find out how hot were the slats on which the patient was laid. He soon came to understand what De La Salle suffered, because on touching them, he found that he could not keep his hand on them or stand their temperature. The only relief that the pious patient allowed himself during this cruel procedure was to sigh and to repeat continually but softly the following words: *My God!* Even more frequently were these others which he constantly had on his lips: *God be blessed!*

Furthermore, he had to make use of this torture repeatedly. As a rule, rheumatism is a chronic malady which often recurs and which at certain periods of the year becomes more acute. It was, therefore, necessary to utilize this barbaric remedy several times and to put the martyr of penance back on his grill more than once. This state of suffering did not, however, prevent the Founder from keeping an eye on his novitiate and maintaining exact regularity in all the houses of the Brothers. He did not even wait until he was completely cured before going to visit the places where his presence was needed, for he considered his health as of no account whenever the service of God was at stake, and he took pleasure in sacrificing it to his glory.

The reputation of the new Institute began to spread, even as the number of Brothers increased. Virtuous ecclesiastics came to Vaugirard to make retreats directed by De La Salle. Among others, Monsieur Guyart, a canon of Laon, made a fifteen-day retreat under the guidance of this great master of the spiritual life. Impressed by so many examples of virtue which he beheld and touched by the intensity of grace which he felt in this holy house, he left it edified and consoled.

### Hardened sinners come to seek conversion

Thus, the reputation of De La Salle's saintly life spread abroad and brought to him notorious sinners who came seeking from his charity a cure for the infirmities of their souls. He was a fit instrument for God's hand to use in these most difficult operations of grace. God did indeed make use of him to bring about conversions which had been despaired of and which can be considered as real miracles of divine mercy. Indeed, the charity of the holy Superior provided these sinners, steeped in iniquity, with a confessor such as they desired: affable, obliging, patient, and unruffled at the recital of the most horrible crimes which they blurted out to him.



When they opened their consciences lacerated, blackened, and perverted by sin to a man whom they honored as a saint, they were amazed to find him unperturbed, unmoved, and as calm as if they had related to him the life of a saint. They were even more astonished to note that he seemed to entertain a higher regard for them than for himself. Thus in the most wretched souls there was born a confidence in this priest who considered himself a greater sinner than they and who thought he was only doing himself justice by adjudging himself the greatest of criminals.

We shall say no more on this subject here, for we intend to speak of it at greater length in dealing later with the holy Founder's virtues. Let it suffice to mention at this point in the story of his life how God at this time made use of him for his glory and for the salvation of several souls wavering on the brink of despair.

The servant of God's charity obliged him to lend himself to those whom the Spirit of God sent to him, as to a new John the Baptist in the desert, so that they might receive the baptism of penance and learn how to practice it in a house devoted to it. This ministry, however, did not distract the Founder from the attention he owed to his novitiate. Nobody understood better than he that all hope for the future of his Institute depended on the seriousness with which the candidates made their novitiate. For this reason, he would not entrust the guidance of the novices to anyone else. This tender father accompanied his children everywhere; he consoled them, encouraged them, instructed them, addressed to them pathetic and touching exhortations, presided over their various religious exercises, and led them in the most tiresome labors and in the humblest tasks. The Founder showed them in his person with what calm mockery must be endured, how to take pleasure in derision, in poverty, and in the cross; finally, he illustrated for them the meekness with which insults, outrages, calumnies, and persecutions should be received.

The efforts of the zealous Superior, watered by his sweat, tears, and sufferings, were blessed by God. His words fell upon willing hearts and brought forth fruit a hundredfold. The Founder had the joy of seeing his novices, like tender plants, docilely take the direction he sought to give them by allowing him to shape them without any resistance on their part. On their souls, open to grace, he made whatever impressions he wanted. His sons, modeled after their father, showed by their conduct that they had been schooled in virtue by a great master and that they had profited by his instructions and example. Even if the unusual habit they wore had not attracted attention, they would have been noticed because of their inviolable silence,

their unfailing modesty, their perpetual recollection, and their unwavering mildness amidst outrages which showed everybody that they were novices or Brothers of the new Institute.

## CHAPTER XII

*The famine of 1693–94 forces De La Salle and his novices to come back to Paris to find the means of survival; he endures with them the hardships of the times, but Divine Providence does not abandon them; later he returns to Vaugirard to continue the novitiate; he revises his rules and puts them in writing.*

The house at Vaugirard seemed to De La Salle a paradise of delights. The fervor that reigned there made it a gratifying place for him. He had to leave it, however—at least temporarily—when famine began to make itself felt with greater rigor toward the end of 1693. Vaugirard was no longer a safe refuge for the Brothers. The house was open to anyone who wanted to come in and was entirely unprotected. Occupied only by lambs, it was exposed to wolves. Their food, frugal as it was, excited the rapacity of the starving. It had already happened that the provisions were stolen from the Brothers bringing them from Paris, and the same miscreants or others like them were ready to pounce upon a meal which could be had already prepared, every day at the same place and time. Hearing of the robberies which were being committed everywhere by force and knowing that the food for the community had also been stolen, De La Salle realized that he risked being cut off from his source of supply and that the meals for the community could no longer be brought in safety from Paris to Vaugirard. So he decided that it would be best to move to Paris. He was forced to leave his beloved retreat for a few months and to bring his novices back to the Brothers' house in Paris.

They did not thereby escape famine. Before long, the Founder could say with the Prophet, *There is no bread in the house*. Indeed, although he remained calm in the midst of the general alarm that agitated the public, *he saw the tempest of hunger* threatening his Community and his followers, fearing *the terrible arrows* of starvation which God's hand in anger aims at both just and sinners in order to stir up the piety of the just and to remind sinners of their disorderly

lives. As for him, *he knew how to live in abundance and in penury*; he had grown accustomed to this, thanks to his long and rigorous fasts. Even though he and his Brothers suffered much during those calamitous times, he experienced the truth that *to those who fear God, nothing will be wanting*. What is most admirable is that at a period when the rich as well as the poor feared, with reason, that they might go without bread, he sought in Providence alone the means of forestalling the rigors of this cruel famine. When robbery was to be feared everywhere and nothing was safe from violence, when people disregarded justice and scorned authority, when some stole the crust of bread from others' mouths, he and his followers always had something to eat. They ate sparingly, of course, but without concern for the morrow.

In those days, in Paris and nearly everywhere else, one could see people rebelling, demanding bread, and threatening sedition. Some searched through the heaps of garbage in the streets hoping to find something to satisfy their hunger and gathering for food things that they could not have endured to look at a few months earlier. Others, driven out of the city by starvation, wandered about the countryside seeking herbs, leaves, and roots to eat. During this time, De La Salle gave his disciples, less confident than he as to the future, daily commentaries on these words of Jesus Christ: *See that you do not grow solicitous, saying, "What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed?" For all these things do the heathens seek. Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things.*

It was a time when there could be found at the gates of Paris, as well as in the city streets, swarms of poor, starving people whose piteous cries would have moved hearts of stone and whose cadaverous faces already bore the imprint of imminent death. The sight was enough to strike terror into the most intrepid souls. Mothers could no longer provide milk for the babies at their breasts. Others barely displayed what remained of a life that was ebbing away. They had lost almost all human appearance, so pale and emaciated were they, so disfigured by hunger. Some poor wretches lay on the ground here and there. Others could barely stand and no longer had the strength to stretch out their hands for alms or to open their mouths to beg for it.

Unperturbed over the future, sure of the care of his heavenly Father, De La Salle patiently awaited from God the food—or at least part of the food—needed each day. When it did not arrive or when it was delayed, he had recourse to the compassion of the One who distributes it, begging for it confidently from our common Father, who never refuses us in our need when we implore him with humility and trust.

Before giving the reader a detailed account of the heroic virtues that the famine provided De La Salle an extended opportunity for practicing, we must recall the various differences of opinion between him and Monsieur Baudran concerning the garb of the Brothers and the founding of the novitiate. Ever since that time, this great man, although so zealous for all sorts of good works, had closed his heart toward the new Institute. He no longer looked upon De La Salle as he had done in the past, no longer showed him the same marks of his goodwill. God permitted this to afford the patience of his servant ample room for exercise, for as we know, the hardest crosses saints have to bear are those fashioned by the hands of virtuous men. God uses the one to sanctify the other and often allows them to crucify each other.

Baudran apparently foresaw that the novitiate at Vaugirard might become his responsibility at a time when charitable donations grew rarer and would have to be shared by a large number of destitute people. He might, therefore, be unable to help out financially, so it was no wonder that he objected to its founding and that he was slow to assist it during the famine. In addition, the venerable parish priest had not forgotten the opposition he had met with on the part of the servant of God to his proposal to change the Brothers' manner of dress. He felt that he did not owe a share in his liberalities to a man whom he considered too inflexible in his convictions.

Baudran withholds the salary of the Brothers in the rue du Bac

De La Salle began to suffer the consequences of this coolness when the salary of 500 livres due to the Brothers at the school in the rue du Bac was withheld. Baudran himself had established this school and had agreed to pay this sum, but God allowed him to forget this, or perhaps the pastor changed his mind. The fact is that De La Salle and the Brothers had to bear the consequences of his forgetfulness or of his change in attitude, since the failure to pay such an amount of money came as a serious blow during a time of public calamity. The Brothers might have expected the 500 livres and the other donations, knowing the outstanding goodness and charity of the parish priest. This sudden and unexpected refusal and the fact that they, too, were poor left them a prey to destitution, so that they were exposed, as the Prophet says, *to the piercing arrows of famine and to feel its cruel wounds*.

To be brought to such an extremity must have seemed very trying to a man born into a wealthy family, reared in the lap of luxury,

and nurtured on the choicest food, a man who had been wealthy himself and could have lived in the most comfortable circumstances if he had not divested himself of everything. On such an occasion, almost anyone else, less given to God, might have allowed regrets over his sacrifices and his renunciation to penetrate his soul and might have reproached himself with having been indiscreet and imprudent. But he, immovable amid the storm of famine, never lost his peace and his confidence in his heavenly Father. Still, to put his trust to the extreme test, God allowed it to happen that he reached the point where he had absolutely nothing left: no bread, provisions, or money, not even the barest necessities of life. The bread had been served up parsimoniously, but finally there remained no food in the house nor any money to buy more. Saying to the Brothers, *We have no bread in the house*, he encouraged them and exhorted them to be patient. He seemed so content that none of them showed any chagrin.

At times it happened that they left the refectory as hungry as when they had come in and that the thanksgiving after meals followed hard upon the blessing before them; sometimes the whole meal consisted of a thin soup made from herbs. Even when they arose as they had sat down, fasting, they left the table with the renewed joy which the Spirit of God pours out into the hearts of all the truly poor men of the Gospel. Thus their souls were refreshed even though their bodies remained fasting. Once, they were agreeably surprised. Expecting nothing for dinner on entering the refectory, they found a small amount of very black bread. De La Salle presented it to the community but kept none for himself. Nobody would eat any until he did. Forced in this way, he took a tiny bite. His example was followed by all. Each took such a small amount that there was some left over. This bread was the result of a diligent search by the bursar, who apparently received it as an alms.

This insignificant, short-lived relief left them all as famished the next day as they had been before. The lack of food continued for so long a time and remained so severe that it wore down the most resolute courage and the most heroic patience. Finally, the long-suffering of the Brothers gave way, and they found fault with their Superior for pushing too far, as it seemed, their confidence in God, for even during this time of supreme calamity, he continued taking in new candidates who were driven more by hunger than led by a true vocation and who, by augmenting the number of mouths, merely added to the common wretchedness. Nothing upset or frightened De La Salle or shook his trust in God's Providence, in whose arms he rested without any concern, like a little child asleep on its mother's bosom.

### Divine Providence comes to the rescue

God, whose loving Providence had never abandoned him, gave a new proof of his solicitude to his servant and to his disciples, who were all at the last extremity. God showed that he had not forgotten them and that he had not overlooked their needs. After putting its virtue sufficiently to the test, God took pleasure in providing for his family by an unusual happening.

Baudran, peeved with De La Salle as we have said, had forgotten him, and his charity seemed asleep as far as the latter's needs were concerned. However, God had his own way of awakening him. One day, when there was nothing in the house in the way of money or food except one coin worth four sols, the Brother in charge went out to buy some cabbage for what promised to be the last meal for a community which, after eating it, had nothing to look forward to but starvation. This Brother sought to buy some respite against death by purchasing a few vegetables. He might have said, somewhat like the widow of Sarepta, "I am going to buy a few cabbages to prepare for the Brothers and after this respite from hunger to wait with them in patience for the end to come."

But that day God inspired him to present himself along with other beggars at the door of a charitable lady who was distributing alms. The noise made by this rabble had caught his attention. He saw this crowd of poor people stretching out their hands for charity and was moved to join them. When he did, his tall stature and his habit caught the eye of the charitable lady, who was quite surprised. She made him come in and asked him what he was doing out there among that throng of starvelings waiting for a trifling sum of money. "Is it possible," she asked, "that the famine is making itself felt among you, too? Is the parish priest letting the men who have the first claim on his charity suffer from want? The very men whom he employs to teach the poor children?" The Brother replied with much simplicity that his community was reduced to the last extremity, that for quite some time it had been suffering the effects of the famine, and that he was just then on his way to buy some cabbage with the four sols, the only money left in the house. He was going to serve the Brothers a meal which might well be their last.

The virtuous lady was more and more amazed at his tale. *Go in peace*, she told him; *I shall see about it*. She did so indeed, because she went and called to the attention of Baudran the extremity to which the community of his teachers was reduced, the men to whom he had entrusted the education of the poor children of the parish. As

this lady was one of the major contributors to the parish fund for the relief of the poor, Baudran paid attention to what she had to say. Her remonstrance was like an order for him, and he did not delay in sending De La Salle a little money to take care of the most pressing necessities of the house. Nevertheless, his heart, which had opened—whether by compassion for the wretched state in which the Brothers were or out of regard for a person from whom he received such generous contributions for the parish—soon closed again. About the middle of January 1694, when the famine was raging most cruelly, whether Baudran had exhausted all the funds he had left or whether he felt that he owed no special consideration to the Brothers over other needy persons, he informed their Superior that he would not give him anything more and that he would consider what he had given him at the end of the previous year as an advance on the salaries of the Brothers who taught in the parish.

Once again, De La Salle's patience was sorely tried. Once again, he saw his community reduced to extreme want; his children asked him for bread, and he had none to give them. What will he do in this new affliction? Fasting and prayer are two certain means of obtaining everything we want from the Father of all mercies. De La Salle employed both of them. Filled with confidence, he went to the church on the eve of the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul and prostrated himself at the feet of Jesus Christ to lay the needs of his family before him and to beg him to remember that he was its true Father.

Apparently, when he finished this prayer, the servant of God was inspired to go to Baudran with a kind of presentiment that he would be heard. He did go to see him and reported the desperate plight of his family. He could not have come at a more favorable moment, because Baudran had just received a sum of money from the king for the relief of the poor in his parish. His joy over getting such sorely needed help at such an opportune time, just when conditions were most tragic—help which enabled the charity of the pious pastor to reveal itself—enlarged his heart and inspired him with pity for the needs of the Brothers and their Superior. He embraced him and gave him 200 livres on the spot, promising that he would not take into account the extra money paid the previous year and that he would send him 200 livres more in two or three weeks, a promise which was kept. Thus the servant of God received a new proof that divine goodness never fails those who hope in God.

As a matter of fact, however, Baudran's help was slim enough; the 400 livres did not last very long in a house where everything was wanting. When this sum was exhausted, De La Salle found himself

once more in the same abject penury as before. He had no other recourse than to apply once again to Baudran, hoping to find in the latter's charity the help that all the needy had a right to expect and trusting that the heart of the pastor, so easily moved by the plight of the poor people in his parish, would show compassion toward that of the Brothers.

For the moment he was not disappointed. The pious pastor, touched by the difficulties of the community, agreed to provide the bread they needed, and at De La Salle's request, he gave the orders to his baker to send the community a fixed quantity daily. This gesture agreeably surprised the servant of God. Bread, the staff of life, was the main thing he wanted and the principal staple consumed in his poor family. The rest might be lacking, but if bread was assured, he did not worry too much. But if his joy was great, it did not last long. He had deceived himself in thinking that Baudran would give him the bread necessary for his community out of pure charity. If Baudran had in fact intended to do this, he did not take long to regret it and even to go back on his word. Toward the end of July, the baker sent him a bill for 800 livres, representing the cost of the bread he had supplied to the Brothers for two and a half months. This bill frightened Baudran and made him rescind his promise, persuaded that he could not sustain such a heavy expense. He even made De La Salle assume this debt, because he refused to give him any money and pretended that he had only intended to advance him the sum he had promised for the annual salary of the Brothers who were teaching in the parish schools.

No matter what De La Salle told him on the subject, Baudran remained deaf to his prayers and remonstrances and would listen to nothing. But Divine Providence again came to the rescue by a sudden drop in the price of wheat and by an even more unexpected return by Baudran to his former sentiments of esteem and love for the Institute of De La Salle. In fact, he promised to give the Brothers 100 livres a month for the rest of the year. This was considerable, even though it did not suffice to cover the cost of the bread, which amounted to 50 écus a month.

But Divine Providence, which had tested the confidence of God's servant by the most painful trials, remained De La Salle's unfailing resource. It provided for the necessities of the poor community in Paris while other far richer religious houses encountered great difficulties in coping with that difficult time. To make De La Salle understand that God alone had provided him with the unexpected help he had received, God once more permitted Baudran to shut his eyes to their



needs. With regard to De La Salle and the Brothers, the pastor seemed to lose the tender compassion he felt toward all other poor persons.

### New disagreements with Baudran over the residence

During the first six months of the following year, 1695, the Brothers received nothing from the pastor who employed them in his parish schools. Worse yet, Baudran refused to pay the rent on the residence which he himself had leased for them and which he had always paid for in the past. In addition, he wanted them to pay the rent for the previous year, 1694, the year of the cruelest privations, which had been for them a year of patient endurance, penance, and extreme poverty. This refusal was motivated by De La Salle's reluctance to move the Brothers from their lodgings in rue Princesse. Baudran wanted to send them to another house in rue Guisarde, and to force them to go, he refused to renew the lease on the first house. But as this second residence was not proper for a community, De La Salle would not accept such an unfavorable change.

Once again, he preferred to risk incurring the displeasure of the parish priest and to suffer, in consequence, the privation of the money which was due him in justice and in charity rather than to expose his followers to the drawbacks of the new house. Hesitant as ever to follow his own opinions, he consulted others on what he should do. The advice he received was to assume the lease on the house in rue Princesse himself, if he could get it. But would this be possible? It hardly seemed so, for what assurance could the owner of the property have that an empty purse could ever furnish the 700 livres annual rent? How could he count on the poorest Community in the kingdom, which lived on alms alone, which had to struggle so hard to secure the bare necessities of life, and which the famine had all but swallowed up in the year just gone by, as it had so many other unfortunates who had died of hunger?

De La Salle, however, who in almost all things hoped against hope, took a chance and leased the house. The agreement, although only a verbal one, held firm to the great astonishment of the servant of God himself, who could not sufficiently admire the action of the Almighty in this affair. It is indeed amazing that the owner of such a large house risked leasing it to men as poor as any in the poorhouse. When Baudran learned of the new lease, he sent for De La Salle and made a scene over it, but the servant of God mollified him by assuring him that he would assume full responsibility for the lease and would himself pay the rent from then on. So the pastor had nothing

more to say except that De La Salle *was a stubborn man who had always wanted to have the upper hand over him and over De La Barmondière*. Yet, with De La Barmondière, the servant of God had always acted according to the advice he got from Baudran, and with Baudran, he was guided by the advice of men for whom Baudran himself entertained the deepest respect.

He returns to Vaugirard to continue the novitiate

The worst of the famine now over, Paris no longer held any attraction for De La Salle. The racket in the streets, the important people who lived there, the constant turmoil of affairs which went on, made him sigh after the solitude of Vaugirard. So he hastened to go back there as soon as he could, taking with him five or six novices and some of the Brothers. There, at peace in the place of his repose, he seemed once again to forget that he was in this world and that the world itself still existed, so completely occupied was he with God and with the pursuit of perfection. At this he labored like a man who has but one thing to do and who takes that thing totally to heart. Considering that each day might be his last and feeling that he had not yet done anything for God, he sought to please him at every moment and to make his days full by the continual practice of virtue. Keenly scrutinizing the road he still had to travel, he hastened to advance with giant steps without seeking either rest or relaxation. Like the great Apostle, he forgot all that he had done and suffered for God and thought only of what he still had to do and to suffer.

The eight or nine Brothers whom he had left in Paris to teach in the schools of Saint Sulpice would come to spend their holidays and feasts at Vaugirard as they had been in the habit of doing before the famine. Thus they shared the company of their father and joined in the exercises of the novitiate during a good part of the year. Their worthy Superior, in solitude with them, was concerned only with helping them advance on the road to heaven while doing the same thing himself. He thought only of their sanctification and his own; he disregarded everything else and did not even think of it, any more than the dead do in their tombs. In him everything spoke of and incited others to the practice of the most sublime virtues: humility, mildness, mortification, penance, charity, recollection, the interior life, the spirit of prayer, the practice of poverty, and detachment. These virtues shone forth in all he did. He proclaimed them also by his silence and preached them by his constant example. In order to inspire their own fervor, all the Brothers needed to do was to look at him. Since he was

always at their head in the humblest duties, the most servile occupations, and those most distasteful to nature, they learned from his example that whatever we do for the love of God is done with joy.

### How he composes the Rule

When he saw that he was now able to have a certain amount of leisure, De La Salle felt inspired to profit by this to work at composing a Rule. As he had been careful to make experience precede the regulations he wished to establish, all he needed to do was to set down in writing the practices which the fervor of the Brothers had already sanctioned. Such was the wise conduct of this pious Superior. Everything that he planned to include in his Rule he had taken the precaution of having implied by his words and authorized by his actions. By studying Jesus Christ, he had learned to do before teaching, to lead before advising, and to advise before commanding.

In this way, his wise procedure tended to create lasting laws and faithful observers rather than variable laws, the obligation of which is thrown off as easily as it was accepted, thus multiplying infractions and violators of the law. Convinced of this, he had made a long trial of all the regulations which he planned to establish, and the experience of over fifteen years had taught him what he should add to or eliminate from the customs previously introduced. When he collected them all together in a code of rules, he was merely proposing practices which everyone had accepted and recognized. The least perfect among the Brothers could not object to them, because nobody was imposing new restraints on them; only that which had already been established was being reduced to writing.

Before taking up his pen, however, this new Moses, as was his wont, had sought the light and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and to draw down these on himself, he made use of fasting, prayer, and fresh practices of penance. When he had done this for a considerable time with great fervor, feeling his heart open to heaven's will and filled with the Spirit of God, he put together the collection of his rules.

Nor did this suffice. The humble Superior did not wish to impose anything by his own authority. He wanted everything to be adopted by the consent and goodwill of the Brothers. Although as their father, Founder, and leader he had every right to lay down laws for them and to make them submit to them, he had the humility never to impose anything on them without their agreement. He proposed to their judgment and submitted to their decision his concepts, sentiments,

and desires, eliminating whatever they were unwilling to accept and to confirm by their own approval.

As he had always acted before, so did he now act on this important occasion. He gave the collection of rules, such as they still exist today, to an assembly of the older Brothers to read and examine. He allowed them full liberty to make any remarks they chose and to tell him frankly what they wished to see added to or eliminated from the text. When each one had offered his observations, he listened with meekness and docility to what they had to say, and they all found him ready to make changes according to their desires. But these good sons were convinced that their virtuous father had greater insight by himself than all of them put together and that he had included in the Rule only what the Holy Spirit had inspired him with and what custom had authorized. They therefore received the Rule with respect and submission, and with one mind and heart, they approved all the articles contained in it.

The attitude of a humble and docile heart which led De La Salle and even obliged him in all things to submit the Rule he had just written to the approval of his disciples was in him a permanent and habitual disposition, not only on this point but on all the rest. Later on, when some less perfect Brothers told him that the Rule was too irksome and too austere, they found him ready to make whatever changes wise and enlightened men might suggest. Take this Rule, he would say, to three religious superiors as virtuous and as enlightened as can be found. I submit it to their judgment and willingly accept the additions and modifications that they may see fit to make.

### Specific regulations for recreation

The only major change De La Salle made in the customs already in force was with regard to the community recreations. These took place among the Brothers, as they usually do in most other religious groups; all had the liberty of speaking as they wished, without restraint. In this way, unfortunately, certain defects had crept in. A practice needed for the relaxation of the body was becoming dangerous for the soul.

If the disorders flowing from recreation that is scarcely Christian had not yet been noticed in the Community, at least it was to be feared that with the passage of time and a slackening of fervor, such abuses might creep in. As he did not think that in this matter he could expect for his Institute a special privilege which no other order has ever received, he considered it wise to see how he could prevent this

from happening. The simplest remedy, if it had been feasible, would have been to do away with such a dangerous activity altogether, since it is so easy to abuse it to our detriment. Some relaxation is necessary for both mind and body, however, and human frailty can scarcely do without it. The bow that remains constantly bent ends up by snapping. A mind that is forever under constraint grows exhausted. Exercises of piety become wearisome and unpleasant if never interrupted. Only in heaven can we live by the spirit alone and find rest and ever-renewed satisfaction in the actual, exclusive, and constant exercise of the love of God. As long as we remain in this mortal body, the burden of which weighs down the soul and directs its desires to things below, we need recreation even as food and sleep are needed. The great secret is to recreate ourselves in a Christian manner and to sanctify ourselves in the process.

This secret De La Salle had sought for a long time; to discover it, he had recourse to prayer. After the example of the saints, he had made it a rule for himself never to do anything of any importance without consulting God at length and often. To achieve purer and more prolonged prayer, he was in the habit of going on retreat. He made one, therefore, when he was trying to decide what to do about the recreations and to learn from God the secret of making them proof against the defects which are so commonly found in them and which make them occasions of disorder.

What he did after this retreat will indicate to us the resolution he was inspired to take regarding the means of sanctifying the recreation of the Brothers. At the same time, it will illustrate for us with what gentleness and wisdom this prudent Superior implied, by his own example, the practices he wished to introduce into the Community. On leaving his retreat, he told some of his most fervent disciples the plan that God had inspired him to adopt concerning this matter, and he begged them to help him introduce several new rules regarding it. We shall not mention them here, since we shall have occasion to discuss them farther on.

Once De La Salle had arranged as he wished in a codified body of rules all the practices and customs followed in the Community, he thought of enriching the Community with other works which would be of use to the Brothers and to the schools. Among these were the volumes on Christian civility, some instructions on holy Mass and the manner of hearing it well, the book on how to receive the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist with profit, and catechisms of all sorts: short ones for the children, others for the Brothers which were more developed, thorough, and scholarly and included moral teaching and

pious practices. These are the sources where the teachers in the Christian Schools can find material to help them explain the great truths of religion. He also composed meditations and prayer books for the personal use of his disciples.

## CHAPTER XIII

*Perpetual vows are introduced among the Brothers; De La Salle uses the occasion to try once again to resign as Superior but in vain; he obtains from the archbishop of Paris permission to set up a chapel in the novitiate house; the opposition he encounters from the parish priest of Vaugirard.*

The Brothers who were fervent and firmly attached to their vocation had not lost either their longing for perpetual vows or their hope of pronouncing them. Vows for one or three years seemed to them too temporary an engagement. They did not fear to take on definitive obligations with regard to a Master who is immutable by nature and infinitely good by essence. They felt that they only half belonged to God as long as the ties that bound them were not indissoluble, and they trusted that God's grace would afford them the strength that their wills did not find in themselves. Determined to belong to God without any possibility of turning back, they felt ashamed at not yet having made to God the full sacrifice of their liberty.

"Shall we," they asked De La Salle, "not be attached any closer to God than farm laborers are to the master they serve? At the end of their year of service, they can move on and enter the employ of someone else or renew their yearly contract with the first. With one foot inside the house where they labor and the other outside, they are always ready either to stay in or to get out as their interests may require. None of the proprietors can count on their services beyond the stipulated time, because none of them possesses the hearts of these mercenaries. Are we not serving God after the fashion of these paid laborers by binding ourselves to him for a year only or for three at most? Once this period has expired, we are again as free as air. Unfortunately, in thus recovering our liberty, we once more find the cause of our ill-regulated conduct, and this can lead to the loss of our souls. If the sacrifice of our freedom were made once and for all, we would have to persevere in our holy state. This act would fix our wills

irrevocably, and by binding ourselves forever, we would attach our hearts definitively to God.”

De La Salle was happy to hear such words, and his silence gave the Brothers a chance to repeat them often. He enjoyed hearing them express such desires but was unsure whether they were really mature and arose from deep-rooted piety or were merely superficial aspirations. He preferred to disregard them and seemed not to pay too much attention to them. By this apparent indifference, however, he wished to find out what spirit moved his disciples and whether human considerations or the Spirit of God led them to insist on making perpetual vows. Longanimity and perseverance, which are gifts of the Holy Spirit, are also signs of divine inspiration, and it was these signs that the wise Superior awaited to let him know what he should think of the wishes of his disciples.

Although he saw their constancy, he chose to temporize before giving them any hope of being satisfied. To test their dispositions further, he told them at the beginning of 1694 that he would allow them four months, until the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, to reflect on the matter. He also wrote to the senior Brothers who were away from Paris in the four other houses, asking them to think seriously about the matter and to recommend it to God in prayer. As for himself, as usual he turned to vigils, fasting, prayer, and other austerities to draw down God’s grace and light, because he considered this a matter of the highest importance, one which called for serious thought and circumspection.

On the one hand, De La Salle was delighted to see that his children showed such great zeal for perfection and such eagerness to belong entirely to God. On the other hand, experience teaches that perpetual vows, which by their nature are bonds of perfection, often become occasions of damnation for those who make them rashly. Hence he feared to see his disciples bind themselves in this way without sufficient forethought. Unsure whether the obligations which they wanted to assume would prove to be means by which the Spirit of God might draw them up to perfection or chains by which the evil spirit would drag them down to their destruction, he hesitated, remained undecided, and consulted God unceasingly.

But the divine will was not at all clear to him on this point. Ever wavering, he kept weighing the reasons for and against the idea, and the more he considered it, the more he feared to draw back or to go ahead in a question of such importance and delicacy. As he found within himself neither the light he needed to make up his mind nor sufficiently obvious indications of the divine will, he sought these in

his disciples themselves. To establish them in a condition where they might receive such enlightenment, he called on those whom he judged the most capable of binding themselves by irrevocable commitments to come to make a retreat, one after the other. What he had in mind was: 1) to prepare them for such a sacred and important step; 2) to study at leisure each one's dispositions and to see if he could find in their souls the degree of virtue and grace needed for the decision being considered, and 3) to put each one's soul in a condition where it could be purified and exposed to the rays of the Sun of Justice in order to merit God's divine light.

### De La Salle explains the consequences of perpetual vows

These private retreats of the twelve senior Brothers whom he had selected and who were the only ones he considered ready to take perpetual commitments were over with by the end of the four months. He then called them to Vaugirard, and on Pentecost Sunday, they all began a general retreat which lasted until the feast of the Most Holy Trinity. During this week, the wise Superior did not fail to address to his disciples the necessary admonitions concerning the engagements which they sought to assume. He made plain to them the consequences that these vows entailed as regards their salvation. He instructed them thoroughly on the merit and excellence of perpetual vows, but he also made clear their dangers and the obligations they involve.

He pointed out forcefully that these bonds of perfection often become what Saint Paul calls snares when it is a question of the vow of chastity, which presumptuous or imprudent persons sometimes embrace rashly. Those who have not received the required grace make the vow for their own misfortune. On such slippery terrain, he said, it is better to withdraw prudently than to advance too boldly. A wise and prudent delay in view of testing oneself and of ascertaining God's will cannot have any unfortunate consequences, whereas precipitation might expose one to regrets, perhaps to horrible sacrilege, or at least to requesting shameful and odious dispensations.

Not content with lending them his own insight on this most important point, he wished to learn from their own lips just how far their understanding went. For this purpose, he had the Brothers join him in dialogue where all of them were at full liberty to declare their feelings in this matter. The only topic discussed was that of the vows. Each one said what he had on his mind and shared his opinions with the rest. Judging by the conclusions reached during these colloquies,



it would seem that the Brothers, enlightened by the insights of their Superior in this most delicate matter, did not allow themselves to be carried away by indiscreet fervor, and the outcome was that the perpetual vows pronounced would be those of obedience and of stability. Subsequent events showed how right De La Salle had been in not following the impetuous zeal of his children in this matter, since of the twelve Brothers who bound themselves perpetually by these vows of stability and obedience, only six persevered.

Three of them are still living

De La Salle wanted the ceremony of making these vows to be kept secret from the rest of the Brothers. He wanted those who would be present and involved in the occasion to appear to forget it and to bind themselves to inviolable secrecy. To make sure that no one else might entertain any suspicion of what was going on, he retired with these twelve Brothers into a remote area of the house where they held the ceremony at their ease and in full liberty. Beginning the ceremony as the first in the midst of the Brothers, he recited his consecration in a tone and with an expression so filled with unction and devotion that he reduced them all to tears.

De La Salle pronounces his vows first and with devotion

His vow, which was the same for all the others, came to this: that he consecrated himself to God to procure his glory as far as he was able, and for this purpose, he joined himself with this one and that one, naming the twelve Brothers, to keep together and by association the Gratuitous Schools, and so forth, and that he was making a vow of obedience both to the body of the Society and to its superiors. To this he added the vow of stability in the Society for all his lifetime. The formulary of these vows was signed by him in this way: *J. B. de La Salle, Roman Priest*.<sup>9</sup> All the other Brothers, imitating him, pronounced the same vows, one after another.

He strives to have the assembly elect another as Superior

This assembly of twelve principal Brothers linked to one another and fixed by vow in their vocation seemed to offer the humble Founder

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9. Blain is in error here. The original document preserved in the archives of the Generalate in Rome shows the signature *De La Salle*, with no *J. B.* and no *Roman Priest*.

another favorable opportunity for relinquishing the first place. His humility, still displeased at having to occupy it, had never given up the idea of having a Brother replace him. Once before, he had taken advantage of a similar gathering to put forth this plan, and he had done it so skillfully that he had succeeded as fully as his passion for humility desired.

More than ever, De La Salle hoped that he would succeed again in this second assembly, similar to the prior one. Ever eloquent on this subject, he was prepared to put forward the same reasons which on the former occasion had won the Brothers' votes while misleading their good judgment. The respect, affection, and attachment that they felt for him gave him an advantage over them, and he hoped that their reluctance to refuse him what he asked or to cause him any chagrin would induce them to grant him the last place once again, in spite of his priestly character. With this in mind, the Founder called the Brothers together again the next day and spared nothing to win them over and to make them accept his point of view. Laying aside the reserved air which he usually assumed, he adopted a more familiar, engaging, and insinuating attitude by opening his heart to them in such a way as to lead them where he wanted them to go.

Among other things, he told them: "Since Providence had now joined them in a body through the perpetual vows they had pronounced the previous day, it would be wise to seek means to make this union so strong and so permanent that neither the world nor the devil could alter it. The first such means was to place all their trust in God alone, remembering that those who rely on mortal man are leaning on a frail reed which, as Scripture says, when it breaks pierces the hand that holds it. As for himself, they should consider him only as a poor priest who lacked both the power and the prestige to uphold them and their Society. It was the height of folly to count on any man and to base their hopes on human resources. They should recall that although he had recovered from a mortal illness three years previously, he might find himself again at death's door any day, and in that case, they would be obliged to elect someone else as Superior. Hence, it was better to provide for this eventuality ahead of time rather than wait for it to happen and be forced to make a choice. Strong reasons demanded that they do this without further delay, for if they kept on putting it off until his death, this could bring about very serious consequences for their Society."

He added that "the second means of rendering their union indissoluble would be to have as their head one of themselves, someone who was not a priest. The sacerdotal character would place a vast gulf

between them and such a Superior. This would weaken their union, and inferiors not closely united to the one who governs them are like a body in which the head and the members are badly joined and which consequently remains either lifeless or languishing. It was time—and high time—to take away from him the government of the Institute, and if they delayed in doing so, they would come to regret it.

“The first result of neglecting this advice of his would be that if he happened to die, there would spring up as many superiors as there were schools. This diversity of leaders would infallibly cause divisions in the flock. Once the sheep were dispersed, they would lose contact among themselves and all subordination to a common shepherd. Then, not following the same line of conduct, they would cease to have the same spirit, convictions, and sentiments. These diverse groups, no longer constituting a single organism, would adopt differing ideas and modify their doctrine, their way of life, and their habit. Very soon this division would cause their ruin. These Brothers, going their separate ways, could not be replaced save by men having different talents, customs, and views. Before long, they would see hired teachers taking over the schools, which—once they ceased to be gratuitous—would cease to be Christian and would no longer prove effective in the education of poor children.”

“Suppose, for the sake of argument,” he continued, “that the various ecclesiastical superiors of the localities where the Brothers are established should agree on giving you, after my death, only one priest as your Superior (a highly improbable supposition). Would he be the right man to lead you? Would he understand the spirit of a community? Of yours in particular? Would he follow its rules? Would he be willing to adopt your manner of living? Could he sympathize with you or you with him? Would you be prepared to give him your confidence? Would he be prepared to live with you as one of you? Even supposing that he were a saint, a man filled with the Spirit of God, zealous for the salvation of his neighbor, full of charity and tenderness in your regard, would he be the right man for you, not having been brought up like you and with you? In addition, his dignity as a priest would always create a gap between you and him, and with his being unacquainted with your customs, traditions, principles, and practices, how could you have but one heart and one soul with him? Would he not wish to change your rules? In a word, would he be the right sort of person to direct you? How long would it take him to acquire the experience needed to govern you according to the spirit of your Institute? Would it not call for a miracle to find a man really apt to govern you? Can you expect such a miracle? If not, why delay in doing away

with your present priest-superior and in making it a law for yourselves never to give this title to anyone clothed in this dignity?"

The Brothers unanimously elect De la Salle as Superior

His discourse was moving; the reasons advanced were impressive and conclusive, and De La Salle expected that they would win the assent of the Brothers. He did not doubt that they would have the same effect as they formerly had in similar circumstances, but he was mistaken. The Brothers had been swept away on the first occasion by the cogency of these arguments, but this time they did not yield to them. They remembered the mistake they had made, the reproaches addressed to them for it, and the embarrassment that had overtaken them when they had put the feet at the head and the head at the feet. I mean when they had allowed De La Salle to be vanquished by his own humility and had permitted this former canon, this doctor in theology, this saintly priest, the Founder of their Institute, their father and first Superior, to obey a simple Brother, to live in dependence on him, and to submit to him with childlike simplicity.

True, this admirable example of humility and obedience which recalled so vividly that of Jesus when he subjected himself to Joseph and Mary had provided great edification to all, within and without the Community, and had illustrated the virtue of a man who carried his love of dependence and abjection to such lengths. But it had done no honor to those who had allowed the father to abase himself before his children and to put one of them in his place as Superior. By authorizing this, they had committed a fault; they had repented of it and were not in a mood to repeat it. The humble Superior, feeling that the Brothers were not yet ready to satisfy his love of abjection and that they could not bring themselves to proceed to an election which he alone thought necessary and advantageous, sought in the depths of his humility new words of eloquence and fresh reasons to bring them around and to overcome their reluctance. For this purpose, he spoke again with so much vehemence and energy that he worked himself into a profuse perspiration. The Brothers were distressed because of the disappointment he felt over their resistance. They did not want to contradict him, so they feigned to be convinced by his reasons and consented to hold an election.

They said to one another: "It won't do him any good, because he will see himself confirmed as Superior by a unanimous vote. Putting our father back among his own children and choosing one of them to guide him would be to violate the very order of nature and of grace.

If we did this, people would make fun of us as before, saying that our simplemindedness had been duped by his humility. Are we ready to give ourselves once more to the reproach which we heard in the past that we agreed to put the sheep in the shepherd's place, a Brother above a priest, a penitent to direct his confessor? Apart from his priestly dignity, his titles of doctor in theology and former canon place him far above us. And even if he were our equal in these respects, who among us is like him as regards enlightenment, learning, wisdom, experience, virtue, and holiness? Should we go along with his dominant attraction for abasement and obedience which is to the detriment of our Society? Must his humility win out over our duty, our gratitude, and our sense of justice?" These thoughts occurred to all of them, but as they did not venture to express them, they kept them to themselves, and so De La Salle imagined in his humility that he was once again going to be able to occupy the last place.

He was overjoyed when he saw the twelve Brothers get ready to do what he desired and cast their votes for the election of another Superior. Convinced that the Holy Spirit would inspire them to replace him and that he would repeat to them in their hearts what the Founder himself had impressed so forcibly on them, that is, that they should put a Brother at their head, he asked them to make interior prayer for half an hour to prepare themselves to make their choice in a truly supernatural manner and to ask God to show them the one whom he had chosen to be their Superior. So they all made interior prayer, but the language which the Holy Spirit spoke in the depths of their hearts was quite different from that which the humility of the servant of God had inspired. They all resolved that as long as he lived, they would never have any Superior but him. When the votes were cast and the ballots counted, every last one had voted to put back in the Superior's place the one who had wished to relinquish it.

Great was De La Salle's surprise at this turn of events. He had already begun to sing victory in his heart and to congratulate himself on once more being the least among the Brothers. He had flattered himself that they would not refuse him this favor which he expected on account of the services he had rendered them, the supplications he had addressed to them, the forcefulness of the arguments he had laid before them, and the interests of their Society which, according to him, demanded his replacement. But he was disappointed. Confused over their apparent stubbornness in refusing him the last place, he grew rather emotional about the matter; his countenance revealed his agitation. Then, recovering his usual calm, he began to speak and gently reprove them, saying that they were forgetting themselves in

disregarding all the reasons which he had explained to them and which required the choice of a Brother Superior. He said that they were losing sight of the Institute's best interests; indeed, they were ignoring them. He asked them to think of these interests and to come to a better judgment.

In a word, his humility made him indignant on this occasion and seemed to arouse his anger. No one had ever seen him show so much emotion. He was upset and seemed unable to control himself when he saw himself returned to the first place. Anyone else would have accepted the decision in peace, adored God's designs, and sacrificed his yearning for abjection to this manifestation of God's will. Instead, he thought he should make one last attempt to leave his position. His distaste for the first place was all but invincible, and he felt that he should not make fewer efforts to be relieved of it than ambitious people make to attain it. To succeed in this, his only recourse was interior prayer. He begged the Brothers to begin over again, hoping that the Holy Spirit would finally put into their hearts what he had put into his own and make them realize, as clearly as he realized it himself, that he was unworthy and incapable of being their Superior.

Once again, his low opinion of himself led him astray. The Brothers, after giving themselves once more to interior prayer, judged his capacity to guide them on the basis of his humility. They never thought him more worthy to be at their head than when he sought to give them proofs of how unworthy he was of this position. So without conferring with one another, all of them persisted in their inviolable resolve to keep him in the first place. When they had finished praying, there followed a second vote, and the second, just like the first, designated him as Superior, once again by a unanimous vote.

Then the Brothers, feeling themselves emboldened by these repeated and precise indications of where the divine will lay, took the liberty of pointing out to him that he was bound to submit and that by resisting their choice, he was contradicting the will of God. They begged him not to refuse to recognize them as his children and to allow them to honor him as their father. They added that his death, no matter how late it might occur, would always be soon enough to enable them to substitute a Brother as his successor and that the grace they begged of God was not to have to make such a change before the end of his days.

They agree that after his death, only a Brother would be Superior

The humble father eventually yielded to the pious desires of his children. Raising his eyes and hands to heaven, he submitted to the will of God, now so obviously manifested, and returned to his previous calm. However, the prudent Superior, unwilling that this election should—before or after his demise—serve as a precedent for conferring on some other priest the title and role of Superior of the Brothers, agreed to his election only on condition that all twelve Brothers present should sign the official act of his election and that they should add to this document a statement formally excluding any other priest or anyone in Holy Orders from ever governing the Brothers. They were happy to satisfy his desire on this point in order to have him continue without reluctance in his role as their Superior. Consequently, all signed the following declaration:

“We, the undersigned, Nicolas Huyart [sic], Gabriel Drolin, and so forth, after associating ourselves with Monsieur J. B. de La Salle, priest, to keep together the Gratuitous Schools by the vows which we pronounced yesterday, declare that as a consequence of these vows and of the association which we have formed by them, we have chosen as our Superior Monsieur J. B. de La Salle, to whom we promise obedience and entire submission, as well as to those whom he will assign to us as our superiors. We also declare that it is our understanding that the present election will not have the force of a precedent for the future. Our intention is that after the said Monsieur de La Salle, and forever in the future, no one shall be received among us or chosen as Superior who is a priest or who has received Holy Orders, and we will not have or accept any Superior who has not associated himself with us and has not made vows like us and like all those who will be associated with us in the future. Done at Vaugirard on 7 June 1694.”

Thus obliged to remain in the first place which he occupied, De La Salle applied himself with renewed zeal to fulfill his obligations worthily. His whole concern was to model himself on Jesus Christ, to make him live again in his person, and to represent him to the Brothers by reproducing his life and his virtues and by seeking to imprint his image in their souls. The number of his disciples kept growing, but his Community remained just as poor, and the life led there, equally austere.

It was about this time that some important bishops expressed the desire of having Brothers and asked De La Salle to open Christian Schools in their dioceses, but he was not in a rush to accede to their

wishes. He wished to give himself the time needed to train his disciples well and to make them proficient in humility, patience, mortification, charity, and all the other Christian virtues before making them good schoolmasters. As we have already remarked, he was convinced that before trying to sanctify others, they could never be too holy themselves and that they would never make their ministry useful to the public except when they joined notable examples of virtue to the lessons in piety that they imparted to the young, thus adding weight to their words by the holiness of their conduct.

Convinced of this, he preached to his novices nothing but a high esteem for virtue and a great desire to acquire it. By the zeal he manifested to acquire perfection himself, he taught them that it was the *one thing necessary* and that since it depended on their efforts, it was the only thing that deserved such efforts. He said that they would never prove useful to their neighbor except insofar as they were truly virtuous and that real piety is the Gospel pearl, which alone has value in God's sight and which should be purchased at the cost of everything else. He warned them that they should not imagine they could obtain true piety except through long and toilsome efforts and that to find it, they must seek it diligently and painstakingly and labor as hard at it as those do who seek gold in the entrails of the earth or pearls in the depths of the sea.

Almost two years went by like this, in calm and in the pursuit of virtue. About this time, the see of Paris, vacant since the death of François de Harlay, was filled by Louis-Antoine de Noailles, bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne. His arrival brought about some notable changes. During his visitations, the new archbishop took note of various abuses which had crept in, and he was particularly displeased at the great number of private chapels found everywhere. Private chapels had become so common that even ordinary citizens wanted to have them in their country houses. The archbishop resolved to put an end to this situation.

To reform this abuse, Archbishop Noailles issued a decree placing all these chapels under interdict. The one which was next door to the novitiate, where De La Salle was in the habit of saying Mass and giving Communion to the Brothers, was included in this general prohibition. Consequently, the virtuous Founder was caught in a most inconvenient situation. This chapel, so close by, was extremely handy for him and the Brothers. It made it unnecessary for them to go to the parish church, situated at a considerable distance and difficult to reach on account of the almost impassable roads in winter or during spells of bad weather. In addition, by frequenting this chapel, the Brothers



kept away from the people who insulted them, made fun of them, and played tricks on them; it also helped them avoid whatever might have been an occasion of temptation, seduction, or opportunity for frivolity.

#### De La Salle obtains permission for a chapel in the novitiate

In this difficulty, the zealous Superior of the Brothers approached the new archbishop, explained the problem to him, and asked for permission to set up a chapel in the house at Vaugirard to celebrate Mass there. He was received in the most gracious and obliging manner by the prelate, who esteemed him and was delighted to show him every mark of consideration. De Noailles knew of this saintly priest and had a high regard for his virtue. When bishop of Châlons, a city not far from Reims, he had heard him spoken of as a saint, for all Champagne had retold the story of the sacrifices and heroic virtue of this canon who had left everything to take charge of a few poor schoolmasters. A man who had given such great examples of virtue had seemed to him, in truth, one of the new men worthy of apostolic times, according to all those who had heard of him.

De Noailles, favorably disposed by the esteem which he had for a long time entertained for De La Salle, was happy to give him this special mark of it. While granting his request, the archbishop also confirmed in writing the oral authorization that his predecessor had given the Founder to establish a community in Paris, and to this he added, without any limitation of time, all the powers the Founder needed to exercise his ministry, a favor he granted to very few priests. By this token of special consideration, De Noailles wished to indicate that De La Salle was a distinguished man in his judgment and an even more distinguished one in his heart. In fact, this prelate preserved these sentiments toward De La Salle until his death. He always saw him with pleasure, received him cordially, and granted his requests with kindness, and when he met any of the Brothers, as he did, for instance, at Saint-Denis-en-France when he was making a visitation there, he would ask them for news of their Superior and urge them to recommend him to his prayers, adding, *He is a saintly man; I ask for his prayers.*

#### The pastor of Vaugirard objects to the novitiate chapel

Thus provided with the authorization of his archbishop, De La Salle did not delay in making use of it. He had an oratory set up in the

most appropriate room in the house, and he himself helped erect the altar. This little chapel, outfitted in a few days, was blessed by one of the vicars-general, who came for this purpose. The joy of the little flock and of its shepherd was indeed great.

It was, however, soon disturbed by the parish priest of Vaugirard. Although he was De La Salle's friend, he was upset over this innovation and came to complain to him about it. The strange thing was that he had endured patiently and without objection the existence of the private chapel in the home of a layman nearby and had not found fault when De La Salle brought the Brothers there to say Mass for them and to give them Communion. Yet now he seemed to take offense and even scandal when he saw this chapel opened in the Brothers' house after the other one was shut down, even though the Brothers' chapel had been erected with the express and written consent of the chief pastor of the diocese. In spite of this, the parish priest made a great deal of fuss about it. Without any consideration for the Superior and for the venerable authority which granted the canonical right to have a chapel, he made its opening a crime for De La Salle.

According to the pastor, the deed was scandalous because it withdrew the Brothers from his parish. In addition, like the good doctor from the Sorbonne which he was, he appealed to theology in order to intimidate the conscience of the Founder and to make him entertain a scruple over the bad effects this step was going to produce in the locality. He added that he could not understand how a man who professed such attachment to the Church's regulations seemed to care so little about ignoring them on such an essential point and that he was depriving the Brothers of the merit they could gain by assisting at the parish Mass. His example would be an excuse for the rest of the parishioners to stay away also, and thus he would have to answer to God for the harm his nonconformity would occasion.

Fundamentally, this pastor of Vaugirard was a good priest who did all this solely because he thought his pastoral duty required it. He honored De La Salle for his eminent virtues, and he admired the Brothers as well. The more he cherished the one and esteemed the others, the more eager he was to see them come to Mass at his parish church and thus edify all his people. Their staying away was something he could not swallow. He was prepared to accord his esteem and friendship to De La Salle provided that he obtained satisfaction on this point which he had so much at heart.

He appealed to all his erudition to prove to him in strictly logical form, therefore, that he should give up his private chapel and bring the Brothers back to the parish church. Good example, the Church's

regulations, the danger of giving scandal and of providing others with an excuse for not attending parish services—in a word, all the arguments that a good theologian can so skillfully marshal were invoked in order to make it a question of conscience for the Superior of the Brothers of the Christian Schools if he and his community failed to attend the parish Mass and Office. It must be admitted that all the reasons advanced by the parish priest of Vaugirard were excellent in themselves, but they admitted of exceptions and did not nullify the privilege granted by the highest authority in the diocese. The conclusion to be drawn from these arguments was that a good Christian should include among his other duties that of assisting at the sermons and instructions given by his pastor and at the parish Mass. Nevertheless, they did not do away with the right that the archbishop had given to the pious Founder to establish a community and to erect a chapel in his community house.

De La Salle listened with much composure to the complaints of the parish priest and paid great attention to his arguments. He honored the pastor even more highly than he was honored in return; they were good friends. The servant of God was persuaded that the pastor was only doing what he conceived to be his duty as a good parish priest, full of zeal for the best interests of his parish. He would have wished with all his heart that he could have satisfied him and attended the services in his church, if he had been able to bring there in safety and without so many inconveniences the group of young novices, who needed to live a retired life subject to their Rule and who must be watched over and not allowed outside their own house. So the zeal shown by the pastor of Vaugirard for having his church filled on Sunday only stimulated that of De La Salle to keep his young men away from a place which, while infinitely holy because of the presence of Jesus Christ, still offers serious dangers to young novices, who have only recently left the world.

The man of God then entered into a dialogue with the parish priest, agreeing with him that as a general rule, his position was sound and admiring him for pleading it so vigorously. “It is a praiseworthy thing in a pastor,” he added, “to want to see his sheepfold filled, and his zeal in carrying out all the duties of his mission is highly edifying. Certainly, the mind of the Church is that people should frequent their parish churches, at least all those who are free to do so. She even makes it a law to assist at the parish High Mass and at the instructions of the parish priest, if one can do so without any major inconvenience, as the last General Council explains concerning this point of law.”

“But there is no rule without exceptions, no human law which cannot be dispensed from, no superior authority which does not have the right to grant privileges. If the rule about attending Mass in the parish church can admit of exceptions, surely we should exempt from it a group of young men who cannot leave their residence without danger. We would allow an exception in the case of a man menaced with prison. If such a man, to avoid capture by the police, came to hear Mass early in the morning, we would excuse him from attending the parish Mass. Let your charity do likewise for those who cannot appear in public without risking their vocation and incurring detriment to their souls. If this ecclesiastical law, like all others, admits of dispensations, who deserves one more than these young men, who have not yet put aside all the worldly inclinations they once experienced? They cannot appear in the midst of the world without feeling a renewed attraction for it welling up in their hearts and without being exposed to mockery, derision, and insults which their virtue is still not strong enough to endure patiently.

“If you agree that superior authority has a right to grant dispensations, respect the authority of our archbishop, who has permitted me to establish a community and to erect a chapel, even if this privilege seems to involve an exemption from fulfilling some of our duties in the parish. In effect, how can you demand that those who have rules, special exercises, and a type of life entirely different from that of seculars—who, in a word, form a sort of special parish—should be present in your church, where there is nothing for them to gain for their souls?”

After these introductory observations, the servant of God begged the parish priest to consider seriously the danger run by these young novices, recently come from the world, who had not as yet lost their inclination for, their attraction to, or their curiosity about the world, if they had to attend services in the church, where people—who often came there from Paris—gave examples of conduct that was hardly to be imitated. True, by bringing them to the church, he would be bringing them to a holy place, but it was also true that even in the presence of Our Lord, they could see dangerous sights capable of leading their hearts astray or at least of distracting them and causing their fervor to cool. The pastor himself could not keep out of his church many suspicious and questionable characters whom the proximity to Paris drew thither on Sundays and feasts. Nor could he make sure that the roads leading to the church were free of young scamps who enjoyed making fun of the Brothers. In sum, he could not deny that novices, who need recollection, the practice of the interior life, and

much solitude in order to withdraw their minds from the vain images of the world and of creatures, could not frequent the parish church without running the risk of losing, not gaining, piety; consequently, he begged the pastor to approve his need to keep them restricted to the house.

The dialogue thus concluded was not followed by the success that either of the interlocutors expected. Just as the parish priest did not succeed in convincing De La Salle, neither did the latter persuade the former. He agreed, however, to go on the first Thursday of each month to celebrate a Solemn Mass of the Blessed Sacrament in the parish church and to bring the Brothers with him. He kept his word. De La Salle carried the Blessed Sacrament in procession, sang High Mass, and officiated at the entire ceremony with the recollection, modesty, and devotion of a saint. During this time, he was so absorbed in God that the deacon was often obliged to remind him of what he had to do next. Like him, his disciples showed themselves so recollected, so devout, and so completely prostrated before God's majesty that the whole parish was highly impressed and joined in their devotion. That day, Vaugirard was no longer recognizable as Vaugirard. The parish priest, even more deeply edified than his parishioners, felt more eager than ever to get the Brothers and their Superior back to his parish. He renewed his pleas and begged them not to refuse him this consolation. As he did not succeed in convincing them, his disappointment only increased, and sometime later, it burst forth in full fury.

On the feast itself of the most Blessed Sacrament, the parish priest—more disappointed than words can express, because he had not been able to overcome De La Salle's opposition either by the arguments he advanced or by his insistence—tried to win from him by violence what he had not been able to obtain through friendship. For this purpose, he came to the community and disturbed its silence and peace by his outcries and bitter complaints. He raised the specter of scandal and disorder. According to him, everything was topsy-turvy in the Church of God because the novices did not participate in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament. At that very time, they were reciting the Office, and by paying close attention in order to recite it piously, they remained deaf to the unaccustomed uproar that had invaded this sanctuary of silence.

The parish priest became more enraged because his voice was covered by the voices of the Brothers who were singing the praises of God, and he only redoubled his protests. He upbraided the Brothers for a devotion which kept them within their residence when, in his

opinion, they should have left it to pay honor and homage to Jesus Christ as he was carried in the procession. In vain did De La Salle try to calm him down and to justify his own conduct by alluding to the many inconveniences which he feared if his novices went outside. The parish priest would listen to nothing and departed even angrier than he had been on his arrival. Some time later, however, he resumed his friendship with De La Salle, who, in order to placate him, occasionally brought his community to Mass in the parish church, especially on Easter and on the feast of Saint Lambert, the patron of the parish.

The parish priest of Vaugirard was not the only one with whom the holy Founder ran into difficulties on the same subject. The most pious pastors are the most zealous for getting people to attend services in their parish churches, and a number of them caused trouble for the servant of God by their importunate demands and by their complaints which were basically and generally unreasonable. These saintly parish priests wanted to make faithful parishioners out of men who lived under a Rule. By this they showed that they indeed had the spirit of their own state but that they did not understand what community life requires.

Some years later, when De La Salle established the Brothers in Rouen and opened his novitiate at Saint Yon in the suburb of Saint Sever, two of the best parish priests in the city became his enemies and denounced him repeatedly to the ecclesiastical authorities in an effort to make his Brothers act like model parishioners. The pastor of Saint Sever was a worthy and zealous man who, because of these qualities, was held in great esteem by Monseigneur d'Aubigné, the late archbishop, a most estimable prelate who loved upright clergymen. It is hard to believe to what an extent this pastor's solicitude for seeing his church filled with parishioners wearied and harassed the Brothers at Saint Yon. He constantly cited them before the prelate's tribunal to have them obliged to assist at the parish services and to bring the novices there also, along with the boarding students.

This was impossible, for a number of Brothers were occupied with keeping guard over the prisoners shut up in the institution, either by the orders of the king, by decree of parliament, or at the request of their parents. Nor were these the only ones who had to be watched. The other boarders, who enjoyed a greater degree of liberty, only sought a favorable moment to escape. It was necessary to keep an eye on them all the time. Yet in spite of the Brothers' vigilance, several of them managed to run away, climbing over the walls, sneaking out through a door left unlocked or by opening it with a forged duplicate

key. When the Brothers, to placate the parish priest or to avoid his harassments, took it upon themselves to bring to church their young boarders, most of whom were kept there against their wills, they had seen several take to their heels with the readiness that prisoners show when they find the doors of their prison ajar. On such occasions, if one of the Brothers wanted to take out after them, either he could not catch up with them or else the remaining ones, profiting by his absence, decamped also.

In vain did the Brothers of Saint Yon make the humblest remonstrances to the parish priest of Saint Sever on this subject. They begged to be excused from bringing to the parish church their young prisoners, whom they kept in the house on the orders of their parents so that they might be instructed and corrected there. The Brothers explained that it was impossible to take them out without giving them a chance to run away. These arguments were considered frivolous, and the pastor would not listen to them. Nothing would satisfy him except bringing these inmates to the parish church, but to do this, it would have been necessary to chain them down.

Concerning the novices at Saint Yon, the parish priest of Saint Sever demanded what the pastor of Vaugirard had previously wanted. The Brothers objected to this, invoking the same reasons that De La Salle had used with the pastor of Vaugirard. These arguments did not satisfy the pastor of Saint Sever. Although he showed himself very charitable toward everybody else, he considered as his enemies those whom he could not have as his parishioners. As time went on, Divine Providence put an end to these harassments, thanks to the recognition of the Brothers' Institute and to their profession of vows, which set the Brothers free, as it does all those who embrace the religious life, from the jurisdiction of the parish priest and from the ordinary duties of parishioners.

The dispute with the late parish priest of Saint Nicolas in Rouen did not go quite so far, because De La Salle put an end to it by having the Brothers who taught in the city go to live in another parish. This parish priest, since deceased, enjoyed an excellent reputation for virtue and was one of the most exemplary, zealous, and pious pastors in the diocese. But like everyone else, he had his blind spots. He would have liked to run his parish and his clergy as if he had been the superior of a seminary. He restricted his zeal to the confines of his parish; any good work which transcended its boundaries was of no concern to him. He did not want people to go outside his parish. He expected them to be as assiduous as he was at the services, to make all their donations to the parish, to limit to the parish all the good that

could be done. Whoever acted thus was his friend. He understood nothing of the exercises of piety required by community life and could not conceive of any beyond those practiced in the parish. He could not admit that the Brothers who lived in the parish should prefer their community prayers to the devotions in vogue in the parish.

The Brothers who teach in the schools do not try to separate themselves from the life of the parishes. On the contrary, they are its firm supporters and attend church assiduously on Sundays and feasts, at the head of their boys. But their Rule requires—it could hardly do otherwise—that they attend services in the parishes where they teach, not in those where their residence may be located, for one of their main duties is to bring their students to church for High Mass and Vespers. This obligation, so essential to the good education of the young and to the Brothers' Institute itself, of attending services in the parish where they go with their students made it impossible for them to frequent the parish where they lived in Rouen. This was what the parish priest of Saint Nicolas complained about so bitterly. He even wanted the Brothers to come, in their turn, to present the blessed bread, something that no other parish priest before him had ever thought of requiring them to do.

As a matter of fact, the poverty of the Brothers dispensed them from having to do this and so did their obligation of being with their students on Sundays and feasts. The parish priest of Saint Nicolas, vexed over this refusal, complained to the archbishop. He did obtain satisfaction of a sort but not exactly the kind he expected: he was told to pay for the blessed bread himself. "Cannot you see," asked Monseigneur d'Aubigné, "that since they are so poor, the Brothers are dispensed from making this contribution for the blessed bread? Since you want them to present it anyhow, buy some, and give it to them; then they can present it back to you at Mass. Your charity, by making up for their indigence, will satisfy your piety."

That was how the matter was resolved. The parish priest had his way and got the blessed bread made as he wanted it. But since he was having it made for the poor, he took care to have it baked inexpensively. Yet, as eager as he was to carry out all his parish duties, he showed himself less so in the future, when he had to fulfill this particular one at his own expense. The pastor was the most punctilious man in the world. Although he could not find fault with an offering which had been prepared to his own specifications, he was irritated, nonetheless, over the manner in which it was presented. None of the Brothers was present when the blessed bread was offered, and this led to more complaints on his part. This time, however, he did not go



to the archbishop, because the favorable verdict he had obtained on the previous occasion was not the sort he cared to see multiplied. He contented himself simply with reproaching the Brothers about this and also their Superior when he later came to Rouen.

In vain De La Salle tried to make the pastor understand that it was impossible to satisfy him on both points: to have the blessed bread made and to come to present it, since the Brothers had to bring their students to High Mass and Vespers in their own parishes and watch over them to make them behave. "This duty," he added, "is something necessary for the proper education of these children, the essential end of our Institute. Should the Brothers abandon their students in order to show themselves at Saint Nicolas? The parish priests of Saint Maclou, Saint Godard, and Saint Eloi would hardly be pleased if their teachers let the students run wild in this way on Sundays and feasts. Would the children not lose on those days the benefit of all the instruction given them during the week? What would be the use of founding Christian Schools if the teachers left the sanctification of the Lord's day to the discretion of these youngsters, ignorant and prone to mischief as they are?"

All these arguments made no impression on the parish priest of Saint Nicolas, who although very glad to find sheep not of his flock come into his fold, could not endure to see his own sheep attend other churches. It happened some years later that he contradicted his own principles, however, because he was delighted to see a certain Sister who did not live in his parish bring her students to his church for services on Sundays and feasts and assist thereat with them. Nor did he pay attention to the protests of the other parish priests involved in this matter. Since De La Salle could not convince the pastor, he decided to find a residence for the Brothers in some other parish, for he loved peace, hated all such bickering, and was ready to sacrifice anything to avoid it.

If we have anticipated somewhat in mentioning these last two events, which did not occur until several years after the period we are now discussing, it was only because the opportunity of speaking of them happened to come naturally at this point. We might have overlooked them later.

## CHAPTER XIV

*The number of De La Salle's disciples increases considerably; he is obliged to look for another house; Monsieur de La Chétardie, the successor of Monsieur Baudran as parish priest of Saint Sulpice, seconds his project; the zeal he showed for the Institute.*

The Lord poured out abundant blessings on the novitiate of Vaugirard. The reputation for virtue which it enjoyed drew to it such a large number of postulants that the house became too small to contain them. De La Salle was thus forced to look for another, more spacious residence. Poor as he was, how could he ever hope to find one? He was not only poor but the father of the poor. To the eyes of the flesh, his house at Vaugirard seemed to be the refuge of all the indigent. Everything was lacking, and it took a truly genuine vocation to keep young men there when they could have lived at their ease in their own homes. Nevertheless, poor as was the sort of life lived there, so many came and went and so many stayed that considerable expenses were incurred. It is difficult to understand how a man who had kept nothing of his fortune could discover the means of meeting the needs of the house.

He found help in the generosity of certain charitable persons and in the support of the parish priests of Saint Sulpice, all of whom were zealous for the Institute of the Brothers and vied with each other when it came to claiming the right to confer favors on it. On the one hand, De La Salle preferred to suffer privations for a long time before revealing his needs. It was only when he found himself reduced to the last extremity that he turned to his benefactors. On the other hand, the Founder did not like to importune them or to go to visit them. He approached them only when it was absolutely necessary, and, as a rule, nothing was known of the community's needs except that which could not be hidden from public view. The Brothers, who were not so detached as he, were sometimes tempted to fail in their trust in Providence and to lay aside provisions when they had a chance. But their Superior, who did not want them to entertain fruitless anxieties about an uncertain tomorrow, would not countenance these precautions which seemed to him an unworthy response to the care Providence had always shown them. And the fact is that Providence never abandoned him. Just when he was poorest and least provided for, God sent him, in the successor of Baudran, a new father, a

zealous protector, and a man eminently capable of furthering his work.

In 1697, upon the resignation of Monsieur Baudran, M. de La Chétardie took possession of the parish of Saint Sulpice. It did not take him long to show that no other good work interested him to such a degree as that of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. He had inherited not only the parish but also the piety of De La Barmondière and Baudran, and he surpassed them in his generosity toward the Brothers. He even seemed to envy De La Salle the honor of having endowed the Church with such a necessary Institute.<sup>10</sup> In fact, he declared himself its father, defender, and promoter. We shall see what progress the Christian Schools made under his auspices. First, however, we must return to the account of the events that occurred in 1694.

The twelve Brothers who had made vows of obedience and stability and whom the pious Superior had chosen as his twelve principal disciples were dispersed by him among the five houses of the Institute, to be their firm support and foundation stones, as it were. Of those whom he had called in from the provinces, he kept with him several who were not sufficiently well established in virtue and arranged to have their places taken by others whose religious spirit was more solid.

During this period between 1694 and 1698 when the Founder was concerned solely with sanctifying both himself and those whom God had sent him, he took in a goodly number of candidates. He could not close the door to them when they requested admission, especially since the famine had been succeeded by a time of plenty. Therefore, there were no grounds for supposing that in asking for admission, they were actuated by any motive other than that of consecrating themselves to God. Moreover, the novitiate at Vaugirard quickly separated the chaff from the good grain. The life led there was so uninviting for nature that nothing but grace could make it bearable. Nothing but a genuine vocation could survive in such an environment. Our heavenly Father left his servant three full years of leisure and deep peace so that he might cultivate, water, and nurture the young plants whom he had transplanted from the world into his garden.

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10. Rigault observes that this remark provides the key to understanding the entire history of the conflict which later on developed between De La Chétardie and De La Salle.

## De La Salle appoints a virtuous but harsh Director of Novices

After this period, the increasing number of Brothers and the multiplication of his concerns obliged De La Salle to give up the personal direction of the novices at Vaugirard and of the Brothers in the Paris schools and to entrust these functions to two of his oldest disciples. Although these two men were not among the twelve who had made perpetual vows in the Society, De La Salle thought them capable of replacing him during his absences because they seemed pious and endowed with goodwill and zeal for regularity. But experience taught him at his expense that he had chosen badly. These appointments lay at the origin of the terrible persecutions which he had to face during the rest of his life and which on several occasions introduced division into his Community and for a time threatened its spirit and its very life.

These two Brothers did not lack a certain basic virtue, but their religious spirit was of a rather untamed and, so to speak, fierce and unmeasured variety. It was neither enlightened nor prudent. They lived a penitential life and were stern men, hard on themselves and equally hard on others. They could never succeed in moderating the ardor of their zeal, in seasoning their corrections with the salt of wisdom, or in adapting to the human weakness of their subordinates the penances they imposed. They could not gauge the degrees of strength and weakness, of pusillanimity and courage, and of grace and virtue present in those of whom they were in charge.

Here, as always, the divine judgments are incomprehensible. God often abandons the greatest saints to their own insights, and by the mistakes they make, he shows us that personal opinions, however good and reasonable they may appear, are capable only of leading us astray if they are not specially inspired by the Holy Spirit. God permitted Saint Francis, that apostolic spirit, that divine man who seemed to be led by the Holy Spirit and guided in all things by the hand of Jesus himself, to make a serious blunder when he designated Friar Elias as his successor. In the same way, God several times allowed De La Salle to make some serious mistakes in the choice of men to represent him. If those he appointed had been worthy of his trust or had enjoyed the qualities needed to fulfill their duties properly, his Institute would have made remarkable progress in a short time. Unfortunately, however, the Brothers to whom De La Salle entrusted the direction of his Institute frequently destroyed what he had built up with so much care and sacrifice. Pride or lack of prudence took possession of them. Once at the head of their Brothers, they revealed what they were in

themselves: men lacking insight and prudence, blind guides who could neither direct themselves nor guide others.

We have already mentioned the flourishing state of the communities that De La Salle had left behind in Reims when he came to Paris. If these places had endured as they were, they would have been a fruitful training school for Christian schoolmasters for country parishes and of novices for the Brothers' Institute. But scarcely had the pious Founder absented himself, when the harshness of the Brother whom he had left in charge brought strife and division into the house. The seminary for country schoolmasters fell apart; the junior novitiate closed, and half of the novices left. As we shall see shortly, a second seminary for country schoolmasters was launched in the parish of Saint Hippolyte in Paris, but after a most auspicious beginning, this institution too soon crumbled, also on account of the Brother in charge.

At the period we are speaking of, De La Salle and a large number of fervent novices were about to take up residence in a spacious house. After having had the consolation of seeing his disciples and their good works multiply and his Institute progress, spreading everywhere the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ, he would have to witness furious storms and tempests assail his work on account of the imprudent actions of those whom he had chosen to replace him, so that for almost twenty years, his Community would totter on the brink of ruin. His protectors became his most violent persecutors. His best friends and advisers turned their backs on him and refused even to lend him the help of their counsel. Bishops who were most inclined to favor him and who honored him as one of the holiest men in France would lose all esteem for him and would feel that they were doing him a favor by not forcing him to vacate his own house. De La Salle himself would be in difficulties with the law and would have to flee to avoid the police and even prison.

During De La Salle's absence, Satan began to test the Brothers, throw them into confusion, discourage them, and make them grow so disheartened with their vocation that a good number of them left the Society. The devil also managed to introduce a new form of government and to alter the Institute's primitive spirit. Before dying, De La Salle would have to witness all these misfortunes and to realize that they all sprang from the harshness and indiscretion of the Director of Novices and the Director of the Paris communities. This thorn remained deeply embedded in his heart for the rest of his life. Only after he got to heaven was he able to obtain a complete remedy for the wound that his Institute had suffered.

### The Director of Novices and the Director in Paris

The Director of Novices of whom I am speaking was, in De La Salle's absence, quick to assume authority but did not know how to exercise it wisely. His imprudent use tended to destroy, not to build up. By making his arm weigh down heavily on the young people he was in charge of and by his harsh corrections and the ill-chosen mortifications he imposed, he made them into malcontents rather than real penitents. Of course, he wanted to imitate De La Salle and to copy him in all things, and what he lacked was not so much goodwill as good sense, but he was like a clumsy painter who disfigures the objects he wishes to depict. He misrepresented his wise Superior while trying to be like him and instead showed himself as he really was. Far from reproducing the original, he caricatured him without being able to surmount the defects of his own character or attain a true likeness to De La Salle. By his faulty imitation, he dishonored the very man whom he was trying to resemble.

De La Salle had always been in charge of his novices and had instructed them more by his example than by his words. In him everything spoke to and impressed others. His fervor aroused the most sluggish and brought the most negligent back to the path of duty. When he wanted to correct anyone, it was often not necessary for him even to open his mouth; his countenance did it for him. His attitude, facial expression, and gestures were enough to keep others faithful to the Rule or make them return to it; they prevented faults or led to their being atoned. Kind, affable, ready to oblige, he won all hearts and inspired their trust in himself. Enlightened and clear sighted, he could read what was hidden in their consciences. His appearance was always cheerful, serene, calm, and gracious. He attracted even the most timid persons and made them feel entirely at liberty. He was ever the same, always equable in his attitude. A person did not need to study his moods or to wait until the right moment struck before approaching him, and whenever some cloud floated over his countenance, people only needed to look into their own heart to find what had displeased him and caused his sorrow. He acted in a cordial, tender, and charitable manner which drew all souls to him; he found the hearts of children in all his disciples because they found in him the heart of a father.

If he imposed penances on them and corrected them, these were always willingly accepted, because it was not ill humor, passion, or natural inclination that inspired them. His kindness tempered them. Nothing but charity was at their source, and rare wisdom regulated

them. Never did he give a blow without measuring the depth of the wound he was about to inflict and without having prepared an effective balm for it. His perfect understanding of all his subjects taught him the different means to use in winning them over. He knew their strengths and weaknesses, their defects and virtues, their passions and the graces they had received. He had the ways and means of weighing and measuring everything in order to balance the severity of his corrections with the gravity of their faults and, even more so, with their individual dispositions.

Furthermore, the rule he had adopted for himself, that is, to command nothing that he himself did not practice and to advise nothing that he had not tried, had won for him a perfect knowledge of different kinds of mortifications and penance and had earned for him the grace of not imposing them except in a judicious manner and with results. His own example, his fervor, and the unction of his words made everything easy and gave him a power over hearts which could not be separated from his person, but which, unfortunately, he could not share with those to whom he had entrusted his authority. Consequently, the exercise of that authority, when not supported by his own example, charism, and prudence, became odious and produced effects totally contrary to what had been expected.

When De La Salle was away, the Director, strict on himself and harsher on others, undertook to correct the slightest faults by sanctions that were exaggerated. He punished right and left without producing the least amelioration, handing out bitter reproofs and imposing severe penances. If he had been amenable to correction himself, his mistakes might have sufficed to induce him to change, because the discontent of these novices, who were imperfect and tepid, was easy to read on their faces. This should have told him clearly enough that he was laying an unbearable burden on their shoulders and that prudence and charity both suggested that he should tailor the mortifications he assigned to the level of the spiritual strength of his subjects.

The young men, excessively maltreated by a hard and pitiless taskmaster, did not fail to complain to their good father. De La Salle consoled them, encouraged them, and tried to heal the wounds in their hearts and to implant therein respect, confidence, and submission toward the one whom he had put in charge of their formation. As sound government requires, he made the inferiors feel that they were in the wrong. He told them that they lacked virtue and obedience by showing their resentment and bitterness, and he obliged them to make up for their bad example by a generous apology and by full acceptance of the chastisement inflicted on them.

The servant of God feared that he might add fuel to the flames if he admitted the mistakes made by the Director of Novices. He feared that he might accustom the novices to complain about the behavior of their guides and in that way encourage immortification, self-will, and pride, which would have led to revolt and the spirit of independence. Therefore, in order to make them learn obedience and death to self early in their career, he left them under this harsh and burdensome yoke. Furthermore, since he still planned to give up the government of the Community and to put his disciples in charge of everything, he sought by all means to transfer confidence from himself to the Brothers he had appointed as leaders, accustoming all the others to do without him and to find him in his representatives alone.

It may be that De La Salle judged the Director of Novices too favorably and did not think he was guilty either of harshness or of imprudence. It may be that he thought experience would correct him of these two defects. Perhaps, ultimately, he felt it best not to condemn a superior on the reports of a few discontented and ill-disposed inferiors. At any rate, he did not feel it necessary to take the matter up with the Director of Novices or to make any remarks to him about it. Thus the latter did not change his conduct, and so with time the wounds he had inflicted only festered. He added new hurts to the old and thus multiplied the malcontents.

This Director of Novices had his counterpart in the Director in charge of the Brothers teaching in the Paris schools. These two men, cut from the same cloth, imitated each other in everything. Both of them had some virtue and a certain piety, but their piety and virtue were devoid of prudence, rooted in moodiness, and characterized by harshness and extravagance. The imperfect Brothers in the Paris schools were no less dissatisfied with their Director than the novices were with theirs. The former, like the latter, not finding in De La Salle's representatives men like him, not finding charitable fathers and kind spiritual physicians, groaned under the yoke of an obedience which was no longer tempered by divine love.

Toward these discontented Brothers, De La Salle observed the same kind of conduct he had shown toward the novices. Acting, so to speak, as a mediator between them and their Director, he tried to bring them back together again, to unite their hearts by the bond of perfect obedience. Constantly trying to bind up ancient wounds and prevent new ones, he wanted them to find peace in patience. He hoped they would become so humble and so mortified that they would not even think of complaining, except of their own shortcomings. He sought to lead them all to this level of virtue. But not all



were capable of rising so high, and we shall soon learn of the crosses he had to carry as a result of the behavior of these two imprudent men whom he had put in charge of the novices and of the Brothers.

The novitiate moves to a larger and more convenient house

The house at Vaugirard was too small to lodge all the postulants. It was fairly distant from Paris, and this added to the difficulty of transporting provisions every day from the capital. Moreover, it made it hard for the vigilant Superior to watch over the temporal and spiritual concerns of the Brothers and of the novices, since the two groups were separated. All this induced him to seek another place, offering more room, more facilities, and greater proximity to Paris.

There existed such a spot, unoccupied for a long time, which had belonged to the religious of Our Lady of the Ten Virtues, where the children of France<sup>11</sup> had been brought up. It was located a little above the tollgate, near the Carmelites, on the main road leading to Vaugirard. Withdrawn and solitary, spacious and ample, enclosed on all sides by stout gates and well-built walls, containing open spaces and large gardens, close to the city—this property had everything that De La Salle was looking for.

The cost of leasing it was the only thing that seemed to put it beyond his reach. The owner was asking for only 1,600 livres rent a year, but what an enormous sum that was for men as poor as the inhabitants of the poorhouse! Would the proprietor be willing to rent to a man who had nothing, who was responsible for a large Community, who never knew from one day to the next whether he would be able to provide the needed food? Would he himself dare to ask for the lease? Was it prudent on his part—for he had neither funds nor fixed income—to take upon himself an obligation which exceeded the entire value of all the property his Institute owned? These thoughts occupied De La Salle's mind and made him hold off from concluding the lease of this property, so commodious and so necessary. After recommending this transaction to God in prayer, he felt emboldened, and his confidence in Providence, which had never failed him, persuaded him that he could not find any better guarantor than God to assure his solvency.

He mentioned the idea, therefore, to De La Chétardie, who at first showed some surprise. "If you find it so hard merely to live," he

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11. "Children of France" was a term that included the children and grandchildren, not all of them legitimate, of the reigning monarch.

replied, “how will you ever be able to pay such a considerable rental?” However, when he heard the arguments with which De La Salle supported his plan, the pastor agreed with it, and to make his contribution, he increased by fifty livres the annual salary of the Brothers teaching in his parish schools. This unexpected liberality made the pious Founder realize how right he had been to trust in Divine Providence, how agreeable his project was to God, and how little risk he himself would run if he assumed this heavy obligation, relying on the help of heaven. So he signed the lease at the earliest opportunity, and he and his Community took possession of the place in April 1698.

#### Madame Voisin donates 7,000 livres to furnish the house

Once he and the Brothers had moved in, the house was peopled indeed, but it still looked bare and unfurnished because the objects they had brought from Vaugirard were so poor and shabby that they were hardly worth transporting, and there were so few of them that they could hardly be noticed in so vast a residence.

Touched by this extreme poverty, De La Chétardie sent one of the Brothers to Madame Voisin, a generous widow, to ask her to extend her liberality to a house which so sorely needed it. This pious lady, who gave abundant alms to the poor of the parish and to various religious communities in Paris, contributed 400 livres on the spot and promised the same amount every year. But what was that to furnish a house sheltering some sixty people, where there was practically nothing, where everything was lacking? The parish priest called her attention to the disproportion between her gift and the needs that existed in this run-down house, and she generously gave him 7,000 livres right away to cover the cost of purchasing the absolutely necessary equipment. This money made it possible to buy beds, curtains, mattresses, clothing, and a few indispensable pieces of furniture. The house assumed a new look and made its inhabitants realize the advantages of its location and the conveniences it offered.

However, if the residence of the novices became somewhat more livable, their lifestyle did not become any more pleasant. When he moved them to a larger location, De La Salle had in mind only to lodge them all, not to give their bodies any more relief. A bigger house was needed to shelter the postulants who presented themselves and those already there, but all who lived in it were not, for all that, any more at ease insofar as nature was concerned. In this new residence, they still drank water only, and the food was no better than it

had been at Vaugirard. The exercises of piety, the mortifications, and the penances went on as before. As the number of novices increased, so did their fervor. Never had the new Institute been so flourishing, and in a short time it would begin to spread out like a great tree, covering Paris, then all of France, and bearing fruit, had the human enemy not succeeded in checking its progress.

The new residence had a chapel once used by the nuns who had lived there. This was enlarged by adding a choir. When it was ready, one of the vicars-general of Paris came to bless it and dedicated it to God in honor of Saint Cassian, martyr. I do not know the reason why De La Salle chose this holy martyr as the patron of his chapel, unless it was that the mission of instructing children in the principles of Christianity, which this saint had exercised, gave him some kinship with the Brothers of the Christian Schools. For in these later times of the Church, the Brothers are doing precisely what the holy martyr did in the early days at the risk of his life; thus it seemed natural enough to have him as their patron. It may also be that Divine Providence, by inspiring De La Salle to take as his patron this saint who was put to death by his pupils, wished to hint that he would himself endure a similar martyrdom because of the many sorrows that his disciples would cause him.

### Opening a third parish school gives rise to a lawsuit

As De La Salle found in De La Chétardie the heart of a father and a zeal for Christian education which seemed to rival his own, he took advantage of this to suggest the opening of a new school in one of the thickly populated quarters of the Faubourg Saint Germain which needed such an establishment very badly. The pious pastor, willing to undertake all sorts of good works, satisfied his own zeal by fulfilling the desires of the holy Founder. This new school, which De La Salle had been projecting for some time, was set up in the neighborhood of the hospital for the incurables, in the rue Saint Placide. It is still there today. As soon as the new school opened its doors, so many students flocked in that the four Brothers assigned there were overwhelmed with work. It became necessary to send two more to help them out. In this way, the parish of Saint Sulpice in Paris, which is bigger and more densely populated than some of the larger cities of the kingdom, was divided into three sections where the Brothers taught school (and still do), thanks to the liberality of the parish priests.

It is only right to call attention here to the enthusiasm that these saintly pastors showed for Christian education. It seems that this zeal

was conferred on them when they were appointed to this position and that they vied with each other in protecting such an excellent work. De La Barmondière, the solicitous pastor who died in the odor of sanctity in 1694, was the one who first called the Brothers to his parish to run the Gratuitous Schools. His successors, all of whom were men of remarkable merit and uncommon piety, far from neglecting the Christian education of needy youth, distinguished themselves in promoting it, and it seems that the most recent parish priest deserved credit for surpassing his predecessors in heaping benefits and proofs of his goodness on the new Institute.

Let us now return to our story.

This multitude of pupils who flocked into the Christian and Gratuitous Schools left those of the paid schoolmasters empty. This once again provoked alarm among the Paris schoolmasters. As on the two prior occasions, they felt that physical assault was the shortest and easiest way of closing down the new school. Fearing lest they might not be able to secure the verdict they wanted, they decided to seize it for themselves and proceeded to lay their hands on everything used by the Brothers and the students in the school on rue Saint Placide, just as they had done a few years earlier in that of rue du Bac.

De La Salle happened to arrive on the scene just when this vandalism was in progress, and seeing that they were making off with whatever they had laid hands on, he said to his charitable rivals with his usual tranquil air, *Here, take me along, too!* "We have no quarrel with you," they told him, "but with these Brothers." In fact, the Brothers were summoned to court, and during the three months that the lawsuit lasted, the Gratuitous Schools remained shut. During this interval, the zealous Superior fell ill, but his illness did not lead to any complications. Because Divine Providence had destined him to be the advocate as well as the Founder of the Christian Schools, God gave him back his health in order that he might once more plead before earthly magistrates in favor of the public and of poor children. De La Chétardie took the cause of the Gratuitous Schools to heart as much as De La Salle did, and it was by his order and on his advice that the zealous Founder undertook to fight the case.

The Brothers appeared when summoned, accompanied by their Superior. He very adroitly seized a favorable moment to speak when a pause had intervened in the proceedings, so that they could not refuse him the favor of showing how his rights were being violated. He pleaded his own case, therefore, in which nothing but his charity made him an interested party. He did this with so much wisdom and with such cogent reasons that he won the judge over to his side, so to

speak, prompting him to interrogate the schoolmasters, which covered them with confusion and won the case for the Brothers.

To make clear the reason why the judge undertook this interrogation on the side of the Brothers, it must be said that the schoolmasters had based their claim on a misrepresentation. Knowing that the cause of the Gratuitous Schools was the cause of the public and that it concerned the interests of the poor, recalling that they had once before challenged and been shamefully defeated, the schoolmasters knew that their plea would once again be turned down by the court if they showed themselves to be the enemies and aggressors of the needy. At the same time, they were sure of winning if they could convince the court that the Brothers were financially as interested as they themselves were and that the Brothers likewise profited by their teaching. If the judge were to believe this calumny, the Brothers' case would take on a quite different appearance for him. It would no longer have been a question of the public interest or that of the poor, and deserving of no special favor; the Brothers would have been condemned to pay the costs of the lawsuit and enjoined from interfering with other people's rights and livelihood. So the entire weight of the charitable advocate's discourse rested on the gratuity of the Christian Schools.

Monsieur de La Salle had left everything to establish these schools. He had resigned his canonry and given away his fortune, and this disinterestedness inspired him with genuine eloquence and lent him a convincing tone. But the prudent Superior knew that the judge was hesitating between an affirmative and a negative decision. With equal confidence, each party was expecting a favorable judgment. (As we know, a bold-faced liar can sometimes reduce a defender of truth to silence.)

De La Salle also realized that the magistrate might leave the matter in suspense, if truth did not immediately prevail over falsehood. So he dared the schoolmasters to bring forward the slightest proof that what they said was true. He declared himself ready to admit defeat and to close all of the Brothers' schools if his rivals could demonstrate that they were not gratuitous. This challenge disconcerted the masters and naturally prompted the judge to ask them the obvious question. When they could not reply, he gave judgment in the only way possible: against the accusers. For when he demanded that the schoolmasters show proof that the Brothers, like themselves, sold the services they rendered to the young, they had to keep silent and withdraw in shame. By abandoning their complaint, they obliged the judge to condemn them.

De La Salle recognized the hand of God in this whole affair and considered the happy issue thereof as a singular favor from the divine bounty. This is what he himself said about it in a letter he wrote to a Brother in a community outside Paris. Among other things, he informed him that God seemed to have given him back his health only to bring a favorable conclusion to the lawsuit which had ended to the advantage of the Christian Schools.

Delivered once again from unjust pursuit by their rivals, the schools quickly resumed their forward march and once more began producing the abundant and evident good results they had previously afforded. The Lord's blessing flowed out on them as soon as they reopened, and from that time to this, they have never known decline. Order and discipline are maintained in them, and the effects of the Christian instruction and education they impart are notable in the lives of the students.

As no one was more interested in all this than the pastor of Saint Sulpice, no one else appeared happier over it. His pleasure was to go to visit the schools, to inquire about the progress made by the students, and to encourage them by distributing small prizes. He made these visits regularly every month, accompanied by Madame Voisin, who brought him along with her in her carriage. Each visit afforded him new satisfaction. Laden with rewards when he arrived, he left behind him proofs of his liberality; he spread joy and noble emulation among the children, whom he urged to come to school regularly and to distinguish themselves there by their modest behavior.

On one occasion, De La Salle, knowing that De La Chétardie and Madame Voisin were going to come for their usual visit to the school in rue Saint Placide, made it a point to be there to welcome them. Seeing the large number of children (there were over 400 of them) who filled the classrooms, De La Chétardie could not restrain his joy; addressing the one responsible for all this good work, he said to him, *Ah, Monsieur! What a work! Where would this multitude of children be, if they were not gathered here? They would be running the streets, fighting, and learning to their cost the ways of sin and evil!* In the presence of Madame Voisin, he questioned the children on the mysteries of our holy religion. Delighted by their replies, their modesty, and the good order that he witnessed, he embraced the Brothers and gave them the kiss of peace as a sign of his friendship. Going from one class to another with eagerness and a sort of holy curiosity, he thoroughly enjoyed himself and departed only with regret. But he left behind him a new determination: among the students, to study hard and among the Brothers, to instruct their pupils well.

His zeal went even further, and to demonstrate and advertise the good being done in the Christian Schools, he organized on the first Saturday of the month a sort of procession of children from the various classes. The Brothers brought them, lined up two by two, to the parish church to attend a Solemn Mass in honor of Our Lady, after which a portion of blessed bread was distributed to all of them in turn. Madame Voisin bore the cost of this, which amounted to some fifty livres. De La Chétardie's joy knew no bounds when he saw about a thousand children gathered under his eyes, already being instructed and brought up in such an edifying manner, thanks to his charity. He pointed them out to Madame de Montespan, to Madame Voisin, and to the other pious ladies who derived much edification from the spectacle. He mentioned to them what a sort of miracle it was to see the perfect order, modesty, and silence which reigned among these children who were usually considered to be so wild and ungovernable.

In this way, the worthy parish priest of Saint Sulpice showed his affection for the Christian Schools and sustained that of Madame Voisin, which encouraged this pious lady to continue her donations to them. She felt she could do nothing better with her money than to support a work so useful to the public and so necessary for the poor. At the suggestion of the parish priest, she agreed at this particular time when the price of bread had again increased considerably to have a pound of it distributed daily as an alms to all of the Brothers' pupils.

As De La Chétardie's zeal for the Christian Schools grew day by day, he sought to multiply them in his parish as much as he could. In view of this, he caused another one to be opened in rue Fosse de Monsieur le Prince, near the Saint Michel gate. This school, like the others, soon attracted so many pupils that four Brothers had to be assigned to it. It is true that it did not last more than three or four years, because the charity of those who supported it eventually grew cold, and it had to be discontinued. Of course, the Paris schoolmasters were not happy at the opening of this new establishment, but they did not dare cause any trouble. The influence enjoyed by the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, who had declared himself its founder and protector, tied their hands and obliged them to maintain an uneasy truce with the Brothers, even though their hearts were filled with thoughts of strife.

## CHAPTER XV

*Second attempt to establish a Gratuitous School and a training college for country schoolmasters, in Saint Hippolyte parish in Paris.*

By giving the Founder the opportunity of opening a school in the parish of Saint Hippolyte in the Saint Marcel suburb, Divine Providence also furnished De La Salle with a chance to establish a new training college for country schoolmasters. No other type of institution interested the servant of God as much as this. In the concept he entertained of his Institute, there was a place for the Brothers who would teach in towns and cities and one for lay schoolmasters destined to work in country villages. The first part of his plan was succeeding well enough, in spite of opposition and persecution on the part of the world and of hell, but the second, which he had started in Reims with so much success, had not survived his own departure from that city, and he yearned with a holy longing to revive it. God gave him this joy but not for very long. He witnessed the destruction of this undertaking through the treachery of the one among his sons on whom he counted most and whom he had chosen to preside over its foundation. Here is how all this happened.

The pastor of Saint Hippolyte, learning of all the good done by the Christian Schools in the parish of Saint Sulpice, was inspired to secure the same advantages for his own parish. He found De La Salle quite willing to give him two Brothers, and he provided for their upkeep in a truly generous fashion. When he saw for himself how much benefit could be derived from a Gratuitous School conducted by disinterested and truly pious teachers, he looked even farther afield and conceived the idea of extending to country parishes the blessings that the Lord was bestowing on his own. The pastor broached the idea to De La Salle and asked him how it could be carried out. The wise Superior, determined not to send his Brothers to small villages because of the reasons previously mentioned, made the parish priest understand that it would be possible to replace the Brothers by schoolmasters brought up and trained in virtue and in the art of their profession. Seeing that the parish priest was eager to cooperate with him in founding a training college for these country schoolmasters, he informed him about the project and added that he was impatiently awaiting the day when he would see this important work get under way once more.



The eager pastor, delighted to learn that his idea was feasible and that simple and easy means to realize it were available, resolved to second De La Salle's plan; he entrusted to him the job of establishing the training college while he himself undertook to provide the funds. Never did two men intent on a good work seem more satisfied. De La Salle had found in the pastor of Saint Hippolyte the man he had been hoping to meet, the man who would resurrect in Paris the training school for country schoolmasters which had failed in Reims, and the parish priest of Saint Hippolyte found in De La Salle the right man to carry out his desires and satisfy his zealous wishes.

Each one did his part in the undertaking. At the suggestion of the pious pastor, a certain gentleman gave them a house, and a virtuous ecclesiastic donated an income of 800 livres a year to underwrite the foundation. As soon as the house was ready, De La Salle brought in a number of young candidates from Champagne. To instruct them, he chose one of the pioneer Brothers in whom he had unlimited confidence but who, a few years later, turned into a new Judas. This same building also accommodated the classes of the parish school; the second Brother taught one of these, while the other one was conducted by the apprentice schoolmasters under the eyes of their director. The young men, in turn, practiced teaching in order to learn the methods of handling a class effectively.

The Brothers' manner of living and most of their regulations were followed in this training college. The students rose at 4:30 A.M. and went to bed at 9 P.M. Interior prayer, spiritual reading, and examination of conscience alternated during the day with the exercises proper to their profession: reading, writing, and arithmetic. These subjects, along with Gregorian chant, were taught at specified times. Silence and recollection were observed, as well as other practices of piety in use among the Brothers. Each young man wore the clothes he had brought with him on entering, all of them dressing in secular garb. Moreover, they were provided with board, lodging, and instruction gratis; goodwill was all that was asked of them.

This training college flourished for as long as the parish priest lived, some five or six years, but his death brought about its ruin on account of the very means he had taken to provide for its survival, so true is the observation of the Wise Man, who says that *human perspectives are short* and his wisdom, as well as his precautions, are most uncertain. On his deathbed, the pious parish priest of Saint Hippolyte, realizing better than ever the importance of this good work he had helped establish, had no greater concern than to insure its continuation after his own demise. Since the institution was not legally

recognized and enjoyed no official status, he had to find a way to make sure that it was provided with funds. After considering the matter carefully, he thought he could solve all the difficulties by naming the Brother who directed the college as heir to the invested capital that supported the institution. The worthy parish priest had no doubts about this Brother's honesty. Indeed, it could scarcely be questioned. He was one of the two men whom the Founder considered as his two arms and whom he had selected as the pillars of his Community. Together with De La Salle and Brother Gabriel Drolin, this Brother constituted the triumvirate who had obliged themselves by vow never to abandon the Institute and to labor with all their strength for its progress, until death, as we have related above.

De La Salle had so much confidence in him that he had chosen this Brother to be the Director of the new training college. It would seem, therefore, that the pastor of Saint Hippolyte could not have acted more prudently than in making this Brother his heir. We could not have imagined that this man, aware of his true wishes and chosen to execute his projects, would abuse this confidence and appropriate for himself the funds given him for the training college for country schoolmasters. The Brother could surely not have been ignorant of the intentions of the parish priest, since the latter had personally told him of them. Yet the funeral of the pastor was hardly over when De La Salle found out that he had chosen a Judas in the man he had appointed as superior of this institution and that this wretched Brother, like the perfidious Apostle, intended to enrich himself with money given to God and destined for the support of a good work.

### The Brother responsible for the ruin of the training college

When the vigilant Superior learned of the death of the pastor and of the dispositions set up by his will, he came to make arrangements with the Brother. But he got a rude shock when he found his principal disciple ready to turn his back on him and tell him superciliously that he no longer recognized him, could do very well without him, and, in a word, wished to have nothing more to do with him. The avaricious man, elated over his good fortune, was determined to make the most of it. He claimed that the will had been made out in his favor and that the money belonged to him alone.

On this occasion, De La Salle's eminent virtue appeared in all its splendor. His disciple's perfidious conduct was obvious; his ingratitude, notorious; his injustice, crying; his insolence, outrageous. They only served, however, as shadows which brought out in bolder relief

the mildness, humility, and disinterestedness of the servant of God. De La Salle accepted the unjust and insulting greeting of the Brother in humble silence and did not allow himself to complain in the least. Happy over such a turn of events which made him resemble Jesus Christ betrayed by one of his disciples, he felt chagrin only over the ruin of the training college which he had so long hoped to see flourish again. If no man had ever imitated Judas more closely in his perfidious and avaricious conduct than this unfortunate Brother, never did anyone better imitate Jesus in his meekness and patience than did De La Salle on this occasion. He came home in peace and seemed to forget about the wrong done to him. He never dreamed of vindicating his rights in the matter of the training college for which the legacy had been destined.

As abyss calls to abyss, as those who fall from the loftiest positions are the most seriously hurt, the ambitious Brother did not limit himself to this first offense. He laid aside his habit and put the other Brother, his companion, out of the house. He secured release from his vows and thought only of enjoying in peace the goods he had unjustly stolen from the Church. The charitable ecclesiastic who had joined the deceased parish priest in supporting the good work and who, at the latter's request, had agreed to make over to it an income of 800 livres per year was outraged at the unjust use made of the funds left by the former parish priest, and he revoked his own donation. Thus the training college which had been started so quickly and successfully fell into complete ruin, to the great regret of the servant of God, who was powerless to prevent its destruction.

The sacrilegious usurper did continue the school established in the parish. Sometime later, however, either because he had wasted most of the legacy he had appropriated or because he hoped to appease the remorse of his conscience which tormented him, he sought to be readmitted into the Community from which he had separated himself with so much shame and scandal. Like a good father, De La Salle opened his arms to this prodigal and unnatural son. He would have taken him back into the Society with joy, but the advice of wise and prudent people who feared the effects such a pernicious example might cause dissuaded him from doing so.

This was the second wound De La Salle received since moving into the new house. We shall soon speak of the first one, which, although it preceded the second, also followed it. It is easy to understand how much the servant of God suffered on account of the callous behavior of the Brother of whom we have spoken. Our heart can sympathize with the pangs caused by ingratitude, perfidy, cruelty,

injustice, insolence, and meanness more easily than our lips can express that feeling. Nonetheless, a pure soul suffers less from the consequences of these vices than from the ruin of an important establishment destined for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. But the time had not yet come for the Superior of the Brothers to start counting his crosses.

The ones we have spoken of were only the beginning of his sorrows. When he moved from the small house to the larger one, he found bigger crosses awaiting him. Although his Institute achieved important progress there, it was also there that he saw his troubles multiply. The ground on which he walked produced nothing but thorns and brambles for him. He was to encounter new persecutions at every step, and these would leave him only when he departed from this life. This new Job faced these most trying happenings with a confident and tranquil air which amazed those who shared his confidence. Ever the same, he sought comfort in his complete submission to the orders of Divine Providence and in total abandonment to God's action.

The perfidious disciple of whom we have spoken survived his master but not for long. After continuing the school in the parish of Saint Hippolyte for over twenty years, he fell ill of a mortal ailment the day after De La Salle expired. The servant of God died on Good Friday, 7 April 1719. It seems that on the very next day, he interested heaven in avenging a crime which he had so wholeheartedly pardoned during his life. The former Brother fell ill on Holy Saturday, the day the servant of God was buried, and after five months of suffering, he went to give an account to his Judge for the tremendous injustice he had been guilty of toward the Church, for the affront he had offered his Superior, for his scandalous desertion which had shocked his Community, and for the complete ruin which he had brought to the training college for country schoolmasters.

### De La Salle accepts fifty young Irish exiles into the house

It was about this same time that De La Salle opened his house to fifty young Irish lads who had recently taken refuge in France in order to preserve their religion. This project had been proposed to him by the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, acting on the suggestion of the archbishop. The prelate had been asked by the king of England, who had taken refuge in this kingdom, to find a suitable place for the group of young men who had voluntarily left their country to safeguard their faith from persecution. Archbishop de Noailles found no more fitting

solution than to send them to the Community of the Brothers, where their piety might be nourished and the innocence of their hearts, even more threatened than their faith, might be preserved from the corruption of the world.

The archbishop had not yet been prejudiced against the former canon of Reims, nor had there been erased from his mind the intimations of holiness based on reports of heroic virtues that came to him while he was still bishop of Châlons. He loved and honored the servant of God as an apostolic man, and on this occasion, he wished to give him a striking proof of his trust by confiding to him the education of a group of fervent Catholic young men whom His Britannic Majesty had entrusted to him. In doing this, the prelate showed great consideration which he was not, strictly speaking, bound to do, since as the first superior of the diocese, he could of his own accord have opened to these young Irishmen the doors of a community which was entirely subject to him. Because he preferred to request as a favor what he could have required by an order, he sought the agreement of the Superior of the Brothers for something which he could have demanded.

De La Salle strove to correspond with the trust that the prelate showed him. Out of obedience to his superior and out of charity toward these pious refugees, he provided them lodging and let them occupy his house. Not relying exclusively on the vigilance of the Brother whom he placed in charge of them, he himself took a special interest in their education. In this way, they were soon in a position to fulfill honorably the various responsibilities for which they were destined.

While these young men, so staunchly Catholic and so deeply attached to the Roman Church, were being educated in this school of virtue, the king of England, accompanied by the cardinal, honored them by paying them a visit. This great prince, a victim for his religion, had sacrificed his throne to be loyal to his faith. He showed himself extremely concerned about the education of these youths who had suffered persecution on his account.

Everyone knows—it is hardly necessary to mention here—that the great revolution that had taken place in England several years prior to the persecution we are speaking of was a result of the zeal that this worthy king had shown for the Catholic faith. With the queen, his spouse, and their son, the Prince of Wales, he was forced to flee before the tyrant who had pursued the path of crime even to the throne itself. They had sought shelter in France and the protection of Louis XIV, the zealous defender of their rights and of their faith. The loyal

subjects who had followed the royal couple into exile and who had been welcomed in a kingdom which had just recently freed itself from the heresy which had wrought such carnage within it<sup>12</sup> had given the example to those whom they had left behind in their country, exposed to the fury of persecution, and encouraged them to come in their turn to seek their safety and security in France.

Since zeal for the Catholic religion was the only reason for the fall of the king and queen of Great Britain, the usurper of their crown constantly strove to extirpate the faith from the country. The tyrant knew full well that the rightful king still had a large number of faithful adherents in the kingdom he had been forced to abandon, and he realized that their attachment to the true religion kept them firmly bound to their legitimate sovereign. He felt that the best way of overcoming their double fidelity was to make them feel the weight of his murderous arm and to grind down Roman Catholics under his authority. Not ashamed of adding to the odious title of usurper that of tyrant, he often stirred up the flames of persecution again, and since those who practiced the old faith preferred to abandon their lands and their country rather than give up their religion, they came begging the protection of the most Christian king, who made it an honor and a duty of piety to welcome them into his kingdom.

These faithful subjects whom the sword of persecution had caused to flee their homeland in order to remain with their legitimate prince were very dear to their exiled king. Their cause was his own. He showed a father's concern about everything that affected them and took care of them as though they were his children. He certainly showed this on the occasion we mentioned. Not feeling himself liberated from the responsibility for these Irish youths whom he had recommended to the cardinal and entrusted to his charity, he wished to see with his own eyes the place where they lived, to find out what kind of education they were receiving, and to inquire about everything concerning them. Having seen for himself the Christian manner in which they were being brought up, he was completely satisfied. After showing much courtesy to De La Salle, he expressed his gratitude to him for the trouble he was taking to educate these young men and for the progress they had accomplished.

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12. The reference is to the suppression of Calvinism in France by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

### De La Salle's talent for religious education and conversion

This great gift which the virtuous priest possessed for bringing up youths in a Christian manner and for converting hardened souls drew to him the confidence of the greatest sinners. Parents unable to cope with their unmanageable children, despairing of ever being able to bring them back to the path of duty, sought in him the grace that they could not find in themselves to withdraw these children from their evil ways. He often succeeded beyond their expectations and gave back these wild, ungovernable children—now gentle, docile, submissive, and pious—to those who had entrusted them to him.

The prompt and sudden change in a young ecclesiastic belonging to a noble family, who had been sent to him, seemed to be a sort of miracle to those who had known this young man. In vain had every means imaginable been used to induce him to act reasonably and not to lose sight of the state in life to which he was destined. In vain had his relatives thought that sending him to spend some time in the most regular communities would enable him to pick up a smattering of clerical spirit or at least would make him ashamed of his scandalous and ill-regulated life. He turned all the remedies offered him into poison and by a tragic abuse of these means of salvation, he had made them become additional causes of damnation. Only in the Community of the Brothers did he return to his good sense and his faith, but as we intend to speak of the conversions brought about through the ministry of De La Salle in our fourth book, where we shall treat of his virtues, we shall say no more about this case here.

The holiness of the Superior of the Brothers had become known in Paris; it acquainted people with their Institute and inspired several great bishops with the resolution to call them into their dioceses. The first of these was Paul Godet Desmarets, bishop of Chartres, a prelate whose zeal and piety so often served as a bulwark for sound doctrine. He could be looked upon as the scourge of innovators in his time, one whom they all feared as the most uncompromising enemy they had. He was the first to declare war on false spirituality and to point out clearly the subtle venom and the latest perversity it veiled. He and De La Salle had known each other at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice when De La Salle was a young canon of Reims. Just as they had edified each other then, so they preserved a mutual esteem and consideration later on.

### The bishop of Chartres and the clergy petition for Brothers

The great bishop of Chartres had asked De La Salle for some of his disciples several years before this, but the servant of God, under the plea that at the time he did not have enough of them sufficiently well trained, had begged his friend to wait. Although he had every reason to satisfy a prelate who enjoyed such great credit at court and who, on account of his piety and the purity of his belief, wielded such influence over the king, he felt that he should delay sending him any Brothers until he could see clearly that such was the will of God. Bishop Godet Desmarets had been asking for Brothers since 1694 and had frequently reiterated his request. Finally, in 1699, he insisted so strongly that De La Salle could no longer hold back. Before promising to send any of his subjects to Chartres, the humble Superior wished, however, to obtain the consent of the Brothers. So he called them together and informed them of the illustrious prelate's proposal, and after praising the latter's eminent piety and ardent zeal for religion, he let them come to their own decision as they pleased. The Brothers, conscious of the honor paid to them by a bishop whom the partisans of sound traditional doctrine honored as the shield of the faith in France, vied with one another in offering themselves to their Superior for this mission.

Eventually the pious prelate had the satisfaction of seeing all the parish priests in the city of Chartres, without exception, join him in carrying out his design. These zealous pastors, learning that their bishop was trying to secure for Chartres a group of capable and exemplary schoolmasters, unanimously begged him to bring his project to completion as soon as possible. They were so well satisfied with the teachers he had obtained for their parish schools for girls that they ardently desired a similar provision for the boys. The fear that this project might not come about at all or might be long delayed led them to address to the bishop a petition signed by all the parish priests, urging him to conclude the matter speedily. In their petition, these priests speak like experienced, vigilant, and zealous pastors who realize that they are bound to labor for the instruction and sanctification of their parishioners and who recognize that the worst evils afflicting their flocks arise from the lack of a suitable education for the young. Therefore the remedy must be sought in securing for them knowledgeable, pious, and disinterested teachers.

After discussing this matter among themselves several times, they continue in their petition, "We have come to the conclusion that one of the main causes of the indocility, immodesty, ignorance, and the



obviously disorderly lives led by the majority of the children in this city, both boys and girls, is the fact that either there are no Gratuitous Schools for the poor or the schoolmasters and mistresses who up to now have conducted these schools have done so without proper authorization and without the knowledge of the ecclesiastical authorities. In their work, they have no end in view other than earning a livelihood; hence, they do not fulfill their tasks for the good of the children. They lack aptitude, zeal, and constancy. It is necessary to find a remedy for so great an evil, and this means obtaining for this city some schoolmasters and mistresses, established by Your Excellency, whose professional qualifications, piety, and zeal will be well vouched for, so that they may educate the young. In particular, some Gratuitous Schools should be set up for the benefit of the poor children, who because they cannot pay the fees required by the schoolmasters and mistresses, remain without instruction, do not frequent the schools, run wild, and so are easily perverted and become incorrigible.

“We have learned that there is in Paris a priest of great piety who has undertaken to prepare and train young men who possess all the qualities needed to carry out this task properly. This priest is willing to send his subjects wherever they are asked for, provided that their upkeep and livelihood are guaranteed, which requires only a modest sum. We feel obliged to have recourse to Your Excellency, humbly begging you to use all your influence and your charitable alms to secure for this city such a powerful agent for the reform of the morals of the people.”

The bishop of Chartres, delighted to see that his own zeal was seconded by that of the parish priests of his episcopal city, urged the Superior to give him some of his Brothers. Six were sent to teach in the Gratuitous Schools and a seventh to take charge of the material concerns of the community. The virtuous prelate received them with great joy. Forgetting who he was, he displayed great friendliness toward them and gave them all sorts of proofs of truly Christian charity. This bishop was not one of those men who never get off their pedestals and who wish never to be seen except arrayed in all their dignity. He was of easy access, and by his character as well as through virtue, he liked to show himself approachable even to the humblest people and make them feel that in their bishop they had a brother and a father.

As enlightened as he was zealous and being no less wise than pious, the prelate took all the steps necessary to make the ministry of the Brothers effective among the young. The outright protection with which he favored the Brothers, the generous provision he made out

of his own purse for their upkeep, and the petition forwarded to him by the parish priests of the city urging him to bring the Brothers to Chartres were all strong reasons that led the faithful to entrust the education and instruction of their children to these new spiritual guides whom the goodness of God was sending them. All that remained was for the bishop to authorize by a pastoral letter the opening of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. This he did on 4 October 1699. In this pastoral letter, the pious bishop, with his customary unction, declared that ever since it had pleased God to entrust to him the government of the diocese, he had nothing more at heart than the establishment of Christian Schools, especially Charity Schools, in the parishes which needed them most. He added:

“Nothing seemed to us better calculated to inspire the people confided to our care with a knowledge of the Gospel maxims which should regulate their conduct. Sad experience has taught us that the moral turpitude which has invaded all ranks of society results from the little care taken to provide the faithful during their youthful years with an education worthy of their status as children of God, a status given to them in baptism. We felt that in doing this, we would considerably facilitate the task of fathers and mothers, who are strictly bound to bring up their children in a Christian manner, yet who are often unable to do it successfully, prevented as they are by their occupations and their daily labor or because they themselves lack the qualities needed to succeed in this task.

“Think seriously of the weighty words of Saint Paul, that *mothers* (one should say the same thing, with even greater reason, of fathers) *will not be saved except by giving their children a good education*, which means acting in such a way that they may preserve their faith, grow in charity and holiness, and lead well-regulated lives. Our own experience in governing souls has convinced us more firmly than ever of the truth of these words of one of the greatest churchmen of these last centuries, a man who, despite the eminence of his learning, gladly spent the declining years of his life teaching religion to children: *I do not know whether there is anything nobler and more agreeable to God than to cultivate these young plants in the Lord’s garden and to water them with the salutary waters of heavenly doctrine.*<sup>13</sup>

“We have observed—and we were much consoled in doing so—that God was beginning to pour out abundant blessings on the Charity Schools which we had established for girls in certain parishes of the city. This confirmed us in our desire to extend this favor to other

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13. Jean Gerson.

places and to procure similar advantages for boys. What encouraged us even more in this undertaking was to see that our king—always great in everything he undertakes but never more so than in what relates to religion—was extending his solicitude to the establishment and the multiplication of schools and, inspired by piety, was striving to arouse the zeal and vigilance of pastors in this matter. To second his pious intentions, we have brought here some teachers, very well trained for such a noble task and capable of edifying the children by their example as well as of instructing them through imparting the necessary lessons.” After this, he set the opening of the schools for 12 October of that same year, 1699.

The pastoral letter had all the effect that its author could have hoped for. Docile to the voice of their chief pastor, parents hastened to send their children to the Charity Schools, which were soon filled. The great good produced by the Christian education of these youngsters, heretofore left to themselves, was a source of deep joy for Bishop Godet Desmarets, who provided for the schools with a generosity worthy of his great heart. He saw to it that nothing was lacking to them. Fearing lest concern for the necessities of life should distract the Brothers from their ministry which was so useful to the public or lest worrying about their needs should impair their zeal, he took care to provide for everything. It was only after his death that the Brothers realized how much good he had done for them and how deeply indebted they were to him. When they lost him, years of famine followed the years of abundance, and their charitable labors were rewarded by persecutions, as we shall see farther on.

The prelate’s generosity toward the Brothers was linked to an admirable zeal for the success of their schools. His humility led him to visit them and caused him to take pleasure in doing so frequently. He seemed to consider this one of his pastoral duties; he carried it out with noble familiarity and majestic simplicity. He showed the children a father’s interest and spoke to them with a mother’s tenderness. It would be hard to say who remained most charmed, who felt most strongly the pleasure of his visits, the Brothers or the students. He exhorted the students, consoled the Brothers, and urged all to persevere in their good work. The unction of his words left the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ and the seeds of virtue behind him wherever he went. Above all, he neglected nothing that could sustain the Brothers in the difficult beginnings, and he spared nothing to restore their health when they began to suffer from exhaustion.

On this score, the bishop had frequent opportunities to display his charity, because the zeal which devoured these fervent Brothers

for the instruction of the young and the effort of their constant application to their classwork, joined to the exercises of a severe interior life and often to the exaggerated practices of mortification and penance common among them, ruined the health of several of the most robust. Some of them died, blessing God for having led them to so holy a profession. The charitable bishop, deeply disturbed over the loss of some of his best schoolteachers, spared nothing to re-establish or to preserve the health of the remaining ones. As he was convinced that their excessive fervor was the principal threat to this, he begged and implored them with all kindness to confine themselves within the limits of prudence.

Although he himself was no enemy to penance and was a zealous promoter of evangelical austerity, as we can see from the admirable pastoral letter he wrote against the false spirituality in vogue at the time, he warned the Brothers to restrain their fervor so that it might last longer and to wait for God's own good time to offer the sacrifice of their lives, without trying to anticipate God's decrees. He told them that if they did not wish to fatten the victim before immolating it, they should at least nourish it and not overburden it with excessive work and an unbearable load of austerity. He reminded them that Christian instruction and the proper education of poor children were the end of their vocation and the source of their merits for heaven; hence, they should tailor their penances to the requirements of the work that this vocation demanded of them and subordinate the one to the other. After all, the fatigue induced by teaching was in itself a considerable mortification which should be preferred to all others; it cannot countenance what conflicts with itself.

The good prelate did all he could to bring relief to these sick Brothers. He did not disdain to visit them, to examine their spiritual books, to hunt out their instruments of penance, and to take away those that in their fervor they might have made indiscreet use of. So much condescension on the part of a prelate so distinguished by his merit sprang from that basic goodness of heart and charity which characterized him, from the ardent zeal he had for the Christian Schools, and from the singular veneration he entertained for their Founder. On his side, De La Salle omitted nothing to demonstrate his gratitude toward the bishop. In Bishop Godet Desmarets, he honored a true successor of the Apostles, one who was even dearer to him by reason of the purity of his faith and his morals, his zeal for sound doctrine, and his horror of all profane innovations than because of the protection extended to his disciples.

### The bishop forces De La Salle to stay for dinner

When the servant of God, during the visits which his vigilance obliged him to make to Chartres to inspect the Brothers' community and the schools, went to present his respects to the pious bishop, he was received by him like an angel from God or like a former fellow student at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, with that cordiality and holy familiarity which great souls, even in the exalted dignities they attain, never fail to show toward their old friends. The good prelate invariably invited the virtuous priest to dine with him, but in vain did he exhaust all his most engaging manners to induce him to stay.

Finally, weary of inviting a man who always took refuge behind the Rule established in his Community of never eating outside the house except when travelling, he decided one day to obtain through a pious subterfuge what he could not win through appeals to friendship. The servant of God, without suspecting the innocent trap into which he was walking, had not failed on his arrival at Chartres to go, as usual, to the episcopal palace to pay his respects to the bishop. He found all the doors open when he wished to enter but discovered that they were all shut tight, by the orders of His Excellency, when he wanted to leave. So, finding himself a prisoner, he learned that the sentence the bishop had imposed on him was to dine at his table, and thus he had to pay the penalty before he would be delivered. In this way, he finally yielded to the prelate's insistence.

After the meal, the bishop of Chartres and Monsieur d'Aubigné, then his vicar-general, who later became bishop of Noyon and finally archbishop of Rouen, discussed in detail with the servant of God everything relating to the Brothers' Institute and tried to bring him to mitigate the manner of living followed in it and to treat himself with less rigor. Observing his simplicity, his penance, and the extreme poverty to which he had condemned himself, they combatted in him virtues which in their hearts they admired. These distinguished men thought that the virtuous priest carried the practice of austerity too far and that the labor of the classroom, added to such a hard and mortified life, would undermine even the strongest constitutions.

With this in mind and to bring him to moderate his own fervor and to place a limit on that of his disciples, they told him everything that friendship could suggest. But a man who never thought he was doing enough for God looked upon these charitable remonstrances only as reasons for greater confusion and as tacit incitements to imitate Jesus Christ more closely. Finally, he became a sort of spectacle to this group of friends, who examined him from head to toe; nothing in

him escaped the censure or the reproaches of these charitable hosts. Some chided him for the poverty of his clothes; others, for their unusual style; some found fault with his thick-soled, clumsy shoes; others, with the shape of his wide-brimmed hat; all of them criticized a man whom they accused of exaggerating in virtue and joined in exhorting him to keep to the common mean.

In this opposition to his garb, the poverty of his mantle was what struck these gentlemen the most, because not only was it made of the coarsest material but also it was so old and worn that it was fit only to be thrown away. This caused the charitable bishop to have another one made for him, but so that it might be to his liking and that he might not refuse it, he had it cut out of very common and cheap cloth. Since this gift was a true alms, the holy priest accepted it with good grace, humility, and gratitude. This mantle, however, did not remain his to use for very long, because sometime later, a couple of highwaymen stole it from him one night when he was returning from Paris to where he was then staying. He surrendered it to them with the same willingness with which he had received it; as he had accepted it from charity, so now he gave it to them through charity.

The most outstanding and visible change that the Gratuitous Schools brought about in the children at Chartres was an extraordinary modesty in church. Like young saplings which because of their youth bend easily when a charitable and skillful hand inclines them, to the astonishment of the entire city, they finally adopted the attitudes that the Brothers wished them to take and conformed to the example of piety they could see in their teachers. The sight of the Brothers leading them in a humble and recollected posture impressed them even more than the lessons they had heard. Observing the Brothers as they entered the house of God, they learned from their silence and their devout exterior how to behave in the same way, and witnessing the piety with which their teachers attended the Divine Office or holy Mass, they felt ashamed for never having assisted thereat up to then in heart and mind and for having been present only in body. The children were finally persuaded on this score and, in their turn, became silent preachers of devotion and of that respectful awe which should seize every faithful Christian at his first step into God's temple.

Bishop Godet Desmarets was so delighted over such an edifying change in the young people brought up in the Christian Schools that he conceived a great desire of profiting by this situation to reform the entire city on a rather important point. For a long time, he had been bewailing the profanations too common in the Lord's house; he had

witnessed how little faith and religious spirit the people showed in so holy a place which they should have entered only with the deepest reverence. However, he did not know what barrier he could oppose to the flood of impiety which showed itself brazenly in the very presence of Jesus Christ. In Chartres, as everywhere else, the worthy prelate could see with sorrow the churches profaned by laughter, conversations, displays of worldly vanity, and a thousand other disorders which constitute the abomination of desolation in the holy place; yet he did not know how he could prevent these sins which were drawing down God's malediction on his people.

Finally, after thinking the matter over carefully, he decided on a course of action. Convinced that if the people could witness the religious respect that the Brothers displayed in church, their example would have on the citizens of Chartres the same effect that it had produced on their students, he resolved to send them on Sundays and feasts to all the parishes of the city. This idea, although a holy and praiseworthy one, did not correspond with the end of the Institute, nor did it sufficiently safeguard the Brothers' own spiritual good. That was why their wise Superior could not go along with this plan. He also had another difficulty with the bishop of Chartres: the question of teaching reading in Latin.

### Reasons for not using Latin to teach reading

The established practice in the Christian Schools is to begin by teaching children how to read French before teaching them to read Latin. This unaccustomed procedure did not seem to Bishop Godet Desmarets the most natural one; he wished to have it changed. De La Salle, who had introduced this modification in what was commonly practiced only because he had serious reasons for doing so, asked to be allowed to explain them and proceeded to justify the practice by such cogent arguments that the prelate agreed with him. Here, in substance, are his arguments:

"1) Knowing how to read French is far more useful to all children than knowing how to read Latin.

"2) Since French is their native language, it is incomparably easier for them to learn how to read it than to read Latin, given that they know the one and do not know the other.

"3) Consequently, it takes far less time to teach children to read French than to teach them to read Latin.

"4) Ability to read French facilitates learning how to read Latin; the reverse is not true, as experience shows. The reason for this is

that to read Latin properly, all one needs to do is to articulate each syllable and enunciate each word correctly. This is easy when the child knows how to spell and to read French; it follows that anyone who knows how to read French well can easily learn to read Latin; on the contrary, when much time has been spent learning to read Latin first, still more is required to learn how to read French.

“5) Why does it take so long to learn to read Latin? As already mentioned, Latin words are just sounds to people who do not understand them; hence, it is difficult for them not to omit some of the syllables or to spell out words whose meaning escapes them.

“6) Why should people learn to read Latin, when they will never make any use of this language during their lives? What use do the children of either sex who come to the Christian Schools have for the Latin language? Nuns who must recite the Divine Office in Latin need to know how to read it well, but of a hundred girls who frequent the Gratuitous Schools, scarcely one might become a choir nun in a monastery. So, too, of a hundred boys in the Brothers’ schools, how many will later on wish to study the Latin language? Even if there were several of them, should they be favored at the expense of the rest?

“7) Experience shows that those children who frequent the Christian Schools do not stay there very long; they do not attend classes long enough to learn how to read both Latin and French well. As soon as they are old enough to start working, their parents withdraw them or else they stop coming because they have to earn a living. Under these circumstances, if we start by teaching them how to read Latin, the following inconveniences will result: they will quit school before learning how to read French or at least to read it well; when they leave, they will know how to read Latin only imperfectly; in a short time, they will have forgotten what they learned, with the result that they will never really know how to read at all, either French or Latin.

“8) The most serious drawback is that they almost never learn Christian doctrine. In fact, when children begin by learning to read French, they know how to read fairly well by the time they leave school. Knowing how to read easily, they can learn Christian doctrine by themselves and can study it in the printed catechisms; they can sanctify Sundays and feasts by reading good books and reciting well-written prayers in French. Whereas when they leave the Christian and Gratuitous Schools, if they know how to read Latin only, and that badly, all their lives they will remain ignorant of their duties as Christians.

“9) Finally, experience shows that those who do not understand Latin, who have not pursued further studies and acquired familiarity



with the Latin tongue—especially the common people and, a fortiori, the poor who come to the Christian Schools—never succeed in reading Latin well and make fools of themselves when they try to read it in the hearing of those who understand that language. It is, therefore, completely useless to waste time teaching people to read a language which they will never use.”

It has been thought proper to summarize these arguments so as to silence the critics who object that in the Gratuitous Schools, the children are taught to read French before learning to read Latin, contrary to the prevailing custom. It is to be hoped that those who find fault with this procedure will pay attention to the reasons which justify it; then they will be the first to recommend this method.

### Difficulties following the death of Bishop Desmarets

The illustrious Bishop Paul Desmarets did not live long enough to benefit the Christian Schools as he would have wished to do. His death, so deeply deplored by the defenders of traditional doctrine, robbed the Brothers of a true father and a powerful defender of their Institute and deprived De La Salle of a faithful friend. The zealous prelate would have done all that he could have in favor of the Gratuitous Schools if, before his death, he had created an endowment to establish them permanently in Chartres, as several other great bishops have done. Without any financial support to fall back on, the Brothers whom he had generously cared for during his lifetime were left in the direst misery. The Christian Schools, lacking any fixed revenue, have often been in desperate straits in a city where they found enemies among the very persons who everywhere else showed themselves to be their defenders. Since nobody was providing for these men whose ministry was wholly gratuitous, it would have been natural for their zealous Superior to withdraw them from a city which seemed to think it was doing them a favor by not expelling them.

But that holy man, whose actions were inspired only by the sublime principles of heavenly wisdom, paid no attention to the prompting of nature or to the reasons for dissatisfaction that the world gave him. On the contrary, the places where his disciples had to suffer the most and where they were most neglected were the places to which he grew most strongly attached, convinced that the cross is what characterizes God's works as well as God's elect and that there is always much good to be done in localities where there is much to suffer. This man who was led only by the maxims of the saints felt that the institutions which have to struggle hardest are those which eventually

receive the greatest blessings from almighty God and that when creatures fail us, we have the most to hope for from heaven. He had taken for his motto that *there is more grace where there is less nature*; he felt that the foundations against which the devil arouses the most furious persecutions are those which prove most useful for souls and give most glory to God.

In accordance with these principles, he preferred to let his disciples remain a prey to the direst poverty rather than to withdraw them from Chartres. However, necessity obliged him to reduce their number from seven to four while waiting for Divine Providence to change the attitude of the city's inhabitants toward the Brothers, a city which is placed under the special protection of the Most Blessed Virgin and where true and profound religious spirit and genuine piety can be found. The great devotion to the Mother of God which distinguishes the city of Chartres and makes it so illustrious in the kingdom was one of the reasons that kept the Brothers there. Reluctant to leave a city so favored by the Queen of Heaven, they preferred to stay on, even if it meant living in extreme poverty.

As a matter of fact, they still subsist only on a certain quantity of wheat and wine furnished them by the illustrious nephew and successor of Bishop Paul Desmarets and on the rare alms given them by a few pious persons, especially Monsieur de Truchis, today the subchanter, whose zeal for supporting the Christian Schools is worthy of a man filled with the spirit of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, where he was educated. This pious canon, devoted to all sorts of good works and very active in the instruction of the ignorant, within the last few years has obtained the opening of a Brothers' school at Nogent-le-Rotrou, in the diocese of Chartres. We must also acknowledge and honor the piety of His Highness, the Duke d'Orléans, who recently extended his charity to the Gratuitous Schools of Chartres. By granting an annuity of 500 livres, he came to the help of a good work which could no longer survive in that city and made it possible to add a fifth Brother to the four who were already laboring there, like Saint Paul, in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in poverty and persecutions. It is to be hoped that thanks to the protection of this illustrious prince, the Brothers will not in the future be robbed of the legacies which generous people leave them in their wills and which they now have a right to receive, thanks to the letters patent which His Majesty granted to their motherhouse at Saint Yon near Rouen.<sup>14</sup>

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14. In the original French edition, the paragraph that follows is in italics and is introduced by the word *NOTA*.

A pious person named Madame Lardé, who had helped the Brothers by her donations during her life, on her death left them by will an annual income of 3,500 livres. But her heirs and the administrators of the poorhouse at Chartres felt themselves justified in using this money for other purposes, on the pretext that the Brothers did not have letters patent for that city. However, the opinion of twenty-seven Parisian lawyers agreed that the letters patent granted to the house of Saint Yon, near Rouen, were valid for all the cities of the kingdom where the Brothers live. But the poor Brothers, although unjustly deprived of their rights, had learned from their Founder, the most disinterested man in the world. They did not lay any claim or start any lawsuit to obtain justice. Still, they did not despair of securing redress some day from those who now refused it to them, once these latter are convinced that natural law, as well as civil law, makes it a duty to follow to the letter the pious dispositions of testators.

It is difficult to understand why people at Chartres and elsewhere convinced themselves that the Brothers might some day shut themselves up in a cloister or become too numerous. What likelihood is there of such a change which would destroy the Institute? It is natural for every being to seek to remain what it is; no entity aspires to its own destruction. Everything tends to its end by a natural inclination. A person is always attached to his first vocation and esteems it more than any other. Consequently, the idea of shutting themselves up in a cloister would have little appeal to the Brothers, for if they did so, they would cease to be what they are; they would destroy their Institute; they would turn their backs on their vocation; they would change their state. Even if they entertained for a moment such a ridiculous temptation, they could not carry it out, because it would be impossible to execute it without losing all the endowments established in favor of the Gratuitous Schools, and if they lost these, the Brothers would have to go to live, not in a cloister but in a poorhouse where they would perish of starvation.

Furthermore, what would they do in a cloister, since they are forbidden by their formal and essential Rules to aspire to Holy Orders and to the priestly ministry, forbidden so strictly, in fact, that they cannot even wear a surplice in church or sing at the lectern? Their constitutions also prohibit them from learning Latin or from using it if they already know it. To imagine that in spite of these fundamental laws of their Institute, the Brothers might some day abandon their profession and prefer a cloistered life to their role as teachers in the Christian Schools is to conjure up ghosts for the pleasure of exorcising them. Still, it is hardly imaginable to what an extent this silly notion

gained currency in the city of Chartres. If it was not the only cause of the court sentence so unfavorable toward the Gratuitous Schools for the poor, it was certainly one of the main ones.

It is well known how violently the masters of the pay schools oppose the establishments of the Brothers, who receive no fees for their services. During the lifetime of Bishop Paul Desmarests, they kept quiet enough; the protection that this great prelate afforded the Brothers whom he employed and whom he himself had called to Chartres successfully foiled their machinations. But his death delivered them from their fear of his authority and afforded them full liberty to declare war on their pious rivals. Unfortunately for the Brothers, who were like defenseless orphans after the death of the bishop who acted as their father, the accusations of their enemies were accepted by the court. The magistrates, along with the mayor and the town councillors, believed that the public good required that the Gratuitous Schools should be emptied but that those where money mattered should be filled!

Thus, by a decree issued in 1717 or 1718, the Brothers were ordered not to receive any longer, without distinction, all the children who came to them, as they had done up to that time, but to take in only those whose names were inscribed in the Register of Paupers and who were, therefore, entitled to public alms. It was also specified that not more than four Brothers should be employed in the Charity Schools and that they should not display a cross above the school door. Other similar prohibitions were enacted, and the court ended by ordering that the said sentence should be read publicly in the parish churches at Mass.

When this sentence, which closed the Christian and Gratuitous Schools in Chartres to all the children of those who were poor but not quite destitute, was read to De La Salle, who was then living at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet after his return from Marseille, although he was extremely distressed, he could not help both marvelling at a decree which so courteously dismissed the Brothers from the city of Chartres and praising the politeness with which the magistrates discharged those whom they could have expelled in disgrace. But when he came to the conclusion of the document, which prescribed that the sentence be read in the churches at Mass, he suspected some hidden connivance. His first thought was that either the new bishop of Chartres was speaking by the mouth of the judges or that the judges were taking it upon themselves to speak for the bishop. "Such an order," he told the person who had brought it to him to read, "can come only from the authority of the bishop; it follows that

either the bishop has lent his authority to the magistrates on this point or they have usurped it."

Whatever may be the truth of the second alternative, it is certain that the first was not true. The pious ecclesiastic who was speaking with De La Salle refused to entertain this suspicion, and he convinced him that the nephew of Bishop Paul Desmarets was a worthy successor of his uncle, a prelate who honored the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, where he had been educated, by his rare piety, his ardent zeal for sound doctrine, his austere, mortified, and laborious life, and the practice of the other virtues which make him a bishop worthy of the early days of the Church. He was very far from having lent his authority to a measure which infringed on it and which was so unfavorable to the Christian instruction and education of the children from needy families.

For after all, is it only those whose names appear on the lists of the families who get alms from the poorhouse who can be called truly poor? How many are there who perish in their indigence or languish for a long time in hunger before they turn to public charity? How many secretly put up with all that is most unendurable in poverty and prefer to be its victims, rather than sacrifice their pride by making their needs known? How many workingmen and humble folk trying to raise families are not listed on the charity rolls and do not wish to receive such help, yet do not have the means to purchase for their children the instruction that the Brothers are ready to give them gratis? All such children—the majority—were banished from the Gratuitous Schools by the decree of the court; they found the doors of the pay schools closed to them because of their poverty; thus they grew up in ignorance, in idleness, and ran wild. If the public good requires that they be abandoned to their sad lot and that they remain without the education which they cannot pay for, this is indeed the mystery that De La Salle could not understand; like him, we must leave the riddle to be solved by the wise of this world.

The bishop of Chartres realized full well how seriously his authority had been flouted in this matter and how much the public good suffered by the sentence we have mentioned. So he did not fail to appeal against it to the Parliament of Paris, which early in the following year, on 31 January 1719, issued an injunction against the execution of the said sentence which forbade receiving into the Charity Schools any children whose parents were not inscribed on the Register of the Poverty Bureau.

Because it is a characteristic of perfect charity to grow stronger instead of dying out when it is badly treated, the servant of God

thenceforth seemed even more attached to a city which showed itself so ill-disposed toward his disciples. His charity, in 1705, went so far as to let them be exposed to the contagion of a dread disease which ravaged Chartres and carried off a large number of its citizens, rather than to take them away from the poor children who needed them so much. On this occasion, the pious Founder sacrificed to the public good the lives of four of his principal disciples, whom the epidemic laid low in less than six months, just as it did so many other people. The first was a very virtuous novice. The second was an older Brother, an excellent penman and exceptionally talented teacher, and—what really deserves special praise—a true disciple of De La Salle, filled with his spirit and the grace of his vocation. The third, who had been the Director of Novices, was a man who was hard on himself and much given to severe mortification.<sup>15</sup> The fourth was the infirmarian of the Paris community, whom their tender father had sent to his children to care for them in their illness. But his saintly death, the test of his obedience, was also the reward of his charity.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Foundation in Calais in 1700.*

The foundation of the Brothers in Calais, which took place shortly after that of Chartres, was entirely different in the circumstances accompanying it and in the measure of success it achieved. When he sent his disciples to the capital of Beausse [Chartres], De La Salle might have said, with Saint Paul, *For a great door has been opened to me to teach Christian doctrine to young children who are poor and abandoned, but I find there a great number of contradictions and adversaries.* By contrast, in Calais De La Salle was expected, impatiently awaited, and welcomed with honor and joy. He could say with the same Apostle *that he had been received there like an angel from heaven and a minister of Jesus Christ.* I am inclined to attribute this fact, on the one hand, to the sort of reluctance and repugnance which the pious Founder felt when he was asked to send his disciples to Chartres and, on the other hand, to the alacrity and satisfaction he showed in sending them to Calais. Perhaps a prophetic spirit or some

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15. This is the Director of Novices, who by his imprudent severity had brought about the investigation of the Founder by the archdiocese.

sort of supernatural instinct apprised him of what would happen in those two cities.

As a longtime friend and former fellow student at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice of Bishop Paul Desmarets, it was natural that he should hasten to send some of his followers to a prelate who was so kind, so pious, so highly regarded in France, who was in a position to render such great services to his Institute and who, in fact, offered to do so. The worthy bishop of Chartres had offered De La Salle his influence in obtaining letters patent for the Community, as we shall have occasion to relate later on. Far from seizing such a favorable opportunity, however, the servant of God made the prelate at Chartres wait for several years before sending him any of the Brothers, although, if he did not actually push the matter of the school in Calais, he received the proposal with joy and showed a holy eagerness to carry it out.

This city, almost a frontier city with England—from which it is separated only by a twenty-mile strait—is one where openness, good faith, generosity, and liberality reign. Its inhabitants are characterized by deep religious spirit, piety, and sincere attachment to the Roman Church and to traditional doctrine. It is not surprising, therefore, that Calais drew the attention of De La Salle. He felt attracted to it and seemed to read in the hearts of all its citizens the favorable dispositions they entertained toward the Brothers. Indeed, no locality was more propitious for the establishment of Christian and Gratuitous Schools. The people were good, and the magistrates and upper classes were religiously minded and well disposed. This afforded the holy priest entire liberty to advance the glory of God and, through his disciples, to teach Christian doctrine with ever renewed success and abundant benedictions. This is how the foundation came about.

Toward the end of 1699 or the beginning of 1700, Monsieur Ponthon was a student of theology at the Seminary of the Bons Enfants. One day, happening to stop by the parish church of Saint Sulpice, he was agreeably surprised to see a crowd of children, with a Brother in charge of them, assisting at Mass with a piety not very common among youngsters of that age. The order and discipline which kept these naturally unruly urchins in line, the modesty and reserve shown in the holy place by such a large number of boys, irreverent and disorderly by character or by reason of the lack of seriousness proper to their age, the silence and piety of so many children usually so easily distracted and so inclined to laugh and chatter, and finally, the unusual recollection and the devout air he noted in the Brother, all of which was for him a new and edifying spectacle, struck him very forcibly.

He immediately conceived the desire of providing the same exemplary sight to Calais, where he was the pastor-designate upon the resignation of his uncle, the incumbent.

The younger Ponthon immediately wrote to his uncle, the elder Ponthon, the retiring pastor and dean of the city of Calais, relating to him what he had seen in the church of Saint Sulpice. So arresting was the portrait of the Brothers painted by the younger Ponthon for his uncle, a zealous and pious pastor, that the latter conceived a most ardent desire of having some of them in his parish. Because he feared he might die before seeing them in Calais, his eagerness caused him to write without delay to his nephew, begging him to do everything necessary to obtain for the children of Calais some schoolmasters like the ones he had seen in Paris.

The venerable old man longed for the Brothers' arrival. He wrote letter after letter to his nephew to hasten the conclusion of the affair. Feeling himself on the threshold of eternity, he awaited only the arrival of De La Salle's disciples in order to surrender his soul in peace to God. The consolation he desired before his death, which he begged the Divine Majesty to grant him, was to see the opening of a Christian and Gratuitous School in the city.

Another compelling motive added fuel to this desire and made him urge the prompt execution of the plan. God had just called to eternity the former schoolmaster of the city. His place was vacant, the classes were empty, and the children, lacking a teacher, were wasting their time; idleness exposed all these youngsters to great dangers. Consequently, while necessity urged the opening of the school, the circumstances were favorable for establishing gratuitous classes at this particular time. It was, then, necessary to seize the opportunity and not let it escape. To do so, the uncle wrote his nephew to contact the pious Founder to ask him for some of his disciples and to do everything in order to obtain them. When the younger Ponthon came to ask De La Salle, in his uncle's name, to send some Brothers to Calais, he was received with joy and listened to with pleasure. However, as the servant of God never hurried anything, he took the time needed to carry out all the necessary preliminaries to insure that the foundation would be a stable one.

The former pastor of Calais, who could see the end of his life approaching and who feared to die before the Christian Schools were opened, could not brook delay. Impatient over the inevitable bureaucratic red tape encountered in negotiations of this kind, he wrote letter after letter and got everybody in the city involved in speeding up the arrival of the Brothers. The city magistrates, at the entreaty of their



pastor, wrote to the Duke de Béthune, the governor of Calais, to obtain his approval and at the same time to beg him to use his influence to hasten the carrying out of the project. The matter could not have been put into better hands.

The Duke de Béthune was a nobleman distinguished even more by his piety than by his dignity. He took to heart the petition presented by the city, more out of zeal for God's glory than out of condescension toward those who had appealed to his influence. He did not disdain to join his own pleas to those of the pastor of Calais and his flock, begging De La Salle to send some Brothers to Calais as soon as possible.

The servant of God acceded to his request and sent to Calais two of his disciples<sup>16</sup> to open the Christian School there. One morning before this took place, it happened that De La Salle left his residence very early to go to call on the Duke de Béthune at his palace. About 6 A.M., he entered a nearby church to pray while awaiting a convenient time to present himself at the mansion to request an audience. Scarcely had he entered the church when he beheld the duke himself, who was just then receiving Communion. As he was unknown by sight to the holy priest, the latter noticed only the blue sash which distinguished that illustrious personage. De La Salle was both surprised and edified on seeing one of the greatest nobles in the kingdom performing his devotions so early in the morning with so much piety. When he had finished praying, he left the church and went to knock at the mansion door. His surprise was even greater when he recognized in the duke the same man whom he had seen receiving Communion with so much devotion. So impressed was the servant of God by this example of piety that against his custom, he wished to edify his community by telling the Brothers about his early morning adventure.

A gentleman so favorably disposed toward all that was good no sooner heard the Superior of the Brothers than he granted him everything he asked for: to send to the magistrates of the city his own consent in writing, signed by himself and sealed with his coat of arms, to recommend to them the good work which they themselves had recommended to him, and to exhort them, in his turn, to support and favor it. This recommendation, coming from such a highly placed personage whose authority in the city of Calais was loved as much as it was respected, produced all the effects that could have been desired. The officials of Calais have always shown the Brothers all sorts

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16. One of them was Brother Gabriel Drolin.

of courtesies and have always acted toward them as fathers rather than as mere protectors. Monsieur Bignon, at this time the intendant of Picardy and Artois,<sup>17</sup> a nobleman who in all the positions he occupied has always protected the Gratuitous Schools with truly Christian zeal, also contributed to the establishment.

In this way, this foundation at Calais, destined to do so much good, was made with the unanimous cooperation of all who possessed any power and authority, and that of the bishop of Boulogne was not long in being added to the rest. The Brothers had been ordered by their Superior not to open the school until they had requested the bishop's permission to teach Christian doctrine and had asked for his blessing. Accordingly, they went to Boulogne and were very kindly received by M. Pierre de Langle, bishop of the diocese, who at this time had not become as notorious as he later did.<sup>18</sup> He authorized the Brothers' mission by a public letter to his clergy in which the chief pastor of the diocese of Boulogne urged the faithful in Calais to send their children to the Christian School.

On their arrival in the city, the Brothers found everything prepared in a most becoming manner. They had been impatiently awaited. Nobody took more concern about their coming than the man who had so longed to see them, the former pastor, Monsieur Ponthon. His joy on this occasion matched the ardor he had shown in securing their services. At first, the two Brothers were lodged in a wing of the college, which for the past several years has been placed entirely at their disposal by the mayor and the town council. The kindness of these gentlemen toward the Brothers and the schools they conduct grows day by day. Moreover, as the Brothers had little in the way of revenues to count on, the dean wrote on this subject to the Marquis de La Vrillière.

This was the last service that Ponthon rendered to the Brothers, because he died shortly after this, and his nephew, in whose favor he had resigned his position as parish priest, survived him only a few months. This young ecclesiastic, a most promising youth, died when he was still in Paris continuing his studies with perhaps too much ardor. His eager application to study caused him to find a premature death because of his too great earnestness. It seems that he would still be among the living had he known how to moderate a desire which,

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17. The intendants were agents of royal power, with legal and financial authority, compared with the nominal functions of the provincial governors.

18. He was one of the "appellants" against the papal Bull *Unigenitus* condemning Jansenism.

while noble and rare, leads those who yield to it to an early grave. His death, which was the price he paid to purchase knowledge, and that of his uncle, which had occurred a few months earlier, were deeply regretted.

In the uncle and the nephew, the Brothers lost two friends and protectors, and the city of Calais lost two faithful pastors. If the death of the younger Ponthon had not left the position of parish priest vacant, it is probable that those who later appealed against the Bull *Unigenitus* would have found the gates of such a Catholic city shut to them and would not have been able to foment so much trouble there. In this way, the zealous defenders of the Bull, professing the ancient doctrine of the Church, would not have been exposed in Calais to persecution and imprisonment, and Père Quesnel<sup>19</sup> would not have been able to flatter himself that he had a single partisan on the coast facing England. But let us return to our story.

The Marquis de La Vrillière replied to Ponthon's letter by saying that he would mention the subsidy for the Brothers to the king at the first council meeting, and this he did. His letter to Ponthon follows.

"Sir, I have received the letter you wrote me on the fifth of this month concerning the schoolmasters in Calais. I shall take the matter up with His Majesty at the first council meeting at which there is any discussion of the new converts [from Calvinist Protestantism], and I shall advise Bignon what His Majesty decides. Please ask them to be patient until then and to continue to carry out their duties faithfully. I am, my dear sir, your affectionate servant. La Vrillière. Versailles, 12 June 1701."

Louis XIV, as zealous for good works as he was for the promotion of religion, granted an alms to the Brothers as a result of the request made to him, and in the next two years, they received over 450 livres derived from the sale of property that had belonged to the expelled Calvinists. A similar favor was granted them in 1702 at the request of the Duke de Béthune. When this pious nobleman mentioned to M. d'Aguesseau that the two Brothers in Calais had no endowment to support them, he promised to see about it.

The following year, he sent them a considerable sum, likewise derived from the confiscated Calvinist properties, according to the promise he had made in a letter to the town officials, dated 4 February 1702. The success of the school was so prompt and so complete that means were sought of founding others. During two years, the

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19. It was from Quesnel's book that the propositions condemned in the Bull *Unigenitus* were taken.

Brothers had taught school with so much edification and had given so much satisfaction that the authorities decided to ask for two more Brothers and for another to handle the temporal affairs.

The promoter of this new foundation was Monsieur Le Prince, chaplain in the sailors' quarter, who actively campaigned for its establishment in 1703. This zealous priest, wishing to secure for the children of the sailors the same opportunities for instruction that the children in the town enjoyed, resolved to obtain this for them. He mentioned the matter to Monsieur de Thosse, president of the city, who was delighted at the suggestion and supported it with as much truly Christian zeal as he could.

Without wasting any time, the worthy magistrate conferred with the members of his council, whom he found as eager as himself for the implementation of the project. Together they wrote to De Pontchartrain through their parish priest, explaining to him that another school and two more Brothers were needed in Calais to teach the children of the sailors, and they begged him to obtain from Louis XIV a vacant lot in the Court-Gain section of the town, where a guard-house had once stood. The king granted the request. De Pontchartrain wrote to Bignon, sending him the king's order, which was at once executed, thanks to a special tax which the intendant imposed on the inhabitants of the Court-Gain section for the expenses incurred in erecting a building to house the Brothers and their school. De Pontchartrain was also kind enough to reply to the parish priest, telling him that the king had agreed to his request and to that of the city. Here is his letter, dated 4 May 1703:

"I have received your letter of 24 April. I have explained to His Majesty's intendant of Picardy and Artois the intentions of His Majesty concerning the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who have undertaken the instruction of the children of the sailors who live in the Court-Gain. Please address yourselves to him, and he will provide for their upkeep."

The Court-Gain was a section separate from the rest of the city of Calais, situated closer to the port. It was populated by sailors, who, as we all know, have usually received in their youth neither education nor instruction. They are religious at heart, but their religion is somewhat *sui generis*, since they fabricate it for themselves. Their children are accustomed to the sea from their early years and thus become like their parents, men who might be mistaken for half-men or for talking animals if we did not know that they have immortal souls. Nearly all of them are born with a propensity for the fisherman's trade or for sailing, and thus by instinct and by natural inclination, they follow the

vocation of their fathers. When they can scarcely talk, they already know how to handle the oars and are glad to go to sea. Since their ignorance is profound, they are usually as silent about religion as the fish they catch, and when they do undertake to speak of it, they do so with the awkwardness natural to them. Rarely do they observe it correctly and without superstitious practices. It was, then, very important to provide for these poor children of the mariners the means of receiving the instruction that their parents were not able to give them.

### Charity of the magistrates and people of Calais

This school, which opened in 1705, has always produced much good. Filled with the children of sailors, it is for them an academy where they learn the science of salvation. At last, these poor creatures find out why they were created and sent into this world. They learn how to know, fear, love, and serve God. They are taught Christian doctrine and the practice of their religion. To provide for the upkeep of the Brothers engaged in the instruction of these youngsters in the Court-Gain, the piety of Louis XIV led him to grant them an annual pension of 50 écus, which was paid to them every year by an order drawn up in these terms:

“Keeper of my royal treasure, pay and deliver, in cash, to the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Calais the sum of 150 livres which I have granted to them in consideration of the pains they take and the care they display for the instruction of the sailors who serve on my vessels. Given at Versailles. . . .”

Before the opening of the Christian School in the Court-Gain, there was an old man named De La France, who also received from His Majesty an annual pension of 150 livres to teach the sailors. Toward the end of his life, he could no longer accomplish his task, because of his age. This old man died a few years after the Brothers reached Calais. All the principal people of the city gave a new proof of their zeal for the Gratuitous Schools and of their affection for those who taught there to such general satisfaction. They all got together and arranged for the pension hitherto paid to the old schoolmaster to be transferred to the Brothers.

These two pensions, faithfully paid to the Brothers during the lifetime of Louis XIV, in spite of hard times, were suppressed by the regent during the minority of Louis XV. But this young prince, who inherited his great-grandfather's zeal for religion along with his throne, re-established the grant when he reached his majority, at the request of Marquis de La Vrillière, Minister and Secretary of State. The money

has been paid regularly ever since. Here is the first royal order, which was issued on 19 July 1716:

“Keeper of my royal treasure, Jean de Tulmence de Nointel: pay in cash to the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Calais the sum of 300 livres granted to them by the late king, my great-grandfather, in two installments of 150 livres each, one of which should have been sent in advance on 15 December last year, and the other, on 8 February. This is in consideration of the pains and care which they take for the instruction of my sailors. Done at Paris, 19 July 1717. Signed: *Louis, Phelippeaux, Philippe d’Orléans.*”

The charity of the magistrates of the city of Calais for the Christian Schools was not limited to all these favors. It was not satisfied until it had finally secured an assured livelihood for the Brothers. The city finally did this, some years ago, when it obtained for them a pension of 900 livres, the money coming from the duties collected on goods entering the city. Not only the city administration but nearly all its inhabitants sought to help the Brothers. Many of them vied with one another in showing them charity. There is hardly a merchant or businessman who, on returning from a trip overseas or after a successful business transaction or a particularly fortunate fishing expedition, does not, so to speak, pay them the tithes of his profits. In a word, the Brothers can say of the city of Calais what Tobias said of the angel Raphael: *We have been filled with good things through him.*

### The Duke de Béthune and his son, the Duke de Charost

As long as the Duke de Béthune lived, the Brothers always found in him a true father’s heart. His charity was active in whatever concerned the Christian Schools, and his attention extended to all the needs of the Brothers. His influence, his authority, and his interventions were most helpful to them in getting solidly established in Calais and in obtaining from His Most Christian Majesty the pensions they needed to live on. After he died, the Brothers mourned his demise, but it did not take them long to realize that for them, the father continued to live in the son. The Duke de Charost, who inherited the piety of his father, the Duke de Béthune, had also inherited his zeal for the Christian Schools. He was a true friend of the Brothers, if I may say so, and was their zealous protector. His desire to help them seemed to know no limits, and we can indeed say on this point that the son surpassed the father. Oh happy family where piety seems hereditary and where love for religion is handed down to the children along with their father’s noble blood!

In all their difficulties, the Brothers turned to the Duke de Charost with the confidence that children show to a father, and they have always found him such. Never did they beg for his protection in vain. Never did they approach him and suffer a rebuff; never did they seem to beg. Ever gracious and affable, the duke always listened to them with unexampled kindness whenever they sought to speak with him. His high position and his dignity never placed any barrier between them and him. Even more, on several occasions, he himself undertook with singular generosity and condescension to plead their cause, and he lent them the support of his influence and his authority by taking action on their behalf. Here is an example.

When the officials of the royal treasury did not pay out exactly the pension that His Majesty had granted to the Brothers—which happened not infrequently, despite the royal orders that came from the palace—the Duke de Charost, forgetting his dignity, took it upon himself to inquire about the matter and did not disdain to speak to the treasurers and to urge them to expedite the payments. When these were delayed, he would send his secretary, bearing the royal orders, to the treasurer to collect in the name of the Brothers the sums that were overdue and to make sure that they were paid in full.

It was not only the Brothers in Calais and Boulogne whom the Duke de Charost took under his protection; he never refused it to their confreres when they asked it of him. They always found the door of his palace open to them, his ears willing to listen to them, and his heart prompt and generous to be of service to them. In particular, this pious nobleman was most active and zealous to obtain from His Majesty the letters patent for the house of Saint Yon. He himself went to secure the consent of the Duke de Luxembourg, governor of Rouen, which was necessary, and brought it, written and signed, to those who were in charge of pursuing the affair. It would take us too long to go into the details of all the other favors that the Brothers of the Christian Schools owe to this illustrious benefactor. To him, more than to anyone else, they owe their present status. He always did them good and still does. His memory should remain forever alive among the Brothers, and it is only right that he and his father, the Duke de Béthune, should have first place in their gratitude and their prayers.

### Tribute to Monsieur Gense

In speaking of the establishment of the Christian Schools in Calais, we are obliged in gratitude also to make honorable mention of Monsieur Gense. This pious layman, who was so fervent in the practice of

virtue, so devoted to good works, and so zealous for the traditional faith, possessed a considerable fortune, which he used only to relieve the poor and to promote the glory of God. Although an only son, he adopted a life of perpetual celibacy in order to enjoy the happy liberty of devoting himself entirely to prayer and of consecrating his heart unreservedly to God. His humility alone shut before him the door of the sanctuary and forbade him to aspire to a ministry for which his learning and his virtue rendered him highly qualified. He preferred to remain in the ranks of ordinary Christians and there to give himself to the practice of perfect virtue rather than to be exposed to the dangers inherent in the sacred functions.

A lover of all good works, he was their author, their promoter, their helper, or their adviser. His zeal for the Catholic faith made him so well known that it won for him the honorable commission of keeping watch over the Huguenots and of finding out what they were doing at a time when the public exercise of their religion was forbidden in France. Although he wore secular attire, he acted in some way as an Inquisitor of the Faith, a vigilant sentinel in the house of the Lord, devoting himself to driving away from it those wolves dressed in sheep's clothing or else to helping the strayed sheep come back to the fold. After the suppression of Protestant preaching, he showed himself admirably active in going here and there to seek out the preachers and the supposed pastors. He found out about their gatherings and the places where they assembled, in order to have them prosecuted and thus obliged to depart from the country.

This constant activity brought him everywhere the Huguenots tried to gather. Ever on the move, all over Flanders, he caused the partisans of error to flee before him, and he converted a great number of those whom false doctrine had deceived. He was both learned and eloquent, and to these natural talents he joined a divine grace and power which touched and persuaded others. He had to discontinue his activity against heresy, because of the senility of his father, which obliged him to remain at home with him to take care of him in his old age and to comfort him in his declining years. If the old man, who died around 1704 at the age of ninety, interrupted the evangelical activity of his son, he never prevented either his hand or his tongue from combatting the errors of the times. Gense spoke unceasingly against the innovators, and wherever he happened to be, he attacked them with saintly intrepidity.

Never was anyone more openly in favor of Christian and Gratuitous Schools. This great lover of all good works gave this one his highest respect and prized it above all the rest. His joy was complete



when he saw the schools established in Calais. He had brought the Daughters of Providence there and endowed a community of six, after turning over his own house to them, where he also built a chapel for their use. As for the Brothers, they never had a more faithful friend, a more ardent defender, a more zealous protector. He took an interest in everything concerning them and made whatever affected their Institute or their schools his own business. He enjoyed being with them, and his happiness was complete when on occasion he was allowed to join them in prayer and to share their recreations. He came to be edified by their company, but he himself left behind a remarkable example of the very virtues he had sought to admire.

It is difficult to express how much he esteemed the Institute. He spoke of it with so much enthusiasm, gave it such high praise, that he made young men desire to join it and gave those who belonged to it the most exalted idea of their vocation. He encouraged them to fulfill its duties, to accept its pains and fatigues joyfully. In persecutions he became their shield and taught them to endure these crosses with patience and joy.

"You take your place," he told them, among other things, "as harvesters in the Lord's vineyard, and if you were not among the first invited to labor there, you have at least been called to work in its most abandoned corner. You are like the gleaners who hasten after the reapers to gather the stalks which have been neglected and trodden under foot. Your consolation is that there are so many of these that you can pick them up by the handful and with them fill the granary of our heavenly Father.

"If you do not stand at the altar, if you do not preach from the pulpit, if you do not sit in the tribunal of penance nor officiate at baptisms, if your work does not put a censer in your hands to offer incense to the Most High in the temple, at least you have the honor of preparing living temples for God and of laboring for the sanctification of the most abandoned children. If your ministry is less showy than others, it is also the least exposed to danger. If in the Church there are more honored roles, there are scarcely any more useful ones. She possesses plenty of monks and religious, but she lacks catechists dedicated by their state and vocation to the instruction of youth.

"When you teach Christian doctrine, you are doing the work of the Apostles. As you know, their zeal led them all over the world to preach and to proclaim the faith; you also know that prayer and the preaching of the doctrine of Jesus Christ were the two features of the ministry that they considered to be the most worthy of their attention as Apostles. They rid themselves of all other occupations, even those

directed to corporal works of charity, so as to dedicate themselves unreservedly to these two. Saint Paul concentrated on these same activities, and he himself declared that heaven had sent him to evangelize and to teach Christian doctrine."

In short, this fervent Christian could not find expressions strong enough to make the Brothers entertain a high idea of their vocation. Gense was in close contact with Monsieur de Rancé, the abbot of La Trappe. Every year he spent considerable time there and returned therefrom with a truly religious heart under his secular clothes. His esteem for the Brothers had caused him to conceive a very high regard for their holy Founder, and before dying, he wished to have the satisfaction of seeing him. Without waiting for time to bring about the opportunity for this visit he so longed for, he undertook a long trip with Monsieur de La Cocherie, the founder of the schools in the city of Boulogne, and went to Saint Yon near Rouen to meet the Solomon who had drawn him from so far.

The satisfaction they experienced in getting to know each other was reciprocal on the part of these two servants of God. The Divine Spirit, who filled both of them, gave them a mutual insight, and they loved each other even before they had seen each other, because their inclinations and sentiments were in harmony. In the layman, the priest admired the fervor of the early Christians, a noble evangelical simplicity, an ardent zeal for the salvation of his neighbor, and a great and magnanimous heart entirely dedicated to the service of God. In the priest, the layman admired a truly apostolic man, a vessel of election prepared by the Lord in his mercy in these later times to be the ornament of the Church in France, and a man accustomed to crosses and sufferings who had been tried by all sorts of tribulation and ignominy.

De La Salle received his two visitors with the cordiality and the testimonials of gratitude due to two friends and benefactors of his Institute. He spoke with them at length and fully satisfied their desire of seeing him and enjoying his presence. When they had visited and spoken with him, they were so edified and delighted that they declared that the esteem which they had entertained for him previously was far below what was really due him and that the reputation he had acquired did not equal that which his eminent virtue deserved.

They did not grow weary of admiring this new Solomon, filled with heavenly wisdom, not in the splendor of glory and wealth but living in a vile and abject condition, in the greatest poverty, yet more serene amidst sufferings, humiliations, and persecutions than the famous king of Israel was on his throne and in his magnificent palace.

They found in him the Spirit of God which they sought and a perfect example of the most eminent virtue. The conversations that took place among these three men, so alike in their inclinations, were all about God and the things of God. To speak with them with more seclusion and leisure, De La Salle brought his visitors to a little bower at the far end of the large garden at Saint Yon. The meal served to them in this little hermitage did not interrupt their pious conversation, and the three servants of God, more eager for spiritual than for bodily nourishment, spent the greater part of the day thus inciting one another to a greater love of God.

The satisfaction that Gense derived from this visit was proportionate to the desire which had brought him from Calais to Rouen. With equal satisfaction, he received De La Salle in 1716, when the Founder went for the first time to visit the Brothers in Calais. The holy priest could not refuse to go to dine with this pious layman. He did so twice and would have gone again, if he had not noticed a painter concealed behind the drapery and engaged in sketching his portrait. His humility was alarmed by this to such an extent that Gense could not prevail upon him to come back to his table. This fervent Christian crowned such a holy life by an equally holy death which took place a few years after that of De La Salle.

## CHAPTER XVII

### *Opening of a Sunday School in the novitiate house in Paris; new establishments in Troyes and Avignon.*

Monsieur de La Chétardie, so well known for his firm attachment to sound doctrine and for his noble refusal of the bishopric of Poitiers, which had been offered to him by Louis XIV, seemed to rival De La Salle in showing himself a father to the Brothers, so filled with zeal was he for their Institute. This saintly parish priest of Saint Sulpice, who had so wittily remarked that his sixty-six years were also sixty-six reasons which prevented him from ascending the episcopal throne—as he said in the letter of thanks and excuse which he sent to His Majesty—considered his years as so many reasons for trying both to sanctify the great number of souls whose pastor God had made him and to contribute to the multiplication of the Christian Schools.

Ingenious about everything which could promote the education of the poor, he conceived the idea of establishing a Sunday School for

the young men who, occupied all the rest of the week in earning a living, had no time to receive instruction except on Sundays and feasts. No one but De La Salle was in a position to carry out a project of this nature. So, out of necessity and also of inclination, De La Chétardie asked the Founder to take charge of it. The servant of God, who had no less zeal than the pastor of Saint Sulpice, was glad to co-operate with him and willingly undertook the organization of this work which obedience entrusted to him and which he found much to his liking. Without delay, after securing the archbishop's approval and permission for the project, at noon on a Sunday in 1709,<sup>20</sup> De La Salle began in the novitiate house a sort of Christian Academy, open to all young men under twenty years of age. It did not take long for it to be filled to capacity.

Two hundred students, divided into various classes, were given instruction proper to their age and capacities. The least advanced learned how to read and write; others were taught arithmetic, and some learned drawing. This first class period, which lasted about two hours, was followed by the catechism lesson, and that one, in turn, by a spiritual exhortation given by one of the Brothers. The doors of this school were open to all who presented themselves, provided they showed goodwill. Thus none of these young men could excuse his ignorance of Christian doctrine and of the duties required for salvation on the pretext that he had to earn a living during the week.

It is easy for us to understand how much good was produced by this novel type of school, so necessary for young people who have nothing to do on Sundays and feasts and who, as a rule, spend this time learning vice. By means of this school, De La Chétardie had found a way 1) to withdraw a large number of young men from vice, disorder, and occasions of sin; their most innocent occupations on these holy days had been to run the streets and lose their time, while others profaned these days by gambling and debauchery; 2) to give them a taste for learning, to stimulate them to work, even to withdraw them from their laziness and lack of good manners, so as to give them a chance to get ahead and establish themselves in the world; 3) to keep them away from bad company, taverns, and other dangerous places so often fatal to these young people already inclined as they are to evil; 4) to encourage them to live the rest of their lives in a Christian manner.

Although I stated above that Sunday Schools were something new, I did not mean to suggest that De La Chétardie was the first to

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20. The date here is incorrect; it was more likely 1699.

have thought of them, because they had been established in Flanders before his time, as we can see in Van Espen's *De scholis puerorum*. These Sunday Schools, says this Flemish canonist, were often mentioned in the councils held in Flanders. They grew out of the catechism lessons taught in the parishes on Sundays and feasts by the parish priests and their assistants. Although these schools, says the Council of Malines, were not founded to teach children to read and write, it is proper to offer these subjects to the children who attend them and to strive, above all, to instruct them in the principles of religion and the truths of faith. Van Espen adds that this regulation of the Council of Malines, held at the beginning of the seventeenth century, was confirmed by the authority of the prince and that it was strongly recommended that bishops should arrange for the establishment of such Sunday Schools and should provide for the livelihood of the men and women capable of teaching in them, whose duty it was to instruct the children on Sundays how to read and write and, above all, to make them learn the catechism. What De La Chétardie added to this institution of Sunday Schools was to add subjects such as drawing, geometry, and other branches of mathematics to the curriculum.

#### After initial success, the Sunday School is closed

When he saw for himself the great good done in the Sunday School, De La Salle spared neither care nor expense to promote it. But God, who seemed to take pleasure in crucifying him in all things, permitted the enemy of all good to destroy this excellent institution by the very means that the servant of God had taken to consolidate it. He had placed at the head of the school two Brothers gifted with great talent and with considerable ability for art. To make them excellent professors, he had them learn drawing and whatever else might enable them to carry out the farsighted projects that De La Chétardie had in mind for this academy, but he soon had the disappointment of seeing that he had raised these Brothers up only for their own downfall.

Proud of their talents and hoping to use them for personal gain, they dishonored themselves by shamefully deserting their posts. Their departure caused this new school to close, because De La Salle had no other Brothers capable of replacing them, and the time it took to prepare others for this task brought about great changes in the circumstances and caused him to lose all hope of reviving the enterprise. In addition to the painful affliction he endured over the failure of so excellent a work and the loss of two of his dearest followers, the Founder had to bear the shame of being considered the cause of all

the trouble. Told to his face that he was responsible for the failure, he heard bitter recriminations on this score from several persons in authority. The innocent victim who never excused his own conduct allowed himself, as usual, to be accused and condemned, and relying on the testimony of his conscience alone and on God's approval, he abandoned his reputation to censure and to the effects of the most false and unjust prejudices, confining himself to bearing everything in silence and patience. We shall have more to say about this in the next chapter, when we relate the history of the new persecution that hell raised up against him and which lasted for the rest of his life.

### Opening Gratuitous Schools in Troyes

In 1702, De La Salle received a request for Brothers to establish a Gratuitous School at Troyes in Champagne. He sent two, who opened the school with the approbation of the bishop and under his auspices. This school owes its origin to Monsieur Le Bé, parish priest of Saint Nizier. A pious lady had left him an annuity of 200 livres to establish a Charity School in the parish. The priest felt that this money belonged by right to those who make profession of conducting Gratuitous Schools. During a trip he made to Paris, he spoke of this matter to De La Salle, and although the sum in question was most inadequate for the upkeep of two Brothers, the servant of God accepted, fearing that out of too great a concern for material interests, he might let slip an opportunity of teaching poor children in a large city. Provided the Brothers had what was absolutely necessary, he was satisfied. However, they needed a place to stay, and if they had to pay rent out of the 200 livres, they would have had practically nothing left to live on. De La Salle therefore asked the parish priest of Saint Nizier, who lived at the seminary, where he was the superior, to lodge the two Brothers in his presbytery, which was vacant. Agreement having been reached, the contract was signed in Paris without further delay.

The Brothers lived in the parish house during the lifetime of this zealous priest who always did all he could for the Christian Schools and those who taught in them. When he died, his successor, who did not care to reside at the seminary, obliged them to move. The Brothers were quite hard pressed at having to pay rent for a residence out of an annuity which scarcely sufficed for their living expenses. God, however, who never abandons those who consecrate themselves to the divine service, inspired several persons to help them pay the rent. Some years ago, a pious person willed them a considerable sum which was invested to contribute toward the purchase of a home.

A few years after Le Bé's opening of the first school in Troyes, Père Chantreau, who highly esteemed De La Salle's Institute as well as his person, successfully undertook to increase the number of Christian Schools in the city, his birthplace. This famous Oratorian, who possessed great speaking ability and preached with fervor and good results, saw God's blessings lavishly poured out wherever he went. As he sought nothing but God, he enjoyed much influence through his preaching and possessed a special grace for touching hearts. His faith was pure; his doctrine, sound and perfectly orthodox; his piety, profound. His virtue was proof against the greatest personal trials, which his modesty and prudence took care to keep hidden. He had been born poor, as he often stated to his intimate friends; he lived a poor life, often lacking the necessities, and was obliged to have recourse to charitable persons to defray the cost of travel and to supply his most pressing needs. This zealous preacher announced the Word of God, after the example of Saint Paul, in perfect disinterestedness. He remained detached from the goods of this world while enriching others with the treasures of heaven. Not surprisingly, he did not preach in vain. His word, like that of the Apostle, was effective and accompanied by virtue and a power from on high which converted souls.

The only thing he had at heart was the interests of God, and these he sought to promote by the multiplication of Christian Schools. The influence he had acquired over his fellow citizens by the success of his preaching enabled him to persuade them to ask for five more Brothers and to finance their subsistence in order to provide Christian instruction and education to all poor children of the city. For this purpose, during the series of Advent and Lenten sermons which he preached at Troyes and in his meetings with various people, he unceasingly stressed the need for and the advantages of the Gratuitous Schools, which produced such abundant and noticeable results in the places where they were already established.

His zeal aroused the citizenry to put together an annual sum of 300 livres, and he induced various persons to contribute to the good work. It was thus possible to open two new schools, one in the parish of Sainte Marie Madeleine and the other in the parish of Saint Jean, all with the approval of the bishop of Troyes, who took these schools under his protection. There are now seven Brothers in Troyes, who labor successfully at the instruction and pious education of a rather turbulent school population. The salaries of the Brothers are as modest as their work is heavy. Nevertheless, concern for securing the necessities of life does not dampen the zeal of these sons of Providence who have learned from their father to confide in God.

## De La Salle sends two Brothers to Rome

In that same year, 1702, De La Salle finally carried out the project which God had been suggesting to him for a long while: to send two of his disciples to Rome to establish a school there. The desire of implanting his Institute in the capital of the Catholic Church, so that from there it might spread throughout Christendom, was not the main objective he had in mind. Perhaps, in fact, his humility would have forbidden him to raise his eyes so high.

His real motives were these: 1) to plant the tree of his Society and make it take root in the center of Catholic unity, in the shadow and under the eyes of the pope and the Holy See; 2) to found his Institute on solid rock, that rock against which the gates of hell will never prevail, and to attach it to that Church which can neither perish nor falter; 3) to prepare for himself a means to go some day to prostrate himself at the feet of the Vicar of Jesus Christ to ask his approbation for his rules and constitutions and to receive for the Brothers the privilege of making the three solemn vows of religion; 4) to obtain the apostolic blessing for his Institute, in order to strengthen it by placing it under the protection of the head of the Church, and to obtain approval of its mission of teaching Christian doctrine under the supervision and authority of the bishops. Finally, the pious Founder wished to send some of his disciples to the primary city of the Church, the source of Catholic unity, who could vouch for his own faith, for his inviolable union with the Holy See, and for his submission to its decisions at a time when so many people in France seemed to flout them without remorse.

Such were the sentiments which he had always sought to impart to his disciples, in which he had carefully brought them up, and which he had explained to them from 1694 on, when they made the perpetual vow of obedience. From that time on, he had decided that they should work to obtain the approval of the Holy See. He mentions this himself in the first article of his last testament.<sup>21</sup> It was this that he wished to give evidence to when he added to his name the title "Roman priest,"<sup>22</sup> which is how he signed the vow we mentioned previously.

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21. This is not the reason the Founder gives in his last testament. In these two paragraphs, Blain misinterprets the Founder's intention. There is abundant evidence in De La Salle's letters that papal approval was not the object of the Rome mission, and there never was a question of "solemn" vows.

22. The original document in the Rome archives does not have this expression.



If up to this time the pious Founder had not been able to send any of his disciples to Rome, it was solely because he was too poor to do so. So far, he had lived in hope that Providence would procure for him the means of defraying the cost of such a lengthy trip or would offer the Brothers whom he wished to send a chance to make the journey at the generosity of some charitable person. But whether he found such an opportunity too long in coming or whether, after serious reflection, it seemed to him that there was too much danger in exposing the virtue of his disciples to the hazards of so long a trip, whether they went on foot in a group or if they traveled in the company of some benefactor, he made up his mind to send them alone and to pay their way himself.

But where could he get the money needed by the travellers going such a long distance and who had to have some means of subsisting in Rome once they got there? This difficulty which might have stopped anybody else did not even occur to him. Nothing upset this man who relied on Providence, because he had often learned by fortunate experience that Providence takes care of those who trust in God. He therefore abandoned to God's hands the two generous Brothers who, at his invitation, put their trust in God to provide for their needs when they got to the place where obedience assigned them. He gave them only a small sum of money to help them on the road. In 1702, his Community was still so poor that it took all the cash on hand to furnish the travelers with ten pistoles.<sup>23</sup> Of course, such a modest sum, although representing the entire wealth of the Community, was far from sufficient for the expenses of such a long trip, but it could, on occasion, at least make up for the lack of liberality among the faithful.

What De La Salle had foreseen did, in fact, happen. The money, which was insufficient to get the two Brothers to Rome without the help of outside charity, gave out. So they found themselves in the hands of that Divine Providence to which he had entrusted them, and God provided for the one of the two Brothers who showed great courage and patience in persevering under all trials. The other, the younger of the two, came back to France a few months after departing from it and left behind in Rome his older companion, named Gabriel Drolin, who persevered in Rome unwaveringly for twenty-six years. At first, he had to endure stringent poverty and met with great difficulties. Eventually, in the third year of his stay, he obtained the direction of one of the Charity Schools founded by the pope in various

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23. A pistole was worth about ten livres.

sections of the city of Rome. His salary was only fifteen livres a month, barely enough to live on. This virtuous Brother could certainly have found a more lucrative situation. One had even been proposed to him; he was offered different benefices to which were attached fairly substantial revenues. These he could have accepted, since he was a tonsured cleric and had studied theology. But this faithful disciple of a master whom he had seen giving up everything preferred to follow his example rather than profit by the good fortune that was offered him.

Since the Institute of the Gratuitous Schools was approved by the Holy See only a long time after De La Salle had sent his two disciples to Rome with the mission of preparing for this approbation, Brother Drolin was obliged to modify his dress. Most likely, he stopped wearing the Brothers' habit on the advice of his wise Superior,<sup>24</sup> who considered that it was hardly proper to display before the eyes of the Mother Church a garb which she had not yet sanctioned by her approval. Since the Brother was tonsured, he donned the clerical habit, which was well suited to his profession and one in which he could appear to best advantage before the court of Rome. Despite differences in local customs, the disciple tried to follow the wise advice of his spiritual guide and kept in close touch with him. Nor did the good father forget his child so far away; he was careful to send him money from time to time so that he would not be in want.

Ever since the death of De La Salle, the perseverance of this faithful disciple in Rome has achieved, at least in part, the effect that the Founder had hoped it would. The Institute has since been approved as a religious order with the three solemn vows.<sup>25</sup> To this favor of the Apostolic See, Pope Benedict XIII, of happy memory, added another which may become the source of many more, for he gave the Brothers the school where Clement XI had established Brother Gabriel, under the name of Signor Gabriel Drolin. Once this was done, Brother Gabriel, having succeeded after twenty-six years in the pious design which had been the main object of his coming to Rome, left the school in the hands of the two Brothers sent to replace him, and he returned to France in 1728.

When he got back to Avignon, at the age of sixty-five, he made his vows, which were received by the Brother Superior General, who happened to be there then. Now at last, his soul can rejoice in the grace which he had gone so far to seek and which he had waited for,

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24. The letters of De la Salle indicate otherwise.

25. The approval envisions neither "religious order" nor "solemn vows."

persevering from 1702 until 1728. This venerable Brother accomplished perfectly the vow which he had made with his dear father never to abandon the Institute and to labor until death to promote its establishment by every means at his disposal. He deserves all the more praise because the second Brother, who made the same vow with him, was unfaithful and compounded his infidelity with ingratitude, rebellion against his Superior, and embezzlement of the funds destined for the establishment of a seminary for country schoolmasters. That act led to the ruin of this excellent enterprise which has never been revived since.

In these two men, we see verified the truth of the words of Jesus Christ, *One will be taken, and the other left*. One of them, the Director of the Saint Hippolyte training center for country schoolmasters, who had kept only the most tenuous connection with the Society, ended up by leaving it when chance provided him with a profitable way of doing so, and God, who knows the human heart and its attachments, let him succumb to the ambition which ruled him and dragged him down to such great crimes. The other, Brother Gabriel Drolin, who was sincerely attached to his state and walked generously in the footsteps of his saintly Superior, had renounced all worldly desires and thus was not tempted even by the most legitimate offers. He preferred his lowly and despised vocation to a more honorable and comfortable one which would have allowed him to emerge without delay from a condition of extreme poverty to one of relative affluence. This fidelity obtained for him the grace of finally seeing the Holy See approve his Institute and of making his profession in it, after giving the Brothers an example of inviolable attachment to his vocation, perfect detachment from the things of earth, and union and constant submission to his worthy father.

### Opening Gratuitous Schools in Avignon

Although they were not opened until 1703, we shall mention here the founding of the Christian Schools in Avignon, because they had been requested and agreed upon as early as 1702. This was just when the persecution we shall describe in the next chapter was beginning to get under way. Humanly speaking, this persecution which shook the new Institute to its very foundations should have caused its collapse. As we behold it always on the brink of destruction during fifteen years, we can only wonder that it was not eventually buried beneath its own ruins. We can also wonder that God chose the first four years of this long persecution, the most trying ones, to extend to several

cities of the kingdom a congregation which was still in its infancy, not securely established, and threatened by imminent shipwreck.

In fact, we shall see the highest and most respectable authority strike the shepherd, intimidate the sheep, undertake to place them under a stranger's direction, and strive thereafter to keep them dis-united, to cause several of them to grow disenchanted little by little, and to alter the form of government. All this was due to the intrigues of a highly placed personage who enjoyed great prestige and a notable reputation, one who, from being a protector of the servant of God, became his most bitter antagonist. De La Salle, obliged to flee before him, had to leave his flock to the care of Providence, and the enemy of the virtuous Founder took advantage of his absence to attempt to set aside the practices he had established, along with his memory, and to make his children forget their father.

The same period when these spiritual ravages were occurring in the new Institute was also the epoch of its greatest expansion. This was the time decreed by divine wisdom to establish Christian Schools in various parts of France. This Institute, which at this period seemed to be in flames, afterward appeared to rise again from its own ashes. Persecution not only served to spread it and to multiply its members but also produced in its favor the same effects it had brought about at the beginning of the Church. What results did persecution have when Christianity was in its cradle? It attacked the Apostles furiously and obliged them to disperse all over the world, and God made use of this dispersion of the first heroes of the Gospel to convert the Gentiles. In a similar way, just when the cruelest persecution deprived the servant of God of nearly all his authority over his men, when it obliged him either to flee or to go into hiding, when it incited his enemies to raise their hands against him everywhere, God opened up vast new fields for his zeal and multiplied the Christian Schools. In less than four years, in fact, ten new establishments were created, the first being in Avignon.

For a long time, De Salle had been urged by several pious persons of rank to send some Brothers to open Gratuitous Schools in Provence, Languedoc, and the surrounding areas. This suggestion, which might have flattered a man who still retained some vestiges of self-love and who might have been pleased to think that his disciples would carry his name so far away, on the contrary, seemed to the servant of God a dangerous thing and one deserving of serious thought. Far from hastening the execution of this project, the fear of the perils which his disciples might be exposed to held him back and made him hesitate for a long time over what he should do.

He feared lest his sheep, too far from their shepherd and out of reach of his voice, might choose new paths for themselves. He feared lest the distance separating the children from their father might in the long run induce them, little by little, to set aside the yoke of his legitimate authority. He feared that not being under his immediate direction and lacking the encouragement of his presence, they might lose the spirit of their state and that once their piety grew weak, they might seek to liberate themselves and fall into relaxation, might cease cultivating regularity, and finally, might become victims of a disorderly life. He was afraid that accepting new foundations might cause prejudice to the existing ones. He realized that with the growth in the number of schools, he would have to find additional Brothers, which might mean accepting candidates barely suitable to carry on the work, once it got started.

Finally, his most serious concern was exposing his subjects to heresy in lands formerly infected with it, especially in Languedoc. There was a danger that the Brothers might be led astray or might succumb to the bad example of so many people who lived with no religion at all, whom the so-called Reformation had left behind, even after it was presumed to have been abolished. Still, since he had abandoned himself to the guidance of Providence in all things, he thought he could discern God's will in the continual requests made to him to send some of his disciples to these distant places.

The city of Avignon was the first to obtain some Brothers. This was at the request of Monsieur de Châteaublanc, the treasurer of our holy father the pope in the county of Avignon.<sup>26</sup> His wife, a lady of great piety, had left a legacy to found a Charity School and had strongly urged her husband to hasten the establishment of this much-needed institution for poor children. The husband, as virtuous as his wife, took this good work to heart; all he was waiting for, in order to execute the last will of his deceased wife, was to find men capable of carrying out her intentions.

While he hesitated over the choice of teachers to whom he could entrust the Charity School, it happened, fortunately, that a pious person from Lyon informed him that in Paris there existed an Institute of Brothers devoted to this very type of work. This first acquaintance he had with the Brothers' Institute made De Châteaublanc anxious to have them. He did not delay in writing to De La Salle, begging him to send him two Brothers. The deliberation with which the servant of

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26. Avignon was part of the papal states from 1229 until 1791, when it was seized during the French Revolution.

God went about answering this request did not abate the gentleman's zeal, and an unexpected meeting with a Brother of the Institute caused him to renew his efforts. This Brother was one of the two whom De La Salle had sent to Rome; he came through Avignon on his return to France. De Châteaublanc, along with several other pious personages, was delighted to meet him and made him stay for a while. Then, together they addressed new appeals to the wise Superior, asking him to send them some of his disciples as soon as possible. The servant of God recognized the will of God in all this. He no longer dared to delay in answering the requests made to him and sent to Avignon two Brothers, who were received there with extraordinary tokens of esteem and affection.

The pious treasurer of His Holiness, who had so ardently desired the Brothers and had pleaded for them, lodged them in a house of which he had the use, while waiting until the one he had bought for them was ready for occupancy. Since the legacy of his late spouse did not suffice, he supplemented it with a liberality worthy of a man who had consecrated his own person and all his goods to God and to good works. While everything was being prepared for the opening of the Charity Schools, the Brothers went to prostrate themselves at the feet of François-Maurice de Gontery, archbishop of Avignon,<sup>27</sup> to receive his benediction, his orders, and their own commission. This pious prelate welcomed the Brothers with uncommonly cordial tokens of kindness. They won his heart and his goodwill, and time has only strengthened these dispositions. This illustrious archbishop, one of the outstanding benefactors of the Brothers' Institute, should not be passed over in the life of their Founder. It is only right to memorialize him in the annals of their Society and to keep fresh the memory of what it owes him. Under the auspices of this zealous prelate, the charitable school was opened in Avignon in 1703. From the start, the good it produced was so great and so obvious that all those interested in religious enterprises wished to have more such schools.

Advocates of the Christian Schools did not fail to let De La Salle know how they felt. As early as March 1705, De Châteaublanc wrote to him to persuade him to send a second contingent of Brothers. He urged him to do this, invoking all the motives which can impress a man who cared only about God. He assured the Founder that *he was extremely satisfied with his disciples, that the city was very much edified by their conduct, and that His Excellency, the vice-legat, was so*

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27. The archbishop at the time was Laurent Fiesci. It was much later that De Gontery succeeded him as archbishop of Avignon.

*happy over this foundation that he gave expression to his pleasure wherever he went.*

That prelate certainly continued in these dispositions, as we shall see, and he later helped the Brothers considerably by his influence at the papal court when the time came to secure approval for their Institute. When De Châteaublanc was writing the above-mentioned letter, one of the parish priests of the city was negotiating to secure the opening of a Gratuitous School in his parish, but the death of a very wealthy and pious nobleman on whom he had counted and who, he hoped, would underwrite his project made it come to nothing. De Châteaublanc, however, was not discouraged. When he asked De La Salle for two more Brothers, he undertook to provide for their upkeep until such time as Providence would do so by some other means. *I have no doubt*, he said in his letter, *that God will do so, because this is, of all charitable enterprises, the one most necessary in this city. I hope, my dear sir, that you will come and see for yourself and that we shall have the honor of welcoming you.*

This request by De Châteaublanc was too reasonable to be turned down. In the classes already functioning, the work was becoming heavier than two Brothers could handle. It was therefore necessary to send them some help and to increase the number of classes. Divine Providence did indeed come to their aid, as the pious treasurer had hoped. The archbishop and the vice-legate, by order of the great Pontiff, Clement XI, undertook to provide for the Brothers' needs. The Holy Father's representative wished to be the founder of the new school, and God did not delay in granting to the pious archbishop the foretaste of the reward he had prepared for him in heaven for this good work, for he saw with his own eyes the great good that was done.

The archbishop himself went to visit the schools and took pleasure in beholding the fine order and discipline which reigned in them. Delighted by the methods the Brothers used in teaching, he spent hours observing them and listening to the students. He made himself the judge of their progress in the knowledge of Christian doctrine, and his joy was to hear them disputing, in innocent rivalry, the honor of knowing and reciting catechism lessons best and winning the prize awarded to the victors. He even had them come to his palace, where he could judge their grasp of what they had learned, and honored them by listening to them recite the catechism. When the holidays came, Archbishop de Gontery kept for himself the privilege of going to announce them and to dismiss both the scholars and their teachers for the vacation.

His influence was of great weight in Rome when the time came to secure the approval of the Brothers' Institute by the Holy See. The authentic certificate which he gave them to present to the Roman authorities, dated 20 February 1720, contained high praise for them and strongly influenced the court of Rome to grant them what they asked. Among other things, this document declared: "Since the founding of the Gratuitous Schools in the city of Avignon, they have always fulfilled their duties with great zeal and assiduity; the public derives great advantages from their labors, and their efforts to educate children in the Christian manner, as well as their modesty and the purity of their morals, have always been a source of edification to everyone." This virtuous prelate showed his kindness toward the Brothers in even the least details and went out of his way to give personal testimony about them to people whom he knew.

In 1728, he welcomed to Avignon the Brother<sup>28</sup> who had at one time been the Director of the Gratuitous Schools and now was Superior General of the Institute. He gave him extraordinary tokens of his tender charity and permitted him to install a chapel where Mass could be celebrated and where the Brothers from the area could hold their assemblies for the retreat after which they pronounced their vows, just as the others had done at Saint Yon after receiving the Bull of Approval which Benedict XIII of happy memory had recently granted to them. The humility of the prelate would not have been satisfied if he had not come in person to visit this chapel and greet the Brothers and if he had not honored their gathering by his presence. The house where this chapel is located is at the present time the general gathering place where all the Brothers living in these regions, too far removed from Saint Yon, come every year to hold their meetings, make their retreats, and renew their vows when the Superior General passes through on his visitations. Such is the testimonial which justice and gratitude make it a duty to pay to this pious prelate whom the Brothers consider as one of their powerful protectors and as a true father.

To a lesser degree, De Châteaublanc, the papal treasurer, also entertained similar sentiments toward the Brothers. He, too, helped them with his influence in the court of Rome, making himself their panegyrist rather than their patron. There is no sort of service which this pious layman is not happy to do for them. He would deserve a place among the ranks of the early Christians. His modesty does not allow us to speak any more of him; it is after his death that he should be praised, as the Holy Spirit says. He was the soul of all the good works

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28. Brother Timothée.



undertaken in the city of Avignon. After consecrating his person to God, he used his great wealth in bestowing liberal alms on the poor and in promoting works of charity.

## CHAPTER XVIII

*The origin and first stages of the furious persecution which arose against the holy Founder, which obliged him to leave Paris, and which wrought havoc in his Institute until the end of his days.*

The violent persecution which, in 1702, struck the Founder of the Christian Schools with the sudden and unforeseen impetuosity of a bolt of lightning from heaven arose, to all appearances, out of the harsh and indiscreet conduct of the Director of Novices whom he had appointed to take his place when he was absent. In reality, its cause goes back to an unjust and biased attitude toward him which was assumed by a person who enjoyed great influence in Paris and which he gave vent to on this occasion.

If we were to name this person, now that he is dead, we would not consider ourselves to have blackened his memory nor in any way to have tarnished the outstanding reputation which he enjoyed all his life and which was not buried in his tomb. It is nothing new, indeed, for extremely worthy men to disagree, to adopt divergent behavior patterns, and to entertain contradictory views. A diversity of appreciations about how to procure the glory of God makes people oppose each other, even though all of them aim at the same result. At all times, the saints who walk this earth have occasionally caused each other to suffer, and although each follows his own path toward God, it sometimes happens that their paths cause them to clash.

If it is true that the persecutions suffered by God's favored children in this mortal flesh ordinarily come from devotees of the world, it is no less true that similar contradictions at times arise from good people. Of all the different kinds of trials they have to put up with, this is the most humiliating, the hardest to bear. If the saints are attacked by the world and meet with scorn and outrage on its part, this experience simply fulfills God's prophecies: *For if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before you; if it persecutes you, it has persecuted me before you. All those who wish to live in piety will suffer persecution.*

But for God's own servants to declare war on others of God's friends is something that surprises us and increases their dismay and anguish. In this world, everybody condemns in advance those who are blamed by men who enjoy a reputation for virtue, and everybody considers as justified the unfavorable judgments and the unkind conduct the virtuous display toward those they censure. The world's malice leads it always to suspect the worst; it issues its guilty verdicts without examining the facts. With the most shocking lack of thought and the most extreme temerity, it tries and condemns the greatest saints as soon as it sees them attacked by people who have a deserved reputation for probity. In such cases, even the most pious persons are tempted to agree with these accusers and to take their side. Hence it happens that opposition from good people is for persons of the highest virtue a cloud which hides or a veil which entirely obscures their merits.

Let us, therefore, not be surprised if we see earthly angels at odds with one another, so to speak, since those of heaven sometimes engage in seeming disputes, so long as the will of God remains hidden to them on subjects they are interested in. The angels who sought the conversion of the Babylonians wished to keep among them the Jews who adored the true God, so that their belief, confirmed by their example, might open the eyes of these misguided people and make them understand that God is one and that he deserves worship—in a word, to help them accept the true religion. At the same time, the tutelary angels of the people of God feared lest the contagion of bad example from these idolaters and daily communication with such a corrupted people might, in the long run, alter the purity of faith and the morals of the Israelites. So they sought to hasten their departure from a land given over to sin and strove so that the prince might allow them to return to Jerusalem. Thus these blessed spirits opposed each other in a combat inspired by charity, which might have delayed the return of the Jews from their captivity in a strange land, had not the authority of the Prince of Angels, Saint Michael, decided in favor of the guardian angels of the People of God.

The dispute between Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas, which occasioned their separation and made them break away from each other in their apostolic mission, is known to everyone. Few are ignorant of the quarrel involving Saint Cyprian and other bishops of his party with Pope Saint Stephen, who upheld by his authority and by appealing to tradition the Church's doctrine concerning baptism conferred by heretics. Constantinople and the entire Orient were aware of the difference of opinion that opposed Saint Epiphanius to Saint John

Chrysostom on the question of the monks called the Great Brothers. At about the same time, the dispute between Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine flared up sharply, even though it did not last very long. Church history provides many other examples of opposition between saints who often strenuously opposed each other and even stirred up opposition against each other on this earth while pursuing the same goal, the glory of God, but by different means.

It was, then, nothing new if De La Salle had to endure persecution on the part of a person whose merits and virtues caused him to be highly regarded in Paris. If we do not reveal the name of this person and avoid giving any details which might arouse any suspicion as to his identity, it is not because we feel that naming him might stain his memory, because he may have had the best of intentions in doing what he did. The truth is that the pious persecutor of the innocent Founder was right in disapproving of and in having condemned by superior authority certain exaggerated and imprudent penitential practices. Since these had, however, been commanded and carried out without De La Salle's knowledge and in his absence, he should not have been held responsible for them. It was wrong to attribute to the father the indiscretions and violent procedures of two of his children whom he had placed in charge of the others.

### De La Salle persecuted for the indiscretion of two Directors

Little by little, I have finally come to the start of this persecution of which we must now speak. As indicated previously, the need of attending to the business of his Institute as it progressed had obliged the Founder to appoint a Brother to take charge of the novitiate during his absence. This Brother possessed solid virtue but lacked judgment and prudence. He was harsh with himself and even harsher with others, and he had his equal in the Brother Director of the schools in Paris. These two men, so much alike by their want of discretion and their intemperate zeal, made quite insupportable a yoke which was already heavy enough in itself but which fervor, good example, and the wisdom of De La Salle made more endurable to those weakling souls who dwelt too much on what they suffered.

At first, the novices, disgusted and repelled by the excessive severity of their Director, found in their father's kindness and charity a balm for their wounded spirits. As the wise Superior expected true virtue of them, he led them to attribute their ill feeling with regard to the Director of Novices to their own lack of humility and of obedience, and he got them to humble themselves for this by admitting

their failings and by submitting promptly. He taught these malcontents to condemn themselves, never to question the one placed over them, and to seek peace of heart in patience and mortification.

But the two Brothers in charge, who had not enough sense to profit by their own faults and to make use of these to correct themselves, abused the submission which their wise Superior caused their inferiors to show them. They embittered more and more these hearts already badly disposed toward them, and by pushing these weak individuals too hard, in the end they caused them to fall. And fall they did.

The presence of De La Salle was a remedy for all these evils. He uplifted those who had fallen, encouraged the fainthearted, fortified the wavering, and by the grace and unction of his words, soothed the hurt caused by the conduct of the two indiscreet Brothers. The problem, although it had been in existence for some time, remained secret as long as the suffering Brothers could see the physician who knew how to heal them. But in his absence, the harshness and imprudence of his delegates, which were at the bottom of all this, so outraged some of the young men who were already embittered that their ulcerated hearts sought vengeance and led to public complaints, thus revealing the exaggerated penances imposed on them.

The one who was most shocked by all this was the one who should have been least impressed. Although a man of outstanding merit, enlightened, solidly pious, and experienced, he let himself be prepossessed to such a point—God allowed this for the sanctification of De La Salle—that from being a friend, protector, and benefactor, he turned into a secret enemy and a hidden but violent persecutor of the servant of God. Oh strange example of human frailty! This great man, who seemed to honor De La Salle as a saint and to admire his virtue, changed his heart and his attitude toward him overnight, lost all esteem for him, and considered him to be a person lacking in common sense who did not know how to deal with people. He reported the Founder to the higher superiors and to several other outstanding prelates, painting him as a ridiculous and extravagant victim of his own ill-considered piety.

And yet, the man who under the pretext of principles and of piety was thus blackening the good name of the servant of God was the man who should have known him best, because he had the closest contacts with him and had for a long time worked together with him in various good works. It was he who had shown himself his defender and patron and had displayed remarkable zeal in furthering the growth of the new Institute.

His error lay in blaming an innocent man for the faults committed in his absence, faults which he knew nothing about and which two indiscreet Brothers had indulged in without his approval. Certainly these actions deserved condemnation, and those who had corrected others in such a barbarous fashion themselves deserved severe reprehension. But why, without hearing De La Salle, blame and condemn him for deeds of his inferiors accomplished in his absence? The reason seems to be that the two imprudent Brothers were thought to have acted at their father's instigation, that their notions were inspired by him, and that he had authorized, either by his orders or by his example, the inhuman type of correction which had given scandal. That was precisely the idea which was taken for granted and which instead should have been verified. It amounted to making a wise and virtuous priest responsible for the intemperate actions of men led by unrestrained and imprudent zeal. At least before proceeding to accuse and depose him, care should have been taken to establish the facts, to listen to witnesses, and to show convincingly by unequivocal proofs that the Superior was the real author of—or at least the conniver in—the indiscreet practices which were being censured.

Since he had been away from Paris at the time these things happened, there certainly existed a presumption that De La Salle was not aware of what had gone on in the house and that the indiscreet Brothers had profited by his absence to carry their spirit of harshness to the extreme and to yield to their penchant for a type of penance inspired by ill humor and an uncouth temperament rather than by the Spirit of God. Charity and prudence would have demanded at least that judgment be suspended on this occasion and that the condemnation of the Superior should not have been so hastily decided on account of what his inferiors had done.

The truth of the matter, however, is that the enemy was seeking an excuse for a quarrel and for some time had been poorly disposed toward the servant of God. It happens often enough that very minor clashes lead to major consequences, and it is not rare for slight misunderstandings to develop into broken friendships and definitive breaks. The man of whom we are speaking, who before this had been so favorable to the servant of God, had allowed himself, little by little, to grow prejudiced against him, although no one knows why. This ill-founded prejudice had prepared his heart to listen to and to believe anything anyone might say against the Brothers' Superior. The moment was ripe for misunderstandings to break out between these two men who, when working together, had already brought about such great progress for the Gratuitous Schools and whose cooperation

provided hope for even more advances in the future. No wonder that the evil spirit was so quick to take advantage of this occasion and to add to their mutual incomprehension by fomenting gossip and tales which completed the task of irritating their unsettled relations.

We can leave to God, who reads the depths of minds and hearts, to decide by what sort of casuistry De La Salle's former friend became his most redoubtable, although secret, adversary and to determine whether some secret passion, disguised under the honorable aspect of zeal, was not in reality the moving force which led him to stir up so much trouble for the servant of God. *So often*, says the author of *The Imitation*, *we are moved by passion, and we call it zeal; so often, cupidity reigns where in appearance nothing but charity is present*. It is a fact that the complaints against the harsh and indiscreet conduct of the two Brothers to which this man listened were entirely in line with the prejudices he had already formed against De La Salle; thus it was easy for the devil to deceive him and to make him conclude that the Superior was responsible for the faults of his inferiors. This is how the devil always finds within us the tendencies he uses to tempt us. But whatever may be the truth concerning the secret motives that aroused these violent prejudices against the servant of God, here are the facts which provided the pretext for them and led up to them.

### Two novices complain of harsh treatment

The imprudent Director of Novices, who was in charge at the Grande Maison during a short trip that his Superior had to undertake, felt that this was his chance to give free rein to the impetuosity of his intemperate zeal with regard to certain candidates who had even less virtue than he had prudence. The indiscreet penances he inflicted on these young men did not help them to correct their faults but provided obvious proofs of his brutality. This furnished the evidence needed to back up the complaints lodged against De La Salle at the palace of the archbishop. These angry and scheming young men brought their grievances out publicly and sought revenge on the presumed author of the penances which had irritated them and of the shame and resentment they had experienced.

The person to whom they went with their story, who was already ill disposed toward De La Salle, as we have seen, welcomed the plaintiffs and listened to them with a kind and gracious air which not only loosened their tongues but also made them feel free to vomit forth all the venom pent up in their hearts. He then asked them to put their charges in writing and to sign them, which they were glad to do.

These written statements served the purpose of the servant of God's enemy even better than he could have hoped, because they exaggerated the ill-treatment these youths had received and the penances inflicted on them. Thus enjoying the pleasure of revenge, their self-love taught them how to paint the situation in false colors and to mingle false accusations with the true. Blinded and furious as they were, they did not realize that it was not their Director of Novices but their good father who would have to drink deeply for the rest of his life this chalice which they were filling with the bitterness welling up from their hearts.

The confidant of these rebellious novices was not the man to cause an immediate uproar and thus give warning of the secret trap he was preparing. He knew how to handle affairs of this nature and how to insure success by careful and circumspect behavior. Furthermore, not being conscious of the secret passion which indisposed him, he proposed to himself, in the persecution he was preparing, nothing but the noblest of motives: the glory of God, the advantage of the Gratuitous Schools, and the presumed need to give the Brothers a new form of government and to protect their Institute by taking away from them a Superior incapable of governing them properly. After all, this man was not De La Salle's superior and had no authority over him, his Community, or his person. Consequently, he could do nothing against the Founder except by intrigue and clandestine maneuvers. What had to be done was to sow doubts about him in the minds of the higher superiors, to make them think of him as an unyielding, stubborn, presumptuous man, wedded to his own ideas, austere and pitiless in dealing with his inferiors, and excessively harsh in punishing the slightest faults, as a man who never made any allowance for human weakness, and finally, as a person of limited understanding, quite unequal to the task of governing the new Institute properly.

It was not all that easy, however, to depict De La Salle in such an unfavorable light in the eyes of an archbishop who entertained no prejudices against him, was naturally benevolent and moderate, and indeed was strongly inclined to favor a man whom he loved and whom he had come to esteem, even before knowing him personally, on the strength of the reputation for holiness he had acquired in the environs of Reims. Furthermore, the written statements he received had not been directed against De La Salle but against the Director of Novices, and it was not easy to lay on the former the blame for the faults of the latter in the mind of the cardinal, who did not share the secret animosity animating the accuser. Prudence, therefore, suggested delay until new accusations might be forthcoming, until new

charges might entangle in the affair the responsibility of the innocent one whose ruin was being sought.

The opportunity came soon enough. The Director of Novices had his counterpart in the Director of the Paris schools. Inclined to the same sort of violence and imprudence, this man proceeded to the same lengths, providing the persecutor with new ammunition against his innocent rival. This Director of the Paris schools, with the other Brothers of his small community, had come as usual to the novitiate to spend the Sunday. There he made the same misuse of his authority as his friend, the Director of Novices, had done. The object of his brutality was a novice who had been put under his charge when he was sent to do practice teaching in the Paris schools. This young man, who was already strongly tempted to give up his vocation, ran away and went to testify to the harshness of the penances inflicted on him. He spoke to the very same person whom the first accusers had approached with their complaints. The marks left by the cruel treatment he had received were obvious proofs of the truth of his story.

No doubt they should have turned to the disgrace of the one who had inflicted them, but before imputing them to De La Salle, it should have been ascertained whether he had in one way or another taken part in such shocking behavior. As the Superior, he could have been held responsible for it, if he had given occasion to it by secret or public orders, by his approval or advice, by his example, or even by his silence. But if the second fact, like the first, had happened during his absence, without his knowledge, and against his intentions, if his own conduct, his mentality, his way of acting had never occasioned such indiscretions, it was not right to blame him for them. Yet this is what was done. People thought that since the second Brother, appointed to his position by De La Salle, was acting like the first, they were not doing so of their own accord but were simply following the lead of their Superior.

On such flimsy grounds, which a heart already persuaded took for proofs, the enemy of the servant of God felt that he was authorized to impute to the father the faults committed by his children. But to proceed against De La Salle with greater surety, he told the latest accuser, as he had the earlier ones, to set down his complaints in writing. He then summed up this and the previous denunciations in a memorandum to which he added his own comments. In this document, without calling the pious Founder the author of his disciples' conduct, the adversary blamed him for it and concluded that he should be deposed and someone else put in his place, someone with greater wisdom who was better able to govern the Brothers and to



take care of an Institute which was so useful to the Church. When the document was ready, he presented it to His Eminence and did not fail to add, in person, his other prepossessions and grounds for his hidden displeasure against a man whose only crime, in fact, was that he did not blindly follow his accuser's advice and did not let him run the new Society as he saw fit.<sup>29</sup>

A report to the archbishop to have De la Salle deposed

The accuser was careful to back up all the accusations contained in the memorandum and to give them an air of verisimilitude. He imagined that there was sharp division among the Brothers and that many were disillusioned with their vocation. He sought a reason for this and found it in their Superior's lack of ability. He described him as a man inept for maintaining good order and peace and insisted that it was necessary to depose him. Since this was the result he really aimed at, he exhausted all his eloquence to lead Cardinal de Noailles to this conclusion. According to him, His Eminence would have to give the Brothers a new Superior immediately if he wished to save the Institute from total ruin.

The cardinal, however, was not given to precipitous action and was not ready to go so far. He found it hard to believe everything he heard, and he would have treated the document as a calumny and ordered it burned as a defamatory libel if it had come from any other hand than that which presented it. That accusing hand belonged to a man even more venerable for his virtue than for his age. He possessed the art of saying what he wished in a pleasant manner and with majestic simplicity; good faith, candor, and truth seemed to dwell in all his words. Everything in him inspired trust and deserved full confidence; his morals were irreproachable; his thinking was profound; he knew how to deal with the world while remaining a man of deep piety. His external appearance was imposing, and he displayed in everything an appearance of moderation and prudence which did not allow any sign of emotion to pierce through.

In this dilemma, the worthy prelate could not get over his surprise; the more he reflected on the accuser and the accused, the greater perplexity he felt. Whom should he believe? Obviously, either the one must be at fault, or the other was guilty of calumny. At least

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29. Some see in this remark that despite his coy reticence, Blain makes it clear that the Founder's "secret enemy" was De La Chétardie, who wanted De La Salle replaced so that he could take over the government of the Institute.

he had to conclude either that the one was extremely prejudiced and led astray by false suspicions and biased reports or that the other had given occasion for the accusations against him. Charity did not allow him to charge the author of the memorandum with imposture and calumny or to believe him capable of bearing false witness against his neighbor. On the one hand, his great reputation and his real virtue placed him above any such suspicion. To tax him with passion, prejudice, imprudence, jealousy, resentment, and hidden spite—all veiled under the cloak of zeal—seemed highly implausible. His very looks gave the lie to any such suspicions; probity was written on his face. On the other hand, to believe that the accusations were correct and contained nothing but well ascertained facts was something that the prelate's deep regard for De La Salle would not allow him to do.

The reputation for holiness which everywhere followed a man who had condemned himself to a life of such poverty and mortification and who had made his name famous by so many examples of heroic virtue forbade the archbishop to listen to such accusations. He was surprised to see a man already considered a Founder, who had created a new Society and for the past twenty years had built it up and who had managed to preserve it from shipwreck amidst the most furious storms and constant tempests that had assailed it, treated as a man of limited ability and understanding, a victim of presumptuous and ill-considered piety. The cardinal, who had always thought that the servant of God possessed great talent for governing his house and had admired the fine order he saw there when he had visited it with the king of England, now remained uncertain in his mind about what he should believe and do. The decision he made, which was indeed the wisest course open to him, was not to judge the matter too hastily but to let time bring the truth to light.

The business was as ambiguous as it was delicate and called for precise information so as to discover exactly what was what. The cardinal therefore decided that he would look into the question, and the only answer he gave to the bearer of the memorandum was that he would reflect on what he should do. In fact, a few days later, he sent one of his vicars-general to conduct an on-the-spot investigation to find out all he could about what was going on.

To make matters worse, the complaints against the two Brothers in question reached the ears of De La Chétardie. The malcontents showed him on their bodies the welts left by the bloody disciplining they had received, and in exciting his compassion, they also excited his indignation. Although De La Salle was innocent, their story made him the principal object of De La Chétardie's wrath. Convinced that

the Brothers' Superior was the primary author of everything that went on among them, he attributed to him, as their first cause, the indiscreet and cruel penances complained about. This conviction changed his attitude toward the pious Founder. He no longer considered him with the same benevolence, lost all confidence in him, and went from the highest esteem to utter disregard, from the warmest friendship to the coldest indifference.

For a period of several months, he broke off completely with the Founder, sent his disciples away, and closed the schools. True, he took the Brothers back into his good graces sometime later, but he never restored to their worthy Superior his earlier confidence, his former protection, or his financial support which previously had always been forthcoming for the needs of the Community. In this way, the servant of God, abandoned by his best friend and the most zealous promoter of the Christian Schools, was obliged to seek refuge and better conditions in another parish, as we shall mention farther on.

Meanwhile, the archbishop, uncertain and troubled over what he should think of all this, took all the steps required to get to the bottom of the affair. To give himself firm grounds for his judgment, he resolved to establish a sort of inquisition on the spot where the faults had been committed. Monsieur Pirot was the investigator he deputed to look into the affair.

The vicar-general spent about a month gathering information. He came one day each week to observe what was going on and interrogated each Brother in private. In order not to be deceived and to force the truth out, so to speak, he obliged the Brothers to swear to tell the truth when they came to speak with him. This precaution may have been wise, but it was not necessary in a house where sincerity, candor, and respect for authority reigned. Men accustomed to accuse themselves of their shortcomings and to avow their least faults before the entire Community for the purpose of humbling themselves and drawing down on themselves confusion and shame did not need to take an oath to tell the truth. Children accustomed to admitting to their good father with naive simplicity the slightest evil motions of their hearts, revealing to him their lapses, and confiding to him their temptations and all the evil movements that vices, passions, and self-love might occasion within them were not men apt to speak against their consciences.

De La Salle had returned by the time these unusual occurrences began at the instigation of his hidden rival and enemy. He became aware of the inquisitorial tribunal which had been set up in the house but looked upon it with respect, a submissive heart, and an unruffled

and calm attitude. He did not know what had inspired all this, what was its origin and cause, and where it would lead, and he did nothing to find out. Self-love was so completely dead in him, as much as it can ever be on this earth in God's greatest servants, that it did not arouse in his soul any curiosity, complaint, or concern about all that he saw going on. His silence was truly admirable on an occasion when anyone else would have found it impossible to remain quiet. He did not mention to any of the Brothers what was taking place under his eyes. He asked none of them what was the matter, even though he could read the dissatisfaction in their faces, and it would have been easy for him to find out everything that was happening and to get them to admit to him what they had deposed under oath. He inquired about nothing.

His silence was imitated by his children, and his restraint kept them from disclosing to him that he himself was the one being investigated and that in all likelihood some humiliating decision was being reached concerning him. M. Pirot was careful to keep all the information given to him entirely secret. Nobody spoke about what transpired or about what was being said. No one mentioned the questions put to him or his own answers. No one was even tempted to try to find out, and if anyone had done so, his Superior would have imposed silence on him, so great was his veneration for higher authority.

The former professor at the Sorbonne, who alone was in charge of the investigation, did not delegate his responsibility to anyone else and did not associate anyone with himself in the inquiry he was conducting. He was the sole judge, the only witness, the accuser, and the court secretary. He wrote out in his own hand the statements he received and placed under solemn secrecy the various testimonials he so scrupulously gathered. He finally completed his visitation and his scrutiny without giving De La Salle any idea what it was all about or any reasons for such extraordinary proceedings. The facts collected by Pirot contradicted the report originally presented to His Eminence, except for the complaints signed by the three malcontents. Nothing in the memorandum was substantiated. In addition, the vicar-general stated how edified he had been to see the good order, peace, and union which reigned among the Brothers. He could not recognize in the house he had visited that hotbed of disorder, revolt, and discord which had been painted in such lurid colors.

Pirot, having found out the truth about the whole affair, was in a position to see for himself and to understand, through the depositions he had gathered, that the prepossession in the mind of the cardinal against the Brothers' Superior was nothing but a tissue of slanders.

Did Pirot ever state this? No one knows. His report remained as secret as his investigation had been, so that it is not possible to say whether his conclusions were for or against the pious victim of an evil tongue. If we may judge by what happened, it would seem that the investigator decided against the testimony of his own eyes and ears and instead gave credence to the accuser. He preferred to think that he had failed to discover the truth rather than to suspect the veracity of the accuser, a cleric who was above all suspicion and whose charges in assailing De La Salle were given great credibility, thanks to his personal merits, the authority he enjoyed in Paris, and his reputation, which nothing could counterbalance.

It seems, indeed, that the envoy was more impressed by the reputation of the holy Founder's adversary and the plausibility of his prejudices than by the facts, or else that he was not man enough to endorse the evident innocence of the accused in the face of the powerful enemy who attacked him. Or perhaps again—this is probably the fairest supposition and the one nearest to the truth—the investigator, relying on the complaints signed by the three malcontents against the two Brothers in charge, which were certainly substantiated, felt that this testimony compromised De La Salle, that he should be considered as the accomplice of the two guilty Brothers, and that as such, he should be demoted like them, deposed, and declared incapable of governing the new Community.

Even if De La Salle deserved some share of the blame merited by the conduct of his two appointees, it would seem that the degree of his responsibility was quite out of proportion to the chastisement which it was proposed to inflict on him and that before subjecting him to the disgrace of deposition, his superiors should have charitably warned him to moderate with due wisdom the corrections practiced in his house, to limit the use of penances, and to forbid all indiscreet ones. The authorities should have waited to see whether he would show himself docile in following their wise advice, and they should not have despaired of amendment on the part of a man who up to this time had never deserved reproof, either on this score or on any other. It was certainly surprising that on the strength of mere suspicions, they should have proceeded to dishonor a man who, just a few years previously, had been held in such high regard by the archbishop and whose virtues De Noailles himself had recognized when he approved all his requests for his Community and granted him full powers as regards the administration of the sacraments.

Even if it were true that De La Salle had introduced into his Community the type of penances which had given rise to the indiscretions

of the two Brothers in charge and to the complaints of two or three malcontents, the holy Founder could have justified these practices by appealing to the example of the holiest and most ancient religious orders. He could have found such examples as far back as the eleventh century in the famous monastery of Fonte Avellano in the diocese of Gubbio, whose superior was Cardinal Peter Damian, and in the constitutions of the Order of Mount Carmel, as well as in several others. Peter Damian himself relates, in his life of Saint Rudolph, bishop of Gubbio and one of the great penitents of his century, that among his other extraordinary austerities, when he came back to his fellow hermits of Luceola in Umbria, *he never came to the Chapter without taking the discipline there or having it administered to him; his joy was perfect when this was done to him, not only by one of the Brothers but by two.*

Peter Damian relates another fact of the same kind as that which caused the complaints of the dissatisfied novices but which turned out altogether differently. "In this same hermitage," he says, "there was a Brother who often left his cell for no reason, out of light-mindedness and lack of serious recollection. John, the prior of the hermitage, after having reproved him severely for this, had him soundly whipped. While the guilty one was putting his clothes back on, he spoke arrogantly, whereupon the superior ordered them to strip him and whip him again, which was done. This happened six times. Finally, when the Brother had for the seventh time received a severe whipping, he learned wisdom and said, as he was putting his clothes back on, *This time the devil is gone; he was the one who tormented my heart and controlled it; now he has been put to flight and leaves me at liberty. From now on, I will obey my superior.* Peter Damian relates that he himself made use of this kind of correction on a young religious who insisted on exaggerating the practice of abstinence. He also states, in chapter two of his life of Saint Dominic, *that this saint never failed, when he came to the Chapter, to strip and receive the discipline.*

The life of Saint Romuald provides us with a very strange instance of correcting faults by similar chastisements, for he made use of them on his own father. The latter, after retiring to a monastery to do penance for his sins, had made up his mind to leave it and return to the world. Saint Romuald, his son, on learning this, undertook a long journey to go to him, and having reached the monastery of Saint Severus, near Ravenna, where his father was, he made use of his authority as superior in his regard and resorted to a severity which seems surprising but which resulted in good. He ordered chains fastened to his father's feet and had him thrown into prison and beaten

severely. An action in itself so reprehensible was the occasion for an extraordinary enlightenment, as the sequel proved. Sergius, the father of Saint Romuald, came back to his senses, admitted his fault, received many special favors from God, and died a most edifying death. Cardinal Peter Damian tells us all this in his life of the saint.

In the General History of the Reform of the Discalced Carmelites, we read of something quite similar to what gave rise to the complaints we have mentioned. "One day," relates the historian, "the Père Vicar had left the convent of Our Lady of Perpetual Help at Altomir with a professed Brother, so there remained in the house only the novices and a lay Brother who had made profession and who, during the two days he governed the convent, arrogated to himself an authority as absolute as though he had been Superior General of the entire order. The very first day he was in charge of the community, he held the Chapter of faults, as was the custom, right after the collation; during it, he did not spare anyone but reproved each one according to his zeal and the light that God gave him.

"But so as not to omit anything which he considered the obligations of his position, he gave them an exhortation in which he reminded them of their duties. These acts of jurisdiction were not enough to satisfy the zeal of this good Brother who took his authority so seriously. With this in mind, he ordered all the novices to get ready to receive the discipline from him, and once they were prepared, he commenced laying the lash on their bare shoulders very vigorously, for the space of a *Miserere* and a *De Profundis*. These innocents received this harsh treatment with as much humility as though the lay Brother had been the provincial on his visitation and had wanted them to suffer in this way in penance for their sins. So far were they from wanting to murmur about it or complain, they did not even mention it to the Père Vicar on his return."

Here we see an instance of an occurrence which so inappropriately became the origin of the great persecution raised against De La Salle, but there were two differences. The first was that this sort of correction was customary in the Reformed Order of Mount Carmel and was authorized by the constitutions. The second difference was that those fervent novices in the hermitage of Altomir were so mortified that not one of them allowed himself to indulge in complaints and murmuring against the lay Brother whose indiscreet zeal had armed him with the discipline which he used so vigorously on his confreres. We can say, however, in excusing this good Brother, that in the absence of his superiors and of others who outranked him, he thought he was in charge of the monastery and therefore duty bound

to do what that office required and to do what the superior would have done.

In fact, the same historian, speaking of the strict observance that reigned in this Convent of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, established in the grotto of the Venerable Catherine de Cardonne, relates that on ferial days, at the end of Matins, the superior gave the discipline to all religious to make up for any negligence they might have been guilty of in reciting the Office. Everyone also knows that according to the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Canons of the Council of Agde, religious who were recalcitrant and disobedient were to be scourged and that because of his errors, the monk Gothescalq was condemned to this same penance by thirteen bishops at the council held at Quercy-sur-l'Oise in 849. Here is what the Council of Agde, held in the year 506, says in Canon 38: *Let the same be done to the monks, and if words do not suffice to correct them, let the lash be used on them.*

These examples show that even if it had been true that De La Salle had given occasion for these indiscreet penances which caused the complaints made against him by the two or three malcontents, his fault, caused only by an excess of fervor, would have been sufficiently remedied by the reproofs of his superior. It was, consequently, to fall into a much greater excess of severity than that which he was reproached with to make him expiate his fault by a shameful deposition. But according to the testimony of Brothers who lived nearly all the time with their holy Founder and who are still alive, he never gave occasion to these indiscreet penances, either directly or indirectly; he never authorized them or approved of them; they had taken place without his knowledge and in his absence. Was it right, then, that on a mere suspicion, he should have been accused of these excesses, reported to his ecclesiastical superiors, and condemned to removal from office on the grounds that he was a man given to exaggeration, lacking in common sense and knowledge of proper behavior? Yet this is what was done; this was the good turn that his former friend and protector did him, all under the pretext of piety and zeal.



## CHAPTER XIX

*De La Salle is condemned unheard; another ecclesiastic is chosen to take his place; Pirot comes to the novitiate house to install the new Superior and encounters invincible opposition from the Brothers.*

With the same tranquil attitude with which he had seen it conducted, De La Salle saw the visitation carried out by the vicar-general come to an end. He showed neither the slightest movement of curiosity about the reasons for it nor the slightest apprehension over its eventual outcome. Monsieur Pirot, who could not hide his coming and going from the Director of the house, had no trouble in keeping the purpose of his activity hidden from a man who never inquired into the motives of his superiors' behavior and who showed such marked respect for their actions.

This visitation took place during November 1702. Once it was over, the pious Founder thought that he should go to pay his respects to His Eminence and thank him very humbly for the attention paid to his Community. The prelate, who had not lost the basic esteem and affection he entertained for the servant of God, in spite of the malicious reports by which he had been circumvented, received him with his usual graciousness and marked tokens of friendship. So flattering a reception seemed to indicate a positive attitude toward the man of God and to presage a favorable outcome of Pirot's visit, while at the same time, it augured a continuation of the archbishop's goodwill.

It was at this point that his deep humility, blind submission, and perfect death to self appeared in De La Salle in all their clarity. This was one of those critical moments in the history of holiness, where true virtue is revealed in circumstances where imperfect virtue would allow its deficiencies to show. When a man is taken by surprise and sees himself, all of a sudden, the victim of calumny, injustice, and persecution, how easy it is for him to reveal himself a child of Adam by allowing his lips to form murmurs of protest against harsh and humiliating orders, of complaints against his open or secret enemies, or at least by permitting his heart to elicit movements of resentment and re-creation! On such mortifying occasions, how difficult it is even to the most virtuous persons not to show on their countenance some sign of chagrin and displeasure! How difficult it is to find oneself, at one and the same time, accused and condemned without knowing why, without having been convicted, even without having been heard!

## The archbishop plans to replace De La Salle as Superior

Even the greatest criminals hear the charges against them read out. Along with the sentence, the motives for their condemnation are stated, and the accused are not kept in the dark about crimes imputed to them which deserve punishment. But De La Salle was condemned without having been heard; he received from lips which had just been paying him gracious compliments the sentence by which he was deposed. He found himself disdainfully rejected by a kind and benevolent prelate who had always favored him and from whom he had received all the tokens of honor, esteem, and affection that a simple priest can expect from one of the highest-ranking princes of the Church.

At that moment, the servant of God realized that the archbishop must have been terribly misled and that slander, which finds its way even into the palaces of the great, had appeared plausible enough to circumvent the cardinal's religious spirit. Since his former friend and supporter was the secret enemy who had blackened his name in the prelate's eyes, De La Salle had no idea who was behind the story. He paid no attention to the secondary causes but adored God's action and listened in silence, with deep respect and gratitude, to Jesus Christ telling him through the mouth of the archbishop: *Monsieur, you are no longer the Superior; I am appointing another for your Community.*

These words, although accompanied by gentleness and politeness, nonetheless constituted a most humiliating condemnation. As much as to say, with all due proportion, what the prophet Ezekiel, in God's name, said to the impious King Sedecias, *Come down from your throne*,<sup>30</sup> take a lower rank. You occupy the first place, but it is not the right one for you. You are at the head of a Community which you are not fit to govern. Your own best interests and those of the organization which you have brought into being require that a different and wiser Superior be appointed to govern it.

The sentence of deposition, which His Eminence pronounced in a calm and moderate tone, included the hidden meaning of the commentary which we have just given of it, as it is easy to see in what preceded and in what followed. De La Salle was not a man who could fail to notice this and to feel it, and his full realization of what was happening added to the merit of his humble acquiescence in his own disgrace, an acquiescence as prompt as the verdict by which he

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30. Ezekiel 21.

learned of it had been sudden and unforeseen. He could have asked for the reasons for his replacement and inquired who the enemies were that had recommended it. He could have demanded to be heard concerning the facts and the imputations. It would have been easy for him to justify his own conduct and to show that his removal from office was founded on nothing but false suppositions, on complaints which did not refer to him personally, and on faults which in all justice nobody could blame him for.

He knew that he stood before a judge, good and kindly by nature, who was condemning him in spite of himself, who would have gladly listened to what he had to say in his defense, and who, having always shown himself well disposed in his regard, must have felt in his heart a desire to be fair to him. But the humble Jesus, who had heard in silence his unjust condemnation as coming from his eternal Father and who had submitted thereto with the meekness of a lamb that is silent even when being sacrificed, had not taught him how to demand justice, how to present a vindication of his conduct. Instead, the servant of God, who wished to resemble his Master in all things, did not speak except to thank his judge, and after doing so with joy in his heart, a joy which showed on his face, he withdrew from the archbishop's presence, unruffled and happier than when he had come in.

After all, the crown they were taking from him was mostly a crown of thorns. The position of Superior of which they were depriving him had, up to then, brought him nothing but crosses, ignominy, and persecution, the only thing about it which made it attractive in his eyes. Anybody else would have found it unbearable; self-love could never have endured it. The cardinal could never have done the Superior of the Brothers a greater favor or one he more desired than by removing him from the government of his Community and entrusting it to someone else. His hidden enemy could not have rendered him a more signal service than by taking charge of the Community himself and putting him at his feet. This man, although so prudent and clear sighted, never seems to have realized that his attack favored what his rival treasured the most: his love for a humble and hidden life and his horror for the first place. How often had the humble Superior of the Brothers not tried to secure for himself the relief to which they were now condemning him in such a disgraceful way? A situation which made it possible for him to indulge his attraction for continual prayer and for solitude, penance, and union with God seemed to him a desirable anticipation of eternal repose.

When he got back to the community, he said nothing about what had occurred; he did not reveal to anyone the secret of his impending

disgrace. Not even among his dearest disciples did he seek a faithful confidant, not to obtain comfort, not even to express his joy over what had happened. He went instead to the feet of Jesus Christ to beg him to confirm by his authority the deposition that his minister had pronounced and to make it permanent. While awaiting the happy moment of his deliverance, which was not long in coming, the servant of God went about his business in the house as usual and did not allow his looks, words, or actions to afford anyone a hint or presage of what was going to happen.

### Pirot sets a date to install the new Superior

Pirot, wishing to complete his task on the spot where he had begun it and to carry out in person the sentence which he had placed in the mouth of the cardinal, sent a trusted messenger to tell De La Salle of the day he had chosen to go to install the new Superior and to have him acknowledged by the Brothers. This certainly was to put his virtue to the supreme test, or we might say that the vicar-general wanted to show forth this virtue in all its splendor by obliging his victim in person to open the door to his replacement. The archbishop's emissary must have been very sure of the submission of the guilty one, whose condemnation he had managed to bring about, when he ordered him to be present at the execution of the sentence which would remove him from his position as Superior. This confidence he felt was a testimonial of sorts to what he thought of the persecuted man's virtue. Did this not prove his innocence and justify his conduct?

The vicar-general was quite right in counting on the perfect obedience of the saintly priest, for he executed his orders with all the exactitude to be desired and did so, moreover, with a discretion and circumspection which showed that if he did not share the wisdom of the world, he was filled with that which comes from God. The only way Pirot's plan could succeed was to keep it a secret and not allow the least suspicion about it to take shape in the house. If the Brothers had the least inkling that they were being called together for no other purpose than that of witnessing the deposition of their own Superior, the vicar-general would not have found them as submissive as he hoped. It was even to be feared that sons so deeply attached to their father might reject any orders that would seem to them to be contrary to his honor and to their own best interests and that Pirot might compromise the archbishop's authority by trying to impose on them, in his name, a Superior whom they had not chosen, whom they did not even know, and who, as far as they were concerned, was a nonentity.

It was certain that Pirot, who during his visitation had found so much simplicity, candor, and submission among the Brothers, would see his visit end in scandal and confusion if he mentioned too soon the idea of giving them a stranger as their shepherd. If the saintly priest's humility made him indifferent to his public degradation, the love and confidence which the Brothers felt for him would never allow them to witness it. All of them would have been prepared to leave the house empty rather than to see another Superior installed there and their father disgraced. All the sheep were resolved to disperse rather than change shepherds or to leave the diocese and gather again in some other where they would be free to live under De La Salle's direction.

Since silence was so necessary for the success of the operation, the servant of God kept the project so secret and so well hidden that no Brother suspected what was afoot. Without telling them anything about the latest visit that Pirot was to make, the reason for it, or what its results would be, De La Salle took all the necessary precautions so that Pirot would be welcomed with the honor and respect due to his position, and he arranged for the Brothers to be gathered together, as though by chance, when the vicar-general arrived. So he sent word to those in Paris and to those who might have gone out for a walk to be sure to be present in the house after Vespers, without telling them why. This he said with an indifferent air which successfully avoided any curiosity or suspicion. Anyhow, the blind obedience toward their holy Founder which reigned among them did not permit them to make the least comment on his orders. The only point on which they would not agree to his desires was precisely the one on which Pirot would try to give them orders.

Pirot tries in vain to have the Brothers accept the new Superior

If it had been easy to surprise them, it was not possible to change their hearts. Angry at having been deceived through their great simplicity, once they learned why they had been called together against their wishes, they resolved to be neither the instruments nor the witnesses of the shameful deposition of their Superior, whom they considered as their guardian angel. At first, they were greatly surprised when at four o'clock in the afternoon, after Vespers on the first Sunday of Advent, they heard the sound in the courtyard of a carriage approaching. They were even more surprised when they saw Pirot come in, accompanied by a priest whom they did not know. But what was their amazement when they learned from the lips of the vicar-

general that this unknown priest was the new Superior whom he had come to install in the place of their holy Founder!

Then, indeed, Pirot beheld unbelief written on their faces. Sorrow painted on their features informed him clearly enough that by bringing into it a new Superior, he was bringing strife into a house which until then had been quite tranquil and very united. As soon as he had taken his place in the armchair prepared for him, Pirot began explaining the purpose of his visit. In vain did he start by praising their former Superior before going on to praise the new one whom he was presenting to them. In vain did he strive to convince the Brothers to receive the new one with the respect due to the authority which had sent him. In vain did he try to win their confidence for the intruder; in vain did he attempt to inspire them with a liking for his person by reciting in glowing terms his extraordinary merits. In vain did he wish to make them hope that under a new type of government, they would enjoy a more comfortable life, to entice them by holding out the prospect of a more pleasant existence, less poor, less penitential, less constraining, under a less austere leader, one who would show himself more understanding and more indulgent toward human weakness. Their hearts were bound by the ties of their vocation and by the attractions of grace to him who had begotten them in Jesus Christ.

For their father, these men had the hearts of true sons. These disciples were convinced that their spiritual master was without peer in this world. They were not about to bestow their confidence on an unknown priest. These Brothers, accustomed to respect Jesus Christ in the person of their Superior and to follow the most difficult orders, were not inclined to revolt, resistance, or mutiny. So they sought a natural defense in their tears and attempted by their very humble remonstrances to ward off the execution of the sentence which Pirot had come to impose. At any rate, those who were not bound by vows knew that the door of the house was open for them to leave, and by leaving, they were glad to give the new Superior a chance to bring in new sheep to make up a new flock which might consent to be ruled by him and his new laws. Those who had made a vow of obedience to De La Salle considered this vow as a personal one binding them to him; they did not think they were under any obligation to pay the same submission to a chief who was not a member of their organization, whom they had neither selected nor asked for, who did not possess their unique spirit or ways, who was ignorant of their customs and procedures, who was not fit to maintain discipline and the Rule, who could not sustain the austerity required of them or give an example of it. All of them, without having agreed upon any one line of

conduct, had resolved to withdraw and to leave the new Superior alone in the house if the deposition of De La Salle was carried out.

However, since prudence had suggested to Pirot not to mention the change of Superior at first but to try to win over the hearts of De La Salle's disciples by praising him in front of them, he was listened to with much satisfaction as long as he spoke so highly of their holy Founder, as long as he said that it was an honor that God had chosen him to begin a work so useful to the Church and which he had guided so wisely up to the present. But then he took the laurel crown which he had just placed on the Founder's head and wanted to transfer it to that of the new Superior. He began to enlarge on the latter's qualities and virtues, and by a well-known oratorical device, he added that he did not dare to say in his praise all that he could have said, for fear of offending his modesty and humility. The vicar-general noticed, nonetheless, that the Brothers, who had heard the first half of his speech with great satisfaction, seemed much less attentive to the second and were not listening very willingly.

Still, he had to get to his conclusion, and since the purpose of the meeting was to install a new Superior, he had to indicate the one that His Eminence had chosen and the order to accept him. Here Pirot displayed his prudence once again, for without reading the text of the decree, he gave the gist of it cleverly and sought to prepare the hearts of the Brothers to assent to it with joy, saying that the person he was presenting to them deserved all their esteem and confidence and that they must show themselves obedient to him in all things. That word obedient was enough for men who were attentive and on their guard against the proposal the vicar-general had come to make. He had scarcely pronounced it when one of the principal Brothers respectfully went up to Pirot and in a modest tone told him that the Brothers already had a Superior and that they would be obliged if he would not mention giving them another. Pirot realized from this preliminary move that a scene was about to start, but because he was deeply involved in the affair and did not wish to lose the results of his investigation nor let the sentence remain unexecuted that he had convinced His Eminence to pronounce against his deepest wishes, he continued his talk without answering the Brother, gently motioned him aside, and sent him back to his place.

But the Brother, who spoke for the rest, remained calm and did not move. Without showing any irritation, Pirot then spoke more openly of the orders which he had come to transmit and of the Brothers' obligation to submit to them. The Community's spokesman repeated in a louder voice what he had just said more softly. The

former professor of the Sorbonne, accustomed to open contradiction in the schools, did not lose his equanimity but hastened to conclude a discourse which had for its purpose to get the Brothers to accept gracefully the Superior chosen for them and to promise him the same obedience as they had given to De La Salle.

But the other Brothers, fearing this very conclusion, hastened to drown out the words he was pronouncing. They joined the first Brother who had spoken up in their name. They were indignant over what they were hearing. They needed all their virtue to remain faithful to their duty and not show disrespect for the one who was haranguing them. Finally, their patience exhausted and unable to hold back their emotions, like children who see their father being torn from their embrace, they all lifted up their voices to protest the orders given them. They all cried out that they had no other Superior than De La Salle and His Eminence.

*De La Salle is the only Superior we desire; we will not have any other!* That was the only reply the vicar-general heard. The novices joined their voices to those of the older Brothers and added to the uproar with their additional numbers. All, with one voice, appealed against the sentence of the archbishop badly informed and to that of the archbishop better informed. They felt sure that if they were honored by being heard by so kind, benevolent, and just a prelate, they would obtain justice from him, since this was what he truly wanted, and that he would revoke his decision.

Pirot, interrupted by the cries and lamentations of these afflicted men, finally grew disconcerted by this unanimous demand of the children who wanted their father back. Surprised at finding such close union between the members and their head and at seeing in the disciples such a strong attachment to their master, he began to surmise the falsehood of the reports made to him concerning the lack of concord and subordination that was supposed to exist in the house, and he began to regret his excessive credulity.

De La Salle, a witness to this scene, was awaiting the happy moment when his deposition would put an end to it. He suffered more than the Brothers but for opposite reasons. What they feared, he desired. Appalled at their resistance to superior authority, he called for silence and, in his turn, spoke to the Brothers, trying to make them obey. Any other order that the humble Superior might have given them would have been carried out on the spot and to the letter, and Pirot would have learned from this submission of theirs that a man who could obtain such prompt and complete obedience was more capable of governing than he had been represented to be, but to accept



another Superior in his place was more than the Brothers could swallow; all of them felt they had a right to persist in their refusal. In their opinion, taking their Founder away from them was tantamount to destroying their Institute; it was like giving a guardian to children whose father was still living.

How cruel, they said, to tear from a mother's breast the babe she has brought forth, when she wishes to feed it and is capable of doing so! Who can have the grace to promote our work if its very author is supposed to lack it? Who will have the gift of guiding us if our Founder has lost it? When did the Spirit of God abandon him and turn to someone else? You want to change our Superior only to change our government, and you want to change our government only in order to introduce new laws, new ways, a new spirit among us, perhaps to soften our discipline and emasculate our austerity and spirit of penance. In a word, you want to make us soft, tepid, relaxed, unmortified. By trying to make us into a new type of men, you are really destroying us. If you take away from us the master who inspires us with the love of these virtues, who by his example sustains us in practicing them and by his prayers obtains for us the grace to imitate him, we shall cease being what we are: regular, set apart from the world, lovers of poverty, disciples of a crucified God.

It is useless, they told De La Salle, for you to appeal to your authority over us to oblige us to stop obeying you. In vain would you command us in the name of obedience not to obey you any more. It is because we want to obey you always and in everything that we refuse to obey you on this point. All of them protested that they would leave their state if their natural Superior was taken away from them.

Pirot saw that De La Salle had succeeded no better than he had. So he spoke again more forcefully, and to give his words even more respectable authority, he showed them and read aloud to them the decree of His Eminence, signed by him, which appointed the new Superior. This reading put the finishing touch on the consternation that reigned in the minds of the Brothers, added to their bewilderment, and did not hush the tumult. All of them were amazed that someone should have slandered their Superior to such a degree, and their astonishment was followed by indignation against the authors of this calumny and persecution. They felt they had a right to suspend their obedience to a decree which fraud must have secured from the lips but not from the heart of a prelate always ready to defend the innocent. They felt that they would be acting according to his true intentions if they refused to follow his orders.

At this point, the Director of Novices who by his imprudence had stirred up the storm which was breaking over De La Salle wanted to step in and plead for himself as well as for his Superior. Self-love could well have suggested this to him, since his conscience must have told him that he was the one guilty of the indiscretions which were being punished in the person of his innocent Superior. But he paid dearly for this liberty he took. This Brother should have humbled himself and publicly avowed his faults. He should have cried out that he was the Jonah who had provoked this tempest. He should have asked to be thrown out of the house or at least out of the novitiate. He should have begged to be punished with all rigor in order to calm the storm. He should have spoken in the posture of a criminal, asking pardon and a penance, and not have tried to act the part of advocate.

He did not do so for long, because although the vicar-general had kept cool up to then, he now felt his indignation arising. He silenced this indiscreet defender by reproaching him forcibly with being the source of the whole trouble and the main cause of all the disorder. The vicar-general's anger flared out, and with holy indignation he upbraided him in the impetuosity of his zeal: *What? You dare to speak? You, unworthy as you are of the responsibility which is yours!*

Monsieur Bricot, a tall young man from Lyon, was painfully surprised on seeing an occasion prepared for his glory turning to his confusion. Everything he saw and heard embarrassed him extremely. The new Superior chosen by Pirot and appointed by His Eminence found himself unanimously rejected by the Brothers. He felt quite disconcerted, as who would not have, in such awkward circumstances. Having come to witness De La Salle's deposition in order to replace him, he was mortified in no small degree by becoming a foil to emphasize the virtue of the master who was being lauded to the skies by all his disciples. And so, to put an end to a spectacle which had already gone on too long and of which he was heartily sick, Bricot wisely suggested to Pirot that they leave the Brothers the Superior whom they desired to have. All he wanted was to get out of a house whose keys could be handed over to him but not the hearts of its inhabitants.

The vicar-general, who had thought he could conclude this affair as easily as he had begun it, insisted on the execution of the sentence that he had read. He believed that his honor, as well as that of His Eminence, required that he not leave until it had been accepted. So he called upon all his learning to prove to the Brothers that they were obliged to accept and submit. Since these children, so firmly attached to their father, were not easily convinced that anyone had a right to

ask them to consent to his proscription and banishment, the former professor of the Sorbonne wasted his time and his arguments trying to demonstrate to the Brothers that they had to receive the new Superior, even at the cost of disgracing the incumbent.

The Brothers, in response, made use of all the talent they possessed in the art of eloquent speech to get the vicar-general to suspend the execution of the order he had come to enforce. They hoped to have time in that way to ask His Eminence to revoke it, convinced as they were that the archbishop would do so as soon as he learned that his confidence had been abused. This sort of debate between the vicar-general, who wanted to fulfill his commission before leaving and to install the new Superior, and the Brothers, who only asked for a chance to plead their own cause even more than that of De La Salle in the presence of Cardinal de Noailles, went on for over half an hour.

It seemed like an eternity to the Founder, who was the subject of it all and its unwilling witness. His countenance showed that he suffered more from the resistance of the Brothers than from the public affront which had been offered him by superior authority. As he infinitely respected all authority and welcomed its decisions as coming from heaven, he seemed ashamed at his disciples' appeals and requests for delays in the execution of an order which he found so much to his liking. Self-love in him experienced no joy whatever in this constant fidelity of his children; on the contrary, he felt deep affliction in his heart at not finding them as docile as he and as willing to accept his removal from office as he himself was. From time to time, he attempted to speak to reaffirm what Pirot was saying and to oblige the Brothers to end the discussion by the act of humble submission, but it was no use. On this point, the Brothers felt that they were dispensed from obeying him.

The very obedience which they had promised the Founder furnished them with an argument for disregarding his wishes. Since we have promised to obey you, they said, we are bound to subject ourselves to your control. This obligation brings another with it: to maintain you in the position of Superior. For if you are not at our head, whom shall we obey? We made a vow to obey you, not someone else. The very authority which wishes to impose a stranger on us to govern us in your place does away with our vow, leaves us free, and opens for us the door of a house where we remained because of our vow. If a vow is a free act and a deliberate choice, we have a right to refuse to obey anyone else as soon as anyone tries to tell us we must no longer obey him whom we promised to obey. And so, we recover our rights and our former liberty and declare that we wish to make

use of it by refusing a Superior who is being imposed on us in spite of ourselves and in whose regard our vow no longer obliges us.

Such language made Pirot understand that he could not convince men who based their resistance on principles of justice and religion and who invoked their vow of obedience made to De La Salle as a justification for their refusal to accept the new Superior. Consequently, after exhausting all his arguments, he finally left. On accompanying him to his carriage, De La Salle begged him to let time bring the Brothers around and assured him that he was positive he could make them do so and convince them to submit. "Don't promise him that!" was the instant reply of some who had resisted the hardest and who were quite excited. "Our decision hinges on our vow; the one depends on the other, and by the one and the other, the new Superior is excluded. If they force him into the house in spite of our opposition, he had better bring with him his own subjects who will obey him; he will find the place empty. We will all leave with the one we promised to obey."

This reply, more peremptory than the preceding ones, finally convinced the vicar-general that he could not succeed in winning over children whose father possessed their hearts. He even doubted whether time would ever change their attitude. All the steps he took later on were merely a sort of rearguard action intended to enable him to withdraw with honor from an engagement into which his blind confidence in De La Salle's persecutor had so unfortunately involved him. He was piqued, however, because his authority had been flouted. He made His Eminence believe that this discomfiture reflected on the archbishop's own authority and that he should make the refractory Brothers feel the weight of his displeasure. But what could he do? When he has overstepped the bounds of a legitimate use of his authority without success, how can this be remedied? Is there any way of making people knuckle under, when by changing their residence, they can avoid the person in authority and seek a different Superior for themselves?

This, then, was what that man so zealous for God's work had gained, that man who felt that the project was not safe in De La Salle's hands and that the Institute needed another leader to insure its safety. He had believed his own illusions, and that was why he deceived himself. His prudence was as shortsighted as his zeal was mistaken. Both of them proved to be deceitful guides which led Pirot into a labyrinth he did not know how to get out of. After much reflection, it appeared evident to him that things had to be left as they were.

There were really only two alternatives: either destroy the new Institute or leave its government in the hands of its Founder. To do

away with an institution visibly inspired by God, so useful to the Church, and so necessary for poor children was a violent and pernicious solution which the cardinal and his counselors could not accept. Even the man behind the accusations directed against De La Salle would have protested against such a decision, for he had great esteem for the Christian Schools. The only reason that he had caused all the uproar against the servant of God was that he was actuated by erroneous prejudices and felt that the Founder was not capable of bringing his creation to its full perfection. But even he preferred to let De La Salle retain his position rather than to see the whole work ruined; this would have made him inconsolable. A man of such deep piety would not have been able to survive its ruin; he would have died of sorrow if he had felt that he alone was responsible for sinking it.

Finally, everybody agreed that even if it were true that De La Salle did not govern his Community in the most desirable fashion, it was better to let it continue to thrive under his direction than to see it destroyed by removing him from office. The whole difficulty lay in finding a way to save appearances and to secure for legitimate authority the respect due to it and the tokens of submission which had to be obtained from the Brothers, while leaving them in possession of their rights and the Superior they wanted. To succeed in such a delicate task called for a man as prudent and enlightened as De La Chétardie. He undertook it and brought it to a satisfactory conclusion, as we shall soon see. In these negotiations, he secured the help of Monsieur Madot, today the bishop of Châlons-sur-Saône.

## CHAPTER XX

*The tumult subsides; De La Salle remains in his position; the Brothers remain as they were, and peace is made with them and the chancery, but the persecutor, not having succeeded by making accusations to the ecclesiastical superiors, adopts another equally dangerous stratagem, namely, to sow discord among the Brothers and to inspire them with disaffection for their Superior and his way of governing them.*

This last visit of Pirot to the novitiate house had caused more commotion than his previous ones. It finally became known in Paris why the former professor at the Sorbonne had carried out his investigations. People also found out what little success had accompanied the

intrigues so artfully contrived, and they began to suspect who the author of these maneuvers was. This information gave De La Salle's true friends and those who showed an interest in his work an opportunity to take the measures necessary to undeceive His Eminence and to counterbalance at the chancery office the influence exercised there by the enemy of the servant of God. This we learn from a letter that the parish priest of Villers, in the diocese of Paris, wrote about this time to a parish priest in Laon, in Picardy. Here is a copy of this letter.

"I was no less surprised and concerned than you were, Monsieur, at the news you gave me about De La Salle. As I honor and esteem him no less than you do, I have taken and still take all the share one can in the affliction that has been caused him. I did myself the honor of calling on him. It is impossible to be more edified than I was at his constancy, his firmness, his perfect resignation, and his entire abandonment to Providence. I will not be telling you anything new in speaking to you of his virtues, for your knowledge of his rare merit does not date from yesterday.

"I have seen the cardinal and Monsieur Pollet. I hope that with time, His Eminence will get over the impressions given him against De La Salle. Quietism has nothing to do with the matter. He was simply accused of being too austere toward the Brothers, of making use of exaggeratedly rigorous penances, and of being so strongly attached thereto that he did not want to reduce them in any way. An attempt was made to make him appear to the cardinal as incapable of guiding others and especially as a man extremely wedded to his own opinions who conducts himself and the Brothers by his own lights alone. His great crime, from what I have been able to ascertain, is that he does not conform to the opinions of \*\*\*.<sup>31</sup>

"That person would like to take over the government and the interior direction of the Brothers, but this is what De La Salle has not been willing to let him do up to now. I do not know how this affair will end, for you know well enough the mentality that characterizes \*\*\*, the main adversary of De La Salle. If De La Salle were willing to accommodate himself to \*\*\*, he would have no problems at the archdiocesan chancery. Two or three novices left his novitiate, complaining of the ill-treatment they were supposed to have received there. Monsieur \*\*\* inflated their complaints, conducted investigations, wrote a memorandum, and presented it to His Eminence. Upon this, the cardinal appointed Pirot, one of his vicars-general, to make a visitation of

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31. In a copy of this letter in the Rome archives, in place of the three asterisks, the text reads, "the parish priest of Saint Sulpice."

the house and to interrogate the Brothers. He did pay three or four visits for this purpose, and on his last appearance, he brought along M. Bricot, whom His Eminence had sent to be their new Superior.

“On hearing this word, Superior, all the Brothers protested that they already had one, De La Salle, and that they recognized none other than him and His Eminence. After this, Pirot departed. Since then, various meetings have been held privately at Pirot’s residence, involving De La Salle and several of the Brothers. Finally, eight days later, Pirot came back to De La Salle’s house with the new priest and spoke to the Brothers. He made them a thousand promises, among others that nothing would be changed, that they could always keep their Rule, and that De La Salle would not be taken from them. But he also made it clear that they must obey and accept M. Bricot as their Superior. He added that they would always enjoy the consolation of having De La Salle with them and that the priest would come to the house only once a month. They accepted him on these conditions, or at least they did not object as they had done the first time. And if the proverb is true which says that *silence gives consent*, they would seem to have consented to the appointment of this priest, since none of the Brothers said a word.

“This is how things stand at the moment, but nobody believes the situation can last very long, and it is hoped that all this will not lead to any untoward consequences. A first step has been taken, and we shall try to keep up the momentum for a while. All that can be done now is to look for favorable opportunities to undeceive His Eminence and to stress all the qualities of De La Salle. This is what I have already begun doing and what I shall continue to do on all the occasions that Providence may give me. I owe him that much in justice. In addition, the interest that you take in what concerns him makes me all the more eager to act in this way with all possible zeal.”

This letter clearly shows the motives behind the accusations formulated against De La Salle and what weight should have been attributed to them. His crime consisted in not wanting to relax the rules he had established for his Community after consulting the Brothers. The disunion said to exist among them was clearly shown to be a hoax by the unanimous concurrence of their voices and sentiments, which showed that they all had but one heart and one soul. Indeed, Pirot, although irritated over the lack of success which had attended his mission and over the opposition by the Brothers to his orders, could not help doing them justice and saying, when he reported to His Eminence, *If all inferiors were as attached to their superiors as the Brothers are to De La Salle, their communities would be like paradise,*

*and only saints would be found in them.* He added that he had tried in vain everything that his learning and experience had suggested to influence them and to make them consent to the change of Superior. The more he had tried to detach the children from their father, the closer he had brought them together.

On hearing this report, the cardinal began to see that he had been taken in and that he should not have so readily lent himself to the machinations of a pseudo-zealot. He had been right in not wanting to get involved in the condemnation of a man whom he had always held in high esteem and in being reluctant to issue the sentence against him on the strength of the accusations made and the reputation of the accuser. He also felt that the proceedings against the innocent criminal were odious and had been carried out with too much vigor and precipitation. In the depths of his heart, he was not happy with his vicar-general for getting him involved in this affair and for not having succeeded, despite all his investigations, in discovering the falsehood of the accusations made against the servant of God. All these reflections put the archbishop in a bad humor, and because he felt embarrassed, he retained a certain lack of sympathy for the new Community. He found it extremely odd that mere Brothers delayed in accepting his orders and that they resisted his vicar-general.

Ultimately, the dishonor in this whole sorry business fell upon the one who had promoted it. He should at least have opened his eyes and recognized that he had made a mistake in imagining that De La Salle did not possess the art of governing his Community and, still less, the ability of making himself loved. He should have realized that he had made another mistake in thinking that the new Community was filled with a spirit of discord and that the Brothers were disenchanted with their vocation. The events should have made him see that he had been wrong in blaming an absent Superior for the errors of two indiscreet disciples and that he should now try to repair in the estimation of the archbishop the honor of the man whom he had defamed through excessively eager zeal and thoughtlessness. How, then, was it possible for such an enlightened man to delude himself still and not to see that it was his duty to calm the tempest that he had provoked?

That was indeed something astonishing, but is it not only too common that those who are so prudent in their own eyes, who think that all wisdom is lodged in their heads, actually lack it? They dishonor themselves by lack of discretion and by very real, palpable errors of conduct, while they reproach shadows and appearances of evil in the greatest of God's friends.



Such was the disposition of the man we are speaking of. The failure of his intrigue only confirmed him in his opposition to De La Salle. Filled with prejudice, he did not think he had been mistaken, nor did he consider that he had deceived anyone. Acting in good faith and for what he conceived to be the greater good, he felt no remorse. Not only did his conscience, which was at peace over all the uproar he had caused, not reproach him with any fault, but it provided him consoling testimony to his uprightness and flattered him that he had sought only God when he was trying to remove De La Salle from his own house. Thus, not discouraged over this initial setback that his schemes had met with, he cleverly made use of this very circumstance to reach his goal.

He insinuated to His Eminence that the Brothers' opposition to the orders given them had been fomented by the very man who wanted to keep his position. It was a skillful ploy and quite capable of inspiring the most powerful prelate in the kingdom with the determination to push to the wall these simple, guileless men, these children whose only fault was that they loved their father and did not want to subscribe on the spot to his condemnation but hoped that a delay might dissipate the shadows of calumny and, sooner or later, bring his innocence to light. At any rate, if this new accusation did not win full belief, it did succeed in part. If the cardinal did not accept it entirely, the world listened to it. The word got around to the public and disposed the credulous against the Brothers and against their Superior. It was even said that the parliament had wished to look into this affair to oblige the Brothers to make full amends to their primary ecclesiastical superior or to punish them if they refused. De Noailles, however, who in his heart had not lost the high esteem he felt for the virtue of De La Salle, prevented any such steps from being taken.

In addition, it was in vain that the author of this intrigue tried to hold De La Salle responsible for the resistance of the Brothers to Pirot. The cardinal realized that De La Salle was entirely innocent on this score. This unfounded suspicion was completely contradicted by Pirot's own report of what had happened in his presence as a witness both to the humility and submission of the servant of God and to his efforts at getting his disciples to show prompt obedience to episcopal authority. In the process of accusing the Brothers, he had exonerated their Superior. He testified that De La Salle had used all the influence he possessed over his disciples to get them to submit but that he had been silenced by their unanimous reply that they would all leave if another Superior was imposed on them. At the end, when he was leaving, the vicar-general had heard the promise made by De La Salle

that he would get the Brothers to obey, and he had also heard this statement contradicted by them with a promptness which showed that their mouths spoke from the abundance of their hearts. This, too, made it impossible for him to admit the new accusation.

For his part, the holy Founder had never found himself in such an embarrassing situation. Although he had seen his Community seriously compromised in the past, never had it been so close to complete ruin as now. What could he do to shore it up again and to preserve it from total destruction? He no longer had any valid title, and he lacked all authority. If he yielded to the remonstrances of the Brothers, who wanted no other Superior, he would become a rebel, usurping a position he was forbidden to occupy. If he left the house, the Brothers would follow him. In such a delicate situation, not sure of what he should do, De La Salle consulted heaven and abandoned to God the defense of his cause. On the one hand, he dreaded seeing the work which had cost him so much suddenly overthrown; on the other, he felt consoled in remembering God's help, which had so often upheld him in the frequent attacks of the world and of hell. Thus he wavered between fear and confidence. After much prayer and serious thought, persuaded that the cardinal's intentions were of the best, he felt he could put his trust in the prelate's goodness. All he needed to do was to dissipate the unfortunate impressions made on De Noailles and, especially, to offer him humble reparation for what had happened.

### The cardinal rejects De La Salle's attempt to apologize

This did not seem impossible to the servant of God. For one thing, the archbishop must have realized that he had been duped, and he might regret having lent too willing an ear to false reports. He did not approve the way his representatives had proceeded against the servant of God. He was even credited with having said that they had pushed this affair too hastily and had not taken all the measures prudence required to conclude it without so much public outcry. At the same time, a man as humble as De La Salle did not hesitate to seek humiliations. He was always ready to assume the posture of a repentant criminal, to feel like one, and even to take upon himself the blame for the faults of his disciples. With this in mind, he prostrated himself at the feet of his archbishop, and with tears in his eyes, he sought to offer him reparation for the refusal of the Brothers to accept their new Superior. He begged the cardinal not to think that he had anything to do with this. Protesting that he had made every effort to

cause the Brothers to pay blind and prompt obedience to His Eminence, he called on Pirot and Bricot to vouch for the truth of what he was saying.

The cardinal, who was leaving for Conflans,<sup>32</sup> remained silent when he saw De La Salle at his feet. Did he feel touched by the sorrow and humiliation of this saintly man? Did the pain he himself felt over all that had happened make it impossible for him to speak? The holy priest remained prostrate on his knees in the presence of a crowd of people who felt sorry for him, and still the archbishop did not address him a single word. Then, turning, he left without a word, whether out of indignation or of commiseration which robbed him of speech, while the servant of God remained there, his lips still in contact with the floor which he bedewed with his tears.

### The Brothers try to soften the attitude of De La Salle's enemy

On his return home, De La Salle said nothing about this new and shameful treatment, this fresh affront which he had just received. He abandoned his cause and that of his disciples to God and recovered his habitual serenity. No one ever saw him looking morose or disturbed over what would happen, and the only advice he gave the Brothers who went to consult him was to urge them to obey.

Five or six days went by in this way. During this time, the Brothers in Paris, who had not been included in Pirot's investigation, because they were busy in school, conceived a plan for warding off the impending storm by trying to appease the person who had stirred it up. They knew that although he had been indisposed toward De La Salle for some time, he had not lost his appreciation for the Institute, and they hoped to make him change his mind about their Founder. The undertaking was a bold one, for they ran the risk in this visit of drawing down on themselves also the ill will of a man who knew how to disguise his prejudices in the most glowing colors. The Brothers were well aware of this. They were about to engage in a struggle with a giant whose arguments they could not refute, whose presence they could not withstand.

Nevertheless, after fasting on bread and water the day before their visit and having spent the night in prayer, one after another, on their own initiative, and without informing De La Salle, they went to see his redoubtable adversary. As prudent men, they kept their resentment hidden, affected ignorance of his schemes and intrigues, and

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32. It seems that he was going hunting with the royal court.

showed him much confidence. After this beginning, they came to the point and explained the resolution they had all formed of leaving the house if they saw any Superior there other than De La Salle. In conclusion, they begged him to make use of the great influence he enjoyed at the diocesan chancery to obtain the revocation of the order given them to acknowledge as their shepherd a stranger whom they did not know and who did not know them, instead of the one who had first communicated to them the spirit of grace.

It would have been hard to pay a less welcome compliment to a man who had not given up his project. Although he was vexed to the heart by this visit and by what the Brothers said, he did not dare show it. They had come to beg him, as a favor in order to keep De La Salle in his place, to make use of the influence which he had so recently employed in order to put him out! They were asking him to undo what he himself had done and to play the role of intercessor after that of accuser. They were taking away from him all hope of succeeding in what he aimed at, and this they did very adroitly by displaying inviolable fidelity to his rival. Thus they were shutting in his face the doors of a house which he sought to enter only to dominate everybody in it.

He and De La Salle would have quickly come to terms, if the servant of God had been willing to consult him and follow his advice in everything and to let him run the affairs of the Community as he wished. If the Founder had agreed to take him as his master and to become his docile disciple, all he needed to do was to present himself before him and vow to obey him; then he would have seen his erstwhile persecutor become his protector. In the long run, the Brothers' remarks were for De La Salle's antagonist a silent reproach for his unfounded prejudices and suspicions, his talebearing, his disloyal behavior, and his intrigues. They were intended to make him admit his faults and repair them by inviting him to go to the archbishop to try to undo what he had done. This simple and naive discourse, which exteriorly showed so much esteem and confidence in him, possessed a fund of hidden eloquence. It obliged the persecutor to lay down his arms.

Indeed, with reference to the substance of what they told him, he could adopt only one of two possible alternatives: either proceed with the total destruction of the Institute or else refrain from interfering with the Founder in carrying out his proper role. Now, he had too much religious spirit, too great a sense of responsibility to be tempted to follow the first course. His piety would have felt deep regret were he to see the ruin of an Institute he thought so highly of. And

so, although highly displeased over what the Brothers said, he pretended not to seem so.

Convinced that he would not arouse among the Brothers anything but dissension while De La Salle still possessed their hearts, he saw clearly that the only thing for him to do was to yield and to wait for a more favorable moment for detaching from De La Salle these disciples who clung so firmly to him. Even in this, however, he could see his own schemes failing, because he had based his intrigue on the supposed dissatisfaction the Brothers felt against their Superior. He thought that they were sinking under the burden of the inhuman yoke that the latter was imposing on them and that they would be delighted to throw it off. Now he realized his mistake. All that had happened, along with what the Brothers had just told him, made him understand how badly he had misread their dispositions. This realization filled him with confusion over having pushed things too far on the strength of an unjustified suspicion and having so imprudently compromised the archbishop's authority, which he had succeeded in winning over to his own warped views.

The scheme which had failed immediately suggested another to achieve his end of getting rid of De La Salle. This consisted, first of all, in trying to sow among the principal Brothers a certain diffidence toward their Superior, to make them critical of his behavior, and to dispose them against him personally. Next, it consisted in stirring up against him outside enemies on every hand, so that assailed from within and from without, he might be obliged to give way and withdraw of his own accord. This, in fact, is what happened later, as we shall see.

To start the first sort of attack, clever as he was and skilled in dissembling and assuming the mask he wished to use, he appeared satisfied when he had heard the Brothers. At first, he had received them with fire in his eyes, a harsh look on his face, and a forbidding and angry air. But then, assuming a gentler tone and a more gracious aspect, he said to them with a show of simplicity: "You can't be serious! You are really too naive! De La Salle is an arbitrary leader whom you placed over yourselves or who, rather, has put himself at your head to govern you. He has no ecclesiastical jurisdiction over you; he is not a religious superior. Who made him your judge and your shepherd? By what authority does he set himself up as your master?" The Brothers could have replied that Monsieur de Harlay had given him permission to set up his Community, that Monsieur de Noailles had confirmed this in writing and had fully empowered him to act as their Superior. Thus this initial approach was refuted, but let us go on. The enemy of

the servant of God continued: What a mess you have made of things! You practically spat in the face of the vicar-general. What can I do now? He promised them, however, that he would set to work to try to reconcile all parties.

A mediator is appointed to appease both sides

Not wishing to leave things half done, the Brothers thought that they should also see the parish priest of Saint Sulpice and try to get him on their side. It is true that at this time, De La Chétardie was strongly prejudiced against De La Salle and no longer showed himself toward the Founder what he had formerly been. During the first few years, no man had ever seemed more zealous in supporting the Founder and his Institute. The pastor had declared himself its patron, defender, and financial supporter. By this time, however, God allowed it to happen that De La Chétardie had lost practically all his esteem for a man whom he considered a sort of religious fanatic, entirely wedded to his way of looking at things and, in addition, possessed of very limited ability and a tendency to exaggeration.

Still, he had not lost his interest in the Christian Schools nor his zeal for them. If it had been a question solely of the Brothers' Superior, he would not have lifted a finger to halt the persecution against him and would have left him to extricate himself as well as he could from the embarrassing situation in which he had been entangled. In reality, he would not have been sorry to see in the position of Superior someone else who would show himself more accommodating, less austere and rigorous, more accessible, more yielding to the world's ways, and more open to the good advice given him for the proper government of his Community and for the good of his work.

But the future of the Christian Schools, in which the parish priest of Saint Sulpice was deeply interested, was also involved. His clear-sightedness showed him what had happened, and he knew from the Brothers' attitude that it would be necessary either to accept the overthrow of their Society or to let their Superior remain in his position. So this great friend of what was good, this sincere promoter of the Christian Schools, thought he should use his influence to find a solution to this impasse which would save the honor of His Eminence while turning to the advantage of the Institute. It was quite an undertaking, and the means for succeeding in it were not that obvious. To do so took a man as influential and wise as De La Chétardie.

No one knows what arrangement he sought to resolve the problem. The task was delicate, and to bring it off successfully, he had to

leave the Brothers their true Superior and yet oblige them to make amends for having refused the new one. These two requirements seemed difficult to reconcile, yet it was necessary both for the archbishop's honor and authority and for the benefit of the Brothers to have the agreement approved by the archbishop and by the Community. De La Chétardie undertook the task and finally succeeded, although we do not know exactly how he managed to do so.

All we do know is that he convinced Abbé Madot to take this thorny problem in hand. At this time, Madot was a member of the community of Saint Sulpice. Since then, he has been raised, thanks to his rare merit, to the episcopal see of Châlons-sur-Saône. The matter could not have been placed into more skillful hands. Madot had a keen and fertile mind, the talent of speaking well, and the ability to win hearts. Four days after the visit the Brothers paid to the parish priest, Madot came alone in his carriage, at seven in the morning, to the novitiate at the Grande Maison. It was the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin. Madot wished to look into the hearts of the Brothers, so to speak, and sound out their minds, so as to tailor his proposals for a reconciliation according to the attitudes he found among them.

Nothing was more prudent. What the negotiator wanted to do was to bring the Brothers to submit purely and simply to the archbishop's orders. But if he could not win their consent to this, he had thought of a compromise which might make them get to the same point indirectly. This was to promise them that De La Salle would be left in his position if they acquiesced in whatever His Eminence decided. If he found them too suspicious and on their guard because they feared that after their act of total submission, the fulfillment of the promise might not follow, his final resource was to offer them a conditional submission. This last alternative was one he did not wish to propose except as a last resort, but he was firmly resolved not to yield beyond this point. He was determined to bring the Brothers to it and to convince them to accept the conditions of peace and the promise of pardon that would be necessary.

Madot spent four whole hours in his negotiations. He spoke gently, pleaded, remonstrated, advised, and cajoled. There was no type of blandishment he did not use, no type of argument he did not advance, no inconveniences he did not point out and paint in vivid colors. Never did he show to better advantage the gift of eloquence that heaven had granted him. He did not preach, nor did he, in carrying out the mission he had received, make any use of this talent which he enjoyed to such a remarkable degree. It was probably because he

feared he would call in vain upon his oratorical talent before a Community so firmly together. He hoped to influence them more easily by speaking with each member in private.

He entered the house but did not call the Brothers together by having the bell rung. He stopped them wherever he happened to find one, as though without any preconceived design, and tried to win from them in these informal talks what he would not have been able to obtain from them in a public encounter. He spoke to the ones he met; he conversed with one or two; then he joined a couple of others to them; he went somewhere else and got three or four more together. Thus moving about the house, he met with all the Brothers and spoke to them all, telling them either the same things or something different, as prudence suggested. In these conversations, where minds and hearts could meet and dialogue with less constraint and circumspection, he showed himself even more eloquent than he was in the pulpit.

He made a simple and natural use of every rhetorical device, of every trick of the orator's trade. Now he deplored what had happened to De La Salle; now he grew compassionate over his lot and that of the Brothers. To some, he depicted in somber colors the terrible consequences of their refusal to submit entirely; to others, he offered wise advice on how to protect themselves from the impending storm. With some, he commiserated over the afflictions of their father and admitted that his removal from office would cause serious dislocations. With others, he had recourse to remonstrances; he made them realize that their duty should take precedence over their attachment to De La Salle. To all, he stressed the veneration due to episcopal authority. By describing the power of the prelate whom they had confronted, he sought to inspire them with fear of his displeasure, and by portraying His Eminence, in conclusion, as a mild and gentle person, he made them hope for all sorts of favors if they complied with his directions. Finally, he pictured the ruin of their Institute and the lamentable fate awaiting their Founder if they obstinately insisted on keeping him as their Superior against the cardinal's orders.

By eleven o'clock, Madot found that he had not made much headway after all these private conversations. He had not yet said Mass, and he had to hurry if he wished to do so. Annoyed but not discouraged, he seemed to wish to conclude the business by proposing to have his offers discussed publicly. The silence of the Brothers and their lack of reaction made him understand that he had to sing a different tune or, at least, to modify what he had said up to then by proposing conditions or offering promises which would reassure them



about their situation, let them keep their rules safe from all innovation, and leave the Superior in his rightful position.

### How Madot finally succeeds with the Brothers

This was his last card, and he reserved it for the end, after having played all the others in vain. Abbé Madot, who had kept this proposal hidden up until then—and wisely so—finally came out with it, as though offhand. “Brothers,” he said, “Monsieur de La Salle will not be taken away from you. It is only to protect you that you are asked to receive the new Superior, so that you can honor the order you have received and show due respect to the legitimate authority which sends him to you. This new Superior will, moreover, be such in name only and will not exercise the functions of that office. He will come here only once a month. What have you to fear from such rare visits by a man who will leave behind in the house, when he enters and when he leaves, no vestige of his passing? Nobody will touch either your regulations or your community practices. Bricot will respect everything that is established, will leave everything just as he found it, and De La Salle will remain undisturbed in his place.”

This promise was presented as though it were a slip of the tongue of the prudent priest, who had calculated his words well and had kept this proposal as his last resource, ready to use it or not as the occasion might warrant. It had the effect that he hoped it would. This was, so to speak, his secret weapon which he would call upon only in case of necessity. And even so, to make it effective, he had to keep it hidden until the proper moment. He did this with great skill, so that the stroke went straight to its target and apparently solved the problem. *Why didn't somebody tell us this before?* asked one of the Brothers, with a simplicity as natural as Madot's had been calculated and adroit. *Why was this not made plain when they brought this priest here? And why did you yourself, Monsieur, take so long to get to the point in telling us?*

The fact was that His Eminence, as we mentioned before, had not approved of the tactics used by his vicar-general. To him, they seemed rather overbearing and lacking in appropriate measure, more apt to irritate than to win submission. *You went about it in the wrong way*, the archbishop had said. *You should not have tried to prevail by main force; attempting to dominate people only embitters them. When one wishes to bring men under a new yoke, persuasion must be used, not commands. The human heart instinctively tends to fight back when anyone seeks to constrain it. At all times, mildness has won what*

*could not be conquered by force. Authority becomes odious when it is carried too far, and one compromises it when one uses it in an extreme manner. This you have discovered through your recent experience.*

Abbé Madot felt that he was gaining ground and that the hearts of the Brothers were beginning to yield. Like the clever man he was, he took advantage of the opening he had found in order to insinuate his project into their minds. First, he won over two or three. These persuaded others, and eventually he had convinced twelve of them. The others refused to give in, fearing some sort of trick. They were afraid of agreeing to anything which might, later on, turn to the prejudice of their Institute and serve as a key for Bricot to take over their house and expel De La Salle from it. But Madot thought that with the dozen he had convinced, he was in a sufficiently strong position. He would present them to the vicar-general as the representatives of the others and thus seem to bring him the consent of the entire Community. In order not to give them time to reconsider, he hastened to have them leave the house and come along with him to Pirot at the Sorbonne, where they would offer him humble amends and make a declaration of their perfect submission.

"Come with me," he told them, "and offer your excuses to the vicar-general. He was shocked when you refused to listen to his orders; he has a right to some satisfaction on your part. He would be scandalized if you delayed in asking his pardon. And do not do things by halves. By showing him your entire submission, dissipate the reasons he has for being displeased with you. Thus, you will recover his good graces, you will appease the archbishop, and you will dispose him to leave De La Salle in his position and your house in peace."

He had already entered his carriage with De La Salle and one of the Brothers, who could not walk, and was ready to lead these men, like captives in triumph, to the feet of the vicar-general, when one of the Brothers, a bit more distrustful than the rest, began to realize that they were about to give up all they had gained without having received anything positive in return. So he called them all back to reconsider the matter. *What are you about to do?* he asked them. *You are about to oblige yourselves but to what? We need to know. What have you been offered? We need to present our demands and to make sure that these promises we just heard are set down in writing in the same act that spells out the concessions you are about to make. And let it all be signed.*

Abbé Madot thus saw himself once more at the point which he had so cleverly avoided and from which he had so skillfully distracted

the attention of the Brothers, who had at first wished to pin him down to it. Without growing disconcerted and with that frank and open air which wins the confidence of simple people of good faith, he begged them to count on his word and to trust him. No doubt, if he had spoken in this way when he first came in, instead of getting to this point by degrees, like a man obliged to come down little by little toward those whom he cannot bring up to where he stands, he would have succeeded more easily with men who do not begin to grow suspicious until someone begins to deal with them in a less than straightforward manner.

Because the Brothers noticed that Madot had offered these promises only after he had tried, for four hours, all other means of convincing them and of bringing them to submit purely and simply, they remained on their guard and showed their mistrust of his proposals. In order not to be dupes of their own simplicity, they all agreed that before they would leave, a statement should be drawn up and signed, spelling out the conditions they meant to attach to their submission. The clever negotiator found himself once more in difficulty. He was unable to get out of the impasse without agreeing to their demands. Seeing that they put no trust in words, which fly away, and that they wanted something in writing to guarantee what was being agreed, he was forced to give in; if not, his mission would have failed entirely.

With this sort of contractual guarantee, the Brothers hastened to go to the office of the vicar-general; they arrived there almost as soon as did the carriage in which the official delegate rode. They were prepared to offer any kind of satisfaction to a superior authority which they had always deeply respected and to beg pardon for a fault in which, in fact, they felt themselves before God to be completely innocent. There was no sort of humiliation, excuse, or reparation to injured honor which they were unwilling to offer, provided nothing should be modified in their regulations and provided they could keep their Superior. On these two points, they remained adamant, and the most virtuous among them considered it a sacred duty not to give in.

We must not hold this against them, because they were community men. The more such men are attached to their rules, the more their conscience will protest against the slightest relaxation. The more virtuous they are, the firmer they show themselves in preserving the initial fervor of their vocation. Yes, these children deserve pardon for the unusual efforts they made to keep their father. It was only because they feared to see innovations brought in among them with the new Superior and to see fervor depart with their holy Founder that they took so many precautions and showed such innocent obstinacy.

Abbé Madot wished to inform the vicar-general about what he had achieved and what the latter needed to do, so he took him aside and gave him an account of his negotiations. This report pleased the vicar-general, who was sorry for having pursued the demotion of De La Salle with so much vindictiveness, thereby introducing trouble into such a peaceful Community. But he was quite surprised to learn that the Brothers were attaching conditions to their obedience. Here the resourceful mind of the mediator once again came to the rescue. He told the Brothers to kneel down before Pirot and to apologize to him. Answering the question that the vicar-general put to him as to whether the four articles of the document that had been signed were conditions, Madot hastened to reply that these concessions were requested as favors.

Most of the Brothers kept silent on hearing this. Actually, they cared little about the terms used, provided their desires were met. They were concerned about the reality of things, not about words. To these men, determined to preserve their own manner of living, it made no difference if they used the most obsequious terms, provided that they remained in possession of their rules and their rightful Superior. The most respectful and humble expressions were, no doubt, the most proper for them to employ in addressing superior authority, but these terms concealed a certain ambiguity which could give rise to new trouble, for a favor can be refused, whereas a condition cannot without nullifying the contract based on it. Therefore, the more alert among the Brothers, perceiving the difference in the terms used and the danger that their demands might be jeopardized thereby, declared bluntly and in a voice loud enough to be heard that the articles in question were indeed conditions attached to their submission and that if these remained unfulfilled, their obedience would be compromised. Pirot's wisdom made him deaf to all this, and he seemed not to hear them.

Madot, delighted over his success, inquired whether His Eminence could give them an audience and whether he would allow the Brothers to go to prostrate themselves at his feet to recognize his authority. When the vicar-general replied that His Eminence was not available, they all went home, congratulating themselves on the victory they had won. The Brothers exulted because they remained in peaceful possession of their rules and their Founder. The mediator rejoiced that he had made peace and had managed to reconcile the respect due to the archbishop's jurisdiction with the right of the Brothers to keep their way of life and their internal arrangements undisturbed.

The following Sunday, Pirot brought Bricot to the novitiate for the second time and addressed those of the Brothers whom he found there, for the majority of those employed in the schools were absent. Then the entire community went to the chapel, and the vicar-general intoned the *Te Deum*, which the others continued chanting in the usual way. All this was done to save face and to pay due respect to episcopal authority, but it was also enough to dispel the tempest which had occasioned so much talk.

The new Superior showed his face in the house once more, three months later, and then disappeared for good. His visit was a formality which was deemed necessary, but he performed no act of jurisdiction and never gave anyone an opportunity of challenging his right to a title which he made no use of. Since his role left him much leisure, His Eminence found something else for him to do elsewhere. Because his place with the Brothers remained empty, the persecutor did not fail to have him replaced by another ecclesiastic who was entirely devoted to him and whom he intended to use to stir up more trouble.

De La Salle is persuaded to moderate the penitential practices

De La Salle, feeling that he had everything to fear from a former friend who had turned against him and from a simulated peace, took all possible precautions in order not to give him any pretext for interfering and to shelter his own management against his criticism. He put an end to all the penances the use of which his two indiscreet disciples had exaggerated. Although realizing the harm this would do to the piety of the Brothers, he preferred to see their fervor diminish rather than have it disappear entirely as a result of the attacks which were being prepared against him. He was convinced of the truth of the maxim that the best is sometimes the enemy of the good. In other words, in matters pertaining to virtue, we must be satisfied with securing from others what they can give. By insisting imprudently on the most nearly perfect, we may fail to achieve the good. Therefore, the Founder yielded to the advice of wise friends who counseled him to do away with the public use of the discipline, even to suppress it in private for some time, and in general to moderate all the other types of mortification which gave rise to wild tales and provided his enemies with a pretext to accuse him of thoughtlessness.

These friends based their advice on the characters of those who, on leaving his house, were usually disgruntled and tried to justify their departure or their desertion by spreading malicious reports and odious horror stories. They told him that such individuals had entered

the Community led by a spirit other than the Spirit of God and hence could not remain, that they were unfaithful to their vocation, or that they lacked good judgment, were ruled by passion and other defects, and saw everything as painted by their dominant inclinations. Wisdom requires, the friends said, that you deprive all these evil-intentioned eyes and these poisoned and venomous tongues of all matters which they can twist into slander.

Ecclesiastical authorities seconded these counsels and asked the servant of God to lighten a yoke which really appeared too heavy. The vocation of your disciples, they told him, is the sanctification of youth; the Institute is extremely useful to the faithful. The Brothers must not seek in unrestrained penance the shortest path to a better life. Their earthly pilgrimage may be lengthened, but it will thereby become more salutary. As they walk in it, they must bring along with them the children entrusted to their care. They must not present themselves at the gates of heaven alone but accompanied by a large number of children, if they hope to be welcomed there. This numerous escort which must lead them as if in triumph to the home of glory must be made up of the young people whom they have instructed and helped to sanctify themselves.

The penance the Brothers practice must, therefore, leave them both the time and the means of carrying out their task; it should be tailored to fit their vocation so as not to shorten their lives and diminish their reward. While regarding themselves as victims destined for sacrifice some day, they must maintain themselves in good condition in the meantime so that they may go to the altar of sacrifice as presentable offerings. Anyhow, since their work is part of their penance, they must not do anything which would make them incapable of fulfilling their duties. So, they must try to reconcile their health with their penances; let the Brothers make a long life a laborious one and put the finishing touches on it by their fervor. Temper their austerities so that these may serve to mortify their bodies, not destroy them. Penance is like salt: too much eats away at the meat and consumes it, while a reasonable amount preserves and seasons it.

Such were some of the remarks made to De La Salle, who, without undertaking a critique of all these arguments, humbly gave in to the advice of wiser heads and obediently listened to the remonstrances of his superiors. He collected all the disciplines and limited the practice of all the other types of mortification in use in the Community. In this connection, he issued regulations for those placed in charge of others and forbade them to overstep the limits these wise advisers had suggested and which superiors had enjoined.

The Brothers, who were greatly devoted to their penitential practices, were not a little put out over these new regulations; no more painful mortification could have been asked of them than taking away from them the instruments of penance they used. They needed all their virtue to submit to an order which threatened their fervor. They would have found it difficult to show to anyone other than De La Salle such blind obedience on this point, for they feared lest the spirit might suffer from the mitigation granted to the flesh.

But it was their father who issued this order; the confidence they felt in him and the conviction they had concerning his virtue kept them submissive and did not permit them to imagine that they could go wrong by following his guidance. Besides, they realized that this great lover of penance must have had higher reasons for giving them commands so contrary to his own bent and to what he himself practiced. They could readily understand that he was not acting on his own initiative but under external influences and that he was the first to practice the obedience he was requiring of them. Indeed, when one of the Brothers asked him why he now forbade them to indulge in so many kinds of penance so well calculated to arouse and maintain their fervor, his only reply was: *God has made me understand that now we should not continue them.*

God, no doubt, arranged this so that the customs established at this period could remain in force as time went on and so that the Brothers might develop a lifestyle more in harmony with human weakness and with what their state in life demanded. For it must be acknowledged that among them the rigor of austerity reached such heights that the health of more than one would have given way in time. Penance, while making martyrs in the new Institute, would have shortened the lives of many who pursued it with such ardor. Their manner of living was even poorer than that found in a Trappist monastery; it was neither less crucifying nor less frightful to nature. So it was indeed an admirable thing to see, not in some desert place but at the very gates of the greatest city in France, a revival of the penitential life of the hermits in the Thebaid. It is no less astonishing that many Brothers, some of whom are still living, did not fall victim to this life of penance. With their leading a life as austere as that of Trappist monks, it is a wonder that there were not many more of them who died.

It was certainly necessary to mitigate a degree of austerity which human beings could not endure for long without succumbing and which, while increasing the number of great penitents, might have diminished that of holy schoolmasters, so badly needed by the Christian

community. At the same time, it must be admitted that this great spirit of penance had lit a huge bonfire of piety and devotion in this poor house and that when the one was restricted, the other, too, suffered a diminution. Nothing is truer than what the incomparable Saint Teresa says: *Where there is less nature, there is more grace*. The more we do for God, the more we receive from God. Great penances, when authorized by obedience, are followed by heaven's most abundant favors. Men of great courage take heart in this path and race onward toward perfection with the help of austerities which, like favorable winds, sweep them onward and help them progress. The flesh itself, made spiritual through maceration and privations, becomes light in a way and lets the soul soar freely and rise up to unite itself with God without being dragged back to earth by its own weight.

It was, then, no slight cause of sorrow to one of the great penitents of our century to see himself obliged to restrain his disciples' ardor for penance and to put out, at least to some extent, this fire which he himself had enkindled even more by his example than by his words. The Founder learned from experience, with a deep measure of sadness, that it is practically impossible to relax our practice of mortification without seeing the spirit of mortification suffer, too. It seldom happens that fervor of the spirit survives indulgence of the flesh, because grace, which is measured by the violence that a soul does to itself, grows less when we relax this severity in one way or another.

Nevertheless, on this occasion, De La Salle, who abandoned himself in all things to the guidance of Divine Providence and who did not wish to be wise in his own eyes, made the sacrifice of his own inclinations, his own views, and his own experience and sought in blind obedience a security which cannot be found even in the most austere penance when it is neither prescribed nor controlled by obedience. This sacrifice of his did not calm the tempest, as it should have, once the penitential practices which his enemy had used as an excuse to stir up all the trouble had now been done away with. Although he realized that his intrigue had failed, he did not grow discouraged. Although he no longer attacked the servant of God directly, he did so in an oblique manner, as we shall see in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER XXI

*Dissatisfaction and criticism that the enemy of De La Salle tried to sow in the Community by means of his agent.*

The persecution seemed to have died away, but it continued just the same. Its author, seeing the failure of his first attack, undertook another which succeeded much better and which caused new alarm for De La Salle by exposing his Institute to new perils. We mentioned previously that the clever enemy of the servant of God had managed to put in Monsieur Bricot's place another ecclesiastic entirely devoted to himself who, without carrying out any of the functions of a Superior in the Community, went about sowing the seeds of discord within its ranks.

This priest, full of the same spirit which animated the one who sent him, came to the novitiate house from time to time to examine what was going on, to sound out the Brothers and their dispositions, and to prepare the way for a change of government. The intriguer's plan was to use clever wiles in order to get rid of the man whom he had not been able to have removed by superior authority. In order to drive him away, he sought to make use of the very Brothers who had shown themselves so determined to keep him in his position. To attain this end, it was necessary to find a way to hoodwink the Brothers, to inspire them with disaffection for their state, to destroy the union between them and their Superior, and to cause indifference to take the place of attachment in their souls, dissimulation to replace confidence, and silence to succeed openness of heart.

The man who set out to accomplish this did not give up the hope of leading the Brothers who might listen to him to the point where he wished to bring them. He thought that by harping on the poverty of their house, the poor quality of their food, the sorry clothes they wore, and the supposed harshness with which they were governed, he could succeed in making them feel disgruntled. Those who listened to him heard him bewailing their sad lot and growing eloquent over their miserable life.

What?—as their charitable visitor exclaimed in smooth words; will you always be as you are now? Will you always be so poor, dressed in rags, dirty, half-naked, or with patched and repatched habits? Does De La Salle not have the wherewithal to supply your needs, not even the most urgent ones? Why does he accept so many candidates and fill the house with more men than he can feed? After all, the salaries

of the Brothers in the schools are paid to him punctually; would not these sums suffice for the Brothers who teach there? Is it not right that these men should live on what their labor produced? Is it fair that they should be robbed of what they earn?

Such suggestions were followed by an account of the money paid to the Brothers in the schools. After this meticulous inquiry, the Jeremiah who was deploring the wretched circumstances in which the Brothers lived would add in a plaintive tone: Where does all this money go? Why is it not spent to provide for the needs of those who earn it? Why should they lack everything when by right they should want for nothing? What is your Superior thinking of? Where is his charity, his humanity? He refuses the necessities of life to the workers he employs. What a house this is! Its inmates are more wretchedly fed than those of the poorhouse! Would the inhabitants of La Salpêtrière be willing to change places with you? Does Bicêtre<sup>33</sup> treat its dwellers any worse than you are treated? Those who are shut up there against their will would not be willing to leave to come to stay with you.

With whom can I compare you, if not with prisoners who, after losing their liberty, are weighed down by a hard and galling yoke and who, after having spent the whole day in toil, moisten the black bread given to them with nothing but their tears and have only a little straw to rest on during the night? In this portrait, do you not recognize yourselves? Will you always be seen in a habit as ridiculous as it is outlandish, which makes you the butt of public scorn and invites the people's ridicule? If they insist on hiding you under such huge hats and on wrapping you up in a sack of black cloth, at least they should provide you with new clothes when you need them.

He stressed the fact that they drank only water, and his pity was followed by promises: that wine would not be wanting if they had sense enough to accept a Superior who would give them the example of drinking it! One of the Brothers, as tired of all this sermonizing as he was shocked at the promise, answered him one day: *But water is good for you; it keeps your complexion fresh.* If you see us looking so healthy, in spite of our fasting and penances, we owe it to the drink that comes from the river. After hearing this, the cleric stopped criticizing the servant of God in such gross terms. He tailored his remarks better to the circumstances of the moment and adapted them to the dispositions of those with whom he spoke. In a word, he made use of every means to win a favorable hearing, and in the grim portrait he painted of the Brothers' mortified life, he sought a way to incite them

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33. A mental hospital.

against a man who preached nothing but penance and whose life was a model of it.

Sometimes, by painting a picture of a kind of earthly paradise, he tried to make them desire a different kind of government under a less-demanding leader; at other times, he tried to win certain ones over by suggesting that they take things a bit easier; others he approached by making them imagine that the difficulties of their state were worse than they really were. He flattered these by inspiring them with rosy hopes; he intimidated others by making them fear a future which would contain nothing but sacrifices for them. To all, he promised an easier and happier life.

At other times, raking over old coals, he tried to get them to admit that they had been wrong in refusing the new Superior whom God himself had sent them through his representative, the archbishop. He reproached them with having set up their own Superior, one whom they had chosen but who was not necessarily the one God wanted; hence he would not have the grace to guide them. Sometimes he tried to make them regret their so-called blind obstinacy in making a Superior for themselves by their own authority, and he sought to bring them to desire and request another. What advantages, he said, would you not have found in perfect submission to the new Superior whom heaven destined for you? You would have enjoyed greater liberty; all your needs would have been provided for. Now that you have preferred to remain in this blind alley, where can you find the resources needed to relieve your poverty? All your Founder's friends are abandoning him. De La Chétardie himself, your great benefactor, is growing disillusioned with him. If you would only cast away the yoke which overburdens you, what enjoyment you would find in a new form of government! You have become accustomed to bending your necks and to bearing the burden without complaining, but we weep for you. We feel so sorry for you, since you do not pity yourselves, and we are offering you a friendly hand to rid you of your burdens if you will only consent to let your chains be broken.

Is it not strange that many do not wish to profit by the offer made to you and prefer to follow De La Salle in chains rather than to be freed from this captivity? Do they love him? But how can they love so austere a Superior and be so attached to a man who gives no quarter to nature? No doubt, it is because they fear him; that is why they remain faithful to him. But what can De La Salle do for them if they remain attached to him? He will continue to make them miserable. What have they to fear from him if they refuse to live under his bondage? What can he do to them? He can't do anything, either for

good or for evil. His influence is nil. Thus, those who do not dare to break their own bonds are condemning themselves to drag out the rest of their days in a painful and hopeless manner.

Not all this man's words were uttered as bluntly as we have set them down here, but we wished to give the reader an idea of what he was trying to get across. His purpose was to make the conduct of De La Salle seem odious in the eyes of the Brothers. We would only weary our readers if we were to add all the details of the dangerous conversations held by this visiting ecclesiastic. He did not preach from the housetops but went about whispering, in one ear and then in another, his beautiful doctrine for the Brothers to meditate on. One would not have thought that he acted with a predetermined plan in mind; he seemed, rather, to speak at random and dropped remarks about this or that. He chose the right moments, watched for favorable occasions, and always measured the mood of his hearers.

Sometimes it was just one word, sometimes another; to this one, he addressed a wink and a sneer; to that one, a meaningful hint. Everything seemed to issue from his mouth at random, yet everything he said was premeditated. In a word, this priest who worked so painstakingly for the persecutor came to the house in the spirit of Absalom when he went to David's palace intending to spread discontent with his father's government, to steal away the hearts of the children of Israel, to cause them to defect, and to arm them against their king. The emissary's intrigues, however, did not meet with the same success as those of this traitorous son of the holiest king of Israel. The priest either spoke without being listened to or was heard without being believed; if he was believed by a few, this did not turn them against De La Salle personally.

If his ill-intentioned conduct produced any results at all, it was only indirectly that these managed to wound the servant of God. The Brothers usually kept out of the way of this dangerous hypocrite. They avoided meeting him. In vain did he keep an eye open for what was going on and wait for the Brothers as they passed by. Those whom he stopped hastened to cut the conversation short and managed to get away from him. As for De La Salle, he always went out to greet him, paid him due honor, and spoke to him most respectfully.

We must admit, nevertheless, that this doctrine of relaxation, preached so artfully and in secret at a time when the severity of the penitential practices in the community had been reduced, did not contribute to increasing the fervor found in the house. It even became a trap for the tepid; some of them fell into it and found their spiritual doom in it. This was another cause of sorrow for a man who loved

his disciples as a father loves his children and who wept over their loss as a tender mother laments over an only son.

All that the servant of God wanted was to sanctify those whom God had given him. His Community, although his life's work, held no interest for him, except insofar as he knew that God was generously served in it and that the Spirit of Jesus Christ reigned there. To see its fervor growing cool was the bitterest martyrdom his soul could have endured, and in that situation, he would have willingly accepted the destruction of his Institute. Nay, he would have been the first to abandon it, if those who belonged to it had fallen from their early virtue. What torment his heart suffered when he saw some of them belying their early fervor and turning back on that high road where they should always march forward! This was the interior cross which replaced the exterior ones that we have been speaking about. The defection of several of the principal disciples of the holy priest was the bitter fruit produced by the frequent visits of this ecclesiastic who had been sent to spy on everything that was going on in the *Grande Maison* and to be on the watch to seize every occasion of stirring up discontent and dissatisfaction with the Superior.

### The bad effect of these suggestions on two of the Brothers

The first one who listened to these perfidious suggestions and resolved to abandon his vocation was a Brother whom De La Salle considered as his right-hand man. Once he had grown sour, he got another Brother to share his discontent, and once he had made an accomplice of him, the two of them set out for a place where the parish priest was expecting some Brothers. This was a new foundation which had been arranged with the servant of God. This traitorous disciple knew about this and made use of his knowledge to leave the house, thinking he could thus secure for himself a good position and enough to live on comfortably for the rest of his life. Commissioned by no one but himself and without the Founder's knowledge, he went with his companion to take over—or rather to steal—this school. He was still wearing his Brothers' habit and presented himself as having come through obedience. This deceived the parish priest, but his triumph was short-lived.

After he and his companion had been welcomed with all sorts of tokens of esteem and kindness as children of De La Salle, they were driven out ignominiously as soon as their hypocrisy and desertion became known to the ecclesiastical authorities. The parish priest was ordered by the vicar-general to expel from his parish these impudent

interlopers who had intruded themselves into this position. They had not been sent either by the authorities or by their holy Founder. The wretched fugitives immediately came back to the house which they had dishonored and scandalized by their surreptitious departure, but the community closed its doors to them and begged their common father not to let himself be moved by the pleas of these two sons of Belial, since it was necessary to punish their crime and to make an example of them.

### The Director of Novices defects to the Trappists

The second who, in his turn, wounded his father's heart was the Director of Novices, the indiscreet and pitiless taskmaster who had made his novices groan under the heavy yoke of his direction. By yielding to the suggestions of a spirit of penance mostly inspired by a naturally harsh and unfeeling temperament, he had drawn down, not on his own head but on that of the servant of God, the ruthless persecution which we have described above and which led to all the rest that followed. This fanatical devotee of penance had made several of the young men entrusted to his care grow discouraged with their vocation and with perfection itself, thanks to his abuse of the authority entrusted to him. Finally, he too grew dissatisfied with his vocation. A pity he had not done so some years earlier; he would have spared his holy Founder some heavy crosses and would have prevented the ravages in his Institute which we shall relate farther on.

At any rate, bored with his assignments, this Brother asked to be relieved of them and to be sent to a school where he fancied he would do better. This De La Salle refused to consent to, for reasons we do not know. The Brother allowed himself to be led astray by a will-o'-the-wisp; he wanted to leave one house where strict penance was practiced to go to another like it, but there he found the door shut. He went to La Trappe, wishing to enter the monastery. The way he chose to carry out this decision showed that it had not been inspired by our heavenly Father. This man, impelled by passion rather than by the Holy Spirit, instead of informing his Superior of his project, had kept it entirely secret and confided it only to one other Brother whom he chose as his companion in his flight.

How and when did they run away? The most natural way would have been to leave by the door. If they wished to keep their departure secret, they could have chosen the time when the doors were opened in the morning or when they were shut at night. *Whoever does not enter or leave by the door, says Jesus Christ, is a thief or at*

least imitates the wiliness of the thief. Our Lord says again, *Whoever does evil hates the light*. He seeks to carry out his evil actions under cover of darkness. This poor Brother, who chose to depart at night by climbing over the wall, might have realized, if he had reflected for a moment, that he was doing a deed of darkness and was being led astray by a lying spirit.

The two deserters reached the Trappists still wearing the habit of their Community, but they found the doors shut against them. The abbot, who had succeeded Monsieur de Rancé and knew the servant of God very well, refused to admit them until he found out how and why they had left their own Community. He was even kind enough to write to De La Salle to find out from him whether these two Brothers had come to La Trappe with his consent. The holy priest received this letter at a time when the departure of these two Brothers had placed him in a very awkward situation, because he did not have any others who could replace them at the moment. Hope of getting them back assuaged his sorrow. After thanking the abbot for the information which had allayed his anxiety when he learned that the two Brothers had reached La Trappe safely, he begged him to send them back to him and not to admit any others in the future without his assent. This was done.

This Director of Novices, whose indiscreet and harsh behavior had caused so much trouble, died three years later, at Chartres, of a strange and violent malady. He would not open his mouth except to utter horrible cries, which he continued almost to the point of death. The other Brother left the Society definitely not long afterward. These are two terrible examples of God's vengeance on those who govern themselves solely by their own light or are unfaithful to their vocation. This melancholy story shows the difference between true and false virtue. It illustrates the truth that only when virtue is founded on perfect abnegation of our own spirit, natural inclinations, and the like is it truly pure.

### Desertion of the two Brothers in charge of the Sunday School

After these two, the ones who added to the Founder's trials were the two Brothers employed in the Sunday School, which we mentioned above. De La Salle had spared neither pains nor expense to have them learn drawing, geometry, and mathematics. Endowed with aptitudes for these studies, they had become excellent teachers, thanks to their efforts and to their natural ability, and they taught with marked success. Some of their students made them believe that they could

earn a good deal of money if they were willing to use for their own benefit the time and effort they spent in teaching gratuitously.

They listened to these siren words suggested to them by the Old Serpent. Once this temptation took root in their hearts, it caused great ravages in them and enkindled a blaze which consumed what little virtue they still possessed, already seriously undermined by secret vanity and self-complacency. Disenchanted with a state of life which they had embraced in answer to God's call and which had seemed a happy one to them, as long as they did not know any more than the other Brothers, and led astray by the hope of improving their fortune, they themselves came and informed De La Salle that they had decided to leave. They asked him to open for them the doors of a house which offered them only intangible benefits and recompenses in the next life as the reward for their learned teaching.

A strong chain restrained them, of course, from leaving the house, a chain they themselves had forged when they made perpetual vows of stability and obedience. This bond, however, even though indissoluble for a soul which has not lost all fear of God, is not strong enough to hold back souls which have grown tepid and lost their first fervor. In vain did the servant of God, surprised, distressed, and scandalized at the resolve taken by the two Brothers, try by remonstrances and gentle reproaches to hold them back by appealing to the sense of duty in their consciences, which, alas, had become deaf and blind. De La Salle reminded them of the money he had spent to enable them to acquire this knowledge which they were using to jeopardize their souls. He sought to make them realize what a crime they were about to commit and the punishment they must expect for it from divine justice. He spoke to prodigal children who had made up their minds and who could not abide in their father's house any longer.

With hardened hearts, they heard the servant of God describe for them the unpleasant situation they were going to create for him by their desertion. You know, he told them, how much store De La Ché-tardie sets on the Sunday School and on the subjects taught in it. If you go, the school will have to close. How will I ever explain this to the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, so deeply interested in this institution which he devised and set up and which he has seen producing such good results? What are you going to do by forcing the Sunday School to close, except compromise all the others and completely alienate from me the man who is our support and the greatest protector and benefactor of the Institute? All these evil consequences which will follow your departure affect not only you but also the body of which you are members. Is all this not capable of making



you change your minds? If you are fully determined and have lost all concern for the interests of your soul and the souls of your neighbors, at least put off the execution of this sudden decision, and give me time to have two other Brothers prepared to take your places. Is it possible that you want to see the fires of persecution in this house, which are not entirely quenched, flare up again, even after you withstood them with me? Can you have any doubt that your desertion will arouse the indignation of the parish priest against me and will completely indispose this man whom the Institute needs most and that you will be helping to put an end to the great zeal he has hitherto shown for its development?

But the good Superior spoke in vain to these men who had made themselves deaf to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Their departure was something already decided upon; avarice and ambition had joined forces in bringing them to this decision. So they carried it out, to the great distress of the servant of God and in spite of his unwavering opposition. Overcome by his impatience, the Brother most eager to leave ran away. De La Salle replaced him as well as he could. The other, after delaying his departure for a few months with great reluctance, finally imitated his companion's unfortunate example. This scandal put the finishing touches on the sorrow of the man of God and threw him into extreme difficulties.

It is not surprising that God did not delay in avenging the Founder, for he made the first of these cowardly deserters suffer the penalty for his crime. Disappointed at seeing all his fine projects go up in smoke and at finding only penury where he had hoped to secure a fortune, he died without the sacraments in the parish of Saint Roch at Paris in 1709. Thanks to his sin, his death was caused by the extreme poverty in which he lived and which had overtaken him instead of the lucrative situation he had expected to obtain.

### Brothers resist being assigned to study for the Sunday School

De La Salle never grew discouraged; a continual succession of crosses and disappointments had taught him patience. He chose the one among his disciples whom he considered the best fitted to learn the subjects which De La Chétardie wanted taught and which added so much to the reputation of the Sunday School. De La Salle, however, was much taken by surprise by the opposition he found: the Brother was extremely reluctant to undertake these studies. This hesitation had its source in his virtue. It was not lack of interest in his vocation, pure whim, self-will, or laziness which made him wary of undertaking

these brilliant studies but rather love for his vocation and a desire to persevere in it. The example of the two deserters impressed him strongly, and he was afraid that he, too, might meet with disaster in a role which had given rise to their desertion.

Full of prudent mistrust of self and resolved to avoid their unfortunate fate, he wished to remain in the lowly state proper to his profession, and thus he shut his heart against vanity, ambition, and avarice. For these reasons, he objected to preparing himself for a task the dangers of which frightened him and which he looked upon with apprehension as an occasion of infidelity, as it indeed had proved for the other two. He even took the liberty of telling his Superior that the defection of these two Brothers, whose hearts had been puffed up with their learning, was a sign God was giving to the others to limit themselves to the simple functions of teachers in the Gratuitous Schools: reading, writing, arithmetic, catechism, and instructions on Christian living. In addition, this Brother, so dismayed over the misfortune of the two deserters, communicated his apprehensions to all the others, and by leading them to share his views, he made them reluctant to undertake further studies which would almost inevitably constitute for them a snare where the most robust virtue would meet with shipwreck. All of them, sharing his ideas on the subject, came to De La Salle, begging him to leave them as they were and not to oblige them to risk their salvation in the pursuit of learning which was really foreign to their profession.

Seriously embarrassed by this unanimous protest of his disciples against an institution which certainly was useful, De La Salle simply replied, without going into the question of the reasons which might justify their reluctance, that they should, out of concern for higher motives, make the sacrifice of this hesitancy. He told them that obedience, self-mistrust, and a pure intention would provide safeguards against the reef where their lack of virtue had caused the first two geometry teachers to run aground. He insisted that they had to keep open the Sunday School, where so much good was obviously being done, and that it would surely have to be closed if the subjects in question were no longer offered. He explained that he was really not free in the matter, because, as they well knew, the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, on whom they all depended and whose help was essential for them, was vitally interested in the Sunday School. It was much to be feared that he might punish their opposition on this point by becoming indifferent to them and abandoning them entirely. Of the two dangers, it was necessary to choose the lesser one, that is, not to annoy their benefactor and protector.

These arguments were serious ones and should have brought the Brothers to overcome their aversion, however well founded, for pursuing the study of these sciences which had already proved fatal to two of their companions and which remained dangerous for all of them. If they had allowed themselves to be persuaded, they would have spared their Superior a host of new troubles, because it was always he who was considered to be at fault and who had to bear the punishment for the faults of his disciples. These Brothers, biased by principles rooted in piety and out of concern for their salvation, refused to give up their resolution. To show that this was not due to a spirit of disobedience but to a salutary fear of succumbing where others had already met with disaster, they drew up a memorandum which was presented to De La Salle by its author. In it they objected so strenuously to the study of the subjects in question that they felt sure, if he had the goodness to read it, that De La Salle would come around to their point of view. The servant of God did read it but did not answer a word. Perhaps, in fact, he felt that there was nothing to reply, or perhaps he knew that any reply would have been useless.

If we may judge of what he himself thought by what he later did, the Founder seems to have been convinced by the cogency of the arguments offered by his disciples and to have espoused their point of view. He went to De La Chétardie to see if he could win his approval and consent to discontinue these subjects in the school. Unfortunately, the pastor of Saint Sulpice was already deeply prejudiced against the servant of God. He was filled with these preconceived notions—a failing which even the greatest men are not always successful in avoiding in this world—and although he was still quite interested in the Gratuitous Schools, he was very cold toward the holy Founder.

De La Salle was well aware of this; he still entertained great respect for De La Chétardie's outstanding merits and deep gratitude for all his past favors. He was not a little distressed over having lost such a good friend and powerful protector, but what consoled him was that the pastor did not let the indifference he felt toward his own person extend to his work. For this reason, from a sense of duty as much as from concern for his own interests, De La Salle took all possible precautions and tried to preserve in the virtuous pastor a vestige of his zeal for the Institute and his kindness toward the Brothers. This was the main reason why he had wanted some Brothers to study the subjects needed to continue the Sunday School. But all his efforts and conciliatory gestures remained without effect. De La Chétardie blamed him for the Brothers' refusal; convinced that the Founder himself had drawn up the memorandum brought to him, he received him rudely.

## De La Salle is blamed for the collapse of the Sunday School

As one prejudice leads to another, De La Chétardie, who of course was aware of the departure of the other two Brothers, blamed this also on De La Salle and reproached him with it in an outrageous manner. The holy priest listened to him with a patience, mildness, and calm which, while demonstrating his innocence of the charges, also revealed the joy his soul experienced in the midst of ignominy. Days of humiliation were for him feast days, and after having received such greetings and insults from one of the greatest men then living in Paris, he came back home with jubilation in his heart. A few days later, the holy Founder, who still felt deep regret on seeing the parish priest of Saint Sulpice so bitterly antagonistic toward him and thought himself obliged to do all he could to undeceive him, brought him the memorandum that the Brother had written. He wished to give De La Chétardie a proof that it was not he but his disciples who felt an invincible distaste for undertaking the study of these subjects which they feared might prove their undoing.

God's designs on his servants are indeed incomprehensible; he often permits that what constitutes their justification should serve for their condemnation. In this straightforward conduct of the Founder, the pastor saw nothing but duplicity and convinced himself that the one presenting the memorandum was its true author. When he read it, his suspicion that De La Salle had contributed to its composition only grew stronger, and he reproached him in a highly emotional way, saying that in this document he recognized the gist of his thinking and that if it was not written by him, at least it had been ordered by him.

In vain the humble priest tried to convince the parish priest that he had nothing to do with the text and that it had been drawn up without his knowledge. He was not believed. De La Chétardie forgot himself to the point of calling him a liar. God permitted this to purify further the virtue of his servant and allowed him to be thus grossly insulted by a peevish sally from a man generally known for his moderation, all this to exercise the patience of the innocent man thus accused. This insult, which pierces every upright and candid soul more keenly than any other, did not reach the heart of a man who by now had grown accustomed to scorn and affronts. It even inspired him with a significant rejoinder: *Monsieur*, he answered most respectfully, *it is with this lie on my lips that I am going to say Mass*. In fact, he then went over to the parish church to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice.

The servant of God did not, however, get off quite so easily as this. His destiny seems to have been to bear the consequences of

faults for which he was not responsible and to expiate both the real faults his disciples committed and the imaginary ones which were blamed on him. By reducing their salaries, De La Chétardie punished the Brothers for discontinuing the drawing lessons. This measure, which caused much privation in the poorest community in Paris, was felt by the Superior even more keenly than the insult he himself had received. But neither of these incidents caused him to suffer as much as did the failure of the Sunday School. The closing down of this excellent enterprise, which occurred when the subjects which had attracted most of the students were discontinued, justified the firmness with which De La Salle had opposed the Brothers' resolution. He was doubly pained over the ruin of such a good work and over the justifiable irritation felt by the parish priest.

The Sunday School, however, did not close down all at once. Its final demise came about gradually. The first step followed the desertion of those two excellent teachers, as we have mentioned. The second ensued after the refusal of the Brothers to undertake studies they considered dangerous for themselves. One of the Brothers, however, pitying both the deep perplexity into which this refusal had plunged their Superior and the extreme penury of the house which had resulted from it, offered to study drawing. He mastered the subject in a short time, and the Sunday School was able to reopen. More than 200 students filled the classes as usual. The remarkable thing is that these young men never got bored at the Brothers' school, where they devoted nearly the entire afternoon to exercises of piety and to reading, writing, arithmetic, and other subjects.

Whereas such young men are, as a rule, very prone to licentiousness, the greatest benefit the students derived from this was that they forgot the way to the cabarets and other dangerous spots. Instead, they learned how to sanctify Sundays and feasts by prayer and to acquire both the benefits of heaven and the advantages of earth. Several of them changed their conduct considerably and began living like true Christians, frequenting the sacraments and attending church after having made up for the evil lives they had led by a good general confession.

When the Sunday School reopened, so did the purse of the parish priest; he had shut it only to let hunger impress the minds of the Brothers more forcibly than his words had been able to do. The teaching of drawing was also revived in the ordinary schools, because the pastor wanted it taught to the children there. This respite continued for a while. Later, the Sunday School was transferred to the parish of Saint Antoine, where it finally had to be abandoned, as we shall

soon mention. This third step in the destruction of this project was the final one. Still, to this day, all those who were acquainted with its operation in Paris long to see it re-established and often beg the Brothers to open another Sunday School.

### The desertion of another Brother and his request to return

All the misfortunes we have just related were followed by the disgraceful trickery of the Brother in charge of the center for training country schoolmasters in the parish of Saint Hippolyte, by his departure from the Society, and by the complete collapse of this excellent institution. All this we have related above.

The final blow that grieved the Founder very deeply was the departure of another Brother, who left his school, went to live with a citizen of Paris, and put aside his religious garb. As soon as the good shepherd heard of this, he went after the lost sheep and brought him back to the fold. How did he succeed in doing this? By going down on his knees before him, by using pleas instead of reproaches and supplications instead of threats. This prodigal son did not deserve that his good father should thus go seeking him or take such pains to get him to come back.

Some ten years later, this unworthy member was expelled from the house by orders of the diocesan officials in Rouen. But at the time we are speaking of, his talents made him very necessary, and his separation, after all the others we have mentioned, left an empty place that nobody could fill. This Brother was an excellent penman. Nothing was wanting for him to succeed in his vocation except piety. Perhaps we should say that he lacked everything, since he lacked piety. Without it, the most varied talents are useless in a state which has for its end the sanctification of youth. Piety can make up for the lack of great ability, but great ability can never make up for the absence of piety.

To make matters even worse, as we shall relate at greater length in the next book, the enemy took advantage of this particular moment to stir up the schoolmasters once more against the Brothers, who do not sell their services as those teachers do. Up to this time, the influence of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice had protected the Brothers from the vexations of the schoolmasters and had brought their intrigues to nothing. They did not dare to challenge openly these men whom he loved and whose defense he resolutely undertook. Once this protection was withdrawn, the schoolmasters felt that they could make short work of men who were remarkable only by their poverty

and by the slight esteem they enjoyed in the world. The fact was that De La Chétardie, once a firm friend of the Institute, seemed to have lost all his concern for it and no longer took any interest in its progress. His indifference grew, along with his bias, and this led to irritation and then to abandonment. So the moment was ripe for the rivals of the Brothers, and they made the most of it. They began another attack against the Brothers, who, they said, were practicing charity at their expense. The attack was so furious that they seemed about to triumph, and their victory came close to destroying the Gratuitous Schools entirely.

### Fervor lessens with the relaxation of penitential practices

It must be admitted that most of these difficulties were a consequence of the relaxation in the spirit of penance which had once reigned in the Community and had nourished the fervor of the Brothers. De La Salle had been obliged to mitigate its practice out of deference for the advice of wise friends and out of obedience to the wishes his superiors had expressed, but he foresaw very clearly what would follow. It can be said that on this occasion, obedience demanded of him the greatest sacrifice that his piety could ever have offered to God. It was precisely during this time of mitigation that the visiting priest came around, preaching relaxation and sowing complaints against the austerity of which the Superior showed a continual example. It seemed that God was presenting to the eyes of a city, which can be called the world in miniature, these living examples of the penitential spirit of a former time. He wished to show to the most incredulous and the most cowardly that weak human nature, when fortified by grace, can even in these latest centuries of the Church repeat what it did in the first. We must seek the real cause for the disappearance of Christian austerity in our natural cowardice, not in the progressive weakening of the human body.

It is true that the Grande Maison, where the Brothers lived, was better furnished than the smaller house at Vaugirard had been. At the request of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, Madame Voisin had provided beds, essential kitchen utensils, and even tin plates for the refectory—really magnificent equipment in a community which had never used anything but earthenware of the commonest and cheapest kind. But otherwise the poverty, austerity, and rigorous mortification practiced in the Vaugirard novitiate had been transported to the Grande Maison and had even been augmented by the number of novices. The habits they wore were so poor, so threadbare, and so

patched that they were finally put aside only when they could no longer be repaired. Fresh water from the well was the only drink found in this penitential house; wine was never brought in, except for use in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

It is true that in 1700 or 1701, fifteen or sixteen demi-muids<sup>34</sup> of wine arrived at the house. This gift allowed each of the Brothers a demi-setier of wine at noon and in the evening. But the Brothers could recognize the new drink they were served only by its color, not by its taste, and this change did not last very long in such a numerous community. When they drank this wine, they could have said that they did not drink it, so little did they consume. There was only enough to redden the water that they mixed with it, according to the Rule<sup>35</sup> and following the example of their Superior.

The meals, like the drink, included only the most ordinary food-stuffs. This coarse fare, which could not arouse the appetite save when it was whetted by hunger, made the common people give the Brothers unflattering nicknames, such as *eaters of ox feet*. At this time, they no longer received the leftovers from the community of Saint Sulpice, which had provided them with real delicacies now and then.

However long and rigorous the winters might be, the Brothers protected themselves from the cold only by waiting for the sun to return or by using the discipline frequently. This maceration of the flesh, which was a daily practice inspired by lively piety and an insatiable desire for suffering, did not replace other austerities; each one was resorted to in turn. There was no kind of humiliation or mortification which had not become common in a house where De La Salle gave the example.

Yet, the Brothers did not complain under this accumulation of sacrifices. Fervor, which made their burdens light, tempered the hardship by the unction of grace. The delights of the spirit compensated for the immolation of the flesh, and their hearts, which sought this greater satisfaction, were quite willing to purchase the delights afforded by grace at the cost of nature's satisfaction. The most mortified among the Brothers were the happiest, and by merely looking at them, we could not have told by the way they appeared that they were making use of instruments of penance. In this house, no one murmured about the strict life they led or the extreme poverty which reigned. If the imprudence of the two Brothers already mentioned had not drawn from two or three novices the complaints they made, more

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34. About 500 gallons.

35. This provision came only in the Rule of 1725.



against the harsh way they had been treated than against the penances themselves, these mortifications would still be carried on there in all their rigor, and the world would know nothing about it.

Because a great spirit of penance never says *enough*, many of the disciples of this latter-day John the Baptist wished to measure up to him and even rival him on this point, if such had been allowed. As insipid as their food was, they felt that they were too well treated, and they deprived themselves of most of what was served at table. On beholding their master, the disciples felt that they were doing nothing. His example, which they could not equal, did not make them despair but rather spurred them on to undertake, without ceasing, new efforts at overcoming themselves and reaching that perfect death to nature which they admired so much in the Founder. Whether he had grown accustomed to mortification and no longer felt its sting or whether the victory he had won over his natural squeamishness had merited for him the grace of finding tasty the viands which formerly inspired him with disgust, they could see him eating with apparent relish everything that was most unappetizing and poorly prepared.

Such was the life led in the Grande Maison when the new Superior was brought in; it was through fear of seeing this strict lifestyle relaxed by the new master, under the pretext of mitigating its excessive rigor, that the Brothers remained so attached to their old Superior. If these penitents had been as revolted by such a crucified life as the persecutor imagined, they would have been delighted to exchange it for an easier one and would have willingly gone over to a government more considerate of human frailty. But the fact was that they themselves were giving proof of their virtue by trying to defend that of their holy Founder. This refusal to accept a more accommodating Superior for fear of condescending under him to the inclinations of nature, this unwillingness to mitigate an extraordinarily poor and penitential life by accepting a more benign type of government, is something quite unusual. If it was a fault, we cannot find many examples like it, save in the lives of the saints. When a new Superior was offered to this Community, the promise was made that abundance and all the commodities of life would enter along with him. The victims of the most rigid penance and of the direst poverty were told that they would be delivered from this unbearable yoke and that they would recover some of nature's rights. It was this promise which disturbed them. Once again, if the motive was defective, we must at least admit that it is a very rare and spiritually inspired one.

If De La Salle had so attracted the Brothers, if he had, so to speak, bound their souls to his, as Holy Scripture expresses it in

speaking of the strong attachment between David and Jonathan, we may ask how he had accomplished this: merely by the attraction exercised by his virtue, by the impression made by his example. The ties that bound them to him were, on the one hand, entirely supernatural, since the desire for perfection and the fear of not measuring up to it constituted the links in the chain. On the other hand, considering how many things De La Salle had done which deserved all the esteem and affection of his disciples, was it not right for them to remain inviolably attached to him? They did indeed remain faithful and submissive to him, and they gave him the most obvious proof of their confidence and submission when they consented to cut down, as he asked them to, on the great number of practices of humiliation and penance which had taken root in the Institute.

To maintain these very practices, they had rejected the interloper from whom they feared mitigation, but they renounced them when their father proposed it to them and asked them to conform. No doubt they knew that in this the holy priest was acting less from his own convictions than out of deference to the persons whom he had consulted or who had a right to command him. In addition, they realized that by doing away with a good many external penances, De La Salle was trying to promote interior mortification and that by sacrificing his own judgment and his supernatural inclinations, he was offering his homage to perfect obedience and to perfect humility.

In fact, his regret at losing these great means of sanctification was obvious on his countenance when he took away from his disciples their instruments of penance. He showed his sorrow by his signs, and to the protests of the Brothers, he replied that *God would no longer be pleased with sacrifices which were not approved by the superiors*. Penance had become so deeply rooted in the hearts of the holy Founder's disciples that the adversary's agent—who so often came prowling around their house to make them leave it and who thought that by his promises of an easier and more comfortable life he could get them disgusted with the yoke they were carrying and with the one who had laid it on them—was wasting his time and efforts. As a result of the services he rendered to the one who had sent him, all he gained was the confusion and the displeasure of seeing De La Salle and the Brothers go to live elsewhere.

Never was there a more sincere and generous attachment than that which bound these good children to their father. Rather than separate from him, they preferred to undergo all sorts of persecutions, share his poverty and his trials, withstand attacks on all sides, overcome the difficulties and obstacles which were multiplied daily, and fi-

nally, turn their backs on the rosy prospects dangled before their eyes if they had been willing to break with him. Yet, after all, their fidelity to him was not unreasonable. Gratitude and justice made it a duty for them. They owed this to the one who was their father in Jesus Christ.

Grace, which loosens even the bonds of nature, had united them with him, and in addition, they had imposed on themselves an obligation of not submitting to a stranger as their Superior when they had vowed not to accept any Superior who was not a member of their Society. This vow, made and signed by them in 1694, which we mentioned previously, certainly justifies their constant refusal to recognize Bricot as their Superior. Their conscience was bound by this vow; they would have felt they were violating it if they had consented to this proposal. Divine Providence had provided for the safeguarding of their Institute by inspiring them to make this vow at a time when neither they nor De La Salle could foresee what was going to happen.

## END OF BOOK TWO

The index to the names of persons and places  
is located at the end of Book Three.

The Life  
of John Baptist de La Salle,  
Founder of the Institute  
of the Brothers  
of the Christian Schools

A Biography in Three Books

Book Three



Frontispiece from the 1733 edition of Blain's *Life*, an engraving by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger which is now lost. (Émile Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)

The Life of  
John Baptist de La Salle,  
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Jean-Baptiste Blain

Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC

Edited by Luke Salm, FSC

Lasallian Publications  
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Landover, Maryland

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**Cover:** detail (reversed) of a portrait of John Baptist de La Salle, an engraving  
by Jean-Baptiste Scotin of a painting by Pierre Léger, frontispiece, 1733 edition  
(Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle; Iconographie*, Boulogne: Limet, 1979, plate 9.)



The editor is pleased  
to dedicate this revised translation  
to Augustine Loes, FSC,  
in gratitude for  
a life-long association,  
crowned in the Buttimer Institute  
and Lasallian Publications  
by a collaborative search  
for the mind and heart of  
John Baptist de La Salle

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Sponsored by Christian Brothers Conference (the Regional Conference of Christian Brothers of the United States of America and Toronto), Lasallian Publications will include nineteen volumes on the life, writings, and work of John Baptist de La Salle (1651–1719), Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and on the early history of the Brothers. These volumes will be presented in two series.

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## BOOK THREE

LA VIE  
DE MONSIEUR  
JEAN-BAPTISTE  
DE LA SALLE,  
INSTITUTEUR  
DES FRERES DES ECOLES  
CHRETIENNES.

LIVRE TROISIEME,

*Où Monsieur DE LA SALLE est représenté comme le grand Zélateur de l'Instruction & de l'Education Chrétienne de la jeunesse pauvre & abandonnée.*

*Diverses tribulations qui le suivent de tous côtez, & qui donnent lieu à divers établissemens.*

**J**ESUS-CHRIST l'a dit : *Si le grain de froment ne meurt en terre, il ne produit point de fruit.* Ce n'est que par sa mort qu'il renaît & qu'il se reproduit au centuple. La vérité de cet oracle trouve sa preuve dans celui-là même qui l'a prononcé; car c'est sa mort qui a rendu la vie au genre humain; c'est sa Croix qui est la clef du Royaume des Cieux. Aussi tôt qu'il y a été attaché, il a attiré toutes choses à lui, & il a fait de l'instrument de son supplice, le trophée de ses victoires. Les membres suivent le sort du Chef. Plus ils sont mortifiés, plus l'esprit les vivifie: c'est la mort de la nature qui leur procure la vie de la grace. C'est la persécution qui en épurant leur vertu, la fait fructifier, croître, & multiplier. En effet, c'est la persécution qui en dispersant les Apôtres, a montré à l'Univers ses Conquerans; & qui en les faisant fuir de Ville en Ville a porté la Foi, l'Evangile, & le nom de Jesus-Christ sur leurs pas dans toutes les parties du monde. Or ce que l'Eglise a vu dans sa naissance, chaque siècle le reproduit. Les membres particuliers de ce grand Corps mystique, n'ont point d'autres principes de leur origine & de leurs progrès spirituel. Ils croissent & ils se fortifient comme lui au milieu des croix. Les plantes chois-

Tome II.

A



## BOOK THREE

*In which De La Salle is presented as a great promoter of Christian instruction and education for poor and neglected youth; various trials follow him on every side, giving the occasion for several new foundations.*

Jesus Christ declared, *Unless the grain of wheat dies, it brings forth no fruit.* The truth of these words finds confirmation, first of all, in the one who pronounced them; it was his death which gave back life to the human race; his cross is the key to the kingdom of heaven. Once he was nailed to it, he drew all things to himself; he made the very instrument of his sacrifice the trophy of his victory. His members must follow in the footsteps of their leader. The more they die to themselves, the more his Spirit gives them life. Death to nature procures for them the life of grace. Persecution, while purifying their virtues, makes them bear fruit, grow, and multiply.

In fact, it was the persecution which dispersed the Apostles that made these conquerors known to the whole universe. By forcing them to wander from city to city, it led them to bring the faith, the Gospel, and the name of Jesus Christ to every nation of the globe. What the Church witnessed at its birth has been repeated in every succeeding century. The individual members of this great Mystical Body find no other principle at the origin of their spiritual progress. They grow and wax strong, like him, through contact with the cross. The choicest plants in the new land, the kingdom of heaven, are rooted on Calvary and grow only in the shadow of the cross. They thrive only insofar as they are watered by the blood which the nails, the scourges, and the thorns draw from the Savior's veins.

The cross, which tests the virtue of the saints, also perfects their undertakings. At the very time when the enemy of the human race seeks to eradicate the plant that the heavenly Father has placed in the field of his Church, his almighty hand sustains it with even greater power and helps it strike even deeper roots. As we shall see in this

third book, the whirlwind of persecution brought the Institute, along with its Founder, to various cities of France, with De La Salle leaving behind him Christian Schools in all those places from which he was obliged to flee.

## CHAPTER I

*De La Salle, forced to leave the Grande Maison, settles in the Faubourg Saint Antoine in 1703; persecution follows him there and obliges him to withdraw.*

The frequent and dangerous visits that the enemy of the servant of God incited his emissary to pay to the novitiate at the Grande Maison had wearied the Brothers, put their patience to a severe test, and at the end, become so intolerable that for some time they had been begging the one who was the real target of these vexations to give ground and seek peace somewhere else. Although the Founder's enemy had in vain exhausted all his artifices against the saintly priest, he had succeeded only too well in sowing discord among his disciples, and the unfortunate result had been that eight or nine of the principal Brothers had left the Society. The others, more firmly attached to their vocation and having perhaps less talent but more virtue than the deserters, witnessed their misfortune, feared to imitate them, and sought to shield themselves against similar temptations.

De La Salle did not share the apprehensions of his disciples. He was very fond of the Grande Maison, where he lived along with them, because he found it to be well adapted to community life. It really seemed to have been built just for his community. Located near one of the gates of the metropolis, in a spot affording plenty of fresh air, and spacious enough with its large gardens and courtyards, it was still far removed from the noise of the city and favored all the Founder's inclinations. If he had been in a position to select in Paris or in its environs a house suited to his tastes, this one would have been his choice.

The house had once been occupied by a group of nuns called Our Lady of the Ten Virtues. Their order had been founded by Blessed Jeanne de France, whose portrait was painted on one of the walls, along with that of Père Gabriel *Maria de Jesus*, a Discalced Carmelite, who had been the spiritual director of the nuns. These portraits were still to be seen during the time the Brothers occupied the

building. Underneath the chapel was a subterranean vault where the nuns were buried. For a long time, De La Salle had wanted to own a house in Paris in a commodious location where the novitiate could be established. Since the capital of the kingdom was likewise its center, he wanted to make it the headquarters of his Society for a number of reasons which are easily surmised.

At the time of which we speak, this house was for sale. It would have been easy for anyone less poor than the Superior of the Brothers to purchase it. For a long time, the proprietor had been urging the Founder to sign a contract of purchase and was willing to let him have it for 45,000 livres, although the property was worth at least 100,000. In fact, the person who finally bought it for the first-mentioned figure was able to resell it shortly thereafter for double the money. But where could the pious Founder find the sum asked? His poverty made it out of the question for him even to think of it. He did not dare to approach God with his desire for such an expensive house, and he limited himself to praying and having others pray to the God of all goodness to provide him with a fit shelter for his novitiate.

### De La Salle's prayers are heard but thwarted by his enemy

With this in mind and from the time they had first gone to live in the Grande Maison, De La Salle had instituted a special procession at which he assisted every day, vested in his surplice. It took place after the recitation of the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin and in the garden when weather permitted. They sang the psalms, *The earth is the Lord's, and its fullness*, the *Miserere*, and the litany of the Most Blessed Virgin, followed by the *Memorare* and the prayers of the Church, *O God whose Providence*. . . . and *God who art offended by sin*. . . . His prayers and those of the community were heard. A certain individual, inspired by heaven, left him in his will the sum of 50,000 livres for the express purpose of establishing a novitiate. But who could believe it? The influential enemy of the servant of God succeeded in getting hold of this money and deprived the legitimate legatee of it, as we shall explain farther on.

For the servant of God, this house was something like the Promised Land was for Moses. Then, on the very point of taking possession, De La Salle saw himself deprived of it. Yet it would seem that heaven had indeed intended it for him, because when he had taken it over, it was neglected and in disrepair, and it returned to this condition in a short while after he left. The one who bought it so cheaply

was not able to adapt it to his requirements, so he sold it, and its last owner neglected the property so much that it has become entirely desolate. True, common gossip maintains that the place is haunted. This has given the house a bad name and may be one reason why it remains unoccupied. However, the ghosts never bothered the Brothers; only after the Brothers' departure did the ghosts begin to cause problems for the new inhabitants, as we shall relate.

The lease lost, De La Salle is allowed to remain a short time

So, the pious legacy, which had so opportunely come to De La Salle for the purchase of a house he so much longed to have, fell through. This left him and his community on the street, so to speak, for the house was sold, and the purchaser told De La Salle that he had to leave. That new misfortune happened about seven months after the difficulties that had embroiled De La Salle with the archbishop. Although he had been restored to the prelate's good graces, he had not been able to conclude peace with the enemy who had declared war on him. He found at least some advantage in having to give up a house which heaven had so visibly intended for him and which his enemy had so unjustly deprived him of, for the move placed considerable distance between them and kept the enemy's emissary away from the Brothers.

A fresh problem arose. Where could the Founder go on leaving the Grande Maison? The servant of God was caught in a difficult situation, for the new proprietor wanted the Brothers out of his house as soon as possible, so that he could lease it to others. He, therefore, insisted that the Brothers and their Superior must get out. The latter did not know where to turn, for he was at the end of his resources. But Divine Providence, which never abandoned them, arranged things so that nobody offered to rent the house.

De La Salle, taking advantage of this delay, begged the new proprietor, a worthy man, to give him time to look for another house suitable for his Brothers. The owner agreed and did not even ask him to pay rent for the time he remained. The only conditions he placed were that the Brothers should not gather the fruit from the large orchard and that they should give lodging to the gardener and his small family. The gardener, eager to look out for his master's interests as well as for his own, chose for his lodging a spot which gave him an uninterrupted view of the orchard, and there he established himself as a sort of sentinel to keep close watch over the fruit.

The house, reputed to be haunted, proves difficult to rent

It would seem that this unflattering suspicion with regard to so mortified a community was not to the liking of the ghosts who, it was said, put in an appearance from time to time. They undertook to make the gardener and his family move out without delay. The fact was that his choice of that particular section in which to live was a source of considerable annoyance for the Brothers. Apparently, the ghosts were zealous for regularity, and were displeased that a family of lay people had come to interfere with it.

According to the account left by two virtuous but perhaps somewhat naive Brothers, it was a Sister Saint Fiacre, one of the nuns buried in the vault beneath the chapel, who made the most racket. She was spending her purgatory there, as she herself revealed to the two Brothers when she told them her name. They saw her often and spoke with her. The two good Brothers believed that they did so and would have been shocked had anyone relegated their visions and conversations to the realm of reveries and fairy tales. It was, no doubt, to put their imaginations to rest that De La Salle said a *Requiem* Mass for the repose of the soul of that religious and had all the Brothers receive Communion for the same intention. However, all their prayers did not banish her from the place. She still appeared to the two faithful believers.

The very first night, she caused great commotion in the room occupied by the new guests, whom she did not regard with a favorable eye; it was always at night that the living saw the dead come back among them. The shades of night are more propitious than broad daylight to inspire dreams or to make them seem more plausible. Before the Sister's ghost made any noise, she would let these good people go to bed quietly, hoping to enjoy a restful night. She would start her operations when they had scarcely shut their eyes. She woke them up by upsetting everything in the room so that they could not sleep any longer. Everything was turned topsy-turvy: dishes, sideboards, chairs, clothespresses, and other pieces of furniture. She did more than that. After having maliciously surprised those unbidden guests in the darkness when they were first falling asleep, she took their little baby and laid him down in the middle of the room. That new occurrence made those people find the night very long indeed, frightened as they were half to death. They waited only until day returned in order to clear out.

Still, daylight sometimes brings back common sense by curing excessive fear or an overactive imagination. The gardener, who with

daylight recovered some of his courage, resolved to sleep soundly the next night, hoping that he would experience no unpleasant dreams or that he would at least be better prepared to withstand the visits of a ghost. But in vain did he propose to fight it out with the phantom. He had to give in and yield the place without delay. He then moved to some rooms above the stables that were behind the main wing of the building, a long way from where the Brothers lodged. The ghost, satisfied after the retreat of the gardener, left him alone.

This poor fellow, having been severely punished for wanting to intrude among the Brothers and for having suspected their honesty, was no longer tempted to stand watch over them and was even happier to leave their quarters than they were to have him go. The ghost, the friend of the Brothers, wished to indicate her displeasure when they finally left and tried as best she could to prevent their leaving. While they were all looking on, she shook the last wagon carrying their furniture for the length of time it takes to say a *Miserere* and did it so violently that the conveyance was about to topple over. At least that is what some of the Brothers thought they saw while the wagon stood at the door with nobody anywhere around it.

### De La Salle moves to the Faubourg Saint Antoine in 1703

Having taken advantage of the new owner's charity for about six weeks, De La Salle finally left the Grande Maison on 20 August 1703 and went to occupy another, much less convenient building on the rue de Charonne in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, not far from the convent of the Sisters of the Cross. The expense occasioned by the move, which was considerable because of the distance between the two houses, left his poorest of communities a prey to real misery. The holy Founder had rented the new dwelling with the advice and consent of the pastor of Saint Paul's parish, to which the Faubourg Saint Antoine then belonged. When he had gone to pay his respects to the pastor and to ask for his approval, De La Salle had been received most cordially. The pastor knew of the pious Founder and was delighted to have him in his parish. He agreed with and approved his project and told him very frankly that while he was not in favor of new establishments and had in fact turned several away from his parish, he wished to go on record as favoring this one and would grant it his patronage.

It does not seem that De La Salle took a lease on that house, where he remained only about a year and a half. It was as though he could foresee that he would have to leave it before long. Nor did he

request permission to celebrate Mass there, either because he was inspired not to do so or because he had at his disposal, just across the street, the chapel belonging to the Sisters of the Cross, where he said Mass and whither he brought the Brothers to hear it and to receive Communion on the appointed days. Distance did not prevent the Brothers teaching in the schools from spending their Sundays and feast days at the novitiate, as had been customary. The fervor that filled them on those occasions and the joy they felt in being under the eyes of their beloved father made the long trip from one end of the Faubourg Saint Germain to the farther end of the Faubourg Saint Antoine seem short to them.

Although the holy priest was careful to remain in obscurity and never sought to attract special attention, an air of holiness distinguished him, especially when he stood at the altar. His fervor at such times betrayed his humility, and by disclosing the piety which shone on his countenance, it revealed that he was one of God's favored friends. The Sisters of the convent did not take long to notice this. Majesty, piety, and recollection accompanied him to the altar and by making them understand who the unknown priest was, inspired them with a vehement desire to profit by his presence. At first, the curiosity so natural to Sisters made them eager to attend his Mass and see him celebrate. For them he was a prodigy of devotion, renewed day after day, which stirred up their own fervor. They fancied that they beheld an angel exercising the sacred function. Later, several of them wished to place themselves under his spiritual direction and earnestly begged for this favor.

### The Sisters' charity toward the Brothers

Such a request was not much to the pious Founder's liking. He had always been reluctant to assume the spiritual direction of outsiders, especially of nuns, whose guidance required more leisure than the government of his Community left him. But these good Sisters obliged him, in a sense, to grant them out of gratitude a favor which he might have found many good reasons for refusing. This charitable group of Sisters showed itself the main resource of the new Institute and its principal source of funds from 1703 until De la Salle left for the south of France in 1711. That was how Divine Providence supplied the needs of the one who abandoned himself to God's care. God is admirable in his designs and incomprehensible in the means he uses to sanctify his servants. De La Salle, abandoned by his best and oldest friends, found new ones whom he had not previously known, when

he took refuge in one of the remotest corners of Paris. Obligated like the prophet Elias to flee before persecution, he found these Sisters who seemed to have received from God the order to nourish his own, just as the widow of Sareptha had been predestined to feed Elias.

Those charitable religious women did not give the servant of God time to explain his needs. They spontaneously offered their help when they were informed by various persons of the Brothers' necessities, and they gave him abundant alms to provide for his family, which had been transplanted from one end of the city to the other and which, unknown and unappreciated, was suffering all the privations attendant on poverty. The generosity of these Sisters followed De La Salle wherever he went with his sons. Persecution, which sought him out everywhere, did not take long to drive him from the Faubourg Saint Antoine, after having made him leave the Faubourg Saint Germain. The charity of the Sisters did not limit itself to their own neighborhood, and the departure of the servant of God did not cause it to dry up. Distance did not bring about any change in the dispositions of their hearts.

Even the disasters and calamities brought on in 1709 by famine and the prolonged winter did not diminish the generosity of the Sisters of the Cross. The Founder found in them an assured source of help to keep the Brothers from dying when hunger and cold threatened their lives. In those dark days, these saintly women used their resources to help a Community reduced to the last extremity. As if they had resolved to make their own funds common between them, they shared all they had with the saintly priest. The novitiate was then at Saint Yon, just outside the gates of Rouen, and the novices were suffering complete abandonment and were prey to the deepest want. In so rich a city, hearts and purses were closed to men who for several years had been gratuitously serving the children of the poor. No one took pity on them; they met with nothing but rejection and scorn from the great whose charity they humbly solicited. They would have perished of cold and hunger if De La Salle had left them any longer a prey to the forgetful and hard hearts of the public.

In Paris, where virtue reigns at the same time as vice, a goodly number of the inhabitants practice truly munificent charity with open and generous hearts. Although it is the showplace of all the distresses of the kingdom, which seem concentrated there, the capital appeared to the holy priest a more secure refuge against the hardships of the times than did a provincial city like Rouen, which is wealthy indeed, but where alms drop from the hands of the rich only in strict measure after long seeking and with great deliberation. So he brought his



novices back to Paris from Saint Yon, hoping to find in the capital hearts more easily touched by the needs of his children. In this he was not disappointed, because he secured from this one convent of the Sisters of the Cross more assistance than he had in the flourishing capital of Normandy.

When the servant of God was at the end of his resources, saying with a smile, *Let us go to the Cross*, he would make his way to his benefactresses and shortly would return bearing their liberalities. As soon as those kind religious saw him, they did not give him time to open his mouth to explain his predicament but hastened to share what they had with him, and they did so more in proportion to their charity than to their wealth. This recognition we give here is only what is due to such a charitable group of religious women in this history of the Founder of the Christian Schools.

### Terrible persecution by the schoolmasters and writing masters

Once De La Salle had taken up residence in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, he did not remain undisturbed for very long. The schoolmasters declared war on him again with renewed fury, and this time successfully, because the parish priest of Saint Sulpice no longer shielded the Founder from their attacks. It was De La Chétardie who had given orders that the Christian Schools should admit indiscriminately all children who requested gratuitous instruction. His order was right, for who can distinguish in a great city the families which can afford to pay the teachers' fees from those that cannot? But it was precisely the decision to admit to the Gratuitous Schools all the children who wished to enter that disturbed the Parisian schoolmasters. That in one hundred poor children who frequented the Christian Schools, three or four might be found belonging to families in easy circumstances was all the reason the masters needed to cause trouble for the Brothers and pitilessly to close down all their classes. The schoolmasters' pretensions might have been judged reasonable by the public if, while requiring fees from the children of well-to-do families whom they instructed, they had been willing to teach gratuitously the ones unable to pay.

But did they ever do so? They would have been very reluctant to admit to their schools a crowd of children who could bring nothing with them but vermin. They would have thought that such charity might injure their own interests by driving away from their classes the children who brought in all the profit. If the schoolmasters had been willing, out of a sense of equity, to apply their own rules to the

Gratuitous Schools, they would have concluded that their own establishments were not being harmed by those of the Brothers, since the latter were filled only by the children with whom their own paying pupils would not associate.

However, as people grow suspicious when their financial interests are threatened and forge vain and fantastic prejudices for themselves, the schoolmasters remained convinced that the Brothers were cutting into their own revenues, because they taught all children free. Consequently, they always entertained against them a certain amount of ill feeling, which was ready to break out on the slightest provocation. Held in check by the influence of De La Chétardie, who had the authority to enforce the orders he had given, the schoolmasters did not dare cause any trouble; when they had ventured to do so, they had been made to regret it and thereafter kept quiet. They remained firmly resolved, however, to reopen hostilities as soon as the death or the disaffection of the Brothers' protector might give them an opening. They thought they perceived such an opportunity in the indifference that the pastor of Saint Sulpice began to exhibit toward the new Institute. He had let the novitiate leave the Grande Maison and had not tried to keep it in his parish. He no longer had much to do with the Superior of the Brothers and seemed to have lost all confidence in him. His generosity toward the Community had all but dried up, and his zeal for the Gratuitous Schools seemed exhausted.

All this the schoolmasters learned through the grapevine. After having verified these facts, they realized that they no longer had anything to fear from the man against whom they had most to be on guard and who had been the Brothers' staunchest defender. They did even more. To sound out his dispositions, they sent a numerous delegation to him and omitted nothing to make him feel sorry for them. They explained that the protection which he had up to then given to the Gratuitous Schools had caused the latter to be filled by children from their own schools. By offering free instruction to the poor children, he had taken the bread from the mouths of the schoolmasters and their families, thus increasing the number of the poor in the parish. We do not know how De La Chétardie replied, but if we may surmise, basing our opinion on what happened later, he seems to have listened to them favorably. By not opposing their schemes, he gave them free rein to dare all and to undertake whatever they liked.

The new campaign began with a complaint addressed to the lieutenant of police, dated January 1704. The schoolmasters<sup>1</sup> complained of the activities carried on by De La Salle, a priest, and by several other individuals whose Superior he claimed to be. It was charged that

these men, without any authorization or qualifications, conducted various schools under the pretext of charity. The complainants begged that the abuses which had been introduced to their detriment be stopped. They added that even if it were true that the Brothers had the right to teach in the Charity Schools, they should be obliged to admit none but the truly poor students. Far from abiding by this rule, however, they had admitted to the more than twenty schools<sup>2</sup> that they conducted in Paris and its faubourgs all the children who sought admission, whatever the social class, zone, or parish to which they might belong.

To prove their assertions, the schoolmasters joined to their petition a list of the names, professions, and addresses of the parents of the students who, according to them, did not need to have recourse to charity. The main ones were these: a man living on the revenues from his investments, two surgeons, one butcher, a locksmith, a wine merchant, a grocer, a jeweler, and two restaurant owners. All of these, they claimed, were people in easy circumstances.

I suppose that the schoolmasters had inventoried the possessions of all those people and, penetrating their family secrets, had made the heads of the households give them an exact account of their income. Without such information provided in due form, how could the schoolmasters assure the judge that these people who, they claimed, were in easy circumstances were actually such? How often do the walls of a house disguise seriously straitened circumstances which remain unknown to the public? How many indigent people suffer in secret the hardships of poverty while having a reputation of being well-off? This petition, filled with false allegations, was nevertheless believed. Consequently, the lieutenant of police allowed the schoolmasters to cite the Brothers and their Superior before the court. This was done without delay.

De La Salle could have easily defended himself by pointing out 1) that he was authorized by His Eminence to direct a Community of Brothers for teaching in Christian and Gratuitous Schools; 2) that this authorization made him their Superior and empowered him to open the Gratuitous Schools; 3) that it was not possible either for him or for

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1. The complaint was lodged by the writing masters, who were under the protection of the police, not by the schoolmasters, who were under the diocesan precentor. The judgments of the court described in this chapter applied to the writing masters.

2. The figure is erroneous. The Brothers did not have more than six or seven schools in Paris at the time. Possibly the number refers to classes rather than to schools.

the Brothers to identify from the large number of poor children who came seeking a free education those who might belong to fairly well-to-do families; 4) that even if it were possible to do this, he could not judge fairly and equitably about their financial position without having made a juridical inquiry into their possessions and income; 5) that since he had no right to make any such inquiry, it would be highly rash of him to pass judgment on a matter so hidden, private, and difficult to determine; 6) that if he and the Brothers undertook to discriminate between rich and poor children, not only would they run the risk of making mistakes, but they would also be open to all sorts of insults and outrages; 7) that the fact that some people are called surgeons, masons, butchers, locksmiths, wine merchants, and so on does not imply that all of them are, in fact, in easy circumstances; many poor people exercise these same roles; 8) that some of those listed as wealthy might have large families to provide for, something that soon exhausts the resources of those who live by a trade or who have only a limited income; 9) that illness, business reverses, and other misfortunes bring every day to the poorhouse people who belong to all those professions and who, moreover, are both skilled and diligent workers. 10) He would have embarrassed the schoolmasters a good deal if he had asked them whether they were willing to go bond for the fortune they attributed to those whom they had listed among the rich and whether they were ready to pay out of their own purses what might be wanting to those people whose wealth they had exaggerated. 11) As a final argument, he might have suggested that there was little likelihood that parents who were rich or well-off would be willing to send their children to schools frequented by the sons of soldiers, hod carriers, wheelbarrow pushers, and other members of the lowest classes of society.

#### De La Salle is again condemned without defending himself

Such replies, so apt to reduce the schoolmasters to silence, were not employed by a man who felt that in the circumstances, he should say nothing and let those speak up whose responsibility it was to do so. De La Salle believed that the cause of the Gratuitous Schools was not one that concerned him personally but was one affecting the relationship of the public and the poor. Therefore he felt that it was not up to him to answer the summons, and he declined to appear in court. The writing masters<sup>3</sup> did not fail to make the most of this inaction, and they pressed the charges vigorously. As neither De La Salle nor any of his followers appeared in court, they were condemned by default on

22 February 1704. The sentence forbade them to admit to the Charity Schools any children but those whose fathers were genuine paupers and certified as such, and nothing was to be taught them except what was considered proper to their families' social standing. In addition, De La Salle was condemned to pay the costs and a fine of fifty livres; the same fine was levied against each of the Brothers.

This sentence, which gave the writing masters everything they wanted and which caused so much injury to the Charity Schools, did not intimidate the holy Founder and did not keep the Brothers from proceeding with their teaching as usual. We do not know whether or not De La Salle ever paid the fine. In all likelihood, the writing masters had to be content with the hope of collecting it some day and had to wait for the reimbursement of the costs until the Brothers' fortunes took a turn for the better. For the time being, the Brothers, more deserving of pity than of envy, gave their rivals no hope of recovering these expenses for the lawsuit from a Community which lived on alms and whose extreme poverty placed it out of reach of any pecuniary exactions.

Things remained as they were for the next three months, after which the writing masters presented to the lieutenant of police a new complaint, dated 7 June 1704. In it they reiterated all the accusations already made against De La Salle and his disciples. In addition, they charged him with infringing the terms of the judgment rendered on 22 February. They asked that the sentence be carried out with a fine of 500 livres for damages and interest levied against each of the guilty parties. In addition, they demanded that De La Salle be immediately fined 2,000 livres for damages and interest done to the community of writing masters, on account of the considerable injustices he had caused them. Finally, they demanded that all parents owning property and consequently not authorized to benefit by the establishment of the Charity Schools should be forbidden to send their children to such schools or to have them taught by any persons other than those publicly authorized to fulfill such functions.

They further asked that the new sentence be publicized by being affixed in public places wherever necessary and that the culprits be cited to appear in court. All this was carried out. The new citation, however, did not succeed in making De La Salle break his silence or appear in court. The case being that of the public and of the poor, he

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3. Blain suddenly writes "writing masters," whereas up to this point, he had been erroneously calling the adversaries of the Founder at this stage "schoolmasters."

felt that it was up to the magistrates themselves, responsible for safeguarding and preserving the common good, to defend it. Perhaps he thought that since he lacked all influential friends and highly placed protectors, the courts would inevitably condemn him if he appeared and tried to defend the rights of the poor in his own name. His silence resulted in complete victory for his enemies. They finally obtained what they had wanted all along: the condemnation of De La Salle and the Brothers by default. The sentence issued against them on 22 February was confirmed. For having violated its terms, De La Salle was fined 100 livres; each Brother teaching in the schools was fined 50 livres for damages and interest, to be paid to the guild of the writing masters, in addition to the costs of the proceedings.

Fathers whose children did not need to frequent the Charity Schools were forbidden to send their offspring there to learn how to write, under penalty of paying fines, costs, damages, and interest to the said community, that is, of the writing masters. In addition, Sieur<sup>4</sup> de La Salle was ordered to remove within three days the sign which he had placed over the door of his house in the Faubourg Saint Antoine—indicating that in it he was training Brothers or schoolmasters—without authorization to do so by any duly registered letters patent. The sign which so offended the eyes of the writing masters bore only the simple words, *Brothers of the Christian Schools*. It had been there ever since the school opened. The sentence of the court was immediately posted in the public squares in all the sections of Paris where the Brothers had classes. The posters were no longer there the next day, thanks to the efforts of several zealous persons, indignant over the harm this sentence had done to the most necessary initiative of all for poor, neglected Christian children.

In vain the writing masters multiplied their expenses and demanded fines and reimbursement from a Community and a man who, because of their extreme poverty, were in no position to pay anything. However, if they could get no money from the Brothers, they at least enjoyed the churlish satisfaction of sending people to attack them with ladders, hammers, and other tools used in pillage. The sign was torn down and the benches, tables, books, and all the other material used for teaching drawing, reading, and writing to over 200 young men on Sunday and feast day afternoons were carted off in wagons, all without meeting any resistance. De La Salle and the Brothers witnessed the vandalizing of their establishment without complaining or trying to stop the marauders.

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4. The address is insulting; Monsieur is the proper address to a priest.

Quite soon, the noise that the pillage created alerted the Sisters of the Cross and enabled them from their convent to take notice of what was going on. In vain did their tears flow unchecked on beholding such a spectacle. The sight was indeed unusual. A charitable institution, having nothing but the public good as its object, uniquely dedicated to the gratuitous instruction of poor children, was requited for its efforts by being vandalized. It was indeed a spectacle deserving tears, and they were not spared. People looked on with astonishment and compassion as the house was besieged as though by the enemy and then devastated as though it were conquered territory. Right-minded people bewailed what was happening. The poor, those most directly interested, realized that it was they, rather than the Brothers, who were being victimized. But they did not dare make a public outcry or manifest their complaints outwardly. They joined indignation to their complaints, and it was the public, so deeply interested in the fate of the Charity Schools, that caused those who had won the case in court to lose it in the long run because of such violent and unjustified behavior.

The Sunday School, after enjoying remarkable success for some six years, came to an end as a result of this devastation. The good results it produced cause its loss to be regretted even to this day by all those who love what is good and who care about the salvation of souls. Eagerness to learn drawing, geometry, mathematics, penmanship, arithmetic, and reading drew to it from all over Paris a large number of young men, belonging to various trades, who had neither the money to pay for such schooling nor the time to devote to it except on Sunday and feast day afternoons. They reaped the double advantage of becoming better Christians while becoming better workers, for pious exercises sanctified their hearts after their minds had been cultivated by good teaching.

These young men were kept away from dangerous companionship, cabarets, and other dens of debauchery. They learned how to participate in religious services. They lost all taste for vice while acquiring a liking for piety. The salutary instructions they received opened their eyes to the evil of their past life and inspired them with horror for their sinful ways. General confessions and the reception of the sacraments were likewise promoted, and the final result was a life changed for the better. That is what the public lost when the Sunday School was ruined. Jealousy, rather than pecuniary considerations, had led the writing masters to seek its destruction, because there is no doubt that none of the young workingmen who came from far and near to this school had any desire, let alone the chance, to spend part

of their time and money for lessons that they would have had to pay for.

Hence the complaint formulated by the writing masters in their petition against this school was totally unfounded. According to them, it was causing them serious financial loss. What loss could they suffer if the Sunday School did have in its classes these youths who had neither money to give them nor time to attend classes which are open only on working days? The regret occasioned by the disappearance of that good work, the Sunday School, has not yet vanished from Paris. People still desire very earnestly to see it re-established. Every now and then, passersby stop the Brothers and ask when they plan to re-open the Sunday School.

But all the troubles fomented by the writing masters were only the prelude to the gathering tempest which soon burst upon the Founder and his Institute. De La Salle could foresee that the attack on the schools in the Faubourg Saint Antoine would extend with even greater violence to those in the Faubourg Saint Germain. He prepared for another onslaught with invincible courage, and when it came, it found him as immovable as a rock.

## CHAPTER II

*The Brothers are called to Marseille to conduct  
Charity Schools, then to Darnétal, near Rouen, and  
finally to Rouen itself.*

The newly formed Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, almost strangled to death in Paris, went elsewhere in search of breathing space. The winds of persecution drove De La Salle from Paris and brought his Institute to various places: Marseille, Rouen, and Dijon, three of the most flourishing cities in the kingdom. We have already related the beginnings of the school in Avignon. In a short time, it became so well known that it led to the opening of an establishment in Marseille.

The order, the silence, and the modesty which could be observed in the Brothers' classes, with a school population made up of naturally boisterous, giddy, and stubborn children incapable of sustained attention, were sights people never grew tired of. The townsfolk came to the school to satisfy their curiosity and to see the urchins, so prone to cutting up, soon become recollected and attentive to the lessons



that were given to them with such great economy of words. Strangers in Avignon were led to visit the schools when they heard of the unusual spectacle they offered. Friends brought them to see for themselves, if they appeared to possess a certain amount of piety and might be inclined to further the interests of religion.

Messieurs Morelet and Jourdan, two wealthy merchants of Marseille, who were also gentlemen of exemplary piety, had the pleasure of seeing with their own eyes and of verifying whether all that they had heard in praise of the Brothers was true and whether or not there was anything exaggerated in the reputation they enjoyed. Having witnessed in person the way the classes were arranged, the discipline in force among the students, and the assiduity of the teachers, they remained greatly edified by the atmosphere of piety which pervaded all of the school activities, and they were delighted over the new method of teaching with so few words and by the use of signals. Accordingly, they felt inspired to help Marseille share in the good fortune of Avignon.

### The foundation in Marseille

When they went home, these two gentlemen spoke of their project to M. Trovillard, who is at present vicar-general of Arles. He advised them to set up a committee of about a dozen persons to work together to raise the 400 livres a year needed for the living expenses of two Brothers. The proposal was approved as soon as made, and it was carried out without delay. De La Salle immediately sent from Paris two Brothers, who on their arrival opened a school in the parish of Saint Laurent for the children of the sailors. They found a small building which was quite adequate and which was donated to them by one of the founders. The annual support of the two Brothers came out of the resources of the charitable gentlemen who had procured them; to make sure that their support would continue, most of them took care to leave enough capital in their wills.

Monsieur Jourdan did not long survive the foundation of the school which he and Morelet had started, but he did leave it two zealous protectors: namely, his father and his brother, the prior of the parish of Saint Laurent. On his deathbed, the prior entreated them to take the interests of this school to heart and to replace him in order to assure its progress. They have done so with great zeal in imitation of his example.

That school, opened in 1704, just when the greatest upheavals were threatening De La Salle and his new Society, succeeded just as all the others did, but for a long time the parish of Saint Laurent was

the only one that benefited by the Brothers' efforts. Marseille, rich and populous as it is, where it should have been easy to multiply such necessary foundations, had only one Brothers' school for sixteen years. More than once, plans were made to found others, plans which were actually attempted at the time De La Salle visited the city, but only after his death did the project succeed. God willed that the saintly Founder should water this opulent city with his sweat and sow in it the seeds of his virtues and sufferings before his Community could reap a harvest there.

#### Additional foundations come later<sup>5</sup>

From 1704 to 1720, the school of Saint Laurent was the only one the Brothers had in Marseille. Only after a horrible pestilence which carried off the greater part of the inhabitants was it decided to establish other schools. The epidemic, which caused new ravages and presented new spectacles of desolation day after day, did not spare the two Brothers. One died, and the other, having returned by a sort of miracle from the very jaws of death, employed the life God had given back to him in serving the people in his area stricken by the pestilence.

Then the illustrious and charitable prelate, Monsieur H. F. Xavier de Belsunce de Castel Moron, who had been acting in Marseille as Saint Charles had acted in Milan during the pestilence there, resolved to put the crowning touch on all the examples of charity and virtue which he had given during this time of horror in the city by establishing new Charity Schools in the four other parishes of the metropolis. Several pious persons contributed thereto, M. Morelet among others. This virtuous merchant, who placed the largest share of his wealth in reserve for eternity by devoting it to good works, had always shown outstanding zeal for the instruction of youth. He had already founded in his own parish a school which was called *La Major* and had put an ecclesiastic in charge of it. Subsequently, he found another position for the cleric and entrusted the school to two Brothers, after setting aside a sufficient revenue for their upkeep, which he later augmented by forty livres a year.

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5. That is, after the Founder's death.

### The Brothers involved in the hospice for the poor

All the parishes of Marseille were then provided with Brothers engaged in the instruction of the poor children of the city; it was only right that those children living at the town hospice should be afforded the same privilege. Some years later, in fact, the administrators of that institution took steps to provide such an advantage to those children. For that purpose, they invoked the influence of their pious bishop and enlisted the help of his zeal, ever favorable to the instruction of the ignorant. The project, however, presented various difficulties: in the mind of the Brother Superior at the time, a number of objections and dangers militated against his desire to cooperate with the administrators of the establishment. He was afraid that if the Brothers became involved with outsiders having a different mentality and a different profession, they would become the objects either of their envy and aversion if they took part in the governing of the establishment or of their scorn and criticism if they had no positions of authority. He feared even more that Brothers mingling with the secular people in this institution might, through too close a contact, become overly familiar with them, imitate them, and become like them. When Jews live in proximity with the Gentiles, they imitate their example and learn to live like them. It is precisely what too often happens to those who by vocation are supposed to remain apart from the world but who find themselves in close contact with secular people. Little by little, they lose the spirit of retirement, recollection, and mortification and instead become filled with the spirit of the world, which they had so much trouble in getting rid of.

Still, the gentlemen on the committee, desiring with such laudable eagerness to see the Brothers assume the care and education of the children in this institution, insisted so strongly that the Superior could not turn them down. On their side, they were kind enough to agree to the conditions he specified—wise precautions destined to keep the Brothers in perfect regularity. After all, only time would show what the Brothers' virtue had to fear in a situation which, while conforming to certain rules, was still not a religious Community and what good they could do in an establishment where order, subordination, and piety had not, as a rule, struck deep roots into hearts and where servile fear, human respect, and self-interest were the primary motives that actuated those who lived and labored there.

If the Brothers wished to avoid envy and jealousy, which are found everywhere, they would need to secure the goodwill of those in charge without flattering their passions, to uphold their authority

over the children whom they instructed, so that nobody could undertake to deprive them of it, to win the respect even of those whom they could not win over, and to live a life of solitude in the midst of boisterous and undisciplined youngsters. To do all this, the Brothers needed to act with great caution and singular prudence. In any event, if the passions of others and human malice made it impossible for them to do any good in such a place where there was so much to be done and obliged them to withdraw from a situation which they had entered only with reluctance, the experience would be a proof for them that their special charism was not for work in such poorhouses.

What we have been saying demonstrates the enthusiasm that the city of Marseille has displayed for the founding of Gratuitous Schools. Sixteen Brothers, working in various sections of the town, are teaching the children of the poor with great success. Their needs are provided for by foundations which, at the present time, the city council and the magistrates have in their charity undertaken to augment by an annual grant of 800 livres. With that in mind, the officials drew up a petition to secure the court's approval and asked Brother Superior to present it to Cardinal de Fleury.

In addition, since the Brothers were too crowded in the house they occupied, the gentlemen belonging to the illustrious Confraternity of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, composed of the principal merchants of the town, provided them with a beautiful and commodious house, nearly completely furnished, which is called the House of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Finally, so that nothing might be lacking to provide the Brothers in Marseille with fully established status, in 1727 they were accepted by the bishop and the city authorities into the communal corps of religious institutes. I do not think there is now another city in France where the Brothers have more reason to feel satisfied than in Marseille. It is not surprising that they entertain for that city the sentiments of deep gratitude which they seek to turn to the city's advantage by their prayers and supplications to the Lord. This is all we have to say for the moment about the establishment of the Christian Schools in that city.

#### In Paris, De La Salle receives invitations from Darnétal

Before following De La Salle to the capital of Normandy, where he will encounter new crosses and establish new foundations, we must return to him in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, where he grieved over the destruction of the establishment which the writing masters had just closed. Seeing that his Sunday School was ruined, the man of

God resolved to leave a house where he had nothing more to do and a city where he found only enemies. He foresaw that the storm would move over from the Faubourg Saint Antoine to the Faubourg Saint Germain and would cause the same havoc in the Brothers' schools there, since nobody seemed interested in opposing the machinations of his enemies.

The Founder had already received, on two occasions, letters inviting him to Rouen. He felt inclined to go there, and the situation in which he now found himself invited him to do so. His poverty, as stringent as ever, did not allow him to pay rent on a house he did not need. The furious assaults directed against his little congregation discouraged those who wished to enter. Persecution had frightened off most of the novices, so that only a few remained with him. To cap it all, De La Salle still owned the considerable pile of furnishings given to him by Madame Voisin, but he did not know where to store it all. Divine Providence, which never forgot him, inspired a pious person to let him use a large empty warehouse, where he stored most of the furniture. After having transported, as quietly as possible, the few items that he needed to the Brothers' house in the parish of Saint Sulpice, he went to live there with the novices, who were few indeed at the beginning of 1705.

He did not stay there very long, because an opportunity of leaving, which he longed for, soon presented itself. He was asked to send two Brothers to take charge of a school in the parish of Saint Roch. He was delighted with the invitation, sent the Brothers, and went to live with them, along with two or three priests; he always had several priests with him in the various places where he resided. That school did not last very long, only two or three years, and then young student teachers were put in place of the Brothers. The reason was that the Brothers were required to be present during the catechism lessons which the parish clergy taught in the church; they were supposed to keep order, silence, and discipline among the children. The idea was perhaps not such a bad one, but it was hardly appropriate for men bound to a regular life, who by fulfilling this function, were exposed to great distractions and had to omit many of their exercises of piety.

As far back as September 1704, De La Salle had received letters from Rouen requesting him to take charge of a school at Darnétal, a large village just outside Rouen. That locality was thickly populated and widely known for making cloth. It was there, many years previously, that Madame Maillefer had founded a Gratuitous School for girls. A schoolmaster for boys in the town was supported by gentlemen

belonging to the Congregation of the Jesuits.<sup>6</sup> The teacher had recently died, and they were looking for a replacement. Abbé Deshayes, a member of this sodality and presently the parish priest of Saint Sauveur, gave these gentlemen such a glowing account of the Brothers and of their Superior, whom he had known at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, that he won their approval for his plan. Therefore they agreed to ask for two Brothers, if they would be satisfied with a stipend of fifty écus and the lodgings previously occupied by the deceased teacher.

Abbé Deshayes, who was asked to handle the negotiations, forwarded the proposal to the servant of God in Paris through M. Chardon de Lagny, a priest who resided in the community of the parish of Saint Sulpice, where he had charge of the converted Protestants in that parish, a mission he continued to fulfill until his death. Having been a Protestant himself, he knew all about such people. In fact, he carried out this ministry with zeal and success. He even composed seven or eight duodecimo volumes on many topics, very learnedly written and carefully researched. The one entitled *Treatise on Communion Under Both Species* is among the best he wrote; in it, he lays bare the deceit and bad faith of the Protestants, who claim that the use of both species is essential.

Only a man as detached from monetary considerations as De La Salle would have accepted such a proposal, for while asking him for two Brothers, they were really leaving him the responsibility of supporting them. They wanted two Brothers, yet they offered only the modest salary of the deceased teacher, which was barely enough for one man. Thus, when he agreed to their request, the servant of God had to rely on some other source of income than on the gentlemen of the Jesuit Congregation. He was right in so doing, for this foundation petered out a few years later, as we shall see. He counted only on Divine Providence, because he saw clearly that he would have to abandon his disciples to God's care if he wished to establish them in the capital of Normandy.

It is indeed amazing that today there are twelve of them, ten of them teaching in the Gratuitous Schools, who for the past thirty years have been keeping these schools operating on pure charity. It is even more amazing that in such a wealthy city, no one has thought of endowing these schools, multiplying them, or even trying to help them. Most amazing of all, the Brothers during all this time have been so generally and constantly abandoned to their poverty that the alms

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6. Probably a sodality of former students of the Jesuits.

they have received have come from elsewhere. This is the only city in the kingdom where no attention has been paid to the need for the Brothers' schools and to the great contribution they make to the public weal. However, this place where they were so despised and neglected is the one which Divine Providence chose to be the theatre of the greatest blessings poured out on them, as we shall see.

Another difficulty might have hindered De La Salle from agreeing with the proposal made to him. He had always held to the inviolable rule of not accepting foundations in country places, because he considered these dangerous to the salvation of the Brothers. They might have found, in their isolation and away from the companionship and the example of the other Brothers, more liberty and more occasions for falling into relaxation. But this difficulty vanished as soon as the Founder learned more about the locality where his disciples were wanted. He found out that Darnétal is contiguous to Rouen and that the town is more wealthy and populous than many other places that call themselves cities. Moreover, De La Salle foresaw that once the Brothers were established at the gates of Rouen, they would soon enter the city itself and that they would be invited there as soon as people learned about their methods of teaching and educating the young.

In fact, De La Salle felt a holy desire to establish himself in Rouen; he had thought of that ever since the founding of his Institute. Rouen seemed, in a way, the root from which the Institute had sprung, and it was only fair that it should reap some benefit from it. M. Nyel had conducted the Charity Schools in Rouen before going to found the first one in Reims. It was the saintly Madame Maillefer who, while living in Rouen, had the idea of opening such schools in her native city and who had sent Nyel to undertake the project. It was, then, only natural that just as waters following their normal course always return to the sea from which they arose, the Brothers should come to take charge of the Christian Schools in the place where, so to speak, their Institute had been conceived.

### Opening of the school in Darnétal

Consequently, considering the city of Rouen as the origin of his Society, De La Salle thought he should serve it with generosity and entire disinterestedness. Unworried over food and clothing for his disciples, he agreed to everything requested by Monsieur Deshayes but with the specific reservation that the Brothers sent to Darnétal would limit themselves, as was the practice everywhere else, to their functions as teachers. He took this precaution because he feared that the Brothers

might be pressured into undertaking the various chores which the schoolmasters usually performed in country villages: singing the Offices, wearing the surplice, and assisting the parish priest in his ministry—all of which are functions forbidden to the Brothers by essential rules of their Institute. Any derogation from such rules would alter the Institute itself and modify its very nature. To that precaution, the wise Superior added a second: he sent a Brother to Darnétal to inspect the premises to see if they were adequate for a school and to reach an understanding with M. Deshayes about having the house and everything else ready. Once that was done, and after requesting the authorization of the archbishop of Rouen, De La Salle sent the two Brothers about the beginning of February 1705.

As soon as the school was opened, it was filled with students, and God's blessing entered along with them. Within two months, the good results were even more evident than they had been anywhere else. The reputation of the new school soon spread to Rouen. The zeal of certain worthy people was aroused, and they began to envy the neighboring village the advantage it possessed over the city. From then on, they resolved to establish the Brothers in Rouen, and that project was soon realized, as we shall see. It was what De La Salle had foreseen and even foretold. Hope had led him to accept the foundation at Darnétal, in spite of the minimal salary of fifty écus paid to the Brothers—and not very regularly at that. In fact, a few years later, the money stopped coming altogether. The people who had invited the Brothers neglected to provide for them, not only failing to pay the fifty écus but even declining to defray the cost of the major or minor repairs needed by the house. That was, people said, the penance deserved by the deceased parish priest of Longpaon for his revolt against the Constitution *Unigenitus*. But those who imposed such a penance on him did not seem to notice that it was not the appellant but the Brothers who had to suffer the consequences.

Since nothing happened but what De La Salle had foreseen and since in sending the Brothers to Darnétal, he had counted on God alone to provide for them, he considered that they had lost nothing in being deprived of their small salary, as long as they did not lose confidence in the Author of all good. With that in mind, he was unwilling to withdraw them from Darnétal when their salary was no longer paid. This school is still in operation today, even though its income is only seventy-five livres. The parish priest is deeply attached to the Brothers and has found ways to make up the difference by a collection taken up among the people every three months. The school is still as flourishing and well attended as it was at the beginning. No



sooner had it opened, as we have already mentioned, than it became an object of envy for Rouen, where its reputation spread and where the results it obtained spoke for it.

In the city, people began discussing the benefits of the Gratuitous Schools and the need for such establishments for the children of the poor, and steps were taken to secure them. The vicars-general were soon made aware of the interest and were urged to found some Charity Schools in Rouen. They thought well of the scheme and zealously recommended it to Monsieur Colbert, at that time the archbishop of Rouen. Fortunately, he had just arrived, toward the end of Lent, to confer Holy Orders. That prelate, who loved what was good and who judged more accurately than most what was solid and really worthwhile, appreciated the initiative at its true worth; next to the establishment of seminaries, no other good work outranked schools in his estimation. He showed that in his will, in which the only bequests he made went to his minor seminaries and to the community of school-mistresses which he had established at Ernemont.<sup>7</sup> Those were the establishments he had at heart above all others. They were his own foundations, which he considered of the first importance, of superior rank; hence, they were the only ones he enriched with his liberalities.

Being well disposed toward all great undertakings, the archbishop cooperated with the project of his vicars-general. Their plan was approved as soon as it was proposed. There are undertakings which need neither time nor long discussions to find adherence. As soon as they are broached, they win over the minds and hearts of those who have a real religious spirit, because of the great advantages and the valuable results they promise. The only question remaining, therefore, was how to get the Brothers to Rouen as soon as possible.

Archbishop Colbert felt renewed zeal for the execution of this project when he beheld at his feet the Brothers from Darnétal, who had come to pay him their respects and beg for his blessing. Well disposed toward them on account of all the favorable reports he had heard about them, he welcomed them with great kindness and expressed the desire to have other Brothers for his See city. The Darnétal school, which was just beginning and was already producing such good results, promised more of the same for Rouen and hence made the archbishop eager to secure the Brothers. Thus, when inquiring after the Brothers' Superior, he asked if the Founder could send some Brothers to Rouen to open Gratuitous Schools there. As De La Salle desired this no less than Colbert did, the Brothers, who were aware of

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7. Blain was the ecclesiastical superior of that diocesan community.

his wish, were not risking anything when they assured His Excellency that their Superior was indeed disposed to accede to his request.

De La Salle is summoned to Rouen by the archbishop

On hearing their response, Archbishop Colbert ordered Abbé Couet, his right-hand man, to write to De La Salle, asking him to come at once to Rouen—before the departure of the prelate, who was due to leave on Easter Monday for his clergy conference—in order to confer with him about a school to be run by the Brothers. The holy Founder's determination to transfer the novitiate from Paris to Rouen was apparently no secret, since Couet mentioned it in his letter, saying that he hoped to have a chance to collaborate with him in all that concerned his good work.

That letter, so favorable to the pious Founder's plans, reached him at a time when nothing in the world could have been more agreeable to him, for it came when, rejected on all sides and driven from his last refuge, he did not know where to turn or where to go with the wreck of his novitiate. He had to disappear from Paris, from the eyes of his declared or his hidden enemies, to quell the animosity of the one and to dissipate the prejudices of the other. The Brothers at Darnétal also wrote to the Founder, telling him of the success their school was enjoying, of the pious projects that it had given rise to, and of their visit to the archbishop and their conversation with him. They urged him to come in person, as soon as possible, in order to conclude what had been so auspiciously begun. He did so, traveling to Rouen by stagecoach.

He had no trouble in concluding the affair with the prelate, who in what concerns good works was quite incapable of raising difficulties but would rather remove them. De La Salle departed again, almost as soon as he had arrived, and went back to Paris to inform the Brothers whom he planned to send. On his side, the archbishop took up the matter with Monsieur de Pontcarré, the president of the parliament of Normandy, in order to conclude with him the arrangements needed to bring the plan to success. The project won the unqualified approval of that great magistrate, who possesses a brilliant mind and an eminent piety. De Pontcarré promised to back the plan with all his authority and all the efforts inspired by his zeal. He certainly kept his word, for he made himself more the father than merely the protector of the Institute, as the sequel was to show.

Archbishop Colbert's intention was not to found new Gratuitous Schools for the Brothers to operate but to put them in charge of those

that already existed, which Nyel had once directed and which came under the control of the administrators of the town hospice. The plan involved a good deal of difficulty. Great as was the influence in his diocese possessed by the archbishop, the son of one of the most eminent ministers that France ever had,<sup>8</sup> and great as was the advantage that his dignity gave him in the meeting of the council over which he presided, he would have despaired of securing approval for his project if he had not been able to count on the authority, zeal, and eloquence of De Pontcarré.

That outstanding magistrate speaks with such facility, wit, and grace that it is difficult to resist him and not to be led where he wishes to bring you. Such was the powerful asset provided by the president that the prudent prelate wished to utilize. He thought it would suffice for the head of parliament to appear and to address the meeting of the administrators, in order to win a unanimous vote of the members. With that in mind, they called a meeting at which both men were present. The archbishop explained what he had in mind, and the president displayed the oratorical talent he possessed, urging the adoption of the measure.

### Opposition to the proposal of the archbishop

Who could believe that such a pious design, so advantageous to the public, was not approved by the administrators when it was laid before them by the two principal men on the board? Their presence and authority alone, the simple expression of their desires, would no doubt have won unanimous agreement if anything else but a good work had been at stake. I do not know what malignant fatality makes it happen, but everything good, everything that involves the glory of God, must suffer contradiction. Was it because of some predisposition against all new establishments or the fear of seeing a strange community come into a city which considered itself overburdened with those already existing there? Was it concern over losing the vested right of naming the teachers in those schools, as though the positions were a sort of benefice? Was it secret aversion and antipathy for strangers? I really cannot say. Nevertheless, the archbishop's proposal surprised the administrators, and he, in turn, was no less astonished at their surprise. He had foreseen some objections, but he had not expected to find these men so apprehensive over the proposal he had just made,

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8. Colbert, the minister of finance in the early years of Louis XIV's reign, eventually fell into disfavor because he tried to curb the king's extravagance.

as though he wanted to introduce an enemy into the city. There was a certain amount of bafflement on both sides.

### The archbishop overcomes the objections

When they began to discuss the matter, the prelate tried to soften the prejudice in their minds by the solid arguments he advanced. He pointed out that the Brothers would not be a burden. The men whom he wished to invite into the city were not only good in themselves but also dedicated to the instruction and education of the poorest and most neglected children. His Excellency showed them the difference between, on the one hand, groups which are, so to speak, useless mouths in regard to the state, communities whose presence creates problems because they have to be supported by the localities where they exist, because they occupy extensive lands, because they possess vast wealth, and because of the scandalous and ill-regulated lives of some of their members and, on the other hand, institutes the immediate end of which is the public good, charity toward their neighbor, and especially the gratuitous service of the poorest and least fortunate members of society. He made them understand that debauchery, immorality, corruption of the lower classes, and disorders in the state that result therefrom all stem from a lack of instruction.

It was strange, he added, that one could find in a Christian country men who do not acknowledge God, who know nothing of Jesus Christ and his mysteries, who perhaps do not understand the difference between themselves and beasts, between vice and virtue, and who care nothing either for the science of salvation or for their civic duties, all because they have grown up without any religion or schooling, because no one has taken any interest in their education. The archbishop declared that it did not take prolonged reflection to realize how much the prince has to fear from subjects who do not fear God, how much the ordinary citizens suffer from men who are governed only by their bodily senses, and how little the state can hope for from people of whom the vast majority are blasphemous, intemperate, violent, and irreligious. Nobody can deny that such evils, the greatest affliction of the state as well as of the Church, have no other source than ignorance and bad education. He concluded that the state is no less interested than the Church in seeking a remedy for such problems and that the necessary and effective remedy was to establish Gratuitous Schools for those unable to pay for their instruction.

Such cogent arguments gave great weight to the pious cause for which the archbishop pleaded, and they should have made a deep

impression on the administrators, who are usually men of good sense and considerable merit. His pleas gradually brought them to where he wished to lead them and made them realize that as good citizens, as well as good Christians, they should be glad to have the Brothers and should promote, by love for the state as much as by the spirit of religion, an Institute so necessary for the public weal.

In addition, the Gratuitous Schools have endowments administered by the board, and the administrators have the right to name the teachers. The choice is theirs, but in conscience they are obliged to select the best ones available, the ones most capable of educating and instructing the children of the poor. Such a task is eminently suited to young clerics, but the funds available to pay them are not sufficient for their needs. The funds are likewise too modest to suffice for laymen who have some knowledge of the teaching profession. Each of the teachers has to live on what he is paid; if that is not enough, he has to make up the difference by outside undertakings, sometimes illegal ones. Thus, if a Charity School, supposed to be gratuitous, cannot provide the necessities of life to the teachers, they will try to supplement their income by other activities or by secretly demanding fees and other compensations, acts which do away with the gratuitous character of the school.

The result is that the purpose of such modest endowments is either not carried out at all or is poorly achieved. This reason alone, if carefully weighed, should settle the matter, but nowadays, he stated, people get up in arms as soon as you mention a community of men, and when it comes to concluding an agreement with them, people think they are binding themselves with chains. Yet only a community can guarantee to provide competent teachers for the schools on a permanent basis. Educated and trained with this in mind, the Brothers know far more about running schools than all the others who undertake this task. They take pride and pleasure in this work, because they engage in it as a vocation. Since nothing but charity calls them to it, they ask only to be provided with the strict necessities while they devote themselves to this good work.

If we consider the matter carefully, we can see that it is always an advantage to have the Brothers. In their hands, the students are well instructed and well brought up, because they are in charitable hands. When other teachers are sought to instruct youth, if we wish to have capable and devoted masters, we must be prepared to pay them double or triple what the Brothers receive. Since the Society of the Brothers provides very competent teachers for reading, writing, and arithmetic, since their method for learning is the shortest and best,

and since silence reigns in their classes, a child learns in a short time what he would take much longer to acquire with the writing masters, for not one of the latter, if he is at all capable, would consent to teach for less than double a Brother's stipend. Hence there is no doubt that hiring the Brothers is extremely advantageous.

To repeat, in the Brothers' schools, the children learn faster, are better brought up, are more carefully drilled in good manners and in their Christian duties, and are more adequately prepared for their first Communion. All these advantages, entirely gratis and so necessary for the children of the poor, cost the benefactors whose zeal provides these benefits for the youngsters only a small salary. Thus, common sense, the benefit accruing to the poor, and the board's own interests all spoke through the lips of Archbishop Colbert when he proposed to entrust the Charity Schools to the Brothers. But that was precisely the choice that would not be accepted by those men whose minds were mesmerized by phantoms. Only with the greatest difficulty did the archbishop make the board members understand the advantages presented by the plan he was suggesting. Eventually, there occurred a certain meeting of minds, and whether out of consideration for the prelate, deference to the president, or a realization of the cogency of the arguments, the board agreed to lodge the Brothers at the town hospice, so that they could teach the children there, and to entrust to them the endowed Charity Schools of the city, which Nyel had formerly directed.

### De La Salle goes to Rouen with the Brothers

Such was the news of which Archbishop Colbert, on his return to Paris, informed De La Salle. He urged him to send without delay a sufficient number of Brothers to teach the poor children under the control of the board and to take over the Charity Schools of the city. The prelate's secret motive in thus trying to hasten the Brothers' departure from Paris was, no doubt, his suspicion that delay might compromise the arrangement, thus giving the administrators time to go back on their decision. His suspicion was well founded; he foresaw what, in fact, did occur.

The desires of the holy Founder were accomplished at last. For over twelve years, he had been hoping to see the Brothers in charge of the schools that had been under Nyel's direction. Under the influence of a prophetic spirit, he had even declared that they would direct these schools one day. He viewed with joy the accomplishment of his prophecy. His foresight extended even farther. Knowing that he

needed a novitiate and realizing that it could not function normally in Paris, he thought of transferring it to Rouen. Except for the capital, he could think of no other city in the kingdom better suited for the purpose. Rouen was a great, wealthy city, not too far from Paris. There he hoped to find the backing that Paris refused him and to escape the harassment he had encountered. Moreover, the excellent communications between the two cities and the ease with which conveyances ply between them made it possible to make the trip cheaply. But while all the preparations were being made in Paris for the Brothers to leave, people in Rouen had changed their minds. Those who taught in the schools were interested in keeping their jobs, and they gave themselves no rest to avoid losing them. People had come back to their initial beliefs, and the administrators, forgetting in the absence of the archbishop and of the president a resolution that they had so reluctantly taken in their presence, would no longer hear of the Brothers' coming.

This change of heart did not disturb the prelate, who had half expected it. He told De La Salle not to worry, to send the Brothers on, and to go with them, promising that he himself would follow and would soon come back to Rouen to resolve the difficulties which he was sure to encounter on his return.

### CHAPTER III

*De La Salle brings the Brothers to Rouen; they settle there but only with great difficulty and under the harshest and most annoying conditions.*

The pious Founder set out for Rouen with the Brothers, rather after the manner of Saint Anthony on the road to Alexandria, accompanied by his monks in silence and prayer. This trip thus sanctified by recollection and constant prayer might have been mistaken for a devout pilgrimage performed in the most edifying manner. The Brothers observed such modesty that the fatigue of the journey, the variety of objects encountered, and the unexpected events that happened could not alter it. On the road, all the regular community exercises were performed with the same punctuality as at home.

Every day, the travelers heard Mass said for them by the one who acted as their visible angel, and they received Communion from him. This new Raphael, while leading them to Rouen, was really showing

them the path to eternity, and he let them behold only the road that leads to heaven. They were a spectacle to the passersby and left behind them everywhere the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ. Their attitude and their behavior led people to conclude that they were indeed men of God. And since the sort of habit they wore had not yet been seen in those parts, people asked who these men were, since, unlike ordinary travelers, they trudged along without speaking and made use of their eyes only to guide their steps.

When they arrived at an inn, they became once again a subject of curiosity, because when they entered these public places where confusion and uproar so often reigned, they acted as though entering a church. They sought the most secluded rooms, where they set themselves to pray and to find in renewed interior prayer a rest from the fatigue of a journey made on foot. The most indifferent people were stung with curiosity about these strangers who were turning the inn into a monastery. In a word, such a trip was a real retreat. Indeed, that was what the Brothers who made it called it. It would seem that their every step, marked with the sign of virtue, should have led them to a city that favored them and welcomed them like men from heaven. No doubt it would have been thus, if in God's eternal counsels it had not been decreed that the best works must always suffer the bitterest opposition.

### The archbishop tries to temper the opposition to the Brothers

By changing his residence, De La Salle was only changing one cross for another. By coming to Rouen, he became a dweller in the city where his tomb would one day stand, a city which was preparing new trials for him. But since he was used to that, nothing of the kind startled him. On the contrary, he would have been very much surprised if the cross had not accompanied him there, as it had done everywhere else. The archbishop arrived shortly afterward. When the man of God went to ask for his blessing, the prelate told him to come to the next meeting of the board. Without losing any time, the archbishop called the meeting, after again consulting the president, and the two of them were present. They again heard the arguments of the opposition and sought to dissipate them but in vain. To the administrators, their own preconceived notions seemed to be unanswerable arguments.

Since he could not bring them back to the resolution they had previously taken, M. Colbert resolved to appeal to experience, and he asked them at least to give the Brothers a trial. This was the only



stratagem he could make use of to win his point after trying in vain by all means to present the matter under the most favorable light. Since their minds were all so closed that each board member tried to invoke reason in his favor, there was no way to discover where truth really lay, save in making an experiment.

The administrators thought they could see a host of objections to the admission of the Brothers. Letting them come to live in the town hospice would, they felt, cause its ruin or at least introduce disorder. M. Colbert insisted that on the contrary, they would bring with them order, good teaching, and good example. This deadlock could be resolved only by the test of experience. Give it a try, M. Colbert asked them. Do me the courtesy of finding out whether these inconveniences that you are so afraid of are real or imaginary. Only experience can demonstrate this; do not refuse to consult it and to abide by what it shows. This proposal was most plausible, and it was difficult for them to reject it without appearing unreasonable and admitting that they were moved only by ill humor. So the resolution was adopted, and thus all the objections apparently were dropped. They agreed to lodge the Brothers at the general hospice, which is also called the Bureau for Able-bodied Paupers, and to put them in charge of the children there.

At last, Monsieur Colbert could congratulate himself; he thought he had won all he wanted, but in fact he was far from having done so. He was dealing with crafty men who knew how to refuse while appearing to agree. The prelate would not have been so happy over the turn events had taken if he had realized that he was the dupe in the affair. In fact, the administrators had been cunning enough to set a trap in his way. When they opened one door to let the Brothers into the hospice, they were careful to unlock another by which they could infallibly turn them out again. Colbert hoped that the place would be transformed once the Brothers got there and that the instruction and good example they brought with them would expel ignorance and vice. He had a right to expect that, and if the Brothers had been given time and a free hand to act as they do elsewhere, he would indeed have enjoyed this satisfaction. But the administrators, who had agreed to his proposal only in appearance and out of pure condescension to him, since his wish was too reasonable to refuse, were firmly resolved to see to it that the experiment failed.

The harsh conditions under which the Brothers are admitted

How did the administrators accomplish this? They limited the number of Brothers to four and would never agree to increase it. They made them undertake tasks foreign to their state and incompatible with their religious exercises, and they assigned to them an impossible work load. The Brothers were obliged to be present when the paupers got up and when they went to bed, in order to make them say their prayers; they had to instruct the children in the hospice as well as those in the four main schools in the city proper. They were forced to come back from the most distant sections of the city in order to take their meals, and they had to serve the paupers at table when they got back from school, even before they themselves had a chance to eat.

The administrators could easily foresee that the Brothers could not endure such stringent and inconvenient conditions for very long and that De La Salle would not delay in withdrawing them from such intolerable slavery. Under this regime, they would suffer spiritually and materially, in body and in soul, in their health and in their religious life. Those poor Brothers, overwhelmed by the weight of their burden and finding their virtue unequal to the demands made on it, would not take long to cry out to their father and beg him to get them out of a situation worse than that of the Israelites in Egypt. Such was the stratagem which the perspicacity of these gentlemen had laid out for the future and which their Christian uprightness had kept concealed from Messieurs Colbert and Couet in spite of their great sagacity.

I do not know whether or not the Spirit of God allowed De La Salle to discern the snare hidden beneath these conditions and to recognize that the real aim of the administrators was to get rid of the Brothers while pretending to accept them. Possibly he did see through the maneuver, but he resolved to say nothing. His modesty did not permit him to contradict the archbishop and to refuse to go along with the arrangement he had proposed as a means of conciliating his opponents. Indeed, the prelate's suggestion sounded so equitable that no one could turn it down without appearing to be uncooperative. It might also have been that De La Salle could see the good side in the unfair situation itself and was not sorry to discover in the harshness of the conditions imposed the motive that would justify his rejecting them later on. After all, it was only an experiment which did not bind him to anything. It merely allowed him to make a definitive contract later, in full knowledge of what was involved. Once the trial period was over, each party would be free to make its own decision. Because

the holy Founder saw that he really was not running any risk, he accepted the conditions as laid down.

The Brothers came to Rouen on 19 May 1705, and five of them were admitted to the Bureau a few days later. They were given food, lodging, and a small salary for other expenses. The school of Saint Maclou was opened in the same month of May, about three months after the one in Darnétal. Those of Saint Godard and Saint Eloi followed shortly thereafter, while that of Saint Vivien was the last to open.

The Brothers were assiduous in getting the paupers up and having them say their morning prayers. About eight o'clock, four of them went off to their classes. They came back at noon, served the paupers at table, and kept watch to make them observe order during the meal. Then they themselves ate, after which they went back to school. Returning to the hospice around six in the evening, they took the paupers to the refectory and ended the day with them, as they had begun it, by having them say their prayers. A fifth Brother stayed in the hospice and taught the poor children there. It would have been desirable that this sort of regulation would find as much strength as goodwill in those for whom it was prescribed, but since it was not tailored to accommodate human weakness, it could not go on for very long.

The Brothers collapse under the harsh yoke imposed on them

The Brothers were exhausted by their tasks, and their morale began to falter under the multiple burdens they had to face. Their health suffered, as did their virtue, and it was at the expense of both that they persevered for two years in this state of servitude. De La Salle, to whom they complained, felt that he had to put up with the situation. He hoped that the administrators would in the end feel some pity for the Brothers and some remorse for exploiting them in this way. He hoped, but in vain, that they would either take the initiative in asking for more Brothers or at least welcome his offer to send some.

The administrators, who had admitted the Brothers to the Bureau only out of consideration for the archbishop, were not of a mind to keep them there out of deference to De La Salle. If courtesy did not permit them to dismiss the Brothers, their policy provided them with a handy means of getting rid of them by making it impossible for them to stay. Under the pretext of safeguarding the interests of the poor whom they were supposed to look after, they considered that they were right not to consent to an increase in the number of Brothers, since that would have meant spending more money. Such a plea,

which is always worthy of respect in the mouths of those who handle funds destined for the relief of the poor in a way which the public approves of, could not be faulted by the archbishop or by the president, who, as officials of the administration, were also bound to see that the funds of the Bureau were not wasted.

The trump card which remained in De La Salle's hand was that this dishonest pretext gave him the right to withdraw the Brothers, for it was obvious that the burden imposed on them was beyond their strength. The majority of them faltered under their yoke and fell ill. The two Brothers at Saint Maclou each had over 100 students to teach; so did the one at Saint Eloi. The fourth had over 150, and the fifth, at the hospice, had even more. They endured this overwork as well as they could, from May 1705 to June 1707. When one of them succumbed to illness or exhaustion, De La Salle sent a more vigorous Brother to replace him, but that could not go on indefinitely. For a long time, their good father bewailed the harsh conditions imposed on his sons. Unable to do anything to give them relief, he prayed, fasted, and did extraordinary penances to obtain from God a remedy for the situation or to secure God's light in order to know what he should do about it.

He had always wanted to have the schools that had been Nyel's, and he had thought that heaven intended him to have them. Now that they were his, he was reluctant to abandon them. While he hesitated and remained undecided in the midst of all such reflections, he received from his disciples a memorandum which helped him make up his mind. In their document, the Brothers brought out clearly how necessary it was to get them out of the hospice, where the spirit of their Institute ran as much risk as their health did. The advantage to the poor, as well as their own, required it. Nor was it difficult for them to prove their case. Since they were too few in proportion to the number of students, they could not do a good job. The classes were too big; the teachers were overworked, and many of the children were neglected; overwork affected not only the health of the teachers but discipline, order, silence, and instruction itself. In short, the purpose of the schools could not be attained; fatigue, the multiplicity of their tasks, and the long hours caused disorder in their interior life, so that they had no time for interior prayer and their other exercises of piety.

The conclusion was that they should leave the hospice, find a house in the city, and live there according to the spirit of the Institute. They added that if the administrators were willing to give them the income of the capital destined to provide for the teachers in the city's

Gratuitous Schools, they would be content with those modest appointments. It would then be possible to increase the number of Brothers in order to carry on the school's work properly; they feared less to suffer from poverty than to be wanting in regularity.

The worthy Superior, after weighing before God the reasons and other similar considerations, did not wish to decide anything without consulting the president, who was taking more and more interest in his work. That eminent magistrate could only approve of the arguments advanced in the memorandum; consequently, he advised the servant of God to expand these points in a petition which he himself would then present to the administrators of the Bureau and which he promised to recommend. That was done.

De Pontcarré ran no risk in the matter, for the petition did not need his backing in order to be accepted. He saw that the Brothers did not have to ask for any special permission to leave and that the administrators would be happier to see them leave the hospice than they had been when they came. As far as I can ascertain, M. Colbert was not involved at that point. I do not know why not. He was either away or did not wish to become involved in having the Brothers leave a place where he had so much wanted them to be. The fact is that he always honored De La Salle and favored him and his disciples, and he never lost his early zeal for Christian and Gratuitous Schools. He did not disdain to visit them himself, and he witnessed with great pleasure the new methods that the Brothers were using to teach with a minimum of words.

### De La Salle withdraws the Brothers from the hospice

De La Salle was graciously received at the meeting of the administrators, once the purpose of his visit was understood. The members congratulated themselves on having at last secured what they wanted and on having excluded by their clever maneuver those whom they had welcomed out of human respect. They even had the satisfaction of seeing the very people who had urged them to admit the Brothers now asking that they be allowed to leave. Their contentment was complete when they found in the petition a way of turning the departure of the Brothers to the advantage of the Bureau by requiring that they provide the city schools with the same services as before but at an even lower price.

The petition included two articles. In the first, after the reasons were explained, the administrators were requested to consent to the departure of the Brothers. In the second, the Brothers offered to teach

in the Gratuitous Schools of the city on the basis of existing endowments and to be satisfied with the paltry revenue that these provided. The first article presented no problem; it was accepted as soon as it was read. The discussion on the second article gave these gentlemen the opportunity to require of the Brothers a sort of indemnification for the time they had lived at the hospice and to permit them to conduct the four city schools under an onerous title, as though they should have been happy to pay for the privilege of serving the poor.

During the time the Brothers had lived at the Bureau, the authorities had not wished to restrict their work but had scrupulously limited their number to five and had never agreed to increase the number. The Brothers were crushed under the burden of their duties; overwork exhausted some and caused others to fall ill. But no matter. The hospice was still well served, because the little band of Brothers was regularly rejuvenated by new members, in better health, who came in their turn to help bear this exaggerated work load. When the Brothers left, their work would be diminished by half, and some relief would be given to them. The first condition was, however, that their number should be doubled: ten Brothers were asked for to run the schools at Saint Maclou, Saint Vivien, Saint Godard, and Saint Eloi. The second condition required of De La Salle was that he be satisfied with half the revenue from the foundation, namely, 600 livres a year. If he agreed to these conditions, they would consent to let him run the schools in question.

To remain, the Brothers have to work for almost nothing

De La Salle agreed to everything, even though he was being asked for a great deal and was offered little or nothing in return. To understand to what lengths he carried his disinterestedness on this occasion, we must bear in mind that each Brother ordinarily is supposed to receive a salary of 100 écus in addition to furnished lodgings. Moreover, where there are several of them teaching in a given locality, they need a serving Brother and a Brother Director who governs the Brothers and is always ready to replace any of them who may be incapacitated.

Thus, although the Founder was asked to provide ten Brothers to teach in the schools, the true number was twelve. If they had each been paid 100 écus, that would have amounted to 3,600 livres a year; if they had been paid the absolute minimum salary of 250 livres, that would still have meant 1,000 écus, in addition to the residence furnished rent free. But there, for the twelve Brothers, only 600 livres were to be paid, and of that sum, over half, namely 310 livres, went

for the rent of the house they occupied. Clearly, to teach in the Gratu-  
itous Schools in Rouen, they were getting only one-tenth of the salary  
they are paid elsewhere. I am right, therefore, in saying that they  
were being asked for much and given little in return. The fact is that  
the administrators were very glad to exploit the Brothers but did not  
see fit to offer them a commensurate return for their sacrifice. Their  
services were appraised at the lowest possible figure, and they had to  
accept it or leave.

De La Salle accepted, hoping that Divine Providence would make  
it possible for him to find in the charity of private citizens what the  
board refused to give him. He leased a house and occupied it on 2  
August 1707 along with the Brothers who, like him, had to suffer all  
the rigors of poverty. But they were delighted, because they finally  
found themselves free to take up again their exercises of piety and to  
follow their Rule. They felt happy in becoming even poorer, provided  
they could become more regular.

The terms of that agreement are still in effect twenty-five years  
later. Time has brought no modifications in it, except that the number  
of students has increased, thus adding to the Brothers' work. Once  
they have paid their rent, the twelve Brothers have only about 100  
écus left to live on and to defray their expenses. How can they possi-  
bly do it? How have they done it for the past twenty-five years with a  
salary of 100 écus for twelve men? That is certainly one of those mys-  
teries which nobody can believe, unless he knows that there is a Di-  
vine Providence. Another mystery is why people permit the Brothers  
to wear themselves out in their service of the poor without taking any  
interest in trying to help them, as though their work does not concern  
the public, as though the Brothers do not have the right that the Gos-  
pel gives to all workers of reaping where they sow and of living by  
their ministry. It is as though they alone have to labor at their own ex-  
pense in the Father's field.

### Ill treatment as a reward for their work with no pay

They have been abandoned to their fate; the only rewards they have  
received so far for their services in Rouen are continual scorn and fre-  
quent insults. In no city in France have they had to endure such ill  
treatment. In the beginning, they could hardly appear in public with-  
out meeting with some kind of abuse. People seemed to take plea-  
sure in dishonoring them, day after day, by hurling new sorts of  
insults at them. Mud, stones, and blows were not spared them. The  
presence of De La Salle with them could not shield them from all that.

Disregarding his priestly character, lacking respect for the air of sanctity which surrounded his brow, people threw stones at the Brothers in the streets; they threw them at him as well and distributed affronts evenly between the father and his sons. They purposely stopped the Brothers, pushed them into the ditch, and tried to make them fall into the mud. They spat on them and hit them as they passed by. The rabble massed together to laugh at them when they approached and covered them with outrages, as if they were declared enemies.

Insolence in their regard was carried even farther, as shrewish women went so far as to slap them on the face in public for the mean satisfaction of trying their patience or of provoking some response. Every day, some new joke about them regaled the public. Even in their schools, which could be called the theater of their charity, they were not sheltered from affronts. More than once, people invaded the classes to maltreat them. Yet, in Rouen, all this was tolerated. The upper classes were the first to laugh over it and to enjoy the stories about the different misfortunes that had happened to the Brothers and about the latest tricks played on them, instead of chastising the authors of these vexations and by severe penalties putting an end to these disorders.

"Ah, how happy you are, my dear Brothers, if you can understand all this, and how I should envy you, if I had the grace to endure the like," said a priest one day to two Brothers whom he saw passing by amidst the hoots of the rabble. "You are treated with ignominy, but if these insults are tolerable to you and if you can be happy under them, you are not to be pitied. What is most precious and glorious is that in which you share, as Saint Peter says."

We must admit, however, that the city of Rouen has finally begun to change its attitude toward the Brothers. Perhaps people have grown tired of testing their virtue, or perhaps they merely grew accustomed to seeing them. Nowadays, they are at least tolerated and left in peace. Men who were so hated and so despised for the sake of justice and who can say, like their Divine Master, that they were hated without cause, had nothing to hope for from the purses of the charitable in order to eke out their living expenses. They were remembered only when people wished that they were out of the city. The work they did drew as little attention as their persons, and when anyone mentioned their extreme poverty, someone else was sure to reply coldly that it was a great mistake on De La Salle's part to have brought them to a place where he could not provide for their subsistence.

The cruelest indignity was their lot, and it would be difficult to list all that they have had to suffer from it in the past thirty years.



Their work, unpaid and unrequited, has up to now brought them only suffering and scorn. Hunger, thirst, heat, cold, destitution, and the persecutions which are the lot of apostolic men have, so far, been their sole recompense. To this day, they have fought the good fight at their own expense. They have cultivated the Lord's vineyard as well as they could, without sharing in the fruits thereof. In a word, they have spent themselves in the service of the Church without hope of material reward. For thirty years, the Brothers have lived in Rouen, lacking everything: clothes, furniture, often food, and the other necessities of life. Yet never have they been unfaithful to their duty; never have they neglected their proper tasks. Exposed to hunger and cold during 1709 and 1710, they endured, with the exception of death itself, all that famine and a long and bitter winter could inflict upon them.

The Brothers' pitiful condition was not unknown, but nobody showed any compassion for them, and they received nothing but disdainful refusals from those who should have relieved their penury and taken an interest in their survival. It is true that from time to time, God did inspire some worthy persons to extend their charity even to these Brothers, but it would seem that in doing so, God intended to furnish them only with what was absolutely necessary for life and to keep them from dying of cold and hunger, not wishing to spare them the rigors of the one or the other. The alms that came to them were so rare and so insignificant that they considered as extraordinary and even miraculous a gift of twenty-two livres that someone made to them during those calamitous times. It was received from some unknown benefactor, along with a note saying: *Do not concern yourselves with the source of this gift. Put your confidence in God. Take care to serve him faithfully, and he will provide for you.* The advice was excellent; the Brothers would have been happy to receive it more often, accompanied by a similar offering.

## CHAPTER IV

*De La Salle transfers his novitiate to Saint Yon, near Rouen.*

The hope for the harvest is in the seed; the duration of an edifice depends on its foundation, and the holiness of an institute results from a good novitiate. If land that has been badly sown produces nothing except briars and thorns and if a house without a solid foundation is threatened with collapse, we must conclude that if a good novitiate is

wanting, a community finds in its beginning the source of its destruction. It is a spiritual edifice, lacking a solid foundation, which will be overthrown by its own members. There is no hope for holiness where the seed of virtue has not been carefully sown and has not sprung up in souls. When new subjects are professed in an institute, their commitment will not promote the glory of God or the good of religion unless they are trained in virtue. Even if they become as numerous as the stars in the heavens, the Church would reap no advantage from them, and to them we might apply the words of the Prophet: *You have multiplied the people, O Lord, but you have not increased the joy.*

De La Salle firmly held to these truths. Consequently, he had nothing more at heart than to make saints out of all those who aspired to become his disciples. He himself would have labored to destroy what he had erected, had he not found a way to contribute to their sanctification. What pleased him was not the number of Brothers but the number of saints in his Institute. From the beginning, when he had been inspired to gather his followers together, his only thought had been to form them to eminent piety, to make of them new men. They did indeed become such or else soon left his house, and when he saw the number of candidates increase, he sought a place of retirement where he could sanctify them at leisure through the exercises of a fervent novitiate.

The training of the novices was always the primary object of his zeal. He never allowed anyone else to replace him in this task, except when it was impossible for him to fulfill it in person. It was his especially beloved mission, for in it his own interest was combined with that of the Institute. By that I mean that he found opportunities for furthering his own perfection while promoting that of the Brothers. He never had anything more at heart than to direct this academy of virtue, convinced as he was that the level of sanctity in his Institute would be measured by that achieved in the novitiate. Considering it the heart of his budding Society, he paid the greatest attention to it, just as God, the Author of nature, begins the formation of the human body by the heart and, as the Author of grace, initiates our sanctification by changing us interiorly.

In how many ways did the devil not seek to disturb the servant of God in the direction of his novitiate! When De La Salle himself was driven hither and thither, his novitiate felt all the repercussions of the persecutions that hell stirred up in view of suffocating his Institute in its cradle. After transferring the novitiate from one place to another, when he himself was forced to seek refuge here and there, the holy man did not know where he could settle down permanently with it.

In addition, the mobile and uncertain conditions in which the Founder had been trying to maintain the novitiate as well as he could had greatly disrupted it, and it was time to find a suitable location where he could re-establish it. De La Salle had been reluctant to move it out of Paris, the center of the kingdom, where there certainly existed the best prospects for attracting more candidates and providing them with better training. But in the end, he had to leave and to establish his novitiate somewhere else.

Rouen attracted De La Salle's attention because of its proximity to the capital and the easy communications between the two cities. He had been considering this move when Divine Providence offered him an opportunity of executing it by allowing the Brothers to establish themselves at Darnétal and at the Bureau in Rouen. The main objective he had in mind in accepting these schools, under conditions which obliged him to support them mostly at his own expense, was that this would help him find a spot adapted for the training of the novices. He was distressed on seeing his little flock always on the move, now in one house, now in another, without being able to settle down permanently anywhere. He also observed with regret the loss of fervor suffered by his Community as a result of all this agitation. So he ardently begged God to give him some place of repose where he might serve him and teach others to serve him in tranquillity. To obtain that grace, he had, as was his wont, recourse to prayer, vigils, and extraordinary penances.

### De La Salle obtains permission to move the novitiate

Since he was a man with a strong sense of hierarchy and considered his superiors as oracles who pointed out to him the will of God, De La Salle did not wish to make a decision without first writing to M. Colbert to sound him out on the matter. He informed him of the projected move of his novitiate from Paris to Rouen and asked him to be good enough to consent to it, if he thought it proper. The answer was favorable. Abbé Couet, who wrote the reply after having had the archbishop approve the project, mentioned to him how eager His Excellency was to see new schools of the Brothers opened in different places and to have them all over the diocese. The servant of God considered this approval as a sign of the divine will, and he lost no time in trying to find a suitable house.

After looking a long time for one within the city, he finally found what he wanted at the farther end of the Faubourg Saint Sever; he preferred this property to one which had been offered him in another

suburb. The residence, called Saint Yon, is very ancient. Its walls enclose some eighteen acres of land. In bygone times, it had been called the Manor of Haute-Ville, and in the course of the last two centuries, it had passed from one aristocratic family to another, as appears from the various acts of sale in the possession of the Brothers. One of these owners, Monsieur de Saint Yon, who lived there until 1615, gave his name to the property. His piety led him to construct a small chapel, which he dedicated to his patron, a disciple of Saint Denis and a martyr. Such is the origin of the name given to the property.

In 1670, a certain Madame de Bois-Dauphin had bought it and gave the use of it to the sisters of her first husband, nuns of the Sisters of Souvrai, one of whom was the abbess of the famous monastery of Saint Amand in Rouen. As the original chapel was too small, Madame de Bois-Dauphin enlarged it by half to make it more convenient for the Sisters. She would have wished to give the property to the abbey, but the Sisters of Souvrai would not accept it.

After the death of the abbess, Madame de Barentin, a niece of Madame de Bois-Dauphin, became abbess and received the use of the domain of Saint Yon. Finally, when Madame de Barentin died, the property was inherited by Madame Louvois, the daughter of Madame de Bois-Dauphin and her first husband, De Souvré.

De La Salle rents Saint Yon and comes there with his novices

The property was put up for lease at the time De La Salle came to Rouen to establish the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. He went to look it over and liked what he saw. After speaking to Monsieur Colbert, he hastened back to Paris to ask Madame de Louvois to rent it to him. Fortunately, she was well disposed toward De La Salle, because she had heard from her brother-in-law, Archbishop Le Tellier of Reims, and from her son, Abbé de Louvois, who had lived a long time with his uncle, all the favorable things that can be said about a great servant of God. Happy at being able to do a favor for a man considered a saint by her family and also by her late brother-in-law, the former archbishop of Reims—who was not one to bestow such a title lightly—she agreed to let him have the property for 400 livres a year, a very reasonable rate, and signed a lease for six years.

De La Salle concluded the transaction so quickly and secretly that his enemies, who might have tried to interfere and to make the plan fall through, were not even aware of what was going on. With the same promptness, he sent off to Rouen all the furniture he had stored in Paris, in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, to be used to equip the new

house. In this way, the novitiate was already established at the outskirts of Rouen before it was known that it had left Paris. The Sisters of Saint Amand, on learning who was taking over their house at Saint Yon and what he intended to do with it, generously donated the tapestries and paintings that adorned the chapel and a number of articles of furniture. It was toward the end of August 1705 that De La Salle and his followers took up residence in that house which God intended for them and which later did become their property.

When De La Salle arrived in Rouen from Paris, M. Colbert granted him the most ample faculties, with no time limit attached, hoping to make use of a man of such uncommon merit for the benefit of his diocese and to attach him to it. The servant of God exercised these faculties with great restraint. He made it a point to restrict his zeal to his own house and not to share with strangers the time that God afforded him to promote the sanctification of his sons and the perfection of his Institute. If sometimes he went abroad, it was only on rare occasions for some extraordinary gathering where necessity or charity made it a duty for him to be of service to others and to contribute to their salvation. He considered himself at Saint Yon like a man who had been tossed about by a hundred different tempests and had escaped as many shipwrecks, one who finally finds himself safe in port. He thought only of repairing the losses he had sustained and of putting to good use for the well-being of his soul and the sanctification of his sons the peace and tranquillity he had finally secured. No place on earth could have been more to the Founder's liking or suited him better. Although located at the gates of one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the kingdom, the site is solitary and secluded. Offering plenty of fresh air and an agreeable panorama, it contains a series of large gardens. The pleasant solitude favored his dominant inclination for a life of retirement and union with God and promised him full liberty to give himself to prayer and to live, although so near Rouen, like a hermit in the desert.

This property which was so much to the liking of the holy Founder and so well suited for his Institute was equally attractive to De Pontcarré, who used to come out and walk there. That was where the senior magistrate came to rest from the contention of the bar and the fatigues of his office. He enjoyed walking alone in that peaceful spot, and when he came there, the Brothers shut the gates to everyone else, so as to leave him alone with his thoughts and with God.

Thenceforth De La Salle considered Saint Yon as the place of his repose. Once he had established himself there, he took all imaginable precautions to prevent relaxation from penetrating his Community and

closed all possible avenues by which it could infiltrate this new Eden. His first care was to repopulate his novitiate and bring it back to its initial fervor. That was not accomplished without some difficulty, especially at the outset, for the various ups and downs that the novitiate had experienced for some years past had discouraged many candidates and had made them disinclined to follow a vocation that met with so much opposition. With time, however, the regular life led in the novitiate attracted a good number of postulants. The Founder put Brother Barthélemy, a prudent and gentle man, in charge of them, but he did not entirely stop looking after them himself. The training of the novices was always his main concern; he shared it with others only when he was obliged to give his attention to other important duties.

### The Brothers are called to Saint Yon to renew their fervor

While thus rebuilding his novitiate, the Founder undertook to revive the spirit of the Institute in his entire Community and to take advantage of solitude to bring his disciples back to their first grace and fervor. He feared that the troubles, uncertainties, and long-continued agitation that his Community had undergone in Paris might have brought about a weakening of piety, even in the houses situated in the provinces. To counter this trend or rather to forestall it, he called to Saint Yon during the vacation period as many as possible of the Brothers who lived in various places and had them make an eight-day retreat with him. He was always at their head, encouraging all by his presence and confirming by his example of consummate virtue the lessons he imparted to them on this subject. Each morning, he gave them a conference, and one of the priests who lived there gave another in the evening, for the three or four priests who had joined him when he lived in the parish of Saint Roch in Paris had followed him to Saint Yon and lived there.

In this way, the Father gathered his children around him in solitude and breathed new life into them, rekindled their zeal, and inspired them with a new desire for perfection. He stirred up in them once more the spirit of dependence, of mortification, of penance, of poverty, and of love for their vocation. He sought to inspire them to practice all the virtues proper to their state. Because the Brothers heard him recommend nothing but what they saw him practice, they were gently constrained to imitate him. Wherever they met him and at all times, they saw in him a man deeply recollected, united with God, severe toward himself, thirsting for humiliations, with no attraction for anything except interior prayer and suffering.

De La Salle was a punctual observer of the Rule, and when the Brothers confided to him the fear they felt that everything that was being observed among them might not last and in all likelihood would change after his death, he replied that God would ask him an account not of the future but of the present and that he was resolved to be faithful to the end. Convinced of all this, De La Salle was far from relaxing any of his penitential practices. A retreat made under such propitious circumstances and under such an accomplished master gave the whole Community a new impetus toward the interior life and repaired the damage caused by the recent upheavals and the continual persecutions. The Brothers, filled with the joy and consolation given by the Holy Spirit, went home with new enthusiasm. On leaving Saint Yon, they felt that they were only now beginning truly to enter God's service.

### The good reputation of the schools at Saint Yon

The house at Saint Yon, sanctified by the presence of the servant of God, soon acquired a great reputation everywhere and provided a solution to the problem faced by parents who had failed to give their children a proper education. At first, the holy Founder was asked to take in as boarders a number of young people from the city and the surrounding area to instruct them and train them in piety. This request, so conformable to his aims, was agreeable to him. The Christian instruction and education of youth being the principal object of his zeal and the end of his Institute, he was glad to welcome into his house all the children that people wanted to send him, so that they might be brought up in innocence and in the knowledge of their religion. He placed them under the guidance of one of the most capable Brothers, wrote a regulation befitting their age and social standing, and set them up in a sort of junior novitiate where all the actions of the day and the pious exercises were performed at fixed times.

The results obtained in this sort of training school did not take long to become known. When parents came to see their children, they no longer recognized them. They were indeed changed. Most of them displayed such modesty, piety, and docility that their own mothers and fathers could scarcely believe their eyes. They spoke about the school, and other parents hastened to entrust their children to such a remarkable institution. In this way and within a short time, the number of boarders grew beyond all expectations. Rouen was no longer the only city that furnished pupils to Saint Yon; they came from everywhere, even from Paris.

When the public learned of the success of the Brothers in teaching these youngsters, people advised families struggling with stubborn, recalcitrant, depraved, and unmanageable children that they could find for them at Saint Yon a place of retirement and correction; they assured them that their youngsters would be very different on leaving from what they had been on entering. Many parents resolved to follow this advice and entrusted to those teachers, more skillful than themselves, the reform of their children. Before long, the house was filled.

The success met with in this re-education of unmanageable children who had been despaired of led to the opening at Saint Yon of still another special section for people much more difficult to handle. Confirmed criminals were consigned there, some by decrees of parliament, others by court orders, and several by the authority of their parents. The Brothers had the consolation of seeing several of those men change to a better life and do real penance in a place where they had been locked up as malefactors. It is hardly believable how many really perverse men have been converted in that house. Many rebellious and unmanageable children there lost their belligerence and impiety, and many others began to walk once more in the path of salvation and duty. Several desired to remain there the rest of their lives. A few even asked to receive the Brothers' habit and became members of the Institute. Others would not leave, except to enter a monastery. The greater number, once they had gone back home, showed by the kind of life they thenceforth led that they had left Saint Yon very different from what they had been on entering it. In short, the majority of those brought up there have been a credit to the house and give the example of an upright life as a proof of the fine education they received there.

### Three types of boarders at Saint Yon

All these good results which are attributable to De La Salle and were set in motion by him still continue today. Although since the death of the holy Founder, the buildings at Saint Yon have been enlarged by two-thirds, the place is still too small to house all the boarders who would like to enroll there. There are three groups of boarders. The first is composed of the regular boarding students who come to Saint Yon for a truly Christian education. They are in the care of a Brother who keeps an eye on them all the time and who teaches them reading, writing, and arithmetic. Those who so desire and who have the ability for it learn drawing, geometry, and architecture.



The second group is made up of wild and unmanageable young men who are sent there to be reformed and corrected. These are watched over even more closely. They are constantly supervised by a Brother who never leaves them and who never gives them a chance to draw aside or to escape from his vigilance. Their education, however, is not different from that of the first group. They all follow the same exercises of piety; the same exhortations and catechism lessons are addressed to them. They are taught how to receive the sacraments properly. Those who have not made their first Communion are prepared to do so, and if they have already received it, they are taught to make amends for their past life by a good general Confession. In a word, they live as though they were in a seminary or in a fervent religious community, following a series of exercises of piety or instruction suitable to their age and social condition. They take their meals in the same refectory as the Brothers and witness their various practices of piety. That is ordinarily what touches them the most and inspires them with the desire to return to God.

The third group of inmates at Saint Yon is made up of those who are forcibly detained there, whether by *lettres de petit cachet*<sup>9</sup> or by a court sentence. They are confined to a cell and carefully guarded. There, left to themselves, they have plenty of time to reflect, something they had rarely done before, and to go over their past life in the bitterness of their heart. Thus confined within four walls, they learn in solitude what the world had kept hidden from their eyes, and they begin to remember the truths they have forgotten or wanted to forget. Forced to recall that there is a hereafter and that their prison is merely a foretaste of hell, they learn, little by little, to regret the sins which caused them to be condemned, to fear God, and to come back to him.

No doubt when they are first brought in, they often defile the cell which will be their prison by the curses and blasphemies suggested by rage and spite. Often enough, however, they find there a grace which touches them and which, by changing their hearts, causes tears of compunction to succeed the transports of frenzy and despair. When they seem truly contrite, the door of their cell is opened, and they are allowed to follow the exercises of piety performed in the house. It is then that charity completes in them the task of their conversion which fear of hell had begun. Examples of such conversions

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9. These were sealed orders, signed by the king, for the arrest of wayward people of consequence, often nobles or clergy, who had to be removed from public view for a time.

are not rare at Saint Yon, and we could draw up a long list of names of those who found God there after they had lost him.

De La Salle organized the house of Saint Yon into three communities. One was made up of the three divisions of the boarders of which we have just spoken; another included the novices, and the third contained the serving Brothers and others employed in the work of the Institute. All of these had some exercises in common and others that were special to each group. They were carried out so faithfully that in spite of the variety of occupations and the great number of those who lived in the place, no trace of confusion or disorder appeared. The regularity that reigned was so perfect that no one could see a boarder, a Brother, or a novice out of place, nor would one group mingle with another, still less indulge in aimless moving about while neglecting its proper duties. The most edifying thing was that everything went on in this house in such deep silence that outsiders, on entering, sometimes would not realize that it was inhabited. Yet, as a rule, over one hundred persons differing in age, temperament, character, state of life, and position lived there and do so today, under one roof but separated from one another. They had nothing to do with each other, except insofar as the rules prescribed or obedience permitted. Good example was constant and always impressed everyone. We cannot sufficiently admire a house where the number and the different categories of dwellers bring about neither trouble nor disturbance, where the novices do not know those with whom they live, and where the Brothers themselves have no contacts except with their Superior.

Very likely, nothing won for the Brothers the goodwill and the protection of M. de Pontcarré so much as the spirit of recollection and retirement that he witnessed at Saint Yon when he went there to enjoy a little respite from the overwhelming burdens of business. He often spoke of this spirit to Monsieur Colbert, who congratulated himself on having in his diocese such a useful and edifying Community. The archbishop, delighted at being able to number among his flock the patriarch of such a virtuous family, showed himself extremely favorable to De La Salle and begged him to make use for the good of the diocese of the extensive faculties he had given him. The desire of the man of God was, instead, not to appear abroad and make a spectacle of himself. The Founder stayed in his novitiate as much as he could, and only in urgent cases did he feel himself authorized to leave it.

## CHAPTER V

*New persecutions are launched in Paris against  
De La Salle and his Institute.*

Much as the holy priest appreciated the solitude of Saint Yon, he left it as soon as God's will called him elsewhere. He had not been enjoying it for very long, when the same persecution that had driven him from Paris forced him to go back there. True, hidden as he was from the eyes of his enemies, he was not personally exposed to their thrusts, but as a father, he suffered from the attacks made against his disciples and his work. He had thought that by fleeing from his opponents, he would cause their fury to abate and that they would be ashamed to pursue a man who abandoned the battlefield to them. He was mistaken. Hell, which had inspired them, was more aroused against his Institute than against him personally. Unable to make peace with either the one or the other, Satan launched against the schools of Saint Sulpice the same onslaught and harassments which had ruined those of the Faubourg Saint Antoine, hoping to cause them to fail in the same way.

De La Salle learned of these new attacks on the schools at the time in his life when he felt most at peace. He enjoyed the profound tranquillity of Saint Yon. At last, he had found an oasis of rest after so many and such bitter struggles. He was like a man who has come home after a long voyage, back in port after having been exposed for so long to the fury of the waves. Yet now he had to leave his peaceful abode and go back to Paris to face new tempests, in order to serve his Brothers as their pilot and to take in hand once more the rudder of the bark so persistently agitated and threatened with shipwreck.

He was advised that the Christian Schools in the parish of Saint Sulpice risked undergoing the same fate as the school in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, since the writing masters apparently enjoyed complete liberty to cause the same disruption. They came to interfere with the Brothers who were exercising their ministry and created great agitation about keeping certain pupils away. At the same time, De La Salle was informed that those on whose protection he had a right to rely were closing their eyes and affecting ignorance about the vexations carried out against the Brothers. Like people completely indifferent to the outcome, they allowed the harassing tactics to develop, and they seemed not to care which side would emerge victorious.

All this De La Salle had foreseen. After the destruction of the school in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, he had understood that the

writing masters, emboldened by their success, would next move against the Saint Sulpice schools and would try to close them also. It was as a diversionary move that he had opened the school in the parish of Saint Roch. Hoping to make them forget their intentions, he had preferred to disappear and had taken refuge in Rouen with the few remaining novices. But in vain did he expect to mollify by his departure those men whose jealousy and self-interest led them to attack his Institute rather than him personally. After having, as it were, driven De La Salle out of Paris, they wanted to expel his Brothers from the city and wipe out the very name of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools.

In reality, what pained the holy Founder most was not to see his Institute so furiously persecuted. He knew that men would strive in vain to overthrow his work, if God protected it. He recalled that the first preachers of the Gospel were never more ardent in announcing the Good News than when they were in prison and loaded with chains. It was with such reflections that he comforted his disciples and induced them to be patient. He often quoted the famous words of Gamaliel: If this undertaking is from God, who can destroy it? If my work does not come from God, I would consent to its ruin. I would join our enemies in destroying it if I thought that it did not have God for its author or that he did not will its progress. But if he declares himself its defender, let us fear nothing. He is the Almighty. No arm can uproot what he has planted; no hand can snatch away what he holds in his. He upholds the entire universe and keeps it in motion. Nothing happens that he does not see, does not allow. Those whom he covers with his maledictions remain accursed, and in vain do men seek to curse those whom he blesses. So let us abandon ourselves to his guidance. If he takes our work in hand, he will, to further its progress, make use of the very ones who are so determined to destroy it. Indeed, it is from the depths of our afflictions that we should draw the reasons for our joy. If contradiction is proof that an enterprise comes from God, let us be happy; our Institute is indeed his creation. The cross which follows it everywhere gives us assurance of this.

This language of faith reanimated his disciples, and when he saw that they accepted it, his joy was complete. But impressions sometimes fade away, and then it was their discouragement and timidity in the face of opposition, rather than the opposition itself, which he feared. At the time of which we speak, he knew that they were frightened over the persecution which was threatening. He felt that he needed to reassure them by his presence and to go to share with them the trials which he could not ward off from them.

When De La Salle reached Paris, he found his sons a prey to new warnings. Seeing that the devastation caused in the school in the Faubourg Saint Antoine had not closed those in the Faubourg Saint Germain and had not brought about any changes in their manner of operating, the writing masters began their vexations again with a vengeance. First, in the absence of De La Salle, they tried to intimidate the Brothers by repeated threats of summonses, lawsuits, and legal embarrassments. They had intimidated them, indeed, because these mere words—lawsuits, sentences, and procedures—frightened those peaceful Brothers who had learned from Saint Paul that *God's servants should not be parties to litigation*. In vain had the virtuous Brothers tried to pacify their rivals by gentle and humble replies, by prayers and remonstrances. As they had not succeeded, they made up their minds to keep quiet, but by appearing to be deaf and dumb, they only irritated all the more those adversaries whom everything exasperated and who wanted only one thing: open warfare, but warfare on uneven terms, a conflict in which they wished to appear wearing all the colors of righteousness.

As we mentioned previously, the writing masters, not having succeeded in destroying the Gratuitous Schools as they had several times attempted to do, had to be content with demanding that the Brothers should be enjoined from accepting in their classes any students not publicly listed as paupers. That seemed reasonable enough on the surface. People thought that in founding the Christian Schools, De La Salle had in view the instruction of the children of the poor exclusively, since the children of the affluent could afford to pay for their education. But that notion, apparently so equitable, was at bottom pernicious, because it provided those with selfish motives a specious pretext to interfere constantly and to cause trouble in the Gratuitous Schools, quarreling incessantly with the Brothers over the choice of those children whom they would accept in their classes.

De La Salle had discerned the trap that they were setting for him in advancing a principle apparently so reasonable. He had never agreed to it, and rightly so, for if he had, he would have set limits to his charity. He would, under the appearance of a compromise measure, have agreed to the ruin of the Christian Schools, furnished his rivals with an inexhaustible source of dispute, and bequeathed to his disciples an eternal series of lawsuits. Every day, the guild of writing masters or their inspectors would have maintained that such and such a child was rich, even though the Brothers declared him poor. The argument settled today over one would have arisen again tomorrow over another, and how could such a dispute ever be adjudicated?

Who had a right to inventory the possessions of a child's parents to prove whether they were in poverty or in easy circumstances?

Even if De La Salle had not been aware of the bad faith of his adversaries, even if he could have believed that they had not stirred up this new topic of dispute for the sole purpose of ruining the Christian Schools, how could he have subjected himself to such intolerable conditions? Was it up to him to make such distinctions of persons in admitting children to his schools? Was it his business to decide on the poverty or wealth of their parents? Could he have made such a decision in an intelligent manner? If he had taken such a responsibility upon himself, what would people have said of him? Are not all children within their rights when they request gratuitous instruction in schools open to the public? If the teachers who teach *gratis* have more ability than those who sell their efforts, must the child who seems wealthy and who often enough is not so at all choose an ignorant teacher, just because his parents are not on the list of paupers duly recognized by the state?

These arguments and the others which we have already set down in various places show that De La Salle would have granted the writing masters the power to destroy his Institute if he had agreed to their demands. That became evident in the present situation. The writing masters would constantly come to disturb the Christian Schools, calling the Brothers to task for admitting children who could pay. Under the pretext of inquiring into such cases, they called in the law, found fault with this or that, made everybody lose a great deal of time, prevented the students from entering, or forced out others who were present. That was a good way to cause the classes of the Brothers to remain deserted, which was precisely what they wanted. If they had been allowed to continue in that way, the Christian Schools would not have lasted much longer.

Meanwhile, those who had a right to oppose such proceedings and could have easily stopped them did nothing. They seemed asleep and pretended to be unaware of the disruption which, day after day, was growing worse under their eyes. The remedy would have been easy to apply. If the parish priest of Saint Sulpice had put in an appearance, he could have quelled the storm. An agreement had been concluded between the parish priests of Paris and the guild of writing masters by which the latter were forbidden to set foot in the Charity Schools without the permission of the parish priest. Their flagrant violation of the provision clearly put the writing masters in the wrong; it would have been easy to shut the door in their faces and to keep them out when they came only to cause trouble and disorder.

De La Salle's enemies, who had succeeded in poisoning De La Chétardie's mind against him and in convincing the parish priest to side with them, either did not allow the pastor to be informed of the trouble or prevented him from doing anything about it. They even succeeded in getting him to close the school he had established a few years previously, on rue Les Fosse de M. le Prince, as a gesture of appeasement offered to the writing masters. Perhaps De La Chétardie had hoped that by suppressing this school, he would place the others beyond the reach of their attacks. What the enemies of the servant of God wanted was to oblige the Brothers to retire completely from the parish schools and to follow De La Salle himself into self-imposed exile. They hoped to accomplish their aim through their incessant vexations, and they did so. At the beginning of 1706, the Brothers, disgusted and wearied by these unrelenting inspections and bothered more than ever in their work, asked their Superior to let them leave and give up a position that they could no longer defend. After taking the advice of several enlightened persons, De La Salle allowed them to do so.

#### The schools are closed as the Brothers withdraw

The Brothers simply disappeared, and the schools remained shut the next day. Nobody knew why or what had become of the Brothers. Rumors spread, and with time, the story took on additional details. At first, people thought that the Brothers had given an extraordinary holiday to their students or that illness or some important business had led to their departure. But when those theories lost credibility because of the prolonged absence of the Brothers, people began to fear that the closing of the schools might last indefinitely and that the schools themselves might be permanently discontinued, to the great detriment of the public. Fear caused more turmoil than ever and led parents interested in the instruction of their children, who were already beginning to run wild in the streets and to show by their incipient mischief-making the need they had of Christian education, to go to the parish priest to ask for a solution to the problem.

A great many parents, therefore, visited De La Chétardie to make known to him how sorry they were over the departure of the Brothers, how impossible it was for them to give their children the instruction and education they needed or to send them to the classes of teachers who had to be paid for their services. They praised the ability of the Brothers to instruct the children, to make them docile, well-behaved and pious, whereas apart from their influence, they showed

themselves ignorant and unmanageable, misbehaved, and were lacking in seriousness. They added that since the closing of the schools, all these unfortunate consequences were becoming obvious.

De La Chétardie takes measures to restore peace in the schools

These spontaneous and touching remonstrances took effect. De La Chétardie was moved. This charitable pastor, entirely devoted to the welfare of his parishioners, a man who exhibited a special tenderness toward the poor, calmed their fears by promising them to get the Brothers back. Never did he understand better the need his parish had of those men, the good they were doing, the services they rendered to the public, and the advantage religion drew from such useful servants. De La Chétardie requested De La Salle to reopen the Gratuitous Schools, assured him that the Brothers would no longer be disturbed, and promised that he himself would see to it.

He kept his word. He called a meeting of the main officers of the guild of writing masters and had a document drawn up in their presence and certified by two notaries,. This act stated that it was he, De La Chétardie, who had commissioned the Brothers, each identified by the family name, to teach in the Charity Schools of his parish; that John Baptist de La Salle, priest and doctor of theology, had been most regrettably interfered with in that regard by the writing masters, since he had employed his disciples in the work only by De La Chétardie's orders, at his expense, and in conformity with his directions; that he, the parish priest, had in the matter merely been following the example of his predecessors, who had called De La Salle to Paris with his disciples to render service to the poor children of the parish; that the rent on the classroom building, as well as on the lodgings of the teachers, was paid for by the parish priest himself; finally, that it was he who had always provided food and lodging to the Brothers named in the document, that he intended them to continue their work in full liberty, and that he was having this present act drawn up so that all concerned might take note of it and be guided by it.

The document was sent to the holy Founder, who was satisfied with it. Thus, after an interruption of three weeks, he sent the Brothers back to the schools. The act of authority on the part of the parish priest proved an effective restraint on the ill humor and animosity of the writing masters, at least as long as De La Chétardie remained resolved to maintain his position. Calm was restored in the Christian Schools for some time, and the Brothers were able to resume their teaching. Although peace came to them once more, De La Salle did



not enjoy it personally. The battle against his disciples had died down, but the opposition against him continued.

The parish priest would not abandon his preconceptions, and he refused his consideration to the father even while granting it to his children. The servant of God was extremely hurt by his attitude and did not know what he should do to win back the favor of a pastor so respectable by reason of his great age and his outstanding merit, a man whom he loved, honored, and admired by inclination and through gratitude for so many favors received from him. He paid a call on De La Chétardie, and although he was ungraciously received, he did what he could to dissipate the bias in the pastor's mind and to melt the ice in his heart. In spite of having to face the coldness on the visage of the parish priest, he tried to approach him and to overcome the prejudice shown by a man who was so necessary to him. It was all in vain. God permitted the trial to purify his servant's virtue and to show him that he alone was the true support of his Institute.

The fact is that at the time, outside of God, De La Salle had no resource to count on and not a friend in Paris. Everything was against him, and he met with nothing but opposition at every step. At that very time, he had to endure a grave and painful trial, one that he would hardly have expected from a man like De La Chétardie. He paid the salary due to the Brothers employed in his parish schools by giving him state-issued paper money. The notes were highly suspect to people at the time and were quite useless in his hands, and so he was not able to buy provisions for the community, since neither butcher nor baker would accept the notes, nor indeed would anyone else. Nonetheless, the Brothers had to live and needed food. De La Salle had paper money, but he had nothing with which he could buy food. His great poverty, aggravated by the turn of events, threw him into extreme embarrassment, but God, in whom he confided, delivered him from it and helped him change the worthless paper into real money. Either out of pity or out of charity or from some other motive, certain persons did him the favor of exchanging the state notes for coin. That fact amazed all those who learned of it, no one more so than the parish priest himself, who with all his influence would not have been able to bring off such a miracle.

When he had spent all this sum, De La Salle returned to the parish priest for the balance of the salary due. All he received was an ungracious refusal, and he came away with neither coins nor notes. The refusal placed him in a more painful quandary than ever. There was nothing to eat in the house. All purses were closed to him, and where he was concerned, people seemed to think it was all right to be lack-

ing in charity. He believed, more strongly than ever at this point, that the cause of this ill treatment was his own person; he had become objectionable. His sorrow was increased by the fact that while he alone was the object of persecution, it was his disciples who had become its victims. He felt that he was the Jonah who must be cast overboard and that once he had disappeared, the tempest and the famine would cease.

### De Salle disappears to make a retreat with the Carmelites

It did not take him long to test his theory. Here is the innocent stratagem he made use of to obtain the money needed to provide for the Brothers. All of a sudden, he became invisible. He went into hiding in the monastery of the Discalced Carmelites and took advantage of the circumstances to make a fifteen-day retreat there. Nobody knew where he was, except two or three of his principal disciples to whom he had revealed the secret. Meanwhile, one of the Brothers, who was well liked by De La Chétardie, approached him, as De La Salle had instructed him to do. After asking for the money due to the Brothers, he mentioned that their Superior had vanished and that no one knew where. The parish priest, surprised at the news, immediately gave him all the money he wanted. That was not the first time that the Brother,<sup>10</sup> always welcome at the house of the parish priest, had been employed by the servant of God to obtain what he himself had been refused.

Thinking that De La Salle was far away, the pastor wished to seize the opportunity for substituting another Superior in his stead. The one he would have wished to install was none other than that same Brother, a mere serving Brother. It is true that he was an imposing looking figure with a venerable aspect, but he was also very simple and not well educated. He spoke badly, and since he could not express himself fluently, he was incapable of occupying the place offered to him. He was born to obey and could only follow the directions received from another. The parish priest urged him several times to accept the role of Superior, but the Brother was embarrassed by this and could not listen without sorrow to such an offer, which humiliated him but did not tempt him or go to his head. He loved his Superior sincerely and was firmly attached to him. He honored him as a saint and would have considered himself a vile usurper if he had tried to oust him; he would have been looked upon by the other Brothers with horror.

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10. Brother Thomas Frappet, for many years bursar of the Community.

While all this was going on, De La Salle, the pious victim of persecution, was free of all his cares and employed his leisure in prayer and contemplation. His attraction for interior prayer was so great that this exercise was for him like his native element, his food and drink. Never could he sufficiently satisfy his inclination in this regard. We might suppose that in the retirement and solitude of Saint Yon, he would have eaten his fill of the Bread of Life which he enjoyed there, but he became only more avid for it. When he had to take up again the concerns and occupations of Martha, he felt a stronger yearning than ever for the repose of Magdalen, either to purify his soul by a general examination of his life or to plunge himself into God's bosom and attain a more intimate union with the One whom his heart loved and whose absence he considered his greatest torment. He felt special devotion toward Saint Teresa, that great lover of Jesus and of his cross, from whose writings he had imbibed his great spirit of interior prayer and his love for suffering. Combined with the special regard he entertained toward her spiritual children, who make profession of leading a deeply interior and contemplative life, his devotion had led him to choose their monastery to make his retreat. After spending fifteen days there in deepest recollection and intimate communication with God, fortified by prayer and by strength imparted from on high, he left with new courage to face new trials.

Reappearing amidst his disciples as suddenly as he had left, the Founder made them all happy by his return. They had been concerned about him during his absence and did not know what to think. His presence brought back calm, and they profited by the new insights that this Moses had drawn from his retreat. Like him, they felt themselves moved with renewed ardor to acquire the perfection of their state and to show patience under persecution. They did well to prepare themselves for it thus, because it broke out again as soon as the servant of God returned. Because he was filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ, the cross followed him everywhere. The devil could not let him live in peace.

### Persecution begins again with the Founder's return

In vain, the servant of God did all he could to remain hidden in the Brothers' house. His return was soon known in the parish and provided his enemies with a fresh opportunity to renew their harassment in the hope of making him leave Paris and never come back. The fact was that they had never lost sight of their primary objective: to change the form of government of the Institute and to modify both its

spirit and its Rule. As De La Salle had not been willing to go along with their desires in that regard, he had become obnoxious to them. They had moved heaven and earth to get rid of him, as we have seen above, and to make the Brothers dissatisfied with him. Not having succeeded in their attempt, they were trying to reach their ends by another way, namely, by stirring up so much trouble in Paris that he would be obliged to leave the city. They felt sure that in his absence, they would be able to accomplish what they despaired of bringing about in his presence.

It must always be remembered that his worst adversaries were secret enemies who would have been greatly annoyed had their animosity been revealed openly. They were worthy men with a notable reputation for virtue, and they thought that by persecuting his servant, they were rendering a signal service to God. As they saw it, De La Salle had indeed conceived an idea, the outcome of genius, but he was not capable of putting it into execution. His Institute was important for the good of the Church, but it needed someone else to bring it to its full development. Those who thought in this way considered themselves called to complete what the servant of God had begun.

Having found him docile to their suggestions, as long as these did not alter the spirit of his Society, they had declared themselves its supporters, but later on, finding him inflexible with regard to the changes they wished to introduce into his organization, they had come to dislike him. They had misrepresented him to the archdiocesan chancery as a narrow-minded man incapable of governing. They had tried to incite his disciples to revolt against him and to make them dissatisfied with his person and his manner of governing. Failing in this, they had stirred up the rivalry of the writing masters in Paris against the Gratuitous Schools. On this point, they had achieved momentary success. Now they did not give up hope of winning the total victory so long awaited. They thought that by renewing the struggle, they would oblige the holy priest to withdraw from Paris and abandon this battlefield. After that, they could lay down the law to the Brothers, introduce new rules among them, abolish their long-standing practices, and install a new Superior under whose name they themselves would actually govern the Society.

The enemies of the servant of God, who had not lost sight of their previous designs, once again tried to rob the Brothers of the protection of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice and to disparage their Superior. In this they succeeded. Even the greatest men have their weaknesses; there is always in them a human side. They are not exempt from prepossessions; when they give in to them, they act out of

prejudice as others do through passion. While seeking nothing but God, it happens that they end up by warring on his greatest servants; on the pretext of virtue, they combat the most virtuous of men.

De La Chétardie, although enlightened, full of the best intentions, and sincerely pious, did not in that affair show sufficient distrust of himself and of those who sought to turn him against the holy Founder. He became the dupe of their false zeal and their instrument in causing new grief for De La Salle. The Founder suffered the trial like a true saint. No word of complaint, no murmur, no sign of sorrow revealed his affliction to those with whom he lived. On the contrary, his joy seemed to redouble in the midst of his trials and to grow with them. Never did he seem more unruffled; those who were ignorant of what was going on imagined that everything was happening as he wished and that calm finally had followed the tempest. With the exception of the Brother whose ascendancy over the parish priest he made use of and the Brother Director, nobody else knew anything about the unpleasant circumstances with which he was struggling. He kept total silence about all that was happening to him and that concerned him personally. He spoke of it only to God.

#### De La Salle closes the schools a second time

There would be no point in detailing the various trials that his opponents caused the Founder. To sum it all up, it went so far that in the end, he felt himself obliged to yield lest the persecution might extend from his person to that of his disciples, as usually happened. They were beginning to grow discouraged. Worn out by the struggle, they began to lose heart under these violent attacks, in spite of everything he could say to comfort them. Eventually, convinced that so radical an evil could be cured only by violent remedies, the Founder ordered all the schools closed and sent the Brothers, two by two, to various other houses. Only the Director remained in Paris to keep watch over the house and to speak with persons who might come to inquire what had happened. That was in July 1706, when De La Salle was living in the house in Saint Roch parish.

The reason why the holy Founder decided to withdraw the Brothers and to discontinue their classes was the new campaign of intimidation launched against them by the writing masters, who were secretly urged on and abetted. They constantly came to the schools to cause trouble, forced the students to leave, insulted the Brothers, and threatened them with prison. The pretext for all these vexations was the same old one: they claimed that in the Gratuitous Schools were

children whose parents were not paupers. As the parish priest knew what was going on but said not a word, the writing masters took his silence for approval, and that gave them all the liberty they wanted. They carried it even to insolence.

De La Chétardie, however, had not expected that the tragedy would end by the departure of the Brothers. If he had, his zeal for the Christian Schools would have made him speak up and do so with the authoritative tone he knew, better than anyone, how to assume when necessary. That would have reduced the foes of the Institute to silence and put an end to their hostility. He was, then, greatly surprised when he learned that the schools had been closed suddenly, nor was it difficult for him to guess why and to realize that it was his own fault for leaving those innocent men defenseless against their antagonists.

The classes remained shut for three months, to the great regret of the public. It did not take long for the ill effects the closing caused in the parish to become obvious. Most of the fathers and mothers complained bitterly to the parish priest. The poor, who were losing such a valuable opportunity for the instruction of their children, were in despair. Meanwhile, the enemies of the holy priest congratulated themselves over their victory. To make it complete, they suggested to De La Chétardie that he should look for other teachers to conduct the Gratuitous Schools. After all, the schools themselves were certainly needed, and the zealous pastor did not want to see them discontinued, nor did he wish to deprive the poor in his parish of so necessary a means of salvation. He had even promised those who had come to complain to him that he would immediately set about restoring the situation to what it had been.

Those who had been interested in getting rid of the Brothers brought forward a number of candidates to replace them. They were mostly former Brothers who had left the Institute, but apart from the fact that there were not enough of them to staff all the classes, the parish priest was not satisfied with them. The charity that had once inspired them had given place to cupidity. They refused to work for the miserly salaries paid the Brothers, who—like Saint Paul—were content with the bare necessities of life.

### Measures taken by the pastor to prevent further harassment

De La Chétardie was, therefore, obliged to try to get the former teachers back, to the great disappointment of those who had labored so hard to force them out. He let his intentions be known to De La Salle, who was prepared to obey, meek as a lamb, without allowing himself

any complaint or reproach to the priest who had abandoned him to the harassment of his opponents. Delighted to know that the servant of God was prepared to send the Brothers back, De La Chétardie wrote and asked him to come back to reopen the schools as soon as possible.

The holy priest answered that he had preferred to yield to the circumstances rather than to be exposed to the perpetual disturbances which had caused so much harm to the Brothers. He mentioned that the way they had been treated recently had discouraged several and that it was not possible for him to find replacements for them on such short notice. He added that he was unwilling to send Brothers back to Saint Sulpice unless he was given assurances that they would be able to carry on their work in peace under the protection of the parish priest. Finally, the wise Superior, to make sure that he would thenceforth be shielded from all such vexations which had annoyed the Brothers and disrupted their schools, ordered the Director, who had remained alone in the residence, to negotiate with the parish priest and to make sure that there would be no further danger of similar ordeals in the future.

By order of De La Chétardie, the requested measures were taken; the holy Founder immediately recalled the Brothers from the provinces. Twelve of them came back to the parish of Saint Sulpice: ten to teach, one to take care of temporal affairs, and one to be Director of the establishment. Their salaries were regulated on the basis which still exists today. At the request of the Brother so well liked by the parish priest, he condescended to pay them for the three months during which the schools had been closed and also to defray the traveling expenses of the Brothers who were being recalled. That act of charity was indeed necessary, because the poverty of the Brothers was such that they would not have been able to meet these expenses.

This reconciliation had hardly been concluded when it almost broke down because of an untoward event. De La Salle had sent the Brother so well liked by De La Chétardie on an errand to the provinces without advising the parish priest. Because the latter was highly incensed at the assignment, the order had to be countermanded immediately, lest the enemies of De La Salle might use the circumstance to smear him and once more poison the mind of the pastor against him.

The schools reopened at the beginning of October 1706 and were at once filled. The impatience with which the people had waited for the reopening was followed by outbursts of joy on their part. Their reaction once again made plain to the public at large and to the

parish priest of Saint Sulpice what an invaluable resource it is for the instruction of youth to have Charity Schools staffed by teachers who are as pious as they are competent.

So that in the future the writing masters might not cause any more trouble in the schools that were the objects of their jealousy, De La Chétardie sent Abbé de Gergy, his vicar at this time and today his successor as parish priest of Saint Sulpice, to investigate the financial standing of the families of the pupils. The pious priest spent several weeks doing so, and he drew up a list of the students' names, ages, and addresses. The Brothers were told to admit only those who presented a note signed by a priest from the Community of Saint Sulpice who was designated by the pastor to verify the financial status of the parents of the children.

Fathers and mothers were required by this ritual to come from all over the parish to obtain a ticket, which was like a key which opened the doors of the Gratuitous Schools for their children. The procedure disarmed the writing masters completely and deprived them of any pretext for further harassment. It protected the Brothers and their schools and brought peace and quiet back to them; yet, they did not lose a single student. The gratuitous classes were filled as usual, and no child asking for admission was turned away. The large number of pupils, a fresh source of displeasure and disappointment for the masters in Paris, would no longer excuse them for causing trouble.

This issuing of tickets which protected the schools from any invidious visitations, when all was said and done, was nothing but a pure formality, for the same students whose supposedly easy circumstances had provided a pretext for the lawsuits filed by the writing masters returned to the Brothers with their tickets duly signed. The priest in charge felt that in conscience he could not refuse them. Better informed than the writing masters about the family resources and unwilling to conform his judgment to the masters' imagination, he did not feel justified in classifying as rich those people who had a little money, but also a large family, or who owned well-stocked stores but owed more than they possessed.

Thus this epic struggle between the Brothers and their rivals finally subsided. As all this had merely been used as a weapon by De La Salle's enemies to strike at him, their agitation died down somewhat. This new period of calm permitted the opening of new schools, which we shall relate after mentioning the new residence occupied by the Brothers at Saint Sulpice.

For over eighteen years, the Brothers had lodged in the rue Princepsse, where one of the parish schools was situated. The house was



very inconvenient on account of its location; it was open on all sides, so that over twenty families could see what went on. The Brothers could not leave the house without being noticed nor go out to enjoy a breath of fresh air in the courtyard during recreation without being spied on by curious and malicious eyes. This constraint kept them uneasy in a residence which had no garden and was too small for the number of Brothers. The difficulty was not to find a more commodious house but to get the parish priest of Saint Sulpice to agree to the move.

To bring that about, De La Salle, who had still not managed to recover the good graces of his virtuous pastor, thought that while he himself kept in the background, he should make use of the influence of the Brother whom the pastor liked. That Brother started looking for a more suitable residence and did not take long to find one. The house, belonging to Abbé de Mascarani, was located near the Sèves gate, in the same quarter as the Hospital for Incurables, and was just what the Brothers needed: it offered plenty of fresh air, was solitary, easily adapted to the Brothers' style of life, and had a garden. The holy Founder went to visit the place in secret and liked it very much. He told the Brother who had found it to try his best to secure it for the Community. The Brother obeyed, and success rewarded his obedience.

De La Chétardie agreed to the request as soon as the Brother explained the reasons for the change, and the pastor congratulated him on finding the right place. De La Chétardie was confirmed in the opinion he had formed of the house by the report made to him by Abbé Languet de Gergy, whom he had sent at once with the Brother to look it over. He then gave orders to rent it. The holy priest was surprised when he was told that De La Chétardie consented so quickly, and at the same time, he felt much satisfaction because Divine Providence, at last, had made available to the Brothers in Paris a convenient residence, secluded and conducive to great regularity. In this event, De La Salle admired the goodness of God, who out of all the afflictions and contradictions he had suffered, had drawn and had turned in their favor, at least for a moment, a heart so long poisoned against him.

A few months later, the school in the parish of Saint Roch was entrusted to other teachers, and De La Salle was obliged to transfer his residence to the new house. The following year, 1709, which caused so much hardship on account of the famine and the long and rigorous winter, he was fortunate, indeed, in also being able to find there a lodging for the novices, who had come seeking the necessities of life

in the capital. The novitiate, thus established in a place so conducive to fervor, remained there for seven years; the school, meanwhile, continued to function in the classrooms that the parish had rented in rue Princesse. The new residence, so well adapted to requirements, cost 400 livres a year. It was occupied by the Brothers until 1722, at which date they moved to another residence, near Sainte Técla. That was an even more commodious dwelling, where they settled down in permanent fashion.

## CHAPTER VI

### *New foundations at Dijon, Mende, Alais, Grenoble, and Saint-Denis-en-France*

Although the foundation of the Brothers' school in Dijon followed that of Darnétal, we have delayed speaking of it, in order to relate in one place its history and that of several establishments which followed and in order not to break the continuity of the holy Founder's life.

#### The foundation at Dijon

The Christian School in Dijon was opened thanks both to Monsieur Rigolet, first president of the Chamber of Accounts of that city, and to his illustrious family, which can truly be called a family of saints. Father, mother, and children all cooperated with holy rivalry in this good work. The father began it; his wife supported it, and their children brought it to completion. Rigolet was a model for the entire city. He appeared in public only insofar as his duties required; otherwise, he was a lover of retirement, prayer, and good works. The life he led kept him always prepared for his Holy Communion, which, it was said, he had been authorized to receive daily.<sup>11</sup> In a most obliging letter he wrote to the holy Founder, this religious magistrate offered him a place to lodge the two Brothers and 400 livres a year as their salary. De La Salle accepted his proposal, and two Brothers left at once for Dijon, where they began classes in June 1705.

As long as the pious magistrate lived, he granted his protection to the Brothers. The same charity which had led him to endow Christian and Gratuitous Schools in his native city also inspired him with great

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11. A rare privilege at a time when frequent Communion was discouraged.

zeal to support and develop them. Although he did not live long enough to do them all the good he had planned on doing, his illustrious children proved themselves true heirs to his zeal. The Brothers lost this devoted friend about the year 1716. When he died, he was buried by the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, his brother-in-law, in the chapel of Saint Charles, with all the honors due to his rank.

His wife, a sister of the archbishop of Sens and of Abbé Languet de Gergy, was a woman of eminent virtue who deserved to be called the mother of the poor because of her tender charity toward them. After her husband's death, she continued to support the schools with a zeal like his. Equally edifying, the children, who inherited the zeal and piety of their parents, joined with M. de Rochefort, a councillor in the parliament and a relative of M. Rigolet, in enlarging the establishment set up by their parents, with the result that four other Brothers had to be added to the staff. Thus the Christian and Gratuitous Schools are now functioning with great success and with God's blessing in three sections of the city of Dijon with the approval of the mayor and councilmen, who welcomed them by an official proclamation.

### The foundation at Mende

The founding of the Christian Schools in Mende, the capital of Gévaudan, was the result of the pious solicitude of the bishop, Monsieur de Piancourt. This city became the place where De La Salle gave proof of his heroic humility. No one ever showed a more earnest desire to have the Brothers and more zeal for the instruction of youth than this illustrious prelate whose charity despoiled him, before his death, of all his property in favor of the poor and other good works. Toward the end of his holy life, filled with merit and entirely devoted to the labors of his ministry and the welfare of his diocese, the prelate wished to put the crowning touch on his benefactions by founding several Gratuitous Schools and a general hospice for the poor. Considering this double undertaking in favor of the poor as the final deed of his charity, he would have died thinking he had not done for his people all that his zeal inspired him to do, had he not left them these two foundations to alleviate their spiritual and temporal needs.

The bishop himself, in his testament which was dated 19 October 1707, wrote as follows: "The salvation of people and their temporal happiness depend mainly on the proper education of youth, both boys and girls. In addition to the tokens of affection and predilection which we have given to the citizens of our beloved city of Mende by building and endowing for them a general hospice, a permanent and

universal asylum for all the natural calamities and reverses of fortune which can happen to them during life, we feel that we cannot leave them a greater proof of our affection than by endowing schools which will provide them with everything which can contribute to the salvation of their souls and to their temporal felicity.”

In fact, as soon as he learned that there existed in Paris a group of schoolmasters inspired by pure charity and dedicated by vocation to the Christian education and instruction of poor children and that M. de La Salle, former canon of Reims and a doctor of theology, their father and Founder, who was in charge of this new sort of seminary, spent all his time in training and sanctifying these men, the bishop hastened to enrich his diocese by acquiring some Brothers for it. He thus put the finishing touch on his good works by endowing the Gratuitous Schools.

Unfortunately, at that particular time, the holy priest was not able to satisfy fully the desires of the saintly bishop, because he lacked Brothers. Some had grown disenchanted, and others had been driven away by the series of persecutions we have spoken of. Nevertheless, delighted to find so much zeal in this great bishop, the Founder did what he could to cooperate with him; he sent one Brother to begin the Gratuitous School and to give the bishop an idea of what the Brothers were capable of doing. He also promised to send more as soon as possible. The Brother dispatched to Mende<sup>12</sup> succeeded better than the bishop had dared hope. So satisfied was he that he wrote to De La Salle a second time, begging him to send another Brother.

Here are his words on this occasion: “My dear Monsieur, I cannot sufficiently bless God, who inspired you with the idea of training schoolmasters to instruct the young and bring them up in Christian piety. Seminaries train good ecclesiastics, but good schoolmasters, who give children the first impressions of piety and religion, can help to sanctify all Christians. Nobody could be more pleased than I am with the Brother you sent, who, while awaiting a second to help him, has already begun instructing our young people. I should be extremely obliged to you if you sent us another able to teach both writing and arithmetic, because this will attract all the youngsters, and thus we can impart to them the rudiments of Christian piety.

“For my part, I will give the Brothers all the protection they can expect from me, so that they may be completely satisfied by their labors in this city. Brother \*\*\* can tell you of my high regard for him

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12. Brother Ponce, who had opened the school in Darnétal and later was Director in Rouen. He eventually left the Institute.

and for the school. Please see to it that my regard may increase more and more, thanks to the good choice you will make of the teachers you will send me. I shall be most obliged to you. Assuring you of my most particular esteem, I beg you to believe me your very humble and obedient servant. F. P. de Piancourt, Bishop of Mende. At Mende, this 8 April 1707.”

The second Brother succeeded as well as the first. The two of them could see the harvest growing so much in their hands that they alone were not sufficient for the task. The third Brother who came to help them found as much to do as the first two and had equal reason to feel consoled over the results. The pious bishop could not have experienced a keener joy as he saw his days drawing to a close. To avoid leaving his undertakings incomplete after beginning them so successfully, and lest death might surprise him, he made his will, leaving to the Brothers an income of 510 livres as an endowment, along with the house where they lived, and an income of 250 livres for the two schoolmistresses at the girls’ school.

It would seem that God was waiting for nothing more from this pious prelate than the definite endowment of these good works before calling him to the reward due to him for all his efforts. Not long after making these arrangements, he died, to the great regret of the Brothers, who had known him too late and lost him too soon. They were right to deplore his demise, because it brought uncertain days to the Gratuitous Schools he had founded and threatened them with ruin. The Brothers who came after the first three—and proved very different from them—made their holy Superior practice heroic patience. Their insolence provided him with an opportunity of leaving to all his disciples a rare example of meekness and Christian humility.

This is what happened. Three unworthy followers of such a virtuous leader had been sent to Mende after the collapse of the novitiate in Provence, which we shall speak of shortly. They separated from the others and created a sort of schism in their Society. They did not wish to have anything to do with the other Brothers and refused to obey their legitimate Superior. Their irregularity was the occasion of their schism. These tepid and relaxed religious, far from the vigilant eyes of their Superior and without the example of their Brothers and the support of the Rule, had become their own masters, did what they liked, and by following their natural bent, traced out for themselves a path to perdition. Little by little, from a life lived without constraint or restraint, they passed on to a tepid and sensual existence which led to grave disorders. De La Salle bewailed their change and, like a good father, did all he could to make his unruly children come to their

senses. They had imitated the prodigal son in their waywardness but not in their repentance.

Those incurably sick men, who were only emboldened by mild treatment, might have been brought back to their duty by sternness and punishment, but that solution seemed too risky. The best remedy for their hardness of heart was, no doubt, to remove them from the place where they had grown so lax and to send them back to the novitiate, so that they could reflect on what they had done and take up again the true spirit of their state. But that was not an easy solution. De La Salle had the right to act thus, since the foundation had been made in his name and was a part of his Society. Those children of Belial knew his right and feared it, for they were resolved to throw off the yoke of obedience. To parry such a move, they managed to circumvent Bishop de Piancourt's successor as well as the city officials. They succeeded in winning these gentlemen over to such an extent that it was not possible to send the three Brothers away from Mende.

The holy Founder, who was ignorant of all these schemes, was not a little surprised, when he went to pay his respects to the new bishop of Mende, to hear him say, as though he were a master threatening a servant, that De La Salle was not to withdraw any of the Brothers from Mende: he would not accept any others and would send back any who came to replace them. The Founder's astonishment grew even greater when he heard the senior judge and councillor, who is the mayor of this city, speak in similar terms.

If the virtuous Superior had wished to reply, he could have had plenty to say that would have opened the eyes of those gentlemen who had been circumvented by rebellious subjects. He could have pointed out that the irregular life of those Brothers showed the danger of leaving them in the place which had given them an opportunity for relaxation. He might have appealed to the testament of Bishop de Piancourt to justify his making such changes, but he was not inclined to argue. His humility led him to give in and remain silent every time. That is what he did once more on this occasion; he let his silence and calm demeanor give proof that he was in the right, and thus he vindicated his conduct.

During all this time, the holy Superior was residing with his rebellious Brothers but did not show any ill humor over their deceitful and disloyal conduct. He dwelt with them as with any other Brothers, hoping to convince by his good example those whom he could not correct with authority. He was not welcome, however, among the three Brothers, who brooked no interference and who, impatient to

resume their former manner of living, would have preferred to see him out of the way, since he prevented them from doing as they would have liked. The presence of a saint was burdensome to them. Worse, it became a torment for those wretched men. They resented his example even more than his remonstrances, because his example covered them with confusion, became a silent monitor, and addressed to them more pungent reproaches than the most severe admonitions could have done. To get rid of the mute censor, they adopted the most expeditious means, which was to put him out of the house and send him away.

One of them took it upon himself to carry out that commission and insolently told De La Salle that if he wanted to stay with them, he would have to pay for his board. Such rudeness would have shocked him if the remarks that the rebels had already caused the bishop and the magistrates to make to him had not prepared him for it. The affront might certainly have aroused indignation in anyone less accustomed to insults and less dead to himself than the holy priest. In similar circumstances, even the least sensitive of men would have felt justified in taking up the contract of the foundation and showing the three mutineers the terms of the document which authorized him to put them out instead. If he had done so, we could only have praised his wisdom and firmness.

Some may think that he should have acted in that fashion, because the only way to deal with the frenzy of pride is with a cauterizing iron. Proud persons must be obliged to bend their backs before the weight of authority. It is commonly asserted that a superior who does not know how to make his subjects obey does not know how to govern, that the art of reducing rebels to submission is the art of commanding well. The saints, however, act according to other insights than do the rest of us. Their wisdom is from above, and it inspires them with maxims far different than those inspired by human prudence. De La Salle's wisdom led him to humble himself in all things, to give in always, and to profit by all the opportunities that Divine Providence furnished him to abase himself beneath the feet of all, even of his own disciples. His example in this situation was not the first he had given the Brothers in such circumstances; we have already mentioned several others.

To appreciate the extent to which the holy priest put aside his own dignity in that instance, we should mention that the one who treated his good father and Superior so outrageously was the son of a poor cobbler from Picardy whom he had taken in through charity and brought up carefully in his Community. He had accepted him when

the young man was ignorant, incapable of doing anything, not even knowing how to read and write. He had made an excellent teacher of him, had made him, in fact, all he was. The ingrate forgot all that; he forgot who he was and no longer recognized in his father, benefactor, and Superior the one who had lifted him up and who could still set him down again as he had been before. The churlish words of the arrogant disciple deserved the reply made by an emperor to an ungrateful patriarch whom he had appointed: *O man of nothing, it was I who raised you up; man of nothing, I will bring you down again into the dust whence you came.*

But the rebel knew to whom he was speaking. He knew that he was speaking to one whose humility surpassed his own pride. He had learned from other striking examples of humility given by the holy priest that he only kept quiet on such occasions and bowed his head beneath the hand that humiliated him. He saw that happen again a final time, to his own misfortune. The saintly Superior heard the outrageous words but said nothing. Even his silence, which cried out louder than the bitterest complaints or the most stinging reproaches, did not touch his hard-hearted disciple. The latter saw his father, whom he was driving from his own house, withdraw without a word, calm and full of joy, and go to seek shelter under a stranger's roof.

Such impious conduct only led the defiant and ungrateful son down into a deeper abyss. Having raised the standard of rebellion, he got rid of the third Brother, had himself tonsured, hired a serving woman, and committed a thousand other scandalous infractions of his Rule while still wearing the habit of the Institute to which he no longer belonged but which he kept on wearing through the instigation of the devil in order to dishonor it. It is true that he could not put aside his habit without losing the endowment funds, because Bishop de Piancourt had inserted in his will the express clause that the schools which he was establishing would be attached to the Society of the Brothers founded by De La Salle. So it was not through any sentiment of religion but through concern for his own interests that this schismatic kept the habit of an Institute which he had disowned.

Along with his companion, he perpetuated this scandal for about ten years. At the end of that time, divine justice seemed to demand vengeance upon them for their misdeeds. Both of them died of the pestilence which spread from Marseille to Mende, bringing desolation with it. The schools remained closed for two years, after which time, three more Brothers arrived to reopen them at the request of the bishop and some of the principal officials of the town. That was about 1724.



The scandalous behavior of the deceased Brothers had made the bishop and the city councillors regret having given them their backing. It served as a proof that the branch separated from the trunk dries up and perishes and that inferiors who break away from dependence on their Superior sooner or later become frightening examples of men whom God abandons. Although those various events happened at different times, we have grouped them here so that by anticipating a little, we might present a more continuous story. That is what we have nearly always done in relating the establishment of the Brothers and of the Gratuitous Schools so as not to interrupt the thread of our narrative.<sup>13</sup>

### The foundation at Alais

The founding of the Christian Schools at Alais followed shortly after that of Mende. No city in the whole kingdom had more need of such a charitable endeavor. The remembrance of the horrible ravages that the rebellious Huguenots committed in the Cévennes has not entirely died away even now. That region, reddened by the blood of Catholics, was the scene of the last convulsive stand of Calvinism in France. There, more than anywhere else, heresy combined with fanaticism made use of fire and sword, showing the hatred that hell inspires toward the faithful members of the Roman Church. Catholics were torn to pieces, beheaded, and suffered martyrdom by new sorts of torments inflicted with unheard-of cruelty. We can read about it in the history which has been written on the subject. Finally vanquished and forced into its last stronghold, Calvinism fell victim to its own frenzy and had to yield to the arms of Marshal Villars, whom King Louis XIV sent to give the last blow to the cruel hydra that Calvin had nurtured for the misfortune of his own country and that for over a century had brought death and carnage wherever it went.

This great king, who finally exterminated the pernicious error lurking under the mask of reform and which had caused his ancestors to tremble and had so long desolated France, wished to triumph over it as a Christian prince should. The only vengeance he sought for the spilled blood of his subjects was the conversion of those who had shed it or had a hand in shedding it. The project was laudable and truly worthy of the religious spirit of him who had conceived it. It was not easy to carry out.

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13. Later historians have pointed out the serious inaccuracies in Blain's account of this so-called schism at Mende.

It can be said, in all truth, that it was less difficult to defeat those rebellious fanatics than to convert them when their hands still ran with the blood of Catholics and their hearts still thirsted for murder and carnage. Some had made a religion for themselves out of their violence and considered it a duty of piety to kill and slaughter. Others thought themselves called to fight the Lord's battles by revolting against their king. Still others claimed to be inspired and moved by divine power when they became the executioners of their fellow citizens. Few, indeed, of these were much inclined to return to the bosom of the Church which they had just been lacerating.

Nevertheless, that was the laudable project that Louis XIV conceived, and to bring it about, he took the right measures. Two kinds of people, very different from each other, were needed in order to accomplish this task: soldiers and evangelical laborers. The former had to keep the rebels subdued while the latter taught them and tried to deliver them from their errors. Without the former, the latter were in danger of becoming the victims of that false zeal which is so easily rekindled. Without the latter, the former would have succeeded only in fomenting more disorder and in increasing irreligion.

Military forces were stationed all over the country, for there was everything to fear from subjects who were apparently subdued but remained rebellious in their hearts. Experience had taught that this fire hidden beneath the ashes could burst into flame again in a moment and cause new conflagrations. It was, therefore, necessary to pose sentinels to keep constant watch and to hold other forces in readiness to extinguish the flames if they broke out again. This had to be done first, and so it was.

The king's troops occupied all the cities and towns of any consequence where there was danger of mutiny, and they fulfilled their proper duty. They overawed the wandering preachers who spoke of nothing but charity and acted only from fear. The king's militia imposed on those fierce and bloodthirsty souls the peace and tranquillity that the sacred ministry demands.

Once order and calm returned, the prince called for volunteer Gospel missionaries to replace those who had fallen victim to the fanatical fury of the heretics. These missionaries needed a leader to direct them in this work and guide them in their apostolate. This leader, according to Christ's institution, is the bishop. It was felt that to cause religion to flourish and make progress in the areas where error and fanaticism had so long ruled, a new bishopric was needed. Consequently, the city and territory of Alais were separated from the diocese of Nîmes by Louis XIV, and Innocent XII erected a new diocese there.

François Maurice, the superior of the royal missionaries of the area, was chosen to be the first bishop. His first thought was to find worthy ministers to help him in his task, men who could work with him at uprooting and planting, tearing down and building up again, in a zone where the heresy once banished from the kingdom had taken refuge and where hardly one family in twelve was Catholic. Among the zealous laborers whom he recruited to help him was M. Mérez, a canon of Nîmes noted for his zeal for the salvation of souls. The bishop appointed him vicar-general and head of the new cathedral chapter.

The two of them, whom long experience had made experts in the art of winning souls to God, judged that among all the new religious institutions needed to oppose the heresy dominant in this part of France, the most necessary were schools taught by pious and skillful schoolmasters. The origin of the uprisings of the fanatics in the Cévennes confirmed them in this conviction, for the history of this revolt tells us, in fact, that it was an outlaw schoolmaster who lit the first fires of what became such a huge conflagration. They drew the conclusion that in order to destroy the evil by the same principle which had given rise to it, they needed to call in zealous schoolmasters who would give the people an example of outstanding Catholic living. Those trained by De La Salle already enjoyed a high reputation. Their regular life and their pedagogical talent had made them known throughout the kingdom. Their outstanding merit had brought their renown as far as the Cévennes. There Mérez learned that De La Salle, a fellow seminarian at Saint Sulpice, had given up all his wealth and his canonry in order to endow the Church with a new family of catechists and schoolmasters capable of sowing the first seeds of religion in young hearts.

M. Mérez did not doubt that the followers of such a master, trained by him, would be worthy of him. Moreover, the reputation of the schools at Avignon and Marseille had reached him. He was quickly convinced that men who adopt the profession of teaching as a true vocation and who exercise it only through charity have an entirely different grace than others for instructing and educating the young, that there are none more capable and more virtuous than those systematically trained from their early years in a community which has made this task its principal aim, and that only such a community can furnish good teachers on a permanent basis in order to replace those who die or who can no longer serve.

With such ideas in mind, M. Mérez suggested that his bishop invite the Brothers of the Christian Schools into the diocese. The prelate

approved this idea and asked him to write to De La Salle. Here is his letter, dated 2 June 1707:

"I do not know, Monsieur, whether you will recall my name and whether you still remember me, but I have never forgotten you, and I remember very well having seen you at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice around 1671, when you were a canon of Reims. I have been informed that you gave up your canonry and dedicated yourself to all sorts of good works, among others to the founding of a community of schoolmasters who do a great deal of good wherever they are established.

"We need some of them here, where it is difficult for us to find Catholic teachers to whom we can entrust the education of the young. We need two right now at Alais. The problem is to root out heresy in this area and to establish the Catholic religion. It is an important task which calls for excellent workers. We shall have their expenses paid for by the people; thus your Brothers will not need to ask anything from the parents of the children. The salaries of the teachers are already provided by His Majesty; thus there will be nothing new about it. But we need to approach these Huguenots by showing them where their own interest lies and that these new teachers will make their children good penmen.

"I am appealing to you, Monsieur, for some of your followers. The Jesuit Père Beauchamp praises most highly those he has seen at work in Avignon and in Marseille, two very Catholic cities. The diocese of Alais is almost entirely Huguenot and so has a crying need for good workers to re-establish religion here through the education of the children. . . . Zealous as you are, I beg you to consider this part of the country, the corner of the kingdom where religion needs help most desperately, and I can assure you that we need schoolmasters more than any other kind of apostolic workers. We have men who can preach, but we lack catechists. . . . While awaiting the honor of your reply, I am, and so forth. . . ."

De La Salle experienced no little joy when he was offered an opportunity of satisfying his zeal for the extirpation of heresy, and his Brothers were called upon to combat it in the very places where it had taken refuge and where it had felt itself strong enough to insult the true religion and put Catholics to death. He was more convinced than anyone else of how important it was to have teachers capable of gradually liberating the children from the prejudices and errors in which they had been brought up and of combatting such mistakes early by teaching the contrary truths. He did not delay, therefore, in sending two Brothers, who started teaching in October of that same year, 1707. For their upkeep, the bishop of Alais obtained from the

king's piety the necessary funds. That is why the name Royal Schools was given to the institutions where the Brothers taught.

The bishop soon recognized what wise advice he had been given to invite the Brothers into his diocese. Delighted with their manner of teaching and himself a witness of the good they were doing, he wanted them alone to be in charge of the religious instruction of the young, and he forbade all other schoolteachers to teach religion. He aimed at having the Brothers' classes filled with the students from the other schools, and his wish was realized. Because this measure increased the number of students, he wanted more Brothers. He would have liked to see them in all the cities and larger towns of his diocese, as he himself says in the letter he wrote on 28 January 1708 asking De La Salle for more Brothers. Here is his letter:

"We have some of your schoolmasters here, Monsieur, and are very pleased with them. This leads me to wish that we could have more of them to place in the cities of the Cévennes and all the larger towns. If I had thirty of them, I could find work for them to do. They do a world of good. So as to maintain them in the spirit you have given them, I shall be careful to give them my best advice when necessary, and in addition, I will give you a faithful account of them.

"We need another Brother here for a second class. For the convenience of the people, we have to divide the one that we now have, which is too large. I feel sure that if we can spread the work done by your good and dear Brothers, it will become an infallible means of benefiting the families of our poor Catholic people. I send you, Monsieur, my best regards, hoping that you will lend us your help in evangelizing this unfortunate area which deserves the best efforts of your charitable zeal. You may be sure that I will not fail to aid the Brothers and that I shall watch affectionately over their interests on all occasions.

"I ask for your prayers and wish to assure you, Monsieur, that it is sincerely and with all my heart that I declare myself your very humble and very obedient servant. François, first bishop of Alais."

Delighted over the good results achieved by the Christian Schools in a region where heresy was so prevalent, De La Salle sent the extra Brother whom the zealous prelate had asked for, and he offered to send more if they were needed. So it is that the Lord, who takes care to measure out his consolations in proportion to the labors undertaken for his love, deigned to console his servant in the midst of his tribulations. The Brothers in Alais were not spared opposition on the part of the Calvinists; the spirit that animates the supposed reform is too rebellious and seditious to lay down its arms without a struggle.

The Huguenots did not dare to attack the new schools by force, but they tried their best to keep their children from attending them. The children had other teachers, public or secret, and it was impossible to entice them into the Christian Schools. Consequently, the establishment of the Brothers' school would have remained useless if the vigilant pastor who sought out the strayed sheep had not used the king's authority to proscribe all teachers of error.

He did even more. He called upon the same authority to oblige fathers and mothers, under pain of fines, to send their children to the catechism lessons taught by the Brothers on Sundays and feasts. They were constrained to obey, and attachment to the false religion gave way to pecuniary advantage, a not uncommon occurrence. In this way, the Christian Schools were filled with students, but at the start, the results were not very apparent. For if a large number of children attended the Brothers' instructions, they came mainly to cause trouble. Their numbers, instead of bringing joy to the Brothers, served only to increase their difficulties, because these children brought with them the heart and the spirit of their parents, spirit and heart in revolt against the instructions they were obliged to listen to. Fearing that these lessons might produce the intended effect, the parents, as soon as the children returned home, took care to counteract the impressions the lessons might have left on their souls.

The Brothers responded to such unyielding obstinacy with persevering zeal. Without becoming discouraged, they continued their teaching, presenting the remedy which their adversaries considered poison. The good bishop, whose own efforts met with similar opposition from these rebellious hearts, often visited the Brothers to comfort and encourage them, and he gave them the example of a charity which never allowed itself to be vanquished. The Brothers also found in M. de La Fond, a canon of the cathedral and their zealous spiritual director, a father who upheld them, encouraged them, protected them, and rendered them all the services which the most tender charity could inspire.

As I mentioned before, the king provided funds for the school at Alais from a tax on goods brought into the city, conformably to an edict of Louis XIV which Louis XV confirmed by a new decree in 1724. These edicts provided that in all the cities and towns of the Cévennes, schoolmasters and mistresses must be hired. They were to receive a salary of 150 livres a year, assigned to them by the king. In the city of Alais, the bishop, François Maurice de Sault, never tolerated any other schoolteachers but the Brothers; anyone else, Catholic or heretic, who ventured to teach children in secret was put into prison.

In spite of all the pleas made to him by important citizens, the bishop never authorized anyone to teach but the disciples of De La Salle.

In vain did the Huguenots contrive intrigue after intrigue to induce him to give in on this point. The bishop was inexorable, and secular teachers who did not wish to die of hunger were obliged to go elsewhere to make a living by their profession. He spurned all requests presented to him on this subject and threatened with prison those who dared to repeat them. To those who objected that the Brothers at Alais were not first-rate teachers of penmanship, he replied that he had not brought them in to make the children expert penmen but good Catholics. This zealous prelate continued to struggle, even to his last breath, against the vestiges of heresy that had taken refuge in his diocese; he never consented to leave the flock that Divine Providence had entrusted to him and that had such great need of his care, not even to go on to higher positions. He frequently preached during the celebration of the sacred mysteries in his cathedral and joined the example of virtue to the instructions he gave. His successor, who inherited his zeal, showed the Brothers the same protection and kindness.

### The foundation in Grenoble

It was in that same year, 1707, that the Brothers were invited to Grenoble in the following manner. Several clerics of outstanding piety had created a Christian society dedicated to the relief of the poor and the instruction of youth. With time, it came to include in its membership most of the distinguished inhabitants of the city and of the parliament, who all wished to take part in these good works. Their bishop, Ennemond Alleman de Montmartin, undertook the leadership of this movement, and all the members unanimously adopted certain rules of conduct which they bound themselves to observe. Christian humility having inspired them with a love for obedience, they chose a superior from their ranks and were entirely submissive to him. Whoever wished to be admitted to this illustrious body composed of the most notable citizens had to submit a request and remained among the postulants for a considerable time. When one of the associates died, they all attended a solemn funeral service for the repose of his soul, celebrated at the expense of the group. In addition, those who were priests said a number of Masses for the deceased, and those who were not priests had Masses said for the same intention.

These generous persons gathered on fixed days to determine measures to provide for the public weal. As ignorance and the lack of

education seemed to them to be the sources whence sprang the disorders prevalent among the poor, their zeal led them to seek a remedy for this in the establishment of Christian Schools. First of all, they had to provide for the living expenses of the teachers and then to select good ones. This they resolved to do in one of their meetings, where each person promised to contribute according to his means: twenty, twenty-five, or even fifty livres, and at death to leave invested a capital sum sufficient to perpetuate their donation.

As for the choice of the schoolmasters, Abbé de Saléon and Abbé Canel were asked to look into the matter. These two priests were men of rare merit. The first was at that time a canon of Saint André and has since been named bishop of Agen. Having studied at Saint Sulpice, he knew De La Salle well and was acquainted with the good work done by his Institute. He resolved to ask De La Salle for some of his disciples, and this he did during a trip he made to Paris about this time.

The second was also an alumnus of Saint Sulpice and by his virtue added luster to the institution where he had been educated, as well as to the parliament to which he belonged as its clerical adviser. He also visited Paris and repeated to De La Salle the request already made by De Saléon to send them two Brothers until a larger number would be needed. The deep regard that De La Salle felt for these two virtuous priests did not allow him to delay in responding to their petition. However, some fifteen months went by before things in Grenoble were ready for the arrival of the Brothers. When all the preparations had been concluded, Canel, who was commissioned by the devout confraternity to arrange for their coming, sent De La Salle the following letter, dated 30 August 1707:

“Some fifteen months ago, when I was in Paris, I had the honor of speaking with you, Monsieur, to inquire whether you could give us two Brothers from your Community to teach in a charitable school at Grenoble. You were kind enough to make me hope that you would cooperate with us. I think that the bishop of Gap, who remained in Paris after I left, also spoke to you about this matter. In the meantime, we have made everything ready for their lodging and upkeep.

“So I am asking you to send us two Brothers as soon as you can and to let us know what we need to provide them with, both for the journey and for their living expenses in Grenoble. We shall take the money for this from alms destined for various works of charity, for we consider this one, the schools, as among the most necessary. If you will take the trouble to inform me how much they need for the trip, I shall have the money paid to you in Paris without delay. I remain, Monsieur. . . .”



De La Salle received this letter with joy and also with some surprise because of the offer made to him. He immediately sent off the two Brothers he had destined for Grenoble. What surprised him was that the founders offered to defray the expenses of the Brothers' travel, something that nobody as yet had ever thought of doing in the other foundations he had made, even though it was proper that they should do so. It is true that he had not thought of mentioning this to the other founders, who no doubt would not have objected to such a reasonable suggestion. It was enough for the holy Founder to see God's will and his greater glory in an undertaking; after that, he forgot all the rest and abandoned himself to the care of Providence. A single example will suffice to illustrate how heavy a burden these travels of the Brothers constituted for such a poor Community. Once, when he had to send a Brother from Paris to Avignon, De La Salle gave him all the money in the house. The traveler was not oversupplied with funds, since all he got was twenty-eight livres.

Those who contributed the most to the foundation of which we are speaking and who showed extraordinary zeal for the Christian Schools were the president, Monsieur Bara; the grand provost; his brother, Monsieur Gelin, and their mother, Madame Vincent. M. de Montmartin, the bishop, also used his wealth to honor the Lord through this good work. He had even promised to add to his first donation a sum of 2,000 livres, but death, which overtook him during his last trip to Paris, allowed him only the merit of his good intention, not that of executing it. His successor, M. de Chaulnes, displayed a similar affection for the Brothers, and this he passed on, together with his dignity, to his successor, M. de Caulet, the present bishop of Grenoble. The latter, convinced that the Brothers have a special talent for instructing and educating youth, decided to put them in charge of the schools connected with the general hospice for the poor.

The Brothers' first school was opened in the parish of Saint Laurent. A few years later, it became necessary to open a second one, in the parish of Saint Hugues, to accommodate the overflow from the first school. Monsieur Didier, a canon of Saint Laurent, who also contributed to the founding of these schools, showed himself extremely devoted to the Brothers and took the place of De La Salle by concerning himself with fatherly affection about all their spiritual and temporal interests.

### Foundation at Saint-Denis-en-France

The following year, 1708, the holy Founder sent two Brothers to Saint-Denis-en-France at the request of Mademoiselle Poignant, who gave part of the endowment fund needed to provide for their living expenses, and at the urging of Père de L'Hostellerie, prior of the famous monastery of Saint-Denis. It was not without some reluctance that the holy man acceded to this request, for he did not especially like these little towns where two Brothers, left to themselves, are in danger of becoming dissatisfied. Also, he was becoming disillusioned with these small foundations that had to struggle so hard to subsist.

Because he could not turn down the pleas addressed to him and because he had reasons for thinking that the foundress would increase her initial donation, thanks to which it might be possible to add to the number of Brothers, De La Salle accepted the offer, somewhat against his better judgment. But Mademoiselle Poignant died without having had time to complete what she had started, and thus this establishment has remained up to the present in its original condition. It had been planned as early as 1705; in fact, that was one of the reasons why the zealous Superior had returned to Paris that year. The negotiations, however, were concluded only in 1708.

About that same time, the servant of God found the funds necessary to reopen his training college for country schoolmasters. He had never lost sight of that important institution nor given up hope of succeeding with it. He always thought that something would be lacking to his Institute or that the Institute would fall short of rendering to the Church all the services due to it as long as it did not prepare for country places, as well as for cities, pious teachers capable of giving young people the instruction and education needed for their salvation.

So he tried for a third time to set up a training college and bought a very fine house in Saint-Denis for the purpose. But that foundation became a source of new difficulties for him. The municipality opposed the project as soon as it became known. The parents of the donor filed suit against him, accusing him of having taken advantage of a minor. Dragged into court, he was condemned to forfeit the house and pay all costs; he was even obliged to flee. All the trouble happened in 1712, as we shall relate in a moment. Thus, for the third time, the project so dear to the holy priest's heart turned to his shame and confusion.

It is true that God does not always will that the most worthy designs which he inspires his servants to undertake should be carried out. Sometimes he decrees that these projects must be executed by

others. Père Barré had been the first to plan the establishment of training centers for schoolmasters, yet it was not he but De La Salle who was chosen by God to create this great work in the Church. The saintly Minim attempted it several times but in vain, because God had not selected him to be the one to accomplish it. Likewise, De La Salle set about founding a training college for country schoolmasters on three different occasions, and each time the project failed. Why? God's judgments are inscrutable, and it is not for us to inquire into them. Perhaps in his designs someone other than the Founder of the Brothers is to succeed in this work.

## CHAPTER VII

*In the new residence in Paris, God leaves De La Salle and his disciples a prey to poverty, yet he does not abandon them during the year 1709; since the famine is worse at Saint Yon, the Founder calls the novices to Paris; new crosses put his patience to the test.*

It seems that God took pleasure in granting to his servant as much suffering as he desired. Unceasingly, one cross followed another, and his life was nothing but a continual series of trials from the time he started concerning himself with the schoolmasters. His virtue, ever pressing forward, never had a chance to relax; Divine Providence had taken care to provide him with opportunities to exercise it. But the holy priest had found a place of repose in the new residence in Paris and was enjoying the solitude it offered. He found his solace in God after the many trying circumstances through which he had come.

This pleasant interlude did not last very long, however. The repose De Salle enjoyed would soon give way to perplexities and cares which the year 1709 would have made infinitely trying to any heart less steeled than his against adversity. In short, during a year when famine, joined to a long and rigorous winter, reduced so many to beggary, all the woes that follow such calamities besieged him in his poverty-stricken house, yet never did he seem so cheerful or so satisfied as when he was without bread or money or prospects of obtaining any. Then, lifted above himself and all the vicissitudes of life, superior to human fears and distrust, he put all his confidence in God and counted on God's Divine Providence.

After all, he had been accustomed for so long to endure all the afflictions which assail a person's life and which God uses to try great souls that by now he was inured against all that could happen, and he considered good fortune and evil with equanimity, since the one, like the other, disclosed to him the will of God and provided him with an opportunity for acquiring merit. Moreover, his long experience of such crosses had taught him that the more grievous they appear to nature, the more grace hastens to lighten them. He had received a thousand proofs of God's care for him and his disciples, and he was thoroughly persuaded that neither they nor he would lack what was needed, unless they lost confidence in their heavenly Father, who in his goodness provides for the needs of his children.

#### Extreme suffering during the winter of 1709

Filled with such lofty sentiments, he remained at peace, and his repose in God deepened as his needs became more pressing. Not that he remained idle in the arms of Providence or failed to seek the assistance he required and which Providence sends, without external miracles, through the concourse of natural causes which it directs according to God's purposes and guides with infinite wisdom to God's own ends. He sought, and he found. Sometimes he found little enough, in truth, but it sufficed for men who knew how to be content with little and who, like Saint Paul, had taught their bodies through the constant practice of mortification and poverty to suffer—without murmuring and even with joy—hunger and thirst, heat and cold, the want of appropriate clothing, and all the other inconveniences of life.

Observing the family of this man of God, people might have thought that everything was plentiful in his house and that the winter and the famine which desolated all of France and everywhere laid low their victims had no right to exercise their rigor on the Brothers. Fervor alone warmed them in that protracted, bitter winter. In the dining room, they found only enough food to keep them from starving to death, but that was enough for them. They were satisfied, and no one thought of complaining.

How indeed could they have done so? They saw their saintly Superior at their head, displaying joy on his countenance and teaching them by his example to relish, even in the depths of their poverty, the heavenly manna which God had hidden there for them, seeking even in enforced fasting and abstinence the merit of voluntary penance. In addition, between them and him there was this difference: whereas each of them felt only his own personal privations and suffered only

in his own body, he not only shared with them the sacrifices imposed by the shortage of food and the extremely long and rigorous winter, but as their Superior, he felt in his heart the sufferings of all his subjects. They did not share the solicitude which was his of providing for their necessities.

The holy priest, the most disinterested man in the world, had accepted what people offered him for the various establishments of the Brothers. Since, as a rule, what was offered was barely sufficient to cover the simplest necessities in ordinary circumstances, it was far from adequate during times when food prices rose so high on account of public scarcity. Thus it was not only in Paris that the Brothers had to endure the rigor of hunger and the bitter winter; it was practically everywhere and in all their houses. Their father knew this, and his love for them made him wince at the thought of their hardships. He endured in his soul what each of them bore in his body. Those whom he had left at Saint Yon were the ones that worried him the most. They were a prey to abject poverty. They were forgotten or abandoned in an arid and harsh region which produced no more alms than food. They fell victims to the cold and famine and had only death to look forward to. Of all the holy Founder's disciples, these were the most to be pitied, because they lacked everything, even the hope of finding some help. They had indeed gone looking for assistance in the houses of the wealthy, the nobility, and the persons who were reputed to be charitable, but wherever they went, they met only rejection and harsh treatment.

Despairing of finding relief elsewhere, they had finally gone to the archbishop, as to their last resort, hoping that they would find in the prelate, who had just succeeded Archbishop Colbert, the same compassion the latter displayed toward the other paupers of the city. Unfortunately, Archbishop d'Aubigné was prejudiced against De La Salle and the Brothers. The Founder's enemy, who wielded such influence over the greatest prelates and entertained such close relationships with them, had succeeded in poisoning the new archbishop's mind against the servant of God and in giving him an unfavorable impression of the new Institute.

The archbishop of Rouen, although truly religious, zealous, and sincerely virtuous, showed at best an obvious indifference for the Founder and his Brothers. He thought he was doing a great favor to them by not ordering them out of his diocese. He would certainly never have called them in had he not found them there on his arrival. He tolerated them because his predecessor had admitted them. That was all his preconceptions allowed him to do. Furthermore, he forgot

about them and did not like either to see them or to hear them mentioned. Later on, we shall see what De La Salle himself had to put up with, even from such a saintly bishop who had been prejudiced against him. Given these dispositions, Archbishop d'Aubigné would hardly have received very graciously those who came to him asking for charity. The fact is that they left empty-handed.

#### De La Salle brings the novices from Saint Yon to Paris

The vigilant Superior understood quite well that his disciples could expect nothing more in a city where people thought they were doing them a favor by allowing them to labor for the young. As we mentioned previously, the ten Brothers teaching in the Rouen schools were drawing a salary of only 600 livres from the Bureau which employed them, and after they paid the rent on their residence, they had less than 100 écus left. De La Salle had agreed to these terms, and he would not have been welcomed had he arrived asking for an increase in salary. When they had demanded that he supply ten Brothers, the members of the Bureau had obliged him to be satisfied with one-tenth of what was needed for them to live on.

While requiring the services of the Brothers, the Bureau had left it to him to provide for their subsistence. He did provide for it, in fact, as well as he could, and he found in the treasury of Divine Providence the reward for his disinterested charity. The Brothers at Saint Yon shared with those of Rouen, as they still do, the food that the heavenly Father sent them, as well as the vegetables from their garden, which is large but not very fertile. They have to water it with the sweat of their brow in order to force it to yield some return to them for their hard work. That was how these poor Brothers lived in Saint Yon at the time; they still live the same way. At that period, there were about thirty of them there. Ten taught in the Rouen schools, and the others were employed in the novitiate, in taking care of the boarders, and in the various departments of the house and garden. Like the Fathers of the desert, they lived by the work of their hands, being satisfied most of the time with bread, vegetables, and very weak beer.

At the time of which I speak, the Brothers had no endowment, no revenues. Their only resources were their work and the solicitude of their heavenly Father, which sufficed to allow them to live, almost without the help of any charitable donations from the people of a city where alms do not correspond with wealth. Between the Brothers in Rouen and those teaching in other cities, there was—and still is—this difference: the latter have regular income from endowments, whereas

the former do not; the latter's endowments provide them with revenue adequate to cover at least the bare necessities of life, while the former still have not found anyone powerful or generous enough to provide for their subsistence.

Thus the year 1709, with a considerable number of Brothers at Saint Yon and in Rouen, left them a prey to hunger, cold, and destitution. De La Salle was too concerned for their needs to forget or neglect them. But how could he provide for them? He himself, in Paris, and those there with him did not have all they required. To divide his slender resources with those in Rouen would have meant causing some to suffer hunger without really alleviating it for the others. Could he consider enlarging the family which was already at the mercy of the terrible times? If he increased the number of Brothers in Paris, it would have meant bringing them together to see them all starve. But on the other hand, how could he leave at Saint Yon those who were perishing of hunger?

After thinking the matter over carefully, De La Salle felt that he would be able to find more abundant resources for his Brothers in the capital, so he decided to call to Paris some of those in Rouen. Which ones should it be: the novices or the ten teaching Brothers? It was an agonizing choice. The Brothers, who were rendering a service to the public, were getting no help at all from the authorities. Charity forgot them while they were sacrificing themselves and wearing themselves out in its name. Mud, spittle, hoots, stones, and sometimes blows were the rewards given them for what they did. It would have been natural enough to call them away from serving people who seemed so unappreciative and to withdraw his Brothers from a place where they were so shabbily treated.

Anyone but De La Salle would have decided to do so. But he who had adopted the rule of contradicting nature in all things and of doing what was most perfect thought that God's greater glory required him not to close the Gratuitous Schools in Rouen and that he should be happy to further the interests of the poor children by sacrificing those of his family. After all, nobody had yet died of hunger, and the One whom they served in his members was powerful enough to help them and too merciful to abandon them.

De La Salle chose the novices. When they arrived in Paris, they increased the number of Brothers by over fifty percent. The residence, which was reasonably spacious for the Brothers in Paris, became too small to accommodate them and the new arrivals. There were about forty persons living there, which meant that they were in each other's way, day and night. They slept on wretched straw mattresses with

equally shabby coverlets and sheets of no better quality. Those mats were stretched out on the floor in an orderly manner in the various rooms, behind doors, and wherever there was some space available. Yet poor as this house of Providence was, it was open to anyone who wished to enter. The charity of the Superior did not shut the door to anyone who showed goodwill and who was not evidently driven to enter by starvation. Those of his disciples gifted with a less robust faith or a less generous charity than his took it amiss that their father should share with newcomers the bread which was often insufficient for them. However, a good many of the latter did not stay very long, preferring to leave after one or two months. De La Salle consoled himself for the loss and counseled those who reproached him with his too great readiness to admit postulants by saying wisely, *At least they made a good retreat which will be advantageous for their salvation*. Indeed, many postulants departed as they had come in. As they were asked for nothing when they arrived, neither did anyone ask them for anything when they left.

Despite famine, De La Salle receives all who wish to enter

De La Salle counted on Divine Providence. Since our heavenly Father, whose title as Creator obliges him to take care of his creatures, does not find it more difficult to provide for a greater number than for a smaller one, the Founder did not worry about having to feed forty people every day. It did not even seem to bother him that everything was lacking in his house, a situation that recurred often, because God does not make miracles every day and is pleased to put to the test the patience of his faithful ones, as well as their confidence in him.

Those who hope in God do not always find everything they may need just at the very moment. If they never wanted for anything, abandonment to Providence would not be such a rare and heroic virtue; poverty would not put patience to the test, and the perfection of these two virtues, sublime and difficult as they are, would not be so hard to reach. There is, therefore, nothing to be wondered at if De La Salle's confidence in God did not shield him and his little flock from all the hardships of those calamitous times. Let it suffice to state that God never failed him in the end and that after having taken pleasure in letting him suffer for a time, God took pleasure in sending him timely assistance.

Here is an instance. All the provisions in the house were exhausted, as was also the charity of those who assisted the Brothers. The Brothers were without anything to eat, even bread, for the baker



who had been supplying it, not having been paid, refused to do so any longer. In this extremity, the man of God, as usual, had recourse to prayer. He did not take long to experience its effect, for the next morning, as he was going to say Mass, he met a person on whose charity it seemed he could no longer count. When this person asked him where he was going, he replied, *I am going to say Mass to ask God to give us what we need to live, for our community is without food and has no means of procuring any.* The questioner was touched by this and replied, *Go in peace; I shall see to it myself.* He kept his word and shortly thereafter brought ten écus to the Brothers, who were able to surmount their most pressing needs, thanks to this alms.

In cases such as this, when things were really difficult, the wise Superior took care to urge his Brothers by his burning words and his example of submission to have patience and to trust in God. He told them, “Fear nothing. God has never failed to help those who hope in him. Everything is granted to a lively faith and perfect trust, even miracles if they are needed. Jesus Christ has obliged himself to provide those who seek the kingdom of God and his justice with everything they need. Never has he refused it to those who serve him. Every page of Scripture bears witness to this truth. After all, nothing happens in this world save what God permits or ordains. Good and evil, poverty and wealth, come from his hand. It is he who distributes them with constant goodness and wisdom. If we have received so many benefits from his liberality, why should we refuse to accept from his justice the chastisement he sends us? He is the Lord; let him do what he pleases. If we conform our desires to his good pleasure, we shall find relief in our pains, put an end to our worries, and draw a treasure of merit from the depths of our poverty. Even if we have to die of hunger, if God finds us submissive, he will at least crown our virtue in heaven and admit us to the ranks of the martyrs of patience.”

Thus joining his words to his example, the Founder confirmed his Brothers in their submission to God’s orders. Though he showed so much concern for those with him, he did not forget those far away. His charity made him present in spirit everywhere that his body could not go and multiplied him in some way in all the localities where the Brothers were. He was as attentive to the spiritual and temporal needs of each of them as if he had only that one to take care of.

All the Brothers were suffering from the current calamities, and since they received from their endowments only enough to provide them with the simple necessities of life in ordinary times, they were caught up in the vast throng of the needy who lacked bread. Their tender father knew this, and it was no slight sorrow for him not to be

able to afford them any relief except through his prayers and letters. Unable to send them any other help, with what groans did he not offer his prayers to the heavenly Father, begging him to give them their daily bread and the grace to make a wise and holy use of their poverty. All the letters he wrote them stressed these two points. While consoling them, he tried to show them the spiritual riches the famine brought to those who seek these riches with the eyes of faith and the practice of patience.

God showed his concern for his servant and for his poverty-stricken followers, for although he left them in want, he always furnished them with the necessities which so many others lacked. At the end of this disastrous year, none of the Brothers' houses was in debt, whereas others among the wealthiest congregations found themselves burdened with heavy indebtedness. In Paris and in Rouen especially, Divine Providence showed itself more liberal toward the Brothers, because in those places they were in the direst need and deprived of all other resources. If in those cities God was glorified by finding miracles of virtue in De La Salle's confidence and in the Brothers' patience, we can also say that De La Salle and his followers beheld miracles of Providence in their houses on account of the unexpected help that came to them.

A relevant comment was made by a pious ecclesiastic whose house served as a charitable inn where the Brothers stopped when traveling between Paris and Rouen. How did it happen, he kept asking them, that your lives were spared in 1693 and 1709 when so many others lost theirs and that although you, like everyone, were engulfed in the famine, you did not end up being buried in the same tomb? Who were poorer than you, yet who in their poverty found more assistance than you did? How many paupers did not Divine Providence seem to have forgotten while remembering you alone? If you suffered hunger, at least it did not destroy you. Your Community is the poorest in the kingdom, yet it survived these cruel years which, it would seem, should have put an end to it. You have neither property nor income nor endowments, yet you survived a time when famine made itself felt, or at least was feared, in the wealthiest families. Many rich, well-endowed communities were ruined during those times or emerged from them laden with debts. As for you, you are just what you were before. If you have nothing, at least you owe no one anything, and your numbers increased during those days of woe.

### Scurvy enters the community

All that was true. Nevertheless, if God did not abandon his servant, he caused him to suffer greatly. It seems that he took pleasure in making of him a martyr of patience, for God put no limits to the intensity or to the duration of the trials with which he afflicted him. The end of one cross signaled the beginning of another. This we have seen in the entire history of his life, and we shall observe it again in what is to follow. The extreme poverty of the house occasioned the outbreak of a contagious disease. Six of the principal Brothers contracted scurvy, a malady as difficult to cure as it is easy to catch. The disease would have made great ravages in a group so tightly packed together, had the vigilant shepherd not immediately removed the sick ones from contact with those who were well. In that situation, De La Salle again showed himself active but untroubled, diligent but not disquieted. He isolated the disease and those who had fallen victim to it in an infirmary on the upper floor and assigned two charitable Brothers to care for them. He spared nothing to procure relief and healing for them. His charity on such occasions made him truly prodigal in a saintly way. But as much as he would have liked to procure a prompt cure for them, his poverty did not allow him to purchase the very expensive remedies for the illness.

There was at that time a distinguished doctor in Paris who had a reputation for curing scurvy, but while his treatment was effective, he sold it at a high price and demanded considerable fees for making the people suffer who put themselves into his hands. Where could De La Salle have found the money to pay a doctor who sold his services so dearly? At the same time, his fatherly tenderness could not endure to leave six of his children in the throes of such a dangerous malady without trying to help them.

### Praise for Doctor Helvétius

The famous Doctor Helvétius, then so popular in Paris, solved the problem for him. He had given the holy priest the information about the other doctor and had promised that he would ask him to show some charity to poor men who had no means of paying him. At this point in the story of De La Salle's life, we should certainly mention this celebrated Dutch physician. The holy Founder received from Doctor Helvétius all sorts of favors which were always given gratis. Helvétius esteemed De La Salle and rendered his Community all the services that the most disinterested charity could inspire him with.

Consultations, medicine, treatment, visits—all these the Brothers found free at his office, together with a generous welcome and a gracious smile. When they were ill in bed, he was kind enough to come to visit them, and when he did not have time to do so, something that happened often to the busiest practitioner in Paris, he sent in his stead another doctor who worked with him.

The one we are speaking of, contacted by Doctor Helvétius, kindly agreed to take care of the sick Brothers out of charity, following his friend's example, and he sent word to De La Salle to bring them to him. To do this more quickly and surely, the good father bundled them into two carriages which he had rented and went with them himself, in order to encourage them by his presence and comfort them by his words while they underwent the painful treatment which had to be administered and which was repeated several times on different days. The Brothers were cured, and all it cost them was the pain of the treatment and the thanks they humbly offered their benefactor. The doctor was satisfied with this payment, and his charity willingly overlooked their inability to pay. We can even say that out of respect for the holiness of De La Salle and out of admiration for the good his Institute was doing for the public, he completed the cure of the Brothers which he had begun out of consideration for Doctor Helvétius.

### A new cross to bear

No sooner had the man of God emerged from this trial than he was overtaken by another, more humiliating and embarrassing than the former, which came from one of his disciples. Similar ingratitude toward him on the part of his sons was nothing new. He had already found Absaloms and Judases in his own household. No matter how religious his Institute was, it could not be proof against temptation. Since sin was found in heaven itself, in the earthly paradise, and in the apostolic college, no one can be surprised if it worms its way even into the holiest communities.

No place can sanctify those who dwell in it; the dwellers must sanctify their dwelling place. No station is impervious to the devil's stratagems or to human malice. In all times, evil men have rubbed shoulders with the good. The first man found in his own family a sinner, like himself, who stained his hands with his brother's blood. Noah's ark, which saved the survivors of the human race from the universal deluge, preserved the life of one who was to repopulate the earth with sinners and defile it with new crimes. The Church herself,

the holy and spotless Spouse of Christ, includes in her bosom both the just and the sinners, the elect along with the reprobate. There was, therefore, nothing surprising if in De La Salle's family there were to be found rebellious sons and disloyal disciples. God wished to put his virtue to all sorts of tests and to make use of all kinds of hands to strike him and shape him to heroic patience, the virtue which gives to the perfect the final traits of their resemblance to Jesus Christ.

The reader has not forgotten that in all the persecutions he had stirred up against the Founder, the aim of his great enemy was to deprive him of the government of his Institute so that he himself could take control through some protégé of his. To attain his end, he had tried the path of secret intrigue. He maneuvered behind the scenes without seeming to act himself, and in all the stratagems he devised to remove the holy priest from his house and to deprive him of his rightful office, he seemed to have in view nothing but the greater good, the honor of God, and the service of the Church. According to him, De La Salle was a virtuous man, but he did not have enough sense to rule the Brothers. Austere toward himself, the Founder was too strict on his disciples, who succumbed beneath the rigor of his yoke.

To give substance to these assertions and lend them a semblance of truth, he had blamed the Superior for the imprudence of a Director and of the Director of Novices, as we mentioned above. From all these clouds, he had fashioned a storm at the archdiocesan chancery, but after considerable noise, it had dissipated. Not having succeeded in attaining his purpose by attacks from without, the enemy had tried through his emissaries to stir up dissension from within. The result had been the loss of a few Brothers, but the blow had not fallen directly on the virtuous Superior. Despairing of realizing his design, he left the servant of God in peace. After a period of calm, the enemy now thought he had finally discovered the way to drive the Founder from his house and to take over the government of the Institute.

The man whom the devil found ready to carry out this plan was a religious of poor quality who had been in the Community five or six years. Whether he had never been really fervent or had lost his fervor, the fact was that he had grown disgruntled over the poor, humble, laborious, mortified, and retired life led by the Brothers. To secure more bodily satisfactions and to get back the right to do what he pleased, this Brother resolved to betray his master and to throw off the yoke of obedience. Having conceived this plan, the rebel looked for a way to carry it out. The only sure way seemed to be to attach himself to someone able to give him the right advice and to uphold him in his revolt. He could not have made a better choice than he did

of the very person who for seven or eight years had been plotting the same scheme and who, after vainly attempting to put it into execution so often, had finally let it go only because he had given up hope of ever succeeding.

It was to that person the Brother went. If the perfidious disciple did not use the identical terms that Judas did when speaking to the high priest and the princes of the Jews, what he said came close to the same thing. He described his own dissatisfaction over the frugal nourishment, the hard life, and the extreme poverty he had to put up with during several years in De La Salle's house. He let it be understood that he was tired and frustrated and that human nature could only succumb under such an intolerable burden. He did not fail to mention the number of postulants that De La Salle admitted, even though he did not have the means to support them, and added that it would be wiser to take in fewer subjects and to feed them a little better. He expressed surprise that De La Chétardie was letting the ten Brothers who taught in his parish schools die of hunger by turning over their salaries to De La Salle, who used the money to provide for the entire community. According to him, it was totally unjust to share with so many useless mouths the bread needed by those alone who worked and the food which they had earned. He concluded by saying that he was looking for a more agreeable lot and declared that he could get many of the other Brothers, in fact, nearly the entire community, to follow him if they were promised relief from their grinding poverty and given a more comfortable life.

Never did a discourse please the person to whom it was addressed more than this one did. He congratulated himself on his good fortune and began again to hope that through the perfidy of this unworthy follower, he would be able to gain the upper hand in the new community and through him to bring about what he had failed to do by his own authority. The bargain was soon struck, and measures were taken to detach all his disciples from De La Salle. The enemy of the servant of God promised to rent a house for the traitor and for those who would follow him, to see that they were well fed and taken care of, and to make him the Superior, after which the two of them would put into effect the changes they thought desirable.

If you are clever enough, he said to the rebel Brother, you will be able to win others over and create your own party in the community. Once that is done, I will undertake to convince the others, and thus De La Salle will be obliged to remain all by himself in his house. I will succeed infallibly in doing this, because of the salaries which the pastor of Saint Sulpice pays for the twelve Brothers employed in

the parish schools. I will have this money paid to you at the new house, for you and those who will follow you. The loss of the funds which De La Salle uses to provide for his community will mean the disappearance of most of his income and will leave in the direst destitution those who remain with him. Such destitution, which will be more protracted than that which you have recently experienced with him, will gradually detach from him men whom he cannot save from hunger. And if some of them are unwilling to give in, the example of the others will influence them, and we shall see them all come to our new house, where you and I will be in control.

It cannot be denied that these measures, so shrewd in their wickedness, were well thought out and that the scheme might have succeeded, at least to some extent, if God had not intervened to cause it to fail. In secret, the perfidious disciple set about winning over partisans. The first one to whom he broached the idea joined him, but if he was the first recruit, he was also the last. The evil did not go any further, for the Holy Spirit stifled it in its cradle by reproaching this accomplice with the enormity of his fault and by stinging his conscience with such cruel remorse that to appease it, he finally confessed the plot during the Chapter and before the entire community. He disclosed that a plan was afoot to drive De La Salle from the house or to entice the whole community into another residence under the authority of the rebel Brother. Surprised and indignant, all the Brothers felt a shiver of horror at the revelation. They found it difficult to suppress their resentment against the leader of the revolt, who had counted on making them follow him. The most moderate among them were the loudest in condemning the guilty person. With one voice, they wanted to expel this viper from their midst, since he was preparing to wound the community in the process of leaving it.

De La Salle alone remained calm, and by his meekness and charity, he tried to reconcile this new Absalom with the other Brothers. He wept over him as another David. Forgetting and disregarding the injury offered to himself, he seemed concerned only over the loss of the Brother and put all his charity to work to win him back. But it was no use. His crime was of the kind which, committed through pure malice and in cold blood, effectively seals up all the avenues leading to regret and right sentiments and which, in a sense, becomes unforgivable because its perpetrator does not want to repent.

The disgrace that the traitor felt when he was unmasked before the community did not permit him to pay attention to the salutary reflections which grace was suggesting to him through the lips of the man whom he had offended. He surrendered himself more and more

to the natural instability of his heart and stirred up more trouble in the house. Although the Brother was becoming a cause of scandal, De La Salle, full of pity for his unfortunate state, could not yet bring himself to amputate the gangrenous member. He hoped against hope that with time and patience, he might finally bring back his wandering sheep to the path of duty; fear of allowing a single soul confided to his care to perish prevented him from abandoning the unfortunate man. But the guilty one finally made up his mind to leave an Institute in which he felt everyone would thenceforth look upon him with horror. The scandal ended when he left, and the community returned to its usual calm.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Opening Gratuitous Schools in the cities of Versailles, Les Vans, Moulins, and Boulogne.*

The year of tribulation of which we have been speaking had not yet finished when a request came to send two Brothers to Versailles. M. Huchon, the parish priest in the city, sought assistance for the poor in his parish. It was not difficult for him to secure the resources and the protection needed for a foundation from Louis XIV who, as everyone knows, honored until his death that zealous pastor with his esteem and his confidence. The first Gratuitous Schools were opened in a building situated in the Parc aux Cerfs, and they achieved as much success in a short time as they had everywhere else.

The zealous Vincentian, delighted over the great good done by his school from its beginning, worked hard to consolidate the institution. The first thing it needed was a building of its own that was adapted for use as a school. Such a purchase did not seem too easy in a town where, because of the habitual residence of the king and the court, buildings are rarely put up for sale and usually bring very fancy prices. It was harder for him to locate a house than to gather the money needed to buy it.

However, he finally did discover one not far from the Parc aux Cerfs. He bought it at once and set aside an endowment to provide enough income to support the Brothers. A few years later, a schoolmaster who taught in an endowed school not far from the parish church passed away, and Huchon wanted to replace him by a Brother. On learning that De La Salle never sent a Brother alone, he asked



for two, so as not to break the rule. A fifth Brother to take care of temporal affairs was added sometime later to the other four, two of whom taught at the Parc aux Cerfs school and two at the school near the parish church.

After the death of Louis XIV, a building which had housed the minor seminary, located near the church, became vacant. The Brothers acquired the property, thanks to the charity and concern of the parish priest, who took steps to secure it for them. In this as in other matters, he did them a great service, for the building, convenient and isolated as it was, proved very well suited for the Brothers. Monsieur Le Bailly, the successor of Huchon as parish priest of Versailles, inherited his zeal for the Christian Schools and for those who teach in them. It can be said to his credit that the Brothers found in him the father that they thought they had lost when his predecessor died. They have been fortunate, too, in their relationships with the other priests in the Versailles parish community. The Lazarists, so devoted to the salvation of the poor and the ignorant, entertain a special affection for men whose vocation is to instruct the poor.

### *A new disappointment for De La Salle in Versailles*

Although that foundation, set up under the eyes of the king and the court, seemed off to such a good start and although it promised many advantages for the Institute, it almost became a serious danger to it. For a time, De La Salle thought that he would have the embarrassment of seeing such a well-located school fail and of beholding the same hand that had done so much to establish it become busy destroying it. Huchon had started the school, and it was he who threatened to wreck it. Why and how did such a change in attitude come about? We shall explain. If the reader is surprised at this turn of events, there will be even more surprise on learning its cause. What I shall say about it will be a lesson to the Brothers and a warning for those who encourage them to resist the assignments that their superiors want to give them.

The older of the Brothers who had opened the school at Versailles was an excellent Brother and a first-rate teacher. He had to a high degree all the talents needed in his vocation. His notable qualities soon won for him the affection of the parish priest, and the Brother was not slow in ingratiating himself into his good graces. What he planned was to make a nest for himself in a place which he liked and to find a friendly hand powerful enough to keep him there when the hand of his Superior might wish to withdraw him. Although

he succeeded in what he desired, it was to his misfortune, and he brought embarrassment to his protector.

Under the protection of the parish priest, this Brother began to take a bit more liberty than was proper. His companion, who was his inferior, either did not perceive his relaxed conduct or did not venture to admonish him for it. The atmosphere of the court, which the Brother not accustomed to it had begun to breathe at Versailles, inoculated him with the spirit of the world, a longing for a freer manner of living, and a desire to extend the circle of his acquaintances. He did so and began cultivating his contacts with them at the expense of his exercises of piety. Losing the spirit of retirement, recollection, and mortification, he also lost that of regularity; little by little, he fell into a disorderly way of life. He was ceasing to be a Brother and beginning to become a man of the world, one entirely taken up with external values, a superficial man with no concern for his interior life and no love for virtue.

De La Salle was warned of all this; he could see what was happening as soon as he set eyes on the Brother during the visitation he made of the Versailles school. The evil was still only at its beginning, so it should have been easy to remedy it. In fact, it would soon have been cured if De La Salle had been able to have his way. The Brother needed to be removed from Versailles, where the milieu was proving dangerous for him. If he had gone away to a place where a more healthy environment prevailed, he would have recovered his spiritual health. The wise Superior, convinced of this, was thinking of arranging a change. He even planned on making it at once, convinced that the ills of the soul, like the diseases of the body, are easy to cure at the beginning, but when through neglect they are allowed to develop, they become incurable with the passage of time.

### The pastor opposes changing the Brother

The Brother guessed his Superior's intention and took steps to forestall him. As he had lost the spirit of simplicity, he also lost that of docility. He was not at all inclined to leave a position of some distinction which flattered his vanity and fell in with the inclinations of his self-will. He turned to the parish priest to support him in his disobedience and informed him that De La Salle intended to remove him from Versailles. The zealous pastor, who considered the departure of this Brother as a loss for his parish, felt it was his duty to oppose the move. We can say that on this occasion, charity led him into error, for it was charity that persuaded him that he had a right to exempt the

Brother from obedience in order to keep such an outstanding schoolmaster for his flock.

It did not take the pastor long to recognize and to regret his mistake. By keeping the Brother in Versailles against De La Salle's wishes, he himself was working not to keep him but to lose him. Huchon received the Brother graciously and was grateful to him for the attachment he showed to the Versailles school. He told him not to worry, that he himself would oppose his transfer. He kept his word, unfortunately, and thus authorized an example of insubordination which he would have condemned as unacceptable and scandalous in his own Congregation of the Mission, since he was retaining an inferior against the orders of his superior or, rather, obliging a superior to conform to the will of his inferior. In fact, he sent word to the holy priest that if he took away this Brother, he should withdraw the other one as well.

Such an attitude caused the servant of God considerable affliction. He was surprised to hear such a statement from so virtuous a pastor, a priest who had been trained in religious obedience and was a member of a community in which the superior's will is law, where the choice of assignment is never left to the individual, and where any intrigue to remain in or to leave a given position is condemned. De La Salle feared what would happen to the Brother and bewailed in advance the loss of such an excellent subject; he considered such an outcome inevitable if the Brother remained at Versailles. Moreover, he feared the contagion of such bad example in his Institute, and with good reason. How can a Brother's disorderly conduct be remedied when he finds powerful protectors who authorize him to disregard his Superior's orders? The disaffection of the Brothers in Mende had no other origin, as we have seen, and the defection of the Brother in Versailles followed from the same principle.

De La Salle did not fail to call the problem to the attention of M. Huchon, but he was not listened to. The parish priest, who had in view nothing but the good of his parish, did not sufficiently consider where the best interests of the Brother himself lay, for he answered that he would take the responsibility for what might happen and would be able to ward off any evil consequences that might ensue. In saying that, he took on more than he was able to answer for, and he seemed to forget that his power really did not go all that far. De La Salle thus was forced to acquiesce. He felt that he should neither contradict a man determined to keep the Brother nor remove both Brothers and thus destroy the school he had just founded.

So the Brother remained in Versailles, as he wanted. What happened? Once the Rule, the wall that protects docile souls from what

threatens their salvation, was breached, it did not long defend him against the temptations and the other attacks of the evil spirit. He became more liberated than ever and by losing the grace of his state, he lost all attachment to it and to his vocation as well. So one fine morning, he packed his things, doffed the Brothers' robe, and went off.

The parish priest soon heard about the departure and sent after the Brother an elderly Vincentian who lived in the parish house. He caught up with the fugitive as he was leaving Versailles. This fervent priest, long practiced in the art of winning souls to God, tried to do everything to prevail over the Brother. All that zeal and charity can inspire, all that can touch a heart—prayers, reason—he invoked with all his might, but it all proved useless. Everything that had so often been found effective over the hearts of the greatest sinners remained fruitless insofar as this one was concerned. The priest learned by the event that those who have received much grace and abuse it become incorrigible and that whoever abandons his vocation often turns his back on his salvation.

The parish priest was more than surprised. He understood, but too late, how wrong he had been to oppose De La Salle's decision. He realized that he had counted too much on himself and on the Brother. But at least he made up for his fault and turned it to the advantage of the Institute, because having become wiser through this experience, he thereafter left the Brothers to the guidance of their Superior. Convinced as he was that the regularity of the Brothers depended partly on their numbers, he agreed to increase the number of Brothers in Versailles, as we mentioned above. From that time on, the Brothers remained a source of edification in a city which so sorely needed it, and the Christian Schools there continued to flourish.

### Foundation in Les Vans

The opening of the school at Versailles was followed by one in the city of Les Vans, belonging to the diocese of Uzès in Languedoc, in the Cévennes mountains, some six leagues from Alais. Les Vans is a tiny, little-known town, peopled almost entirely by Huguenots, where there is only one parish. We do not know why the founder of that school had such a special affection for the locality nor why he chose to favor the little town and endow it with a special means of salvation in preference to so many others in the region, alike infected with the virus of heresy. For he did not live there and had not even been born there. He did not belong to the diocese of Uzès but to that of Viviers. This benefactor was a virtuous priest, M. Vincent de Saint-Jean d'Elze

du Roure. Happening to pass through Avignon, he wished to see for himself if all the good he had heard about the schools there was true. His esteem for the Brothers of the Christian Schools having been confirmed by what he saw, he felt inspired to establish a similar school for the town of Les Vans. He did not want to leave Avignon without putting his good desire to execution through a testament drawn up in due form by a notary on 20 July 1708.

In the testament, after declaring that he wished to live and die in the faith of the holy, Catholic, apostolic, and Roman Church and to be buried with the simplicity proper to a poor priest, he made the Brothers the heirs of all his goods, charging them, as he put it, to instruct the youth of the town of Les Vans, to train them in piety, and to teach them the principles of the Catholic religion. I am persuaded, he added, that most of the children in the said city, through lack of proper education, become morally corrupt, and since they are born in heresy and have no knowledge or understanding of the Catholic religion, their ignorance is the fatal cause of their evil ways and the disorder in which they live.

If the legacy which he assigned to the Christian Schools was not very large, that was because his wealth was quite limited. The worthy priest gave much to God, since he gave all he had, disregarding his natural heirs, to each of whom he left five sols as a formality and to keep them from contesting his will. His zeal for the instruction of youth was displayed in the terms he used in encouraging the Brothers to fulfill well their glorious ministry. Nor did he omit to beg his relatives not to be offended if he preferred the interests of religion and those of the poor to their own and to beg the lord bishops of Uzès to further by their protection, authority, and support the execution of the foundation, useful and necessary as it was for the good of the Catholic religion and for the city of Les Vans, which had such urgent need of help because of the sad state into which it had fallen in regard to the faith. This short extract from the testament of such a worthy priest is a testimonial to his faith, piety, and zeal. It is a pity that all those who enjoy the same dignity do not show a similar spirit of religion and an equal virtue.

The testament was forwarded to De La Salle after the death of the pious ecclesiastic, which occurred two years later, on 19 September 1710, in the town of Aubenas in the diocese of Viviers. Its execution was not delayed. De La Salle's zeal urged him to implement it, following the intentions of the pious Founder, who on his deathbed had shown his unflagging interest in the school and who had taken further measures to insure its permanence.

## The foundation in Moulins

That same year, 1710, De La Salle sent two Brothers to Moulins, in Bourbonnais, to teach in the school there at the request of an excellent priest named M. Aubri, who had spent most of his life instructing the children of that city. Age and experience having taught him how important it is to bring up children properly, he felt that he could not find a better way to discharge that function, which he was no longer capable of carrying out, than by entrusting it to the disciples of De La Salle, whose remarkable reputation had reached him.

The influence Aubri had over the minds of his fellow citizens, his piety, and his long years of service helped to smooth out all the difficulties which anyone else might have encountered in having his decision accepted in the city. He spoke highly of the Brothers, and he was believed, because people were convinced that he, more than anyone else, was in a position to judge of their ability. On his recommendation, they were welcomed into the city. The people congratulated themselves on having done so when they saw for themselves that the good results surpassed the predictions he had made.

The school was inaugurated under the eyes of Abbé Languet, at that time vicar-general of Autun; he later became bishop of Soissons and today is archbishop of Sens. His zeal made him desire to witness the Brothers' manner of teaching. He was delighted with what he saw, especially with their method of teaching catechism. He ordered the older of the two Brothers to come to the parish church two or three times to give a demonstration lesson there before all the younger clerics and the other catechists of the city, whom he ordered to attend so that they might learn the Brothers' method and follow it. Brother did as he was told, although with reluctance, since it is not the custom in the Institute to teach catechism in church; this function the Brothers prefer to leave to the clergy, whose duty it is. The vicar-general was present at the head of the clergy whom he had ordered to attend. This mark of distinction on the part of a high official with outstanding merit did a great deal to enhance the standing of the Brothers. The classes in Moulins are now so well filled that the three Brothers, who teach approximately 300 pupils, are almost overwhelmed by the work load. It is to be hoped that God will inspire some charitable soul to complete what was begun and carried on so successfully by the zeal of the late Monsieur Aubri.

## The foundation at Boulogne

The foundation at Boulogne, dating from that same year, 1710, was the last one made by De La Salle himself. No other has known such success or has encountered more difficulties. It began under the auspices of Bishop Pierre de Langle, who favored it with his protection and helped it develop by his donations. For a fairly long time, it remained flourishing and at peace. Then it became involved in the troubles<sup>14</sup> that the new errors stirred up and subjected to that false zeal which combats everything that does not belong to its own party. Finally, seriously damaged by the efforts of its enemies, it came close to failing entirely.

The city of Boulogne owes the construction of the Gratuitous Schools to a saintly layman named Monsieur de La Cocherie, who in secular dress lived like a religious, observed celibacy, and devoted himself entirely to good works. His faith was as pure as his life. Unwaveringly devoted to the Roman Church, he was an intimate friend of the bishops as long as they did not adopt questionable views. He conceived a high idea of the Gratuitous Schools as soon as he heard of those who taught in them. The pious gentleman was led to found the school by M. Bernard, a priest of the Congregation of the Mission from the Boulogne seminary, who first spoke to him about it and suggested the idea to him. As he had already devoted the major part of his considerable wealth to other works of piety and no longer had enough money to defray the expense of this new enterprise, he was obliged to have recourse to his friends and to ask other like-minded persons to contribute to it along with him.

His bishop was one of the most enthusiastic in cooperating with his zeal. The sums required for the endowment were collected and invested in the hospice of the city. Four Brothers were called in. When they went to pay their respects to him, the bishop received them as graciously as he had those who, ten years earlier, had come from Calais to ask for his approval and blessing. He also gave new tokens of his kindness to this second group, and after he had greeted them and welcomed them to the city, he lodged them in his seminary while waiting for a house to be rented for them to live in. The house found for them in the lower town was small and inconvenient, and later on, it became necessary to look for another, better adapted to their requirements. Nevertheless, all six Brothers remained in the first residence for two or three years, for the bishop of Boulogne, encouraged

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14. Jansenism.

by the example of the virtuous gentleman, also resolved to found a new school. For this reason, he asked for two more Brothers, whom he sent to teach in the upper town in order to make it easier for all the children to attend school. The second school was a big help and made the whole operation easier, because distance had made it difficult for the children who lived at the far end of the city to attend the first school.

As the first residence was so inconvenient, the founders felt obliged to change it. They obtained through the king's piety an empty lot in the lower town, and plans were drawn up to build. Work was started with enthusiasm, at the expense of the initial founders and of several other important people in the city who wished to take part in such a good work, but the construction soon lagged for want of sufficient building materials. The Marquis de Colbert, commandant of the city under the Duke d'Aumont, finally provided the material. He himself had drawn up the plan of the house and made it his business to see that the work was pursued. He soon had a good supply of building material brought in. He ordered the wagoners to haul some of their loads free of charge and urged the workingmen to lend a charitable hand. Because he encouraged the work by his presence, construction was continued at a brisk pace, and before long, the house was ready for occupancy by the Brothers.

As we related previously, when De La Salle was on his way to Calais, he stopped in Boulogne and was agreeably surprised to see the enthusiasm with which everyone hastened to lend a hand in the construction of the residence. He was even more surprised at the honor paid to him in this city. He was not accustomed to receiving such testimonials, since lack of appreciation was his usual lot. Furthermore, his humility did not allow him to imagine that the public entertained in his regard other sentiments than those which he himself felt or that they really wished to honor a man who thought it only just that he should be condemned to the most ignominious treatment.

In this the Founder was mistaken, as is the way with truly humble souls. The people in Boulogne thought of him far differently than he thought of himself. The high idea that they had of his virtue brought upon him the attention of the entire city. Everyone wished to see the venerable priest whose reputation had spread everywhere, thanks to the virtues of his followers. His humility suffered from all this. Everyone hastened to give him tokens of high regard, which he was alone in thinking he did not deserve. He began to grow weary of staying in a city which, unlike most others, paid him such notable honor. He would have wished to sidestep certain public gestures



without failing in Christian politeness, but there was no avoiding them. He had to appear and to come forward. He did so in his usual poverty-stricken garb, clothing so mean and worn that the Brothers had to take his old soutane away from him by force and oblige him to wear a new one which they had made for him in a hurry.

No one welcomed De La Salle more cordially than the saintly gentleman, De La Cocherie. He thought he was seeing an angel come down from heaven. He tried to get De La Salle to come to his house, in order to entertain him properly, but he soon regretted having offered a banquet to such a mortified and penitent man. He realized this on the very first occasion when, hoping to give a reception for the holy priest, he only succeeded in driving him away from his home. In fact, he could never again persuade the Founder to go there, as we have related elsewhere. De La Salle was wearied and out of sorts over these honors which his humility found unbearable. He therefore hastened to go elsewhere, seeking the ill treatment which he found so much to his liking.

When the holy Founder left Boulogne, he left the Brothers behind him to reap the fruits of his reputation and of their own. They were greatly esteemed there, and their work was applauded by the public. When the Bull *Unigenitus* appeared, however, its enemies became those of the Brothers and 1713, the year of its publication, was the beginning of a difficult period for the Brothers. At first, the Jansenists tried to win them over rather than to persecute them. They did not begin to harass them until their inflexible firmness showed how impossible it would be to win them over.

## CHAPTER IX

*De La Salle journeys to Provence to visit the Institute's establishments in that region; during his absence, an embarrassing situation arises over a house he had purchased in Saint-Denis for the training college for country schoolmasters; he does not defend himself and is condemned on the charge of taking advantage of a minor.*

The story of the life of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is so thickly strewn with crosses that we can scarcely conclude the account of one before starting the story of another. The one we must recount in this chapter outdid all the rest. Up to this time, the

holy priest had emerged from all his humiliations like the sun coming from behind a thick, dark cloud, his virtue more resplendent than ever. He enjoyed a spotless reputation which had never been blemished before any tribunal. All the lawsuits filed against him by the writing masters had never touched his good name. In civil suits, he had been condemned to pay fines, but his enemies had never asked for anything more. They were not out to attack his honor but his schools. Their victory did not affect his reputation.

It can even be said that in spite of the intrigues of his enemies, he was honored as a great servant of God and regarded as a saint throughout Paris. Such consideration is flattering, and no matter how humble a man may be, his self-love may feed on it. Reputation is our most precious natural treasure, and it is often the only one that even the most virtuous men find difficult to renounce. Still, God's chosen ones are asked even this sacrifice. Such was the holocaust which De La Salle was next called upon to offer.

To explain what happened more clearly to the reader, we must go back to the beginning of the affair. I have before me the memorandum which, before he took to flight, De La Salle wrote about this entire episode in order to justify his conduct. I need only to summarize it; we cannot have a more faithful witness to the truth. If this document had been presented in court, as De La Salle expected it would be, thanks to the charity of those in whose hands he left it on his departure, the tribunal considering this case would not have issued against him a sentence so injurious to his memory.

### The origin of this serious attack on De La Salle

In December 1707, Monsieur Clément, Abbé of Saint Calais,<sup>15</sup> came to visit the Christian Schools in rue Princesse. After spending considerable time examining what went on and admiring the order which reigned there, he was eager to see De La Salle and asked the Brother to whom he spoke to conduct him to the house in rue Saint Honoré, where De La Salle had put himself in the hands of a surgeon to take care of a cyst which he had gotten on his knee through his assiduity in prayer.

The servant of God was quite surprised to see the young abbé who was brought in to him throw himself on his knees and earnestly

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15. The young Clément was neither a priest—an abbé in that sense—nor an abbot, in the monastic sense, but he was eventually endowed with the title (and the revenues) of the Abbey of Saint Calais. To receive such a benefice, he must have been at least tonsured, and so, an ecclesiastic.

beg him to give him two Brothers to help him start a worthy enterprise which he had in mind. The abbé mentioned that he already had a large quantity of new clothes, enough to supply several young boys, between the ages of seven and twenty, whom he wished to bring up and who would be given a chance to learn a trade. They would also be taught whatever was suitable to their age and condition. This project was praiseworthy, but as the sequel would show, it was among those that Saint Paul calls *juvenilia desideria*, a young man's fancies against which one should be on guard. The holy priest replied that he could not give any help in the execution of this project if it ran counter to the normal scope of the Institute's work, but he did not further explain what was the normal aim of the Brothers' Institute. The young man's curiosity led him to ask for a memorandum on the subject, and in his charity, De La Salle wrote one out for him on the spot.

The abbé went off with this document, and after studying it for three days, he returned saying that he was not interested in the ordinary schools of the Brothers but that he liked the idea of training schoolmasters for country parishes. Thus his plan seemed to be to join the education of the young boys, previously mentioned, with the establishment of a training college for country schoolmasters. He wanted to combine the two projects in the same house. Thereafter he was quoted as saying that he wished to establish in the institution twenty scholarships for training schoolmasters for smaller villages.

Day after day, the young ecclesiastic showed fresh enthusiasm for the execution of his project. De La Salle was besieged and importuned to join forces with him and to advance the money for the undertaking, which he eventually did, turning over the requested sum to M. Louis Rogier, a friend of his in Paris and a person whom he trusted. Rogier was only supposed to lend his name to this transaction. He did lend it his name in all good faith, but later on, he betrayed De La Salle, his friend, or at least abandoned the cause of an innocent man. As the enthusiasm of the young M. Clément for the implementation of his scheme brooked no delay, he got his preceptor to help him urge De La Salle not to be so reticent over cooperating in the plan. The two of them came to see the Founder and renewed their importunities on the subject.

At first, perhaps, the servant of God did not take all this excitement too seriously, because in young people it disappears as quickly as it arises. Perhaps he wished to take time to consult others and to weigh the matter before God. At any rate, he seemed to hold back in proportion as Clément strained forward. As young people always tend to live in the future and to consider as already settled whatever they

desire, this young man was even then counting on the revenues of an abbey which had been promised him. In his pious enthusiasm, he determined to devote all that income to the furtherance of his project. In the meantime, he said, his father was giving him an allowance of 800 livres a year for pocket money. This he wished to use, with the exception of 100 francs, to promote his undertaking. At least, this is what he told De La Salle to win him over to the plan.

The servant of God did not give in easily. He wished to let time show him what he needed to do and to put the perseverance of the abbé to the test. His perseverance remained constant for a whole year. Two or three times a week, he came to visit De La Salle, begging him again and again to take up the matter. He wrote one letter after another to him on the same topic, but De La Salle did not let all this hurry him, and he never returned any of these visits.

### Persistence of young Abbé Clément

Abbé Clément never lost sight of his project. The earnestness with which he pursued its execution seemed inspired by God, because before getting started on the enterprise, he had submitted it to the judgment of his rightful superior, Cardinal de Noailles, archbishop of Paris. Unwilling, however, that his name should appear publicly, he asked De La Salle to go to the archbishop and speak to him or to his representative about the project in order to secure proper approbation. The abbé had thought of starting his new work in a building in the Faubourg Saint Antoine which belonged to M. Boyer, who lived in the Faubourg Saint Germain. He had frequently gone to see that gentleman to discuss the purchase, but before concluding the affair, he wished to get clearance from the archbishop. It was for that purpose that he asked De La Salle to go to the chancery.

Since this step was according to proper order, the holy priest accepted. He called on Abbé Vivant, the grand penitentiary at the hospital of the Quinze-Vingts,<sup>16</sup> where he preached every day during Lent, told him about the project, and asked him to approach the cardinal about it. When De La Salle went back for the answer, he learned that His Eminence did not think it a good idea to establish in Paris a training college for country schoolmasters and that he judged it more appropriate to put it in some village near the city. Sometime later, the grand penitentiary suggested to De La Salle that he set up the training college at Villers-en-Brie, four leagues from Paris, in a large house

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16. The hospital, originally for the blind, housed 300 (15 times 20) patients, hence its name.

which the parish priest there had just bought. When the parish priest met De La Salle in the street at Saint-Denis, he urged him to accept his offer.

The servant of God informed the abbé of the proposition made to them, but it was not attractive to him, and he turned it down in spite of the remonstrances made to him by De La Salle. The reason he gave for his refusal was that the house was too far away and that he would not be able to go there often enough. He even wrote a rather strongly worded letter on the topic to the holy priest, who in pointing out to him the unfortunate consequences of his refusal, had warned him to be careful not to miss a good opportunity while pursuing one that might turn out to be bad. De La Salle went so far as to tell him that he was reluctant to get involved and feared to commit some false step in his company. The other understood very well what this meant, and he again wrote to De La Salle, in very forceful terms, to assure him that he would never go back on his word and that he would rather sell his shirt than not honor his word. And yet, he did fail to honor it, as the sequel would show. It was his bad faith, of which he became guilty under pressure from his father, which blackened the reputation of the servant of God in the eyes of those who do not get to the bottom of things. It was also about that time that the Brothers' school at Saint-Denis-en-France was opened, as we related above.

### De La Salle provides the down payment for the house

The abbé tried several times, in vain, to acquire the house of the priory by paying off the lease of the person who had rented it. He urged De La Salle to rent him the front section of the house belonging to Mademoiselle de Lage, which the Brothers were renting in part, so as to install there the training college for country schoolmasters which he dreamed of founding. The servant of God agreed, on condition that the cardinal would approve; he even wanted the prior to add his approval. They both gave their consent, but Mademoiselle de Lage refused to lease her house for the purpose. The abbé thus had to look elsewhere. After seeking for some time, he finally found a place suitable for what he had in mind, a house belonging to Mademoiselle Poignant, a sister of the woman who had endowed the Brothers' school. After looking it over several times and also bringing his preceptor, Monsieur Langoisseur, with him to inspect it, he finally decided to buy the house and agreed to pay 13,000 livres for it.

About a month after this agreement, the abbé, knowing that De La Salle was at Saint-Denis, went to see him with Louis Rogier, whom

he had brought along with him in his carriage. He informed the Founder that he had agreed on a price with Mademoiselle Poignant. He begged him to conclude the transaction without delay and to ask the prior to negotiate the terms of the sale while he and Rogier would negotiate with a certain nobleman who also had some claims over the property. They came back later and settled the matter with Père Célerier. A few days later, in October 1708, these gentlemen executed the contract of purchase with Mademoiselle Poignant. To make the down payment, the abbé urged De La Salle to give Rogier 4,000 livres. Shortly thereafter, he again urged the holy priest to advance to the same Rogier, who was lending his name to cover the transaction, another 1,200 livres. That sum was in the hands of the notary, M. Le Mercier. Like the earlier sum, it had been donated to De La Salle for the needs of his Community and especially to contribute to the establishment of a training college for country schoolmasters, directed by the Brothers.

I do not know what made De La Salle suggest to Abbé Clément, after he had bought the house at Saint-Denis, to join with Monsieur Desplaces, who was educating a number of ecclesiastics in his residence. Perhaps he gave him to hope that he would find in that group men capable of directing both the training college and the children whose training was his first interest. The abbé followed this advice and was charmed with Desplaces when he went to visit him. They did join forces. After drawing up a plan for the manner of bringing up these young boys, they wrote out a memorandum which they submitted to the cardinal, who approved it. Thereafter, in the abbé's mind, the two projects—the training college for country schoolmasters and the house to train young boys—were two separate entities.

Some time after the purchase of the house at Saint-Denis with De La Salle's money, the abbé wanted to give him a receipt for the 5,200 livres which had served as the down payment, since Rogier, the legal purchaser, had refused to give such a receipt. This receipt remained, however, in Rogier's hands. Only when the abbé began to have second thoughts did Rogier turn it over to De La Salle, in order to testify to the fact that he had indeed furnished the sum of 5,200 livres, the down payment on the purchase price of the house acquired at Saint-Denis under Rogier's name.

### The cardinal favors the project of Abbé Clément

As soon as the abbé bought the house, he ordered the bailiff of the abbey to vacate the premises, and he gave himself no rest until the

Brothers took over the place. They did so at Easter of the following year, 1709. Not long afterward, they welcomed three young men, the first candidates for the training college. On Sundays and feasts, they attended services in the parish church of Saint Marcel in surplice and soutane. They remained in the house until the high cost of food made it necessary to send them home, but they were told that when times improved, they would be called back. To lighten the burden on that institution, the cardinal obtained from the Duke de Maine a written exemption from the obligation to quarter soldiers. The document was dated the same year, 1709, and mentioned that the favor was granted by order of the king. It also specified that the house was to be the residence of three Brothers, one of whom was to teach Gregorian chant. The purpose of this notation was to show that the premises were supposed to be used by the Brothers for the training of country schoolmasters.

The sale had barely been concluded when Mademoiselle Poignant wanted to get the house back. She offered to refund the money, but the abbé refused. Nor did he wish to entertain Rogier's proposal to resell the house when a buyer presented himself. Finally, sometime later, M. Clément, the father, learned of the acquisition made by his son under the name of a third party. He resolved to invoke his son's status as a minor to have the contract annulled. But the son, whose conscience did not allow him to be part of such a fraud, told his father firmly that he would never make use of his age to cause any damage to anyone.

Things were at this point when De La Salle undertook to visit the establishments of his Institute in Provence, Languedoc, and other distant places. Not that he lacked precise information about what was going on there, since the regulations he had established among the Brothers and the accounting which they made to him about all that the Rule prescribes did not allow the Superior to be ignorant of what was done, even in the most distant houses. But he had not yet seen all those schools, and he was anxious to learn from personal contact how things were going.

He left Paris on this journey in February 1711. He was received with joy by the Brothers and with honor by the bishops of the localities where the Christian Schools had been established, when he went to pay his respects to them. He observed with great satisfaction all the blessings the Lord was giving to the work of his disciples, but he did not have long to enjoy his visits. Letters from Paris called him back there to defend the acquisition made at Saint-Denis.

The father of the young Clément initiates a criminal and civil suit

The affair was serious: De La Salle's interests and honor were at stake. The purchase of the house in question was being challenged. It was claimed that he had bought it at the expense of a minor. De La Salle was accused of having taken unfair advantage of the young man, and because of all this, he was being sued in civil and criminal court. He had no choice, therefore, but to return, not to engage in a lawsuit—for he was firmly resolved not to plead and to yield rather than go to court—but to find out what the case was all about and what he was being accused of. Upon his return, he called on his opponents, but he found them unwilling to discuss the matter. They were deaf to reason and turned down all suggestions for settling the matter amicably. In their view, he was an impostor, a deceiver who had taken advantage of a minor, misled him, and defrauded him. They insisted that he must be declared such by a legal sentence; he must be condemned to all the penalties that justice levies against such offenses. In vain would De La Salle have offered to the elder Clément the house bought partly with his own money, for that man counted on getting it anyway through the sentence of the court. Even that was not enough to satisfy him. He wanted the holy man to pay by forfeiting his honor and his liberty, not so much for the fault as for the enthusiasm of his own son.

Personal condemnations and prison itself were awaiting De La Salle. I do not know whether his adversaries would have hesitated to demand that he be executed, dragged from jail to the gallows. Yet, what had he actually done? He had finally yielded to the importunities of Abbé Clément, who had pestered him for a whole year to join with him in starting a good work. He had given the young man 5,200 livres to use as a down payment on the purchase of the house which he had bought. Such was De La Salle's crime.

What is incomprehensible is how a twenty-two- or twenty-three-year-old ecclesiastic could agree to join forces with his father and declare himself the adversary of De La Salle in a petition so injurious to the reputation of the holy man, presented in both his and his father's name to the civil lieutenant. From the extract which we have given of the memorandum that the servant of God drew up in his defense, it appears that the abbé had acted in complete good faith with De La Salle and that he was intelligent, had good taste and good sense, possessed a basic piety, or at least showed some signs of it. He had not acted inconsiderately but had taken proper measures and precautions; he had asked for the advice and the approval of his superiors. He had



undertaken nothing without the archbishop's consent. His preceptor was aware of his transactions and was the confidant of his projects.

### Abbé Clément's irresponsible conduct

Certainly, the son could have opposed the fury of his father by pointing out to him that every age is appropriate for doing good works and that no law forbids a minor who is an ecclesiastic to engage in them, so long as he causes no harm to anyone and does not burden anyone else's property. He was twenty-three years old and had not so very long to wait before attaining his majority. He intended, as soon as he reached the legal age, to ratify the acquisition made during his minority. He owed this ratification to his conscience, to charity, justice, good faith, and his pledged word. He could not, without betraying all the rules of equity, summon before the bar a man whom he had begged during an entire year to join him in the project.

If anyone was at fault in the purchase of the house in question, it was he himself, since nothing was truer than that he was the one who had purchased it. He had not done anything in the affair that his archbishop had not approved of. The purchase of the house did not in any way benefit De La Salle. Those who stood to gain from it were the country parishes which would secure therefrom capable and well-trained schoolmasters.

De La Salle had indeed furnished 5,200 livres to make the down payment on the house. The young man could have said to his father that if the purchase displeased him, it would be easy to resell the house and let everything return to its former condition, without making such a fuss and provoking so much scandal. But the fact was that those people wished to ruin the holy man, and the abbé, whether deceived or deceiving, went along with them. He was either very weak or very clever. In any case, he acted irresponsibly, and he permitted the servant of God to be forced to answer for a transaction in which he himself had involved the Founder much against his will.

It is believed that the secret enemy of De La Salle had a finger in the affair and did his best to fan the flames instead of quenching them. For a long time, he had wanted to see De La Salle far away from Paris so that he could profit by his absence to take over the government of the Institute. If that was so, as we now have every reason to believe and as De La Salle himself was persuaded, his enemy finally had his way. The servant of God withdrew from Paris, and his adversary, taking advantage of his absence, invaded his flock and undertook to govern it as he wished, as the sequel will show.

### De La Salle prepares a written defense

We have already mentioned how deeply the man of God detested lawsuits. However injurious and defamatory was the petition filed against him, however gross and false the accusations hurled at him, however well founded were his rights in the matter of the house, he preferred to give in, following the advice of the Gospel, rather than to appear in court to carry on a lawsuit. Nevertheless, in order not to be open to the reproach of having abandoned God's cause and of allowing it to be shamefully betrayed by the one who was the real author of the whole undertaking or without opening his mouth to defend himself, De La Salle entrusted to several persons enjoying influence and authority a number of documents, a memorandum, and thirteen letters from the abbé to justify his conduct. He asked them in their charity to see to it that justice was done him.

It has always been believed that what these persons did was to send these papers to be examined by some lawyers who were connected with the opponents of the servant of God. For in the report they drew up and forwarded to those who had consulted them, they gave their opinions, not like advocates but like declared enemies of De La Salle. The outcome of this consultation was entirely in conformity with the petition presented to the civil lieutenant.

When this report was sent to De La Salle, he was indeed amazed at finding adversaries where he had hoped to find friends and defenders. He therefore concluded that his only safety lay in flight and that he would vainly attempt to justify himself, since his condemnation was a foregone conclusion. Whatever he might say, he would be held to be in the wrong; people did not want to find him innocent. They had come to believe their own prejudices and would listen to nothing else. They thought him guilty because they wanted him to be guilty.

Faced with these attitudes in his regard, De La Salle decided to let them have their way and to abandon to them his house, his honor, and his reputation by withdrawing his person from their pursuits. This resolve had not yet been executed when Rogier, who had lent his name for the purchase of the house, came to tell De La Salle that he had been condemned, that the house had been confiscated, that a warrant was out for his arrest, and that he should take whatever precautions he felt necessary to insure his safety.

### The harsh judgment against De La Salle

The servant of God, surprised at such a rapid judgment, was even more amazed that his case had been abandoned by the persons whose protection he had implored. It is certain that if they had wished to appear and take in hand the cause of the saintly priest, they could have spared him this blow. Their influence would at least have shielded him from disgrace, if it could not win for him a favorable judgment. Rogier, who was certainly as much implicated in the affair as De La Salle was, if not more so, and who enjoyed neither influence nor authority, was able to obtain justice for himself. When Rogier saw that the house had been confiscated or was on the point of being lost for De La Salle, he intervened in his own name in the lawsuit, stated that he, too, had an interest in the case, and demanded the restitution of the 5,200 livres which he had put down as the initial payment. That same amount was awarded him, and when the house was sold, he was reimbursed for what he had spent, and the rest was confiscated. De La Salle would not have been in a worse position than he, and similar justice could not have been denied him had he not remained undefended.

Was it due to malice or to negligence that those whom he had chosen as his defenders abandoned him to such unjust treatment? It is not for us to judge, but it is a fact that their minds, too, were made up in advance and that they were in contact with the one who wished to get the servant of God away from Paris. Why, then, we may ask, did De La Salle place in their hands the documents which would have established his innocence? It was because he lacked all other help and support; he had no one else who might be willing to speak for him.

He hoped that prejudice might yield to charity on this occasion and that such worthy men—for the persons whose assistance he had requested were indeed worthy—would set aside all human views to uphold the cause of God. They would have done so on any other occasion, but in the case of a man whom God wished to crucify in all things, the Lord permitted that nobody should take up his defense and that he should be left in the hands of human justice, just as Jesus Christ was in the hands of Pilate, in universal oppression and complete abandonment.

Rogier himself, De La Salle's close friend, was guilty on this occasion by separating his interests from those of the servant of God, although they were closely connected. It would have been easy for him, while vindicating his own rights, to do the same for those of his friend, whose honor and reputation he would have saved as easily as

he saved his own. But God did not permit that to happen, since he willed to add a new mortification to so many others.

### The heroic patience of De La Salle

Only his virtue afforded De La Salle any relief in the midst of so many tribulations. Accepting them from God's hands, like Job, he blessed God, who was their true author and who disposes of all the happenings of life according to his ends. The holy man uttered neither complaints nor murmurs against all the various persons who seemed to have leagued themselves to oppress him. Silence and patience, his ordinary weapons in the trials of life, were the only ones he used against the abbé's bad faith, the father's anger, the ill will of the lawyers, the inertia of his protectors, and the betrayal by his friend.

Considering himself in Paris as though in enemy territory and seeing everywhere only secret or open persecutors and cowardly or perfidious friends, De La Salle left the city the day following his condemnation, during the first week of Lent in 1712, to escape from the ultimate excesses of the persecution, in accordance with the advice of Jesus Christ, *When they persecute you in one city, flee to another*. De La Salle buried himself far away in Provence. He did not return to Paris until he could do so in safety, that is, when his secret and implacable persecutor who had stirred up all the other adversaries could no longer do him any harm.

After the departure of the holy man, the Brothers received two summonses: one from Rogier, who had gone over to the other side, although he had been his intimate friend, and the other from M. Clément, the father. In both of these documents, De La Salle was treated with extreme discourtesy. In particular, they made it a point to call him *a priest of the diocese of Reims* and *superior of the Brothers of the said house*, not Superior of the Brothers of Paris and Saint-Denis. All these expressions revealed the evident collusion between his legal adversaries and his great enemy. The man who for ten years had been striving to take away from the Founder the government of the Institute he had created and whose only purpose was to force him to go back to Reims with the Brothers there, so that he himself could take over the control of those in Paris, revealed his intentions by such statements and showed clearly that it was he who had once again pulled all the strings in this latest persecution. He finally succeeded in his design and triumphed over the servant of God.

### De La Salle misunderstands the Brothers in Paris

What affected the Founder most keenly was that he imagined that all the Brothers in Paris were on his enemy's side. It was a false impression, because during his absence, the Brothers in Paris remained in his regard what they had been when he was present among them: obedient and inviolably attached to his person. What gave him this impression was the fact that Brother Barthélemy, thinking that it was the correct thing to do, had forwarded to him the two summonses in which the holy Founder was addressed as superior of the Brothers in Reims and not in Paris.

Such terms, which could have been dictated only by his rival, made him wonder about the fidelity of his disciples in Paris and fear that they might already have given in to the intrigues of his enemy. For he said to himself, why send me these documents couched in such terms, if not to hint that they no longer consider me as their Superior? His suspicion was ill founded. Brother Barthélemy had sent him the papers in all straightforwardness, thinking that he should let him know what was going on in his absence.

The Founder, thus misled, did what he usually did, that is, he gave way, humbled himself, and abandoned to their own direction those who seemed to be rejecting his control, even as he had done with regard to the Brothers in Mende. In consequence of this mistake, he no longer wished to correspond with Brother Barthélemy, who, he thought, had gone over to his adversary's party and who wished to receive his letters only to betray him under this appearance of confidence. Unfortunately, Brother Barthélemy could not exercise any authority as Superior, because De La Salle had not appointed him his substitute in his absence and because he had not been chosen as Superior by the other Brothers.

The devil did not fail to turn to his own advantage this misunderstanding and to make it a source of harm for the Institute. The Brothers in the provinces who left the path of duty no longer feared any correction; they therefore grew bolder and bolder and threw off the yoke of the Rule. De La Salle, buried far away in the most distant provinces, let no one know where he was. Meanwhile, Brother Barthélemy had no right to replace him or to make use of the Founder's authority. Consequently, those among the Brothers who were not the most fervent, who were no longer giving an account of their conduct and no longer receiving from a Superior either advice or orders that might have brought them back to their duty, took more and more liberties and gradually lost the spirit and grace of their state.

The evil went much farther than it had in 1702 and came close to ruining the Institute. That was what the devil sought by stirring up around the holy Founder so many persecutions which upset the Brothers and weakened their fervor. If the work had been man's work, he would have succeeded. God allowed all the trials, however, only to strengthen the Community and to rid it of unworthy members. In this way, he brought the Institute back to its first condition and gave it back its early fervor when the holy Founder returned. It was this which was the true result of that great persecution.

De La Salle had been deceived by a minor, abandoned by those whom he had chosen for his defenders, betrayed by his friend, and oppressed by his enemies. The victim of his own good faith, the object of the jealousy of a powerful rival, calumniated, accused, condemned as an impostor and suborner, he saw his own property handed over to the person who accused him of fraudulently obtaining it. He saw his good name besmirched because he had undertaken a good work for which he had laid down his money and his name. For the third time, he saw the failure of the projected training college for country schoolmasters, which had been off to such a good start.

Critics and those who never want to make any allowances for devout men will no doubt blame De La Salle for imprudence in doing business with a minor and for not being on his guard, but his involvement was for a good work. Is a minor forbidden to devote to such an undertaking his ecclesiastical revenues and the economies he may make on his personal allowance? Had the abbé not obtained the archbishop's consent for his project? Did it make much sense for him to claim, at the age of twenty-four, that he had been duped? Could not De La Salle have trusted a young man who for an entire year had repeatedly importuned him to join him in the proposed foundation?

It is not to be wondered at if this young abbé, who was responsible for all the disasters we have just described, came to an evil end. After the death of the regent,<sup>17</sup> he was accused of plotting against the state and was exiled, in chains, far from Paris. As for Rogier, he recognized his wrongdoing and tried to make up for it as well as he could. I say as well as he could, because while he could not undo the harm done to the good name of the servant of God, at least he was able to compensate De La Salle for the loss of the 5,200 livres which he had occasioned. In his will, he left him an annuity of 360 livres to be paid him after the death of Rogier's maidservant, adding that he did this *for reasons of conscience*.

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17. Philippe II of Orléans, regent after the death in 1715 of Louis XIV until his own death in 1723.

Never did a legacy turn up at a more opportune moment for the holy man, who by that time had returned from Provence. God made it plain by the arrangements of his Divine Providence that he had inspired the legacy to compensate De La Salle for his loss and to give him the means of finally securing a fixed headquarters for his Institute, where the novitiate would be adequately installed. The maid-servant, who was to draw the legacy first, did not long survive her master, and when she died at the age of fifty, she left this annuity to De La Salle, who was over sixty-six. At his request, the holy man was given the capital instead of the annuity and used the money to acquire the property of Saint Yon. But all those transactions happened only several years later, after his return from Provence, where we shall now follow him.

## CHAPTER X

*De La Salle flees to Provence, where he finds new crosses to bear; en route, he is celebrated with honor, and everyone smiles on him in the cities as he passes through; local clerics involved in the doctrinal split seek to win him over; his new novitiate fails because he will not subscribe to the current opinions; he plans to go to Rome but abandons the idea in a spirit of obedience; finally, he is forced to go into solitude.*

It was not to seek repose that the holy Founder departed to the most distant provinces. The cross followed him everywhere, and vainly would he have sought to avoid it. When he changed his residence by going from Paris to Provence, he merely exchanged crosses. At first, his journey was agreeable enough. He was welcomed by the Brothers on the way like a father whose children love him tenderly. They all wept and tried to comfort him in his affliction, which they shared with him most sincerely.

If at first they were surprised to see him, they were much consoled by his visit and vied with one another in showing him their confidence and attachment. The reason for his departure from Paris was for them a cause of tears, and many did they shed over him while seeking to dry his. More sensitive than he to the wrongs he had suffered, they needed all their virtue to stifle in their bosoms their complaints and outcries against those who were responsible for the way he had been treated. If some expression of indignation escaped them,

the holy Founder, far from approving or even listening to it, exhorted them to adore God's will as he himself did and to consider nothing but God's orders in all the happenings of life. He invited them to join him in praying for his persecutors, so as to fulfill the precept given us by Jesus Christ and to follow his example.

De La Salle is received with honor everywhere

He reached Avignon toward the end of Lent, 1712. The Brothers there, delighted as were all the others over having their Superior with them, kept him with them as long as they could. He was preparing to make a visitation of all the establishments the Brothers had in the area. His plan caused the Brothers considerable alarm, because it was dangerous to venture too far out in the country because of the Camisards,<sup>18</sup> who occupied the countryside and waged a cruel war on all ecclesiastics. It was well known that their great delight was to sacrifice priests to their fury and to satisfy their hatred of Catholics by shedding the blood of the Lord's ministers. Vainly did the Brothers point out to De La Salle that he should not endanger himself to being hunted down by the rabid fanatics whose external aspect alone showed them to be human and who, under the semblance of men, bore the hearts of wild beasts. But nothing could discourage his zeal. However, with the help of Divine Providence, his trip from Avignon to Alais was accomplished safely and without incident.

The eagerness of the Brothers to welcome their Superior was imitated by a large number of persons who knew De La Salle only by reputation. They sought to pay him honor because of the zeal and diligence that his disciples displayed for the instruction of youth. No one showed him greater consideration than the bishop of Alais, when he went to present his respects. The prelate could not find marks of distinction adequate to honor a priest whom he held in such esteem. Among all the graceful compliments paid by the pious bishop to the holy priest, nothing gave him more joy than the way he praised the Brothers for their diligence in converting the children of the heretics. Ever since the Brothers had taken charge of instructing them, many had embraced the faith. As the salvation of souls was the sole object of the Founder's efforts, it was also the one thing that gave him joy.

After remaining at Alais for a few days, he proceeded to the little town of Les Vans, passing through the parish of Gravières, which is

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18. A militant band of Huguenots. The name is derived from the distinctive shirts they wore.



not far from there. He was welcomed like an angel from heaven, and in spite of his objections, he was obliged to spend a few days with the prior, a great friend of the pious priest, who had founded the school at Les Vans and had been asked to take charge of the spiritual direction of the Brothers. The worthy ecclesiastic paid too much honor to the humble Founder, and he gave him too many tokens of the profound veneration he entertained for his person and of the high esteem he had for his virtue for De La Salle to enjoy his stay with him. The virtuous prior carried this respect to the point of reserving for himself the privilege of serving, in his surplice, the Mass of the pious priest. De La Salle felt confused over this special attention but could not prevent it.

It was a joy for the prior when he saw the holy Founder in his house, and he did all he could to have him come back. If he had kept his pious desires better hidden in his heart, he would have had the joy of satisfying them longer and more often, but by doing so much honor to a man who avoided recognition, he instead forced him to avoid his house. In fact, the servant of God found excuses to stay away from Gravières as much as possible in order to avoid all these marks of distinction which he found so distasteful. That was why he resolved to take another road when he went through that area again.

From Gravières he went to Les Vans and gave the Brothers there an agreeable surprise, for they had not expected to see the Superior in their part of the country. They considered his visit providential. The joy of the father and of his children was reciprocal, because on his side, he was delighted to see with what patience these good Brothers labored to instruct the children of heretical parents. After exhorting the Brothers to persevere, he left them a few days later and went to Mende.

That part of the journey was dangerous and difficult for him. He risked his life more than once on the way through the rugged mountains of the Gévaudan with their treacherous precipices. He endured bitter and stinging cold, and by the time he arrived in Mende, his health had suffered. Still, as he was not a man who paid much attention to his aches and pains, after a few days of rest, he began his visits by calling on the bishop, who entertained a singular esteem for him and gave him all possible tokens of it. The prelate told him everything in praise of the Brothers that was most agreeable to him. He begged De La Salle to remain and to dine with him, but the servant of God, who in order to avoid this sort of honor always found a ready excuse in the customs of his Community, asked the prelate to allow him to give the Brothers an example of fidelity to the Rule

which he had prescribed for them. The bishop of Mende, edified by his modesty, preferred to accept his excuse rather than to interfere with his strict regularity.

Everyone in the city wished to meet the Founder of the Brothers. This attention brought him a large number of visits, which took up all his time, for those who came to see him could not tear themselves away, so charmed were they by the gentleness of his words and by the aura of holiness surrounding his person. Because they never grew tired of seeing him or listening to him, he decided to leave as soon as possible without making any announcement and without saying good-bye except to a small number of people, lest they should try to retain him. He departed and returned to Les Vans, running the same perils and experiencing the same inconveniences as before. From there, he left for Uzès to attend to some business and to pay his respects to the bishop.

At the start of their conversation, the prelate embarrassed De La Salle somewhat by trying to extort from him something that he could not grant without harm to his Institute. The bishop listened kindly to the arguments of the Founder and desisted from his request, so the matter was dropped. The bishop had felt that the success of the Christian Schools required that the teachers not be transferred. On that account, he was opposed to any change in the personnel of the school at Les Vans. When De La Salle explained to him the inconvenience that would follow from such a procedure and said so very forcefully, the good bishop, who was only seeking the greater good as he understood it, could recognize the cogency of De La Salle's arguments. The visit was concluded in that manner to the satisfaction of De La Salle, who received from the prelate his tokens of the warmest kindness and his promise to protect the Brothers in Les Vans.

### Attempts to win over De La Salle to new doctrines

Continuing his journey, he passed again through Alais and finally reached a celebrated city<sup>19</sup> which became the theater of the new persecutions that hell had prepared for him. He had been expected there for a long time. His reputation had preceded him, and the expectation was universal, especially among the clergy, who were eager to meet him. Everyone had in store for him compliments and offers of help. Some wished to win over a man whose great virtue had been announced by word of mouth. Others wished to make him adopt their

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19. Marseille.

doctrinal positions and by overwhelming him with their kind services, to lead him to share their opinions out of regard for their persons.

Hardly had De La Salle arrived when all sorts of persons came forward to pay to his virtue the honor it deserved and to offer him all sorts of assistance. Many ecclesiastics among the most highly considered and distinguished in the city wished to be in his company. As they seemed to be worthy men, zealous for good works, and very favorable to his Institute, that was an easy approach for them. They frequently came to discuss with him the best means of spreading the Christian Schools in the city and in the entire province. Such favorable dispositions led the servant of God to conceive the idea of establishing a novitiate in the city. Everything seemed to point to a favorable outcome. The city was large, rich, and supportive of many good works; it contained a great number of clerics, men of merit and zeal such as Saint Paul described: *prepared for all sorts of good*. It numbered many wealthy, pious, and generous persons who gave liberally to charity and, most of all, showed a genuine esteem and appreciation for the Christian Schools. All these indications gave him great hope. The more he considered all factors, the more he felt that God had driven him from Paris, through the secret designs of his Providence, only so that he might come to that city to establish a local novitiate to train candidates from the area, who would be better able to labor in their home territory than others who did not know the spirit and customs and whose inclinations and even language were quite different.

Encouraged by all these considerations, he broached the project to those who seemed to him the most zealous. The plan was approved, and everyone wished to take part in implementing it. The holy Founder was not a little surprised when he found so much cooperation in the execution of a design which he had ventured to propose only with trepidation and which he had found so difficult to launch at Reims, Paris, and Rouen. As though vying with one another, everyone wished to contribute to the establishment of the novitiate. Almost all the parish priests of the city showed their interest, the bishop more than anyone else. Many persons from the city joined them. When one of the gentlemen began donating funds, the others promised to do the same in the future. Never was a godly work started with more unanimity, promptness, and zeal. A house was rented and furnished without delay. Everyone sought to bring in candidates, so that in a short time, there was a large number of them. Every day brought new good fortune.

### Initial success promises a bright future

Such a favorable start augured well for the future. Everybody wished to contribute to putting the final touches on this establishment. In fact, it was considered to be completed. De La Salle alone felt some reservations over such rapid success and feared to see everything buried underneath the ruins of such fine beginnings. The reason was that he did not see the work as founded on the rock of Calvary; hence, he wondered whether it would last. Enlightened as he was in the ways of God, the Founder had learned from his own experience and from that of the saints that undertakings which are not founded on the cross and which are launched without difficulties either do not disturb the devil very much or do not last very long.

Therefore he did not venture to let joy fully occupy his heart, fearing that the present success would dissolve in the misfortunes that the near future might bring. He worried that some secret motive, hidden under a deceitful mask of apparent devotion, might have taken the place of genuine charity and inspired the notable zeal which seemed to animate some of his backers. As he saw it, that would have been enough to cause the project to fail. God does not bless what is not done for his sake. If the Lord is not the *raison d'être* of the edifice men wish to erect, he does not take part in building it, and when it is not God's work, in vain do men wish to construct it. De La Salle's apprehensions were all the more solidly grounded, for he was not accustomed to seeing his undertakings so vigorously seconded. Nothing was newer for him than this unanimity of voices in his favor, this concerted action of so many people ready to open their purses to him. The continual opposition that he had to endure in all his other foundations made him question this one and made him fear that the rapidity with which it was being built might be a premonition of its downfall.

The happenings of life, however, do not always follow the same pattern, and from the success or the failure of one, we cannot with certainty conclude that another will be a failure or a success. The future is in God's hands alone, and he alone knows what it will be. Thus the holy Founder wavered between doubt and hope. For his part, he did what God asked of him and left the rest to Divine Providence. The novitiate was filled, and everything seemed to be going well. The enthusiasm of the people who had contributed the most to the undertaking, instead of growing weaker with time, seemed to gain new strength. Every day they wanted to do something else for this work. Their zeal, which previously had been dispersed and directed

to various objects, soon seemed to be concentrated on this one alone. It had become their sole preoccupation; they neglected or forgot about the others. They scoured the city and the countryside in search of more alms or to persuade other wealthy persons to assist the new undertaking with their liberalities.

If the same spirit had filled all these promoters, if the desire of honoring God had really been the only motive of their activity, there is every reason to think that the novitiate in Provence would still exist today. But the majority of the supporters were seeking only to win over the Brothers and their Superior, and they favored them only insofar as they would espouse the interests of their party.<sup>20</sup> If they were to remain inflexible and give no sign of being won over, the destruction of the novitiate would be decided on in advance, and open warfare would be waged against the Christian Schools.

However, among the many who collaborated in this undertaking, there were some who acted from right motives and who, in promoting this good cause, had only God in view. For a long time, those persons continued to support the novitiate. They even took steps to establish it firmly and to develop the Christian Schools in the city. There already existed Gratuitous Schools which were endowed, so all that needed to be done was to bring the Brothers into them. As for the parishes which had no schools, it was proposed to establish some schools for them. To further this design, a zealous Jesuit who was preaching the Lenten cycle of sermons in one of the main churches undertook to bring the matter before his hearers and to recommend it to them as strongly as he could. He did so very successfully. What he said about the importance and necessity of giving a good education and the necessary instruction to the young was well received, and several pious persons soon gathered to establish a Gratuitous School.

### De La Salle occupied with training the novices

While all this was being done to promote the growth of the Institute, De La Salle, on his side, was laboring to train the candidates who had been presented to him. He made this formation his unique occupation and did not feel that he had anything else to attend to. Because he had come to Provence to hide himself, as we mentioned, he revealed his presence as little as possible and left unanswered all the letters from the Brothers which reached him from all sides. He did so because he believed that the Institute's best interests required that he

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20. The Jansenists, very active in Marseille.

give up all such contacts, so that his enemies might not turn against the Brothers the resentment that they could no longer vent on him personally. Moreover, under the mistaken impression that the Brothers in Paris had not been faithful to him, he did not know whom to trust. In addition, he thought that the Brother whom he had left behind him in Paris in his place would be able fill it and carry out all his duties successfully.

That Brother was, in fact, wise and moderate. He replaced his absent Founder as well as he could, and he did so with great prudence but also amidst considerable difficulty, because those Brothers disinclined to submission and hoping to dispense themselves from obedience objected that he had neither been elected by the membership nor appointed by De La Salle, as we have already said. However, De La Salle continued to correspond with the Brother who directed the novitiate of Saint Yon,<sup>21</sup> because he was convinced that the garden of the novitiate should be carefully cultivated, so that it would make up for all the losses which he foresaw the Society would suffer through his absence. Indeed, he trained some very good candidates there, and they would more than replace others whom relaxation or deceit would lead to ruin. The former were his comfort, and to them he could apply the words of Saint Paul, *You are my crown and my joy in the Lord*, and those of the beloved disciple, *I have no greater joy than to see my children walk in the truth*.

De La Salle did not, for all that, neglect the guidance of the Brothers in Provence and in the surrounding areas. Since they were not far away, he continued his ordinary ministrations to them. He had them come to him from time to time to renew them spiritually, had them make retreats, and tried to strengthen them against relaxation. Those who labored in the city he called back, as he had been in the habit of doing at Paris and at Saint Yon, and had them join in the exercises of the novitiate, thus maintaining them in fervor, dependence, and regularity. The zeal he showed for their perfection, which suited those who had retained a desire for holiness and did not neglect to strive to attain it, was not to the liking of a few tepid and relaxed Brothers. They would have preferred to see him far away instead of so near. His presence was a constraint for them, since he showed himself an enemy of false liberty.

De La Salle's strict spirit of regularity, which he exemplified in the most outstanding manner, began to weary these men. It was only under constraint and for pure form that they returned to the novitiate on

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21. The novitiate had been moved to Paris during the famine of 1709.

the appointed days. The exercises in force there were a species of torture for such tepid and cowardly souls. Novitiate life seemed insupportable to men who were beginning to grow relaxed and who were tired of living under the eyes of a vigilant Superior who aspired only to virtue and holiness and who spoke only of the effort needed to attain them. Unhappy, bored, and discontented with a lifestyle which fervor alone makes enjoyable, they began thinking from the outset of how to put an end to it. How could they manage to do so? That was what embarrassed them, and it was no slight problem.

If they complained openly, they would be admitting their lack of virtue, their selfish, relaxed attitude. Their self-love could not abide such humiliation. Tepid souls show more of this disposition than others, and in them self-love increases as fervor diminishes. People who at one time had some virtue and have lost it are careful to keep up appearances; they often become consummate hypocrites. By trying to preserve a reputation for virtue which they have lost, they become whitened sepulchres which conceal vice and passion under a false semblance of rectitude.

#### *Scheme of the two Brothers to live independently*

Finally, after much thought, the two Brothers of whom I speak found a way to attain their objective without causing any harm to their reputation. It was to plead that the obligation of fulfilling their school duties made it impossible for them to go back to the novitiate. They explained their problem, not to their Superior, who would not have accepted such an argument, but to the founders of the schools. They said that the welfare of the schools suffered from their frequent coming and going to the house where De La Salle lived. The excuse was cleverly framed, and it easily deceived people who were especially interested in the schools which they had founded.

When they went to make a sort of apology to those who employed them, the two Brothers were well received and were commended for the zeal they showed for doing their duty. They said that their consciences obliged them to point out that the classes were not functioning so well, because they were obliged to go so often to the novitiate, and that the schools could not really flourish unless the teachers remained within the limits of the parish as they had formerly done. With additional malice, they observed that they thought it a duty for them to inform these gentlemen that part of the revenues from the school endowments went to the novitiate to support the novices. Since they did not wish to do anything against the desires

and intentions of the founders, they felt obliged to let them know about the problem.

Their remarks, so clever and hypocritical, served to mask their own self-will. They wished to remain on their own domain and live there as they pleased, away from the vigilance of their Superior and far from dependence on him. Those men who for the last few years had been accustomed to breathe the air of independence, thanks to the distance separating them from their Superior, found intolerable the exact observance of the Rule which he required of them. Not knowing how to liberate themselves from it except through trickery and ruse, they made use of means which led to their own downfall and the destruction of all the good that De La Salle was beginning to do in Provence and in the neighboring areas.

The trumped-up charges invented by those two sons of Belial marked the beginning of a new persecution launched against their Superior. Like the small cloud that Elias the Prophet summoned to cover all the land of Israel, it grew little by little and finally culminated in the storm which we shall see bursting over the saintly priest. The persons to whom the complaints were addressed considered them well founded and important. They lent themselves to the bad will of the two Brothers and helped them recover their former liberty. The restrictions which these Brothers found so irksome seemed to the founders a disadvantage for the schools. They believed what the two Brothers wanted them to believe, namely, that De La Salle's insistence on having them attend the exercises of the novitiate interfered with their classwork and that by taking up so much of their time, he left them much less to devote to the students. Under the pretext of maintaining them in the spirit of poverty and detachment from all things, he used the revenues of the endowments to support the novitiate. Without trying to discover the true motive which made these two Brothers act as they did, these gentlemen paid attention only to their complaints, which they considered to be wise and well founded, and thought that they were doing right by helping two people get back their liberty, which is what they passionately wanted without letting it be seen.

Not without sorrow and not without foreseeing the evil results that would ensue, did the worthy Superior see the two dissidents withdraw themselves from his vigilance. But what could he do to prevent it? Without realizing it, the founders required such a change when they demanded that the two Brothers should remain in their residence, as they had formerly done. The gentlemen were insistent, and although it was flimsy, the pretext of greater good for the schools,



which the rebels had so cleverly advanced to obtain their own ends, finally won out. He had to yield and let the two Brothers live as they desired.

From that time on, De La Salle began to realize that in this city he would not enjoy the clear sailing promised him at the beginning and that these initial difficulties would not be the last. Still, people were busy about the opening of the new school, of which mention has been made. Preparations were progressing, and the holy Founder had been advised to call in the Brothers who would take charge of the school. Then, when everything seemed to be ready, suddenly everything fell apart.

### The Jansenists make their influence felt

As mentioned before, it was a Jesuit who had first launched the idea of this school. That was where the trouble lay. If anyone else had a hand in it, nobody would have made any objections; nobody would have opposed it. But in that city, as we said, a new doctrine was widespread and numbered many illustrious adherents. Another circumstance, which also had much to do with the failure of this school, was that a prominent person in the city, a man of superior intellect and considerable merit, had secretly become an enemy of De La Salle because he had failed to win him over to his own unorthodox sentiments. That cleric, the leader of all the group, was the most devious, insinuating, and subtle man in the world. He had approached De La Salle and seemed most friendly. He appeared to be a true supporter of the servant of God and would indeed have shown himself such, once he had won De La Salle over to his party. The two of them, however, did not see eye to eye and remained on guard against each other.

There is a time for everything, a time to be silent and a time to speak, and that time finally came. When the prominent ecclesiastic made the first overtures, he did not get very far without noticing in De La Salle's attitude and on his countenance that the Founder did not care for the new doctrine. That was enough for the man, so wise according to this world. From then on, he felt for the saintly priest the same sort of antipathy that he perceived him to entertain for his own sentiments. He resolved thenceforth to wage secret war against him but without seeming to break off their relations.

No sooner had the Jesuit finished his sermon stressing the advantages and the importance of the Christian Schools than the opponents got busy and started an intrigue to foil the plan. Secretly they

plotted against the project and decided that if they could not stop it, they would try to turn the schools over to others than the Brothers. To succeed in their attempt, they needed a leader with authority, intelligence, and recognized reputation.

Such was the person of whom we just spoke, and he was the one the party chose as the most capable individual in the city to influence people's minds. He gladly accepted the task and fulfilled it with extraordinary diligence. He felt honored in being at the head of his party and in doing it a service. He also enjoyed having a chance to spoil the plan recommended by a Jesuit,<sup>22</sup> and he gloated in advance over the opportunity of humiliating De La Salle.

Like the clever schemer he was, however, he wished to preserve the outward forms of charity in order not to risk alienating the public. Without breaking with De La Salle but, on the contrary, feigning to be closer to him than ever before, he worked underhandedly to alienate those who had become interested in the project and had donated funds. He suggested that it would be preferable to hand over the school to clerics rather than to the Brothers, since clerics, while teaching school, could also make themselves useful in the parish. As he was eloquent, clever, and had winning ways, he had no great difficulty in persuading everyone that he sought only what was good and was, in fact, pointing out where the greater good lay.

Once he was sure of that flank, he proceeded to circumvent the bishop, which he did with supreme skill, giving him to understand that the people who backed the new foundation had changed their minds about the Brothers, preferring to entrust the school to clerics, who could also render services in the parish where the school was to be established. He added that the benefactors were so well decided on the point that if anyone tried to dissuade them, they would give their money to some other work of charity. The prelate, who was strongly in favor of the Brothers and hoped to multiply their schools as much as possible in his diocese, was not a little surprised to hear of this change, the real motive for which he did not realize. But as he had not had time to discuss the matter with the benefactors, he feared to antagonize them by an act of authority. He therefore let things go their way and did not oppose the change.

The actor who occupied the center of the stage then finished playing his role. He went to De La Salle with a melancholy and afflicted air, like a man overwhelmed with grief. With words of commiseration and in a doleful voice, he told him that he had come on a

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22. The Jesuits were strong opponents of Jansenism.

most disagreeable mission: to inform him that the people who were backing the new school had changed their minds and that they now wanted to entrust it not to the Brothers but to clerics. *God be blessed*, replied the servant of God; *apparently that is how God wants it*. Since upright hearts are never on guard against duplicity, the saintly priest, thinking that the man really entertained in his heart the sentiments that his lips uttered, thanked him most sincerely, feeling that he owed him a great debt of gratitude for the interest he was taking in the Brothers' Institute.

When his visitor had left, he went to prostrate himself before God to adore the decrees of Providence, to thank God, and to submit to his action. He foresaw the storms that would arise against him and asked for strength and courage to withstand them. Convinced that sin is the only real evil and that all other misfortunes in life are, in God's plan, means for our sanctification, De La Salle thought only of profiting by those that threatened him and of going forth to confront them with a submissive mind and heart. Like Job, he offered himself to the blows that he foresaw the hand of God was about to inflict on him, and like that holy man, he repeated: *Let my consolation be that in afflicting me, you do not spare me; multiply my bruises as you please and according to the number of my sins*.

Thus prepared for whatever might happen, De La Salle did not have to wait long to hear the first rumblings of the tempest which he had foreseen. Those who had shown so much enthusiasm for the Brothers' establishments soon became the most active in opposing them. But they did not sound the tocsin for the war they were preparing until they despaired of bringing the Superior of the Brothers around to the point where they had hoped to have him. As long as they still hoped to succeed, there was no ruse they did not employ to win him over.

They promised De La Salle all sorts of advantages for his Institute if he would share their sentiments. They made gifts to him, hoping to cause his resolution to waver. To their promises, they joined threats mingled with flattery. They came to visit him often, and during these visits, the burning questions of the day were continually brought up. New maxims, boldly advanced, were vehemently upheld, but either the holy Founder did not listen to them, or he showed his disapproval by an austere countenance, or else he refuted their views by some short, incisive remark, for he detested all quarreling, being convinced that error only grows stronger through argument.

### De La Salle reacts negatively to the theological discussions

The clerics, who held conferences regularly on certain days, were happy to have De La Salle in attendance and often invited him to come. The discussions were not always on topics of piety; the current theological issues were the matters ordinarily discussed. De La Salle was always amazed to hear from the same mouths the language of angels when they spoke of God and the language of Luther and Calvin when they spoke of the pope and the bishops. He could find no charity in those who affected to be the perpetual panegyrists of that virtue, and he could not understand how those who so strongly urged its necessity found it so easy to dispense themselves from its practice and showed no mercy to anyone not of their party. These discussants seemed to make a virtue out of blackening the reputation of their adversaries, and whoever slandered their foes most outrageously was considered the most truly zealous. The spirit of contention, passion, and vanity characterized the discussion of the peculiar opinions that were considered. Each one wished to show off his theological acumen, insisting on triumphing and making a name for himself. They rarely agreed among themselves, except to consign the Molinists—or at least those whom they considered Molinists—to perdition as Pelagians and enemies of the grace of Jesus Christ.

De La Salle suffered greatly during these meetings; he usually kept silent. When they insisted that he speak, he strongly defended the truths that had been attacked and the persons whose characters had been torn to shreds. He declared that he was not much edified by what he saw and heard. He regretted the time wasted in altercations, invectives, and the display of vain erudition. He advised them to replace such idle, unfounded, and novel theories, which lead only to wordy confrontations and threaten charity, with discourses that nourish piety and contribute to worthwhile knowledge. His remonstrances were not well received; they irritated men who had invited him only so that he might listen to them and bow before their decisions. Their pride was offended when they found one giving them lessons whom they had hoped to make a docile disciple. They resolved to avenge themselves, concluding that there was no longer any point in showing him friendliness, since they had nothing further to hope for from him.

### Persecutions from the Jansenists

Nevertheless, they had to camouflage for the eyes of the public the persecution they were about to start against De La Salle and parry all

suspicion that hatred and passion were the origin of the unfavorable reports they were on the point of spreading about him. After having honored, praised, and almost canonized him, they were going to decry him, blacken his name, and defame him. The public would have been shocked, if the way had not been prepared by voiceless rumors, by calumnies clothed in an appearance of verisimilitude and uttered by the mouths of devout people or by tongues accustomed to giving lies a ring of truth. But what could they find to criticize in a man whose life was so upright, whose morals were so irreproachable? Exaggerated regularity, excessive severity, invincible inflexibility, harshness that repelled others, stubbornness, and unyielding convictions that nothing could shake—such were the descriptions they used to oppose his extraordinary virtue, his solid doctrine, his spirit of recollection, mortification, and penance. Those virtues had been considered his vices, since his enemies had come to look upon him as a Molinist. Not that he really was one, of course, if we understand what this term actually means, that is, a follower of Molina. He was such in fact, however, in the meaning that those people attached to it, that is, an opponent of Jansenism.

The servant of God did not expect reproaches of that sort from people who pretended to such strict regularity in their conduct, boldly preached a severe brand of morality, and wished to pass themselves off as the restorers of the primitive spirit of penance. In recent centuries, when the Protestants claimed for themselves the noble name of reform, the example of penance given by Saint Charles Borromeo opened the eyes of all who did not insist on keeping them closed, so that they could see for themselves where true, interior, and supernatural virtue lay, that virtue which is inseparable from the true faith. The same distinction could apply to this later occasion, when we contrast De La Salle with the partisan proponents of the new doctrines. The latter preached penance in public; the former practiced it in secret. They claimed the appearance of reformation, but he gave the example of true reform. They spoke of nothing but grace and charity; he strove to draw down the one and to grow in the other. By thus comparing themselves with him, they tacitly admitted, while censuring him for his excesses in regularity, reform, and penance, that he really practiced virtue, whereas for them it was only a matter of appearance.

Not having anything else to reproach the servant of God with, his critics blamed his manner of governing. They disapproved the practices of piety he had established among the Brothers; they criticized as stilted and pretentious the recollected air that distinguished them;

they found fault with the different kinds of penance and mortification that De La Salle had learned from the saints and had introduced into his Community. They represented him as unconventional, harsh, unbalanced, inflexible—a man who never changed his mind. According to them, caprice was at the root of all his behavior. He was hard headed and agreed with nobody, and what was worse still, he wanted to mold everyone else to resemble him. He laid impossible burdens on the shoulders of the Brothers and subjected them to an impractical and outlandish lifestyle. In a word, they managed to misrepresent one of the most brilliant examples of virtue that has edified France in our century.

Considering De La Salle as a tacit censor of their conduct, they resolved to force him to leave the city. To oblige him to do so, they aroused all the idle people against him and made him odious to all those whose interests coincided with their own. Nor did they stop short at words. They acted in an underhanded way to dissuade people from giving him further alms, after discontinuing those which they themselves had at first bestowed on him. That stratagem seemed to them the quickest way of getting rid of him and of causing his Community to disappear quietly. Because famine makes the strongest city surrender, starving the enemy out is a sure method of conquest.

De La Salle was, however, a man who, like the great Apostle, knew how to endure hunger and thirst, who taught his disciples by his example to fast and abstain for long periods, and his enemies soon realized that this method of reducing resistance, so effective with others, would have little effect on him, since he was satisfied with bread and water and was accustomed to using even these with restraint. So they tried another line of attack against him: they worked stealthily to empty the novitiate. That proved easy for them. As they themselves had filled it with candidates devoted to them, it was not difficult for them to persuade the young men to leave. They approached most of the novices and got them to leave a house which they had encouraged them to enter in the first place. They turned away others who would have wished to join, telling them that De La Salle's way of life was too austere.

The novices who left echoed—or rather trumpeted abroad—the message given them by this group of founders and original supporters, and they published aloud what they had been saying more or less secretly to the disparagement of the servant of God. He was, they charged, excessively rigid in his approach, had no consideration for human frailty, and was as harsh with others as with himself. In the novitiate, they could neither raise their eyes nor open their mouths

nor make any use of their senses; the slightest fault was punished by some penance. People under such a regime became uncivil, uncouth, taciturn. The entire day was spent in exercises of piety and mortification. Often enough, it was claimed, the novices, their minds and bodies exhausted, would go to the refectory to find there practically nothing to eat or only food that inspired repugnance. To live there, they should have neither will nor judgment and should pay no attention to the body's needs. No one could stand this sort of life except De La Salle himself, who either was ruining the health of those who sought to imitate him or was driving them insane.

Thus it was that these gentlemen, using as proof the distorted experiences of unhappy novices, changed into crimes De La Salle's virtues of retirement, recollection, abnegation, mortification, obedience, and penance, in all of which he excelled and of which he gave such outstanding examples. Under hateful labels, they slandered virtues which outshone theirs. They went even further and published a pamphlet filled with calumnies in which the utmost malice had gathered together whatever could make him appear odious and rob him of all esteem. Their screed produced the effect that its authors hoped for. Since the malignity of the human heart inclines it to believe what is evil, the lying tract made everyone think the worst of De La Salle. People believed the evil that was said of him with no other proof than that they saw it in print. Such is the poison of calumny. It needs to advance no proof or appearance of truth in order to be believed. And even though defamation bears within itself the demonstration of its falsity, no matter how incredible it may be, people wish to believe it, especially when it is aimed at the most virtuous men.

### De La Salle responds to the calumny with equanimity

Since the evil effects of the pamphlet were spreading everywhere, the servant of God thought it his duty to try to contradict it. He issued a reply in which he let the truth speak for itself, and charity characterized all he said. He allowed no expression to fall from his pen which could satisfy wounded self-love, sting his adversaries, or make them think that he had been hurt by their venomous attacks. He contented himself with unmasking the falsity of their calumnies without saying anything that might wound the calumniators. The strongest thing he said was that his experience had taught him what the Church had to fear from a party which was gaining strength day after day and that he could foresee with sorrow the wounds that the Spouse of Christ would have to endure from such enemies.

Still, in spite of his attempt at refutation, calumny won the day. It spread from the city to the rest of the province and even reached the Brothers' establishments in the more remote places. There it produced all its malignant effects. The calumniator was believed on his mere word. Because he lied brazenly, nobody thought of questioning the facts he invented or of verifying them. What usually happens when true piety and sincerely devout persons are involved happened once again. People read the defamatory pamphlet with curiosity and evil-minded satisfaction, but nobody took the trouble to read the reply. They opened their ears to those who wished to slander the holy Founder but closed them against those who sought to vindicate him.

De La Salle did have friends who took up his defense, but they were not heeded. His allies tried to parry the blows aimed at him, to mollify irritated hearts, and to re-establish the honor and just deserts of the servant of God. But people's minds were too prejudiced against him, and his enemies kept repeating the old falsehoods while inventing new ones to add thereto. Things finally came to a head when they robbed the Brothers of the hope of extending their work. The latter had been promised a school in another very large parish, but suddenly no more was heard of such a school.

### Terrible effects of the calumny

The trouble spread farther and farther and even affected the hearts of the Brothers in the city, the province, and the environs. The novitiate had to be closed when the last novice left. Even the most resolute Brothers began to waver. Some of them abandoned the Institute, in spite of the prayers and remonstrances of their father. Those who were working in the surrounding areas but did not realize what was going on believed the false reports which were being spread about their Superior. They began to join their voices to those of others who were complaining and murmuring aloud.

There was the notorious Brother Director of Paris, whom we spoke of previously,<sup>23</sup> harsh on himself and even more so on others, who by inflicting such indiscreet and exaggerated penances, together with the Director of Novices, had given rise to the great persecution that was the start of all the others. He had been sent by De La Salle to open the school in Mende and had also been commissioned to visit the houses of the Institute in Provence. This Brother allowed himself to be influenced by all that was happening and left the Society. His

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23. Brother Ponce.



desertion was neither sudden nor unforeseen. It took place with the deliberation of a man who had been planning it for a long time. Before leaving the house, he took care to set aside as much money as he could. When he had a considerable sum to line his pockets with, he departed with the embezzled funds.

It is easy to imagine the hurt such a father felt in his heart when he learned of the desertion and fall of the prodigal, who more than any other deserved the name of child of his sorrow. That was the cruellest blow he had to suffer during the persecution. He did not really experience its bitterness to the full, save when his bosom was torn by the very children whom he had begotten in Jesus Christ. The external warfare waged against him was not so unbearable to him, so long as it did not lead to conflict within his family that armed his own sons against him.

In this matter, his adversaries were able to attack him on the point where he was most vulnerable. If his enemies had been satisfied with ruining his reputation, they would have rendered him the greatest service he could have hoped for from them. By occasioning humiliation for him, they were striving to make him conformable to Jesus in his abjection. If those gentlemen had limited their attacks to discouraging his novices, the servant of God would have been able to bear it, for they would have been tearing down what their own hands had built up. But what overwhelmed him with grief was that they succeeded in worming their way into his own house and there making of his children other Absaloms in revolt.

In fact, the two Brothers we spoke of, who were the instigators of this persecution, at that time added insolence to their previous betrayer of their holy Founder. They did not blush to tell him that *he had come to Provence only to destroy instead of building up*. Such a reproach was as excruciating to him as their earlier disobedience had been, but the only vengeance he took was to show them new tokens of his meekness and kindness. Whether out of necessity and because he had no one else at hand or whether by a deliberate choice, the Founder sent one of these Brothers to Mende sometime later, where the rebel consummated his fall by open rebellion and fresh insolence, as did the other Brother, who had taken up his residence there without De La Salle's orders.

The reader will recall what we have already related: that wishing to establish themselves in this town, the two Brothers, thanks to the backing they got from the bishop and the senior magistrate of the city, were able to defy their Superior, who wished to change them from a place where they were becoming irregular. They proceeded to throw

off the yoke of dependence. Those ungrateful and unnatural children forced their father to leave the house, telling him that if he wished to stay, he would have to pay for his board.

### A planned journey to Rome is delayed by the bishop

Time, which effaces all things, in this instance only embittered people's minds the more. His patience had not appeased the hatred of his adversaries. They even profited by his withdrawal from the scene—for he no longer appeared in public—to spread abroad new calumnies about him. The interests of his Institute seemed to be seriously compromised in that part of the country, and he began to think that they would soon be irremediably jeopardized. Blaming himself as the cause of all this, he thought of leaving that region of France for good.

Because he was in a city with easy passage to Rome, De La Salle resolved to travel there in order to prostrate himself at the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles and to present his respects and offer his obedience to Peter's successor. That was not a new desire on his part. For a long time, he had felt himself inspired to make such a trip in order to satisfy his special devotion to the chief of the apostolic college, to secure from the Sovereign Pontiff the confirmation of his mission, and to ask him to approve his Institute. If time had permitted him to do so previously and if he had not feared to cause harm to his little flock by going so far away, he would have yielded to the inspiration with great satisfaction. But now, both the time and the opportunity of satisfying his desire seemed to have arrived. Freed from all other occupations and driven, as it were, from place to place, he believed that Divine Providence itself was beckoning him to Rome.

A vessel about to set sail for the capital of the Christian world provided De La Salle with an opportunity which he would probably never again have. The circumstances decided him to reserve a place on board and to have all the provisions for the trip purchased by the Brother whom he had chosen as his companion for the journey. Still, he did not wish to undertake the voyage without God's approval; the divine will was the only rule he followed. He did not listen to his own wishes, except when he recognized that they came from the Holy Spirit. In order not to let any human or natural element intervene in this decision, he was careful to maintain himself in total indifference with regard to the trip and to keep himself absolutely dependent on God's good pleasure. The following incident proves his attitude.

While awaiting a favorable wind, the servant of God prayed and recommended his voyage to God. He was ready to go and ready to

remain, according to those orders of Divine Providence which events would transmit to him. Up to this point, nothing had happened to oppose his desire; in fact, everything seemed to favor it. The ship was ready to weigh anchor; all the passengers were coming aboard. De La Salle followed them and reached the docks. Just as he was about to embark, he met the bishop, who stopped him and begged him to come back to his house. He wanted him to take possession of a school which he wished to entrust to the Brothers. Immediately the saintly priest obeyed and no longer thought of his trip to Rome. As though the voice of the prelate had been the voice of God, he returned home and said to the Brothers as he entered the house, *God be blessed! Here I am, back from Rome. It is not his will that I should go there. He wants me to busy myself with something else.*

Here, surely, we have an example of virtue which is not ordinary. It shows to what an extent De La Salle was dead to himself. A man must have no self-will if he manifests none in the project of a journey to Rome. Everyone knows by experience the irritation felt when meeting with obstacles to our least important plans. Nevertheless, in spite of the bishop's assurances, the school could not be opened at the time, because of the opposition of De La Salle's enemies.

True, the Institute did not lose anything by this postponement and has since been rewarded many times over for the disappointment it experienced then. Indeed, no other city in France has shown more zeal for the Christian Schools or more goodwill toward the Brothers. They have opened classes in every section of the city, classes which are so well filled that we might think that each was the only one available. If the blessings that God pours out on them are so abundant, we can truly say that they are the consequences of the crosses which De La Salle had to bear in that city. Today, his children reap with rejoicing what their father sowed with so much sorrow. The furrows where they reap are so productive because he watered them with his tears. They enjoy peaceful possession of a terrain where he had to endure cruel warfare. The tribulations were his lot; the rewards are for the Brothers. As long as the man of God lived, that city was his enemy. After his death, it became reconciled with his disciples, and today it brooks no rival in conferring on them all possible favors.

That is how God deals with his special friends. In this world, the cross is their lot. Everything they undertake is blamed, contradicted, opposed. The world looks on them with scorn. Against them, hell arms the hands of sinners and even those of worthy people. The opposition they encounter from them is ordinarily that which they feel most keenly. God himself seems to join in the fray and abandons

them when he sees them, like his Son, nailed to the cross. But once they are dead, everything they have suffered returns in the form of blessings. God has invested what they lost at a high rate of interest. He makes up to them in glory the ruin of their honor and, in the end, brings to nothing all that the world and the devil undertook against them. Where De La Salle had to suffer most, his Institute is now most flourishing. Where he was most despised, his children are now most welcome. Where he sowed amidst crosses and thorns, the Brothers are gathering a most abundant harvest.

## CHAPTER XI

*After the ruin of the novitiate, De La Salle finds his Institute deeply troubled in that region; attributing all these calamities to his own sins, he retires to a solitary place to let the tempest blow over; he goes to Grenoble, where he lives unknown and in retirement; he visits the Grande Chartreuse; he suffers another severe attack of rheumatism, relieved only by another session of painful therapy; he visits a holy hermitess known for her sanctity.*

We know what Saint Paul's zeal made him undertake; we know what love for his fellow countrymen made him suffer. We know that the hardness of heart manifested by the Jews produced in his soul a wound which made him agonize constantly. To prevent their condemnation, he offered himself to God as a sacrifice, and for them he would have been willing to be anathema for the sake of Jesus Christ. There was nothing which he was not ready to endure and by which to be immolated for their salvation. He would have taken delight in the most cruel tortures if thereby he had been able to expiate their sins and with his blood to wash away their ingratitude and malice. The spectacle of their blindness was for him a cause of affliction that nothing could console.

Every day, Saint Paul wept fresh tears over his people. What plunged him into desolation was that he wept over them as Samuel bewailed Saul, with tears that were unavailing because the malice of his people had reached its summit. We also see in Saint Paul the same love and the same tenderness for the Gentiles whom he had won for Christ. He made their joys and their sorrows his own. He loved them as his children; he bore them all in his bosom, eager to place them

into the heart of Jesus. He wept with those who wept, rejoiced with those who rejoiced, and made himself all things to all men to win them all to the One who had redeemed them. He caressed and consoled them with a mother's affection and sympathized with all their woes.

This portrait does not represent the great Apostle alone. We might say that the same brush he used to paint his likeness can be utilized to depict all those who possess an ardent charity, those whom God has made the spiritual fathers of a religious family. In varying degrees according to the depth of their love, they all feel the loss of those whom they have begotten in the Spirit. This helps us to understand what De La Salle suffered when, without being able to stop them, he saw some of his Brothers fall into wayward behavior and take the path of perdition. That sort of martyrdom lasted as long as his life itself, ever since he gave up being a canon of Reims. For at all times, he saw some of his disciples turn aside from their first virtue, go backward, and give scandal.

As we have already mentioned, many of the Founder's disciples insulted him, revolted against him, betrayed him, maltreated him, or abandoned him. So often had he experienced such sorrow that when he withdrew from Paris, he felt he could not trust himself to any Brother. True, the great majority remained faithful and profoundly attached to him. Nevertheless, he had so often experienced ingratitude, perfidy, indiscretion, or wrongdoing on the part of those on whom he counted and whom he considered the pillars of his Congregation that he anticipated similar failures on the part of others and more of the same kind of sorrows for himself.

If all the founders of orders have had to deal with this sort of trials, I think I can truthfully say that not one of them ever had to endure crucifixions of this type so frequently and to such a degree as the pious Founder whose life we are relating. It seems that God himself took pleasure in destroying what the pious priest had built up and what God himself had inspired him to work at. Almost everything that the holy man undertook was opposed, contradicted, or destroyed. Either he could not make his plans succeed or he saw them succeed only to be destroyed. In spite of it all, De La Salle blessed God, like holy Job when his servants came to announce to him the loss of his goods, the collapse of the house where his children were, or some other catastrophe, but the Founder remained inconsolable over the loss of his sons. That cross was always the hardest for him to bear. As charity grew in him, it diminished the keenness of his other woes but only increased the agony of this one.

The only relief he could find in his sorrow was in blind submission to the unfathomable judgments of God. He took occasion of them to humble himself and to redouble his penances and acts of fervor. That is how he used the relaxation and lapses of his disciples: to further his own sanctification. Desolate at finding cockle growing in the part of the Master's field that he had sown, he redoubled his efforts at cultivating the other parts and making them bear a rich harvest. Ashamed at seeing sin in a Community where the dew of heaven fell in such abundance, he humbled himself before God and blamed either his own negligence or his bad example. Brokenhearted when he saw vices sprouting among the virtues of his disciples, he thought he could find in himself the cause of the disorder, and he made himself accountable to God for the faults of his inferiors. Considering himself as something despicable in the presence of the divine sanctity, he confessed himself a culpable and sinful man who drew down God's malediction on whatever he undertook.

#### De La Salle tormented by doubt

He began to ask himself whether his mission really was from God and whether a work that everybody opposed was not, in fact, the creation of his own spirit. Fasting and prayer were the two means he used, as he generally did, to discover God's will or to appease his anger. To assiduous prayer he joined strict penance and tried to take vengeance on his body for the faults of his disciples, for which he considered himself responsible. We have mentioned often enough already what a strong attraction he had for communing with God. Outside of prayer and meditation, nothing afforded him any enjoyment. In his sorrows and labors, that was where he turned for consolation and repose. In his doubts and difficulties, that was where he sought light and where he consulted the divine oracle.

But at the time of which we write, the holy exercise of prayer became for him a desert-like and arid land which offered him only thorns without flowers. His soul no longer enjoyed the divine sweetness; heaven held back its manna and no longer allowed it to fall before him. God spoke to him no more and left him in darkness. The Sun of Justice seemed veiled to his eyes, and his soul remained without energy or vigor. Such darkness was another reason for his desolation, harder to bear than the rest, as saintly souls well know. Tears can be sweet indeed when Jesus Christ deigns to dry them. Crosses are truly lightsome when he shows himself and helps us carry them. Abandonment by creatures is scarcely felt by a heart united with God,

one which enjoys the gift of his presence. When Jesus Christ consoles us, rejection and opposition by creatures are thorns with dulled points which we scarcely feel. But when God joins creatures in crucifying a soul, then it seems to be in a sort of hell or, more correctly, in a true purgatory. At such times, the more pure and ardent our love for God is, the sharper and more cruel the torment appears.

The servant of God found himself in that crucifying condition; he could address to God the words that the royal prophet places in the mouth of Christ on the cross, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Sometimes he might have added, *Will my sins separate me forever from you? When shall I be reconciled with you?* Like King Ezechias, he could exclaim, *My eyes are dimmed from lifting them on high and from offering you my longings and my distress.* With David he might have cried out, *I lift up mine eyes to the eternal hills where you have established your throne and whence I hope for succor. My soul sinks through weariness, but I await him who is my salvation. When, O Lord, will it please you to console me? My tears flow day and night while my enemies ask me, or rather I ask myself, Where is your God?* Thus the servant of God, afflicted by the Lord even more than by men, seemed to struggle with him and sought to force his goodness to yield to his tears and entreaties. No longer experiencing the consolations which he was accustomed to and which lightened his burdens, he blamed the loss on his sins and believed that they alone were the cause of the persecution which he endured on the part of both God and men.

Persuaded that this was so, the Founder resolved to withdraw for a time, to hide himself in some solitary place, in order, as he himself said, to bewail his sins and to throw himself, like a new Jonah, into the raging seas in order to calm the tempest. Abandoned by God and by men, he considered himself fit for nothing any more, and believing his presence to be the source of the opposition, he thought he might bring it to an end by departing. *My absence*, he said to himself, *may mollify those who are irritated against me and may suggest to them more favorable thoughts with regard to my dear children.*

### De La Salle retires to a hermitage

So De La Salle withdrew to a hermitage some ten or twelve leagues from the city. There, elevated above himself and all the world, he found himself like a traveler on some lofty peak where winds and storms no longer swirl. There he discovered a deep repose and sweet tranquillity. Occupied with God alone, he forgot everything else. If his

thoughts sometimes turned to his Brothers or his persecutors, it was to pray to God for them and to implore the Divine Majesty to uphold the former and to convert the latter. The injuries and outrages offered him had left in his soul no other traces but those that perfect charity inspires for enemies whom he loved in God and for God's sake. The saintly Founder had already begun to find his Mount Tabor in this desert, and like Peter, he exclaimed, *Lord, it is good to be here!* He enjoyed such peace and calm there that he would have wished to end his days in that spot, unknown to men, but he had not yet reached the end of his labors. God had others in store for him which would last until the end of his life.

### Rumors spread by his enemies

During this time, De La Salle's enemies spread the rumor that he had abandoned his Institute and that his departure had led to that of several of the other Brothers who had been the dupes as well as the imitators of his bad conduct. Nothing was more false. In truth, the saintly priest had several times been tempted to take up his residence in some parish, there to labor at the conversion of sinners, abandoning to the care of Providence a house from which his enemies wished to banish him by all means. Whether wiser counsel dissuaded him or whether a special light from on high showed him that such was not God's will for him, the fact is that the Founder's thoughts were not followed up and led to no action. He always kept the same tenderness for his children. If he stayed away from them for a time on this occasion, it was only through prudence. If he withdrew into solitude, it was not through caprice, ill humor, or melancholy but only to stay out of the sight of his adversaries and to procure some respite for the Brothers.

However, the rumor spread that De La Salle had broken down under misfortune and, despairing of being able to maintain his Institute, had abandoned it. This tale, although completely false, created a bad impression on people's minds. It tempted the Brothers, even the most resolute ones, to do as their Superior was supposed to have done. Those whom piety and a true vocation bound most closely to him were in consternation at this news. Confronted by such an unexpected turn of affairs, they were seized with extraordinary perplexity, not knowing what they should do. Fortunately, the falsity of this rumor was soon discovered by persons who were entirely trustworthy. They provided the facts to the credulous and pointed out that the people who had put out the report were given to barefaced lies and



were extraordinarily adept at deceiving the public. The slander was nothing but a stratagem invented to bring about the ruin of the Institute.

#### The Director of the abandoned novitiate seeks him out

After the pious Founder had spent some time at the hermitage we mentioned, he retired to another solitary place in the city of Mende. There, far from men's eyes, the servant of God believed that people were thinking of him as little as he thought of them. Because he forgot them, he was persuaded that they had forgotten him. He was not a little surprised, therefore, when the Brother Director to whom he had entrusted the new novitiate came to meet him in this most recent solitude. This Brother had left the novitiate because there was nothing more to do in it, as there were no more candidates. De La Salle's departure had hastened the failure of the novitiate. His enemies, as we mentioned, had induced all the young men whom they had invited to join the Institute to abandon their vocation. It was to report that information to his Superior and to try to comfort him in his dark hour that the good Brother had come, and also to ask De La Salle for a new assignment.

The news did not surprise the holy priest; he had been expecting it. What amazed him was that anyone should still think of him. Like a man convinced that his memory has faded from the earth, he replied, *God be blessed, my dear Brother. What leads you to address yourself to me? Do you not know how unfit I am to command others? Can you be ignorant of the fact that several Brothers seem not to want me any more, that these words of the Gospel seem to apply to me: "We will not have this man rule over us?" They are quite right, he added, for I am incapable of it.*

The Brother, confused, edified, and touched by these words, displayed on his countenance the sentiments of his soul. Letting his eyes speak for his lips, he told him by his tears everything that his heart wished to say. Indeed, that worthy Brother had always preserved for his father a great depth of tenderness and veneration. He had come, in his straightforward way, to ask for orders. He threw himself at his feet and said that he would not leave until he had secured his father's blessing along with a new assignment. That Brother is the one who succeeded Brother Barthélemy and who today governs the Institute as Superior.<sup>24</sup>

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24. Brother Timothée Samson-Bazin.

When he had arrived in Mende looking for De La Salle, the Brother thought he would find him at the Brothers' residence. The Founder was no longer there. The father had been turned out by his own children, who had let him know that they no longer recognized him. They also said as much to the Brother who had come in search of his Superior, telling him there was no room for him in the house. The rude welcome and the disdainful air that accompanied it seemed strange to the one who was thus addressed, but his surprise vanished and he consoled himself when he learned that De La Salle had been the first to be treated thus, that when he had come to his own Community and his own house, he had met with this new resemblance to Jesus Christ who *came unto his own, but his own received him not*. The Brother met the holy Founder in the lodgings which Mademoiselle de Saint-Denis had put at his disposal, and there he lived as in a real hermitage.

That pious lady belonged to an aristocratic family and possessed a considerable fortune which she devoted to providing for and giving a Christian education to a large number of girls born to heretical parents. Some other women had joined her in this charitable and useful work and formed a community called Ladies of the Union. When she heard of the insult that his own disciples had offered to the holy Founder, she was inspired to take advantage of his disgrace to further the well-being of her own soul and that of her community. Filled with esteem and respect for his virtue, she aspired to the honor and the merit of rendering to this servant of Jesus Christ the same attentions that Martha and Mary paid to Our Lord himself. She was happy to provide him with board and lodging and everything else he needed.

At the time, De La Salle was making a retreat with the Capuchin Fathers. He had asked them for hospitality when he had been turned away by the Brothers of Mende, and they had charitably welcomed him. Mademoiselle de Saint-Denis envied them, so to speak, the merit of harboring De La Salle; she offered to provide for his expenses entirely, an offer which he accepted. The pious lady, delighted at having this burning lamp so near to her, wanted nothing more than to profit by his wisdom. She received from him much excellent advice for the guidance of her new community. The time that she managed to spend with him seemed short to her, and like Magdalen at the Savior's feet, she never grew tired listening to his words. Her zeal even led her to do all she could to make De La Salle stay in Mende, hoping to attach him to her community for its benefit. With this in view, she offered to pay him a salary as long as he lived and, after he died, to provide for a third Brother to be added to the two already in the city,

all this if he consented to stay with her. The servant of God, however, would not listen to such a proposal. What she did obtain from him was a set of regulations for her community. She took all possible care to profit by his stay in Mende, which lasted about two months. When he left, she bought him a horse with which to continue his travels.

### De La Salle goes to Grenoble to lead a hidden life there

From Mende, De La Salle went to Grenoble, where he thought he had discovered a new heaven and a new earth in the oasis of profound peace he found there. The Brothers in Grenoble realized what a treasure they possessed and took advantage of his presence. Delighted at having with them the father who had suffered so much persecution in Provence on account of more than one of his sons, not to mention outsiders, they tried by their kindness and attention to make him forget the sorrows he had suffered on account of the ingrates.

To show his appreciation, the Founder resolved to remain with the Brothers of Grenoble as long as he could. Everything concurred in making him decide thus: the good dispositions of the Brothers, the peace which reigned among them, the solitude that enveloped their residence, and the hidden, retired life he led there. In fact, unknown to nearly everybody and not eager to form new acquaintances, he hoped that he could remain in Grenoble like an anchorite in the midst of the forest, devoting himself to continual prayer and penance.

His attraction for these two exercises made him select the most retired room on the top floor of the house. Far from men, but occupied with God while hidden from the world, he was truly in his element. Once again, he was able to yield to his inclination to devote himself almost without interruption to prayer and mortification. His prayer had no other measure than that of the day itself, no other interruption than that of changing from one exercise to another. He left the Brothers only to return to his contemplation. He did not break off his interior prayer except to pray with them. Ever punctual at all community observances, he was always the first one in the oratory and left it last of all. While he remained alone with God, nothing interfered with his communing with him. He lived without seeing or being seen by anybody; such was his desire.

### He visits the Grande Chartreuse

Since it was nearby, he did not want to miss the opportunity of visiting the celebrated monastery which a saint from the same diocese as

his had founded in a setting of ice and snow, in order to make himself and his companions invisible to men, dealing with whom is so dangerous even to the most solid virtue. Exchanging one solitude for another when he left his own retreat, he could not fail to derive profit for his soul by going to visit the Grande Chartreuse, about three leagues from Grenoble. He could not fail to show his devotion toward Saint Bruno, whom he had imitated so closely by giving up, like him, a canonry in the cathedral of Reims and everything else that would make the world smile on him, in order to embrace a life as austere as it was humiliating.

On reaching that frightful desert,<sup>25</sup> De La Salle felt himself closer to God when he saw the spot which the restorer of the solitary life in the West had sanctified by his tears and by the rigor of his penance. With admiration he beheld those steep cliffs where an almost perpetual winter prevails, for they are hidden most of the time beneath snow and ice, so that those who dwell there seem to be buried alive. Edified by the silence and recollection which reigned among those solitaries, he felt his attraction for a retired life grow stronger than ever, and he would have wished to end his days among them.

The holy Founder was received with great hospitality, but he was not shown those special signs of distinction which custom in that holy house decrees must be offered to a canon of Reims, because he let no one know that he had once been honored by that title, and he did not permit the Brother who accompanied him to mention it. Among all the devotional places in the holy monastery which De La Salle visited, his heart was most charmed by the hermitage of Saint Bruno. His own associations with that saint moved him, and if he had followed his inclination, he would have been the second canon of Reims who hid in the cleft of those rocks. He had to do violence to his piety in order to leave the place, but if he went away in body, his spirit remained behind.

The prior, struck by the modesty and remarkable piety which the holy man could not dissimulate, realized that he was entertaining a distinguished guest. Without paying attention to the appearance of a poor priest that his guest presented, he honored, without knowing him, the virtue which shone out from beneath his shabby clothes, and he did all he could to persuade him to stay longer with them. De La Salle and the monks edified one another. In spite of himself, the Founder's sanctity, veiled under the mantle of poverty, revealed itself

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25. Although isolated, the monastery is situated in the midst of some of the most impressive scenery in Europe.

during days devoted to holiness. Since those are most capable of discerning true virtue who practice it themselves, the saintly solitaries soon realized that the poor priest who was staying with them was a great servant of God. On his part, De La Salle took with him from this holy solitude all the edification he had come to seek. He left after three days, not having given to his devotion all the time he would have wished to allot to it but all that he could spare from the business of his Congregation. He returned to Grenoble filled with esteem and veneration for that celebrated monastery.

After he returned to the city, De La Salle once again took up his retired way of living, with new affection for it. His eagerness to serve God seemed like that of a fervent novice who, on leaving the world, is in a hurry to repair the sins of his past life and the time already lost. He gave himself to interior prayer like a man who finds there his very element and cannot live apart from it. When the bell called the Brothers to the oratory in the morning, they found him kneeling there in the attitude of someone who had spent a good part of the night in prayer or at least had been engaged in it for a long time.

During the day, if anybody wanted to find him, it was no use looking for him anywhere but in his little corner reserved for prayer, where three persons could not have managed to squeeze together, much less take a comfortable posture. He stayed there like the dove in the cleft of the rock, as Scripture says, and never complained except when he had to leave it. He put aside with ever-renewed determination whatever could distract him from God or shorten his communing with him. Thus he received very few visits. He had already been in Grenoble for some time before anyone knew it. He did not want to know or to be known, and he showed clearly that he could get along without others, so long as he could converse with God.

### De La Salle teaches class

However, he did not yield to his attraction for continual prayer to such an extent that he could not succeed in weaning himself away from the delicious milk that God provides to pure souls during this life when the opportunity for practicing other heroic virtues presented themselves. He was ready to leave the embraces of his heavenly spouse when God's will called him elsewhere.

By De La Salle's orders, the Brother in charge of the school in the Saint Laurent parish had undertaken a long journey for the interests of the Community. The holy Founder took his place and devoted himself

to teaching the children with that gentleness, patience, attention, and calm that all the Brothers should show when exercising their functions. Thus we might have beheld this doctor, this former canon of Reims, this founder of a Congregation, showing himself honored, taking pleasure, and considering it a duty to teach the children, to help the little ones learn their *abc's*, to encourage the older pupils to read and write, and to impart to all of them the rudiments of Christian doctrine. The way in which he fulfilled his duty showed clearly enough the joy he felt in fulfilling it and his assiduity in practicing the different virtues which at every moment are called for in a classroom. If the Founder showed favoritism for any students, it was toward the poorest ones. His concern for them was manifested by the trouble he took to help them make progress in reading and writing, for, as he said, those were skills they badly needed. That was how his humility succeeded in hiding his charity. His zeal in their regard made them his favorites during the catechism lessons which he taught them every day. Again, the students he singled out for special care were the most ignorant ones. Such children, usually abandoned to their natural stupidity or light-headedness by teachers lacking in zeal or charity, became the objects of his predilection and occasions for displaying his patience.

God blessed his efforts, showing that kind and patient zeal finally succeeds and can work miracles, even on the most limited intelligences. Ultimately, he managed to teach these children the truths of religion and cause them to advance in reading and writing. Here we have an outstanding example which should be imitated by all those in charge of youth. Unless we are on our guard, self-love can seek its satisfaction in a classroom as well as anywhere else, and then natural inclinations take over. We neglect the poorest, most stupid, and most ignorant pupils and those who are not naturally attractive, reserving our zeal for those who are agreeable to deal with.

Not wishing to shirk in any way the duties of a schoolmaster, our holy priest, as is the custom among the Brothers, brought his pupils, two by two, to church to hear Mass. Only after settling them in order did he ascend the altar to celebrate. And how did he do so? With modesty, interior spirit, and reverence which drew to him the eyes of all his little students and of all the people in the congregation. At such times, the holy man forfeited his attraction for the hidden life, for he showed everybody who he was. After seeing him when he brought the children to church or said Mass for them, people called him nothing but "that holy priest." Such was the name that his humble ministry merited for him in Grenoble.

When the Brother he was replacing came back, he and De La Salle resumed their usual occupations. The Brother once more took over his duties in the classroom while the servant of God returned to his life of retirement, prayer, and penance. The only distraction the Founder allowed himself was the composition of several works of piety for the instruction of youth and for the use of his disciples. He also revised his book, *The Duties of a Christian*, thus providing a third and more accurate edition.

While so usefully occupying his time in solitude, De La Salle learned, to his great joy, that God had finally brought back peace to his foundations in Provence and that everything was quiet there. Convinced that if he returned, his presence might arouse new trouble there—for his enemies were not dead, nor had they changed their attitude as far as he was concerned—he resolved to stay away. He limited his efforts with regard to Provence to prayer, letters, and dispatching special visitors to the Brothers. The city where he had been so badly treated had the first place in his prayers and sacrifices. The Brothers who had been so disturbed and exposed to seduction received his vigilant attention. He encouraged them and comforted the others by his letters. Finally, as he did not dare go to visit them, he entrusted that mission to certain of his disciples possessing superior capacities.

### An attack of rheumatism calls for a painful remedy

He had barely finished the re-editing of his works when he suffered another violent attack of rheumatism. His mortifications had brought it on, for he had paid no attention to the early symptoms when he felt them, and he had not mitigated in any way his usual manner of life. His failure to take proper care of himself proved costly. As the illness grew worse, his sufferings increased and soon became so unbearable that finally he had to yield and stay, first in his room and then in bed, where he was practically helpless, unable to move his limbs. Next, a fever broke out and caused concern for his life. Some pious persons who had come to know him when he was teaching school, fearing to lose him so soon after having known him so late, hastened to show him the anxiety they felt over his condition and spared nothing to secure some relief for him. His disciples, brokenhearted on seeing him in danger of death, surrounded his bed day and night and spared nothing which could help to preserve a life so necessary for them. They wept in his sight and sympathized with his pains with all the tenderness of devoted sons.

De La Salle tried to console them and to console himself with them, reminding them of the example of Job and repeating his words: *God be blessed! Let his will be done, not ours. If we receive health from him, it is only right that we should endure illness with constancy. Let his holy name be blessed eternally!* The first and last of these expressions, so deeply fixed in his soul, were constantly on his lips, and he left them to the Brothers as a sort of slogan. At this time, he should have been content, and his desire for suffering should have been satisfied, because his pains were sharp and piercing and extended all over his body. All the remedies used seemed only to aggravate the illness. To find a remedy which might work, several had to be tried out on him, and he had the merit of seeing his pains increased by the very means which were supposed at least to alleviate them.

There existed, in fact, one effective remedy which had already been tried on him with success in Paris. The cure was worse than the disease and was a true martyrdom, as the reader will remember from what was said of it before. Still, it was necessary for him to have recourse to it or else to remain in bed half crippled. The two alternatives were terrible enough; each made nature tremble. However, if he had listened to the flesh, he would have preferred to suffer the agonies of rheumatism for a long time rather than cure them through a therapy which itself was a terrible torture. That in itself was enough to make him choose the treatment. Moreover, he was anxious to recover his health, less for his own relief than for the sake of helping and consoling his Brothers, who were afflicted and worn out on account of him.

For the second time, therefore, he was stretched out on a bed of torture, made like a sort of gridiron, and the pain he endured caused him again to resemble Saint Lawrence. He faced the agony with such heroic patience that it seemed as though the spiritual fire which charity had enkindled in his soul was even more ardent than the flames which caused his flesh to suffer. On this second occasion, as on the first, the servant of God found healing in this treatment. In a short time, he was relieved and gradually regained his strength.

De La Salle's greatest regret during the first days of his convalescence, as during his illness, was that he could not stand at the altar to immolate the spotless Lamb, for he was far from sharing the attitude of those who seem to show their devotion by excommunicating themselves, as it were, depriving themselves of the Body of Christ and who, while making much ado about their priesthood, let this august dignity remain sterile in them. He had learned from the Apostle that the duty of a pontiff is to offer sacrifice to God, and so he made it a



duty for himself to celebrate Mass every day. His love for Jesus Christ and his desire to procure God's glory made this an obligation for him; nothing could prevent him from saying Mass when it was possible for him to do so.

This longing brought De La Salle to the altar as soon as he was able to walk again without falling. As he could not go very far, the Brothers assisted him by bringing him to the little chapel in the hospice which the Carthusians have at Grenoble. He said Mass there as soon as he was able to stand. During that illness which forced him to remain in bed almost without moving, to make up for the Divine Office which he could not recite and for all the other exercises of piety, he said the rosary several times each day and kept himself united with God through the use of continual short prayers.

### De La Salle goes to Parménie to make a retreat

Once he was well enough, De La Salle's first concern was to make a retreat in order to recoup his spiritual losses, as he called the omission of his interior prayer and of his other habitual exercises of devotion. As he was looking for an appropriate place to make this retreat, Abbé de Saléon urged him to spend a few days at a country place of his, called Parménie, some four leagues from Grenoble. The priest's kind offer was just what the holy Founder needed, and he accepted it. Because that solitary place favored recollection, several persons went there to make retreats.

Parménie is located on the crest of a high mountain which in the past was uninhabited. The place was frequented only by shepherds who brought their flocks there to graze and by the inhabitants of the village at the foot of the mountain, who every year went in procession to a cross erected on the mountaintop. That rustic spot, fairly well known today, owes its celebrity to a poor village girl, named Louise, who enjoyed a reputation for great holiness. Louise had come to live at the foot of the cross we just mentioned. Her attraction for solitude and the presence of the cross which she beheld made her sojourn on the mountain agreeable to her. Her deep piety and her profound innocence prepared her for receiving communications from God. She carefully avoided contacts with people and made a paradise of that place where she felt closer to heaven and where the cross of Jesus Christ served as her book. As God's grace grew in her soul, so did her desire to fix her abode permanently on the mountain, in order to be closer to God alone and to concern herself solely with matters spiritual and divine.

She obtained the consent of Abbé de Saléon, to whom the property belonged, and there, with the alms that she begged for, she had a small house built; her poverty made it impossible for her to pay for a larger construction. She lived in that dwelling like the courtesan Thais in her cell. But the more she wished to remain unknown, the more she became known. The name of the hermit shepherdess spread everywhere, and she soon became famous. People came to the mountain to see her in order to be edified. Several persons, touched by the grace of God, remained with her to spend a few days in retreat. Soon the house, which was too big for her, became too small for those who came to consult her or to profit by her instructions and example. Seeing this multitude of people who visited her hermitage, she felt herself inspired to build new lodgings, one for men and the other for women. The project called for money. She sought it in the same way she had found the earlier sums, by appealing to the liberality of persons interested in works of piety. With the funds which humility had begged for and which charity donated, she added a small chapel to the two wings of the buildings she was constructing.

However, if what people say is true, she had to suffer more than the shame of begging while she was gathering the money she needed to build. Apparently, when she was collecting alms in the diocese of Lyon, she was arrested and put into prison by the orders of the archbishop. The humiliation only heightened her zeal for the execution of her project instead of extinguishing it. She even comforted the pious persons who bewailed her arrest by assuring them that the one who had her locked up would soon set her free again. It happened just as she had predicted. Even more, the archbishop, to make amends somewhat for the stain he had inflicted on her reputation by having her put in jail, gave her a considerable sum to help build the church.

This new *Généviève* became the oracle of the whole countryside. People came from all over to consult her. Even the Lord's ministers themselves did not disdain to ask her for enlightenment and did not feel that they were demeaning themselves by seeking advice from this unlettered woman whom everybody considered a prodigy of holiness. Among the gifts with which heaven favored her, the discernment of spirits and knowledge of the future were the most remarkable.

#### Sister Louise and De La Salle in mutual consultation

When De La Salle was at *Parménie*, so near to this celebrated Sister Louise of whom everybody spoke, he did not fail to make use of the

opportunity of seeking edification from her presence. He went to visit her and conversed with her for a long time, and he did so on several occasions. He recognized the extraordinary graces that God had been pleased to impart to the soul of this humble village woman, and he became, like so many others, her panegyrist. In her turn, she discovered in the soul of this priest who spoke to her the eminent perfection that the cloud of slander and defamation kept hidden from the world. She felt herself filled with respect and confidence in his regard.

Such men being rare on this earth, Sister Louise resolved to profit by De La Salle's presence to open her heart to him, to consult him, and to ask his advice. She did so with all the candor and simplicity of a humble soul that seeks God and hides nothing. In the account of her life which she gave to the holy priest, she mentioned in detail the struggles she had to undergo in her solitude and the vexations of the demons. She remarked that since she had built the two retreat houses, Satan's attacks had become more violent and more frequent. The servant of God gave her on this point the counsels that the Spirit of God inspired him with. They seemed to satisfy her very much.

In his turn, the Founder wished to profit by the insights of this new Deborah. He told her about his past and present sufferings and the opposition he had encountered ever since he had undertaken to establish the Christian Schools. Louise found it all very surprising. She could not get over the fact that such a worthy enterprise, so useful and so necessary, could have met with such opposition in the midst of a Christian country. As though by God's inspiration, she told De La Salle in that connection that he was not yet finished with his labors, that he would have to suffer still more, but also that a crown was in store for his patience. The holy priest admitted to her that he ardently longed to spend the rest of his days in solitude, which attracted him strongly, in order not to have to think of anything except God and himself. *Such is not God's will*, replied Louise. *You must not abandon the family that God has made you the father of. Labor is your lot; you must persevere in it to the end of your days, combining as you have done heretofore the life of Magdalen with that of Martha.*

In this answer, De La Salle recognized the order of God. He admired the wisdom of Providence, which had brought him from one of the extremities of the kingdom to hear this saintly woman interpret for him the divine will. Thus those two lights illuminated each other, and their mouths were used by God to impart his commands to each other. Their holy conversation seemed too short to both of them when it came to a close at the end of the two-week retreat which the servant of God had resolved to make. De La Salle and Sister Louise said

good-bye with mutual joy over having met one another but with regret over the prospect of never seeing each other again.

It is hard to say which of the two was the more highly edified and pleased. Louise rejoiced because she had seen a saint on this earth, sent to her by God in her place of retirement. She could not sufficiently bless the divine wisdom which had brought to her on the top of her mountain the director she had needed, so enlightened in God's ways. For his part, the holy Founder did not admire any less the dispositions of Divine Providence which through unerring paths unknown to him had brought him from Paris to a mountain at the other end of France to present him to this village woman who instructed him and then, like a humble disciple, asked of him lessons in perfection.

Their heavenly adventure was considered by both as among the greatest graces God ever gave them. They never forgot it, and they thanked him for it every day. Louise, who did not know how to read, wanted to have copies of the writings of the servant of God, even though she could not make use of them, and he could not refuse her request. She looked upon the books as a souvenir of the opportunity God had given her of seeing him, as a deposit which she preserved like a relic in her solitude. On his side, as long as he lived, De La Salle wished to profit by the vessel of election he had found hidden in the wilderness. From time to time, he wrote to her amidst his greatest difficulties in order to obtain light in his doubts.

#### The benefit De La Salle derived from his visit

On his return to Grenoble, the servant of God gave proof of the benefits he had reaped from his contacts with an earthly angel hidden under the weakness of the female sex. His words were fiery, and his soul seemed entirely rejuvenated. His fervor was more obvious, while his ardor for perfection knew no further difficulties. He was like Moses descending from the mountain; he showed no signs of mere human nature in himself but rather seemed to have been deified after his intimate contacts with God and the conversations with his servant.

The Brothers who had the happiness of living with the Founder looked upon him with renewed admiration and listened to him with renewed respect. He rewarded their hospitality by the priceless lessons he gave them on perfection, the paths leading to it, the courage it calls for, the renovation of spirit it demands, the importance of striving for it when they are yet young, and the constancy needed in persevering in the practice of virtue.

His disciples profited by the instructions and examples given them by their father and hastened after him in the way to heaven. They drank deeply of the pure water which springs forth unto eternal life, which he had brought to them with such abundance from Parménie, so that they became truly spiritual men through his company. The master could enjoy no greater consolation than that of seeing his disciples making progress in virtue.

He was experiencing this solace when a new cause of trouble came to interfere with it. He was still living with the Brothers in Grenoble when the Constitution *Unigenitus* was received in France and officially accepted. It was published in Grenoble, as in almost all the other dioceses of the kingdom, in the year 1714 by M. Ennemond Alleman de Montmartin, who later changed his attitude, however, and issued a second pastoral letter contrary to the first one. His second letter was not welcomed in such a Catholic diocese, except by those who had inspired it.

### De La Salle declares himself in favor of the papal Bull

De La Salle had always shown great reserve with regard to the questions involved. His principle was to announce his faith by his works rather than by his words. Now, however, he felt that it was time to speak up, since people everywhere were taking it upon themselves to give opinions for or against the papal decree. To speak up with more certainty and more effect, De La Salle waited until the celebrated Bull of Clement XI, which condemned the 101 propositions taken from the book, *Moral Reflections on the New Testament*, had been duly and properly promulgated. Then he made it a matter of conscience for himself to state his position and to confess outwardly the inner sentiments of his heart, without fearing the reprisals of the powerful party which had caused him so much harassment in Provence.

De La Salle would have preferred to remain silent, if the circumstances of the times had allowed him to do so, because he was a great lover of peace. On the one hand, he knew that the progress of false doctrines is rarely arrested by controversy and that calumny and persecution would be the reward of those who opposed them. On the other hand, if he had failed to take sides resolutely and publicly with the adherents to the Constitution, such reticence might have made his position appear ambiguous in a matter of doctrine or placed him among those who tolerated or were indifferent to error. He spoke out, and he did so with zeal. His zeal was enlightened, wise, and controlled by the motions of the Holy Spirit. He read the celebrated Bull

to his disciples along with the pastoral instruction of the clergy. He explained all of the 101 propositions, made their meaning clear, showed the hidden or obvious poison that they contained, and illustrated the error and danger they involved.

His zeal would have been only half satisfied if he had limited it to his disciples alone. At a time when people from every walk in life, including women, were taking the liberty of dogmatizing and speaking against the Holy See and the bishops, he thought that as a priest and doctor in theology, he was obliged to take up the cudgels to defend the anointed of the Lord and the doctrines of the Church. The holiness of his life afforded him an advantage that not everyone had in dealing with error. The uprightness of his conduct, the purity of his morals, and the austerity of his penance gave him the right to unmask the pharisaism of Quesnel's partisans and to put to shame those who tried to assume the exterior appearance of virtue.

Without insisting as much as they on the discipline of the early centuries and without trying to pose as a great reformer or restorer of the pristine spirit of penance, De La Salle illustrated both in his person, and he renewed the example of the early Christians. Still, he said nothing bitter or offensive against the enemies of the Constitution. Without passion or false zeal, he spared their persons while combating their opinions, and by his conduct, he showed that it is in deed, not merely in word, that we must give praise to charity. Yet he was very careful to warn people against them and their books. He forbade those who consulted him to have anything to do with such men or to read their works, and without saying anything bad about these new enemies of the Church, he made people fear to be led astray by them.

The servant of God was rewarded as the saints usually are in this world. I mean that he was assailed by calumny and persecution. The friends of Quesnel, who speak and write so feelingly about charity, invented and spread lies about him in order to discredit him. It is well known what they were capable of saying about a resolute partisan of the Constitution, so we need not go into details here.

They did not succeed, however, in defaming the servant of God in Grenoble. His virtue was too well known in that city, and all the shadows that the Quesnelites tried to project onto it only served to bring it out in bolder relief. On that occasion, the party went down to defeat. Even those who were the least passionately involved in the dispute judged rightly that truth could not be on the side where there was no charity and that a teaching opposed by such a great servant of God should be rejected.

## CHAPTER XII

*What was going on in France during the absence  
of De La Salle.*

If we were permitted to judge of the actions of the saints, who conform to principles so markedly different from those of other people and who, often enough, act outside the ordinary rules of human prudence because they are following the motions of the Holy Spirit, we might be tempted to condemn the precipitate and secret flight of De La Salle to Provence. It occasioned great turmoil in his Institute and came near bringing about its ruin. It would seem, in fact, that before taking this resolution or before leaving Paris—or at least after his arrival in Provence—the holy Founder should have informed the Brothers, let them know where they could write to him, answered them, directed them by letters from his place of retirement, and, in short, appointed the Brother whom he felt best qualified to take his place in Paris, one whom the others would then have honored as their Superior in his absence.

The servant of God did none of these things. He went into hiding in the most distant provinces and did not want to let anyone know where he was going. He remained there unknown and did not reply to the letters he received from the Brothers. He did not even designate anyone to replace him during his absence. Finally, as far as the Brothers in France<sup>26</sup> were concerned, he showed no sign of life or movement, as though he were actually dead. No doubt, a man as wise and enlightened as he must have had serious reasons for acting this way, but it is impossible for us to guess what these reasons were.

Did he want to accustom the Brothers to get along without him and thus oblige them finally to choose one of their number for their Superior, a thing they had never wanted to do while he was among them? Perhaps he carried humility and the low sentiments he entertained of himself to the point of considering himself as a source of malediction and the cause of the troubles which constantly beset the Congregation. Perhaps he thought that some of his own disciples had gone over to his enemies and that he could no longer trust anyone. Perhaps, finally, he wished to persuade his adversaries that he no longer intervened in the government of his Institute, hoping thereby to disarm their ill will.

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26. France, that is, the northern provinces around Paris.

## Disorder that results from De La Salle's long absence

Whatever may be the truth about this matter, we are reduced to mere conjecture, since De La Salle never wished to give any explanations on this score, although he was frequently asked to do so. Yet his precipitate and hidden flight gave rise to several difficulties which followed. The first of these was that even though there did not arise among the Brothers any dispute such as had arisen among the Apostles as to which of them was the greatest, there was uncertainty as to whom the Brothers should obey. De La Salle not having made this clear, there was no certain rule to follow on this point. The second disorder, which followed on the first, was that in the absence of any clearly recognized authority, a good many faults remained uncorrected, and thus the indocile remained unpunished. A third difficulty was that a few Brothers, weak in virtue and wavering in their vocation, considered their state as uncertain and unstable and left it. Others, suspecting that the holy Founder himself had abandoned the Institute, felt that they had a right to imitate his example. A fourth source of trouble was even more dangerous, for it gave rise to another form of government which De La Salle's rival, of whom we have so often spoken, finally managed to introduce into the Society.

The Institute seemed mortally stricken. Undermined to its foundations, it was threatened with collapse. Its ruin had indeed begun, and it is a sort of miracle that it eventually managed to rise again with brighter prospects and greater success than ever. Nothing could prove more clearly that it had God for its true author and that the former canon of Reims had merely been God's minister. If the Institute had been De La Salle's work, it would have passed into oblivion, and people would scarcely know that there had ever existed a Community called the Brothers of the Christian Schools. But because God was its real Founder, it could not be destroyed, either by men or by the devil. If they succeeded in altering its spirit and government for a time, that was only in order to show forth the divine power that re-established it after its eclipse and brought it forth rejuvenated from its tomb.

At the death of Jesus Christ, the Synagogue exulted and thought that the infant Church would be buried with him in his sepulchre. God permitted that mistake in order to give back a new life to the members, as well as to their head, and to show that he holds the keys to death and to life. Christ's resurrection was the miracle which served as the proof of all the others, for that miracle, the most stupendous of all, is the invincible proof of his divinity, of the truth of his religion, and of his Gospel. From his death itself, Jesus Christ drew forth our



life and his glory. It is more glorious for him to have died and to have risen again than if he had ascended to heaven without experiencing death.

May I be permitted to apply this reflection to our present subject? If the Institute had always remained flourishing under the eyes and leadership of its father, in spite of all the storms that shook it, the finger of God would be quite evident, and no one could reasonably deny that the Holy Spirit was the guide of a religious family that flourished amidst persecutions. The Founder himself, seeing his children increase and greeted by the blessings of men for their outstanding reputation for holiness, would have enjoyed the consolation given to nearly all the founders of religious orders. Instead, what was particular to him is that not long before his death, he saw his Institute in turmoil, and shortly after his death—no doubt thanks to his prayers—he could see it, from heaven, restored and more flourishing than ever. To whom can we attribute this sort of resurrection, if not to him who *alone does mighty deeds*, as the Prophet says, to him who mortifies and who gives life, to him who draws good from evil and blessings from losses?

As we shall see, De La Salle witnessed before his death a new form of government imposed on his Community which, naturally speaking, should have caused its ruin, but he also had the consolation of seeing the end of such an innovation. The great series of persecutions which at one time seemed to annihilate his Congregation only served to purge it of the unworthy members it contained and to cause it to enter at last upon a stable and flourishing state.

### Indecision of the Brothers as to what should be done

While De La Salle was busy only with his own sanctification in the hidden existence he led far from Paris, the Brothers in the capital and those in the neighboring schools suffered much from his prolonged absence. They did not know what had become of him, and all the efforts they made to find out remained unavailing. The more they were attached to their vocation and to his person, the more their chagrin grew day by day. Time, which usually heals all things, could not comfort them. Sometimes hoping to see him again, sometimes fearing to have lost him, they were sad and desolate. The Brothers did not know the reason for the Founder's silence and seeming indifference, so that he appeared to have forgotten his sons whom he so greatly loved. Most of the Brothers, besides being uneasy over his fate, were also deeply perplexed over their own. After doing all they could to

discover where he was hiding, they almost despaired of finding him again. Some thought he was dead; others imagined that he had abandoned the Institute. Each advanced his own arguments, differing from those of the others, and some were becoming unsettled in their vocation. All felt themselves hesitant and uncertain.

Their quandary was, at first, to know whether they should wait any longer before adopting some solution or whether they should let the Institute pass through a sort of interregnum until some news came about him. In the meantime, each Director of a house would govern it as he saw fit. But as time went by and no word came from De La Salle, uncertainty also grew about what was to be done. Whom should they obey? Who should be recognized as the Superior? De La Salle had not designated anyone, nor had the body of the Society chosen anyone. Had the time come to select someone? How could this election be carried out?

A body cannot subsist without a head; the members need a leader to direct them and communicate his influence to them. If De La Salle was still alive, nobody wanted any other Superior. If he was dead, then it was necessary to choose another Superior. But was he really dead, or was he still living? Nobody knew. Would he ever come back to the Brothers, or was he lost to them definitively? Here again, there was nothing but uncertainty. If he were to come back some day, would it not be offering him an injury and seeming to wish to replace him if they named another Superior? But if they were never to see him again, could they any longer delay in choosing another capable of succeeding him? Suppose that an election was needed: when, where, and how could it be held? Time, place, and manner all presented difficulties. The only practical time would be during the summer holidays; any other time would cause too much disruption in the houses and schools. Where could the Brothers meet? That, too, was a knotty question. In Paris, the Brothers still had many enemies, and they realized that De La Salle's rival would not fail to interfere in all their deliberations and would try secretly to control the assembly. Finally, who should convoke this meeting and decide where to hold it?

Amidst so many perplexities, the Brothers were like sheep without a shepherd, without a guide or counselor, like an orphaned family that has just lost its father. Thus, nothing was done. Inaction and consternation reigned. The Brothers looked at each other and did not know what to say. They could not reassure each other nor come to any definite conclusions. Each one expected someone else to take the lead and give an order about what should be done. To whom should they address the account of their conduct which the Rule prescribed

every two months, an essential practice for the good of the Institute? Who should take the responsibility of replying to their letters? Who should arrange for new schools, change the Brothers from one place to another, correct the indocile, admit postulants, send away those who were unfit? Who should speak and act in all those matters? On all such points, nothing definite could be decided.

### Brother Barthélemy gradually fills the role of Superior

Eventually, the need to do something was brought home to the Brother who was at the head of those in Paris and who had been put in charge of the novitiate by De La Salle himself. He was Brother Barthélemy, a man of mild, docile, and discreet character. Everything would have remained in the same confused state if he had not acted. When people came asking for De La Salle, Brother Barthélemy was the one who had to deal with them. A number of letters addressed to the Founder required prompt answers; someone had to give them. Thus, little by little and without set purpose, he found himself handling the Brothers' affairs and being considered as the Superior of the Brothers in De La Salle's absence, not through a formal election but by tacit consent and unspoken approval.

Since De La Salle had put Brother Barthélemy in charge of the novitiate, it was presumed that he would have appointed him to take his place if he had thought such a measure necessary. Moreover, if the Brothers had met to elect someone, he would certainly have been their choice. He was virtuous, loved by all, and highly regarded, and as he was such a peaceable man, it was felt that his government would be peaceable also. In this they were not mistaken. In those very difficult times, he adopted the wisest measures to insure that De La Salle's absence would not cause the Institute the harm that could have been feared. If he was not able to avoid all harm, he did prevent most of it. His conduct was such that the inconveniences that did occur were easy to rectify after the holy Founder's return and even after his death. Nevertheless, he met with some opposition at first from certain unruly members who were not displeased at living without any Superior and who tried to disguise their disobedience under the pretext that they did not wish to recognize any Superior other than De La Salle or that the Brother who was acting in his place had neither been designated by him nor elected in a regular assembly.

Brother Barthélemy did not take umbrage at their opposition. He agreed that their hesitation in recognizing him in the role of Superior was well founded and that it was indeed possible to question his right

to the title as long as no one knew for sure whether De La Salle was alive or as long as he himself had not been given this position by a canonical election. Thus, he was governing more like an elder brother who during his father's absence was taking care of the family rather than like a true Superior. This wise, humble, and moderate attitude won him all hearts and gave him full authority. Two or three rebels were the only ones who refused to submit to him. The humble Brother endured them patiently, but as their disobedience led to disorderly conduct on their part, the principal Brothers resolved to make an example of them so that the scandal might not go any further. They had a meeting, therefore, and dismissed those proud religious, who later on might have spread to others the mortal poison of their independent spirit and thus occasioned even greater disorders.

#### Brother Barthélemy errs by being too accommodating

The only mistake Brother Barthélemy made, without realizing it, was to listen to the pernicious advice given him by De La Salle's great rival. That man allowed him to take the place of the absent Superior without offering any opposition. He himself would have chosen Brother Barthélemy as Superior, if he had the right to appoint anyone, for he felt that since this virtuous disciple lacked the insight, firmness, and strength of mind of the Founder, he would be able to use him for his own purposes and bring him around to what he desired. Here are the means he took to succeed in his plan.

The conniver stayed in the background and did not appear openly. If he spoke, it was through the lips of another. When he acted, it was by another's hand. I mean that he operated through a cleric entirely devoted to him who lent himself to whatever his master wished. This tool, who allowed himself to be manipulated in all things by his master, tried in every way possible to get Brother Barthélemy to consent to something that De La Salle—who saw through him more clearly—would never have been willing to accept. It was to drop from the Rule of the Institute a number of customs and practices and to give it a new form of government, along with new regulations and new superiors.

The agent that the enemy made use of<sup>27</sup> was just the sort of individual he needed for the role. He was an upright man but not too clever; he had much virtue but little sense. He showed great zeal for

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27. This priest was M. de Brou, not a Sulpician but connected with that community and especially with De La Chétardie.

what was good, but he did not understand what was best for a community. In other words, he was a man with considerable influence, thanks to his birth and family connections, but though a worthy ecclesiastic, he was so completely won over to the other's ideas that he could see only through the eyes of the other and acted only on his advice. The rival knew that his man was ready to move in whatever direction he wanted him to, and he intended to use him to control the Brothers. In this he succeeded, because by means of the virtuous ecclesiastic, he got Brother Barthélemy to go along with his system.

### The rival of De La Salle plans to change the Institute

The main points of the proposed organization were these: 1) the Brothers should have superiors from outside the Community, men capable of directing them something like the external superiors who direct nuns; 2) the house in Paris should form a separate entity and should depend entirely on the ecclesiastical superior; 3) the novitiate should be suppressed as a useless burden; it cost too much to educate and feed all the novices; moreover, there was no need for so many in Paris, since the Brothers should remain fixed in the schools where they taught, as will be explained below; 4) the Brothers should stay in one place and not be changed from house to house; 5) to fill the gaps made by those who died or left or who had to be dismissed for misconduct, it was proposed to have one, two, or three novices, more or less, in each house, according to its revenues and its personnel needs; 6) finally, a new form of government was to be set up, but about this we have no definite information.

Such a system, as is evident and as will be shown in a moment, would have turned the Institute topsy-turvy, along with all its laws and its customs. It would have obliterated the name of De La Salle. In ten years' time, it would have thoroughly destroyed all he had worked for: so thoroughly, in fact, that no one would have known why the former canon of Reims had left his native city, his family, his canonry, and all his goods nor what he had accomplished in the Church. In short, the scheme tended to make of the Brothers' Society a series of little splinter groups, lacking subjection to a common chief and depending only on the local superiors, something like the many communities of schoolmistresses which are being multiplied in France today and which each bishop establishes or allows to be established for his particular diocese.

But why this insistence on breaking up the Congregation of the Brothers into houses unconnected with each other and subordinated

to no central authority? Would it not have been more natural and more flattering to pride to make himself the head of the whole Society rather than of the Paris group alone? No doubt, the former solution would have been more flattering to self-love, but it was not possible. The Founder's rival could perhaps captivate and keep dependent on himself the Brothers in Paris; he had at his disposal the means necessary to do so. But his power did not extend any farther. He knew that the other Brothers would not have been willing to acknowledge him as their Superior or to obey him. In addition, if he had undertaken to govern all the Brothers, he would have had to assume the responsibility of providing for them, something he was not prepared to undertake; the Brothers often had to suffer privations during times of public calamities. Finally, he would have had to keep up the novitiate De La Salle had started. That would require a good deal of money, too, and he did not venture to underwrite such a heavy expense. So, out of necessity, he had to limit himself to the scheme outlined above.

To get Brother Barthélemy to agree to the plan, De La Salle's rival took the quickest way. He had the Brothers' salaries cut off, and they had to go on starvation rations and were in need of everything. When they went to collect the money due them or even to ask for charity, they were told to apply to Monsieur . . . , a very religious and generous priest, who would surely come to their help. They were also advised to show much confidence in him, even to choose him for their Superior. They were assured that they would find in him a firm resource in all their needs and that he was another De La Salle. The Brothers, however, were in no hurry to follow his advice. They were wary and rightly so. They had not lost hope of seeing their father again, and they feared that if he returned and found his place occupied by some stranger, he might decide to give up the whole matter permanently.

However, the virtuous ecclesiastic whom we have just mentioned was an outstanding man in many ways. He sought only what was good, even when he let himself be manipulated by De La Salle's enemy. He often came to visit the Brothers in his role as their ecclesiastical superior. He called himself such, hoping that the Brothers would eventually give him the position, and he urged them to do so. This cleric said that he wanted to be the Brothers' protector, benefactor, and father. He promised to use his influence in their favor and to bestow on them his services and his liberalities. They could have had all his help, in fact, if they had been willing to put him in De La Salle's place; by reserving to the Brothers the liberal alms he bestowed in

other directions, he would have made them quite rich. By dint of the favors and benefactions which he gave the Brothers when they were in need, he accustomed them to allowing him the title which he had first assumed by his own accord—in other words, to calling him their Superior, since the term pleased him so much.

### A clerical Superior with no election by the Brothers

It was not merely the name, however, but the reality and the rights attached to the position that he was really after. He wanted the Brothers to call him their Superior and to act toward him with the spirit of dependence that becomes inferiors. That was more difficult for him to obtain. After all, words are cheap, and nobody ever went bankrupt by making compliments. What this ecclesiastic wanted from the Brothers was not an empty title but real jurisdiction and complete authority. Fully aware of the situation of the Brothers, in order to make his election more rapid and certain, he decided to suspend all his alms in their favor and to have the Brothers' salaries held back. He succeeded in making the Brothers suffer a great deal and undergo a veritable famine, but he did not succeed in getting them to choose him as Superior in due form. In the meantime, he tried to exercise authority which had not yet been given him. He would not allow Brother Barthélemy to admit postulants without his permission, and he took it upon himself to send candidates away; according to the system he wanted to introduce, only three or four novices were to be kept. That was an infallible way to destroy the Institute, because if the measure had been kept in effect for any length of time, the Institute would not have been able to survive.

That was the situation De La Salle found when he finally returned from Provence; there were then only three or four young men in the novitiate. Brother Barthélemy no longer counted. He had let himself be captivated and dominated by the person of whom we speak. If he had wanted to take in a larger number of novices, he could not have done so, because he had been deprived of the means of providing for them. He did not, like De La Salle, possess the secret of finding resources in the treasury of our heavenly Father.

That was the total of what De La Salle's rival had then been able to accomplish through the instrumentality of his agent. In spite of his efforts, the pseudo-superior made no headway in the area where he really wanted to dictate. Some of the older Brothers, who loved Brother Barthélemy, resisted vigorously and encouraged each other not to give in. They were willing to give the title of Superior to the man who

seemed so eager to have it and who bestowed it upon himself, but the title, without the corresponding authority, did not satisfy him. The cleric even took occasion of their calling him such to try to extract real authority from the Brothers. *You call me your Superior*, he told them one day, *but you should show concretely that I am really such*. And for fear that the Brothers might seem to misunderstand his words, he added *that he wanted a formal statement drawn up which, after being signed by the Brothers, would be included in the house register*.

That was an important point which would affect the very essence of the Institute. Foreseeing that some such circumstance might arise, De La Salle had bound the Brothers, as we related above, to decide that they would elect as Superior no one but one of themselves after his death. In doing so, what he had in mind when he wished to give up his position as Superior was to oblige the Brothers to choose someone from among their ranks to succeed him. The point seemed so essential to De La Salle that he wished to see it put into effect while he still lived, so that once he was dead, there might not be any difficulty about it. It was, therefore, very important that the Brothers not yield to the proposal made by their protector. We must blame the lack of firmness displayed by Brother Barthélemy in agreeing to it. He did what was asked of him out of complaisance. After De La Salle returned, however, the page was torn out of the register in order to do away with the record of the mistake.

Brother Barthélemy is urged to introduce the new government

Having led the Brothers to the first stage, the ecclesiastic wanted to push them even farther so as to carry out his plan. He did not explain himself, and he spoke of his scheme only in monosyllables. He wished to prepare their minds and to win them over to his project before explaining it clearly. He made great promises. He offered to put them in possession of an endowed house. But he always added a *but*, a condition which he implied without stating it plainly.

Finally, whether he thought that his time had come or whether he wished to feel out their reactions, on one occasion he proposed the new form of government. One of the articles stated that each house of the Institute would train its own candidates. A second specified that the relationships between the houses would be discontinued. A third was the conclusion of the previous one, namely, that the house in Paris would be a unit unto itself. He was not listened to. To avoid an argument, the Brothers respectfully answered that before deciding, they needed to get the opinions and consent of the Brothers in the



provinces. The good Brothers congratulated themselves on having parried the thrust. They thought they had won, but they were deceived by the simplicity or the exaggerated complaisance of Brother Barthélemy, who did not see the consequences of the step he was being asked to take.

The person of whom we are speaking was himself an upright man who meant no evil, but the one who was manipulating him and whom he served so well was a crafty person who knew how to open doors that had been shut in his face. His suggestion was to get Brother Barthélemy to write to the Directors of the various houses, asking them to look for an outside superior capable of directing them and of taking care of their affairs. If Brother Barthélemy were to fall into this trap, the cunning Achitophel would have managed to make acceptable in another way the proposals that had been rejected, and in spite of the Brothers' refusal, he would have succeeded in introducing a new type of government, thus succeeding in his designs.

To fool Brother Barthélemy about the essential matter, to get him not only to subscribe to it himself but even to promote its execution and to be the one to bring it about, he was told how much he was to be pitied for being in charge of a work so difficult to direct that he was laden with a weight which De La Salle himself had not been able to bear and which he had finally got rid of; that this responsibility was heavier for him than for the Founder, since he did not have his character, authority, or experience and did not find among the Brothers the same affection, docility, and trust.

He was told that if he did not wish to be crushed by the burden that had overwhelmed De La Salle himself, he needed to secure the backing of the authority of a number of clergymen, persons of influence in the places where the Brothers were established, and to turn over to outside superiors the greater part of his responsibilities; that such superiors, thanks to their prestige, would be able to maintain regularity among the Brothers, reduce the indocile to obedience, and bring back to the path of duty those who were inclined to take too much liberty; that he would never manage without their help to control men who could with impunity throw off the yoke of obedience.

Although specious, the advice seemed wise to Brother Barthélemy, who did not foresee its consequences. He did not even dream of suspecting that any motive other than charity had inspired it. He thanked those who thus counseled him and asked them how he could put their suggestions into effect. The means for doing so were at hand. Brother Barthélemy had reached the point where they wanted him, and only one further step was needed. It was not difficult.

He was told that he should write to all the houses of the Institute and persuade the Brothers to select for themselves an outside superior who would be able to govern and uphold them during the absence of De La Salle, of whom nothing had been heard for so long. At the same time, Brother Barthélemy was promised that his letters would be endorsed by others having greater weight. In fact, Brother Barthélemy's letters were accompanied by those from a highly regarded abbé, which gave them greater efficacy.

Soon De La Salle had, on every side, a multitude of vicars to function in the role of superior. Instead of one Superior, the Institute had as many superiors as there were distinct establishments. Thus, the system so long planned by the secret rival of De La Salle, which he had not previously succeeded in implementing, finally was a *fait accompli*. He had labored during ten years to have it accepted, but each time he had tried to impose it, he had met with confusion. Now the time was ripe to put his plan into effect, and he did not fail to seize it. The lengthy absence of the holy Founder had encouraged his adversary to set his project in motion again and to get it accepted. It had been proposed earlier to the Brothers and immediately rejected by them, but guile succeeded where authority had failed. The scheme was presented under a disguised form; it was given a different appearance. Under a deceitful mask, it was agreed to, at least by the one who was acting as Superior.

That was as far as the adversary of the holy Founder was able to go, but no farther. At that point, when the Institute should have been fragmented, naturally speaking, it was the new system that failed and came to nothing. All the storms of previous persecutions, like the waves of a tumultuous sea, soon died down and were quelled. To put the virtue of his servant to a final test, God willed to give to his enemy what looked like complete victory and to De La Salle the mortification of witnessing what looked like the certain and imminent ruin of his Institute when the new form of government was introduced.

That crisis was probably the bitterest pill that the servant of God ever had to swallow in all his life. But he had to endure only the bitterness, and he thereby won the merit of his patience and submission to God's orders. After testing this new Job in all manner of ways—by the loss of his goods and of his spiritual children, by infirmities and painful illnesses, by outrages and continual persecution, and at last by the sorrow of seeing his life work on the brink of destruction—the Almighty gave him back a new family, re-established his Institute, made it more flourishing than ever, and in the end, rendered it secure and unshakable.

For the God who had permitted the evil to occur had also prepared the remedy for it. He inspired the new superiors with the right attitude they needed to adopt, in the absence of De La Salle, with regard to his Institute. They limited themselves to declaring that they were its protectors and guardians, while leaving to the Directors of the houses and the Brother who acted as Superior all their rights. They upheld their authority, helped to put superiors and inferiors into communication with each other, and, in a word, did what De La Salle himself would have done if he had been able to be present in each diocese.<sup>28</sup>

Disorders that could come from this new form of government

Some of the new local superiors, realizing the dangerous consequences that this new type of organization could lead to, did their best to have it rescinded. They warned Brother Barthélemy that he should take steps to secure a revocation and suggested to him ways of doing so. Also, those who were interested in the welfare of the Institute and who had kept a high regard for De La Salle were deeply alarmed by the strange innovations and feared lest the Christian Schools might come to an end with the one who had founded them. A number of the principal Brothers, more enlightened than the others, more familiar with the nature of their Institute and with the right way of governing it, complained aloud about the new system, asserting that the service some people claimed to be doing the Society was really a mortal blow to it.

What, they asked, is the purpose of this new type of arrangement that is being introduced? Do they want to deprive the Founder of the right to govern his Institute, so that when he returns, he will find the doors of all the houses closed to him, houses that he himself founded? Is the idea merely to sustain the Brothers during his absence and keep them true to his spirit, to keep watch over the Institute, as it were, so that on his return, he may find it just as he left it? Do they want to give his creation a more appropriate form, correct its defects, and consolidate its foundations, or do they want to create a new Institute on the ruins of the old? No matter how these changes are presented, they still amount to pernicious novelties, born of malice or at least dreamed up by mistaken zeal.

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28. Blain himself was one of these ecclesiastical superiors, assisting the Brothers in Rouen.

Brother Barthélemy is shown how to nip the evil in the bud

All this—and more, which we omit—was told to Brother Barthélemy by several of the principal Brothers and even by some of the ecclesiastical superiors chosen in the various dioceses to replace the absent Founder. Those men, clear-sighted and full of concern for the Institute of the Christian Schools, regretted that such evil counsels had been followed and offered their help to limit the damage that was bound to result. Their role placed De La Salle's Institute in their hands, so to speak. It would have been easy for them to dismember it, piece by piece, in accordance with the new plan of reorganization and to take the leadership of that section committed to each of them. They could have made themselves the heads of those little individual congregations and have won for themselves, very cheaply, the title of founders by making new regulations and introducing new practices contrary to the intention of the true Founder. It was thus, apparently, that the authors of the new system had hoped to hoodwink the local superiors. But whatever may have been their true intentions, the Almighty, who allowed the project to be suggested, did not allow it to be carried out.

To put a stop to the disintegration of the Institute, three or four steps were suggested to Brother Barthélemy. The first was to undertake a general visitation of all the establishments, to win over by kind and gentle persuasion the Director and the Brothers in each house and to convince them not to interrupt the contacts they had with him and their connection with the body of the Society. The second was to prevail on them not to involve the outside superiors in any but external affairs and in those where their protection might be needed. The third recommendation was to call these ecclesiastics protectors, not superiors. The fourth and final suggestion was to call a general assembly of the principal Brothers at Saint Yon during the vacation period, in order to deliberate on the general welfare of the Institute, to make a fervent retreat together, to be renewed in spirit, and then, in the absence of De La Salle, to choose a Superior and to stipulate that the outside Superior would be considered only as a protector, to be dealt with in the same way that at Rome religious orders deal with their Cardinal Protector, who is assigned to them to favor them with their powerful influence.

Those of the superiors who had given such advice were the first to conform thereto. They refused to perform any act of jurisdiction in regard to the Brothers. They would not even assist at their meetings nor concern themselves with the internal affairs of the communities. They limited themselves to giving advice when asked, and beyond

that, they left the Brothers free to be governed by their acting Superior and kept for themselves only the right of being helpful on occasion. The remarkable thing, which shows that God's hand was on De La Salle's Community, was that all the other superiors did of their own accord—or rather by divine inspiration—what those we have been speaking of had suggested. They all considered themselves simply as the protectors of the Brothers and did not try to interfere in any way in their manner of living. What difficulties did arise among the Brothers were not due to these ecclesiastics but to the new system itself which the enemies wanted to introduce.

It did cause some disturbance among Brothers of differing personalities: the tepid and the fervent, the docile and the rebellious. Many did not know what to think under the circumstances. Some bewailed the absence of De La Salle, as if it were the cause of all the trouble; others longed for his return, considering it the only remedy for the sorry state of the Institute. Some, despairing of seeing either the remedy or the liberator, were tempted to leave an Institute which was being so profoundly modified that it was, in fact, becoming a different one altogether. Others were glad to camouflage the reasons for their departure by their complaints over what was happening. In the end, several did leave, among them some of the older and better members. They were weary of being forever in an uncertain and unstable situation. But most who left turned away from their state as schoolmasters only because they thought that they were being urged to give up their vocation as Brothers.

### De La Salle is finally advised of the disorders

From every side, letters were written to De La Salle about all this. The writers earnestly reproached him for his absence. Most of the letters were wrongly addressed, because his whereabouts were not known. Hence the letters never reached him. But one letter would have been enough to tell him more than he wanted to know. He was finally informed, and the news afflicted him grievously. Of all the letters which the Brothers and those interested in the welfare of the Institute sent him, a few did get through and apprised him of the disorder and trouble that his enemies had succeeded in introducing into the Society and the decadence which threatened it unless he himself returned without delay to sustain it with the same hands that had laid its foundations. This bad news was, in the divine counsels, the greatest trial that God had in store for him. On learning the true situation, this second Job submitted to the orders of God, adored his incomprehensible

designs, blessed his holy name, and abandoned himself to his adorable will. Yet he did not let himself lose courage. He hoped against hope, like Abraham, being convinced that if God so willed, he could bring forth new children for him out of the very stones and raise the Institute up again, making it more flourishing than ever. *God be blessed*, he said. *If this is his work, he will take care of it.*

His trust in God was not in vain. Other more comforting letters began to arrive, informing him that the situation was not quite so desperate as it had at first been represented; that God had succeeded in drawing good from evil in favor of the Institute; that the local superiors had acted as fathers and protectors for the Brothers, helping them with their advice and encouraging them to observe their Rule without interfering in the internal affairs or the domestic government of the various houses; that some of the superiors had advised Brother Barthélemy about what was not going well, so that he might remedy it, so great was their unwillingness to violate the rights of the acting Superior or to cause more difficulty in the houses; that some Brothers, in fact, had approached them to get their help in personal problems, but as that might have adversely affected the general good, they had wisely told them to take such matters up with their superiors, who were the rightful judges in such cases. When De La Salle returned, he would have the satisfaction of learning that the new system of government had not led to any unfortunate consequences.

It would seem that the unrest that was pervading the Institute, especially the Brothers in Paris, as a result of his absence should have made De La Salle decide to return there and set everything straight. However, convinced that he was more fit to destroy than to build up and that God did not need him to protect his work, the Founder thought only of remaining hidden, even more than he had been thus far. All the arguments which filled the letters sent to him to get him to leave his solitude were not enough to convince him. He did not even answer the letters that the Brothers wrote him on the subject, hoping to accustom them to forget him entirely and to discourage them by his obstinate silence.

The Brothers order De La Salle to return, and he obeys

His strategy, however, did not succeed. The more he wanted to be forgotten, the more the Brothers thought of him and realized that they could no longer live without him. His long absence had taught them how dear he ought to be to them and how necessary his return was. They importuned him unceasingly and wearied him by their letters.

Finally, seeing that all such appeals were useless, they hit upon one means which would prove effective in making him come back. Since he paid no attention to their desires, their tears, and their prayers, they considered the idea of sending him an order and of commanding him to return. The expedient was a bold one with no precedent. The very fact of giving him an order seemed to be an infringement of his legitimate authority which they were bound to respect. But what else could they do? Necessity knows no law, says the proverb, and charity sometimes makes us take extraordinary steps. If on this occasion the sons gave orders to their father, it was only so that they might obey him again. If the disciples prescribed a law to their master, it was only because they wanted to be ruled by him.

The principal Brothers of Paris, Versailles, and Saint-Denis held a meeting and agreed to write him a letter in the name of the entire Institute. In it, after trying to convince him by invoking the most tender and touching arguments, they ordered him, in the name of the obedience which he, as they, had vowed to the Institute, to come back to Paris without delay. Their missive, couched in simple and straightforward language, shows so evidently the esteem and veneration they entertained for their holy Founder and their fear of losing him that it suffices to quote it in full to refute everything that his enemies ever said about the harshness of his government and the stubbornness with which he was reproached.

“Monsieur, our very dear father, we, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in view the greater glory of God, the greater good of the Church and of our Society, recognize that it is of the utmost importance that you should again take up the care and general government of the holy work of God, which is also yours, since it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and to direct it for such a long time. Everyone is convinced that God gave you and still gives you the graces and talents needed to govern properly this new Company which is so useful to the Church, and it is only just for us to acknowledge that you have always governed it with much success and edification. This is why, Monsieur, we very humbly beseech you and command you in the name and on behalf of the body of this Society to which you have promised obedience to take up permanently the responsibility for the government of our Society. In testimony of which, we have signed, done at Paris this first day of April 1714. We are, with most profound respect, Monsieur, our dear father, your humble and obedient inferiors, . . .”

In my opinion, this letter is an outstanding testimonial to De La Salle's exceptional virtue. The Brothers must have had a very high

idea of the humility and obedience of their Founder to dare to write him in that way and to believe that he would be willing to submit to a command which was certainly out of place in the mouths of those who issued it. The Brothers would have been inexcusable if their simplicity and their need had not authorized such a step. A man less humble than their Superior would have been irritated and shocked by such imperious language, and he would have taken his revenge by maintaining a profound silence or by sending a sharp reply. But the Brothers never feared anything of the sort. They knew the character of their Superior too well to have any doubts. In all circumstances, he had given them such extraordinary examples of humility and obedience that they felt they had a right to expect this one also and even to require it of him. They were right.

Nevertheless, such an extraordinary letter at first surprised the servant of God. If he had not recognized the signatures of the Brothers, he might have suspected that it had been forged or that it was a pious stratagem invented by some of those most zealous for the Institute and most closely attached to his person. But though unable to question the genuineness of the letter, he was stunned as he read it, not sure whether he should blame the boldness of those who had written it or praise the zeal which had inspired it. The various thoughts which passed through his mind as he read the letter finally led him to defer to his inferiors and to give them, once again, an outstanding example of submission and dependence, since that was what they expected of him.

On learning of his decision, some friends opposed it as strongly as they could, but he replied that he had to obey. Whom do you wish to obey? they inquired. Have you a Superior in your Community? I want to obey the Brothers, he replied. They are commanding me to return to Paris. A strange reversal of roles, they exclaimed. The legislator receives the law from those for whom he made it! In vain did they strive to convince him that he had no orders to take from his inferiors, his sons who were simple Brothers, while he was their Superior and father, a priest and Founder. Nothing could swerve him from his resolve, however; he reiterated it, declaring *that after having taught obedience for so long by words, it was only right for him to begin teaching it by deed.*

This humble maxim reduced his friends to silence. They were as much edified as surprised. They congratulated the Brothers on having a Superior who gave them such an example; they could not doubt that an Institute founded on such heroic acts of virtue was indeed the work of God and would emerge gloriously from the abyss of crosses



and persecutions in which it seemed to have been swallowed up, ready to perish.

Abbé de Saléon, today the bishop of Agen, and Monsieur Didier, a canon of Saint Laurent, who was kind enough to add to his title of the Brothers' protector that of their confessor, were the ones who felt the deepest sorrow over the fact that they were about to lose their holy friend. The Visitandines of the monastery in Grenoble also showed their profound regret. It was in their church that the holy priest had chosen to say Mass, and the degree of devotion and piety he showed while offering the Holy Sacrifice had taught them to know and to honor him. The dignity with which he officiated at the altar used to attract nearly all these religious to his Mass, although it was not their community Mass.

After saying his farewells in the city, the servant of God spent the last night before his departure in prayer, recommending to God his journey and the Brothers of the house which had sheltered him. Before leaving, he noticed that one of them had some little clash with the Brother Director. He hastened to smooth it over and left them all in peace after exhorting them, like a new Saint Barnabas, to persevere in union, charity, fidelity to their vocation, the spirit of retirement, and avoidance of the world. It is easy to understand how distressed the Brothers were over the separation. It was all the more grievous for them, since they knew they would never see him again.

De La Salle took the route through Lyon. After he arrived there, his devotion led him to the tomb of Saint Francis de Sales, where he remained in prayer for an hour to obtain from God the spirit of that great saint and his protection for his Institute. Some of the people that he knew and went to visit in the city wished to keep him with them for a while, but he excused himself by saying that obedience made it imperative for him to return to Paris as soon as possible. From Lyon he proceeded to Dijon, where the Brothers welcomed him with joy mingled with sadness because of the short time he could spend with them to console them for his long absence. Finally, he arrived in Paris on 10 August 1714.

## CHAPTER XIII

*The manner in which De La Salle returns to Paris  
and is received there; he suffers new affronts; he  
delivers a possessed man.*

De La Salle had come back to Paris at the voice of obedience. He made his appearance there like an inferior and said to the Brothers when he met them, *Here I am; what do you want of me?* The Brothers were seized with astonishment and could say only that they wanted him to take up again the general conduct of the Institute. The holy priest objected that since the work had been preserved during his absence by the almighty hand which had begun it, his help was not needed. He added that they should suppose him dead and act as though he were no longer in this world. He stated that he was resolved to live thenceforth as a private individual, a status to which Providence had led him by secret paths; that having tasted the joy of living without the burden of responsibility for others, he could not bring himself to reassume such an onerous duty; that it was time to think of choosing a Superior General who, by ruling wisely, could repair the harm he himself had done.

That was the direction in which the holy Founder wanted to lead the Brothers. He had already tried several times to convince them of it, even in the early days of the Society, but his humility had never succeeded in overcoming the inflexibility of his sons on this point. Now his project had more than one aim in view. Besides his great love of dependency which constantly urged him to take the last place, he wanted to introduce into the Society before he died and to authorize by his example the form of government which should remain in force after him.

De La Salle feared that at his death, an attempt might be made to put at the head of the Brothers a Superior who was not a member of the body of their Society. It was to forestall such an eventuality, which he regarded as the ruination of the Congregation, that he had even bound the Brothers by a vow (as was pointed out above) to choose a Superior from among themselves as soon as possible after his death. His fears were not idle ones. As we have seen, after ten years of intrigues to set up an outsider as superior in Paris, his enemy had finally succeeded. To make sure this situation did not perpetuate itself, De La Salle thought it essential to elect one of the Brothers as Superior, so as to make any outside Superior who might appoint himself to the

position entirely superfluous and put the Community in a position to conduct its own affairs in its own way without external interference.

This was what the Founder wanted to see during his lifetime so that when he was dying, he might hope that his departure from this world would not introduce any changes in the Brothers' way of governing themselves. He was afraid that if the Brothers failed during his life to exercise their right to govern themselves, as all other Congregations do, they might definitively lose the prerogative after his death. All his efforts were again of no avail. He could not win his disciples' consent to his stepping down, although he had been seeking to do so for so many years. They had not made him come back in order to remove him from office. Anybody else in his place would never be to their liking. They could not get along without him nor withdraw from his authority. So they all knelt at his feet to show him their respect and their submission to his orders.

The servant of God, once again deprived of what he so desired, retired to his poor cell with a heart full of sadness because he could not escape a burden which had become so wearisome for him and which he thought he no longer had to bear. The release which he had been trying to obtain for so long and for which he offered constant prayers to God was finally granted to him, but only two years later. During this interval, however, he kept only the title of Superior and let Brother Barthélemy take care of the details of administration. The latter did nothing without consulting him, yet the servant of God did not even wish to direct the house or preside over the spiritual exercises.

What he did keep in his hands was the exercise of his sacred ministry, which he could not hand over to any Brother. He said Mass for the Brothers, heard their confessions, and on Sundays and feasts, gave them a spiritual exhortation lasting half an hour. The rest of the time, he remained in his room—praying, reading Holy Scripture and other pious books, and composing spiritual treatises for the benefit of his sons. His manner of acting disappointed the Brothers somewhat. They felt that they had him back only in part and regretted not being able to profit more fully by his presence. But they dissimulated their displeasure for fear of causing him any grief. Moreover, they hoped that they would bring him around, little by little, to what they desired.

As the eternal counsels decreed that every day of the holy man's life should be marked by the cross, it was not long before he encountered new humiliations. His great enemy no longer lived; God had called him while the servant of God was still at Grenoble.<sup>29</sup> The

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29. De La Chétardie died on 29 June 1714.

news of the death which he received there had hastened his return to Paris; he would not have dared to come back if that man were still alive. He stated this to some of the Brothers he trusted. But his powerful adversary, although no longer living, had left behind him people who inherited his views and his prejudices against the servant of God.

### The ecclesiastical superior puts questions to De La Salle

One of these people affected to be highly scandalized because De La Salle continued to hear the Brothers' confessions, believing that he was not authorized to do so. His intemperate zeal over this pretended irregularity drew from him expressions of shocked surprise which he made known to Brother Barthélemy. He even went so far as to question De La Salle about it. The latter allayed his astonishment on this score but caused him even greater amazement when he showed him the extensive faculties he had received from His Eminence when Cardinal de Noailles first became archbishop of Paris and which were granted without any time limit. The ecclesiastic in question was all the more astounded at the authorization, because he did not know of anyone else who had received such ample powers and because he himself did not enjoy anything like the same privilege, although his rank and birth might have made it seem that he should.

Not being able to harass the holy priest on this point, he initiated a quarrel with him on another, God permitting all this for the greater perfection of his servant. The person of whom we speak was really devoted to what was good, and his virtue was even superior to his high rank. At the same time, he was imbued with the false ideas of his deceased master and seems to have wanted to cause that man's animosity against the holy priest to revive in him. Always seeking some way to cause trouble, he was not happy over the holy Founder's return to Paris and did not know how he could get him to leave again. It may be that the presence of the servant of God cast him and his title as Superior of the Brothers in the shade, or perhaps he wanted to go ahead with the execution of the new scheme of government and realized that it had no chance of succeeding as long as De La Salle was on the scene. Whatever may have been his motive, he wrote a memorandum and sent it to De La Salle, demanding a reply.

### The questions put De La Salle in an embarrassing situation

These were the questions he wanted answered promptly and precisely: Who will henceforth be the Superiors of the Community of the

Brothers? What vows will the Brothers make? Who should be contacted when new foundations are to be established? What salary will be required? What will be the rules of the Society?

These questions were insidious and ticklish, especially the first one, on which the rest depended. The servant of God could not answer without furnishing new weapons to his adversaries and walking into the trap laid for him. If he answered that in the future the Superiors of the Community of the Brothers would henceforth be members of the Society, that they had to be Brothers and not priests or outsiders, his opponents would have found fault with all such terms. They would have argued that he himself was bringing in an innovation and changing the original organization of the Society, since he, although a priest, was its Superior and had been since the beginning.

They would have taxed him with pride and singularity because he wanted to be the only one of his kind, so to speak, and did not wish that the Community should ever have another priest as Superior after him. They would have accused him of narrow-minded and eccentric thinking because he felt that the Congregation would be better governed by simple Brothers without learning or culture than by enlightened and scholarly clerics. They would have faulted him for condemning what had just been done so successfully and for objecting to the naming of ecclesiastical superiors for the Brothers in their various houses. That would have meant deeply wounding the author of the memorandum, who had been the primary instigator of this undertaking. Finally, it would have meant telling the ecclesiastic that he was not recognized as the superior of the Brothers in Paris and that he was usurping a title that nobody had a right to give him.

If De La Salle had replied that the Superiors of the Community of the Brothers in the future would be priests like himself, like those who had been appointed in the various dioceses, 1) he would have approved the new form of government which his enemies were trying to introduce, had in fact introduced, and which he considered as a calamity and a source of the total ruination of his Institute; 2) he would have excluded himself from the Society and given his enemies legitimate pretexts for driving him from it; they might have asked him why he had returned to Paris, since there was already an ecclesiastical superior there; 3) he would have destroyed what he had built; he would have encouraged the Brothers to violate the vow which he had inspired them to make, namely, to choose after his death neither priest nor outsider as Superior but only a Brother from their own ranks.

It is certain that the ecclesiastic had no rights and no semblance of authority over De La Salle. The latter could have refused to reply

and have asked the questioner why he was meddling in what was none of his business. The servant of God was too humble to do anything of the sort. It is also quite certain that if De La Salle had brought the list of questions to Cardinal de Noailles, who had never authorized them and who did not look with such a favorable eye on those who were the authors, it would have drawn down his indignation on the intriguers. De La Salle was too wise to stir up such a tempest and too charitable to want to avenge himself on those who were eager to have a chance to cause him more trouble.

The simplest thing for him to do was to pay no attention to crafty questions, answering them only with silence. That he did not dare to do. Although the priest had no authority over him, he had usurped it over the Brothers, and they needed him. He could do them much good and also much harm. Thus humility, charity, and prudence made it a duty for him to reply. Humility always made him think of himself as the lowest of all and led him to abase himself before everybody and to submit to all as though they were his superiors, in the spirit of what the Apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul taught their disciples. The man of God was so filled with humility that he never addressed the person of whom we speak except with deep respect. He dealt with him as with his superior. He received his corrections and often put up with his harsh and scornful treatment without being offended. Charity made it necessary for him to answer in order to parry the blows that the priest could aim at the Brothers. Finally, prudence also suggested a reply. The Founder needed to make his own position known; otherwise, his silence might have authorized more innovations.

Obviously, his quandary was considerable. The questions were artfully couched and designed only to entrap him in what he might say. Eventually, since he had to answer, he abandoned himself to the Spirit of God and responded in all simplicity what he felt God had inspired him with on each of the questions, except the first. His reply, forwarded to the one who expected it, only embittered more deeply a man who wanted to be embittered and who sought an occasion for an outburst against the servant of God. He appeared indignant that no answer had been given to the first question. That was the point on which he wanted a definite answer, because all the rest depended on it.

To satisfy him, the holy Founder should have replied that the Brothers in Paris would be governed by his opponent and by Messieurs \*\*\*.<sup>30</sup> Any other answer would have irritated him, for that was what he really wanted, to be named Superior by the Founder

himself, excluding the Founder in the process, and to have him hand over the Brothers in Paris to his full power and control. That was precisely what De La Salle feared and what he considered would be the complete subversion of his Society. The displeasure evinced by the priest in question worried him very deeply because he could foresee what would follow from it, but he did not let the matter upset him.

De La Salle left it all in God's hands and replied that he could not give any answer to the first question. At that time, there was really no one exercising the role of Superior. De La Salle, the real Superior, did not wish to act officially in any way. The Brothers had not chosen anybody else. It would not be until two years later that they finally elected Brother Barthélemy. Their persistent refusal to accept the resignation of their Founder and De La Salle's constancy in refusing to act as the Superior left everything up in the air. It seemed an excellent opportunity for the man who was trying to intrude himself into the Community to get the title of Superior for himself from the servant of God, so that he might then arrogate to himself the authority the title confers and thus complete the implementation of his new system of government.

Even if De La Salle had not had serious reasons to be cautious, prudence would not have allowed him to give any reply to the first question posed. For, as he said, if I put down in writing that the Community of the Brothers will be governed by \*\*\*, I will risk the displeasure of the archbishop of Paris. If I say that it will be subject to the prelate, I will draw down upon myself and the Brothers the ill will of these priests. Such weighty reasons prevented him from hazarding a response to the first article and from exposing himself to the disadvantages which must ensue. Consequently, he was punished for not replying, and the Brothers had to suffer the consequences. That was what De La Salle had feared, but he was prepared.

The person who was causing all the trouble had been clever enough to have the salaries of the Brothers placed in his hands. He was firmly resolved not to give them the money due them until De La Salle satisfied him by providing him with the answer he wanted. When the salaries fell due, he asked the Brothers who had come to collect them whether De La Salle had given his answer. The simple and straightforward Brothers said frankly that he had not, because he did not know what to respond. That was a new disappointment for a man who wanted the title of Superior from the lips of De La Salle

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30. The asterisks here and in what follows are all in the original, leaving open to speculation what the possible answers may have been.

himself and who had made up his mind to get it in exchange for the sum owed the Brothers. He refused to give them the money. De La Salle was not surprised at the refusal, because he had expected it. But the Brothers urged him to answer, pointing out the lack of funds in the house, and they did all they could to rouse him from the inaction in which he remained about the matter. But he still refused to reply, foreseeing that no matter what he said, there would be unfortunate consequences to contend with.

### The Brothers find a way out of the difficulty

As the Brothers could not get any response out of him on this point and as they were in pressing need, they decided to give an answer themselves, for they thought that a reply from them would not involve the same disadvantages as one coming from De La Salle, would secure for them the funds justly due them, and would deliver their Superior from the difficulty in which he had been for the past six weeks. Without going into the details of what happened on this occasion, suffice it to say that the Brothers found a way, if not to satisfy the author of the questions, at least to make him appear satisfied.

Here is the answer they gave in writing to the first question: *The Institute of the Brothers will be directed by Messieurs \*\*\*, who, in agreement with Messieurs \*\*\*, will select an ecclesiastical Superior.* Although they knew that this answer would not please him, they felt sure the inquisitor would have to be content with it, because he himself had given the Brothers the advice *that when some difficulty arises, they should get together, two or three of them, as the Gospel suggests, to resolve it.* Thus they felt he would approve whatever they decided in this manner. It also followed from his advice that since the Brothers had decided that it was not up to De La Salle to answer the question but up to them, there was no reason to keep insisting that De La Salle should do so.

Things turned out as the Brothers had foreseen. The priest read the paper and handed it back to them, smiling without any sign of displeasure. When the Brothers came home, they showed the paper to De La Salle and told him that the priest seemed satisfied. The holy Founder heaved a deep sigh and exclaimed, *My God, what a heavy weight you have removed from my heart!* The next day, a Brother went to collect the salaries, which were punctually paid, and that was the last that was heard of the business. Afterward, De La Salle was more firmly resolved than ever to abdicate his position, and he took even greater care not to exercise his authority in any way. He remained



nearly always in his room—praying, reading, and composing meditations for the use of the Brothers; other than that, he limited himself to hearing their confessions and to giving them spiritual conferences on Sundays and feasts.

### The story of the Chevalier d'Armestat

About a year after De La Salle returned to Paris, the Chevalier d'Armestat entered the novitiate of the Brothers. The young man belonged to an aristocratic German family and had served for several years in the emperor's army, under Prince Eugène. After the battle of Denain,<sup>31</sup> he left the army for unknown reasons. He passed through Lyon and stopped there for some time. During his stay in the city, the exorcism of a possessed woman was the current topic of conversation and excited the curiosity of people with nothing much to do. He, too, became curious to witness the spectacle and to learn whether what people said about diabolical possession was indeed true. Perhaps he simply wanted to make fun of the exorcism and of the simplemindedness of Catholics, who—as religious innovators claim—are too credulous about such matters. A Protestant like him was not apt to look upon the exorcism ceremony as anything but a charade to amuse people. As a soldier, he took pride in being an agnostic and in not believing in the existence of demons.

With such dispositions, he entered the church where the exorcism was being carried out. Salvation, which he received on entering, was a gift to him from the devil through the mouth of the possessed woman, a reward either of his curiosity or of his incredulity. He learned more about exorcism than he had wanted to know, because the possessed woman looked at him and, trembling with rage, told him, *You don't believe that there are any demons, but one day you will experience their fury.* Never was a man more surprised. If he had come to mock, he soon found matter for tears.

Struck by such a salutary truth that God was revealing to him through the father of lies, he pondered it seriously, and his reflections immediately led him to abjure Lutheranism and to take instructions in the Catholic and Roman faith. He lost no time. A few months later, he made his profession of faith before the archbishop of Lyon. He then proceeded to Paris, where the first thing he did was to put himself into the hands of a skillful director of conscience who could lead him

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31. Where Marshall Villars defeated Prince Eugene in 1712, thus ending the War of the Spanish Succession.

to God and help him withdraw from his evil life. He was advised to consult a virtuous priest of the Community of Saint Sulpice, who recommended that he join the Community of De La Salle. He was received there on 8 October 1714 and the next day began following the exercises of the novitiate.

It would seem that the devil was waiting for him there to make him experience his fury, as foretold by the possessed woman. That was not so very difficult for the evil spirit to do, for during military service, the Chevalier had received several wounds which had been cured only through the application of the remedy called the *secret*. The wicked spirit, who had used his knowledge to cure a man who belonged to him, did not want him to continue to enjoy good health once he was converted. As soon as he entered the novitiate, the new convert began to feel excruciating pains all over his body. The violence of the pains brought tears to his eyes and made him heave deep groans. The Brothers, who were ignorant of the reasons for this, thought it was the result of his fervor and his sorrow for his past sins. Only on the next day did they discover the real motive for his sighs and tears.

When he did not appear at the community exercises, they went looking for him and found him in his bed, unconscious, unable to move, bathed in blood flowing from his wounds, which had reopened even though, before this, they had been so well healed that the scars were scarcely visible. All sorts of attentions were lavished on him, but the remedies did not revive him. He remained speechless and motionless. Fancying that he could not long survive, the Brothers had Extreme Unction administered to him. The sacrament had such a noticeable effect that his wounds immediately closed again, speech and consciousness returned, and he regained such good health that by the next day he was able to take part in the novitiate program once again.

His recovery did not last long, however. A few days later, he relapsed into a condition worse than the previous one. He lay unconscious, bereft of all sensation, and the only use he made of his senses and members was by horrible contortions. He vomited blood, and his eyes turned in their sockets as do those of a possessed person. Once in a while, he rested his gaze on a certain spot in the room, and his lips quivered as though he were addressing someone. Meanwhile, he moved his arms as though trying to ward off blows and to defend himself.

The Chevalier spent the night in extraordinary agitation, and no one could make him take any nourishment or even open his mouth.

Finally, he fell into a sort of coma that lasted four hours. During that time, he thought he saw a crowd of demons in horrible shapes which threatened to do away with him if he did not immediately give up the new type of life which he had just begun. The frightful sight evoked horrible grimaces in him, and he seemed so near death that everyone thought he was about to expire. Then he seemed to see the Most Blessed Virgin, to whom he had become very devout since his return to the true faith. Merely by her presence, she dissipated the infernal crew and comforted him.

As soon as he came back to his senses, he insistently begged to be given the habit of the Society, and his request was granted. The favor cost him dearly, for the devil seemed to consider the taking of the habit as a new insult and avenged himself by inflicting new torments on him. The infernal spirit seemed to seize him by the throat and to try to strangle him. The novice could not breathe and resembled a man who is choking to death. His tongue grew so thick that he could no longer articulate a word. However, even in this extremity, he did not lose consciousness. He received Holy Viaticum. As his life was despaired of, the Brothers gathered a short time later to recite the prayers for the dying. The paroxysms seemed to diminish during this interval, and by the time the prayers were ended, he looked as though he had revived.

But the devil still did not let go. Since by all the torments he had not been able to get his slave, who had escaped from his bondage, to give up his proposal, he had recourse to trickery. His imagination made the poor sick man think he saw De La Salle, Brother Barthélemy, and the priest who had advised him to enter the Community all standing over him and scourging him cruelly. Actually it was the devil who was punishing him in the form of those persons; whether in reality or only in imagination is hard to say. The fact is, nevertheless, that the novice suffered a great deal, and his pains were not at all imaginary. The evil spirit's trick was effective. He wanted to persuade the patient that he had found three torturers in those three virtuous persons. The novice became firmly persuaded that it was indeed so, and that idea almost caused his fall. The Brothers did everything they could to make him realize his mistake, and finally he recognized that it was all due to the malice of the wicked spirit. Once he was delivered from his false notion, his courage against Satan's attacks grew stronger, and the devil's efforts against him were renewed.

The struggle seems unbelievable. We would hardly dare affirm it in this century when nobody wants to admit anything that seems extraordinary, if we did not have as witnesses the Brothers who were

present at the entire scene. The devil, not having succeeded in tearing his vocation from the novice's heart, tore out all his toenails during one night. The Brothers saw the result the next morning and had to admit the evidence of what was before their eyes. That kind of testimony is not to be rejected, not even by those who claim to be skeptics. Like the Brothers, De La Salle, too, witnessed that happening as well as the others we have related. He had just come back from Grenoble, and for over six weeks he had done for this new convert, so cruelly assailed by hell, everything that the most tender charity could suggest.

Thinking over what he had seen, De La Salle remained convinced that it all indicated a case of true diabolical possession. But as he was wise and always proceeded in everything with the greatest circumspection, he did not want to create a great fuss about the matter. After all, there is no absolutely certain proof to be had in such cases, and it is easy to be mistaken. Hence he did not want to recite publicly the prayers that the Church prescribes for the deliverance of possessed people. De La Salle shut himself up in the sick man's room and recited over him the prayers and performed the ceremonies prescribed in such cases. They proved effective, and the novice was freed from the grasp of the devil, who up to then had not been willing to let go of his captive. From then on, the novice felt no more attacks of the evil spirit. Unfortunately, however, he did not remain faithful, and he did not persevere in his vocation.

## CHAPTER XIV

*De La Salle returns the novitiate to Saint Yon; he obeys when he is forbidden to return there himself but later is allowed to do so; there he occupies himself zealously training the novices; he finally persuades the Brothers to elect a successor and shows them how to do so; he retouches the Rules and gives them the form they have to this day.*

About that time, there occurred the death of King Louis XIV, which was a fresh subject of sorrow for De La Salle.<sup>32</sup> He wept over him, as did all good-thinking people, and he feared what would result for the

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32. The "Sun King" died at Versailles on 1 September 1715.

Church and the state. That the two previous kings had ascended the throne as minors made everyone understand what could be expected from a third.

In Louis XIV, the Institute had a staunch protector, for His Majesty had always granted everything that had been asked in favor of the Christian Schools. The religious-minded prince had just decided to found a school at Fontainebleau with a grant of 500 livres for two Brothers, but his project was never carried out. The Church suffered a great loss by the death of a king even more redoubtable to heresy than to neighboring monarchs. De La Salle's concern for the Church was even greater than his concern for his Community. Indeed, it was not difficult for him to foresee that religious innovations would flourish while the heir to the throne remained in tutelage.

At that time in Paris, the lack of funds and the extraordinarily high cost of living, which was going up every day, made the holy Founder resolve to send the novitiate back to Saint Yon, where it could more easily survive; in the provinces the price of food was not as exorbitant as in the capital. Brother Barthélemy, therefore, left for Rouen in October with three or four novices. That was all he had, because the new form of government which had been instituted would not permit a greater number, as we mentioned before. The novitiate was re-established at Saint Yon, where it has remained ever since. De La Salle lingered another month in Paris with the school Brothers. Before leaving to join the novices, he begged the Brother Director of the house to let him pray for two days shut up in his room, leaving it only to take his meals. He wanted to consult God to learn whether he should go to present his respects to Cardinal de Noailles. Apparently he was inspired not to do so, for after saying Mass early one morning at the parish church of Saint Sulpice, he went to salute Abbé de Brou and bid him good-bye.

That worthy cleric, who devoted himself in a humble and hidden way to all sorts of good works which attract little or no attention, had been asked by De La Chétardie to look after the Brothers after De La Salle had departed for Provence and to render them all the services he could. He always did so with much charity. Because of his concern for the good of the Brothers in Paris, he hastened to object to De La Salle's departure, trying to keep him in the capital. He even went so far as to *forbid him to go*, using a term which he knew would be acceptable to such a humble man and which charity sometimes borrows in order to supplement the lack of real authority.

The reason why this pious priest wanted to keep M. de La Salle in Paris was that he did not know how the Brothers could subsist

without him. Everything cost so much that he feared they would be in dire want. De La Salle, who seemed to find superiors everywhere and who made it his duty to defer to this one in a most particular manner, obeyed him with the simplicity of a child. The Brothers, less inclined to acknowledge quite so many superiors, felt rather put out by this new interference and by the dislocations the delay was going to bring about in their affairs. They felt that the holy Founder's presence was needed at Saint Yon and urged him to go there at once.

To find a way out of the impasse, two of the Brothers went to see De Brou to make him realize that De La Salle was taking in all seriousness the prohibition he had given him not to leave Paris and that the holy man honored in him the authority which a perfectly humble man recognizes in everyone who speaks to him. Consequently, he hesitated to go to Rouen, where he was urgently needed. It must have been a cause of much edification to the pious priest to see a man with the name, the accomplishments, and the age of De La Salle honoring his youth to such an extent and respecting orders which he had no right to give him. As charity had inspired his words, it also led him to retract them when the Brothers assured him that the presence of their Superior was not absolutely necessary in Paris.

### De La Salle at Saint Yon

Having thus returned to the place where he would find a tomb and the end of all his sorrows and labors a few years later, De La Salle thought of nothing thenceforth but of preparing for death, of laying aside all other concerns, and of leaving the Institute in the state he desired it to be. But as his hour had not yet come and he had not quite finished his task, the Brothers did not allow him to enjoy the repose he sought in God while awaiting the eternal rest of heaven.

De La Salle had brought them up in the practice of meticulous obedience. He had taught them not to do anything without permission—in his absence as well as in his presence. Thus it was right that he should be the victim of his own principles and that charity should make agreeable to him the incessant importunities of his disciples: addressing themselves to him directly or by letters, asking him for advice or permissions. In vain did he send them to Brother Barthélemy. They always came back to him, like sons to their father, persuaded that he could not lay aside his authority over them.

The task which he preferred in the house was the direction of the novices. In the past, he had always made that his best-loved occupation and his principal duty, as we have seen, for he was convinced

that the holiness of his Institute depended on the fervor of the novices. Conforming to that principle, he applied himself to his task more assiduously than ever. He observed the young men and examined them thoroughly, seeking to inspire them in all things with the spirit and the maxims of Jesus Christ, to give them a taste for his virtues and his dispositions. He showed even greater zeal in cultivating their interior life than in regulating their external comportment. He had them give him an account of all that went on within them. By observing them so attentively, he obliged them to practice recollection and to pay attention to all the motions of their hearts.

Whatever was not God or did not lead to God meant nothing to him. He esteemed nothing in the novices but virtue; that was what he wished to teach them to value more than anything else. On entering Saint Yon, they had to forget the world and the things of the world or else leave quickly. In that agreeable solitude, heaven was all that counted. Whatever did not concern their salvation was forgotten. The learning of this world was contradicted. The novices would have been unaware that the world existed, if they had not known it before entering. To get along with De La Salle, they needed to be eager for perfection, determined to renounce themselves and to undertake the task of perfectly dying to themselves. In a word, he wanted his novices to be fervent or at least willing to become such; otherwise, he had no use for them. What he was after was holiness, not numbers. Those in whom he discovered courage to labor at their perfection were his friends whom he cherished with special tenderness, yet they were the ones whom he mortified the most.

The Founder strove to make the novices progress rapidly in the thorny path where cowardly nature begs for an opportunity to rest—or at least to catch its breath—and where even the most fervent from time to time need the spur. He pardoned nothing in those generous souls, because he wanted to accustom them not to pardon anything in themselves, to foment an irreconcilable hatred between their heart and their flesh. On this point, he imitated the conduct of that wise superior praised by Saint John Chrysostom, who would have felt he was taking the bread from the mouths of his most perfect inferiors if he had not humiliated and mortified them, in season and out of season, with reason and without reason.

Toward those who were weak in virtue and toward beginners, the holy Founder acted differently. He encouraged and incited them and always upheld them. He tried to make the yoke of Jesus Christ easy for them and to bring them to experience the delight of his service. In their regard, he behaved like a tender mother who carries her

babe in her arms when it is tired of walking and soothes it on her bosom. Those who seemed to be slowing up in the path of virtue aroused his compassion, and yet occasionally they experienced his severity. He urged them on energetically; he incited them and made them feel the prodding of his charity. Even charity, as the saints say, can be sharp and can cause wounds, but they are wounds which heal the malady and never aggravate it.

What did he not tell them to show them their spiritual maladies and the consequences of sin? What did he not do to oblige them to seek healing in prayer, in better preparation for receiving the sacraments, and in evangelical abnegation? The hearts which he found hard and insensible moved him deeply. He deplored their misfortune and seemed frightened by their state. He taught them to weep over themselves, to bewail their condition, and so to avoid the fatal effects of their obstinacy.

Those who appeared uncertain in their vocation won all his care. He sought the cause of their temptation and taught them to discover the causes in themselves. If he did not discern in them the signs of a God-given vocation, he opened the door to them and was the first to invite them to depart. If he happened upon vocations which were defective, he taught such novices how to rectify their intentions and purify their motives. As for those whom the Holy Spirit had led to join the Institute, he omitted nothing that could strengthen their faithfulness to grace and confirm them in their chosen state.

Always ready to listen to all of them, he showed them a father's heart, even in the reprimands addressed to some, as well as in the kindly gestures directed to others. His occupation did not tire or overburden him. He gladly left all other tasks aside to devote himself to that one as to the most important of all, the essential duty. Indeed, what can be expected later on of a man who has not been trained in virtue from his entry into the Community, of a man who has not made a novitiate or who has made it badly? Can a building stand if its foundation is not solid? Can we expect to see a grown man enjoy good health if in his infancy he had no milk, or only bad milk, to nourish him?

### Brother Barthélemy gradually assumes leadership

The virtuous Brother Barthélemy, Director of Novices, was delighted to see De La Salle taking over what had been his duties, and like an elder brother, he took his place among the novices to profit by the instructions given by their common father. This humility delighted the



heart of the holy priest and won his confidence. There was nothing hidden between him and Brother Barthélemy. Making himself in his turn Brother Barthélemy's novice, he asked his advice on all matters, and he followed it. Some of the older Brothers conceived a little jealousy over this preference and would have wished to see their father show his confidence in others of his sons who also seemed to deserve it by their age and their seniority in the Community. But the holy Founder had other maxims. He thought that in a Community, age and seniority could never make up for any lack of virtue or prudence. He felt that only those years should be counted which fervor had sanctified and which were crowned by humility of heart. The rest were only a matter for regret, sorrow, and confusion.

After seven or eight months had gone by in this way in the house of Saint Yon, Brother Barthélemy once again put De La Salle's humility and obedience to the test by asking him to visit the Brothers in the schools of Calais and Boulogne. To demand that he leave his dear solitude meant calling on him for a great sacrifice. But the man who had made so many others did not refuse this one. He left Saint Yon about the middle of 1716. As we have already mentioned, in speaking of the founding of these schools, what De La Salle did during this visit and the manner in which he was welcomed, we shall not repeat the account.

### The need to have a Brother as Superior

On his return from his journey to Calais and Boulogne, De La Salle spent his time in exercises of piety, knowing that prayer is useful for all things and that to it the gifts of grace are promised in this present life and those of glory in the next. Only one thing disturbed him: he dreaded to die in the position of Superior. That honor his humility could not endure, and he felt that the best interests of the Institute did not require it. The last place among the Brothers was the one that his heart longed for. Since he had not been able to occupy the last place during his life, he passionately yearned to do so at his death. The many vain attempts he had made on various occasions to win this point had not made him give up hope of succeeding. The less he found the Brothers disposed to condescend to him on this subject, the more he begged them to give in to his arguments.

He had serious ones indeed. He felt death approaching, for he was already advanced in years. The Brothers were at last able to govern themselves and to find in their ranks a worthy Superior. He had led them, little by little, to look upon Brother Barthélemy as their

leader by turning over to him most of the details of administration. He had accustomed the Brothers to doing without him and his services by refusing to let them involve him in their affairs. It was time for the Institute to assume the shape it would have to maintain, and it was important for this to take place while he lived. There were serious reasons for apprehending that after his death, the Brothers might run into serious difficulties in choosing a successor from among their ranks. It was even to be feared that efforts might be made to deprive them of that right. He knew that measures had already been planned to put a secular priest at their head. Past experience taught him what to expect in the future.

If some people had plotted to profit by his absence from Paris to introduce a new form of government into his Institute while he still lived, what might they not be preparing to do after his death? If on his return to the capital, he had found somebody occupying his place—acting as Superior, even pretending to give him orders and wanting the Founder to acknowledge him and his usurped authority by a written document—what might they not try to force his disciples to do after he was gone? What was more, all the ecclesiastical superiors appointed in the various provinces still kept the title as regards the Brothers, and it was to be feared that some of them, not content with the mere title, might want to act as such. The only way to prevent such disorders in the future was to put things back the way they had originally been and to place a true leader at the head of the flock.

A Brother chosen as Superior in due form by a legitimate assembly and by common consent, raised to this position under the eyes and at the behest of De La Salle himself, recognized and revered by the obedience of the Founder, and confirmed in his jurisdiction by the submission of the Brothers in general, would inaugurate the type of government which had been envisioned ever since the start of the Institute, bringing an end to the system which had recently been abusively foisted on it to its detriment. It was ridiculous, in fact, that the Brothers should not have a Brother to govern them and that they should lose from the start a right possessed by all groups and communities, whether regular or secular—a natural right belonging to all men.

After all, their Society, made up of lay Brothers, resembles more than any other those established in the fourth-century Church. Saint Anthony, Saint Pachomius, Saint Hilarion, and all the other saintly abbots, who had under them whole armies of solitaries, were not priests. The Brothers of Charity have a Superior who is a Brother like themselves, elected from their ranks. A man who had not lived with

the Brothers, who was unfamiliar with their Rule, who did not understand their customs and consequently did not share their same spirit, a man entirely different from them in everything, was hardly fit to be their Superior. Would such a person not be, with regard to them, a new sort of commendatory abbot? What grave inconveniences would such a form of government not lead to? De La Salle could foresee them; he had every reason to fear that an institution which he had so much trouble in defending against the intrigues of those very men who were only waiting for his death to usurp power over it would quickly come to an end when they got hold of it.

### Preparing for the transition

Those reasons, joined to his profound humility, which had always urged him to give up the first place and take the last, in order to give the example of the most perfect obedience, ultimately led the Founder to take the final steps to overcome the opposition of the Brothers. He called them together at Rouen and Saint Yon and declared that his mind was made up to resign his position as Superior and to rid himself even of the name, now that for some time he had given up the exercise of its functions. He told them that they should no longer oppose this design, since it was already partly executed.

By turning over so much of his authority as Superior to another, De La Salle had accustomed them to do without him; he had prepared them to relieve him of the title as well. He insisted that it should be done while he was still living and that they should choose one of their number to take the leadership and should submit to him. There was no time to lose, he added, if they wished to forestall the difficulties which his death might bring to the execution of so important a measure. They could not take too many precautions nor show themselves too careful in making sure that the election would be canonically valid and carried out according to all the rules. Finally, opening his heart, he explained to them the apprehensions for the future which disturbed him.

The decision of the holy Founder was a new source of chagrin and sorrow for his children. It hinted at his approaching demise as well as at his present abdication. Like children soon to be deprived of a beloved father, who do not want to hear either his death or his absence spoken of, they heeded the sentiments of nature rather than the dictates of reason and sought to turn down a proposal which so afflicted them. They represented to him the difficulties which a change would bring about, the sorrow they would experience if they were

deprived of his direction and wise counsels. The election of a new Superior would leave them little liberty to address themselves to him in confidence as they had always done. The servant of God disposed of all these objections by promising that he would remain with them and be for them what he had been up to then, that he would keep them close to his heart, would listen to them, would continue doing all he could for them, and would render them all the assistance that a good father owes his sons. Finally, he gave them so many reasons that they could no longer oppose what he planned to do.

Once all of the Brothers had yielded to the Founder's proposal, the next step was to set in motion the preliminaries for the election of one of them as Superior. To do so within the rules, an assembly of the whole Community should be convoked in a convenient and suitable place; all the Brothers must consent to the gathering; the principal Brothers should be summoned to it, and all the others must promise in writing to subscribe and submit to whatever the assembly might decide.

All the Brothers present having agreed on these points, the holy priest suggested a means of carrying out the proposal. The simplest and shortest way to get everything arranged in peace and good understanding, he said, is to send one of you to all the houses, someone acceptable to the Brothers and enjoying their esteem, to prepare them wisely and calmly to share our views and to understand the reasons which make it necessary to call the assembly and to proceed without delay to the election of a new Superior; above all, it is necessary to make sure of the consent of all the houses of the Institute. As to where the meeting should be held, there can be no better place than Saint Yon. Here, in solitude, liberty, and peace, we will gather from all over France and decide on whatever we like, without distractions, obstacles, or publicity, so that the world will not know what is going on. If you agree with this, he concluded, pick out the Brother whom you wish to send as your deputy to the others, the one you feel best qualified to handle this affair. They all turned to Brother Barthélemy. He was meek, prudent, and held in high esteem by all the Brothers.

### Brother Barthélemy tours the Institute

Carrying the instructions of his worthy Superior, Brother Barthélemy left Saint Yon in October 1716 and spent the rest of that year visiting the more distant houses. Then, having returned to Saint Yon, he gave De La Salle an account of what he had accomplished and received more advice from him. Soon afterward, he resumed his travels to

complete what he had begun. His journey was marked by God's special protection, especially on two very dangerous occasions when God saved him.

On the first, he fell from his horse and, unable to disengage his foot from the stirrup, was dragged a considerable distance. He could have been killed in the accident, as has happened to so many others, but God protected him, and he escaped with nothing worse than a bad fright.

On a second occasion, two thieves threatened him one evening as he was leaving a certain city and pursued him quite some time, but they did him no harm, for they seemed to be held back from him. They came close to him and wanted to stop him, but they could not do so. They seemed to be restrained by an invisible hand. The thieves themselves were astonished at what was happening and did not know what to say or to do. Brother Barthélemy, uneasy over such evil company, asked them several times with his usual calm what they wanted. But as though their tongues were tied as well as their hands, they remained disconcerted and speechless. Finally, they separated from him, to their mutual satisfaction, for the bandits were glad to find their freedom restored. As for Brother Barthélemy he bade them farewell with great relief. When he saw that he was alone, he recognized God's hand in his deliverance and blessed his goodness.

For the rest, Brother Barthélemy's journey was successful. He was received everywhere with great tokens of joy and respect, and he found all hearts docile and open. He made the Brothers understand and approve all the plans that had been made, and in each house he took care to get the Brothers to sign a statement consenting to the election of a Brother Superior and promising to ratify whatever was decided in the coming assembly.

De La Salle took all these precautions—and others which we purposely omit—because he considered the meeting as the accomplishment of all his plans and the beginning of the establishment of his Society in its natural condition. From the beginning at Reims, he had wanted to give it that form of government. He had sought to bring it about at Vaugirard as early as 1694, and for over thirty years, he had tried several times to achieve it but had always found invincible opposition on the part of his disciples, as we have mentioned. He would have met with the same attitude, even to his death, if he had not made use of a pious artifice inspired by his humility to triumph over it. The artifice was to get the Brothers accustomed, little by little, to get along without him and to leave unused the authority which they did not want to see him lay aside in favor of anybody else.

Once he had taken this resolution, he never went back on it, and when he departed to hide himself in Provence, he left in Paris the government of the Institute, which he never again consented to take up fully when he returned. The letters which reached him in Provence he refused to answer. That obliged the Brothers to consider him as someone dead and to look no more to him for any services. When the Brothers ordered him to leave his place of retirement and to come back to Paris, they found him docile to their voice and ready to receive their orders but not to resume his functions as Superior.

Disappointed in not having been able to lay aside his title, he handed over its exercise to Brother Barthélemy. Although Superior in name, he was no longer such in fact. That was the only reason that convinced the Brothers to give him a successor. We might as well do it, they reasoned, since he no longer wishes to govern us. It was time for them to agree, because De La Salle had only two more years to live. If the Institute had not taken the steps to choose a leader from among its members while he still lived, it would in all probability have been obliged to accept one imposed from outside.

Inexpressible was the joy De La Salle felt when he learned of the success of Brother Barthélemy's mission and of God's protection of him on his journey. Delighted at the prospect of finally being able to lay aside a burden which he had found so irksome for so many years, he blessed God and longed for the happy moment when he would finally be at liberty. It was, however, necessary to wait until summer before calling the Brothers together, particularly as it had become the custom among them to hold such gatherings at Pentecost and to prepare by a retreat those who would take part in the meeting.

### The assembly at Saint Yon in 1717

The same program was followed this time. All the Brothers Directors were called to Saint Yon; sixteen of them were dutifully present on the appointed day. Pentecost Sunday was the first day of their retreat, which De La Salle opened by a fervent discourse on the importance of doing well what they were about to undertake. He proposed a method of proceeding in a supernatural manner during this gathering and in the election of a new Superior. He had drawn this up himself and had taken it partly from the Rule and Constitutions of Saint Ignatius. He had also composed a prayer, in French, to invoke the Holy Spirit and to implore his assistance, and he gave them copies to use.

The Brothers were faithful to say this prayer five or six times a day. They also conformed to the other advice of their holy Founder,

as well as to the arrangements he had drawn up for the retreat and for the election. They asked him several times to preside over the assembly and to take the lead in the exercises as being their true Superior, but he did not consider it proper to do so. He withdrew to his poor little cell to raise his hands to heaven and draw down on his sons an abundance of grace, after urging them to let the Holy Spirit himself preside over their assembly and to beg him unceasingly *to show them the one whom he had chosen* as their Superior.

Purify your intentions and desires, he told them, if you wish to be used as God's instruments in naming the one destined for you. Avoid all human views; do not listen to the voice of nature; reject all false lights and the prejudices inspired by selfishness. Consider yourselves in this election like the Apostles in the choice of the one who would replace the perfidious Judas, without any self-interest or preconceived notions, without sympathy or antipathy, without passion or personal inclinations, without yielding to any attraction or repugnance of nature. Keep your hearts in complete indifference, and do not let them be fixed on anyone but the Brother whom the majority of the votes will indicate.

As it is not you who should choose but God acting through you and in you, always keep your mind raised toward God, and do not grow weary of addressing to the Lord this prayer of the Apostles: *Show us the one whom you have chosen*. If you wish to know who this one is, give your vote to the person whom your conscience demands, the one possessed of the greatest virtue, the one whom at the hour of death you will wish you had chosen, the one most capable of governing the Institute, who excels in its spirit, is the model and exemplar of this spirit, and is the most capable of maintaining regularity, of causing fervor to reign, and of sanctifying you. Name the one among you whom you know to be the most enlightened, the wisest, the most virtuous, the firmest. Give your vote to the one who most perfectly possesses the qualities so necessary to govern God's family: prudence, mildness, vigilance, firmness, piety, zeal, and charity. Give it to the one who combines in himself in the highest degree these virtues which are so difficult to join together: zeal and prudence, clear-sightedness and charity, firmness and mildness, goodness and severity. Give it to the one who is mild but not weak, vigilant but not meddling, firm but not inflexible, zealous but not harsh, kind but not weak, prudent but not crafty.

Give your vote to the one who is the holiest or who wishes to become such, so that he may be your model whom you may imitate in all things, to the one who will be the humblest while occupying

the first place, who will show you a father's heart and will make you love his authority. In this choice, do not pay attention to talents, birth, age, seniority in the Company, personal appearance, and stature. In a word, do not consider the man; consider only God. You will certainly choose the one whom God has selected if you seek someone who agrees with his heart, not yours, a man of grace in whom grace acts, not a man according to your tastes who is pleasing to nature.

### The election of Brother Barthélemy

With these words and others of the same kind, the servant of God led his disciples to the dispositions he desired to see in them. They chose Brother Barthélemy as the president of the assembly. After two days and many prayers, it was he who received the majority of the votes and was elected Superior General of the Institute. They immediately brought the news to De La Salle, who did not seem surprised. *He has been acting as such for a long time*, he remarked.

All the Brothers congratulated themselves on this choice; only the chosen one condemned it. If he could have done so, he would by his prayers and tears have caused them to retract an election which he did not wish to ratify. He felt all the weight of the responsibility that they wished to place on his shoulders, and he could not bring himself to assume a burden that the holy Founder himself had for so long sought to lay aside. When the Brothers knelt before him to acknowledge his authority and submit themselves obediently to him, they made him all the more fearful of having to command them. He regretted all the more the impossibility of no longer being able to obey. By humbling themselves before him, they added to his confusion. He blushed to find himself in De La Salle's place. His sorrow choked back his words. The tears he shed continued to reproach the Brothers with this election, but they would not listen either to his complaints or to his reproaches.

Because his sighs were no more effective than his pleas, he was obliged to accept through obedience a position which his humility would have refused, but he agreed only on condition that two Brothers, chosen from among the most able, should be given him as his aides to share with him the weight of his responsibility. That was done. The assembly appointed two of the principal Brothers as his assistants to help him with their advice. The retreat continued until Trinity Sunday, which was the great feast of the Institute. The Brothers renewed their vows on that day, immediately after De La Salle and Brother Barthélemy had first renewed theirs.



After the retreat, the meetings continued, on De La Salle's advice, in order to examine all the rules once again, under the guidance of the new Superior, and to add or delete in full liberty whatever might be thought necessary. Once the observations and remarks were made, it was decided unanimously to place these suggestions into the hands of De La Salle and to ask him to make whatever use he wished of them. He promised that he would work at the project, and, in fact, he applied himself to the task of revision with great diligence. It was at this time that the Founder composed the chapters on modesty and on good government, taken in part from the Rule and Constitutions of Saint Ignatius, which he wisely adapted to the needs of the Institute. He also wrote the chapter on regularity and a few others which did not yet figure in the Rule. Given by its very author the form which it has today, it was authenticated and signed by Brother Barthélemy and then sent to all the houses to be observed uniformly by all the Brothers of the Institute.

## CHAPTER XV

### *Remarks on the rule for recreation and on the Rule of the Brother Director*

Although we have already spoken of the rule concerning recreation, it seems useful to say more about it here, since some Brothers wished to modify it. During the assembly of 1717, a new examination was made of the chapter of the Rule which lays down the manner in which the Brothers should act during the recreation periods. Among other things, it states that the Brothers "should not speak without having first saluted Brother Director and received permission from him. They should not speak of any person in particular, except to speak well of him. They should not inquire about anything curious or useless. They should keep silence when separated from the others. They should not indulge in any buffoonery or unseemly behavior or perform any indecorous gestures. They should not speak too loudly or laugh boisterously. They should not contradict each other or correct what another has said, since this is something that only Brother Director should do. Finally, they should converse on edifying topics which can lead them to love God and to practice virtue."

It must be admitted that this chapter calls for a high degree of perfection and presupposes that the Brothers are real saints or men

who wish to become such. Those who are holy are filled with God and like to speak only of God. *From the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks*, says Jesus Christ. From the treasure of his heart, a good man draws holy and edifying talk. Filled with God, he thinks of God always and wants to speak of God unceasingly. All other topics displease him, bore him, or leave him indifferent. Saint Francis Borgia seemed to drowse, and he found it difficult not to fall asleep when people talked in his presence of things other than God or that did not refer to God. Such were all the saints. *They bear the world and the things of the world spoken of only with regret*, as the author of *The Imitation* says, while they always listen with fresh delight to any talk about God or the things of God.

If a certain disinclination to speak of anything but God is not always a sure sign of holiness, it is at least a great means of attaining it. *Those who are of the world speak of the world, and those who are of God speak of God and like to hear God spoken of*, as Our Lord says. When we speak of the world, we fill ourselves with the world and the concerns of the world; when we speak of God, we fill ourselves with God and what refers to God, and we empty ourselves of the world and of worldly concerns. *Evil conversations corrupt good morals*, says Saint Paul. Why? Because evil talk fills the mind with evil thoughts and the heart with evil desires. On the contrary, pious discourses fill the mind with holy thoughts and the heart with sentiments which lead us to God. Hence you will never find a fervent religious eager for profane conversations, which fill the mind with useless ideas. His aim is to keep his mind lifted up to God and his heart united with him. He seeks to banish from his conversations all that can cause him to lose recollection. As nothing leads us to God more surely than speaking about God, a true religious allows himself no other conversations. If he does allow them, he finds himself ill at ease.

### De La Salle's rule for recreation

Following these principles, De La Salle made it a rule for his disciples to avoid in their recreations everything that might distract them, trivialize them, empty them of God, and fill them with the world and with worldly concerns. If he does not suppose that all of them are already saints, he gives them credit for wishing to become such. Now, all those who are saints or want to become saints appreciate these rules and find satisfaction in conforming to them. True, the tepid do not like them, and those who are beginning to grow irregular or to become relaxed also find them very irksome. That is their own fault;

they should accuse nobody but themselves. If this rule no longer pleases them, the reason is that they are no longer what the rule supposes them to be: fervent and eager for their sanctification. By the dissatisfaction they feel with such a rule, they can judge how far they have relaxed in their pursuit of virtue.

De La Salle had weighty reasons for establishing this rule. His long experience had taught him how much good or how much evil recreation can produce, according as it is well or badly conducted. Disorder in communities ordinarily has no other source than the misconduct that so easily insinuates itself into this activity. As Saint Madeleine de Pazzi observed, in badly made recreations, the devil reaps the most profit; from them arises the loss of those religious who are damned. The great reformer of a monastic order, the celebrated M. de Rancé, Abbot of La Trappe, feared such recreations so much that he did away with them altogether and did not allow any at all.

In permitting them to his followers, De La Salle sought a means of sanctifying them. To do this, it was necessary to prevent the sins so easily committed during them and to promote the practice of the virtues proper to this exercise. How many ill-regulated actions do members of communities not make themselves guilty of in recreation when they are not watchful over themselves? Light, indiscreet, and unmeasured words, frivolity, idle chatter, and impoliteness are the least of the lot. Pretentious statements, bragging, arrogance, scorn for our neighbor, worldliness, curiosity about news or the pleasure of imparting it, speaking about the world and the things of the world, or inquiring about them are faults which easily escape human weakness during recreation time. Particular friendships, little plots, murmuring, mockery, slander, quarrels, disputes, and many other defects which affect or wound charity are frequently found there, as well as biting words, animosity, resentment, impatience, bitterness, anger, moodiness, bad humor, patronizing airs, harsh, cutting, or scornful language, clowning, voicing dangerous principles or unedifying topics, and many other faults against either modesty or humility or contrary to the other virtues. These are all sins which members of communities may be guilty of.

Now the rule that we are speaking of does away with all of these sins, and in addition, it helps us to practice the virtues of humility, obedience, recollection, and Christian courtesy. It teaches us to speak with circumspection, measure, and wisdom, to listen in silence, and to profit by what is said. It leads the heart to God, nourishes devotion, inflames the soul with fervor, and makes recreation a kind of spiritual conference, unconstrained and agreeable. It instructs, enlightens,

warms the heart, encourages, consoles, produces spiritual joy, and fills us with God. In a word, from a recreation carried on in this manner we often experience, as several of the Brothers know, more fervor and goodwill than from our interior prayer. When we speak of God and the things of God with simplicity, candor, and cheerfulness, God is found in the midst of us. As they separated, the Brothers could often say, like the disciples of Emmaus, *Were not our hearts burning within us while we conversed so enthusiastically about the things of God?* Did not Jesus Christ seem to be in our midst and to speak to us?

### Varied opinions about religious recreation

But, someone will object, such a recreation is not really recreation; it is interior prayer or a spiritual conference. This objection was made long ago. De La Salle heard it often, but he did not let it disturb him. It is true that recreation carried on in this way is no longer a recreation that robs us of recollection, no longer a profane, worldly, vicious, and dangerous practice, but nothing prevents it from being a true recreation while remaining holy and spiritual. For in taking recreation thus (when the weather permits), the Brothers are out in the fresh air; they move about; they speak; they allow their eyes and senses decent liberty; they let their minds relax, and they reinvigorate their bodies.

Because each one asks permission to speak by a sign, because one person takes his turn talking and all do not talk at once, because nobody shouts or gets excited and wears out his vocal cords or lungs by arguing vociferously, does this mean that we are not recreating ourselves? Is it essential to recreation for all of us to speak at once, to brawl so that we cannot hear one another, to stir up a cloud of dust and breathe it in while making violent motions, or to make our arms, legs, and whole body share in the tongue's excitement? Is it essential to recreation to spend it in playing, in boisterous exercise, in being so agitated that when it is over, our faces are bathed in sweat, our heads buzzing, and our chests exhausted?

"I number among the causes of relaxation" (says a famous author) "the recreations that have been introduced in these recent times. The Rule of Saint Benedict does not say a word about them, nor does any other ancient rule that I know of. This practice seems to be founded on the opinion of some modern theologians who feel that free and light-hearted conversation is a necessary respite after serious application of the mind, like rest after bodily work, and they call the proper use of this mental relaxation the virtue of *eutrapelia*. But they

do not know that this pseudo-virtue, derived from Aristotle, is numbered by Saint Paul among the vices, under the same name of *eutrapelia*. What has deceived them is that not understanding Greek, they have found in the Latin text of Saint Paul the word *scurrility*, which they have not neglected to classify among the vices. The same word means a vice in Latin and a virtue in Greek. And so, if I am not mistaken, there we have the origin of these recreations. The fact is that conversation is not needed to give us respite from too great tension of mind. Bodily motion is more appropriate—walking or light manual work, for instance—for this movement returns to the more distant parts of the body the animal spirits which were too concentrated in the brain. Conversation, on the contrary, entertains and often augments the agitation of the mind, not to speak of the temptations to which it exposes us: raillery, backbiting, and rash judgments about matters of Church or state, for the topics of the day are often what are discussed in these recreations. I refer the reader to his own experience, and I beg religious persons to ask themselves what is the most ordinary matter of their confessions, frequent as these are.”

Without adopting the conjecture on the origin of recreations that this author hazards in an essay in which so many excellent ideas can be found, his final reflection, borrowed from the celebrated Abbé de Rancé, seems extremely reasonable and true. No one has better discussed this subject than that great reformer of monastic perfection in the last century. He treats of it with his usual emphasis and eloquence in his fifteenth explanation, which deals with some of the difficulties found in his *Book on the Monastic Life*.

#### Abbé de Rancé on religious recreation

“We have been reproached,” he says, “with being too severe on the subject of conversations, and some have pretended that it would be useful, nay, even necessary, for religious to engage in amusing conversations and to employ these so-called innocent pastimes.” To answer this criticism, he shows that every Christian is obliged to imitate Jesus Christ, whose entire life was painful and laborious. “Nowhere in his life,” he continues, “do we find anything like a diversion or recreation. His sacred lips never opened to utter a word of mockery; laughter he did not know; indeed, he called down a malediction on those who laugh: *Woe to you who laugh*. Saint Paul, who was so filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ, forbids these sorts of conversations to Christians. They are referred to in the Vulgate by the term *scurrilitas*, which means amusing and agreeable stories told to make others laugh

but which do not suit the only affair that we have to concern ourselves with in this world, namely, our sanctification, serving God and pleasing him; *scurrilitas* is not to the main point. If abstinence from joking and funny stories were a form of perfection foreign to a monk, we might say that he had no obligation to practice it, but it is so closely connected to his profession, so intimately bound up to the penance he has assumed as an obligation, that we cannot fail to count it among the things that the monk must naturally expect to find in his path.

“Nothing proves more clearly that it is a mistake to want to introduce such practices into religious houses, which can justly be called houses of prayer, than the consideration of the inconveniences which follow from them. For if these stories and conversations—which are supposed to contribute to the recreation of the Brothers and to dissipate the vapors which, some people suppose, solitude and retirement cause to gather—are really capable of doing this, and if these witticisms are keen, delicate, and clever, as can happen according to the type of mind that produces them, is it not to be feared that they will be sought after more than they should be? Will those who invent them not be pleased at having won admiration? Will they not seek applause from those who hear them? Will they not spend their time looking for clever sayings and preparing in their cells what they intend to say in recreation? And will not this spirit, which is really the spirit of the world, displace the simplicity, mortification, and piety which should reign in the cloister?

“If, on the contrary, these jokes are clumsy and vulgar, if they lack the wit which alone makes them capable of amusing anyone, the conversations will be filled with idle tales, impertinent remarks, stupid jests, and trifles capable of corrupting hearts and minds and of filling them with low thoughts and sentiments unworthy of the exalted state of religion. The result will be that the Brothers will contract improper familiarity with one another. Instead of looking on each other with esteem and charity, they will only despise one another.

“Moreover, in such conversations it is so difficult to keep to the golden mean that hardly anybody can avoid exaggerating in one way or another. Our feet are on a steep and slippery slope; it takes only one false step to fall into a liberty that the law of Jesus Christ does not admit of, either for a simple Christian or for a monk. It is very hard not to allow ourselves to be surprised on such occasions. A word escapes too freely; evil-mindedness picks it up. We do not show our neighbor all the reserve we owe him. The joy which we wish to arouse has nothing to restrain it and degenerates into heedlessness

and license. On leaving these conversations, we always feel spiritually drained, distracted, troubled, perhaps scrupulous—if we are inclined to be so—and suffering from a number of other similar maladies. Show me, if you can, how this conduct is compatible with that presence of God, that spirit of renunciation, that purity of heart, that perfection that Jesus Christ expects of monks. For my part, I consider such conduct no less opposed to that perfection than shadows are contrary to light.

“We can find a peremptory argument in the instructions that the saints have left us on this topic. Saint Benedict forbids and banishes absolutely from the conversation of his Brothers all frivolities, mockery, and useless words, those that lead to laughter or excite that human joy which some consider so necessary and innocent. He was careful not to change his opinion, for he wanted the Brothers not to lose sight of death or of the judgments of God. He wanted them always to keep in mind the reality of eternal rewards and punishments. The opinion of this great man, whom Jesus Christ gave to his Church as the founder and patriarch of all the monks of the West, should silence all those who think otherwise.”

After proving his affirmations by the authority of Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Ambrose, and Saint Basil, Abbé de Rancé refutes the objections to his thesis. “A number of arguments,” he says, “are brought forward to counter this opinion and to establish the contrary one. It is said that we should not condemn what is granted to religious merely to afford relaxation to their minds, exhausted by constant tension and unremitting exercises. Such an argument does not even deserve a hearing. First, just because something may be useful or even necessary, does it follow that we should put it into practice? We should first inquire whether it is in no way wrong, whether it is free from all evil consequences, whether there is nothing in it contrary to the true rules. If it sanctions even a little departure from them or is opposed to them, we cannot doubt that it is forbidden to make use of it, whatever good or advantage it might afford.

“It is mere imagination to suppose that such recreations, diversions and merrymaking are necessary and that monks and solitaries need them to dissipate the clouds which, it is said, obscure the spirit in solitude. There are other means for doing this which are more proper and more suitable to their profession and to which they can have recourse: when they assemble on certain occasions, when they hold conferences in the manner we have explained, when they leave the state of inner recollection which is habitual for them, when they speak of God with holy liberty, and when they converse freely and

unhindered about what refers to their duties or to the life, actions, beliefs, and remarkable statements of the holy Fathers, to the constancy and happiness of the martyrs, who preferred the glory of dying for Jesus Christ to all this world's happiness. Finally, when they speak of all that can stimulate their zeal and increase their ardor and fidelity in God's service, we must admit that such conversations are all that is needed to give them true consolation, to restore to their minds whatever they may have lost in the depths of their silence and retirement."

Let the reader continue with what this author says in the same work. It is a pity to have to omit such splendid passages, but they would be too long to insert here. We can also read in the rest of his rebuttal the way he answers the argument that this manner of making fun and amusing ourselves not only involves nothing reprehensible but is a virtue that the ancients called *eutrapelia*.

To use the words of this new Saint Bernard, *Those who object may say whatever they like, but I know that the irregularities, the exaggerations, the factions and cabals, the party spirit, the murmuring, and the dubious friendships that flourish in cloisters all start because of the communications that the Brothers have with each other*. I cannot too strongly approve a rule which does away with all such disorders and which, without forbidding all recreation, obliges the Brothers to sanctify it by the actual practice of humility, obedience, Christian civility, and discretion in word and by limiting themselves to holy and spiritual conversation.

### Some difficulties

True, this rule is irksome for nature and contradicts self-love. That was why some of the Brothers, seeing that the Rule was being subjected to revision, thought that it would be a favorable opportunity for having the rule of recreation modified; they tried to bring it about. However, after much discussion, they gave up their proposal, as we shall see after I explain what had given rise to the rule in the first place.

From the beginning of the Society of the Brothers, De La Salle had introduced among them the practice of very strict silence. Although he allowed them a period of pious conversation after dinner and after supper, he forbade all speaking except under truly necessary circumstances. Those who had to speak by reason of the duties of their position or those who had obtained permission were to speak in a few words and in a low tone. He punished faults against this regulation severely, considering them far from minor, for, as Saint Scholastica says, silence is the guardian angel of communities.



To maintain this exact silence in its perfection, De La Salle permitted recreations, which he considered both as a respite necessary for human weakness and as a new means of sanctification. Constant tension and application of mind demand some relaxation, and bodies engaged in exercises of piety or in labor need some rest. Nothing wastes away the body more than an uninterrupted interior life, where we are constantly engaged in mortifying the senses and keeping watch over the movements of the heart. Such a regime is like a constant drip of water which noiselessly and insensibly wears out nature's resistance. Recreation is the relief provided by nearly all communities to restore the soul's strength and enable it to renew its attention to itself. Recreation, if well performed, can—like any other action—become a means of sanctification, for it provides frequent opportunities for practicing all the virtues. We can leave recreation filled with God and with fervor if we are careful to bring Jesus Christ into it and to converse with him in simplicity of heart.

These two motives which have introduced the practice of recreation into nearly all communities did not permit the holy Founder, so full of tenderness and concern for the needs of his children and for their health, to forbid such moments of relaxation in his Society. At first, he gave the Brothers full liberty to speak and to recreate themselves without interfering with them by any regulations. In fact, none was needed. Fervent souls discover within themselves the laws inspired by the Holy Spirit, and as they follow where the Holy Spirit leads, all their words are measured and all their actions sanctified. In those blessed early days, the Brothers were so recollected, so attentive to themselves, so circumspect in all things that there was no need to restrain them by regulations. Filled with God, they spoke of God; any other discourse was foreign to them. But alas, such is the frailty of human nature. Among us men, fervor is always a passing visitor to which natural slothfulness never gets accustomed and which is eventually eliminated.

For several years, nothing was more edifying than the Brothers' recreations. God was their object; spiritual topics were the matter of their discourses; the practice of virtue was their exercise. Recreations resembled the conferences of the Fathers of the desert; each Brother came to them only in order to contribute his own fervor and to take away with him that of the others. Modesty and recollection were combined with noble simplicity; agreeable openness of heart, with polite and courteous behavior. Loud talk, frivolous words, vulgarities, loquaciousness, sallies of humor, vivacity, shallow exchanges, and all the other common defects in conversations were unknown there.

But they did finally put in an appearance. While speaking of God, the Brothers began to speak of other things, too. After beginning the recreation by spiritual topics, they ended up by discussing worldly matters. Then confusion, lack of restraint, and loss of recollection followed and brought along with them the other disorders which so easily penetrate recreation. The more fervent Brothers grew dissatisfied, and the time of recreation became a sort of martyrdom for them. De La Salle noticed the trouble at its inception, but he could not put a stop to it. Neither daily penances nor exhortations were able to arrest the contagion.

Because it was recreation time, some thought that anything was permitted. Several of the most fervent Brothers stopped coming, on the pretext that they had other things to do. Many of the novices were tempted to leave their vocation, and several of them did so. The Brothers lost the mutual respect that they owed each other. Even the Brothers Directors were not spared, and at times De La Salle himself suffered the same treatment. Indeed, some took advantage of his patience. Because he made himself all things to all men and appeared among them as though he were just an ordinary Brother, some of them, lacking in good manners, exercised his forbearance by their vulgarities and their uncivil behavior, which he pretended not to notice and over which he did not show any displeasure. However, none of these drawbacks suggested to De La Salle the idea of suppressing recreation or of eliminating the abuses that had crept in. He endured patiently an evil that he could not remedy and hoped that God would provide a solution. He was neither upset nor astonished, because he knew that even the holiest communities from their early days had suffered from like disorders during recreation.

I myself heard the Founder say that the Society of Jesus, so virtuous and so holy, which even its bitterest enemies have to admit is very regular, had encountered the same problem in the beginning and that steps had to be taken to remedy the evil by new regulations. At that time, only fourteen years had elapsed since De La Salle had founded his Institute, and already the abuses in recreation had begun to affect its fervor. God, however, did not permit the evil to go any farther but applied a remedy almost without anyone's realizing it. In about 1694, when there were only five houses and not more than thirty Brothers, De La Salle, influenced by an extraordinary movement of fervor, was making a month's retreat at the novitiate in Vaugirard with four of the principal Brothers. He was inspired to seek a means for shutting the door on all false liberty during recreation. We explained in the proper place what he did to this end; we shall not repeat it here.

Some years later, the servant of God set down in writing what he had authorized in practice and made it the sixth chapter of his Rule. He considered the chapter so important that he had it read every Sunday during dinner, so that all might pay attention to it and observe it faithfully. He was not disappointed. He had the consolation of bringing back to the recreation of the Brothers the fervor that had originally characterized it. The rule which taught them to sanctify this exercise corrected all the abuses that existed, and the fidelity with which the rule was observed prevented the abuses from ever recurring.

The chapter on the manner of behaving in recreation, so conformable to the maxims of the Gospel and of the saints, had been in use among the Brothers for nearly twenty-four years without having met with any serious opposition during all that time. It was only in the 1717 assembly that three or four Brothers suggested to the others that they should modify a regulation which so constrained nature, even in the very action which was supposed to provide nature with some relaxation. The holy Founder had turned over to the members of the assembly the complete Rule, which had not yet received any approval from the Holy See. He allowed the Brothers full liberty to make whatever changes they desired. The chapter on recreation became the main topic of this examination, at the request of the three or four Brothers who were present.

After much discussion extending over two meetings and after much prayer, it was agreed, to conclude the affair in unanimity, that they would consult superiors of communities who had the highest reputation and the most experience. So that the interested parties could not complain that they had not been allowed to present their points of view, two who advocated changes were delegated to plead their cause before such arbiters. De La Salle was asked if he approved of this, and his prudence could not let him refuse. He quite willingly abandoned his work to revision by others.

Père Paul Baudin, at that time the director of the Jesuit novitiate in Rouen, who later became provincial—a man of uncommon piety, wisdom, and talent, as well as of great experience in government—was one of the main authorities consulted on this question. He and the other superiors of well-known communities all came to the same conclusion. After listening attentively to the arguments on both sides, they concluded that the Brothers should continue to spend their recreations as they had been doing for twenty-four years with so many blessings and that they should be careful not to change anything. The opinion was clear and decisive, but it is rare for those who have lost their case to acquiesce in the sentence which condemns them.

One of the Brothers who urged changing the rule appealed from the opinion to the example of the judges themselves, and he pretended to find a contradiction between what these superiors had decided and what took place in their communities. In your own houses, which are so regular, he said, the recreations are not carried on in such a constraining manner. Even games are permitted, such as bowling, tenpins, and quoits. Say *tolerated*, not *permitted*, these men of experience replied. Such things were not allowed in the Rule, but these customs have been introduced little by little. We endure them because we cannot do away with them. We can see their unfortunate consequences, but we cannot remedy them.

At this, the Brother was reduced to silence and said no more. The others who shared his opinion imitated him, and it was finally decided, with no dissenting voices, that the chapter of the Rule concerning recreation would remain as it was. So that no one in the future, in ignorance of what had taken place, might pretend to change it, the assembly decreed that the manner of making recreation, authorized by twenty-four years of experience with great benefit for the Institute, should remain unmodified in the future as being the most suitable for body and soul, the most agreeable to the fervent Brothers and to those who wished to become such.

De La Salle, who not only was endowed with great wisdom but also possessed much experience, was so convinced of this that he made the rule of recreation one of the four essential supports of his Institute. He went even farther, because in the Rule of the Brother Director, of which we shall soon speak, he ordered the Director to be present at recreation rather than at interior prayer if he was forced to choose to be absent from one or the other of these exercises and to take some other time for his prayer, so convinced was he that the progress or the decline of a community starts with the manner of making recreation.

### Recreation and the policy on boarders

Finally, to complete what needs to be said on this topic, all the points of the Rule which make up the chapter on recreation are antidotes for the defects which can creep into it and which had indeed crept into it in spite of the care and attention of the vigilant Superior. It was to correct these disorders committed under his eyes that he detailed the practice of the contrary virtues. Because the light of the Holy Spirit showed him that such important rules might be neglected if strangers lived with the Brothers, he closed the doors of their ordinary schools

to boarders, who never keep silence, who tend to be too free in their recreations, and who bring with them everywhere disturbance, disorder, and irregularity. Directors must pay attention to this. Let them remember that regularity will begin to suffer in the community as soon as it is open to boarders. Let them trust the wisdom of their Founder on this point and follow the Rule approved by the Holy See, which forbids them to accept boarders into their ordinary schools, because silence and the rule of recreation would suffer along with the other exercises.

But how can they refuse such a favor to a friend, a benefactor, or some person in authority? By showing the Rule which forbids it. This excuse will always be accepted by a person with true religious spirit. A denial authorized by the Rule never offends anyone who thinks rightly. Firmness in observing the Rule edifies even those who are asking for its transgression. Disregarding it often scandalizes the very friends who request the derogation. Seculars never conceive a higher regard for persons living in a community than when they find them regular and faithful to their duties. When we are resolved to turn down a friend, a benefactor, or a person in authority who asks for something that God does not allow, we are ready to refuse when he demands what the Rule forbids. Instead of saying: But how can we say no to a friend, a benefactor, a person in authority? we should say instead: How can we violate a rule that our Founder considered as the safeguard of silence and of the spiritual exercises?

### The importance of the Brother Director

All that we have been saying makes it clear that De La Salle did all he could to sanctify recreation and to remove from such a dangerous action all the faults which too often disfigure it. The behavior of the Brothers Directors also drew his attention to an equal degree. In the Institute, the name Director is given to the one in charge of each house who must watch over the Brothers, his inferiors, take the lead in the exercises, manage the business of the house, both interior and exterior, and give an account of everything to Brother Superior, whose vicar he is, so to speak. It is easy to see that the well-being or the decline of the Institute depends on the proper or improper behavior of the Directors. They are subaltern leaders, each of whom has a portion of the flock to guide. They are the captains of the chosen people and share in caring for them by watching over the group committed to them. They are the eyes and the tongue of the head, that is, of the Superior who governs the entire body.

After a careful study of the reasons for the decadence of monasteries and for the relaxation that had overtaken the most flourishing communities, De La Salle concluded that the decline was due to the superiors. According to him, it was their fault if the devil caused such ravages in these earthly paradises. It was through their negligence that relaxation and then vice and disorder penetrated there. If they had been vigilant, firm, and regular, the delightful gardens of the sacred Spouse would not have fallen fallow; they would still be today what they were at the start. Primitive fervor would still make them the honor of the Church and the bountiful radiance of Jesus Christ.

Convinced of this, the holy Founder often said that the Institute was in the hands of the Brothers Directors. They were the ones who labored either to build it up or to tear it down; its regularity depended on theirs, and fervor would not be maintained therein except through their fidelity to the Rule and to their duties. Convinced that God knows those who are modeled after the divine heart and that God's hand alone knows how to form them, he prayed and fasted continually to obtain from heaven Directors of proven virtue, filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.

To win this favor, starting about the year 1696 and continuing until 1710, he had established in his Community the practice of a daily fast and daily Communion. In other words, each day one or several Brothers, depending on the number in each house, fasted and received Communion in turn every week to ask God to give them worthy Directors. Finally, at the suggestion of the older Brothers, meeting in Paris, this fast was fixed by De La Salle on Fridays and extended to all the Brothers. It has thus become a fast of Rule, as it were, or rather, a fast dedicated by custom for this same intention, as is also the Thursday Communion or that made on a feast day during the week.

De La Salle, who when it came to penance had a hard time moderating himself, did not content himself with one fast day each week. He fasted continually for four years, not excepting Sundays and the most solemn feasts, including Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas, and so rigorous was his fast that he ate nothing for his collation but a piece of dry bread and drank only plain water.

### The Rule of the Brother Director

About 1700, De La Salle composed the Rule of the Brother Director, which he sent in manuscript form to all the houses, ordering the Directors to have it read in the refectory during dinner on the first Thursday of each month. The Director himself was to use it for his

own spiritual reading on Sundays and Thursdays. Until his journey to Provence, De La Salle had this practice observed with invariable constancy, without paying attention to the complaints of some who found this reading annoying. However, to accommodate human weakness and to make the practice of this rule easier, he changed a few expressions which some timorous souls found too embarrassing and which led to scruples in those who were inclined to be so.

In spite of mitigation, the Rule met with a certain opposition from some Directors, for they found it difficult to submit to laws which did not permit them any other use of their authority except in what is necessary to insure the observance of perfect regularity, thereby obliging them to become examples of this virtue themselves. Their self-love was not a little irritated, because the first rank which they occupied in their houses gave them less liberty than the others enjoyed. Their duties, and consequently their faults, were proclaimed publicly every month, since they had to give an account of everything to the Brother Superior and were really the mere executors of his decisions, with no discretionary powers of their own. Humble and obedient men, those eager for their own perfection and for that of others, were delighted by a Rule which made it impossible for them to abuse their authority. By regulating all their conduct by the obligation imposed on them to refer everything to the Brother Superior and not to do anything extraordinary without his permission, it freed them from the terrible account they would have had to give of it at God's tribunal.

In his wisdom, De La Salle closed his eyes to the infraction of several important regulations pertaining to the Directors of the various houses and waited to remedy the problem until his disciples conceived a greater ardor for the perfection of their state. He did not even speak about the matter on his return from Provence or in the assembly of 1717, although that would have been an excellent occasion for calling attention to these points of Rule while he was revising all the rest and, at the request of his disciples, was putting them into their final form. If we may hazard a guess as to the reasons for his silence, it would be that his humility, prudence, and abandonment to Divine Providence led him to say nothing. Humility no longer permitted him to act in any way as the Brother Superior or legislator. He thought he was the one who was drawing down the wrath of God on the Institute and that the best thing he could do for its welfare was to pray and not to have anything more to do with its government.

De La Salle knew that all his efforts had not sufficed to save his Society. After it had more than once been on the point of crumbling, God had revived it and given it a new lease on life. For this reason,

he let the divine hand, which was apparently succeeding in bringing his creation back to the right path, take care of leading it to its perfection. In addition, he wanted the rules concerning the Brothers Directors to be their own creation; they themselves, he felt, should legislate on their own needs. He left it up to their fervor to choose the rules of perfection for themselves, so that being more willingly accepted, their observance might be more meritorious and so that they might subject themselves thereto with greater exactness after having embraced them with greater liberty. The fervor which he could see increasing among his disciples made him hope that it would bring them to this point.

### The Directors eventually adopt their Rule

He was not mistaken, for in the assembly of 1725, which was composed of thirty-two of the principal Brothers, the Directors have already done in part what he would have wished. Those worthy sons, ashamed at seeing such wise and important regulations drawn up by their father falling into disuse, felt inspired to have them receive the honor and obedience they deserved. They decided that the Rule of the Brother Director should be read in public twice a year, once at the beginning of the year and a second time when the Brother Visitor came to make his visitation of the house.

It can be said that here we recognize the perfect disciples of the holy Founder and the heirs of his spirit and virtues. Humble people do not seek to keep their obligations hidden from their inferiors nor to conceal from them the knowledge of the laws which reveal their own shortcomings. On the contrary, they are pleased when their Brothers know what they themselves are supposed to do, so that they may even in this life bear the confusion due them over their faults, be corrected by wise advice, or be kept to the path of duty through the salutary fear of disedifying. The Brothers, thus made aware of the duties of their superiors, are greatly edified by the zeal which they display in carrying out their obligations, and through emulation, the Brothers become more ardent in fulfilling their own Rule. The more regular they see their Director, the more they become such themselves. His obedience to his Rule makes it all the harder for them to dispense themselves from theirs, and he is always in a stronger position to recommend fidelity to the Brothers when his words are backed up by his own deeds.

In addition, when inferiors know the duties of the one who governs them, they become the witnesses, the censors, and the judges of



his conduct. He fears their eyes, their tongue, and their pen, and he resolves to do through the love of God what he might be tempted to do out of human respect. The Director, who must watch over the others, has as many censors over himself as he has inferiors, and they render him much the same service as he renders them. Their presence reminds him of what he ought to do. The public reading of the Rule prescribed for him will bring him either the approbation of his Brothers or the opportunity for humbly confessing his shortcomings. Thus, by accusing himself and admitting his faults, he makes up for the disedification he may have given them and obtains God's pardon.

Let us, then, conclude that nothing but the spirit of pride could take offense at the reading of the regulations or be mortified by it. A humble Brother will always take pleasure in such reading and will seek reparation for his faults in this publication of his duties. A truly obedient man, far from wishing to command without wanting to obey, is delighted to establish his right to command on his own obedience and by his example to preach submission, the spirit of dependence, and fidelity to the Rule. If in their houses the Brothers Directors are like older brothers in a family, do they not owe their younger brothers the example of complete fidelity to all the wishes of their father? If they are subordinate pastors in the Institute, must they not base the authority they exercise on entire submission to higher authority? If they are the protectors and guardians of regularity, must they not show themselves lovers of the Rule which the holy Founder prescribed for them? Can they dispense themselves from their obligations and still be considered the defenders of the common rule?

No man will have the grace to command if he does not possess the virtue of obedience. He will never convince his inferiors that he loves regulations if he himself neglects them. If he feels that publicizing his duties is humiliating for him, he shows that he must not be faithful to them. If he were faithful, reading them would be a eulogy of his conduct and would provide him with a certificate of good conduct. If he considers the frequent reading of the regulations which should govern all his actions as a tacit reproach for his own faults, he shows that he is neither humble enough to admit his shortcomings nor obedient enough to love dependence, not penitent enough to want to correct himself nor virtuous enough to want to let himself be governed in all things by the laws drawn up for him.

For myself, I can never believe that the holy Founder in heaven will ever consider as a faithful disciple of his the Brother Director who neglects the wise regulations he left him. Such a son dishonors his father and refuses to conform to his desires. If he considers them to be

impractical, he accuses the Founder of harshness and lack of discretion. If he considers them too perfect, he confesses his own slackness and want of fervor. If he agrees that they are wise and mild, he must either bring himself to observe them or admit that he is dishonest. Finally, all the Brothers, especially the older ones and the ones who hold some position, all the true disciples of the holy Founder, should zealously work together so as not to leave his work unfinished and to give him in heaven the joy of seeing all his laws punctually observed on earth.

As the Brothers did in that assembly, Directors will make it their pleasure and duty to put into practice what De La Salle asked them to do during his life. They will read their particular regulations as often as possible and make them their spiritual reading. For their regularity to be perfect, it must include fidelity to this last point. Their example will make agreeable the obligation which they will impose on themselves. Indeed, which Brother Director would wish to distinguish himself by obvious signs of pride when he knows that all the others publicize every week the laws that they have received from their Moses? Obedience is a token of the respect they owe to his Rule; if they fail to pay it, they leave the task to him. Justice and gratitude should lead them to give good example to the other Brothers and to afford De La Salle in heaven his deserved satisfaction.

Moreover, what more authentic sign is there of divine inspiration in all the regulations made by De La Salle than the care that Divine Providence has taken to justify them, to re-establish them, and to consecrate them by the approval of the Holy See? We have seen above that the holy Founder's rivals, more opposed to the Rule and practices of virtue in which he trained his disciples than to his person, treated them as being either too perfect or too difficult, exaggerated, and impractical. Was it not under this pretext that they had slandered him at the archdiocesan chancery and made every effort to remove him and to prejudice the Brothers against his government? As we have seen, when they finally became masters in his house after he left Paris, they brought their own spirit and a new form of government into it and altered the Rule.

After their vain triumph, what happened? God snatched victory from the hands of those who had abused it, and before he died, the servant of God beheld the changes introduced into his Community nullified, reduced to nothing. The Founder saw the former discipline flourish again as before, saw fervor revive, the Rule accepted and confirmed by the body of the Brothers themselves. As the sequel will relate, the Rule was ultimately approved by the Holy See. Can we not

say that the hand of God is manifested and that the Holy Spirit clearly showed that God was the author of the regulations that De La Salle left to his Institute? If that is so—and who can doubt it?—we cannot hold that the Rule was only half inspired. If his sons cannot doubt that the Spirit of God himself, by the pen of their Founder, wrote the regulations which he prescribed for them, they must follow them all to the letter, without exception, without modification, without distinction. The Directors must give the example. The fidelity they show for the special regulations given them will strengthen the zeal and the exactness of all the others in observing the Common Rule.

### The action of Divine Providence in regard to the Rule

I must also mention here some signs of special approval on the part of Divine Providence in regard to the rules of the Institute. Toward the end of 1713, the Brothers, disturbed over the absence of their Founder, not knowing where he was, and having almost lost hope of seeing him again, undertook to have their regulations approved by His Eminence, Cardinal de Noailles. This idea had been suggested to them by Abbé de Brou, who—acting as the ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers in the absence of De La Salle—showed great concern for all their interests. The incident which gave rise to this initiative was the kindness that the prelate showed the Brothers of the school at Saint-Denis, when he went there to administer the sacrament of Confirmation, and the singular esteem he then displayed for De La Salle. After asking about his health and his whereabouts, the cardinal praised him before the entire gathering, adding that he was indeed a saintly person and a great servant of God. He asked the Brothers to give De La Salle his kindest regards.

De La Chétardie, the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, aware of these tokens of the cardinal's interest in the Institute, went with Abbé de Brou to thank him and to beg him to take this work under his protection. Later, De Brou took Brother Barthélemy and another Brother to pay their respects to His Eminence, who received them most graciously. The prelate inquired which of the two Brothers was the Superior, and having been told, he questioned him very gently, asked if he had many novices, and recommended to him to train good schoolmasters.

It was this kindly attitude of the archbishop toward the Institute which suggested the idea of asking him to approve the rules. Once this action was decided upon, Brother Barthélemy, on the advice of Monsieur de Brou, called together the Brothers of Paris, Versailles, and

Saint-Denis to decide on any changes which they thought needed to be made in the regulations. For so long a time, the rivals of the holy priest had exaggerated their difficulty to such an extent that they were finally believed by some of the Brothers, not necessarily the most fervent ones.

Once the rules were put in good form, with notations in a separate document, De Brou went to the archbishop and asked him to examine the rules and to approve them. To this the prelate agreed. He then entrusted the task to Abbé Vivant,<sup>33</sup> one of his vicars-general. He kept the documents for seven or eight months. It was during this time that the troubles arose in Paris over the Constitution *Unigenitus* and the refusal of Cardinal de Noailles to agree to it.

As time went on, Vivant sent the documents back to Abbé de Brou with a letter, dated 4 April 1714, in which he stated, "His Eminence does not think that anything should be decided about this matter or signed in his name with regard to the regulations themselves or to the changes which it has been proposed to make in them. He has full confidence in your wisdom for the good government of the schools which you have charge of, and he feels sure that under such wise direction, piety and peace will flourish in them."

There is every reason to believe that the prelate, who considered De La Salle as a holy man and a great servant of God, was unwilling to meddle in the affair during his absence, out of respect for his virtue and regard for his person. The cardinal loved him and did not want to substitute another Superior in his place. He remembered how, in 1702, the Brothers had demonstrated their love for the Founder and their attachment to him, as well as the invincible opposition they had expressed to the intrusion of M. Bricot.

In all these matters, the protection of Divine Providence over De La Salle and over his rules was obvious. 1) Nothing was changed; they remained as they were. 2) Nothing was changed so far as the Founder personally was concerned, and no other Superior was put in his place. The government of the schools was given by the letter of the vicar-general to De Brou but not the government of the Brothers. Thus De La Salle remained their legitimate Superior. No authority other than that of the archbishop could remove him. 3) The proposed changes in the rules lapsed and lost all their authority, not having received episcopal confirmation. 4) The appointment of local ecclesiastical superiors that had been introduced became void of meaning,

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33. François Vivant, whose brother, Jean Vivant, would later on be helpful in securing papal approval for the Institute.

since De La Salle had not been replaced by any ecclesiastical superior. In a word, the cardinal's refusal to deal with the regulations of the Brothers was certainly inspired by heaven, for any approval he might have given would not have helped at all to secure that of the Holy See and might even have prevented it.<sup>34</sup>

## CHAPTER XVI

*Praise of Brother Barthélemy; heroic examples given by De La Salle at Saint Yon after his resignation; through obedience, he goes to Paris to transfer to the Society the 5,200 livres left to him by a will; he stays at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas, where his virtue shines forth; the testimony of the superiors of that holy place.*

The result of the assembly that we have spoken of was to re-establish discipline, the early form of government, and the former practices, along with the primitive fervor of the Institute. What had been decided at the meeting was confirmed unanimously by the Brothers in the various houses, even as it had been passed unanimously by the Directors who made up the assembly. On his return, each Director told the Brothers what had taken place: the election of Brother Barthélemy and the ratification of the rules in the new revision. The decisions met with entire submission of mind and agreement of wills.

The sorrow of the Brothers over losing De La Salle as their Superior was somewhat alleviated by the choice of Brother Barthélemy to succeed him. Brother Barthélemy was loved because he had a mild, compliant, and easy-going manner; at the same time, he was humble, prudent, and somewhat retiring. Always ready to follow the wisest counsels, he was never attached to his own way of thinking. Not relying too much on his own insights, he was eager to have recourse to the prudence of others. When he consulted them, he did so with great openness and simplicity. He was quite prepared to let a matter be decided by the judgment of others rather than by his own.

The position of Director of Novices, which he had occupied for a long time with great effectiveness, had won for him the confidence of all the younger Brothers who had been trained by him. The role of

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34. Suggesting that De Noailles was out of favor in Rome for opposing the Bull *Unigenitus*.

Superior, which he had been exercising in fact for some years with so much prudence, in De La Salle's presence as well as in his absence, had also won for him the hearts of the older Brothers. Everything went on as usual, and it was not easy to see that a new Superior had been selected in the Institute. The only thing new among the Brothers was the emulation they displayed in hastening to send their new Superior their tokens of respect and genuine proofs of submission. The virtuous Brother Barthélemy did not occupy his position for very long, because he died on 7 June 1720, about a year after De La Salle's death and three years after his election.

Still, he remained at his post long enough to give the Brothers ample proof of his virtue and to win for himself a great store of merit before God. He governed during difficult times, and his patience was tried on more than one unpleasant occasion. The Constitution *Unigenitus*, about which men's minds at the time were so overwrought and so divided in France, brought him more than one cross. Not that he took it upon himself to issue dogmatic pronouncements. After De La Salle's example, he never broke his silence on this subject, save when he was obliged to declare his faith or to uphold that of his inferiors. But since several of them lived in dioceses where Quesnel boasted a large number of adherents, the blows aimed at the Brothers fell upon their Superior. Pens skilled in writing in a style that was harsh, bitter, and venomous sent him letters filled with invective and threats. Tongues practiced in spreading lies and in ruining reputations while recommending charity honored him, as they honored so many others, by hurling at him the most odious epithets and the most biting insults.

The zeal that Brother Barthélemy displayed in keeping his Brothers firmly united with the Holy See and submissive to the majority of the French clergy was the only motive for their anger at him, but he considered their opposition an honor and acted with so much wisdom under these attacks that if his enemies could not love him, they could not at least refuse him the tribute of praise which he deserved by his meek, humble, and prudent conduct. By his equanimity and the serenity of his countenance, he strove to keep his pains and infirmities hidden, even from those who lived with him. He did not let it appear that he was hurt either by the outrages which he so often received from without or by the importunities and even the harsh treatment he sometimes received from certain indiscreet persons.

To complete his encomium, let me add that he never forgot who he was in respect to his predecessor. He always remembered the gulf that separates a priest from a layman, the master from the disciple, the

father from the child, the second Superior of the Society from its Founder. A docile disciple, he spoke only because the master was resolved to keep silence. A submissive son, he took over the government of the family as an elder brother only when the father had turned this duty over to him. As a simple Brother, he never lost sight of the sacred character which raised De La Salle above him; he never performed any act of authority in his presence except with embarrassment and when obliged to do so by the humility of the one who had left the first place only to be sure of never leaving the last one.

In spite of De La Salle's firm resolve not to take part in any business, he could not prevent Brother Barthélemy from turning to him every time he felt the need of his insight. The Brother Superior did nothing without consulting De La Salle and followed his advice with the docility of a child. If De La Salle spoke to the Superior with all the respect and deference of an inferior, the Superior followed the example he had before his eyes and seized the opportunity of humbling himself, in his turn, before the one who gave him such an example of this virtue. By this modest, humble, and prudent conduct, the new Superior showed himself a worthy son of the holy Founder and acquired the veneration and trust of the Brothers.

These reciprocal examples of humility, union, and good understanding between the two highest authorities in the Institute produced the most desirable effects. They reinforced the union among the other members of the body and encouraged emulation among the inferiors; the whole family returned to its early spirit and its former fervor. That is what the Brothers owe to the wise government of their second Superior, who died full of merit and whose passing was regretted by all who knew him.

### De La Salle in retirement

Once De La Salle had attained the condition of an inferior which he had so long and so ardently desired, he no longer thought of anything save of fulfilling the obligations it imposed and of practicing the virtues it required. He reserved to himself no mark of distinction, and as a reward for all he had done for the Brothers, he wanted nothing but the right to practice submission and dependence. The only privilege he demanded was to be forgotten, slighted, and permitted to die in this state of abjection in which he had spent his entire life since the establishment of the Christian Schools. He could be seen, like the most fervent novice, punctually observing the most insignificant details and following all the regulations with scrupulous exactitude.

The Founder no longer remembered what he had once been nor even what he still was, save to draw thence new grounds for confusion and humiliation. The titles of Founder and Superior which he had found onerous and crucifying were so completely effaced from his mind and from his behavior that it seemed he had never possessed them and that he had never had anything else to do all his life but obey. As for his sacerdotal quality, he let it appear only when he ascended the altar and when he sat in the tribunal of penance. These were the only functions that he reserved to himself: to say Mass for the Brothers, to hear their confessions, and to address exhortations and instructions to the boarders. In all else he behaved like a priest who has been deprived of his functions, like a minister of the altar who has been condemned to spend the rest of his life doing penance in a monastery.

With this in mind, he refused all demonstrations of confidence which the Brothers offered him and which they could not help showing to the wise and virtuous father who had brought them up. *I am nothing; go to the Brother Superior*, he said to those who came to him asking for permissions. When others wrote to him to ask his advice, he would not even read the letters. If he consented to do so later on, it was only through obedience, considering as an order the request of Brother Barthélemy asking him to do so. His answers to those who had consulted him were of a sort to correct his correspondents for their supposed fault, for he concluded the advice he gave them by saying, *Take care not to address yourself to me on such topics again. You have a Superior; you should lay your difficulties before him. As for myself, I do not wish to interfere any more in anything; I want only to think of death and to bewail my sins.* Thus the saintly priest closed his life in abjection, obedience, and dependence.

Brother Barthélemy was embarrassed on seeing De La Salle so often at his feet to ask for the slightest permissions. Because he wished to spare him the inconvenience of this behavior and himself the confusion of commanding a priest, his confessor and father, he gave him a general permission to do anything he thought proper. But such a perfectly obedient man could not agree to that. It robbed him of the merit of all acts of humility, which displeased him, so he did not wish to make use of this permission. To confirm by his actions the teachings he had given his disciples on this subject, he used to ask permission for the least thing.

The Founder never presided over any community exercises, not even spiritual exercises such as vocal or interior prayer, where his sacerdotal character conferred a certain preeminence on him. The



place he occupied during these holy exercises was that of the publican: the last place nearest the door. He did not venture to change the hour of Mass without express permission. When he went to recreation with the serving Brothers, it was on condition that one of them should preside. The presiding Brother, whom he now considered as his superior, beheld him asking for permission each time he wished to speak. If they tried to show him any special mark of distinction, he would at once withdraw and finish the recreation with one of the young boarders.

As much as they tried to have De La Salle occupy the first place in the refectory, they never succeeded on this point in overcoming his humility, which aspired only to the last place; he took his seat among the serving Brothers. Only with difficulty did they prevail on him to bless the table. If he gave in to this request, it was only because they showed him that his priestly character did not permit a Brother to give the blessing in his presence. When one of the novices came to sweep his modest cell and asked his permission to do so, he replied, *I don't want anything, my dear Brother; go find out whether they want me to go outside.* He would never have allowed anyone to do him such a service of humility and charity if the Brother Superior had not ordered it.

Finally, this saintly priest was for the Brothers an accomplished model of perfection. Each act he performed was an example of virtue. Humble, submissive, obedient, simple—he had reached that happy stage of spiritual childhood which Jesus Christ himself praised. Relieved of his burdens and able to concentrate on himself, he made his own sanctification his only concern. Whatever the world could offer meant nothing to him. He could no longer turn his thoughts aside from God, from whom nothing could distract him. Since his own perfection was his sole aim, he sought it without ceasing, without allowing even the slightest occasion of furthering it to escape him, as the Wise Man advises. I would not be saying too much if I affirmed that those venerable ancients of the famous monastery described by Saint John Climacus, who obeyed their superior like children, would have found a master of humility and obedience in De La Salle and could have modeled themselves after him in this style of living. The more the saintly priest sought to humble and to belittle himself, the more God took pleasure in enlightening him. The fact which we are about to relate shows that the state of abjection is also a state of enlightenment and the true school where Jesus Christ imparts it.

### The proposal for a foundation in Canada

Monsieur Charon, a very zealous man and one of the founders of the Hospice of Canada, had come to Paris on various business matters. He strongly insisted on having four Brothers and on bringing them back with him to that country. His pleas were finally heard. Brother Barthélemy gave his consent, De La Salle agreed, and in concert with the Brother Assistant, who was called to Saint Yon especially for this matter, they chose the Brothers whom they destined for this mission. Two days later, when the Brother Assistant was about to return home, he went early in the morning to say good-bye to the servant of God. He was much surprised to hear De La Salle say, *Oh, my God! What are you about to do? You are going to undertake something which will cause you an infinite number of complications and which will have disastrous consequences.* Brother Barthélemy, who had come in just then, stated that there was no way to back out now, that everything was agreed upon and settled. In fact, the money had already been paid for the expenses of the voyage.

But the saintly man simply repeated, *What are you about to do?* Then he said no more. This repeated remonstrance so impressed the Brothers that they did not proceed any further in this matter. After breaking off the project, they did not have long to wait before finding out that the whole business was a pious fraud. The good M. Charon admitted that he had planned to place the four Brothers in separate localities, with four country parish priests, to teach the children there. In other words, he wanted to detach these Brothers from the Institute and expose them to lose their vocation or to be cast adrift. They would surely have been lost to the Society, since they would no longer have had either contact or relations with it. They would really have left it by ceasing to live in community and to practice its rules. In a word, as we have seen previously, De La Salle never wanted to send his disciples to country schools, because he would have had to dispatch them singly and abandon them to their own conduct.

The Brothers chosen for the Canadian venture were four men distinguished by their merit and virtue, since that is the sort of person needed for working among the Iroquois and the savages. De La Salle felt that they would be lost to him if they were sent. It was no doubt thanks to a supernatural inspiration that he found out about what was proposed. How else could he have foreseen the future and have read into the heart of M. Charon? The latter was obliged to substitute other persons for the Brothers, but he did not bring them with him to Canada, since he died on his return journey. He had secured from the king

letters patent for six schoolmasters, but his death led to the failure of the whole scheme, and his plans were buried with him.

### Popular reaction to De La Salle's resignation

Meanwhile, the news of De La Salle's resignation had reached Paris, and on every side, people judged him differently, each one speaking of the matter according to his own dispositions. Esteem and praise from men had not often been his lot, and it was rare that anything he did met with anything but blame. His latest gesture was condemned by all those who knew him. Some said that he was demeaning his priestly character by subjecting himself to persons who lacked it. They had not remembered that Saint Anthony, Saint Hilarion, Saint Pachomius, and so many other abbots who were not priests were at the head of an infinite number of solitaries and monks, among whom there were priests, and that priests accepted obedience like the others. If they had recalled that Saint Francis was only a deacon, yet numbered among his disciples priests and even doctors of rare merit, they would have dropped this accusation.

Others taxed the Founder with imprudence and considered him guilty of ruining his Institute by entrusting it to a simple Brother. Some accused him of laziness or pusillanimity and attributed to him a love of repose and, by his fleeing from the work, a preference for a state of undisturbed tranquillity over a position surrounded by cares and difficulties. His enemies gave an even more sinister twist to his action. According to them, his subtle and refined pride was at the bottom of it all. He sought in the lowest place the esteem and praise of men which he had not been able to secure in the highest. The servant of God, who thought only of preparing himself to face God's judgments, paid scant attention to all these comments from men. God alone was his entire preoccupation, and all the chatter that went on about him seemed to him like so much nonsense. He laughed when he was forced to hear about it.

While the servant of God was thus entirely taken up with the repose and the solitude where he could occupy himself with the thought of heaven and with putting his soul into that state of purity needed to enter the divine sanctuary, he received a letter which called him to Paris to collect a legacy left to him. It was not a gift; it was restitution made by Monsieur Rogier, who in the past had been so intimately associated with him in works of piety and who had lent his name for the purchase of the house at Saint-Denis of which we spoke previously.

### De La Salle returns to Paris to collect a legacy

De La Salle reached Paris on 4 October 1717, in obedience to the orders of Brother Barthélemy, who had strongly urged him to secure for the Society the restitution of the money, which had been made to look as though it were a donation. He took up lodging in the celebrated Seminary of Saint Nicolas, a revered institution in which many ministers of the altar were trained and from which so many saintly priests came. He did not want to stay at the Brothers' house, fearing the tokens of submission, respect, and confidence which his children owed their father and which they were quite prepared to offer him. Perhaps, too, he wished to avoid reawakening the animosity of some of his rivals, an animosity which had not yet died down and one which might have provoked new trouble for the Brothers.

In the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, De La Salle showed himself, as he did everywhere else, the perfect priest. As a star, he had gone to shine in a different heaven and to shed rays of ecclesiastical virtues and spirit in a place which was one of the sources thereof. Let us listen to one of the superiors of that seminary on this subject. Here is the letter he wrote to Brother Barthélemy after the death of the servant of God.

"We are most pleased, dear Brother, to learn that you intend to give to the public the life of De La Salle, your venerable Founder. The clergy will be edified by the outstanding examples of virtue which he provided and especially by his zeal for the instruction of youth and the establishment of the Christian Schools. We enjoyed the honor and the advantage of having this holy priest with us in our seminary from 4 October 1717 to 7 March 1718. As you see, the time was short, but it sufficed for us to recognize in him the special gifts God had given him and the graces which he strove to keep hidden from men. We observed in him especially an extraordinary zeal and fervor for his perfection, deep humility, and a great love for mortification and poverty. Zeal for his own perfection was manifested 1) in the fact that not content with being present every day without exception at all the spiritual exercises—morning interior prayer, spiritual conferences, the Divine Office, and the like—he further mentioned to me that he spent two and a half to three hours daily in meditation; 2) in the entire dependence on the seminary rule in which he wished to live, for he was always the first to go to the exercises, and for him there was no unimportant point of rule. He would not have wanted—I do not say to go out into the city—even to speak to an outsider without asking for permission.

“In vain did I tell him several times that he enjoyed all permissions in our house and that this point of the regulations did not apply to him. It was impossible to make him accept any such dispensation. His humility seemed equally admirable to us, and it was universal. He did nothing without asking for advice, and the opinions of others always seemed to him better than his own. In conversations, he listened more willingly than he spoke, and never was he heard to say anything to his own praise. Filled with horror and scorn for the worldliness which a number of ecclesiastics show in their external behavior and in their manner of dress, he kept his own garb most simple and wore clothes made of very ordinary serge.

“All the rest of his external appearance corresponded with this, and that is partly the reason why I said that he loved poverty. His affection for this virtue showed itself in the generosity he displayed in renouncing everything and divesting himself of everything so as to promote the establishment of his Community, in the precautions he took to teach the Brothers who compose it and to perpetuate among them a spirit of simplicity and of detachment from all that is not absolutely necessary for one’s life and support.

“His mortification, finally, threw us all into confusion while it also edified us. When he first came to the seminary, he never wished to accept a room with a fireplace, and instead of warming himself with the others, at least during recreation time, he preferred to converse with some seminarian in the halls or in the garden in order to have a chance of suggesting to him some holy thought and detachment from the things of earth. As his modesty, his recollected air, and the unction of his words made it impossible to doubt that he practiced most faithfully what he preached, it is impossible to gauge the good he did in this seminary.

“Some have tried erroneously to represent him as a man with a penchant for some of the new doctrines. Wise and prudent as he was, he rarely spoke of such matters, because he knew that such discourses serve no useful purpose and often cause harm. Nevertheless, he was most submissive and attached to the decisions of the Church. I recall that he warmly approved a community of his Brothers, in a large city in Provence, who preferred to incur disgrace on the part of the highest authorities in the diocese rather than to do what was required of them. It seemed to them contrary to the respect that their Founder had always taught them to profess for the authority of the Holy See and of the Church of France.

“Such, my dear Brother, is the testimony that I feel I owe to the late De La Salle, whose death was deeply regretted by all of us here,

to you, to the public, as well as to our own edification. If God hears our prayers, De La Salle will continue to live in his Community by the fidelity which it will display in never deviating from the maxims and examples of zeal for the instruction of children, for simplicity, poverty, edification, obedience, and profound veneration for the bishops, and so on. I recommend myself to your prayers, and I remain, with complete esteem for your Community and for yourself in particular, my dear Brother. At the Seminary of Saint Nicolas, 1 March 1721."

This letter truly constitutes a thorough eulogy, one which did not come from the lips or the pen of a simple person who is easily edified or who, by a fortunate preconception in favor of virtue, tends to find it everywhere. Ordinary people, on slight appearances, often canonize men who are saints only on the outside, but those who understand what virtue really is do not bestow this title so freely, because they know how hard it is to deserve it. Even ordinary virtue, when it is easily seen, attracts a lot of attention in the world, because it is a light shining in the darkness and because, when surrounded by vices and passions, genuine merit shows up by its uniqueness. But in places where piety reigns, where examples of virtue are an everyday occurrence, where people are striving after perfection, a virtue which appears notable must indeed be eminent. One must be nearly perfect to shine forth among the perfect and to be considered a saint. This is what the reader must keep in mind concerning the letter just cited.

De La Salle lived in that seminary a life so retired and solitary that the persons who knew him could scarcely find him there. He withdrew from everyone's eyes and avoided dealing with others, even with the Brothers, whom he denied the consolation of coming to see him. Only his Brother Director had that privilege, and he was allowed to make use of it only on rare occasions. If some of the Brothers who could not put aside their confidence in him wished to profit by his advice, they had to use some stratagem to surprise him, and when they did so, the first counsel he gave them was to refer to Brother Superior and to get accustomed to doing without him, since he had not long to live. That lesson, so calculated to detach them from his own person, did not satisfy them. Because they could not lay aside their character as his sons, they begged him to preserve his character of father in their regard until death. Ultimately, he succeeded in causing all hearts to be opened toward Brother Barthélemy, and he had the consolation of seeing all the Brothers perfectly submissive to the one whom they themselves had chosen as their Superior, of seeing them faithful to reveal their inner dispositions to him in all candor, to honor him with perfect confidence, and to follow his advice faithfully.

De La Salle had been summoned to Paris to conclude the business of the legacy of which we spoke. He went to a notary, who read to him the article that concerned him. In it he was referred to as the Superior of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. That title, which he felt no longer belonged to him, alarmed his humility and seemed to him contrary to the truth. After answering that he was no longer the Superior of the Brothers, he added that he could not use a title which he no longer possessed, and he refused to sign the document in that way. In vain, the notary pointed out to De La Salle that the title was not important, did not deserve any attention and still less any scruple on his part. Nevertheless, he added, it was necessary to use it, since the acceptance had to be couched in the exact terms contained in the testament.

The humble priest, as strongly attached to truth as he was to abjection, continued to resist. Unable to bring himself to use a title to which he no longer had a claim, he preferred to renounce his right to the legacy rather than to receive it at the expense of truth and humility. So he withdrew, leaving the money in the hands of the notary, who persisted in refusing to give it to him except in the terms laid down in the will. Three months went by this way, during which it proved impossible to constrain the humility of the servant of God. Finally, the notary, edified by this resistance, came to the conclusion that he could perhaps allow the omission of the word Superior without having to fear any untoward consequences. He felt sure that this kind of conduct would not be emulated very often and that if he had met one man ready to refuse money and an honorable title—and to refuse the one because of the other—he would not soon see a second case of that kind. That was how De La Salle finally signed the receipt of acceptance and received under the guise of a donation what was really an act of restitution.

### Acquisition of the property at Saint Yon

About the same time, Divine Providence, which destined the property of Saint Yon for the Brothers, caused events to turn out in such a way that what seemed foreordained to drive them away from their beloved solitude was what put them in possession of it. The Marquise de Louvois, who owned the house, died. Her heirs sent word to the Brothers to vacate the property as soon as possible and to return it to them. The Brothers, who had been living there for fourteen years, were surprised and disappointed; their Founder felt the same way. There seemed no possibility of finding another place so well suited to

the young Society, situated like this one on the outskirts of one of the principal cities of the kingdom. Of all the places that commerce and industry cause to flourish, this was the one nearest Paris, for which it was actually the port and warehouse.

The property, which they had rented so cheaply, enjoyed pure, fresh air, very different than that of Rouen. It was in the country and had large gardens favoring both the piety and the health of the Brothers and offering them an agreeable place of retirement. De La Salle was delighted to stay there, because he could remain as solitary as he desired and because no other location was so suitable for the novitiate. After having been forced to transfer it from one place to another, he had established the novitiate at Saint Yon permanently, and he desired that it should not leave there, unless Divine Providence brought it to some similar place near Paris, the heart of the kingdom, which is also the center of all good works and the place in France where the Brothers find the most favor, success, and resources for their development.

Faced with the unwelcome necessity of giving up on short notice a house so beloved and so necessary, father and disciples had no other recourse than to turn to God, for no consideration could be expected from the heirs. When there is property to be divided up, nobody wants to speak of doing favors. De La Salle exhorted his followers to abandon themselves to Divine Providence and to hope against hope that they might yet see themselves in peaceful possession of a place which seemed made for them. He even told them that they should consider buying it. This surprised them, for the extreme poverty which had accompanied them ever since their foundation had not deserted them. Lacking revenue and money, they had sought their daily sustenance in the granary of the heavenly Father. De La Salle knew better than they that none of the houses of the Institute had any money; they could only honor the intentions of Divine Providence. So it was from that source alone that they should expect the funds needed to buy the house at Saint Yon.

To win such a blessing, prayers were not spared. The great desire of the Brothers to have the house lent ardor to their supplications, and in the end they were effective. De La Salle found in the treasure house of our common Father enough money to conclude the purchase. The first sums came from the legacy which we mentioned above; the rest was furnished by generous people who were interested in helping the Institute. All came about in such a way that the hand of God clearly appeared, for it was just at that time that the article of Rogier's legacy concerning De La Salle came up for execution.



The old servant who was to enjoy, in the first place, the 220 or 250 livres of income from the estate of Monsieur de Plancy had died, leaving the right to this money to our holy priest. It was an annuity, not a lump sum such as was needed to purchase Saint Yon. However, God provided the money by inspiring De Plancy to offer to pay the capital instead of the annuity which was due. Charity alone was the motive which inspired this offer; it was only to be helpful to the Brothers, who needed ready money, as this gentleman learned, that he agreed to donate the principal. His proposal was accepted with great joy, and the funds were used to make the down payment on the property of Saint Yon, which was eventually purchased.

Divine Providence also favored this acquisition in a very obvious manner, because Abbé de Louvois, the testamentary executor of his mother's will, was eager to do a favor for De La Salle. De Louvois promised the Brothers to give them the first option to buy the place and offered it to them at a very reasonable price so as to make its purchase easier for them. As we have already mentioned, the name of De La Salle was venerated in the entire family of the former prelate of Reims, Archbishop Le Tellier. De Louvois, aware of who and what the Founder of the Christian Schools had been and was, of what he had done and suffered, considered him a saint and was delighted to have a chance to do him a favor.

Still, despite all De Louvois's goodwill toward the servant of God, the enemy of all good came near foiling his generous dispositions through the intrigues of some people who wanted to include in the contract certain clauses for their own advantage which would have proved very disadvantageous to the Brothers. The projected contract had been broken off twice, and the transaction seemed to have failed. Finally, after two months of uncertainty, it was brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and the property of Saint Yon was acquired under the names of two of the principal Brothers.<sup>35</sup> De La Salle did not want his name mentioned in the deeds. Content with having the merit before God, he did not want to have the honor before men and took care to hide his name, although he was the one who furnished the money that closed the deal. For this, he sent Brother Barthélemy to Paris and gave him the legacy which had been left to him, together with an act by which he renounced this legacy in favor of the Institute.

His joy was great indeed on seeing his children in possession of a property so favorable to recollection and prayer, so convenient for

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35. The Institute, as such, was not yet a legal corporate entity and could not buy, sell, or own property.

the novitiate, and so necessary for his Institute. It was, however, only after his death that the Brothers gained undisputed possession of the place, thanks to the letters patent granted them by the king. In the meantime, they were often disturbed and several times were alarmed, both from within and from without, on the subject of this purchase. People eager for gain and incited by the malice of others were working underhandedly to put the Brothers out. They did not despair of seeing the property fall back into their hands some day. They felt that it had been torn from their ancestral heritage and that their avidity gave them some right to it.

Moreover, one of the Brothers in whose name the house had been bought died, leaving his property rights to the other Brother.<sup>36</sup> Although the survivor had too much religious spirit to be tempted to take advantage of the situation for his own profit at the expense of the Society and to appropriate the domain for which he had merely lent his name, still it was something to be apprehensive about. There had already been an example of such dishonesty among the Brothers, as the reader will recall. The letters patent put an end to the alarms and worries by confirming the Brothers in the ownership of Saint Yon.

De La Salle is urged to return to Saint Yon

The peace and quiet that the founder of the Brothers enjoyed at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet attached him to the place, so that it was not easy to get him away from it. Considering himself a mere novice in the pursuit of perfection, he thought that the seminary was just the right place for him. Over sixty-five years of age, he needed to begin again, like a young cleric, to acquire the ecclesiastical virtues, thinking that he had not yet reached the first degrees thereof. Thus, less important in his own eyes, more submissive, and more docile than a young man who has just been tonsured and who comes with juvenile ardor to draw from seminary life, as from its source, the true ecclesiastical spirit and to allow himself to be trained in piety by experienced masters, he wished to renew in the Seminary of Saint Nicolas the practices of fervor which he had learned at Saint Sulpice when he was sixteen or seventeen years of age and to close in the house at Saint Nicolas the life of dependence and of interior abnegation which he had begun at Saint Sulpice.

De La Salle's entire ambition was to die like Jesus Christ in the practice of obedience, humility, and mortification. Hence his heart

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36. Brother Barthélemy had died; Brother Thomas was the other Brother.

kept him bound to a spot where he found it easy to exercise these virtues. Such ties which the purest virtue weaves were not easy to break, and the Brothers were not heeded when they urged the servant of God to come back to them. They had at their head a Superior General elected from their own ranks, one whom they themselves had chosen. He was wise, and his conduct corresponded with the opinion everyone had of his solid virtue. They had at last become proprietors of a stable establishment very well suited for the novitiate. Once these two goals had been achieved, the holy Founder had nothing more to do in the Society. If he were to go back to Saint Yon, he felt he would be occupying a place uselessly. That was what he replied to those of his children who begged him to give himself back to them.

Brother Barthélemy, who agreed with his good father in everything else, did not share his views on this point. Thinking that De La Salle's presence was more necessary than ever for the Institute, he suffered grievously in being deprived of it and used every means to shorten the time of the Founder's absence. He feared lest being already rather advanced in age, infirm, and worn out physically, the servant of God might die outside the bosom of his own family and that other hands might have to close his eyes. Moreover, he and the other Brothers had witnessed for so many years the heroic acts of virtue that their Founder had practiced during his life that they did not want to miss those that would bring that life to a close.

Their reasons were valid, but they were not the kind that carried much weight with the humble Founder or that could have prevailed on him to come home. So Brother Barthélemy was careful not to appeal to them. He insisted, rather, on the fact that it was only proper for the father to live with his children, on the desire of the Brothers to see him among them again, and on the duty he had of not abandoning the Society he had founded. The holy Founder, impressed by such arguments, took refuge in his incapacity to do anything at all. Claiming that he was entirely useless, he wished to persuade the Brothers that the Institute should consider it a blessing from heaven to be rid of him.

I need to be led, not to lead. It is time for me to begin working at my own sanctification after having striven for so long to sanctify others. Since God gives me such a splendid occasion to do so, I must profit by it. If I let it escape, that would be a fault with which I would have to reproach myself for the remainder of my days. I have commanded long enough; the time for obeying has come, and I need to teach you by my example to prefer the state of dependence to that of

authority. I have turned my back, most fortunately, on all cares foreign to my salvation. I am released from all the distractions which interrupt my communing with God. Why should I trouble the sweet repose I enjoy to take up again those solitudes? After serious reflection, I am much inclined to end my days here.

This refusal only made the Brothers' desire for the return of their holy Founder all the stronger and more pressing. However, seeing that they could not convince him unless they invoked arguments based on authority, they turned to the superiors of the seminary and begged them to use obedience to prevail on De La Salle to come back to his own house, since he wanted to stay in theirs only to be able to practice obedience in all things. The superiors could not turn down this request which, although contrary to what they would have preferred, was so reasonable. Delighted to have with them so saintly a priest, they would gladly have paid him to stay, but his own children were asking them to make him leave. By obliging him to go back to the Brothers, the priests consented to lose him. It was a real sacrifice for them but one they generously made.

The compliment they paid to the holy priest to get him to go back to the Brothers could not have been more gracious or more effective. They told him that as he was the model for the whole seminary, he was a consolation and a joy for them in the Lord, that they considered his stay among them as a favor from heaven, and that to keep him, they would have gone to any length if God's interests and those of the Institute were not opposed to theirs. However, since the two were in competition with each other, the former should prevail over the latter. They felt it to be their duty to point out to him that he owed his presence to his own family. It would be a shame for them to deprive his children of the father whom they still needed. In this case, justice and charity, courtesy and duty, all made it an obligation for them to ask him to give in and to point out that he could no longer keep himself away from his flock without exposing several of those who belonged to it to fall into false ways, without provoking murmurs on the part of some and complaints and tears on the part of all. He should believe what they told him on this subject, all the more since it was only with great reluctance that they presented this request to him on the part of the Brothers and that they were acting as mediators between them and him only at the expense of their own inclinations.

The humble priest did not allow himself to be dazzled by such an honorable and flattering address which came from the heart rather than from the lips and which might have nourished self-love in any

person less solidly established in self-contempt than he. After all, those who spoke thus were men of high merit and distinguished virtue, and it would have been easy for him to feel satisfied with himself on hearing them. At any rate, he replied that since he was incapable of governing, his presence would be useless to the Brothers, while his absence would cause them no harm. He added that since he did not yet know how to obey properly, it was to his advantage not to leave a place where he was only learning how to practice this virtue.

This reply was worthy of him. It was to be expected, and nobody was surprised, but he did not foresee that his own words would be used against him; he did not suspect what would happen next. For they told him that since he made obedience his law, he should do through obedience what was asked of him. Because obedience was indeed his supreme law, he submitted without a word as soon as obedience was invoked. He immediately began to prepare for his return to Saint Yon, where the Brother who had replaced him as Superior was eagerly awaiting him.

It was a sacrifice on both sides when he said good-bye to his charitable hosts. Shared aspirations had brought them together, and virtue was the tie that cemented their friendship. The purer it was, the closer and more cordial it became. The separation was hard on both one side and the other. As they bewailed the departure of their friend, the priests in charge of the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet also regretted losing a saint. They deplored even more the absence of the spiritual benefits that his presence had afforded them and their students.

On his side, the Founder of the Christian Schools departed with extreme reluctance from a place which he regarded as the source of true clerical spirit in France, the site he had chosen as his resting place, where he longed to end his days in submission, dependence, humility, and continual prayer. In short, it was a major sacrifice for him to bid farewell to the virtuous priests, whom he honored as the fathers of so many holy ministers of the altar, men whose zeal, piety, and skill in the administration of the sacraments, in the instruction of the faithful, and in pastoral work give infinite honor to those who trained them.

Before leaving for Rouen, De La Salle paid the Brothers in Paris the visit that they had awaited with so much eagerness. Their joy was great, but it lasted only a short time, for he stopped in to see them in passing and only for a few moments, like Jesus Christ appearing to his Apostles after his resurrection in brief, fleeting moments which left their hearts filled with regret for his absence, mingled with the joy that

his momentary presence afforded them. Perhaps these good Brothers, giving way to their filial tenderness, might have imitated the holy women spoken of in the Gospel who, delighted at seeing their Divine Master alive once more and fearing that they might not be able to enjoy his presence as much as they wished, tried to retain him. The Brothers in Paris might have done the same, I say, if they had known that this was the last time they would see their holy Founder. No doubt, if they had realized that they would not meet him again on this earth, they would have thrown their arms about his neck, bedewed his face with their tears, and obliged him to mingle his with theirs as they embraced him as did the disciples of Saint Paul when they said farewell to him.

At least, all of them eagerly asked him for his last blessing. He hesitated to give it to them and would probably have refused if Brother Barthélemy, in begging him to do so, had not made the request sound like an order. The humble Founder, who considered himself as the least member of the Society and forgot all that he had been, did not dare deny himself a right which he could never lose, however lowly the position he might assume and to whatever obscuring of his priestly character he might have condemned himself, since he could never efface it. So, in the presence of Brother Barthélemy, whom he honored with deep reverence as his Superior, his humility did not permit him to perform this act which is a sign of preeminence, but the same humility, subject in all things to the voice of obedience, made it impossible for him to refuse as soon as the one whose requests were orders for him had spoken. Then, in company with Brother Barthélemy, he left for Saint Yon on 7 March 1718, some thirteen months before his death.

## CHAPTER XVII

*On his return to Saint Yon, De La Salle thinks only of preparing for death; the nearer death approaches, the more brightly shines his virtue; new examples of humility, obedience, zeal, and charity; persecution follows him even to his deathbed, and his honor receives a final blow when the archbishop of Rouen revokes the faculties granted to him.*

The Brothers at Saint Yon saw their Founder once more as an angel from heaven and welcomed him as they would have welcomed Jesus

Christ himself. His return brought them an increase of joy and of grace; his presence made itself felt by the benefits that accompanied it. Indeed, it was necessary to revive fervor, good order, perfect regularity, the spirit of recollection, silence, prayer, mortification, and obedience, which had suffered some diminution. After his return from Provence, the servant of God had indeed re-established Saint Yon in the peace, union, and tranquillity which had been altered in his absence, but he had not had time to revive the perfection which had reigned there at the beginning. His long absence had brought about at Saint Yon itself the same disorders that it had caused elsewhere.

To restore the primitive fervor of the house, more time was needed. As De La Salle had been called to Paris not long after he had returned to Saint Yon, his stay there had not been long enough to enable the mother of virtues to reconquer its first sway. It is well known how quickly and easily fervor can be lost and how much time and difficulty must be spent before it can be recovered again. We can say, however, that it was gradually coming back to Saint Yon when De La Salle departed for the last time and that when he returned, it reappeared with him. His example, his zeal, and his instructions rekindled the divine fire which he had ignited there before his departure for Provence.

The novices and Brothers of Saint Yon, happy at having recovered their master in perfection, vied with one another in profiting by the limited time they still had to enjoy his presence. It would seem that the Holy Spirit repeated to them the words of Jesus Christ to his Apostles, *Walk while you have the light*. Walk with giant strides in the way to heaven while you have the guide who will conduct you there. Take pains to follow his footsteps with ardor while you have him at your head. Take advantage of the light which his actions and words offer you, lest the shadows of tepidity, infidelity, and cowardice overcome you.

In their midst, De La Salle was like a torch which flared up more brightly as it approached its end. Like another Elias, *his words were ardent; he was all aflame and shone like a star in the firmament*. Entirely concentrated on preparing himself for death, he no longer lived save as a man belonging to the next world. He often spoke of it, and in spite of his attention to repress his soul's aspirations, he could not help allowing it to be seen that he was heartily tired of his exile on this earth and sighed unceasingly after heaven. The weight of years, the weakening of his powers, and the increase of his pain showed him that his end was near and that Divine Providence had destined for him a tomb at Rouen, since God had sent him to die at Saint Yon.

Moreover, the servant of God, feeling himself useless in this world and seeing his wishes finally fulfilled, no longer restrained his desire for death. As it delayed in coming, he begged God, if he so willed, to hasten the moment of his dissolution. For a long time, for too long a time, he had been living with these thoughts in mind. The Spirit of God warned him that it was time for him to go back to the One who had sent him. His task was accomplished; nothing further held him on earth. He desired to be delivered from the prison of his body and to be united with Jesus Christ. His pilgrimage here below seemed long to him, and all his yearnings were directed toward his heavenly country. To make himself more worthy of it day by day, he sought to mark the final moments of his life by some act of virtue. As though he wished to leave to his disciples at every step some trace of his charity, zeal, humility, and obedience, he went about giving examples of these virtues.

De La Salle had so completely forgotten what he had been and what he still was that seeing him, a person might have taken him for what he pretended to be: the least of all. If his garb and tonsure had not shown who he was, nobody could have believed his rank; everyone would have taken him for a serving Brother. Nothing in him recalled what he had been, what he had given up, what he still was, or what was due him. It was entirely against his wishes that the Brothers did not forget, as completely as he himself had forgotten, that he belonged to one of the first families of Reims, that he had been a canon of an illustrious metropolitan church, that he had given up everything—family, home, canonry, and wealth—to follow Jesus Christ.

It was even less possible to recognize by any natural sally which might escape him or by any sudden movement of self-love that he was the first Superior and Founder of his Society, the father, director, and leader of the Brothers. He was so submissive, humble, and obedient that no one could have guessed that he had ever commanded or had ever done anything else but obey. He was seen speaking to the Brother Superior with the respect a child shows to his father and with the reverence he would have displayed at the feet of the Sovereign Pontiff. Nor should his attitude surprise anyone, for this humble priest saw only Jesus Christ in Brother Barthélemy, and he was as little concerned with his own personal qualities as he was attentive to those of that good Brother.

Views of faith had effaced from the mind of the servant of God the idea of what either of them was in himself. He was as unmindful of his noble birth, his dignity in the Church, his learning, and his merit as he was of the fact that the new Superior of the Institute lacked all



these human advantages. To say it all in a word, De La Salle, on his return to Saint Yon, had no other occupation than to abase himself and to obey. The nearer he approached the end of his life, the more there could be seen growing within him this desire of humbling himself and of departing for the next world without bringing along with him anything belonging to the old Adam.

The Brothers, eyewitnesses of all this, beheld this redoubling of his fervor with admiration, but they were frightened by it because they felt it foreshadowed his imminent death. They thought, and rightly so, that this light was about to be extinguished, since it flickered so brightly. In the course of his life, we have seen with what a holy passion he cultivated retirement in order to keep himself in God's company. Hence there was no reason for surprise if in the last days of his life, he was so careful to remain continually recollected.

The Founder's esteem for interior prayer was so great that he judged people on the progress they had made in it. Whoever did not apply himself to it with fervor was not, in his opinion, a very spiritual person, no matter what reputation he might have for virtue. In such a soul, he said, there is nothing great; it enjoys few of heaven's graces and gifts. Wherever the Spirit of God does not reign as master, the natural spirit dominates, and self-love does not yield place to charity. Now it is only through interior prayer that the soul empties itself of self and fills itself with God. His love for this holy exercise made him take up his pen to recommend it and to awaken an attraction for it by describing its advantages and its excellence.

In his little work entitled *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, he tried to smooth out the paths of interior prayer by explaining the manner of performing it well. He spoke to the novices every day on that noble subject in order to give them a liking for the divine food which offers a delightful manna to those who have had the courage to persevere while enduring its initial bitterness and aridity. It was after the interior prayer that they made before dinner, a prayer of which he asked them to give an account, that he entered with them into instructive and interesting details. At first, he opened their minds to the mistakes they had committed in it, whether out of negligence or from lack of understanding; then he enlightened them as to the manner in which they should have proceeded. Next, he read them some pages of his book and taught them how to spend the time of interior prayer usefully.

But as he knew that the spirit of interior prayer is not something easily acquired and that success depends on the preparation they bring to it, he taught them how to make interior prayer outside the

appointed time by accustoming themselves to converse with God during the day, by making his presence familiar to them, by watching carefully over their senses, and by applying themselves to perform all their actions for God in union with those of Jesus Christ.

To help them enter into such a spiritual life, he composed for them a collection of choice sayings, lively and ardent sentiments, various instructions—both short and enlightening—and prayers of all sorts. His intention was to furnish them an arsenal of spiritual arms against the suggestions of the evil one and against useless thoughts which, while amusing the soul, fill it with vanities and often, by exciting its passions, leave it empty of God.

### De La Salle's influence on the residents at Saint Yon

Moreover, De La Salle's continual prayer was not a state of idleness, nor was it unfruitful in the house at Saint Yon. All those who lived there felt the influence of the lights and graces which he derived from prayer. The zeal with which it inspired him made him attentive to every opportunity for practicing charity toward the boarders, old and young, who resided in the house under the guidance of the Brothers. He visited the older ones frequently. They badly needed such help. Because of their evil conduct, they had been locked up by the authority of their parents or by court order. They were doing involuntary penance, which, as a rule, helps people very little to amend their lives or to expiate their sins. These young men, blinded by their passions and hardened in vice, were not easy to reach. Often enough, their captivity made them bellicose and difficult to approach. The desire of regaining the liberty which they had abused occupied them wholly and blocked their ears to the pious exhortations addressed to them. If they paid attention and seemed docile and open to good impressions, it was often only through hypocrisy and dissimulation. By pretending to be converted, they hoped to win their deliverance.

It is easy to understand why these libertines were in no mood to hear any talk about God or penance. Persons of ordinary virtue, after all their remonstrances and exhortations, left them exactly as they were before. To win over such souls steeped in sin, it takes persons endowed with a special and superior grace. It takes saints whose approach puts the demons to flight and whose fiery words can melt such brazen hearts.

It did not take long to notice that De La Salle was in the habit of visiting them. True and solid conversions were the sign and the result of his action. First, he won their confidence, so that they turned over

the care of their consciences to him. In the hands of such a charitable and skillful physician, the most desperate maladies of their souls were cured; the most inveterate and seemingly incurable wounds began to heal. Everybody was surprised; the inmates themselves wondered at their prompt restoration. Their conversion brought about their liberation, but some of them did not wish to leave Saint Yon except to enter the cloister. Others, when they returned to the world, made known by their well-regulated and edifying lives that they had the good fortune to find in their prison a saint through whom grace and repentance had been given to them.

The young boarders who were sent to Saint Yon to be educated and trained by the Brothers also felt the effects of De La Salle's zeal. With great kindness, he heard all their confessions; neither their number nor their importunity seemed to weary or bore him. He made himself all things to all men, so as to gain all to Jesus Christ; he became a child to his children and often mingled with them at recreation time. On their side, they were delighted to see him and came thronging around him so that they might enjoy not only the pleasure of listening to and seeing him at close range but also that of showing him their affection. For they truly loved him; he had won their hearts. Then the servant of God, after seizing the favorable moment of giving them some short instruction proper to their age, bade them farewell, to their regret, not wishing to interfere with their innocent amusements. If one or another was lacking in docility or had fallen into some fault, he would take him aside, and by his advice and exhortations, reprimands and encouragement, he would usually leave that person changed or at least touched by his concern.

He heard the confessions of all the Brothers, numerous as they were, once or twice a week, and he did so with such fatherly tenderness that they could not remember them later on without being deeply moved. On Sundays and feast days, he addressed a fervent conference to the Brothers urging them to acquire virtue and to strengthen their fidelity to their vocation.

### Ill-treatment from within the Community

In his solitude, the saintly priest was not shielded from persecution. He found his path still strewn with thorns, both inside and outside the Community. After living for so long on the cross, it was only right that he should die there, after the example of Jesus Christ. Having lost his rank, so to speak, and being nothing any more among the Brothers, he gathered, as he had hoped to do, the benefits belonging to the

lowest place which he had chosen. Some, at times, seemed to overlook or to forget what he had been and what he still was in their regard, and they treated him in a manner that lacked the proper respect. What appears even more surprising and shows that God acts in a special way in dealing with his most distinguished servants, making everything concur to further their sanctification, is that one of his oldest disciples, who had never left the ranks of the serving Brothers, treated the servant of God with haughty insolence without being aware of it. If he had realized it, he would have felt a deep confusion. In fact, the Brother was truly filled with esteem and admiration for his father and considered him a saint. He had always remained inviolably faithful to the Founder in all the critical events we have spoken of. Yet, when he dealt with him, he treated him with arrogance and put the virtue of the servant of God to a severe test.

De La Salle was once invited by a priest in the city, a man with whom he had a close relationship, to say High Mass on Sunday in the parish church. He could not refuse the invitation to dine at the priest's house, because it would have been too far for him to return to Saint Yon. In addition, he did not wish to refuse an invitation from a friend whom he needed to cultivate and who had already done several favors for the Community and was in a position to do more. Yet, on his return home, the humble Founder was reprimanded by the Brother in question, who reproached him with violating the Rule by dining away from the house. On another occasion, the same Brother told the Founder that he was being fed and lodged at Saint Yon out of charity for a penniless priest who was no longer good for anything. On hearing this compliment, the servant of God could not help laughing. The one who had paid it to him had accustomed him to receiving others like it with mildness and serenity.

Another Brother, as ill-mannered as the former and much more stupid, put the humility of the servant of God to the test in another way. This Brother was a false mystic, a real fanatic, a man convinced that he had attained a high degree of interior prayer and was specially favored by God. Enraptured by his chimerical perfection, he considered De La Salle as just another ordinary priest, not sufficiently enlightened to guide him in his supposedly elevated mystical state. I suspect that the Brother would have ventured to dispute first place in the realm of mystical prayer with Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross. According to him, heaven had no more secrets for him, and he carried on familiar converse with its inhabitants. The Most Blessed Virgin and the angels paid him such frequent visits that he was no longer surprised on seeing them. All these marvelous favors were granted

him, he said, in a hayloft where he had arranged a sort of oratory for himself. The place, he declared, because of the miracles of grace which occurred there, was so sacred that nobody could enter it save barefooted. He saw himself surrounded with celestial light at the first step he took into it. Waiting for him were various citizens of the heavenly court who had come to see him. Books by Luis de Granada, Rodriguez, or Saint Francis de Sales and other similar authors, whose spirituality was solid and approved, were very elementary, according to him. This eagle, nourished only on heavenly manna and raised so far above the common ways, did not deign to read such ordinary material. Malaval and some of the other Quietist authors were the ones he liked, the only ones he judged worthy of himself.

In vain did De La Salle strive to open the eyes of the poor Brother, duped by his own self-love of the most blatant kind. Possessed by the demon of pride, he scorned the advice of a man whom he rated far below himself in spiritual awareness. The only thing the servant of God managed to persuade him to do was to consult someone else and to reveal to him his interior soul. The superiors called in a canon, a great friend of the Institute,<sup>37</sup> who had the patience to listen, at least in part, to the prideful reveries of the idiot who was enraptured by the prodigies of Satan when he transforms himself into an angel of light. Without being actually deranged, no one could have had such a meager endowment of common sense. He was really impoverished in spirit but not with the spiritual poverty which makes a man truly wise by making him truly humble. He suffered from a lack of intelligence as well as of grace. He spoke only to praise himself and to give others the same exalted idea he had of himself. The canon, surprised at first that this Brother should be seeking advice from an outsider, told him that he had in his Founder a new Moses or a new Saint Paul and that he would not find in any other the enlightenment he could find in De La Salle. But the Brother would not agree with that opinion. Furthermore, he was not looking for advice from anyone but himself. It was not to seek guidance but to cause his interior life to be admired that the fanatic consented to reveal himself. In vain did the canon try to open his eyes to his palpable illusions and to the evident pride he displayed. In vain did he strive to show him his errors and discover to him the operations of Satan in his pretended mystical experiences. The canon was classified by the Brother as one more of those who understand nothing about extraordinary spiritual ways, and his advice was scorned just as De La Salle's had been.

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37. No doubt, Blain himself.

Finally, the devil's work was completed. Some days later, the visionary, although a man of mature age, jumped over the walls enclosing the property, losing his hat in the process. He then presented himself at the Abbey of La Trappe, but he found the door shut. Not knowing what else to do, he applied and was accepted out of charity in the house of some nuns, who put him to work sweeping the church and helping the sacristan. A short time later, his life came to an end there, and he was no doubt quite surprised—when death overtook him, he who had thought himself to be richly endowed with grace—to find that he was naked, poor, and miserable. He died as his desertion merited and as his pride demanded: a prey to despair and abandoned by God.

#### Difficulties with the archdiocesan authorities

Outside the Community, De La Salle had much to suffer from his ecclesiastical superiors. Archbishop d'Aubigné of Rouen treated him with a harshness which has few parallels, and so did his vicar-general. The latter, although of a mild and obliging character, declared himself the enemy of the servant of God and did him all the evil turns he could. His position gave him many opportunities to do so. We can recognize in such treatment that God is pleased to make use of all kinds of hands to work at the sanctification of his elect and that even the just, at times, persecute other just men.

Among the many illustrious bishops whose virtue shone brightly, I dare say that France contained no other more pious, more regular, more zealous, more laborious, or more exemplary than Archbishop d'Aubigné. Yet it was that worthy prelate, still so deeply mourned in the archdiocese of Rouen by good Catholics and virtuous priests, who strewed De La Salle's path with sharp thorns and treated him as the most unworthy priest of this vast diocese.

The archbishop, who had been the vicar-general of Bishop Godet des Marais at Chartres, had given to De La Salle and to the Brothers at that time all sorts of tokens of his esteem and his kindness. But, as we mentioned earlier, he allowed himself to be so strongly prejudiced against them by the secret enemy of the servant of God that he would neither see the Brothers nor hear them spoken of. When the holy priest came to Rouen, he did not fail to present his respects to the archbishop, but he was always badly received and had to put up with his lack of consideration. On one occasion among others, the prelate, usually so moderate— even in dealing with ecclesiastics whose lives were a scandal, he respected their state and priestly character while

not sparing their personal shortcomings—addressed De La Salle in unmeasured and harsh language. The humble priest, who was already kneeling, no sooner heard the first words from his superior's lips than he prostrated himself on the floor to receive the rest of the admonition with due respect and humility. When Archbishop d'Aubigné had finished speaking, De La Salle arose without opening his mouth to excuse or justify himself, made a deep reverence to the one who had just treated him so unfairly, and then left. On that occasion, as on all the others, the humble Founder did not proffer a word of complaint or show any sign of displeasure. The Brother who had accompanied him, upset over what he had just heard, saw him leave the chancery as calm and collected as he had been on entering.

The vicar-general of whom we just spoke, far from trying to mollify the prelate and to defend De La Salle, seemed only to incite and embitter him the more. He, too, had allowed himself to be prejudiced against the servant of God by the late parish priest of Saint Sever, who was highly regarded by the archbishop and was indeed a worthy pastor. That priest, as we mentioned, never stopped criticizing the Brothers and their Superior, and as we explained before, he complained everywhere that they did not keep to the terms of the agreement reached between them and him. The agreement had become impossible to observe in certain of its articles, and it was entirely unreasonable to insist on their execution. Yet it was on this point that the priest, no doubt meaning well, continually accused De La Salle to his ecclesiastical superiors.

In vain did the saintly Founder try to point out that he and the Brothers were not violating any of the articles agreed upon, except those that experience had shown to be impossible to keep. In vain did he seek to demonstrate the inconveniences which had already resulted and the disorder which had ensued when they had tried to carry out such provisions. He was never listened to. The other side was not interested in knowing the truth. The vicar-general's prejudices had reached such a point in the last meeting when this matter had been discussed that he charged De La Salle with lying and accused him of that fault to the archbishop. A canon<sup>38</sup> who happened to be present when this imputation was made, indignant at seeing a man whom he honored as a saint blamed for a shameful prevarication, could not help raising his voice to justify him and said to the vicar-general that certainly either De La Salle had not explained himself properly or the

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38. Blain, who had been brought to Rouen by Archbishop d'Aubigné when the latter was transferred from the see of Noyon to that of Rouen.

vicar-general had not understood what he said and that a man like De La Salle was not capable of wishing to deceive his ecclesiastical superiors by a vulgar lie. In spite of all that the canon could say, the humble Founder was pronounced a liar and condemned to suffer the penalty for it by being suspended from his priestly functions.

The canon, appalled by this sentence even more than by the accusation, immediately went to the servant of God, who was already suffering from his last illness, and asked him for the correct information about the matter concerning which he was considered to have lied, without informing him of what had happened or warning him of the insulting incrimination against his sincerity. The pious De La Salle explained in a few words and with his usual straightforwardness what had happened, without suspecting that anyone was considering him guilty of lying. He had put the matter clearly to the vicar-general, who had misunderstood and had suspected him of practicing duplicity, had accused him of it, and had condemned him for it without any reason for doing so.

The canon returned with this information to the chancery, but it was all useless. God permitted this trial so that his servant might die, like Jesus Christ, in disgrace. The vicar-general still maintained that De La Salle had lied to him, and he would not listen to any explanation of what had happened. Not willing to admit that he had made a mistake, he had to maintain his story that the Founder of the Brothers was deceitful. The condemnation was then confirmed, and the canon, who had tried to demonstrate De La Salle's innocence, was asked to transmit to him orally the decision to revoke his priestly faculties.

The canon said nothing, since further discussion would have been useless, but he was not at all happy to be charged with such an odious commission, founded on a calumny dictated by false impressions and prejudice. He was not prepared to lend his cooperation to the passion of a man who, although moderate and kindly by nature, seemed to have forgotten on this occasion the gentleness which was so characteristic of him. Moreover, as De La Salle had only a short time to live, it was only right to show him some consideration. Even if he had been guilty of the falsehood imputed to him or of other more considerable faults, it seemed shocking to blacken his honor by relieving him of his priestly functions at the very end of his life. The decent thing to do would have been to let him die in peace with his honor intact. They would not have wanted to offer such an affront or to cause such grief to anyone else.

In addition, what consternation would the suspension not cause in a house like Saint Yon, where there were over eighty persons



whose confession De La Salle heard regularly? What a scandal it would be, or rather, what complaints against authority would such a step not give rise to if it became known? For all these reasons, the canon resolved to keep the matter secret and to leave the entire affair in the hands of Divine Providence. He did not doubt that if he himself said nothing, someone else would be sent to Saint Yon to tell the holy priest that he was suspended. To prepare him for such a blow, the canon warned him that serious trouble was brewing against him at the chancery, that he had not been able to avert it, and that soon the news would be divulged. He said no more. In fact, as those in authority saw clearly that the canon was not willing to act as a messenger, they sent someone else to inform the saintly priest that his faculties had been revoked.

That was two or three days before De La Salle died. The insult did not provoke any outbursts, because the holy priest said nothing about it to anyone and because his death, which followed almost immediately, did not leave any time for the suspension to be made public. The canon, De La Salle's friend, went to see him two days before he died and learned from De La Salle's own lips that someone had come to inform him that his faculties had been revoked. They had asked me, the canon said, to bring you the news myself, but I was in no hurry to carry out such an unpleasant task. I suspected as much, replied the dying man, after what you did me the honor of telling me at your last visit.

He accepted such an ignominious blow, which was his last, without losing anything of his peace and tranquillity. He spoke of it with a cheerful and serene air and seemed not to feel any chagrin or the least resentment over it. One thing should not be forgotten. When some of the Brothers, a few days later, informed the vicar-general of their Founder's death, the vicar exclaimed, *He is a saint! The saint is dead!* He might have added that he himself had fastened the last jewel to the saint's crown. But how can a man with any sense declare someone to be a saint after accusing him of imposture and causing him to be suspended? If this contradiction in sentiments and behavior seems incomprehensible, it is only because God permits the hearts of even good men to grow passionately bitter toward his favorites, but he does not allow them to lose the esteem that their virtue deserves.

## CHAPTER XVIII

*Last illness and death of De La Salle*

The closer De La Salle felt his death approaching, the more he labored to die to everything and to cause the remembrance of himself to fade from the minds of all, even of his dearest disciples. But in spite of all he could do, he still remained in their hearts what he had always been and should have been: their father, their Superior, their Founder. He could not eradicate from their grace-inspired souls that depth of confidence, tenderness, and openness toward those who have engendered us in Jesus Christ. He constantly spoke to them of death and affirmed that his own was not far off, that they should no longer consider him as among the living and hence should get accustomed to doing without him. He replied in the same vein to those who consulted him by letter. "I beg of you, for the love of God, my dear Brother," he wrote to one of the pioneer Brothers, whose confidence in him he had not been able to diminish, "in the future, do not think of addressing yourself to me in any way. You have your superiors whom you should consult about your spiritual and temporal concerns. Henceforth, I wish only to prepare myself for death, which must soon separate me from all that is created."

Before long, in fact, the Brothers came to fear that his prediction would be fulfilled. The rheumatism which he had contracted long before by his vigils and his austerities and by sleeping on the floor after spending the greater part of the night in prayer had become chronic and would not yield to any remedies, even the most potent ones. The sort of fire torture which we described had given him some relief, but it had not cured him. As the years went by, his pains increased and spread throughout his members, so that at the end, his desire for suffering must have been fully satisfied. The pangs were exacerbated by the continuation of his austerities and his ordinary exercises of piety, for he left none of them aside and treated his body as if it were bereft of sensation, which gave some the impression that he was not really all that sick. They were tempted to believe that a man who never complained and who did not allow the most violent agony to show itself must not be suffering very much.

In fact, all he strove for was to let God alone be the witness of his patience, to suffer in silence, and to hide from the Brothers the knowledge of what he endured. In this he succeeded, because his countenance, which remained always calm and cheerful, serene and

peaceful, on which there appeared not the slightest cloud of chagrin or alteration, made them think that he was without pain when, in fact, he was enduring very sharp pangs. They might have thought he was in fairly good health had the diminution of his strength, joined to the difficulty he felt in moving about, not shown the contrary.

The asthma with which De La Salle had to contend for some time was an additional complication which his fasting aggravated. His various ailments did not prevent him from observing Lent in 1719 with his usual strictness. Although he breathed only with difficulty, so violent was the suffocation caused by the asthma, the Brothers could not prevail on him to try to get some relief or to mitigate his Lenten penances. He answered them *that the victim was ready to be immolated and needed to be purified*. On returning from a trip to Paris which he had to undertake, Brother Barthélemy was no more successful than the others in convincing him, so they had recourse to his confessor and asked him to forbid the holy priest to continue a fast which was putting his life in danger. He submitted to the injunction of his confessor, thus causing the spirit of penance to yield to that of obedience.

Not long afterward, a violent headache resulting from a blow from a falling door, together with a sharp pain in his side, made him truly a sick man. The doctor who came to see him declared that the illness was mortal, and he did not fail to inform the patient. The virtuous priest heard him with a smiling countenance that showed his satisfaction. It was for him a joyful piece of news which he had been awaiting from one day to the next. His sole desire was to leave this earth and to be united with Jesus Christ. The life he led had no interest for him; he wanted to die as soon as possible. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain by death. A man so long attached to the cross of Jesus Christ and crucified with him could face with nothing but joy the demise which would put an end to his suffering and usher in his happiness.

While not entertaining any hope of curing his patient, the doctor tried by every possible means to give him some relief from his sufferings. Although the saintly man knew that these remedies were quite useless, he did not refuse them, for they were very unpleasant and thus furnished him opportunities for offering God the sacrifice of his repugnance. But everything that they tried to do to relieve his pains was unsuccessful. The illness gathered strength and grew considerably. Then he asked the Brothers not to waste any more money and to spare the cost of his treatments. He added that his hour was drawing near and that they should have recourse only to the sovereign Physician, who alone could cure him or afford him any relief.

The discontinuance of the therapy and his abandonment to God made it possible for him to say Mass again and to offer the sacred Victim. Rather, his fervor, which had been impeded by the kind of treatment they had been using on him, found itself at liberty to celebrate the sacred mysteries again and to hear confessions for about a fortnight, in spite of the pain he endured. On such occasions, virtue gives us strength or helps us rediscover the powers that are only hidden, not removed, from the depths of our nature. The great souls that never pay attention to their bodies demand from them, even unto death, efforts which are truly prodigious.

De La Salle's condition was such that anyone else would have remained in bed. To all appearances, he should not have been able to get up, and his incapacity for doing anything should have forced him to stay in bed. But he did not pay any attention, and everyone was amazed at seeing him up and about, doing things and forcing his body to obey him so that he could satisfy his devotion. What is too violent, however, cannot last. Even if virtue can inspire courage and make up for the weakness of nature by redoubled fervor, it cannot, aside from a miracle, restore exhausted strength and bring back to full vigor a body that has been worn out and abused. His illness grew so violent toward the end of Lent that the servant of God was obliged to remain in bed. In proportion as he felt his body growing weaker, his joy increased and shone on his face. *I hope*, he said, *that I shall soon be delivered from Egypt and brought into the true Promised Land.*

#### De La Salle celebrates Mass for the last time

The feast of Saint Joseph was drawing near. His special devotion to this great saint, whom he had chosen as Patron and Protector of the Institute, made him conceive an ardent desire to celebrate Mass that day in his honor. He was content with merely desiring to do so, for it did not seem that he could say Mass without a miracle. Still, the favor that the servant of God hoped for—without daring to expect or, even less, to request—was granted to him.

On the eve of the saint's feast, about ten o'clock at night, he felt his pain lessen and his strength return. He was surprised at the change, and imagining that he was dreaming, he did not mention it to anyone. Next morning, he discovered that this sudden improvement was neither a dream nor his imagination, for he felt strong enough to get up and to celebrate the divine mysteries. His joy was great at being able to satisfy his devotion. The joy of his children, who thought he was cured by a miracle of the Almighty, was even greater. All of

them together blessed, praised, and thanked the goodness of God and their patron, Saint Joseph. The saintly man took advantage of this favor and celebrated Mass with the recollection and fervor befitting the last Mass of his life. His free and unconstrained air as he said it made the Brothers believe that God had restored him to health through the intercession of Saint Joseph. They all hastened to ask his advice for their spiritual progress, as though he had been perfectly cured. He answered them for the last time with the ease of a man possessing his full vigor.

After satisfying his piety and that of the Brothers, he relapsed into his former condition. His strength failed, and his end seemed close at hand. Then the Brothers understood, to their great regret, that his health had not been given back to him but merely lent so that he might celebrate Mass in honor of Saint Joseph and satisfy his devotion toward this great saint.

#### The visit of the parish priest of Saint Sever

Informed of the danger in which the Founder of the Brothers lay, the parish priest of Saint Sever came to visit him. After assuring him of his sympathy for the suffering he was enduring, he exhorted him to patience. This priest, accustomed to encountering disquiet and apprehension whenever he visited people who were dying, was much surprised and rather disconcerted when he saw De La Salle so calm and so indifferent to whatever might transpire. As though shocked or disedified by this seeming security which the servant of God enjoyed, he thought it his duty to withdraw him therefrom by speaking to him very plainly that death was approaching and that judgment would follow it. *Realize*, he told him, *that you are going to die and that afterward you will have to appear before God. I know it*, replied De La Salle, *and I am entirely submissive to his orders. My fate is in his hands. May his will be done.*

By these few words, the priest understood where the confidence and serenity of the patient came from, and he judged that lengthy remonstrances were not necessary for a man who was entirely absorbed in God and who seemed already to enjoy the happiness of the blessed. He was even inspired to put an end, in peace and charity, to a slight disagreement which he had with the saintly man, who had not been willing to accede to everything the priest wished to require of the Brothers in his parish. The reconciliation afforded the sick man no small consolation.

### De La Salle receives the last sacraments

From that moment on, his heart abandoned itself to his desire for the sovereign Good, and he concentrated all his thoughts on the heavenly Jerusalem. His union with God and his aspirations toward him were unceasing. He requested Holy Viaticum, which he called his passport, and received it with an eagerness which surprised all. The priests of the parish raised some objections to granting his wish, as they did not think he was yet so near death, but eventually they promised to bring Viaticum to him the next day. The delay favored the great desire he had to prepare adequately for receiving Viaticum. He spent the entire night in preparation. As soon as day broke, he gave orders to prepare everything so that he might receive his Lord as worthily as possible. The Brothers did so with as much magnificence as the poverty of Saint Yon would allow. Nothing could have pleased him more, because he wished everything connected with the sacred mysteries to be beautiful and rich.

While the Brothers were getting the house ready for the coming of Jesus Christ, De La Salle was lost in recollection, preparing his heart. At that moment, he once more ignored the fact that he was desperately ill, and in his fervor, profound respect, and ardent devotion toward the Blessed Sacrament, he found the strength to get up from bed. Reluctant to welcome the Prince of Eternity while lying in a bed, he insisted so much on being allowed to rise and put on his surplice and stole that the Brothers could not refuse his request.

Seated in a chair, he awaited the arrival of his Lord and God. When the tinkling of the little bell announced his coming, he could no longer contain himself. Confused at appearing seated before his Creator and his Judge, he gave way to a transport of fervor which caused him to prostrate himself before the host, to adore Jesus Christ, and to annihilate himself in his presence. With a countenance lit up by his excessive joy and ardent charity, he received the Viaticum in the same manner in which he had so often been seen celebrating holy Mass, namely, with seraphic devotion. The flush which appeared on his face gave him a healthy look and made the bystanders think that he was actually better. In fact, some of them showed astonishment that the Viaticum was being given to a man who seemed to be quite well.

It was time to grant this consolation, which was not complete until they brought him the last sacrament, a blessing which he asked for with insistence. He felt his strength ebbing away and knew that the prison of his body had almost reached the moment of its dissolution.

Extreme Unction was administered to him the following day, Holy Thursday; he received it with complete presence of mind, responding to all the prayers. When these were finished, he remained in deep silence for seven hours, entirely occupied with the graces God had just given him. He broke this silence only to satisfy those who surrounded his bed and who wished to witness his blessed death, to receive some advice from him, or to hear some word of edification. He satisfied all of them and even revealed to several of them things hidden in the depths of their souls, revelations which surprised them very much.

A layman who was present, whether out of curiosity or out of piety, wished to try this out for himself and asked the dying man to tell him what he thought of him. The answer was: *You can be saved if you want to be. God is bestowing great graces on you, but you are not profiting by them. You are not going to him as you should. You are hiding the talents given to you.* Nothing was nearer the truth; the man admitted as much and added that the servant of God had read his soul and all that was taking place in it.

#### De La Salle's last testament

The Brothers, disconsolate over the loss they were about to experience, hastened to gather his final words. Here is the first article of the testament which he left them: "First, I recommend my soul to God and, next, all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools with whom he has associated me. I urge them, above all else, always to show entire submission to the Church, especially in these evil times, and to give proof of this by never separating themselves in anything from our Holy Father the Pope and from the Church of Rome, always remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to ask God for the grace that their Society might always be entirely submissive thereto. I also recommend to them to have a great devotion to our Lord, to love very much Holy Communion and the exercise of interior prayer, to cultivate a very special devotion toward the most Blessed Virgin and toward Saint Joseph, the Patron and Protector of their Society, to fulfill the duties of their employment with zeal and disinterestedness, and to maintain close union among themselves and blind obedience to their superiors, which is the foundation and the support of all perfection in a community."

As he found it very difficult to speak and his voice was growing weaker, the Brothers thought that his agony was about to begin. Then all his sons threw themselves on their knees and asked him to bless them. Brother Barthélemy, raising his voice, besought him to impart a

blessing to all those present and to extend it to all the Brothers of the Institute. At first his humility made him reluctant to do so, but finally yielding to the pleas made to him, he lifted his eyes and hands to heaven and said, *May the Lord bless all of you!* This blessing caused many tears to flow from the eyes of his disciples and opened a new wound of sorrow in their hearts. The realization of the loss they were about to sustain grew stronger as the moment drew nearer. Like loving children who are about to become orphans through the death of their father, they found comfort in their sorrow only in their piety, in their submission to God's will, and in the hope that when their Founder was taken from their sight, he would continue in heaven the services he had rendered them on earth.

### The death of a saint

Toward evening, he began to lose consciousness, as indicated by his disconnected speech. The Brothers then recited the prayers for the dying. When these were finished, the Founder regained consciousness, and he took advantage of this last moment God gave him to inspire his disciples with his own horror of the world. "If you wish to preserve yourself in your state and to die in it," he said, "never have any familiar dealings with people of the world. Little by little, you will acquire a liking for their way of acting and will be drawn into conversation with them, so that through politeness, you will not be able to avoid agreeing with their language, however pernicious it may be. This will cause you to fall into infidelity, and no longer faithful in observing your rules, you will grow disgusted with your state, and finally you will abandon it."

He could say no more; a cold sweat broke out over him and deprived him of speech. At that moment, he entered into an agony which lasted from midnight until half past two the next morning, which was Good Friday. He then recovered slightly, and someone suggested to him the thought of imploring the help of the most Blessed Virgin by this prayer of the Church which he was in the habit of addressing to her daily in his evening prayer: *Maria, Mater gratiae*. Brother Barthélemy, who never left his side, asked him whether he accepted with joy the sufferings he was undergoing. Yes, he replied, *I adore in all things the guidance of God in my regard*. These were the last words he uttered. At three in the morning, he fell into agony again, which lasted until four. The agitation which it caused him did not prevent his face from appearing tranquil and reassured. Finally, about four o'clock, he made an effort as though to rise from bed to



go to meet someone. Then, joining his hands, he raised his eyes to heaven and expired. It was Good Friday, 7 April 1719. He was not quite sixty-eight years old.

### Eulogy of the Founder

Such was the demise of the Founder of the Christian Schools, of the saintly priest whom God raised up in these latter times to labor for the instruction and education of the poorest and most neglected youth. If there never was a more necessary and more useful undertaking for Christian society, neither was there ever one which was for so long, so universally, and so cruelly opposed and persecuted. During the nearly forty years the servant of God devoted himself to it with unexampled constancy, he enjoyed hardly a day of peace. His zeal, his trouble, and his courage brought him constantly renewed crosses. Scarcely could he open his mouth without being contradicted, blamed, humiliated, and treated as an indiscreet, stubborn, eccentric sort of person, a vain and proud man. So humble, submissive, and unpretentious did he act that people all thought they had a right to reprehend him, to give him orders, to assume the posture of his judge and his superior. Facing enemies whom hell raised up against him on all sides, he pursued none of them and adopted no defense other than that of humbling himself and yielding. He was inflexible only on the questions of regularity, of keeping the spirit of poverty, of recollection, of mortification, and of the other Gospel virtues which produce saints. He was as docile as a child on all the rest.

Filled with courage in the greatest dangers which threatened him or menaced his Society with imminent ruin, he displayed an unshakable confidence in God, generous abandonment to all the orders of Providence, and a deeper horror for the slightest imperfection than for the greatest evil in life. Whoever so desired could maltreat, humiliate, calumniate, and persecute him in his own person and in that of his sons, yet during forty years, he never opened his mouth to complain. He had become so familiar with affronts, scorn, and injury that he was surprised and thought he was in a different world when compliments were paid to him. Friends and enemies, the great and the not so great, rich and poor, learned men and ignoramuses, saints and sinners, prelates and superiors—and even his own disciples—took up arms and waged cruel war against him. All of them were, in God's hands, the instruments of his sanctification.

Persecuted everywhere, he fled from one city to another, following the counsel of Jesus Christ, and he wandered from province to

province without finding peace anywhere, without discovering a place where he did not meet his Calvary where he was crucified. Ever since he first thought of founding the Christian Schools, what day was there, what spot which for him was not marked by the sign of the elect, the cross, and which he himself did not sanctify by heroic acts of humility, patience, mortification, obedience, or submission to God's will, by abandonment to Divine Providence, or by some other virtue? Could we not say of him, in all truth, what the Doctor of the Gentiles said of himself and of all the Apostles: that he was considered as the refuse of the world? But in the midst of so many crosses, which were as numerous as the days of his life, in the midst of so many contradictions, affronts, outrages, and injustices, who ever saw him upset, sullen, disconcerted, infuriated? Who ever heard from his mouth a single word of bitterness, impatience, or resentment? Who ever saw his countenance altered by the agitation of his heart? Calm, cheerful, recollected, satisfied, gracious, and modest—that was how he appeared in the midst of all the tempests that afflicted him. He emerged from them as unruffled as he did from interior prayer.

How often did he not witness in his own house some of his children rising up against their father, disciples taking up arms against their master, members rebelling against their chief? How often did he not see himself alone—or nearly alone—abandoned, betrayed, persecuted from within and without, encountering hands raised against him on every side? Can we not say that God seemed to take pleasure in setting all persons against him and in delivering the first blow himself? For no matter how pure his intentions were, God seemed to cross them. No matter how holy his projects, God appeared determined to lay them waste. He was able to do hardly anything that succeeded, and if the project of establishing the Christian Schools did finally prosper, how long did it take him, and how did he do it? It took him forty years of pain, labor, and continual alarm, years which he concluded, as he had begun, in ignominy.

If all France so admired Abbot de Rancé, buried in his abbey of La Trappe and reviving there in our day the austerities of the Thebaid, should she not also have congratulated herself on having seen, almost at the same time, a young canon of Reims renouncing his canonry, not in favor of his own brother or of some relative but of a stranger with a reputation for virtue, on having beheld him giving away his family fortune to the poor and condemning himself to a life of abjection, poverty, and suffering and then raising the standard of penance at the very gates of Paris, leading there a life as austere as that of La Trappe and much more humble and poor?

If we compare the life of the Brothers at Vaugirard and at the Grande Maison with that of the celebrated penitents who made the solitude of La Trappe so illustrious and if we ask our own self-love which of these two states we would care for least, I am not afraid of being mistaken if I maintain that if we had to choose between them, self-love, forced to the choice, would prefer the life of La Trappe to that of the infant Society of the Brothers. In fact, although the austerities practiced in the two situations can be viewed as parallel, nevertheless, it must be admitted that at this time, ignominy was as much attributed to the habit of the Brothers as glory was to the reform initiated by De Rancé.

We have seen above that the exercises of penance, mortification, and humiliation reigned with such complete sway in the youthful Institute that the Founder's enemies made such austerities a crime for him and took occasion from them to slander him to the ecclesiastical authorities as a man whose fervor made him imprudent and whose severity knew no mitigation and as a torturer of the human body. They obliged him, in spite of himself, to tone down the great rigor and to discontinue a number of practices which they considered insupportable to human nature. The constraint applied to the servant of God to make him lighten the burden borne by his disciples merely made him add to his own. For as though he wished to compensate God for the maceration which his disciples were forbidden to practice, he reserved them all for himself.

Hairshirts, iron girdles, cruel disciplines, vigils, sleeping on the floor, the most insipid food, frequent and strict fasts, poor clothing, traveling on foot, almost complete abstinence from wine, constantly doing without fire—all these were penitential practices which he could never bring himself to give up. In all truth, we can address to him the reproach which has always been leveled at the greatest saints: that he was the torturer of his own body. Interior mortification completed in him the putting to death of the old man which external mortification can only begin. He was so dead to himself that he manifested no sign of repugnance or of natural inclination. No sudden sally of passion escaped him, let his desires or his fears become known, or showed his resentment or touchiness.

Such perfect mortification, having made him complete master of himself, also established in the depths of his soul a peace which the most trying events of life could not trouble, and his confidence in God added thereto a joy which the whole world could neither give nor take away. When he lacked everything, when everything rose up against him, then did he seem the most assured. He hoped against

hope, and rarely did he hope in vain. Apostolic zeal and generosity inspired all his conduct. Nothing seemed difficult for him when God's interests were at stake. Once he was sure of the divine will, he never gave up what he had undertaken, whatever assaults might be directed against him by the world or by hell. He possessed a special grace for winning over the most hardened sinners; he never undertook the conversion of one of them without succeeding. He had a tender, generous, and sincere heart; he was affable, considerate, and polite. His natural disposition was both tender and firm, energetic and active, but he did nothing hastily and was incapable of cowardly surrender. He took his full time to reflect, but once he had made a decision after mature consideration, he held to it, at least so long as he felt that it was conformable to God's will.

Brought up in the lap of luxury by a wealthy family, by parents who loved him dearly, he seemed to have had in the beginning a very delicate constitution. Nevertheless, his body, inured to labor and to austerity, grew more robust with age, so that as his virtue grew, his health likewise improved. No doubt he would have enjoyed good health, even to an advanced age, had he not undermined it by excessive penance.

He stood a little above average in height, with a frame well proportioned and solidly built. A wide forehead, prominent nose, and two large beautiful eyes, nearly blue, made up his arresting countenance. His features were gentle and agreeable, his voice, strong and distinct. Exteriorly he appeared cheerful, serene, modest, and pious. His skin, somewhat tanned by his long travels, usually appeared slightly flushed. His manners were simple, gracious, and open, without affectation. His hair, chestnut in his youth and curly, had with the years become gray or white and made him look venerable. Finally, grace enthroned, so to speak, on his countenance made him amiable and inspired piety. I dare say that no man in our day looked more like a saint. He appeared as such to all who saw him; he inspired them with the desire of becoming saints themselves. On his approach, people were seized with respect. They felt confused in his presence because they felt themselves sinners and tepid or unfaithful souls. Such is the portrait of John Baptist de La Salle, priest, doctor, former canon of the metropolitan church of Reims, and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Those who knew him will agree that even this portrait is very imperfect.

## De La Salle honored in death

The news of De La Salle's death spread quickly throughout the city of Rouen. Everybody hastened to come to see, for the last time, a man considered a saint although not treated like one. In the end, only death gives to true virtue its real luster and differentiates the saints from those who are not saints. Their glory, just like their false happiness, ends where the glory of the saints begins: I mean, at the grave. Death, which plunges into oblivion all the partisans of the world and makes them vanish from human minds, re-establishes the servants of God in true honor and makes the remembrance of them imperishable.

Death, which causes the world's partisans to be trampled underfoot and mingles their ashes with the common dust of the streets, withdraws the saints from ignominy and throws full light upon their forgotten virtues. Who is the great one of earth, be he prince or king, whom death does not turn into a frightful corpse, the presence of which is insupportable? The sight of it scares all; its deformity strikes terror; its decomposition drives all away. But when a saint lies dead, he draws people to him; everyone is eager to behold him, to have a relic of him. In his case, death loses all its horror.

That was what occurred after the death of De La Salle. His face seemed as beautiful and serene after he expired as it had been during his life. Everyone hastened to claim something belonging to him. The difficulty was to satisfy all those who asked for relics; a crucifix, a New Testament, an Imitation of Christ, and a rosary were all he had. They constituted his entire wealth. Once this inheritance had been seized by the most clever and most adroit hands, the others fell upon his poor garments. Everyone wanted some bit or piece for a relic. Outsiders did not scruple to appropriate, by a pious theft, whatever they could lay their hands on. Some even cut locks of his hair; others treasured things which he had used. Those of his disciples who were not able to get anything seemed as disconsolate as children who have lost their father's inheritance. To console them, copies were drawn up of the testament he had made shortly before his death; these were given to all the Brothers, present or absent.

To satisfy the devotion of his disciples and of the public, the body of the saintly priest, clad in sacerdotal vestments, was laid out for viewing in the chapel of Saint Yon from the evening of Good Friday until the afternoon of Holy Saturday. He was then buried, with no special ceremony, in the chapel of Sainte Suzanne in the parish church of Saint Sever in the presence of a large crowd of people who had come to the funeral. Several religious of different orders and various

clerics joined the parish clergy in honoring the memory of the deceased. His body was carried by six of the Brothers and followed by all the others, who bedewed with their tears the path they followed and who mingled their sobs with the chanting of the Psalms. Here is the epitaph inscribed on his tomb:

D. O. M.

HIC EXPECTAT RESURRECTIONEM VITAE VENERABILIS JOANNES BAP.  
DE LA SALLE RHEMUS, PRESBITER, DOCTOR THEOLOGUS,  
CANONICUS ECCLESIAE METROPOLITANAE RHEMENSIS, INSTITUTOR  
FRATRUM SCHOLAE CHRISTIANAE. OBIIT SEXTA PARASCEVES, ANNUM  
AGENS LXVIII, DIE SEPTIMA APRILIS ANNO 1719, IN AEDIBUS  
FRATRUM SANCTI YONIS HUIUSCE PAROCHIAE. DET ILLI DOMINUS  
INVENIRE REQUIEM IN ILLA DIE.

Because the feast of Easter and its octave made it impossible to hold the funeral Mass, it was celebrated with great solemnity on the Monday after Quasimodo Sunday by the clerics of the Minor Seminary of Saint Patrice, which is now at Saint Nicaise. Many pious persons hastened to pay to his memory the honors which he had so carefully avoided during his life, and God seemed to find their devotion agreeable, since he gave tangible tokens of his power, although we do not venture to declare them miraculous in anticipation of the judgment of the Church. Such is how, even on this earth, God rewards those who have been faithful to him unto death.

All who knew him regretted his departure and considered his death as a loss for the Church. The conviction about his heroic virtues, which he had left behind him wherever he had been or had dwelt for any length of time, brought him after his death a concert of praise from all over France. Worthy men could not refuse their tears, and his disciples were all but inconsolable.

The constant stream of letters which Brother Barthélemy received on this topic made it impossible for him to forget his loss and kept open the wound in his heart. His sorrow lasted as long as his life. Once deprived of De La Salle, he was as much at a loss as an orphan who, by the death of his parents, remains at the mercy of Providence without money, friends, or defenders. Life became a real trial for him, and as he himself declared, earth had no attraction for him, since he no longer saw his dear father in Jesus Christ.

To assuage his sorrow, the Superior set about collecting and causing to be collected accounts of all that the holy priest had done, while his memory was still fresh in everyone's mind, and to secure accounts of his life from those who had been eyewitnesses of it. He was

also much comforted by the goodwill shown by the Brothers, who, scattered as they were all over the country, took care out of precaution and for greater surety to have a large number of Masses said for the repose of the soul of their Founder, even though they felt sure he was in paradise. Many parish priests had solemn Masses sung, out of charity for the late Founder. No one showed more sympathy over the loss of De La Salle than the priests of the Seminary of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet, who had been so edified the previous year by the examples of eminent virtue they had witnessed on his part. The reply that one of them sent to Brother Barthélemy on this subject deserves to be quoted here.

“My dear Brother, I was truly sorry to receive your letter concerning the death of your most honored beloved father, M. de La Salle, of which M. de La Vertu had already informed me. I have spread the news of this sad event, and I have recommended him to the prayers of our community while informing them of the details which you had given me in your letter. You may be sure that each of us joins you in praying for the beloved departed. All of us, and I in particular, consider him as a saint who is praying for us in heaven. I do not think that your Community can ever decline, having such a protector with the Lord. You know better than anyone else what a holy life he led, what opposition he had to face in founding the Institute, an obvious sign that it is God’s work. I hope it will be strengthened by his prayers and by your correspondence with grace.

“We were fortunate enough to be edified by his presence during some six months while he did us the honor of residing among us. I think God had sent him to preach to our young men by his example and to help us to rise from our tepidity. His life here was most humble and mortified; he slept little and prayed much. Our bell-ringer told me several times that he always found him up when he went to ring the rising bell, even during the coldest winter weather, and during that time, he never went to the room where the fire was, except when I insisted on bringing him along with me, a thing which happened seldom, since my schedule did not correspond with his.

“He made at least three hours of meditation regularly every day. He was more faithful to the house regulations than the lowliest of seminarians, obeying with admirable promptness the first sound of the bell which announced the exercises. He was so submissive that he wearied the prefect by coming to ask him for permissions, even for those which are not required of the seminarians themselves: for instance, to speak with persons who came asking to see him, to bring them to his room, as you yourself noticed more than once, to go out

on free days, and even to write letters, for he never wrote a single one without an express permission. He was so willing to accede to the requests made to him to take part in funeral processions, without a stipend, or to conduct the funerals of children that it seemed as if that activity was something he valued very much. In a word, retirement, prayer, charity, humility, mortification, and a poor and hard life seemed to be what delighted him.

“As for myself and my hometown, we shall forever be indebted to him. When he lived in the Faubourg Saint Marcel, he was charitable enough to educate four young men to teach school. They left his institution so well trained and so full of zeal that if they had found in the local ecclesiastics someone capable of cultivating the good dispositions he had inspired them with, they might have established a most useful community for the province. One of them became a priest, and he teaches the humanities with edification for the young, in spite of the opposition they have frequently had to contend with from the magistrates and sometimes from parish priests and other ecclesiastics. I hope that this death will not deprive me of the affection of your Community and that you will always do me the honor of considering me as one of your friends. For my part, I shall strive always to give you proofs of my sincere friendship in the hope of sharing the merit of all your good works and your prayers before the Lord, in whose love I remain, very humbly yours, . . .”

This testimonial to De La Salle's virtue by such an able judge is not out of place here. It will, no doubt, bear fruit in the seminaries. The example of an ex-canon, priest, doctor, venerable Superior, and celebrated Founder being faithful to the first sound of the bell, asking for the least permissions, practicing childlike obedience, keeping recollection, avoiding the world, and engaging in practices of humility, charity, and mortification will teach young clerics that these virtues are proper to all ages. The period spent in the seminary is the time to learn how to acquire similar virtues, and De La Salle, in spite of his advanced years, exercised them with so much joy and ease in the Seminary of Saint Nicolas only because when he was young, he had acquired the habit of exercising them at Saint Sulpice.

Brother Barthélemy was not alone in being inconsolable over the loss of the holy Founder. Like him, many others could neither prevent themselves from weeping over it nor heal the wound that it had inflicted on their hearts. Time, of all remedies against affliction the most effective, could not soothe them, and they looked for an end to it only with the close of their lives. Thus Brother Barthélemy, who could not console himself, was obliged to comfort others and to dry their



tears when he could not prevent his own eyes from shedding them. Here is a touching letter he sent to one of the Brothers, trying to console him.

“My very dear Brother, may the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us. You had every reason to shed tears when you learned of the death of our very dear father. I do not think that any of our Brothers was able to refrain from doing the same; it was something so natural. But after considering everything, my dear Brother, we must admit that it was the holy will of God. God had given our Founder to us for as long as he pleased; now he has taken him from us to reward him for his labors and for his saintly life. We must submit and conform ourselves to his divine good pleasure. The holy Apostles, too, were very sad when they were deprived of the sensible presence of their Divine Master, but to console them, he said, It is expedient for you that I go, for if I go not, the Holy Spirit will not come upon you. Our dear father is not lost; he is, in all probability, among the saints in heaven. He can do much for us before God’s throne, since he obtained even on this earth so many graces for himself and for all the souls whom he helped to be converted and to give themselves to God.

“Now we admire his lofty virtues, his angelic purity, his deep interest in church ornaments and sacerdotal vestments, for which he spared no expense, his great liberality toward the poor, even though he himself was in need, and toward our Brothers as well, his zeal for the salvation of souls which made him at one time propose to exchange his canonry for a pastoral charge so as to be able to exercise his zeal; his humility, patience, obedience, complete resignation to Divine Providence, and so many other heroic virtues. I think he must take rank among the virgins, if I may judge by what I learned of his conduct with reference to chastity and virginity. No, my dear Brother, do not ask God to withdraw you from this world; I shall pray to him with all my heart to keep you here for as long as it may please him, for his glory, for the salvation of souls, and for your own greater good. I forbid you to die, except to your own self-will and way of thinking. Our dear father did not die without permission; I think he would have died much sooner if he had been able to get permission to do so. Hence, do not be sad any longer to no purpose, for the one whom you weep for as dead is living and enjoys peace which nobody can ever take from him. Be at peace, too; keep yourself in the close union he recommended to us and in the practice of the other virtues.

“Do not sadden the Spirit of Our Lord, which is within you, by an unjustified melancholy over our dear father. I do not know how I

myself manage; I am sad and joyful at the same time. The remembrance of his holy life and the recollection of several remarkable things which happened during his illness and at his death console me. So try to be more cheerful, for sadness which does not come from the movement of the Holy Spirit is dangerous and has unfortunate consequences.”

It must be admitted that the sorrow felt by these good Brothers was amply justified. What loss in all the world could have affected them more than that of the father who had begotten them all in Jesus Christ, nourished them with the milk of his teaching, stimulated them by his example, upheld them by the power of his prayers, defended them by his patience and invincible courage from the persecutions of the world and of hell—and all this for nearly forty years? In losing him, they lost their teacher of the spiritual life, their guide in the paths of perfection, their legislator, Founder, and model. In losing him, they lost one of the greatest servants of God which the seventeenth century had seen in France, an apostolic man, a man of consummate virtue, a man according to God’s own heart, a true image of Jesus Christ on earth. But, in truth, they have not lost him. He is in their regard in heaven what he was for them on earth. Shortly after his death, he wrought in their favor truly prodigious favors, and he continues to do so every day. I can, indeed, call prodigious the abrupt change which took place in the fortunes of the Brothers in France, where all of a sudden everything became favorable to them and where everything they could have desired and asked for was given to them, as we are about to see.

## CHAPTER XIX

*Unexpected blessings received by the Institute of the Brothers after De La Salle’s death; at almost the same time, they obtain letters patent from King Louis XV and a Bull from Benedict XIII approving their rules and constituting their Society as a religious order.<sup>39</sup>*

The Brothers, disconsolate over the death of their holy Founder, continued to bewail his demise, and although time soothes the aching heart and dries up tears, it could not make them forget the vastness of their loss or allow them to cease fearing the results it might bring. They were not alone in weeping and in fearing. All who had known

the virtuous Founder, all those who felt true concern for the Christian Schools, and all the friends of the Brothers mingled their own tears with theirs, and all of them, alarmed over the perils threatening the Institute, feared that it might well be buried in De La Salle's tomb.

They might have been correct in their apprehension if the Institute had been the work of men, but as the sequel will show, the Holy Spirit was its true author and De La Salle only the instrument. Indeed, we shall see the Institute grow stronger, be firmly established, and after the demise of its father, assume its final form and perfection against all probability. Perfect union among the Brothers, an edifying subordination to the Directors of the various houses, cordial and unreserved submission to the Superior General, a sincere love for their state and vocation, an ardent zeal which each member of the Society showed for his own perfection, a reflowering of their early fervor, and a noble emulation for virtue were the happy dispositions which heaven desired to see and which it brought about in order to cause this great undertaking to proceed.

The Brothers vied with one another in trying to fill themselves with the spirit of their Founder, and each of them sought to make De La Salle live again in his own person. Though he had been taken from their sight, he remained ever present to them in spirit. They pondered the teachings he had given them in private, the instructions he had imparted to them in public, and the heroic examples of virtue which they had witnessed. The fear of not profiting by these, joined to the desire of imitating him, made them hasten in his footsteps with even greater ardor after his death than during his life.

It was a further cause of admiration for those who knew the Society intimately to see it not only maintain itself in the state in which the Founder had left it but even make progress and perfect itself without any human support and with no other resource than Divine Providence. They were surprised to see in this organization such an effective type of government, in the members such total dependence on the head, who was a simple Brother, and in everyone such great unanimity in pursuing the same ends.

They saw perfectly accomplished this truth which De La Salle had so constantly maintained and which had drawn down on him so many persecutions: namely, that the proper government of the Society required that one of its members should be at its head and that an outside Superior, no matter how virtuous he might be, would only

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39. This is not accurate. The Institute was not approved as a religious "order" in the canonical sense, and only selected rules, some of them paraphrased, were incorporated into the Bull.

lead the Institute to ruin, because he would never truly possess its spirit and principles. Since his profession, mentality, and manners would be different than those of the Brothers, he would not possess the required resemblance between the Superior and the members. The Prince of Pastors, Jesus Christ, wished to be—sin excepted—like unto men, so that they might love and imitate him and so that he might guide them with more tenderness and gentleness.

The Brothers had only one heart and one soul. Among them there was no diversity of opinion. All wanted and thought only what the Superior wanted and thought, and the Superior himself had no other thought or will than that of the Brothers, because all of them, guided by the spirit of their Founder, which they seemed to have inherited on his death, were always unanimous in their views of what was best and in the choice of the means to procure it.

De La Salle still seemed to be alive in Brother Barthélemy, the joy of the Brothers, his inferiors. He had so well imbued himself with the spirit of his holy father that he spoke and acted like him in all things. Trained in his school and for so long his humble disciple before becoming his humble Superior, he never lost the disposition of a lowly disciple with regard to De La Salle. His own humility had constantly forced the humility of the Founder to give him advice on all matters, to share his insights with him, and to rule the Society through him.

Consequently, when Brother Barthélemy had governed the Institute for two years under the eyes and with the advice of De La Salle, it did not seem that there had been a change of Superior. It was, then, a new blow for the Institute when God took Brother Barthélemy fourteen months after the death of De La Salle. Then the tears, which had not yet ceased flowing, welled up again with abundance in the eyes of all the Brothers. They mourned the death of their father all over again in the death of this son who was so much like him, who had taken his place, and who represented him so well in their eyes.

Once again, the Society seemed in desperate straits. Consternation seized all hearts, and each member, seeing that God had for a second time taken away their leader, feared for the Institute. Even the least timid and the least humble wondered whether God might be punishing them in his anger and abandoning an Institute whose holiness they thought they had sullied by their infidelity and tepidity. Others thought that they were the causes of God's malediction and that they were obliging divine justice to avenge their own particular faults on the entire Community. These humble sentiments redoubled the fervor of the Brothers and disposed them to receive the favors which heaven destined for them.

God entertained sentiments of goodness and mercy in their regard. If he took away those who seemed to be the pillars of the Institute, it was only to convince them that he would be able to preserve it without their help and that since it was his work, he did not need any man to complete it. They all realized this, from the highest member to the lowliest novice. Filled with courage, great confidence in God, and renewed attachment to their vocation, they conceived an extraordinary desire to persevere in it to death and thus to contribute by an augmentation of their fervor to the perfecting of the task that De La Salle had so generously begun and carried through.

### The election of Brother Timothée

Brother Barthélemy's two Assistants, seeing themselves charged with the guidance of the little bark so long agitated by so many furious storms, took the tiller in hand with great courage and guided it like skillful pilots amidst these new dangers. Their concern was to keep everything in good order and to give to the deceased Superior a successor who would equal him in merit. Without losing time, they sent to all the houses of the Institute a circular letter which informed the Brothers in a most touching manner of the death of their Superior and indicated to the Directors the date of the assembly which would choose his successor. The spirit of union, subordination, and dependence which De La Salle and his successor had left among the Brothers at their deaths maintained them all in due order without letting the grief which overwhelmed them alter their peace of mind. They all welcomed the letter with great respect, and the Brothers Directors of the various houses, all eighteen of them, punctually carried out the orders given them.

A canon,<sup>40</sup> a friend of the Institute who enjoyed Brother Barthélemy's confidence and whom the Brother had chosen for his last confession when he realized he was in danger of death, had taken care to ask him which of the Brothers he considered the best qualified to replace him. The dying Superior had indicated Brother Timothée, at that time Director of the house in Avignon. He added that Brother Timothée was the one who, also in De La Salle's opinion, deserved to be chosen and that the saintly Founder might have picked him to take his own place, even during his life, if the Brother had been a little longer in the Society. In fact, he was at this time only a neophyte in the Community, so to speak, but his prudence, his even temper, his

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39. Jean-Baptiste Blain, the biographer.

good spirit, and his kind, gracious, and courteous ways had drawn the Founder's eyes on him and merited his being chosen to succeed him some day.<sup>41</sup>

Such was the testimony that this canon gave in his favor, relating the statement of the late Brother Barthélemy to some of the principal Brothers who had come for the election. They did not need to be persuaded on this point, for because of either a divine inspiration or a predisposition in favor of Brother Timothée, they were nearly unanimous in choosing him. All of them were delighted to give their vote to a Brother whom their saintly father himself had singled out and to find their own judgment on this point in conformity with his.

The election took place on the feast of the Assumption, 1720. It found only one discontented person in the assembly, namely, the newly elected Superior. The satisfaction felt by all the others was equaled by the disappointment on the part of the new Superior. The Brothers had the double joy of seeing in the first position the one whom De La Salle had hoped would occupy it and of finding themselves in no danger of being called to it themselves, for each of them feared this responsibility as much as he wished to see it entrusted to Brother Timothée. Thus, while he was in consternation over his election, the others were comforted and reassured, like men who reach port after avoiding a dangerous shoal.

Such was the attitude that all the Brothers had inherited from their beloved father with regard to occupying the primary place. His example had inspired them with a real horror for it. The Brothers recalled all the efforts he had made during thirty years to escape from it, the pains and unbelievable persecutions he had to endure while occupying it, the repose and joy he had enjoyed when he had finally descended to the last place, the constant attraction he had for a private and retired life, hidden and unknown to the world. So well had they absorbed his spirit that they felt themselves irreconcilably opposed to being the Superior. All of them, delighted that they had avoided this position, congratulated themselves on having conferred it on the one who seemed the most capable of occupying it and whom heaven itself appeared to have indicated by the almost unanimous vote which had taken place, as well as by De La Salle's own choice.

Their holy joy was troubled only by the tears and sighs of the new Superior. Considering his election at first as a sort of bad dream,

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41. In 1717, Brother Timothée was thirty-five years old and had been in the Institute since 1700. He was only four years younger than Brother Barthélemy.

he could not believe that they really wanted to place at the head of the other Brothers the youngest man in the assembly, the one who, he felt, deserved it least. He wished to think and to make others think that by error they had mistaken his name for someone else's and that it was simply impossible that the choice should have fallen on him. But finally, when the voting slips made it clear that he was indeed elected and his eyes demonstrated to him that his ears had heard aright, he changed from astonishment to desolation and acted like a man who has just heard the sentence condemning him to execution. They were obliged to let him bewail his pretended misfortune and to listen to the complaints he made to the Brothers about their poor choice, as well as to the pleas he presented asking them to revoke their decision.

After these first moments of sorrow, when reason seemed to be drowned in tears, the Brothers did what they could to console Brother Timothée and promised him that they would make his task an easy one by perfect submission to his orders and an exact fidelity to their duties. Such edifying dispositions, far from diminishing Brother Timothée's sadness, only added thereto, because they showed him that such inferiors should be at the head of the Institute and he himself at their feet. Each of them, he protested, possessed the merit that the first place required, while he, the only one unworthy of it, could only draw down God's wrath on the Society, put it to shame, and find his own ruin in his elevation.

The Brothers, delighted to discover such edifying sentiments in their new Superior, hoped for all good things from a man who thought of himself what he should have thought, what the Spirit of God teaches men to think, and what true humility makes apparent. They had made no mistake in their choice, for it was under the government of Brother Timothée and thanks to his wise action that the most important undertakings for the good of the Brothers came to fruition beyond their most sanguine hopes, as we shall see.

### The title to the property of Saint Yon

The first task was to make sure of their ownership of the property of Saint Yon. This was as difficult as it was important. The Brothers were in great danger of losing title to the estate and seeing it taken over by strangers, even though it had been bought with their money and De La Salle's. The purchase had been made in the name of two Brothers, the first of whom, Brother Barthélemy, had just died, and the second Brother was infirm and advanced in age. The possibility of his death

threatened to dispossess the Brothers.<sup>42</sup> If Divine Providence, which kept watch over God's work, had not preserved this Brother in life when he was so necessary, the domain of Saint Yon would have reverted to another owner, and thus the Brothers would have been reduced once again to their former unsatisfactory situation which had lasted so long and which had caused them so much trouble. They would have found themselves without a roof over their heads, obliged to wander from one place to another, lacking any stable habitation where they could establish themselves in peace and set up their novitiate. They would have been turned out of a house which belonged to them; they would have been in greater difficulty than ever to find another domicile. Where could they have discovered a place like Saint Yon: vast, spacious, healthful, enjoying good air, solitary, and favorable to recollection, yet situated at the gates of one of the richest and most important cities in the kingdom?

### The application for letters patent

It was a matter of supreme importance for the Institute to assure its ownership of the property. But that was as difficult to accomplish as it was important, for it required letters patent. The Brothers, lacking means and influence, hardly dared to plan on setting in motion the machinery for securing the letters. On the one hand, the difficulty of the enterprise disheartened them; on the other, necessity spurred them on to try and to hope that God would grant them success.

That was the project which the new Superior and his council resolved to undertake. They therefore drew up a memorandum which M. de Pontcarré, first president of the parliament of Normandy and the great protector of the Institute, approved and promised to support with all his influence. That pious and illustrious magistrate, a friend of all God's works, did indeed take the first steps. He wrote to M. de Bezons, then archbishop of Rouen, asking him to countersign the Brothers' request and to grant them his protection. Once his cooperation was obtained and now with the backing of the first president and of the highest religious authority in the province, the Brothers took the liberty of presenting their petition to the royal chancellor, who, before proceeding further, wished to know whether the city was in favor of the move. He wrote to the intendant of Rouen, asking him to confer on this matter with the mayor and the city council.

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42. This was Brother Thomas, fifty years old and not exactly an aged invalid. He still had another twenty years to live.



The project would soon have been brought to a successful conclusion had other and more important obstacles not arisen. At the request of the first president, the city government willingly gave its consent without delay and in due form. The statement by the city authorities and the other necessary documents were forwarded to the minister of justice, who promised to speak of it to the regent. The process seemed well on its way, but, as usual, God's projects move slowly and never fail to meet with impediments. This one was halted at the very door of the royal council by the man who could have done the most to make it succeed.

In fact, the Brothers found a redoubtable adversary in the chancellor's secretary, who was also the first president of the fiscal chamber. He knew all the legal tactics apt to cause their petition to be rejected, and, in fact, he caused it to fail by a very specious, cleverly thought-out, and legal maneuver. The pretext on which he based his opposition to the Brothers' request for letters patent was that these were not needed for the schools. He defended this opinion very skillfully in the presence of the chancellor and of the two Brothers who had been sent to plead their case. His argument seemed valid and did not admit of any reply. Since the Christian Schools are authorized and recommended by various declarations of the king, even some very recent ones, what need is there, he asked, for letters patent to confirm the right of the Brothers to conduct them?

Of course, they did not need the letters to teach in the Gratuitous Schools; the permission of the bishops was quite sufficient for that. But they needed the letters to insure their ownership of their property at Saint Yon, to give public recognition to their status, and to establish them as a regularly constituted Community capable of acquiring and possessing property in the kingdom. M. d'Aguesseau<sup>43</sup> did not seem convinced by his secretary's arguments. He answered very kindly, telling the Brothers that he would take the matter under consideration. He did speak of it to the regent, but the latter, apparently won over by the secretary who had come out in opposition to the Brothers, rejected their request.

Thus the attempt failed in 1721. It was taken up again with more likelihood of success when M. d'Armenonville was made keeper of the seals after the disgrace of the chancellor. The change put a whole new face on the matter, and the Brothers did all they could to profit by it. Circumstances could not have been more favorable, because the

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43. The royal chancellor, or minister of justice, who may have been a Jansenist sympathizer.

new minister was known for his great zeal for sound doctrine and for his depth of religion and piety, which made him a friend of all good works. The Brothers managed to approach him, thanks to the recommendation of Abbé de Saint Aubin, Superior General of the Seminaries of Saint Sulpice. He promised them his help and protection. The former chancellor's secretary, who had also lost his post, was no longer in a position to block the Brothers in pursuing their plan, but he did manage to retard it by constantly refusing to send back the papers which had been left in his hands and which he never returned.

It was necessary, therefore, to begin all over again, which occasioned new expenses, and to solicit for a second time the protection of Archbishop de Bezons and of De Pontcarré and to get a second statement of consent from the city authorities. When all that was done, certain highly considered persons outstanding for their piety approached those who had the honor of belonging to the king's privy council. All those men were in favor of an Institute so useful to the public and so necessary to poverty-stricken youth. They promised their protection and their votes. The Marquis de La Vrillière, among others, showed himself very active in promoting the affair.

Even so, their goodwill remained ineffective for the time being because the regent, surprised at seeing the members of his council pleading with him unanimously to grant letters patent to the Brothers, was somewhat embarrassed at first. On the one hand, he was reluctant to refuse the favor flatly, but on the other, he did not want to give in to their petition. The expedient he came up with, in order not to grant anything while not refusing anything, was to temporize by saying that it was necessary to wait a while longer. Thus he cleverly evaded the request and stymied the project once more.

A year later, a third effort was made, which the regent again caused to fail while appearing not to refuse. Once more, his entire council, along with the prime minister, Cardinal Dubois, at its head, was ready to grant the Brothers what they were asking for. Other friends, as distinguished by their high birth as by their piety, joined the first group in pleading the cause of the Institute. The worthiness of their petition was obvious enough, and all agreed that the prince ought to give his protection to an Institute devoted to the task of conducting Christian and Gratuitous Schools which had been so strongly authorized and recommended by royal edicts.

The see of Rouen was vacant at the moment, Archbishop de Bezons having died recently, and this gave His Royal Highness a specious pretext for setting aside the petition backed by his whole council. De La Vrillière, irritated at this new delaying tactic, objected

that the late archbishop had given his consent, but M. Le Duc d'Orléans<sup>44</sup> replied that the agreement of the archbishop's successor was also needed; therefore, they must wait. Unfortunately, the new archbishop had not yet been appointed and was not named for a considerable time, and everything had to remain in suspense for two more years. The new setback did not discourage the Brothers. Hoping against hope, they multiplied their prayers and did all they could to interest the Most Blessed Virgin on their behalf. Convinced that success would be theirs if she intervened in their favor, they made a vow to fast in perpetuity on the eve of the Immaculate Conception and to consecrate themselves solemnly to her on the feast itself if she secured the letters patent for them.

Before the regent died, toward the end of 1723, he had named M. de Tressan, bishop of Nantes, to be archbishop of Rouen. This prelate was a member of the regent's council and had frequently befriended the Brothers since they had started their efforts to obtain the letters. He gave them new assurances of his benevolence and promised that as soon as he entered into possession of his archdiocese, he would take their project in hand and bring it to success. However, nobody knew how long that would take, and his gracious words did not guarantee that the sick and infirm Brother who had lent his name for the purchase of Saint Yon would stay alive. If he died, the house would be lost, and the Institute would once more become what it had been previously: unsettled and uprooted, its members unsure of what would become of them.

As it was extremely important for the letters patent to be granted before the Brother in question died, the Brothers decided to send him to plead for them in person. He was an excellent choice. Tall, well-built, with a venerable air which won respect, he looked like one of the ancient patriarchs, although his pallor and emaciation caused him to resemble one of the desert abbots of old. His candor and simplicity won the favor of those whom he approached. So it was decided to send him in person to promote the affair, in the hope that the sight of him might touch the responsible people and hasten the conclusion of the business.

Although he was not feeling well, the Brother left for Fontainebleau, where the court was, and he did all that could be expected of him. His pale and drawn countenance, which seemed to warn those he spoke to that his death could not be far off, pleaded more eloquently on his behalf than his words and gave visible testimony that

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44. The regent.

it was urgent to guarantee the possession of Saint Yon to the Institute and to afford the Brother personally this final assurance by the letters patent or else consent to the loss of the property and the death of the Brother.

M. de La Vergne de Tressan, the archbishop-designate of Rouen, found himself urged by so many highly placed persons, all distinguished by their piety, to present the request of the Brothers to the council that he finally resolved to do so, even though he had not yet been installed. In doing this, he was only following his natural inclination toward kindness, his willingness to oblige everybody. He was even more strongly moved to act by the condition in which he found the Brother, whose death would have had such disastrous consequences for an Institute which was precious to the Church, one established at the gates of his archiepiscopal city.

When the petition was presented and read to the council, it won the approbation of the members with no dissenting voice. The king, who by this time was of age, was surprised at this unanimity and looked inquiringly at Cardinal de Fleury,<sup>45</sup> who held the Institute in high esteem and was more in favor of the project than anybody else. The prime minister gave His Majesty to understand that this good work was indeed worthy of his protection and deserved the favor requested. Immediately the prince, who had inherited his father's piety and his great-grandfather's zeal for religion, graciously authorized the granting of letters patent to the house of Saint Yon and directed that mention be made in the state register that the letters were to be delivered once De Tressan had been enthroned as archbishop.

Thus, after four years of negotiations and unsuccessful attempts, the house at Saint Yon definitely became the property of the Brothers. Their status, up to then uncertain and unsettled, was consolidated by the letters patent issued on 28 September 1724, eve of the feast of Saint Michel. Some three months later, the documents were forwarded, thanks to the archbishop, who by that time had returned to Paris after taking possession of the see of Rouen early in 1725. The Brothers are not the only religious group to whom Archbishop de Tressan rendered such an important and necessary service. His interest in the Christian Schools led him to request the same favor for the Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, called Sisters of Ernemont.<sup>46</sup> They are devoted to the care of the sick in country places and to the gratuitous

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45. He served as prime minister during the early years of Louis XV's reign.

46. Blain was ecclesiastical superior of that congregation.

instruction of youth in the city and diocese of Rouen. Louis XV granted this favor with equal graciousness.

A retirement home in Rouen for old and infirm priests received the same favor, thanks to this prelate. If he did not do as much for the Seminary of Saint Nicaise, which had applied for letters patent through former Archbishop d'Aubigné, he made sure that this institution so necessary for the education of young candidates for the priesthood received 2,000 écus annually from funds of the diocesan clergy, money which had been granted by Louis XIV at the request of Archbishop d'Aubigné. In addition, he added to the seminary itself, and presently he is having additional buildings constructed to lodge a larger number of candidates. Thus, thanks to his zeal and his efforts, Archbishop de Tressan procured for the state four kinds of establishments which are among the most necessary for the Church and for the public.

The letters patent of the Brothers were registered by the parliament of Rouen on 2 March 1725 and by the fiscal office four months later. But this last formality was concluded only with great difficulty and much opposition caused by the parish priest of . . .<sup>47</sup> The pastor was concerned about the loss he might suffer if the arid and sandy area where Saint Yon is situated was withdrawn from the territory on which his revenue was based. On that occasion, he used all his influence to prevent the letters patent from being registered in court. He was too prudent to try the same tactics with the parliament, because he would have had to contend with a redoubtable adversary in the person of the first president, De Pontcarré, the outspoken protector of the Brothers, who was at the same time the magistrate in charge of furthering the acceptance of the letters patent.

So the priest very cleverly waited, before trying to oppose the registration of the letters, until they were before the second court, and he did so with consummate skill. He visited all the members of the council and was eloquent enough to make them believe some of the things he stated. Actually, the letters were contrary to the interests of a man who, convinced that the Brother who was the legal owner could not live much longer, flattered himself that the house of Saint Yon would revert in a short while to its former owner and that he himself would be able to maintain his jurisdiction over a section of his parish so rich in sand and gravel.

Monsieur . . . , hearing about the intrigues of this opponent of the letters patent, was kind enough to pay a visit to Monsieur de La

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47. Blain omits the name here; no doubt he is referring to the pastor of Saint Sever, where Saint Yon was located.

Rivière-Lesdo, first president of the bureau of finance, to ask him to use his influence in favor of the Brothers. His action was needed, for almost all the members of this office had allowed themselves to be strongly prejudiced by the Brothers' adversary. He had intrigued so assiduously that one of the main magistrates had promised him to cause the affair to fall through by refusing his consent, which was necessary. But the powerful friend of the Brothers, possessing a superior mind and equal authority, acted so adroitly in their support in this complicated matter that they began to hope that things would take a turn for the better.

It was not possible, however, after the reading of the letters patent on 2 July 1725, to prevent the procurator, coached by the Brothers' enemy, from advancing all the calumnies suggested to him against the Brothers and from falsely imputing to them all sorts of misdeeds quite apt to prejudice the second court against them. His discourse achieved part of its intended effect on judges who were already not too open-minded, for although it did not prevent them from registering the letters, it suggested adding to them some extremely burdensome conditions, very harsh and mortifying for the Brothers, in spite of the eloquent address made in their favor by M. de Captot, the advocate general. The conditions were, however, soon declared null by a decree of the king's council, thanks to the appeal made by the pious and influential protector of the Brothers. In this way, in spite of the surprising intrigues of one man, the letters patent were registered in the two highest courts of Normandy. The Institute, which had become a religious order through the Bull of Approbation of the Holy See, which the king's council had accepted as valid, was finally liberated from the dependence and the sort of slavery in which its adversaries had sought to confine it through those special clauses, contrary to the common law and to the privileges of all religious communities.

### The papal Bull of Approbation of the Institute

We must now speak of the approbation which the Holy See gave to the Institute of the Brothers. While the Brothers were petitioning the French court for letters patent, they were also at work at the court of Rome, seeking to obtain a Bull of Approbation. About the same amount of time was spent in both these endeavors, and their successful termination occurred almost simultaneously.

To set the second of these negotiations in motion, Divine Providence made use of a Brother of the Society who previously had been in the employ of M. de Soubise, the father of Cardinal de Rohan. This

Brother<sup>48</sup> had been admitted into the Community by De La Salle around 1707. He loved his vocation, was zealous, presented himself well, spoke agreeably, and was beloved and highly regarded by the illustrious family by which he had once been employed. That was what inspired Brother Barthélemy, shortly after De La Salle's death, with the idea of taking advantage, for the benefit of the Community, of the esteem that the Soubise family had for their former employee. The two of them, therefore, went to pay their respects to His Eminence, hoping to win his protection but without having any definite idea in mind as to how he could help them.

Cardinal de Rohan was happy to see his father's old friend, now dressed in the Brothers' habit. He received them very kindly and, while telling the Brother how pleased he was over his decision to become a religious, inquired if he could be of help to him. The Brother, who was only waiting for such an opportunity, did not fail to seize it, and he begged His Eminence to take the Community under his protection and to give the struggling and persecuted Institute the support it needed. The cardinal willingly promised to do so.

After Brother Barthélemy's death, the same Brother offered to go with Brother Timothée, introduce him to His Eminence, and solicit his patronage again. They went together, paid him their respects, and enjoyed a long and cordial audience with him during which the prelate again promised his help and protection. At that time, the project of securing a Bull of Approbation had not yet been launched. In fact, the idea of doing so did not come up until some six months later, in 1721, when the news became public that Cardinal de Rohan had been named ambassador extraordinary of France to the court of Rome and was soon to depart. Who could better serve the interests of the Brothers in the capital of Christendom than so mighty a prelate? He had promised to protect them, and his heart did not belie his lips. By character, by his love for all good works, and by his special regard for an aged and faithful employee of his father, he was entirely willing to help the Brothers. It was a fine opportunity to solicit the goodwill of the Holy See through his influence and authority.

All these ideas, a bit confused at first, began to take shape in the mind of the Brother Superior. As they sorted themselves out, they left him with the desire of having Rome approve the Society founded by De La Salle and the rules he had composed. Brother Timothée informed the old Brother of his plan, and the latter agreed to help. So he and a companion given to him by the Superior were sent to bring

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48. Brother Honoré.

to the cardinal a memorandum drawn up in the form of a *placet*. In the document, His Eminence was asked to use his influence at Rome to have the rules and the Institute of the Brothers approved. However, they could not speak to the cardinal himself, who was on the point of leaving, so they addressed themselves, very fortunately, to Abbé Vivant, who was going to Rome as part of Cardinal de Rohan's entourage.<sup>49</sup>

The matter could not have been put into better hands, nor could it have found another patron more qualified to bring it to success. Vivant had already been to Rome several times, had lived there for long periods, and knew how things were done there. He was, moreover, a man who favored all good works, who took pleasure in helping others. As this task of the Brothers was especially to his liking and he could see the great good it was capable of accomplishing for the Church, he took the Brothers' interests to heart and promised to promote them with diligence. This he did with a zeal and skill which deserve for him eternal gratitude on the part of the Brothers.

It would seem that the Brother of whom we have spoken lived only to do that service to his Community. Not long after he had presented this *placet* to the cardinal, he died, in August 1721, at the age of sixty. He had lived in the Society for some fifteen years as a serving Brother.

Cardinal de Rohan's sojourn in Rome was a brief one. On his arrival, he found that Clement XI had just died, and after taking part in the conclave that elected Innocent XIII, he returned to France. The journey, however, was not without advantage for the Brothers, for Abbé Vivant took care to place their Rule into the hands of some of his Roman friends along with a recommendation from His Eminence that they take steps to secure approval by the Holy See. On his return to Paris, he commissioned one of his friends, a banker at the Roman court, to negotiate the matter.

One difficulty seemed to stand in the way, and it took time to resolve it. Abbé de Tencin, today archbishop of Embrun, was at that time in charge of expediting day-to-day affairs concerning French interests in Rome. He ordered the people who were trying to obtain a Bull of Approbation for the Brothers to suspend their attempts until the king had granted the letters patent or until he himself had received from His Majesty a statement in their favor. Thus both the Bull

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49. Jean Vivant was the brother of François Vivant, vicar-general of Paris, who had won the cardinal's support in maintaining the Brothers' rules without the changes advocated by the Sulpicians.



and the letters patent, which were being sought at the same time, remained in suspense. Almost four years went by without any progress, but finally the hour chosen by Divine Providence for settling this business came, and the Bull was issued shortly after the letters patent, as we have related above.

Innocent XIII died not long after his election. Cardinal de Rohan returned to Rome for the conclave, and Abbé Vivant again accompanied him. During his stay in the Eternal City, he arranged everything for the granting of the Bull, as he had promised the Brothers before his departure. Thus, on returning to Paris after the election of Benedict XIII and finding that the letters patent had been issued, he immediately advised his friends in Rome of this fact and urged them to pursue with the greatest diligence the approval of the rules of the Brothers and their Institute. He was obeyed with zeal and success, and the Bull was issued toward the end of January 1725, after the ceremony of the opening of the holy door for the jubilee year.

I must not omit here some circumstances which show the attention that God manifested in favoring after De La Salle's death all the pious desires of his servant which during his life he seemed to take pleasure in denying. De La Salle had always hoped for three things for the well-being and perfection of his Institute: that it would become a religious order, that the Rule would be approved in its integrity without addition or diminution, and that the Institute would not be merged with some already-approved older order.

His hopes were carried out to the letter without any special effort on the Brothers' part and even without their having thought of doing so. A year before the granting of the Bull, they had been advised by their Roman correspondents that the Holy See would refuse to approve their rules unless they were willing to take the three vows of religion. Their Rule spoke only of the vow of obedience, but all of them knew in their hearts what their father had in his, that is, the pious desire to add to the vow of obedience those of poverty and chastity. Several Brothers had already made such vows in private. Thus delighted over the opportunity that Divine Providence afforded them, they hastened to accept this glorious yoke which was being offered to them and joyfully presented their hands to the agreeable chains which had been prepared for them. This holy disposition brought the Brothers to the complete fulfillment of their desires. Their Rule was approved as De La Salle had left it, without additions, restrictions, or changes and without being joined to any other Rule. This last point was important, and the saintly Founder had greatly feared that approval might not be granted. In fact, he had good reason to be

apprehensive on this point, for his Rule could not have been combined with any other of a different nature. Any change, consequently, would have modified its form instead of fortifying it, and it would have ended by destroying it.

The Bull of Approbation of the Institute and of the rules of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was presented to the royal council and accepted by that body in spite of the opposition of some of the officials of the court. The royal letters were sent off, sealed, and finally registered by the parliament of Rouen on 12 May 1725.

To all the Brothers of the Institute—who had not been kept informed of the negotiations we have been describing—this good news seemed a heavenly boon. All the business had been carried on in such secrecy, inside as well as outside the Community, that except for the four or five main members of the Society who were in the know and who were the principal agents, nobody had the slightest suspicion of what was going on. The first president, De Pontcarré, was himself not aware of the request for the Bull of Approbation. So surprised was he over the complete success it had met with that he remarked in his initial moment of astonishment *that the Brothers have gone a long way in a short time*.

It can be said that the Brothers' ship, for forty years the plaything of storms and winds because of the persecutions of the world, which is always an enemy of God's works, and launched on such a lengthy voyage, where it had been a thousand times in danger of shipwreck, had finally reached the desired port. What was the surprise, the joy, of the poor Brothers, up to then so maltreated by the world? It is easier to imagine than to describe. At last they were in a more assured condition. They learned that their status had changed into a more perfect and certain one, like men who, on awaking from sleep, find a treasure, recover their liberty, or inherit a fortune. They saw themselves at last what they had desired to be without hope of ever becoming such. The great advantages that the papal Bull brought them for the perfection of their Institute in general and for their own individual perfection were motives for a renewal of fervor among them; each one thought of nothing thenceforth save of profiting by the great grace offered him and of preparing himself to become a perfect religious.

Finally, Divine Providence, as if wishing to show by an evident sign that the Bull and the letters patent were God's own doing, provided for the expenses they had occasioned. On this account, Providence became more liberal than ever toward the sons who from the beginning had been entrusted to its care and whom it had always provided for and protected, even when they had been abandoned

and rejected by creatures. God procured for them by natural and apparently ordinary means all the financial help they needed. This came about through the large number of boarders that applied for admission to Saint Yon. To let it be known that it was God's doing, there has never been such an influx, before or since, of students capable of adding to the resources of the house by such a large sum of fees.

On 6 August of that same year, 1725, the general assembly of the principal Brothers, both Directors and older Brothers, was convoked to accept the Bull of Benedict XIII in the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The Bull was received as the Ark of the Covenant had been in Jerusalem of yore by David and the principal men of Israel, namely, with transports of joy, gratitude, praise, and devotion which seemed to make this a day of eternal blessedness for these good Brothers.

The days which followed, up to the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin, were spent in retreat, silence, close union with God, profound recollection, and renewed fervor. This retreat served as a preparation for making the three vows of religion. Brother Superior had wished to give up his position on that occasion, but his humility found so much opposition in the General Chapter on the part of all the members that he was obliged to remain in office in spite of his pleading and urging. Morning and evening, Père Baudin, the Director of the Jesuit novitiate in Rouen, came to address the assembly. He was a man of rare merit and uncommon virtue. Père Malesco of the same Society and the Directors of the major seminary also spoke on the special grace that heaven was giving the Institute, on the excellence of its status, and on the importance of being faithful thereto. All these talks helped to enkindle the fire of the Holy Spirit in the house of Saint Yon during these days of retreat. The retreat ended by the pronouncing of the three vows of religion, made by each Brother in turn before the Blessed Sacrament exposed. The profession was made on the feast of Our Lady's Assumption. Abbé Robinet, canon of the cathedral and vicar-general of the diocese of Rouen, representing and holding the place of the Holy Father, celebrated Mass and addressed an eloquent and touching exhortation to those present.

In that General Chapter, the members, after voting to have the Rule printed in order to make sure that it was not altered or changed with the passing of time and the introduction of possible relaxation, also adopted several disciplinary provisions to maintain regular observance in full vigor. One of these points concerned the use of tobacco, the introduction of which it was desired to prevent by specifically forbidding it. It was decided that all postulants would be

informed of the rule forbidding tobacco and that the doors of the house would be opened only to those who were willing to give up this practice for the rest of their lives.

Since that time, the blessings of the Lord have been multiplied on the house of Saint Yon, as De La Salle had foretold. On the eve of his death, he had said, *This house will flourish*. Indeed, he would no longer recognize it if he returned to life. Since his death, it has been enlarged by more than half. Every day, to the great astonishment of the public at large and even of the Brothers themselves, we can see large stone buildings going up which seem to be founded on Providence alone. One large wing joined to the original structure runs from west to east. It was built at the cost of some 25,000 livres. This addition was begun thanks to a gift of 2,000 livres donated by the father of a retarded child who entrusted the youngster to the Brothers for the rest of his life. God so generously provided the remainder of the money needed that the Brothers themselves would be at a loss to account for it.

The building of the chapel, which is nearing completion, was also undertaken without reserve funds or resources other than the generosity of our heavenly Father. Here is what suggested this project. In one of the houses of the Society, the salaries of the Brothers of 300 livres per year had not been paid for nine years. They had begun to despair of ever collecting this money, so they made a vow to devote this amount, if they ever did receive it, to the building of a chapel at Saint Yon. Shortly after the vow was made, the back salaries were paid. The amount was not sufficient to cover the expense of laying the foundation of the proposed chapel. The Brothers, however, used the funds to start the project, in the hope that the divine hand which had begun it would not leave it unfinished. Since that time, the building has gone ahead day by day, although the Brothers had no special benefactor to rely on, no special funds to draw from. It is true that they build very economically and at the expense of their own leisure time. They received at no cost the foundation stones from the fine house of the late President Carel, which was torn down just a short distance from their gate. They can get all the sand they need on the property itself.

The architect and a good many of the workers come from among the Brothers in the house. The Brothers do most of the work themselves. They extract the sand, transport the materials, shape the stones, and do virtually everything else. They live mostly on the produce of their garden, a dry and not very fertile spot situated in a sandy bottom which they water with their sweat and force by their

hard and assiduous labor to reward its owners. Moreover, they drink only weak beer and eat only coarse bread. In this way, they economize enough on food to be able to build, and their own work represents over half of the building costs. The rest comes from the funds of Divine Providence, causing their task to progress little by little. Up to now, the charity of the public whom they serve in Rouen with such unexampled disinterestedness and generosity has not helped them in any way.

## END OF BOOK THREE



# Index

This index includes the names of persons, places, and documents in the three books of *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, except the name of John Baptist de La Salle. The table of contents of each book and the individual chapter headings will help the reader locate the events and themes in his life. See *Cahiers lasalliens* 9 (Rome, 1974) for a complete index of general and specific names of places and of persons in the three early biographies of De La Salle by Bernard, Blain, and Maillefer.

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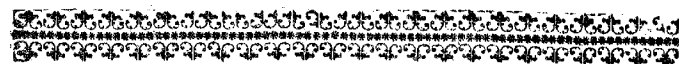
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The Mind and Heart  
of  
John Baptist de La Salle



LA VIE  
DE MONSIEUR  
JEAN-BAPTISTE  
DE LA SALLE,  
INSTITUTEUR  
DES FRERES DES ECOLES  
CHRETIENNES.



LIVRE QUATRIEME.

*Son esprit , ses sentimens , & ses vertus.*

CHAPITRE PREMIER.

*Pureté de la Foi de M. De La Salle.*



Quoique M. De La Salle soit né dans un tems où les nouvelles erreurs du Janfenisme faisoient autant de progrès que de bruit , & dans une Ville où elles ont depuis long-tems trouvé crédit & faveur , & grand nombre de zélez partisans , Dieu lui a fait la miséricorde de l'en préserver & de lui en inspirer de bonne heure une grande horreur. Cette heureuse prévention contre les nouveautez qu'il porta de Reims au Seminaire de S. Sulpice , s'y fortifia de maniere qu'il fut toujours à l'épreuve des tentations les plus délicates & les plus intéressantes sur ce sujet. Au sortir de cette sainte maison , qu'on peut regarder comme un des boulevarda de la Catholicité en France , & la pépiniere des zélez défenseurs de la saine & pure Doctrine ; il alla continuer dans l'Université de Reims les études qu'il y avoit commencées dès l'enfance , & il y prit le Bonnet de Docteur ; mais sans se laisser inatruir des sentimens nouveaux qui commençoient à s'introduire dans cette Ecole , une des plus anciennes & des plus célèbres de France. Il évitoit avec-soin toutes disputes

<sup>Y.</sup>  
Dieu préféra  
ve le jeune  
De La Salle,  
de l'autre  
de la nouvel  
le Docteur.

Tome II.

C c

The Mind and Heart  
of  
John Baptist de La Salle

Jean-Baptiste Blain

Translated and annotated  
by Edwin Bannon, FSC  
Edited by Augustine Loes, FSC

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## FOREWORD

The publication of this volume has been made possible by the considerable scholarship and patience of the translator, Edwin Bannon, FSC, of the District of Great Britain of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He completed his work about six years ago but had to wait until now for its publication because of an unexpected delay in the program of Lasallian Publications.

In addition to translating the text of book four of Canon Blain's biography of John Baptist de La Salle, Brother Edwin has enhanced the value of this volume by adding an informative introduction and extensive notes, drawing on his familiarity with the whole field of Lasallian literature and studies.

The editor wishes to acknowledge also the leadership of the first executive director of Lasallian Publications, Joseph Schmidt, FSC, of the Baltimore District, who in 1986 invited Brother Edwin to prepare this translation and authorized his adaptations of the original edition of the text. Thanks, too, are due to Joseph Melofchik, FSC, of La Salle University (Philadelphia), Joseph Murphy, FSC, of Manhattan College (New York), and Gilles Beaudet, FSC, of Ville de Laval, Québec, for their careful critical reading of the original manuscript. Paul Grass, executive director of Lasallian Publications, has ably brought the manuscript through the final stages of its publication. A word of gratitude is also heartily expressed to Stephen Olert, FSC, Principal, for the use of the computer lab of Queen of Peace High School, North Arlington, New Jersey, and for the technical assistance of Mr. Leonard Heinzmann and Michael Kelleher, FSC, who teach in the lab. Henry Chaya, FSC, of Manhattan College, also gave valuable help.

Augustine Loes, FSC, Editor





## INTRODUCTION

John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, died at the Institute's headquarters at Saint Yon, in the vicinity of Rouen, France, on Good Friday, 7 April 1719, at the age of sixty-eight. Fourteen years later, the first published biography of De La Salle appeared from the printing firm of J. B. Machuel in rue Dami-ette in the same city. Three unpublished biographies had preceded it: an incomplete draft dated 1721, written by a member of De La Salle's Institute, Br. Bernard Dauge; a second version by the same author completed by May 1723, and another manuscript *Life*, also completed before the end of 1723, by a nephew of De La Salle, Dom Élie-François Maillefer, a Maurist Benedictine of the Reims abbey of Saint Remigius.<sup>1</sup> Maillefer was to produce a second version of his biography in 1740. The circumstances that gave rise to each of these five earliest accounts of the life and work of John Baptist de La Salle and the interrelationship linking each to the others have been studied in exhaustive detail by Émile Lett in a 345-page monograph published in 1956. The basic information has also been sketched by other modern writers on the Saint, among them W. J. Battersby, who included a lucid outline in the introduction to his 1957 biography. The details need not concern us here except where they are relevant to the work I am introducing.

The 1733 official biography had been commissioned by the second successor of the Founder as Superior General of the Institute, Brother Timothée (Guillaume Samson-Bazin) in the wake of the 1724 General Chapter. It was published in two quarto tomes of 448 and 504 pages, respectively. The general title of the work was simply *La Vie de Monsieur Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Instituteur des Frères des Écoles Chrétienmes*, but each of the two volumes was divided into two

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1. The bibliography at the end of this volume contains information about the various works cited in this introduction.

2. The three books are separately bound as *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, by Jean-Baptiste Blain (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000).

parts, or books, each having its own sub-title. Books one, two, and three constitute the historical biography. They were translated into English by Richard Arnandez and published in 2000.<sup>2</sup> For this important breakthrough in Lasallian studies, the English-speaking sectors of the world-wide Institute are indebted to the Lasallian Publications of the Christian Brothers Conference of the USA/Toronto Region. This present work constitutes book four of the Blain biography.

When Blain's two original volumes appeared in 1733, their title pages identified the author simply as Monsieur \* \* \*, but as Lett has shown, an incontestable tradition dating back to 1740 demonstrates that even outside the Institute the author of the monumental work was known to be Jean-Baptiste Blain, canon of the cathedral of Rouen, doctor of the Sorbonne, and ecclesiastical superior of the Rouen community of Brothers. The present introduction is hardly the place for a biographical sketch of this devout, erudite clergyman, who was exactly fifty years old when Brother Timothée requested him to undertake the task of writing an official *Life* of the Founder. Not a great deal is known about Canon Blain, who was certainly a considerable personage in the church circles of Rouen during the first half of the eighteenth century. Such information as painstaking research has been able to gather so far has been published by Abbé André Fouré, chaplain to a Rouen community of Sisters for whom Blain had composed the Rule.<sup>3</sup>

Blain subtitled book four of his work *Son esprit, ses sentiments et ses vertus—His spirit, his sentiments, and his virtues*. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the work as ESV in this introduction. A question immediately arises as to why the author, having completed in copious measure the historical account of De La Salle's life, added this study of his psychology and spirituality in a section that at precisely 300 pages, exceeded by eighty pages the longest of the preceding parts.

Blain's answer to the question, as represented by "A Word of Explanation to the Reader," is surprising on more than one count. It is unusual for an author to preface his work with an assurance that he was not very keen to write it and to give fairly convincing reasons for his reluctance. But the principal surprise is our impression that the idea of book four was sprung upon the biographer almost as an afterthought. It seems that "the Brothers most involved in the project," having read the manuscript of the first three books, were prompted by their reading to suggest this fourth book, offering reasons so persuasive that the author could not refuse. Lett expresses his surprise:

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3. In *Revue des Sociétés Savantes de Haute-Normandie*, no. 15, 1959. Fouré's fifty-page article was later reprinted in *Bulletin des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes* (referred to hereafter as *Bulletin*), no. 160, January 1960.

Was the thing not then agreed from the beginning, as the context seemed to imply? Had not the author already been asked too much for him to believe himself obliged to yield a second time to the somewhat exorbitant wishes of the Brothers concerned in the affair? Once again, Blain acquiesced, but it was because the Brothers were able to speak with documents at hand.

Taken at face value, it is a strange scenario. Is the reader to understand that Blain knew nothing of the documentation that the Brothers produced only after they had read his initial manuscript, documentation whereby the Founder would be enabled to speak for himself? Those fifty-eight letters, of which thirty-five are known only from ESV; those additional testimonials that contribute so many otherwise unknown historical details to what was already in the biography proper and that in the process assembled a collection of almost a hundred sayings, none of which we should wish to be without? Was it just an afterthought that the Founder's published *Meditations* and *Collection of Various Short Treatises* should find a place in the official account of his life, works generously cited in ESV and not at all in books one, two, and three? If "A Word of Explanation" is to be taken literally, what is to be made of a statement within the text of ESV relating to the anecdote of the feast of the Assumption at Calais: "I deliberately omitted to mention this incident when writing of De La Salle's visit to Calais because I wanted to include it here"?<sup>4</sup>

The reader to whom "A Word of Explanation" is addressed may be excused for thinking that the perfectly legitimate device of literary accommodation has been brought to bear. The biographer was, in the first place, conveniently forestalling criticism of what he calls *beaucoup de redites* (a good deal of repeated material), which it would be hardly possible to avoid; in the second place, he was justifying the undertaking, the argument being attributed to the Brothers themselves. Whether, in fact, he needed to make excuses for the repeated material is moot. He might feasibly have claimed that the unity of the two-volume biography required it and that a studied avoidance, if indeed such had been possible, of references to incidents previously related in full would have produced an artificial, disoriented result.

But the argument that Blain ascribes to the Brothers calls for a closer look. It was no doubt true that they and the confreres they represented could "never grow tired of hearing [their] Father spoken of"; that the repetitions feared by the author would serve rather to instill in them the example of their Founder's virtues; that in reproducing De La Salle's excellent teaching, both oral and written, the author would,

4. See below, page 67.

they confidently hoped, show how the saintly man practiced that teaching himself. The argument was totally persuasive, even as outlined in “A Word of Explanation.” But there is room for doubt whether the biographer has reported everything that the Brothers concerned said to him in response to his professed reluctance. The starting point of such a doubt is a statement of Blain.

The biographer tells us in a foreword to book 1 of his work that what he would write would be based on reminiscences and testimonials of reliable witnesses, documents “carefully assembled by the late Brother Barthélemy and put in order by one of the Brothers.”<sup>5</sup> Lett shows, by comparison with other texts of the period, that the phrase, *mis en ordre* (put in order) means something more than a simple act of arranging; it implies also the composition of a work incorporating the material in the sequence appropriate to the purpose envisaged. In fact, the Brother concerned, Bernard Dauge, in a personal statement regarding the choice that had been made of him to be the first biographer of the Founder, says, “As soon as it was decided to entrust to me the composing of a Life of Monsieur de La Salle, I felt deep anxiety, fearing the reproaches and the criticism which would arise here and there.”<sup>6</sup> The French phrase *mettre en ordre* is translated as *compose*. In a preface to his first draft, Bernard outlines the plan he was to follow—the biography will have four parts. He continues:

In the first part we will treat of his childhood and his preparation for sacred orders; in the second we will describe the establishment of his Institute; in the third part we will relate the difficulties he encountered in his work and the travels he undertook to spread the Institute; and, finally, in the fourth we will describe his principal virtues and the strength of his soul. This, briefly, is what we propose to do.<sup>7</sup>

The last phrase—in the French text, *ce que doit contenir cet ouvrage*—is an imperative; there are other indications that Bernard was accomplishing his daunting task according to guidelines proposed or imposed by his superiors. Having expressed his fears, he adds:

Nevertheless, I had to follow the desires and orders of my superiors, who promised me their help, and this is what convinced me to undertake this project.<sup>8</sup>

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5. Blain, “*Dessein de cet ouvrage*,” *Cahiers lasalliens* (CL) 7, 112–115

6. Bernard, in *John Baptist de La Salle: Two Early Biographies*, 337.

7. *Ibid.*, 269; the English text does not reflect the imperative in French.

8. *Ibid.*, 337.

This is not surprising. Bernard was twenty-three when the task was enjoined upon him; if this age signified a remarkable and, in the light of the surviving fragment of his work, an excessive confidence in his ability on the part of those above him, it was to be expected that they would monitor him closely to ensure that the biography would prove to be “such as was desired,” to use another phrase from Bernard’s personal statement. Lett suggests that the phrase “such as was desired” meant such as was suitable for submitting to the Roman congregation concerned with the granting of the Bull of Approbation for the new Institute, negotiations for which had been initiated soon after the Founder’s death. The petition for the approbation would be much strengthened by the support of a biography of such a man as the one who founded the Institute, especially a biography in which due emphasis was given to the Founder’s attachment to the Holy See at a time when the French church was divided in matters doctrinal.

Bernard’s first draft broke off in the middle of the second part, and we do not know what his completed version contained because the manuscript disappeared from Lasallian history after it was submitted to De La Salle’s brother, Canon Jean-Louis, for his observations and corrections. But we do know from Bernard’s personal statement and also from a covering letter that Br. Jean Jacquot sent with the manuscript to Jean-Louis that the desired emphasis on John Baptist’s loyalty to Rome was duly made, inordinately so, in the opinion of another judge, Canon Guyart of Laon, to whom the manuscript was shown. It is reasonable to assume that it was the fourth part of the manuscript, devoted, Bernard said, to the Founder’s “principal virtues and his spirit,” that would have provided the main opportunity for the emphasis desired.

If Lett’s surmise is correct, the role envisaged for the Bernard biography was not fulfilled; how the completed manuscript disappeared is one of a number of questions that have so far been answered only by hypotheses. Evidence for John Baptist’s orthodoxy was provided instead by a copy of his will and by a copy of the so-called “Calais letter,” a transcription of which Blain was to use in *ESV*.<sup>9</sup> The Bull of Approbation was duly granted by Pope Benedict XIII in 1725.<sup>10</sup>

It was after the General Chapter held at Saint Yon for the solemn reception of the document that Brother Timothée entrusted to Canon Blain the task of producing an official biography of the Founder of the newly approved Institute and handed him the dossier of material already used by Bernard, perhaps amplified by notes received later,

9. See below, page 66.

10. The history of the negotiations has been brilliantly told by Maurice-Auguste Hermans in *Cahiers lasalliens* (CL) 11.

together with the manuscript of the Maillefer biography. Whether Brother Timothée was able to give him also Bernard's completed version remains an open question. Hermans thinks it quite probable that the manuscript was returned to Saint Yon at the time Blain was at work on the biography and that it was subsequently lost with all the other manuscript material used by Blain. Lett, on the other hand, proposes the theory that Jean-Louis de La Salle passed the Bernard manuscript to Maillefer, who incorporated its information into his own first account, which could not have been written without it, and that the manuscript was then destroyed, accidentally or otherwise.

Whether or not he had the complete Bernard manuscript to work from, Blain certainly had the young Brother's original dossier of source material, and as he says, it was Bernard's arrangement that he adopted. Corroborative evidence emerges from a comparison between the subject matter of Bernard's four parts and the four subtitles given by Blain to his own four books of the biography.<sup>11</sup>

Blain acknowledges indebtedness to the Brother biographer, not only in his foreword but again in the present work. He nowhere mentions Maillefer, although he certainly made extensive use of the Benedictine's work while rejecting his structure. The learned canon of Rouen preferred the young amateur biographer's procedure to that of the erudite librarian of the Abbey of Saint Remigius, who had disregarded not only Bernard's fourfold division but also his chapter arrangement, opting for a straight narrative with multiple subheadings.

Blain's preference must surely have been made in deference to the wishes of the Brothers most involved in the project, who had imposed the quadruple format on Bernard in the first place. If the official biography of the Founder of the Institute was to be "such as was desired," it must provide not only a historical narrative of events, however much these were shown to have shaped him into a saint, but also a specific study of his spirit, sentiments, and virtues, especially his views regarding papal authority and his heroic practice of the theological and cardinal virtues. If the original objective for which that format had been required of Bernard had been achieved, a new purpose was already vested in the hopes and aspirations of the authorities at Saint Yon, namely the beatification and ultimately the canonization of their Founder. This is surely what was in the mind and doubtless in the speech of the Brothers who made it impossible for Blain to refuse the professedly unwelcome task. In addition to what Blain quotes them as having said, they might, in all verisimilitude, have added that they wanted a biography that "would be suitable for presentation at Rome and, later perhaps, constitute a principal docu-

11. Blain, *The Life*, book one, 3; book two, 161; book three, 483.

ment, *une pièce maîtresse*, in the dossier for the process of beatification,” to borrow a retrospective assessment by Rigault.

As the copious documentation in the Institute’s central archives in Rome relating to the said process shows, Blain’s work, specifically book 4, proved indeed to be the *pièce maîtresse* in the evidence that brought the cause of the Founder to the triumphant moment of his beatification in 1888. In addition to the sworn testimonies of witnesses interrogated during the three diocesan processes of Paris, Reims, and Rouen, extracts from the Blain biography, duly translated into Italian for the convenience of the assessors in Rome, were submitted in 1836 with the petition for the introduction of De La Salle’s cause into “the Court of Rome,” as the phrase was. Of the passages cited, ninety percent were from ESV, chosen from just under a third of the 300 pages of the work. The objections to the introduction of the cause, technically called the *animadversions*, raised by the *Promotor Fidei* (the “devil’s advocate”) were likewise answered principally from the same source.

The importance of this was rendered all the more significant because the *Promotor* began his objections with a question about the length of time that had been allowed to occur between the death of the Founder in 1719 and the inauguration in 1830 of the diocesan processes. He quoted a 1741 decree of Pope Benedict XIV requiring that eyewitness testimonies must be adduced unless the lack of these was due to a justified lapse of time. The advocates of De La Salle’s cause had no difficulty providing a satisfactory response to the animadversion regarding the lapse of time, but the *Promotor* further questioned the qualifications of the witnesses who had been interrogated. Almost all, he pointed out, could claim only to have heard about John Baptist de La Salle’s saintliness or to have read about him in published works available to anyone. The significance of Blain’s frequent introduction, no fewer than fifty-five times in ESV, of such phrases as “The older Brothers who lived most closely with him and were the most intimate witnesses of his life are at one in claiming. . . .”<sup>12</sup> and “We have testimony about this from a devout canon who spent some time with him in the community. . . .”<sup>13</sup> became crucial from the outset.

The animadversions having been successfully answered, the cause moved forward in 1840 to the apostolic process, conducted under the direct authority of the Holy See and no longer the responsibility of the diocesan authorities. The interrogation of witnesses in the three cities principally associated with the Founder’s life centered in

12. See below, page 119.

13. See below, page 177.

the first place and chiefly on whether John Baptist de La Salle had practiced to a heroic degree the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, and other virtues ancillary to these.

For this apostolic process, the star witness—a term he would have found uncomfortable—was Brother Calixte (Jean-François Leduc), an Assistant of the Superior General, Brother Philippe (Matthieu Bransiet), who had named him to be the first to give testimony at the Paris tribunal. It was a carefully considered choice. The *Promotor Fidei*, who had discounted forty-eight of the one hundred and fifteen witnesses originally cited as having nothing significant to say about John Baptist's virtues, was to comment approvingly on Brother Calixte's consummate knowledge of everything to do with the Founder. "Authors," the *Promotor* said, "who dedicate themselves to assiduous research and then apply total care to the composition of works intended for publication are hardly as clear, judicious, and precise in the order and development of their chapters as this witness in his replies."

Brother Calixte, replying to the preliminary questions of the Paris apostolic tribunal regarding the grounds on which he would base his testimony, gave primacy to his familiarity with Blain's two volumes but especially with book four and forthwith held up the further questions of the interrogators with a cogent, six-point presentation of his reasons for having total trust in the veracity of this source. His depositions, as they appear in the *Summarium super Virtutibus*, include citations from over one hundred pages of ESV, translated into Latin. Br. Calixte Leduc may be said to have made the greatest single contribution to the success of the Founder's cause, not only by his testimony at the Paris apostolic tribunal and earlier at the Rouen diocesan tribunal but also by his assiduous attention to the administrative details connected with the cause and his ready availability as consultant to the advocates. Regrettably, we must also admit that his zeal led him to injudicious handling of the difficulty raised by the *Promotor* over the Founder's writings, as described in outline by Rayez in 1952.<sup>14</sup>

But the influence of ESV was not limited to its fulfillment of the primary purpose for which it had been written. The work contributed potently to shaping the Institute's corporate image of the personality of its Founder, not only directly but also by the use made of it by subsequent biographers. A rapid outline of its bibliographical history during the nineteenth century may be of interest here. It is axiomatic that for subsequent biographers of De la Salle, Blain's books 1, 2, and 3 of the 1733 publication were the exclusive, or in one or two cases the al-

14. Rayez, "Lasallian Studies in the Mid-twentieth Century," in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 102–05.



most exclusive, source for the narrative of the events in the life of the Founder, at least until the Sulpician Jean Guibert broke the mold with *Histoire de Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, published in Paris in 1900. The task for each of these early authors was to condense something around 370,000 words of those three parts into an account, accessible to a general readership, of the life of the man who had made quality education available to young people who otherwise would have had no formal education at all. It would not have been surprising if all such biographers had deemed the additional 180,000 words of book four somewhat redundant and had left this part out of account. Those who actually did so, however, are in a small minority.

Even the anonymous author of *Éloge Historique de M. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, a declared abridgement of Blain, dated 1740, devoted a last chapter to “Remarks on the saintliness of J. B. de La Salle,” obviously based on ESV. Twenty years later, a Jesuit, J. C. Garreau, produced what he also declared to be an abridgement of the official biography, but although he even included a summary of Blain’s dedicatory epistle to the Divine Child and divided his work into four parts, ESV has no place in it.

An adaptation of Blain was published in 1785 by Abbé de Montis with the expressed purpose of presenting to young aspirants to the priesthood the life of a saintly ecclesiastic well suited to make them aware of “all the dignity and holiness of the priesthood to which they aspired, together with the important obligations it entailed.” The author, a Doctor of Theology, an official censor for the King, and a member of the *Académie Royale de Belles-Lettres de La Rochelle*, has this to say in his preface:

The fourth book especially of this work, treating of the virtues practiced by this great servant of God in an eminent degree, will show them [the students for the priesthood] what they must do and what they must avoid in their holy state of life to sanctify therein not only themselves but also the souls who will be in their charge.

Predictably, De Montis gives due weight to ESV, allocating two-fifths of his 320 pages to it and often following Blain’s text verbatim.

The next adapter, Abbé Carron, disregarded ESV in *Le Tendre Ami des Enfants du Peuple*, 1828, but an anonymous author of a particularly brief abridgement, published in 1838 under the title *Le Vêritable Ami de l’Enfance*, devoted almost half his pages to ESV.

The first attempt to adapt Blain from a critical standpoint was that of Abbé Salvan, an honorary canon of Toulouse, a member of the

*Académie des Jeux Floraux* and of the *Société Archéologique du Midi de la France*. His account, published in 1852, is *Vie du Vénérable J.-B. de La Salle, Fondateur de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes; accompagnée de notes historiques sur un grand nombre d'événements et de personnages contemporains*. In his introduction the author writes:

I have not felt bound to reproduce some of the letters and sayings or the personal rules attributed to the Venerable by M. Blain because the authenticity of these various items does not seem to me to be sufficiently proved.

This disclaimer, however, is rather ignored, for Salvan includes an impressive précis of ESV along with a number of sayings and letters.

By a curious coincidence, the year 1874 saw the publication of two important biographies of De la Salle, each, like Salvan's, adopting a deliberately academic approach. Armand Ravelet produced, in Paris, *Histoire du Vénérable Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, for which he claimed in his preface to have undertaken personal research in the Paris National Archives and in the municipal archives of Rouen, Reims, Châlons, and Mende. The distinguished layman, a retired editor of the influential newspaper *Le Monde* and translator of works of Saint Bernard and others, expressed the hope that his research had enabled him to bring something new to the knowledge of De La Salle's life. They had indeed, especially in the lawsuits brought against the Founder in Paris, but what is of more immediate interest here is that Ravelet's page-and-a-half preface contains the following passage, clearly inspired by ESV:

In the life of the Venerable de La Salle, however, it is mainly the saint that it is appropriate to study. It was his love of prayer, his charity, all his supernatural virtues heroically practiced, that explain the eminent qualities which distinguished him in the eyes of the world and the success of his gigantic enterprise, which seemed to be more than human strength could sustain. . . . John Baptist de La Salle . . . was a great founder, but he was an even greater saint, and it is on his saintliness that we should focus our attention.

Somewhat unexpectedly, however, Ravelet does not follow Blain in offering a separate study of the Founder's virtues. His thesis, as the preface goes on to say, is that "the explanation of exterior achievements is [to be sought] in the life within," and so his method is to space his references to ESV throughout the historical narrative.

The other biography whose first edition is dated 1874 was published in Rouen anonymously *par un Frère des Écoles Chrétiennes* but was known in Lasallian circles to be the work of Brother Lucard, the first member of the Institute to emerge as a published historian of the Founder and his achievements. Appointed to the task by Brother Superior Philippe, Lucard was free to carry out archival research in Reims, Paris, Rouen, Chartres, Avignon, Moulins, Marseille, and Grenoble. His ready access to the archives of the Maison Mère at rue Oudinot in Paris enabled him to provide information for his readers not found in any of the preceding biographies. He was the first, for example, to speak in his preface about Blain's predecessors, Brother Bernard and Dom Maillefer, and to quote both freely in his text. Although adopting a firmly historical stance throughout, Lucard found ESV indispensable; a score of direct quotations from it occur in his text. Incidentally, he shows an awareness of the significance of De La Salle's personal rules<sup>15</sup> long before Rayez drew attention to the fragment as an "extremely valuable" document.<sup>16</sup>

It was in 1882 that ESV came into its own officially, so to speak, as a section of the great biography worthy to stand as a self-contained work of interest and edification, worth reading independently of the biography proper. Abbé Auguste Carion, chaplain to the Institute's generalate in Paris, edited book 4 of Blain's work under the title *Esprit et Vertus du Vénérable Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, which was published under the aegis of the Institute's Superior by the *Procure Générale*. Carion's introduction would be worth quoting at some length if space permitted, reflecting as it does not only a moment in the Institute's history when a need was felt for spiritual renewal—conversion, we might say today—and when ESV was invoked to inspire it but also the mentality with which such a work was viewed a little over a century ago. A few extracts must suffice.

Carion claims to have reproduced Blain's text "with the fidelity required for the transcription of the words of so serious a witness and one so worthy of belief":

We have added nothing and made no change in [the author's] thought. Our task has been only to render the reading of the work easier by replacing outdated expressions with an equivalent or recasting turns of phrase that could embarrass or surprise anyone not familiar with seventeenth-century speech.

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15. See below, pages 240–242.

16. Rayez, "The Spirituality of Self-Abandonment," in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 149.

But a comparison of the 1882 edition with Blain's original shows that Carion's editorial procedures were hardly thus restricted, as indeed he goes on to indicate in his introduction. He admits to having modified "the rare passages in which, inadvertently, the wording of the text offered an inexact theological meaning" and to having "rectified certain errors of fact."

Even these did not exhaust the kinds of changes the editor felt entitled, if not obliged, to introduce. At the very outset, we become aware that he has omitted entirely Blain's lengthy discourse on fidelity to the church, which constitutes all of chapters 2, 3, and 4 of the present translation of book 4. He justifies this particular excision:

It is understandable that Gallicanism, which was so prevalent in the eighteenth century, could have justified this digression. Today there is no point in burdening with it a book addressed to pious and enlightened readers, sincerely submissive to the infallible authority of the Holy See.

Carion suppresses numerous passages, such as the anecdote of the Founder's rebuke of the Brother in a church;<sup>17</sup> the sentence beginning "Certainly, if he did have the misfortune";<sup>18</sup> the clause "not with those lazy and idle ministers";<sup>19</sup> in the first paragraph of chapter 10, from the words "Yet this is usually" to the end;<sup>20</sup> the digression on the difficulty of preserving chastity intact, from "To achieve this state of purity" to "a courageous and total self-abnegation";<sup>21</sup> the paragraph beginning "He made routine use of fasts and hair shirts";<sup>22</sup> the sentence beginning "In the opinion of one of his disciples who knew him best,"<sup>23</sup> and so on throughout the work. So freely, indeed, does Carion suppress passages of greater or lesser length that his edition shortens the original by over 10,000 words.

Another device that the editor deemed useful to employ for the new generation of readers of ESV was to include information from the biography proper, not then available in a new edition, although that lack was to be supplied five years later. His intention was to make more comprehensible what in ESV are simply allusions. For example, where the original merely says, "Their demeanor in church impressed

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17. See below, 85.

18. *Ibid.*, 98.

19. *Ibid.*, 99.

20. *Ibid.*, 101.

21. *Ibid.*, 114–16.

22. *Ibid.*, 119.

23. *Ibid.*, 136.

a nephew of the parish priest of Calais and led to the foundation of a school in that town,"<sup>24</sup> Carion introduces two paragraphs, quoting from book 2, chapter 16, the complete anecdote about M. Ponthon. He applies the same treatment to the mention of Msgr. Godet Desmarests in the same context.

We can understand Carion's position. Like Blain, Abbé Carion was working according to the wishes of the superiors who had commissioned the new edition of ESV and who, it is reasonable to surmise, had made clear their intentions to the chaplain-editor. Those intentions were certainly more concerned with the pastoral and formative benefits to be gained from Blain's study of the Founder's mind and heart than with rigor in presenting the text just as it had left the Machuel press in 1733. In fairness, I must say that in the introduction I have quoted, the editor reveals a disarming self-consciousness about his procedures:

We are well aware that the fastidious will be shocked at this kind of literary vandalism, so little in keeping with the taste of an age roused to indignation by the updating of a word or phrase as if at the sight of an antique bronze deprived of its precious patina by unintelligent burnishing. It is not for the fastidious that we have undertaken the task. The vast majority of the readers for whom this book is intended will see in it only holy inspirations and edifying examples. What matters here is to avoid anything that might hinder readers or distract them from the devout reflections or the generous impulses that an account of the acts and thought of a saint should arouse in simple and well-disposed hearts.

A modern authority on Blain failed to be impressed by Carion's apologia. "Imprudent in the extreme," writes Hermans in his essay, *Vers une biographie critique de Saint Jean- Baptiste de La Salle*, "are these choppings and changes of Abbé Carion. So much literary vandalism, to use his own term for it!"

But the closing word on this particular episode in the bibliographical history of ESV is in the administrative circular number 33, dated 21 November 1884, *Le Chapitre Général et ses Résultats*. There Brother Superior Joseph Josserand is able to write:

The capitulants of 1884, considering the importance as well as the rarity of Blain's work and noting the considerable good already produced by the part reprinted in 1882, namely, *The Spirit and Virtues of the Venerable de La Salle*, have earnestly requested us

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24. Ibid., 85.

to have the biography itself republished as soon as possible so that communities not already in possession of the work, which means the great majority, may be able to obtain it.

The biography was duly published in 1889, in a single quarto volume of 775 pages, incorporating the word *Bienheureux* in the title, the beatification having taken place the previous year. The editorial responsibility had again been entrusted to Auguste Carion, who contributed a thirty-three-page introduction, borrowing much of what he had included in his introduction to the 1882 edition of *The Spirit and Virtues*. A reprint of the latter work was already called for in 1890, and an anonymous translation of it into English was published in Paris in 1895 and forthwith became required reading in the novitiates of the English-speaking sectors of the Institute, as its French counterpart had long been in the French-speaking novitiates. It was Carion's edition that introduced into the Institute tradition the habitual reference to Blain's fourth book as simply *The Spirit and Virtues*. The 1889 volume was never translated into English.

One more nineteenth-century work merits a mention because it owes even more to ESV than to the biography proper. Not unlike Abbé de Montis before him, the author, J. Cellier, a pastor in the archdiocese of Rouen, had the idea of proposing John Baptist de La Salle as a model for priests. His book, over 400 pages long, was published in 1896 under the title *Le Bienheureux J. B. de La Salle, Gloire et Modèle du Clergé*. Written in the wake of the beatification and with the euphoric fervor generated by the event, Cellier's book is a protracted panegyric, treating the Founder's virtues in the abstract and pointing the application at every stage to the priests and seminarians to whom the work was addressed; it may be described as a reworking of ESV with a clerical readership in view. The author's admiration for the Founder rivals Blain's; indeed he outdoes him with an appended *Litanies du Bienheureux de La Salle* comprising twenty-four invocations and then an extended prayer composed of forty-eight rhyming couplets. The unremittingly flowery and apostrophic prose of Cellier's 400 pages renders them unreadable today, but that such a book could be published at all testifies to the standing of the Founder of the Christian Schools outside his own religious family.

And so to the year 1900, momentous in the history of the Lasalian Institute, the year in which its Founder was canonized by Pope Leo XIII, the same pontiff who had beatified him twelve years before. Almost inevitably, a new biography was called for, and the need was met by the Superior of the Society of Saint Sulpice, Jean Guibert, who dedicated his work as "an act of homage by the Company of Saint

Sulpice to the most glorious of its alumni.” The 725-page volume is *Histoire de Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, significant because, as the author explains in his preface, “We have neglected nothing to give our work a strictly historical character.” In the context of this assurance, he somewhat high-handedly dismisses the work of his predecessors:

A life whose social influence was so profound deserved to be made known to the public. Not that several authors—among them Blain, Garreau, Salvan, Ravelet, and Lucard—have not already recounted the virtues and works of the Founder of the Brothers. For various reasons, their work hardly reached beyond the sphere of activity of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Blain’s work, assuredly the best, is less a history than a voluminous treatise of spirituality for which John Baptist de La Salle’s life furnishes the theme. Lucard assembled the materials for an important work, but his insufficiency of artistic talent diminishes its value. The other biographers merely condensed Blain.

Such words, published on the threshold of the twentieth century, signaled a new approach, and the expectations they aroused in the reader were not disappointed. The learned author’s purpose was sufficiently affirmed by the list he gave of his sources without pretending, he said, to give all those pertaining to the subject, but only those he himself had consulted; the descriptive list extends to twelve closely printed pages.

The “strictly historical character” Guibert claimed for his work did not allow its author to leave ESV totally out of the reckoning; a dozen or so borrowings from it can be counted, all skillfully woven into the historical tapestry unfolded in the massive volume. In the following year, Guibert published a shorter study of the Founder under the title *Vie et Vertus de S. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*. The author, it would seem, had quickly realized, or it had been put to him by others, that there were still readers who looked to be inspired to better things by the life of a saint at least as much as to be informed of its historical details supported by documentary proof and scholarly apparatus.

Guibert’s *avant-propos* to the 1901 book begins, “This work makes no pretense to scholarship; its primary aim is to edify the reader.” In fact, Guibert proceeds to tell the story of De La Salle’s life in two hundred pages and then devotes the remaining one hundred and fifty to a discussion of the Saint’s virtues, of which the chapter headings, *Foi et Vie de Foi*, *Espérance et Confiance en Dieu*, *Amour de Dieu*, *Esprit de Religion*, and so on, show the indebtedness of the discussion to ESV.

“Guibert,” writes Rayez, “leaves all his predecessors far behind; they had assiduously plundered Blain. . . . henceforth, it was Guibert who would be plundered.” This is an appreciative assessment of the Sulpician’s *Histoire*, but it would be a mistake to read it to mean that subsequent biographers in some sense discarded Blain. He is very much present in the proliferation of twentieth-century studies of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, and the notes to the present translation will, it is hoped, sufficiently show the critical respect with which he has been treated by the principal modern writers on the Saint. Nevertheless, Blain’s shortcomings as a writer have been amply rehearsed, and it is perhaps more especially ESV that illustrates Rigault’s assessment:

[Blain] is much more a preacher than a historian. He wearies and irritates the reader with his *longueurs* and his padding, and the persistent amplification of his material leads him to exaggerate certain episodes. He admits himself that he is not very reliable about dates.

These faults and others, such as a tendency to contradiction in details and a repetitive effect caused by using the same episode to illustrate different virtues, are admittedly only too well exemplified in ESV. But Rigault’s assessment does not stop at the point quoted:

But, with all that taken into account, it has to be said that [Blain’s] work achieves the object the author had set himself: it demonstrates to perfection the greatness and holiness of John Baptist de La Salle. Furthermore, it provides on the origins and early years of the Institute and on the difficulties the Founder had to contend with a mass of information it would be difficult or impossible to find elsewhere.

It is this positive aspect of Jean-Baptiste Blain’s achievement that the reader is invited to keep in mind at the outset of book 4 of his work. *Tout comprendre est tout pardonner*, and although Blain’s faults remain faults, whichever way we look at them, we will view them more indulgently if we do not lose sight of the purpose for which he was writing. Even his amplifications may have been a result of his wish to oblige the superiors who had commissioned the work. Those superiors fully intended to send copies of the official *Life* to Rome despite the fact that the immediate need concerning the Bull of Approval had been met. We know that thirteen copies were received there two years after publication and twenty more the year after that. Two quarto tomes would make a more striking impression in Rome’s



ecclesiastical circles than a single, fairly slim volume into which, as Maillefer's 1723 draft had shown, a simple narrative of events could have been contained.

The same intention of circulating copies in Rome would certainly have prompted the discourse on loyalty to the Holy See that comes almost at the outset of the present work and that even Abbé Carion decided had to be deleted from his edition. Most likely, any would-be reader in Rome of a *Life* of a French ecclesiastic of that time would glance first at the section entitled "His spirit, his sentiments, and his virtues" to discover where the personage and his biographer stood in matters of doctrine and whether, therefore, the two massive tomes were worth tackling at all. It was an infelicitous start to ESV even for Blain's first readers at home, who expected to learn about the mind and heart of the provider of Christian education for the people rather than to be lectured on doctrinal orthodoxy. For readers today, this section has at least the merit of being a first-class contemporary document of the history of the church in early eighteenth-century France.

Exaggerations abound in this work, but if readers are looking for positive aspects to brace themselves for the reading, they might remember that hyperbole has been a much-used literary device by countless writers far more accomplished than Canon Blain ever aspired to be. Perhaps our biographer has left a hint within these pages as to how he intends his hyperboles to be read. Commenting on the maxim of the Desert Fathers reported by Cassian, that to seek perfection it was necessary to close the eyes, the ears, and the lips, Blain remarks, "It was a way of saying that they used these senses only in a restricted way." Then, as if to reinforce the point, he refers to the saying of Jesus that John the Baptist neither ate nor drank.

Be that as it may, the anecdotes and letters introduced by the biographer sufficiently serve to keep the exaggerations from getting out of hand and, at the same time, partly explain the apparent contradictions that are scattered throughout ESV. Blain was keeping close to the eye-witness testimonials he had received; if, for example, one such had testified that De La Salle "was never seen to be angry,"<sup>25</sup> and another witness remembered the Founder coming away from a visit to M. Gense "quite upset and in a burst of holy anger," telling the Brothers that he had been made a fool of,<sup>26</sup> so be it. The witnesses were at variance, as witnesses can be, not their conscientious recorder.

The sayings also serve to modify the platonic treatment of the Founder's virtues. After reading chapter 10 on De La Salle's zeal for the exact observance of the church's prescriptions for priests, it comes

25. See below, 228.

26. See below, 383.

as something of a surprise to us to hear him say that when he travels, he does not usually carry his permit to say Mass.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, how human and unexpected is the confidential admission to two lay friends<sup>28</sup> of the man portrayed in chapters 12 and 13.

Many of the sayings do merit attention. In the present work, ninety-eight are cited in quotation marks and at least fifty indirectly, excluding those of which Hermans doubts the authenticity, and their presence helps considerably to sharpen the focus of our image of the Founder. Gaetan Bernoville, a professional biographer with a score of books to his credit including a stylish biography of De La Salle produced in occupied Paris, 1944, may have been overstating things in writing that Blain's literary service to De La Salle and to Grignon de Montefort reminded him of that of Eckermann to Goethe, but the sayings recorded in ESV help to see the point of the remark.

The letters known only from this part of Blain's work render it valuable for our knowledge of the Saint. Abbé Salvan had doubts, which he omitted to substantiate, about the authenticity of some of the letters cited by our biographer, but a more qualified expert on the question, Br. Félix-Paul Vandamme, does not hesitate to include them all in his critical edition of the Founder's correspondence.<sup>29</sup> Thirty-five are known only from ESV; twenty-three, only from ESV and one other source.

The Institute Administrative Circular 335, *Les Lettres de Saint J. B. de La Salle*, edited also by Félix-Paul, includes a discussion of Blain's use of the letters. Nowhere is the authenticity of Blain's citations questioned; on the contrary, where another source is available, Blain's text is preferred, and the other source is used to complement it. In *Cahiers lasalliens* 10, Hermans doubts the verbatim fidelity of Blain's transcriptions in a few cases, but in no instance does he dismiss a letter as unauthentic. Battersby does not include in his 1952 edition any of Blain's examples, but he was probably influenced by the convenience of the complete Ms 22 collection available in the Rome archives of the Generalate. Of these, nineteen are found in ESV; Blain's fifty-eight citations had not yet been assembled. Battersby's edition appeared in the same year as, but ahead of, Circular 335; however, in his introduction he does respectfully refer to Blain's use of the letters:

It is certain that Canon Blain had a large number of letters at his disposal when he wrote his monumental *Life* of De La Salle. He

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27. See below, 158.

28. See below, 304–05.

29. *Letters of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1988).

makes numerous quotations and sometimes cites a letter at full length. We have none of the originals which he thus used, however, and so far it has been impossible to discover what Blain did with the documents after the publication of his book in 1733. It is difficult to believe that this mass of material was thrown away or destroyed, at a time when even the paper itself was valuable, so we are left with the hope that one day it may come unexpectedly to light.<sup>30</sup>

That would indeed be a day for rejoicing in the history of the Lasallian Institute, but in the meantime we may feel confident that the letters cited by Blain, whether originals or copies of originals, emanated from the hand of *De La Salle*, the saint's invariable signature on all the fifty-three known autograph manuscripts. The contents alone of most of them support this impression. Those addressed to Brother Barthélemy, the one rebuking him for swinging his arms<sup>31</sup> and the one concerning the state of the novitiate,<sup>32</sup> are not likely to have been made up by the biographer. The wonder is that he included them at all, considering the idealized relationship between the Founder and his first successor portrayed elsewhere in *ESV*. Another letter with a particularly authentic ring to it is the one addressed to his niece, tactfully declining her invitation to attend her profession ceremony.<sup>33</sup> Its reference to his no longer being Superior accords with the known date of Jeanne-Remiette's profession in the Congregation of Notre Dame.

Félix-Paul declares that Blain's "almost excessive" use of letters addressed to persons outside the Institute informs us about an aspect of De La Salle's priestly zeal and activity that otherwise would be almost unknown. All three source biographers assure us that the Founder was sought after as a spiritual director by several kinds of people ("*plusieurs sortes de personnes*," Bernard says<sup>34</sup>), so many that "because he was unwilling to neglect his Brothers," he accepted very few.

But the evidence of fourteen letters quoted in *ESV*,<sup>35</sup> eight at considerable length, shows that De La Salle was unsparing of his time and his concern in fulfilling the role of spiritual director; at least in his written counsels, whatever the impression Blain gives us of his reluctance to grant interviews for the purpose.<sup>36</sup>

30. Battersby, *De La Salle: Letters and Documents*, xxi.

31. *Letters*, 124.

32. *Ibid.*, 126.

33. *Ibid.*, 131.

34. Bernard, CL 4, 81.

35. *Letters*, 105–18.

36. See below, 113; see also, *Letters*, 282–87, for a general discussion, on the basis of his correspondence, of the Founder as spiritual director.

A fitting conclusion to this section is to add that ESV is the principal, although not exclusive, source of our knowledge that De La Salle possessed an exceptional gift—*charism* we would say today—for converting hardened sinners. The eleven cases recounted in chapter 25 with circumstantial detail and corresponding narrative interest would seem to exemplify the biographer's tendency to exaggerate if a few of the same cases were not also to be found in the pages of the professedly cautious Maillefer.

The reader of ESV will soon become aware of the author's readiness to quote the Fathers and other spiritual writers in testimony of a doctrinal point. Blain, a doctor of theology, seems to have been a diligent reader of the kind of literature he uses. In the Institute's Rome archives is an extended note based on a report, kept in the *Archives Départementales de la Seine-Maritime*, concerning the auction of Blain's library held on 18–19 August 1751, six months after his death. A complete list is given of the 391 volumes offered for sale, 211 by named authors and 180, auctioned in job lots, by various unnamed authors. Among the identified works are an eight-volume folio set of Saint Augustine, of whom ESV has ten quotes, and works of Saint Gregory the Great (twelve quotes), Saint Bernard (eight), Tertullian (four), Saint Bonaventure (six), Saint Cyprian (one), Saint Thomas's *Summa Theologica* (four), and Saint Gregory Nazianzus (one quote). Conspicuous by their absence from the identified list are the works of Saint Jerome (nine quotes), Saint Ambrose (five), and Saint John Chrysostom (four). The number of volumes auctioned hardly represented the canon's complete library, according to Fouré, who puts the total at about 500. Blain had donated his multi-volume Bible and other books to the Ernemont convent, and according to our authority, he had probably made similar gifts to other friends as he grew older. Single volumes quoted in ESV could well have been among those of the *divers auteurs* not identified, such as the Rule of Saint Benedict (four quotes), of Saint Pachomius (two), and of Saint Basil (one), Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences* (six), Saint Athanasius's *Life of Saint Anthony* (three), Saint John Climacus's *Ladder of Paradise* (five), a Franciscan volume comprising Celano's *Life* (three), *Fioretti* (one), and *Mirror of Perfection* (three), two treatises of De Rancé (three), and, of course, *The Imitation of Christ* (eleven quotes).

The degree of the biographer's accuracy in using his quotations varies, nor is he by any means consistent in providing references. But the freedom and general aptness with which he uses these printed sources suggests that Blain had a scholar's familiarity with the contents and certainly that his 500 tomes were not merely gathering dust on his shelves. To what extent he availed himself of the *Indices Sen-*

*tentiarum* provided in the folio volumes he used must remain a matter for speculation. Incidentally, his numerous citations from the Fathers offer a certain topical interest to ESV for a modern reader. The postwar years, a *kairos*, according to Von Balthasar,<sup>37</sup> for a return to the Fathers of the Church with their attention to the transcendence of God, have been marked by a renaissance of patristic studies; the movement received a further impulse from Vatican Council II.

The haphazard way Blain offers references for these works is even more in evidence when it comes to his generous use of the Scriptures. Like the saint about whom he is writing, the biographer is so familiar with the Bible that direct quotations and allusions recur constantly in these pages (310 from the New Testament, 93 from the Old Testament). We get the impression that more often than not, he is citing from memory, which would explain why he offers a textual reference only in a minority of cases, less than a third of the total identified in the notes. In this prolific use of the Scriptures, Blain aligns himself with all the French spiritual writers of his time, for whom the inspired word of God was the criterion by which all authentic holiness was to be judged.<sup>38</sup>

Blain's allusions and citations generally fit in naturally with what he is saying, whatever we may think of their aptness here or there, but he occasionally puts a strain on his reader's acquiescence by using a scriptural passage to establish a structure of perfection to which his hero is then shown to have conformed in every detail. Examples of this device are his use of James 3:17 in chapter 20 and of First Corinthians 13 in chapter 30.<sup>39</sup>

The final judgment on any book rests with the reader who has done the author the honor of attentively perusing its pages. All the more so in the case of the present work, first published over two and half centuries ago, readers will decide whether the sponsoring a translation in the final decade of the twentieth century was justified.

The translator, at any rate, can only express the hope that his rendering may not have contributed to a negative verdict. His personal reaction to the close encounter with Jean-Baptiste Blain necessitated by his task of translating him is an enhanced appreciation of the biographer's achievement. It is the achievement of an "incurably humble man" (Lett's term) who sought only to meet the wishes of those

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37. *Dieu et l'Homme d'Aujourd'hui* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1954).

38. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 4, cols. 226–38.

39. Luis Varela makes some perceptive remarks about the use of the Scriptures in ESV in his study, *Biblia y Espiritualidad en San Juan Bautista de La Salle*, published in English as *Sacred Scripture in the Spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000).

who commissioned the work—inspired, however, by his personal love and veneration for the saint whose portrait he was to create. That veneration shines out of every chapter of this fourth book of his great biography, culminating in the epilogue, although the reader may demur at its grandiloquent phraseology. It is a remarkable testimony to have been written for publication by one who had known John Baptist de La Salle during the last four years of the saint's life and who was aware that his words would be read by many who had known him for a much longer period.

Vatican Council II, in *Perfectae Caritatis*, reminded religious institutes that in the process of renewal, they should "let their founders' spirit and special aims . . . be faithfully held in honor."<sup>40</sup> In the response of the Institute founded by De La Salle, Blain's privileged interpretation of that spirit must surely have a place, however far social and technological developments have distanced us from the seventeenth-century European world view reflected in the biographer's pages.

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[Ed. note: In this English edition, Brother Edwin assigns chapter numbers and groups the marginal headings that Blain uses throughout the French text. Contrary to his frequent use of chapter numbers in books 1, 2, and 3 of *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Blain divides book 4 into only three chapters—on the faith, the hope, and the charity of John Baptist de La Salle—to conform to the required outline for submitting proof of the heroic virtues of the person proposed for beatification by the church. The table of contents of this present volume includes a side-by-side comparison with Blain's headings and his organization of book 4 (as in *Cahiers lasalliens* 8). Scriptural quotations in Latin are taken from an edition of the Vulgate that was available to Canon Blain; those in English are taken almost always from the Douai-Reims translation, the only authorized Catholic version available at the time Blain was writing.]

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40. *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*, 28 October 1965, no. 2b.

## A WORD OF EXPLANATION TO THE READER

It seems fair to warn the reader that he will find a good deal of repeated material in this fourth part of the biography. It is hardly possible to avoid it when treating in detail of the virtues of a person whose life I am presenting. This, no doubt, is why the majority of our most notable writers who have in recent years given us biographies of canonized saints or of other persons who have died with a reputation for holiness have desisted from making a detailed study of their virtues as such. The life of such persons was, after all, no more than a tissue of actions exemplifying humility, meekness, obedience, mortification, patience, charity, and the other Christian virtues. Once the saint has been laid in the tomb, the story is finished; there is hardly anything new to be added to the account.

When an artist has completed a full-length portrait of someone, it does not occur to him to follow it up with separate representations of the head, the hands, or other parts of the body. No painter, however fertile his imagination, has adopted such a bizarre procedure. But this is just what those biographers seem to do who, having portrayed their Christian hero in a full-scale account of his life, proceed to delineate him again by a separate treatment of his virtues. Inevitably, they go over ground they have already covered and become prolix, either simply repeating what they have said or lapsing into banalities.

Why then, it may be asked, make the same mistake here and leave myself open to annoying readers of good taste, who have no

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1. There is no evidence to prove that this intention was carried out; there is some to suggest that it was not: internal evidence, such as the pagination of the 1733 edition, the sequence of the printer's guide marks for the binder, and the wording of the single ecclesiastical "Approbation" for "*ce second Tome*" printed after the fourth part of the biography; external evidence, such as a document showing that thirteen copies of the work "printed in two volumes" were received in Rome on 28 May 1735 (*Bulletin*, 1950, 230) and the prefatory remark of the anonymous author of *L'Éloge historique de M. de La Salle*, dated "Rouen 1740" and referring to Blain's work as having been published "in two quarto volumes in 1733."

time for repetitious matter and may well regret having spent money on what amounts to a second version of the biography? It is, in fact, to avoid committing such a fault, amounting to an injustice, that the first three parts of this work, constituting the complete account of De La Salle's life, are being put on sale separately from this fourth part.<sup>1</sup> In this manner the discerning reader who cannot bear to be told the same thing in two different ways and the would-be purchaser who does not like to pay more for a book than he needs to will have nothing to complain about.

For my part, I must frankly admit that I was not very keen to undertake this fourth section. The fear of repeating myself and of making the work unduly long made me want to finish the account with the death of the person it treats of. But the Brothers most involved in the project<sup>2</sup> have persuaded me to disregard objections that in their opinion are more specious than real. "For whom are you writing this life of our Founder?" they asked me. "It is for us, his disciples, and others like us, people with simple tastes, who are looking only to be edified. In other words, you are writing for persons who will not be put off by repetitions but will see them as necessary to impress more deeply in their mind things that cannot be said too often and that cannot be sufficiently assimilated." They continued:

It is true that there are fastidious people who pride themselves on their good taste and have no more liking for reading repetitious matter in a book than they have for hearing it in a sermon. But it is equally true that such persons have little inclination for reading the life of saints and prefer to leave such to those who are seeking to be edified. It is like the case of a preacher who is misguided enough to seek to satisfy the ears of sophisticated people (who always form the smallest part of even the most numerous congregations) at the expense of the simple folk. He pours forth, quite uselessly, his finely composed eloquence, and his discourse has no effect because it means nothing to the majority of his listeners. In the same way, an author would be wast-

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2. According to Lett (285–286), these would have been Brother Superior Timothée (Guillaume Samson-Bazin), his Assistants, Br. Irénée (Claude-François du Lac de Montisambert) and Br. Joseph (Jean Le Roux), and the one former Assistant, Br. Jean (Jean Jacquot, whose resignation had been accepted by the 1725 capitulants). But (adds Lett) the name of Br. Bernard, designated in the first place as biographer of the Founder and compiler of the dossier to be used by Blain, must reasonably be included also. It was a restricted inner circle, for Blain, in a letter to the Superior (CL 8, appendix), says that an effort was made to keep the project secret.



ing his effort if in his concern not to offend any intellectual people who might read him, he fought shy of repeating matter that could be very profitable to the ordinary faithful.

Moreover, because part four is going to be put on sale separately from the first three parts, no one will have any cause to complain; only people who believe that the fourth part will be useful to them will buy it and read it. As for those of us who can never grow tired of hearing our Father spoken of, we will certainly not be annoyed by mere repetitions; they will serve to instill in us with renewed benefit the example of his virtues that we want to keep ever fresh in our memory. After all, many facts had to be left out in the first three parts, and these can be brought together in the fourth section. Everything relating to Father de La Salle is precious to us, and we would not like to be deprived of any of the graces that for us are attached to even the least circumstances of his life.

Moreover, Father de La Salle provided much excellent teaching, orally or in his writings, about the practice of virtue, and I would hope that you will allow him to speak for himself and that reproducing his doctrine on the virtues would show you how he practiced that doctrine.

They concluded their argument thus:

If it is true that there are eminent writers who have made sure not to add to the biography of saintly persons a detailed examination of their virtues, there are many others, both ancient and modern, who have done just that and who, therefore, could be faulted for repeating themselves. But they wanted, no doubt, to be useful to souls who hunger and thirst for justice, and they had the courage to risk incurring such a reproach. It is their example we should follow because it matters for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

The Author



PART 1

THE FAITH OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

SECTION 1

THE INTEGRITY OF HIS FAITH

[CHAPTER 1]

*God's protection of the young De La Salle against the attractions of the new doctrines; his later indifference to human opinion in this matter; his concern to preserve the integrity of his disciples' faith*

John Baptist de La Salle was born at a time when the new errors of Jansenism were making headway as fast as they were causing people to talk, and his birth took place in a city where those errors had long been given a favorable hearing and where there were many eager followers. But God in his mercy protected him and inspired him from the start with a great horror of the teaching. He had a happy predisposition against the newfangled ideas, and this he took with him when he went from Reims to the seminary of Saint Sulpice.<sup>1</sup> There he was further strengthened, so that he ever afterwards remained proof against even the most subtle and beguiling temptations of this nature.

He left that holy establishment (a bulwark, we may say, of French Catholicism and a nursery of zealous defenders of sound doctrine) to resume his studies at the University of Reims, where he had begun in his youth.<sup>2</sup> There he gained his doctorate, but without allowing himself to be swayed by the novel ideas that were beginning to infiltrate

1. Blain (book 1, chap. 2) describes De La Salle's brief period at the Paris Seminary of Saint Sulpice, with lectures at the Sorbonne. The influence of both establishments on the spiritual and intellectual development of the future Founder has been studied in great detail by Poutet (vol. 1, 232–355). Salm, *John Baptist de La Salle; The Formative Years* (1989), 46–90.

2. Blain is referring here to John Baptist's seven years of attendance at the Collège des Bons Enfants, studies that culminated in the diploma Maîtrise-ès-Arts, preliminary to university courses as now understood. His work for the licentiate and doctorate was undertaken at the University of Reims, after the premature deaths of his parents obliged him to leave Saint Sulpice and return to his native city. Blain chronicles these academic stages sketchily in book 1, chaps. 3 and 8; Poutet provides a deeply researched account of them (vol. 1, 139–79 and 356–68; see also, Salm, 7–38).

one of the most ancient and celebrated centers of learning in France.<sup>3</sup> He avoided discussing the subject, keeping in mind Saint Paul's advice to Titus and to Timothy.<sup>4</sup> He knew that such discussions have nothing to offer in the way of instruction and serve only to start quarrels.

He gave a wide berth to those who were full of the new notions, whose talk was all of predestination and grace, and who never stopped proposing futile and petty questions, arguing and disputing endlessly about matters of faith. He was convinced that a sacred minister should confine himself to studies calculated to strengthen his faith and nourish his own piety and that of others. Probing into other matters was, as far as he was concerned, only a way of passing the time for people with nothing better to do or for devotees of the false teaching.

He used his studies to develop his religious spirit, not, as so many others do, for the sake of acquiring a vain reputation for learning. Anything that served merely to arouse curiosity and foster a spirit of argument or to gain a futile claim to be clever seemed to him unworthy of a doctor of theology who should prefer to defend the faith by shedding his blood rather than by contentious debate. He severed all connection with people whom he saw taken up with the new doctrines, again bearing in mind Saint Paul's words to Titus. He was convinced that such persons have strayed from the right path and are guilty of sin and condemned by their own conscience, whatever show of piety they may affect. Their intellectual error may not have had its origin in a perverse disposition, but he believed that the latter state is a normal consequence of the former. Moreover, because error is the subtlest of poisons, a person is soon contaminated by mixing with people infected by it. Saint Paul tells us this. He had good grounds to trust the faith of Titus and to have no fear of his association with heretics, but he wanted him to serve as an example to the faithful by keeping clear of such people. De La Salle applied Paul's instruction to himself. From the moment he took up his studies at the University of Reims, he repudiated uncompromisingly any connection with the supporters of Jansenius.<sup>5</sup>

He never went back on this early stance. It would have served his interests to go along with a powerful faction that could have done

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3. "While Louis XIV was still reigning, Reims was, with the Sorbonne, the only university that dared oppose acceptance of the Bull [*Unigenitus*]. . . . Six professors, headed by Le Gros, petitioned the King to suspend acceptance until a General Council could show the mind of the bishops; this was the origin of the Appeal movement. On 26 June 1716, the theology faculty, represented by thirty of its teachers, proclaimed unanimously that it had never accepted the Bull." Taveneaux, *Le Jansénisme en Lorraine, 1640–1789* (1960), 442.

4. Blain notes these sources: Titus 3:9–11, 1 Tim. 4:7, and 2 Tim. 2:23.

him a lot of good as well as much harm. Later, its adherents were to offer him financial resources, influence, and protection. They were in a position to promote his Institute, founding and multiplying Christian Schools on every side, and in fact they sought to win his friendship by all kinds of useful services. But he never let up in this matter; he preferred to risk the hostility of these people (and they never forgive an injury) rather than to have anything to do with them.

Had he chosen to court the favor of the most influential prelate in France, who regarded him as a saint and honored him with exceptional esteem and friendliness, he could have spared himself all the persecutions he was to suffer; people would have come kneeling at his feet instead of trampling him under theirs.<sup>6</sup> To see his Institute prosper with the authority of letters patent and the influence of the mighty, all he needed to do was to declare himself of the same mind as the bishops who opposed the Constitution *Unigenitus*.<sup>7</sup> Instantly he

5. The name usually applied to Cornelius Otto Jansen, 1585–1638, author of *Augustinus*, a treatise on grace and human nature published posthumously at Louvain in 1640. The work purported to interpret Saint Augustine's anti-Pelagian teaching but in 1649 was judged heretical by the theologians of the Sorbonne, whose verdict was ratified by Pope Innocent X in 1653. *Augustinus* is the source of the doctrines comprised under the term Jansenism. The papal condemnation *Cum occasione* of 1653 specified five propositions of the work as conflicting with orthodox doctrine. The basis of these propositions is that it is impossible to obey God's commandments without a special grace but that the operation of grace is irresistible, so that man is a victim of natural or supernatural determinism. The theological pessimism underlying the teaching gave rise to the moral rigorism associated with Jansenism.

6. The prelate referred to is the archbishop of Paris, Louis Antoine de Noailles (1651–1729). In book 3, chap. 15, Blain relates that the archbishop, on a pastoral visit to the town of Saint-Denis, where the Brothers had been at work since 1708, expressed his esteem for their Founder before the assembled parishioners, saying that he was a saintly man and great servant of God.

7. The Constitution (or Bull) published by Pope Clement XI on 8 September 1713 condemning the work of the French Oratorian, Pasquier Quesnel, *Le Nouveau Testament en français, avec des réflexions morales sur chaque verset*, usually referred to simply as *Réflexions morales*. Louis de Noailles, as bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne, had commended the work in 1694, a favor that resulted in the book's going through several editions. De Noailles, transferred to the see of Paris in 1695 and made Cardinal in 1700, opposed the Constitution when it was published and, in 1717, added his support to a formal appeal against it to a future Council. He withdrew his name, however, from the appeal in 1720 but formally accepted the Constitution only in 1728, the year before his death. The reference books all make a point of De Noailles' indecisiveness, but they also agree that he was a man of piety and generous charity, culminating in his leaving his personal fortune to the Paris hospitals for the poor.

would have found himself treated as a saint in Paris; his praise would have been on everyone's lips, and his newly established Society would have been speedily and firmly assured of success. But he preferred instead to suffer opprobrium, as Jesus Christ had done. Like another Moses he chose the persecutions that befall those who defend the truth. The treasures of Egypt (the favors of those who opposed the papal constitution) were not for him. When the prelate mentioned above finally declared himself against the decision of the Holy See—and, incidentally, against the general stance of the French clergy regarding the bull *Unigenitus*—De La Salle refused all further favors and kept aloof from him. He preferred, so to speak, to let himself be walked over by his adversaries rather than appeal to the authority of this prelate who would have been doubly pleased both to vindicate John Baptist and to strike a blow at people who were no friends of his either.

His zeal in this matter made him careful to preserve his young Institute from the deadly poison of the new ideas. Wherever those ideas infiltrate, they inevitably weaken religious fervor and observance and subtly destroy the spirit of subordination and submissiveness that is the very soul of religious communities. His care in this matter led him, on the one hand, to keep at a distance anyone whose views were suspect. He did not mind how people felt about this; the door was firmly closed against any who had declared themselves in favor of the new teaching. On the other hand, his concern moved him to instill in his disciples an inviolable attachment to the Holy See, a total submission to the decisions of the church's head and its magisterium, a sincere aversion, amounting to horror, for doctrinal novelties, and a firm determination to steer clear of those who favored them. It was his wish that the Brothers should have nothing at all to do with such people. In one of his letters to Brother Barthélemy he wrote, "It is hardly right to have dealings with people of this sort, much less to be dependent on them."<sup>8</sup>

To enable the Brothers to keep a due sense of caution about these things, together with a suitable measure of self-mistrust, he made it his business to go over their catechism lessons with them. He would show them why they should remain firmly loyal to the See of Saint Peter and completely submissive to the decisions of the church as pronounced by its chief pastor and the other prelates whose claim to govern is derived from Jesus Christ. The following chapter will bring together in suitable order the principles, instructions, and practices he proposed to them on this sensitive and important issue. While

8. "To be dependent on them," for example, for the reception of the sacraments (*Letters*, 128).

avoiding needless repetition, this discussion will provide the reader with a body of doctrine calculated to preserve his faith pure and untarnished. The subject merits such treatment.

[CHAPTER 2]

*Preamble; his teaching on the respect due to the church;  
those who govern it are to be held in honor; the respect  
to be shown for customs and practices approved  
by the church; the church's discipline is not to be criticized*

No one willingly takes heed of what is erroneous and false. The desire for truth is urgent and compulsive because it is born in a person and necessary for his well-being. But where are we to find this cherished thing that all men seek if not in its proper dwelling place, the church? Truth is mediated by the church, which is its custodian and oracle. Jesus Christ has told us to turn to the church for what is true, and it is through the church that he speaks to us. The church is his seat of government; from there he pronounces judgment as from a tribunal; she is the school from which he gives his instructions.

We should honor the church, then, as our sovereign, listen to her as our teacher and love her as our mother. She has a claim to our respect because of her authority, to our submission because she is infallible, and to our love because of the bountiful care she takes of us. These were the sentiments that John Baptist de La Salle endeavored to inspire in his disciples.

From whatever aspect we consider the church, her titles of nobility and her august characteristics are such as to inspire religious respect. All authority, in fact, attracts and lays claim to respect, and the higher the authority, the greater will be the respect. This being so, what degree of respect is not the church entitled to expect from her children, seeing that they acknowledge her authority to be greater than any other in the world? Nowhere can there be found authority so august and divinely ordained. It has its origin in God, and its purpose is the fostering of religion; these are two characteristics to which it has an exclusive claim.

In the first place, the authority of the church is divine because all claims to it come directly from God, and the immediate provenance of its power is heaven itself. The church owes her foundation to the Son of God, who guaranteed that she would never perish. She is governed by the Holy Spirit, whose promised presence will never fail. She has been revealed to humanity, and humanity is called upon to enter her

and never abandon her. Christ is her head; the Holy Spirit, her teacher. The Apostles are her foundation stones; the martyrs, her defenders, and her offspring are the early Fathers, the doctors, and all the saints. Thus the church's authority is unique in nature because it emanates directly from him to whom was given all authority in heaven and on earth. Christ transmitted this authority personally and without other human intervention. It is exercised under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who keeps it safe from abuse; it is preserved by the protection of heaven, and there is no fear that it will ever be lost.

Secondly, the nature of this authority is such as to inspire the utmost reverence. It is concerned only with man's relationship with God, whose glory alone it envisages as it seeks to lead the faithful to salvation. The church leaves worldly matters to the world and confines herself to what relates to faith, the Gospel, Christian morality, and the spiritual guidance of her children. She cherishes above all else the honor of her divine spouse and seeks only to procure his glory, making his interests her own and occupying herself only with extending his kingdom on earth and multiplying citizens for heaven.

Never, then, in the world has there been a form of authority more worthy of respect than that of the church. The faith has been entrusted to her keeping, religion is centered in her, and with her is found the pillar of truth. She has all that is worthy of veneration, all that deserves the submission of the human mind. Apart from her there is only superstition, error, and falsehood: superstition like that of the pagans, whose worship is as false as the gods they adore; error like that of the heretics, whose belief is as foolhardy as the motives on which it is based; illusion and falsehood like that of the Jews, whose expectations are as vain as the dreams that sustain them.

This respect that we owe the church makes three demands on us. The first of these is that we hold in great veneration those who govern her. They are the Lord's anointed ones against whom no hand may be raised. Those who wound them with rash words wound no less the church herself, for how can her head and eyes be assailed and she remain insensible to the pain? How can the visible head of the church be insulted without affronting him whom he represents, namely Jesus Christ? The Lawgiver of the Old Testament says:

If you discover that some difficult and doubtful question has arisen among you and your own counselors are at variance in what they say, you will bestir yourselves to go to the place indicated by the Lord your God. There you will approach the Levite priests and the one who has been appointed Judge at the time, and you will ask them to decide the truth of the matter. You will



abide by whatever is determined and taught according to the Law by those who preside in the place chosen by the Lord. You will cling to their judgment, not turning to the right nor to the left. As for anyone who proudly refuses to submit to the judgment of the high priest, the minister of the Lord your God and to the decree of the Judge, he shall be put to death so that you may remove the evil from the midst of Israel. All the people, hearing of this, will be filled with fear, so that one henceforth will become arrogant and presumptuous.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the Law authorized the high priest of the Old Testament to demand respect and submission for his decisions to the extent that those who failed in this were punishable by death. What then is to be thought of those who raise the standard of rebellion against the high priest of the new dispensation?

The second sign of respect that we owe to the church is never to decry or criticize her approved practices on the pretext that such practices are superstitious, overdone, far-fetched, or useless. This is the kind of talk the heretics use; sincere Catholics never speak this way. People who take such liberties bring their faith under suspicion, acting as they do like those Protestants whose talk and writings are replete with profane and ridiculing mockery aimed at customs that the church counts holy. Such denigration is only too much with us in our day. There are too many so-called purists who cry scandal or who affect to be grieved by this or that detail of the practices and what they call the trivial observances that the piety of the faithful has made sacred. There are too many peevish and carping spirits who take offense at these quite normal customs and find them either harmful or childish and pretend to be shocked by them.

These people, new-style heretics, have the temerity to bring up again the old arguments against, for example, what they call the abuse of indulgences (how Luther started),<sup>10</sup> or they attack the use of sacred images and relics, saying that they constitute a falsely exaggerated form of worship, if not superstition (Calvin's starting point).<sup>11</sup>

Certain restless critics even claim and persist in maintaining that the honor given to the Most Blessed Virgin is overdone. They find the

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9. Deut. 17:8–13.

10. For a modern Catholic discussion of Luther's ninety-five theses and the preaching of Tetzel that provoked them, see John M. Todd, *Martin Luther; A Biographical Study* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1964), 114–30.

11. Calvin's polemic against the use of images is found in the earliest edition of *Institution de la Religion Chrétienne*, published in 1536, when the author was twenty-seven (*édition critique*, J. D. Benoit, Paris, 1957, vol. 1, 127ff).

prayers addressed to her by the faithful or the formulas used by the church inappropriate. They would like to reword the *Salve Regina*<sup>12</sup> and are similarly dissatisfied with other prayers consecrated by the universal usage of the faithful. They turn a deaf ear, and would like us to do the same, to the glorious titles and praises addressed to Mary in her Office. These people have no time for the rosary; they say it is a prayer suitable for simpletons, a boring and barren repetition of mere words. The term *scapular* turns them sour and rouses their spleen. They make their own piety consist in showing no signs of it. But they make it a point of honor to substitute images of their personal heroes for those of Jesus Christ and the Most Blessed Virgin.

This was how the originators of the so-called Reformation went about their business; the people of whom I am speaking seem to be following in their footsteps and copying their ways. On the one hand, they sacrilegiously demolish the statues of the saints, burn their relics and scatter the ashes to the winds, and disfigure paintings of them; on the other, they put up representations of the men they deem illustrious and honor their memories by preserving their ashes, as if these were the precious remains of martyrs or of defenders of truth.

All these critics should have enough sense of justice to believe that the church, without benefit of their good advice, is quite well aware of any abuses that need to be put right. They should accept that it is her responsibility to apply the remedies and that they can safely leave such matters to her. As for us who have the church to guide us, we need have no fear of the surly fastidiousness of those who under the pretext of defending the glory of the Son, attack that of his Mother. When the early Fathers have said so much in praise of her, we would be on shaky ground if we maintained an embarrassed silence about her august privileges. Just because malicious critics, in opposition to the spirit of church, call her titles into question, would it be right for us to say nothing? Should we not dare to say loud and clear that all the respect we can pay her will in no way surpass what she deserves—and this without detriment to the honor due to God and without forgetting the infinite distance that separates him from even the holiest of his creatures?

Considering the explicit statements of the councils, the decrees of so many popes and bishops, the judgments given by the theology

12. "Luther objected especially to the words 'Queen of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope,' but Daniel (*Thesaurus hymnologicus*, vol. 2, 322) points out that the language of devotion is not that of dogma, and notes that some Protestants, unwilling that the anthem should disappear from Lutheran churches, reconstructed it 'evangelically.' . . . The Jansenists found a like difficulty, and sought to change the expression into 'sweetness and hope of our life'" (H. T. Henry, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1912, vol. 13, 410).

faculties, and the consensus of countless doctors of divinity, we are surely entitled to call her pure and without stain and to believe her to be such. To lack the moral courage to speak out in favor of her Immaculate Conception just because there are those who prefer to reserve judgment about this privilege would make us guilty of a false kind of prudence and a misguided sense of caution. Again, ought we not abide by the tradition of our forefathers and believe, as they did, in the resurrection of the virginal body that was so pure that it bore and gave birth to the body of Jesus Christ? Are we to be denied this right simply because there are people willing to object to a tradition so ancient and so well authorized by the church?

We come now to the third way in which respect for the church is to be shown: never to take occasion to find fault with her way of guiding us or with the discipline she imposes. What we have to be convinced of is that the church today is the same church as in the early centuries. Her teaching is no less holy today than it was in the time of the Apostles; the purity of her faith now, in what some would call her advancing years, is the same as when she was newborn—she is no less aided by Jesus Christ, no less inspired by the Holy Spirit. With this conviction we will find that all she does is good, and when our judgment (always prone to follow misleading notions) fails to agree with something done by the church, we will turn our gaze aside.

It is true that her way of guiding her children has not always been the same, nor has her discipline always conformed to a uniform pattern. But neither differences in time nor diversity of customs causes what she does to lose its twofold character of being holy in itself and productive of holiness, as well as immune from error and incapable of leading astray. Everyone is aware that as Saint Gregory once expressed it, uniformity of belief in no way entails uniformity of discipline.<sup>13</sup> No one has ever challenged Tertullian's well-known dictum that although faith admits of no variations, discipline does.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the former, neither the passage of time nor the decline of morals can ever bring in a modification, but the latter has quite often moved with the transient years and unfolding centuries.

If someone wanted to do away with new usages that were introduced into the church's discipline and that differed from those received from the Apostles and their initial followers, it would mean, for

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13. Blain gives no reference, but his remark corresponds to the following text in Gregory's Letter 43: "*in una fide nihil officit sanctae ecclesiae consuetudo diversa*" (*Patrologiae, series latina* [hereafter, PL], vol. 77, col. 497).

14. No reference, but this is an evident simplification of a text from Tertullian's *Against Marcion*, book 1, chap. 21: "*Stabat igitur fides semper in Creatore et Christo ejus, sed conversatio et disciplina nutabat*" (PL, vol. 2, col. 270).

example, abolishing the rule requiring Mass to be celebrated in the morning and by fasting and bringing back the custom of celebrating after the evening meal, as Jesus Christ did. We would have to heed the call of latter-day heretics and reintroduce the custom of presenting the chalice at Communion and thereby restoring reception under both kinds. It would mean giving the faithful the option, as formerly, of receiving the host in the hand and communicating themselves.

We would need, to say no more, to re-establish the custom of Baptism by immersion, to hold agapes and banquets in church, to bring legal cases exclusively to the bishop for judgment, to put the church's goods in common for the benefit of the clergy. Are we to deem it an offense for the church to have made certain changes, as if she had thereby altered the nature of what she had received for safe-keeping from the Apostles and not simply rescinded usages that were only concerned with organization, had nothing to do with the deposit of faith, were quite optional, and were destined by their nature to last only for a limited period of time?

Differences of place and of custom justify such kinds of variation. The advance of time makes them inevitable and completely reasonable. New practices displaced the old, day after day, as time went by, and this even in the earliest and most flourishing ages of Christianity: the new has always built on the remnants of the old. The church observes this and permits it, or even prescribes it when there are overriding reasons for doing so. When this happens, it is our duty to respect her motives; it is never right for us to criticize them.

Thus the church felt obliged to modify her ancient severity with regard to penance. She felt compassion for the weakness of those who were spiritually ailing and whom an inflexible firmness might have discouraged, embittered, or even driven to revolt. Her intention in doing this was not to pillow the heads of sinners and cushion their arms by way of pandering to their softness. In her compassion for their weakness, she stooped down to their level to raise them to hers.

Was she, therefore, to be intimidated by the acrimonious zealotry of those who favored the bygone rigor, people who kept check on her indulgent approach only to make a crime of it? Who or what, in fact, was responsible for relaxing the rules of public penance? Was it not the sensitivity of sinners, which the church felt obliged to take into account for fear of seeing them incur spiritual death by their stubborn refusal of salutary remedies they found too harsh? If the church, then, toned down her discipline in later ages, it was not because of softness or overindulgence on her part. It was simply the response of her wisdom to a compelling need. Nor should we think that because she let the canonical penances lapse, she intended thereby to relieve

sinner of doing any penance. It is well understood that she leaves to them the responsibility and duty of making satisfaction to God for their offenses.

So, we can hardly be too astonished that certain enthusiasts for the primitive observances put themselves forward as critics of the new, as if the church of today had lost the authority she received from Jesus Christ or had no longer the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Those who have made a practice of scrutinizing the church's behavior down the ages, taking the liberty to fault her on the matters we have mentioned as well as on many others, always proclaim their wish to remain among the ranks of Catholic people. But they ought to admit that they are taking the same road as those who eventually secede from the church. They begin by pretending to want everything to be regulated in accordance with the ancient canonical laws and then start to inveigh against what they imagine are abuses of these. They have no fear at all of bringing in real abuses themselves by introducing errors under the appearance of zeal.

For a long time, impiety was wont to show itself in its true colors. Now it assumes the disguise of the reformer, affecting to deplore wrongs that it would be able to put right only by introducing real and self-evident abuses. Perhaps we should more fear than desire such a restoration of the ancient usages; it could on that score be deemed a dangerous innovation. A true Catholic both admires the thinking behind the church's organization accredited by the old rules and punctiliously follows the new ways authorized more recently.

The early Fathers devised and ordained what was for the good of the faithful. If those who came after sometimes departed from what had been laid down, they had the same objective in view: the destination was the same, but they approached it by a different route. The church has always preserved the spirit of the ancient canons, even when she modified the letter. Her children all owe her this mark of respect: never condemn her but always try to understand her intentions so as to bring their judgment into conformity with hers. As Saint Augustine said, "Once the mother of all the faithful has given universal approval to a given practice, it is no longer possible to question its suitability except by a quite inadmissible audacity."<sup>15</sup>

Hence it is by no means an enlightened and wise procedure, as some would have us believe, to make sinners feel the full weight of their sins by failing to encourage them to stop their wrongdoing and

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15. There is no reference, but the quote is a quite proximate rendering of a statement from Augustine's letter 54: "*Similiter etiam si quid horum tota per orbem frequentat Ecclesia; nam et hinc quin ita faciendum sit, disputare insolentissimae insaniae est*" (PL, vol. 33, col. 202).

delaying to provide the remedy they need for their healing. It is true that the church does allow, request, or require her ministers to take time to test those who approach them to confess their sins. The reason is to make sure of the willingness of those concerned to keep away from the occasions of sin and to break the habits that hold them bound; the intention, in short, is to bring them to feel a profound regret for their sins. But the church does not intend that the act of reconciliation should depend upon the sinner's having begun to do penance; she knows that death could overtake them during the course of such a harshly contrived delay and also that satisfaction loses nothing of its value when carried out after absolution.

These would-be Jeremiahs, let it be said, who accuse the church of being relaxed, should confine themselves to weeping over the ruins of the Temple<sup>16</sup>—I mean the decadent morality of the world. They should be content to sigh for that golden age when people honored the Gospel by putting it into practice and when the saintly lives of Christians endorsed its maxims. Their study of the ancient regulations should have for its purpose only to cause us to feel confusion at the contrast between the austerity of those days and our own effeteness; either that or simply to identify the period when those regulations fell into disuse. Their lamentations then would resemble those of the saints and could be only a source of edification to us.

Indeed, would that we might once again see the church as it was in those early times, those halcyon days that we honor in memory, even as we regret their passing, days when the church counted her saints by the number of her Christian followers, when she brought children to birth only that they might die as martyrs. This has been the wish of saintly and, indeed, all right-minded people in these latter times: a wish that would rekindle any dying or extinguished flame of religious feeling, recalling for Christians of our time the virtuous way of life of those of old.

Zeal of this kind, accompanied by a docile and humble acceptance of the church's present way of governing, deserves nothing but praise. But what sort of praise can anyone expect who stirs up arguments and quarrels, gives rise to malicious criticism and persistent faultfinding, and manifests nothing but bitterness and indocility? It is right and fitting that people be moved by the thought of the beautiful, ancient discipline, so pure in its origin, so edifying in its development, and so saddening in its decline. But no one should feel free on that account to censure the church's disciplinary practice today or to question her rights concerning it, still less to withhold the obedience that

16. An allusion to the Book of Lamentations, long attributed to the Prophet Jeremiah.

she deserves and that is her due. Acceptance of her decisions presents no problem to those who have real respect for her.

[CHAPTER 3]

*His teaching on submission to the church's authority;  
no risk entailed by such submission; the unfortunate  
consequences of lack of submission; the church's authority  
as confirmation of our faith; the effects of overattachment  
to our own views; the truth of this teaching demonstrated*

The church is our mother; therefore, we should entrust ourselves to her guidance. She is our sovereign, and we as her subjects must obey her commands. She is the teacher who instructs us, the judge who settles our differences in matters of religion, and the expert we can consult in our doubts. It is a duty for us, therefore, to defer to her decisions. Trust in her guidance, obedience to her orders, and acceptance of what she decides—these are the three dispositions that should be ours to the end of our life.

They are not only the right dispositions for us but also reasonable and necessary. I have nothing to fear in entrusting myself to the guidance of the church. Like a child in its mother's arms, I can be at peace in her care. I can feel safe in my belief because she accepts responsibility for it and acts as my surety. I can be certain of my religion and of the convictions it requires me to hold. When disputes occur, she is there to settle them.

She regulates religious worship, and as long as I follow her regulations, I know that I am being devout in the right way. As long as I hold to her teachings, I remain safe from exaggeration and illusion, and I steer clear of every path that leads to error. Trust in the church's guidance means peace within me and security about my belief and practice. Because of the enlightenment she provides, I can recognize error and reject it; I know abuses when I see them and so avoid them; I can tell if some practice is only a superstition and hence can say it is not for me. As I have said, it is just like the child in its mother's arms, resting on her bosom, content to trust in her safekeeping—*in pace, in idipsum, dormiam et requiescam*.<sup>17</sup>

Or we can think of ourselves traveling in a ship that is sailing toward a blessed eternity, carrying us along in tranquillity and sweet security through the world's perilous places. We have nothing to fear unless we choose to leave the ship. It is Peter's bark, and it is indeed

17. Ps. 4:9 (Vulgate).

threatened by high winds and storms, but as Saint Ambrose remarks, because the Holy Spirit is at its helm, it will never be shipwrecked, despite the billows and tempests.<sup>18</sup>

When the hurricane of new doctrines comes roaring around me, pushing me this way and that and perplexing my mind, I have only to listen for the voice of the church and heed what she tells me, and forthwith I find that calm is restored. I am dwelling once again in the midst of peace and profound tranquillity, believing as I do that it is Jesus Christ who has spoken through the church. “*Imperavit ventis et mari, et facta est tranquillitas magna*—He commanded the winds and the sea, and there followed a great calm.”<sup>19</sup>

The ark of Noah is such an appropriate image of the church that I cannot think of it without being struck by the points of resemblance.<sup>20</sup> Inside the ark all was safe; outside, nothing but devastation. Those who dwelt within it were free from fear, safe from the universal horror and perdition. Just as the waters of the deluge became the grave of the rest of humanity, whereas they served to the advantage of Noah's ark by raising it up and carrying it along effortlessly, making it simple to steer a true course, so likewise there is nothing to fear in entrusting ourselves to the church's guidance.

The assurance she received from Jesus Christ is our guarantee of security. But if we stray from her to follow some other guide, we will find a precipice ahead. Truth is such that we cannot take a single step away from it without moving in the direction of falsehood. Once we leave the ark, where faith is secure, shipwreck must follow immediately. To distance ourselves from the Holy See, which is the center of unity, is to doom us to restless anxiety, faced with the divided views of individual teachers and left to be our own judge of what is to be believed or to rely on the judgment of people who most certainly do not have the prerogative of infallibility.

A disposition of obedience to the church, then, is what more than anything else should characterize our life until the day we die. Her requirements—and this is an infinitely consoling thought—are always just, gentle, reasonable, proportioned to our strength, accommodated to our weakness, and suited to our state in life. Only a little goodwill is needed to carry them out, for if health or ability is lacking, we are dispensed. The church is a kindly mother who has no wish to

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18. No reference is given, but this sentence is close to a passage from “De Salomone,” a sermon attributed to Ambrose: “*Quae etsi undarum fluctibus aut procellis saepe vexatur, tamen numquam potest sustinere naufragium, quia . . . gubernator proram paracletus servat Spiritus*” (PL, vol. 17, col. 697).

19. Matt. 8:26 (Vulgate).

20. Blain uses the classic patristic typological interpretation of Gen. 6–7.



make life difficult for her children. If circumstances are such that we cannot fulfill what she asks, she accepts this valid excuse.

Let freethinkers say what they will; let them protest as much as they like against the church's requirements; it is only because of their ill will and rebellious attitude that these requirements seem onerous. If such people scorn the commandments of God, we can hardly expect to find them obeying the church; people who have no fear of disobeying their heavenly Father will be more than ready to resist the orders of their mother, the church. But it is up to us to maintain a spirit of careful obedience in her regard and act as children do for whom their mother's influence counts more than anything else.

Acquiescence in what the church decides is the second disposition that we must maintain with unshakable constancy up to our dying day. This constitutes the character of her children, the distinctive mark of good Catholics. Nor is it a difficult attitude to maintain, except for those who get caught up in other people's ideas and become infatuated with the attractions of what is new. Provided that we are not prepared to trust private opinion and that we accept the need to consult a reliable judge, there is no problem in finding such a judge who is enlightened, righteous, and infallible.

Submission to sovereign authority should be absolute, to infallible authority sincere, to limitless authority universal. The authority of the church has these qualities, and our submission to her decisions should correspond. Religion has its center in the church; she is the interpreter of Holy Scripture, the one to whom the Gospels have been entrusted, the guardian of the faith, and the pillar of truth. Recourse to her entails no risk, and there is no hazard attached to accepting her judgments. It is, rather, in refusing to believe what she says that we risk all. It is obvious that we leave ourselves open to losing our faith if in place of what she proposes to us, we prefer to follow our own ideas or those of other people no more enlightened than we are.

To whom, in fact, are we to turn to for guidance if not to the church? To the word of God? To our own interpretation of it or to that of someone else? But is either such interpretation infallible? The word of God is found in the Scriptures and in Tradition, and who can claim to understand it better than the church?

Scripture itself cannot act as a judge in controversies that arise in matters of religion. It is true that the Bible is the book of faith, the oracle that must be consulted, but it is a silent oracle, and people can make it say anything they want it to say. In the words *This is my body*, Calvin found only a figurative expression; Luther saw in them nothing in the nature of transubstantiation; neither one accepted any notion of sacrifice. Of this passage alone, brief and clearly expressed as it is, we

can find more than one hundred interpretations, but only one interpretation is true.

I give this one example as being representative of a thousand others, and I refrain from alluding to all those that the Doctors of the Catholic church have used to prove to the Protestants that Holy Scripture is difficult to understand, often textually obscure, both sublime and profound in the mysteries it contains, and susceptible of so many different interpretations that it often serves only to intensify arguments instead of settling them. "Let no one appeal any more to the Scriptures alone," said Tertullian long ago; "let them be used no more as a scene of battle where every combatant claims the victory in the many conflicts waged there."<sup>21</sup>

The Jews continue to look for Jesus Christ hidden in the obscure places of their Law, and they blindly fail to see him resplendent in their prophecies. All the heretics search for weapons for combat in the divine sayings; to listen to them, every page of the sacred text furnishes arguments in favor of what they maintain. The Protestants did not invent the idea of crowding their pages with passages of the Scriptures to support their pronouncements, which is a good way of misleading simpleminded folk. The Arians, Macedonians, Donatists, Nestorians, Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians—in fact, innovators of every century—had already shown them the way. All these were only, so it seemed, speaking the pure language of Holy Scripture. But Saint Augustine says that it is from the wrong interpretations that people presume, despite the church, to give the Scriptures that heresies arise.<sup>22</sup> There has never been a heresy for which support has not been looked for in the written word of God.

"It is no vanity on my part," wrote Luther, "to claim that for the past thousand years, the Scriptures have never been so carefully restored or so well explained and understood than by me." What a humble testimony the heresiarch offers with his usual modesty!<sup>23</sup> It

21. Blain gives no reference but uses an evident gloss of a passage from Tertullian's *De praescriptionibus*, chap. 19: "*Ergo non ad Scripturas provocandum est: nec in his constituendum certamen, in quibus aut nulla, aut incerta victoria est, aut par incertae*" (PL, vol. 2, col. 31).

22. No reference, but the statement concerned, slightly adapted by Blain, is in Augustine's Eighteenth Treatise on the Gospel of Saint John: "*Neque enim natae sunt haereses . . . nisi dum Scripturae bonae intelliguntur non bene; et quod in eis non bene intelligitur, etiam temere et audacter asseritur*" (PL, vol. 35, col. 1536).

23. We can balance Blain's irony by this assessment of Luther's translation of the Bible from a source the biographer would have approved: a late-nineteenth-century biblical dictionary edited by a Sulpician and dedicated to Pope Leo XIII. In the first volume of this multiple-volume work, we find this:

was from this assumption that he arrogated the right to decide things for himself rather than appeal to the councils, the Fathers, or the Sovereign Pontiffs. The other sectarian leaders, Zwingli, Calvin, Socinus, and the rest, although their teaching was at variance with his and with one another's, still claimed the same privilege. All their followers have taken their example and presumed to read and expound Holy Scripture as they wished.

We have here the origin of the sectarians' trumped-up slur that the Bible is forbidden fruit to Catholics. This book, they claim, is unknown to Catholics because the church of Rome keeps hidden from the children of God the testament bequeathed to them by their Father. But the same origin may be claimed for the holy constancy with which the church refrains from making the text available to all and sundry or giving everyone freedom of access to it, knowing as she does that it is "a two-edged sword"<sup>24</sup> that simple folk and the young, not knowing how to use it, might handle with harm to themselves.

The bad faith of the innovators in corrupting the text, their liberty in twisting its meaning, their dishonesty in making changes in the versions they produce, their cunning in disguising their poison with brief explanations and moral reflections seasoned with false unction—all are good reasons for necessary and legitimate prohibition. Moreover, the circumstantial accounts of various crimes related in the Scriptures, the plainspoken detail of certain elements of legal observances, and the style and diction of the Song of Songs, for example, sufficiently demonstrate that even in the Sacred Books everything is not suitable for all to read. A holy obscurity permeates these divine writings, an element of impenetrable mystery that for the simple reader, as well as for the arrogant one, could constitute pitfalls destructive of faith.

"Put no trust in a heretic," says Saint Ambrose, "who cites the Scriptures as his authority; the devil himself uses passages with the intention of deceiving Jesus Christ."<sup>25</sup> No, we must consult the church if we wish to get the meaning right. Saint Jerome says:

"[Luther] was helped in his work by Melancthon, Bugenhagen, Jonas, Aurogalus, Kreuziger, and some Jews . . . but his personal contribution was considerable; he brought an application and patience to it that nothing could weary. . . . The style is clear, lively, varied, and noble. . . . His adherents never stop praising the literary quality of this great work; their admiration under that aspect is justified" (*Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Paris, 1895, vol. 1, cols. 376–77).

24. Heb. 4:12.

25. No reference, but Blain is using a passage from Ambrose's *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, having spoken of the temptation of Jesus, Ambrose continues, "*Ergo non te capiat haereticus; quia potest de Scripturis aliqua exempla proferre. . . . Utitur et diabolus testimoniis Scripturarum non ut doceat, sed ut circumscribat et fallat*" (PL, vol. 15, col. 1619).

Scripture is the mysterious book spoken of in the Apocalypse, the book sealed with seven seals and destined to remain unopened except for the one who has the key, which came from David. It is a mistake, therefore, to want it to be placed in the hand of anyone and everyone, with each having the liberty to interpret it with a personal analysis and commentary. If that were allowed, the one sure thing that would happen would be an endless series of errors leading to as many meanings and, therefore, to as many different religious beliefs as there are crackbrained commentators.<sup>26</sup>

As for Tradition, who if not the church is the custodian of that? The church is surely the judge of what the Fathers taught, for it was on her behalf that they spoke. The reason they are heeded is that they expounded the mind of the church and handed on her doctrine. But individually they were capable of error and in need of the church's guidance, without which they could not be sure of themselves.

Saint Augustine was, we may say, the greatest of the Fathers, a man of the most towering intellect. But I would not heed either him or his teaching if he had not transmitted that of the church or if the church had not adopted his. He would be outside the pale, as far as I am concerned, if he did not speak the language of the church. We have an assurance of his own to justify this attitude: he would not believe the Gospel, he said, if the church did not require him to do so.<sup>27</sup> So we may say, and with greater reason, that we would not believe Augustine if his teaching were contrary to that of the church. If it should ever happen that the church were to disown him (an eventuality we need not fear!), he would lose all credibility in the eyes of good Catholics. If his authority is great, he owes that greatness to the church's recognition of it; the prestige he enjoys with us has its origin in her. Let us honor him as the Doctor of Grace but also as a Doctor of the church. The first title constitutes his claim to glory, but the second justifies our confidence in him.

Are we free, then, to follow our own views in controversial matters of faith? Surely no one would dare grant unintelligent, ignorant, or

26. No reference, but the implied quotation is a free treatment of a passage from Jerome's Letter 53, "*De studio Scripturarum*," addressed to Paulinus, beginning, "*Liber in Apocalypsi septem sigillis signatus ostenditur. . . . Quanti hodie putat se nosse litteras, et tenent signatum librum, nec aperire possunt nisi ille reseraverit qui habet clavem David*" (PL, vol. 22, col. 543).

27. For the first time in his citations from the Fathers, Blain gives a marginal reference for this aphorism from Augustine's *Response to the Letter of Manes*: "*Evangelio non crederem nisi me Ecclesiae catholicae commoveret auctoritas*" (PL, vol. 42, col. 176).

simpleminded folk, persons without education or culture, women, and the rank and file—who, nevertheless, constitute the greatest part of the faithful—the right to follow their own judgment in matters of faith and doctrine. This would put the key of knowledge into hands incapable of using it and leave the blind to find their own way; it would entrust the Gospel and religion to profane keeping.

However, neither may the learned men of the world rely on their mental prowess to judge matters of religion; to do so would be a blind and culpable presumption on their part. When we think about it carefully, the one enemy of truth we should fear most is our own intellect. To trust it is to trust an imposter quite capable of treachery. To consult it is to look for false, self-deluded advice. If our only court of appeal is our own intellect and if we choose to follow the decision given there, we are accepting the word of a judge who is biased, blind, and a liar.

There would be rare confusion in religious matters if everyone were the arbiter of his own opinions, wanting to formulate his beliefs according to his own ideas. As that great man, Bossuet, has said, there would be as many religious beliefs as there are minds to formulate them. Is it not a fact that there were men who seemed the wisest, most learned, and enlightened, who finished by advocating the wildest extravagances, like worshiping man-made objects, fabricating gods according to their own fantasy, making a religion of all kinds of vice, and claiming to honor some divinity with every sort of crime?<sup>28</sup>

Even after the coming of Christ, the most outlandish ideas were found among the Christians, propounded by people unwilling to heed the church and accept her decisions. No heresy, however farfetched, absurd, impious, and monstrous, has ever run its course without benefit of worldly approval, without attracting a following and finding defenders among the learned, and without shaping weapons from the speech and writings of lofty intellectuals.

Origen and Tertullian are only two examples among hundreds. The former was the wonder of Christendom both for his learning and for his piety. The latter was the illustrious champion and erudite apologist of the Christian religion. Yet the former scattered sophistries and errors throughout his commentaries on the sacred texts, wanting to make the Scriptures the source of his own mental aberrations and those of some philosophers. He went astray and led countless others astray because he relied too much on his own intellect. The second

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28. A marginal reference to book 1 of Bossuet's *Histoire des Variations des Églises protestantes*. The attributed sentence is not there in so many words, but it states a leading theme of this work (*Œuvres Complètes de Bossuet*, Paris: Lachât, 1875, vol. 14).

became the dupe of Priscilla and Marcella,<sup>29</sup> those two notorious prophetesses of the Montanist sect.

In view of all this, we might wonder how anyone can still have confidence in the promptings of his own intellect, as if intellects were now more honest and enlightened and less prone to error than those of so many great men admired in centuries gone by as prodigies of learning. No one can flatter himself that he has powers of reasoning that are proof against falsehood and error; to do so would amount to an abdication of sound reasoning. Let us always be suspicious of our intellectual powers and mistrust them in everything to do with religion.

It is, after all, the nature of the human mind to be uncertain, changeable, and irresolute in the majority of opinions it arrives at, three further reasons why it is not to be relied on. Take the first characteristic, its uncertainty. For every definitive piece of knowledge we have, there are a hundred others that remain subject to doubt and amount to no more than opinions. It often happens that what today is deemed quite certain begins to look doubtful tomorrow and sometimes, after further investigation, turns out to be quite wrong. This is true even in matters of secular knowledge, which for the most part fall within the scope of the senses and can be checked. How much more so it is, then, with regard to questions of a divine and supernatural nature, where faith alone can shed light! Only the church can be our guide for those. People who refuse to follow her are liable to stumble with every step they take. A kind of mental vertigo will throw us into a state of confused agitation if the only point of reference we have in religious matters is our own judgment.

Saint Augustine's lamentable experience is worth recalling in this connection. In his self-portrait of the period before his conversion and in *The Utility of the Faith*, he describes all who, like him at the time, had no other teacher than their own limited intellect:

I passed from one sect to another, from this opinion to that, declaring myself in favor now of one, now of the other. I was ready to take up any one of them, and then no less ready to drop it. One day a Manichean, the next an Academician, perpetually struggling with my reasoning powers, constantly at odds with my intellect. My own thoughts left me weary and uncertain and in a state of despair of every arriving at the truth.<sup>30</sup>

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29. Eusebius, the source authority on Montanism, calls her Maximilla.

30. Although Blain places this passage in quotation marks, he is not quoting but summarizing material from two sources that, exceptionally, he names within the text: *Confessions* (book 6) and especially, *The Utility of the Faith* (English edition, *Fathers of the Church*, New York, 1947, vol. 4, 415–17).

So it is that uncertainty causes a tendency to change, which is the second characteristic of the human intellect. It is this tendency which is the source of the confusion always in evidence as the various heresies have succeeded one another, heresies which, like swirling rivers, have flooded and infected flourishing regions of Christendom and then have divided up into countless separate streams.

Take Lutheranism as an example. How did all those sects materialize that have made a hundred-headed monster of that heresy, if not from the pride of human reason? Everyone wanted to become a master after first becoming a disciple; all wanted to be listened to when they had been listeners themselves; they grew weary of receiving lessons and aspired to the role of doctors of truth, giving their own lessons and dogmatizing in their own fashion. This is how divisions and splinter groups developed. There was no agreement possible because no one took notice of the church.

This is the explanation of the conflicting ideas of the author of the new reform, a topic about which whole books have been written. It is at the root of the perpetually changing beliefs of the Calvinists, whose ideas today are quite different than those held by their founder. What has happened in a sect like theirs is happening all the time in individual minds, and experience shows that the intellect becomes divided and confused within itself from the moment it constitutes itself judge in matters of faith. If it no longer looks to the church, it has nothing to cling to and remains in a state of uneasy suspense.

Then there is irresolution, the third characteristic failing of the human mind, which by its nature is restless and ever eager for new knowledge. The intellect needs some stabilizing agent to calm its restlessness and restrain its curiosity, some fixed rules to check its inconstancy, and some sure statements of truth to keep it from going astray. Only a humble submissiveness to the church is capable of supplying all these needs. A submissive spirit sets limits to the roving intellect and restrains mere inquisitiveness. It focuses on a single criterion of conduct, namely that it is God who speaks through the church. When the church has spoken, we must be silent and hold our peace. She is invested with infallible authority that guarantees her against all misapprehension and error in matters concerning religion. It is hers to make steadfast the irresolution of the human mind and keep it from straying from one opinion to another and from wearying itself with useless discussions.

To shed further light on these principles, I must also say that whoever refuses to submit humbly to the church implicitly claims either to have evidence to support him or to have the backing of some other authority. Either he is saying that he has personally researched the

records of doctrinal disputation to discover the truth that has eluded the early pastors of the church and the sovereign pontiffs or he is asserting as an undeniable fact that some school of thought has assumed proprietorship of the truth, to the detriment of the Apostles' successors. This is the kind of temerity and presumption that has destroyed all innovators. The ancient philosophers claimed evidence for the absurd fancies they propounded as truths; the heretics of every century since then have appealed to "evidence" as they disseminated their errors with their impressively assured air. Is it the heretics, then, whom the Holy Spirit enlightens? Is it to them he reveals truths hidden from his church? Must we listen to them or else find ourselves "classed with pagans and tax collectors?"<sup>31</sup> Must the church heed what they say and maintain a respectful silence in their presence?

No one is likely to believe that the prerogative of infallibility has passed to heretics. Extraordinary miracles would be needed to convince people of this, and even they would not suffice. Before they could be deemed worthy of belief, it would be necessary to expunge from the New Testament the passages that guarantee to Peter and the other Apostles all of Christ's authority, together with his assistance, guidance, and protection to the end of time. We would have to draw a line through all texts that proclaim the church the pillar of truth and the judge whose word is final in all disputes pertaining to religion.

There is the further consideration that people who cling to their own views and arguments are only restating the Protestant claim to private judgment and will end as fanatics. Even supposing they have some doubts about their insights and so take on the views of some scholar or other for their rule of faith, we are entitled to ask who the learned men are whom they thus honor so highly by raising their tribunal of right and wrong above that of the Sanhedrin of the New Alliance. Are their names found in the Gospel, like those of Peter, James, John, and the other Apostles? Have they been given a guarantee of inerrancy by Jesus Christ? How long is it since this privilege of infallibility was snatched from the head and first pastors of the church and handed over to erudite men? At what point in time were the scholars commissioned to silence the Apostles' successors and instruct us themselves? What are the terms of the requirement entitling them to summon to their judgment seat and submit to their arbitration a decision of the Holy See supported by the consensus of almost all the bishops of the world?

But, someone will reply, these opponents of the Constitution<sup>32</sup> are among the most learned men, the most distinguished intellectuals, of

31. Matt. 18:17.

32. *Unigenitus*, see above, chap. 1, note 7.



the age. Even granted this for the moment, does it make them infallible or not? But if they are not infallible, I have a right and a duty to suggest that they are here in error. The legitimate presumption is against them in favor of the head and the princes of the church whose decision they are contesting. If they are deemed to be infallible, on what grounds is the claim to this prerogative based? Have they received it by ordinary or extraordinary means?

The guiding presence of Jesus Christ, promised to Peter and the Apostles to the end of time, remains by a perpetual succession a privilege of those who have come after them. They are endowed with it and will never be deprived of it, according to the teaching of our faith. If this is called into question, we have to suppose that a promise made by Jesus Christ is void and unfulfilled. If the privilege of being unable to be deceived has been transmitted to teachers whose names are nowhere to be found in the Gospel pages and who can provide no evidence of having been commissioned by an extraordinary intervention to exercise this prerogative, then the authority of the divine utterance has been rendered null and void, and the church has perished and come to nothing! But if such horrifying possibilities are inadmissible, we are entitled to regard the new teachers as impostors and to stand firm, as our forefathers did, by the See of Saint Peter and by what was taught by the combined authority of the earliest pastors.

#### [CHAPTER 4]

*The characteristics of a dutiful attitude to the church's decisions: sincere, unquestioning, single-minded, without hesitation, total, and without reservation*

Few people are willing to range themselves on the side of the declared opponents of the church's decrees. Even those who do appeal against those decrees claim allegiance to the church or at least wish to appear loyal, and they point to their appeal as a sign of their attachment to the faith. But to what church do they profess to remain faithful? What kind of submission do they show if they reject the decisions of the principal pastors and the head of the church? Is it possible to be loyal to the church and not defer to the pope and the bishops in mind and heart? Submission, to be perfect, has to be interior and sincere, simple and unquestioning, prompt and unhesitating, universal in scope and without reservation. These are the four essential characteristics of such submission, as I will now proceed to show.

Submission must be sincere and based on motives of faith and on the formal promises of Jesus Christ. The church's decisions are not like those of secular tribunals. Those who preside over the latter, however wise, enlightened, virtuous, and upright they are deemed to be, have received no assurance of the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and so they can make mistakes, as in fact they often do. They are personally liable to err, and they experience all too often the fact that they are not proof against prejudice, self-interest, and illusion. As such, they have no claim to the submission of people's minds as to what they decide; they cannot stop anyone from disagreeing with the sentences they pass or from appealing against them to a higher court, be that court only the judgment seat of God. Secular tribunals are concerned only with what relates to this life, to what comes within the scope of the senses, to matters of a transient and ephemeral nature. There is no call, therefore, for God to undertake to guide their judgments and make them infallible.

The church, on the other hand, is required to pronounce only on matters of faith and doctrine or relating to discipline, morals, and the guidance of the faithful. She is the oracle and the heart of religion, concerned only with the salvation of souls and the glory of God and of Jesus Christ. It is fitting, therefore, that she be unable to err or to lead her children astray and that she have the prerogative of making sovereign decisions exempt from appeal because exempt from the risk of error. This prerogative, which belongs to her and to her alone, enables all her children to share one and the same belief and to remain steadfast in the one faith. Because she is assured of divine assistance and incapable of error, she has the right to claim perfect and genuine submission, which can be such only if it is interior and sincere.

The second characteristic of this dutiful acceptance of the church's decisions is that it be simple and unquestioning. We are not forbidden to contemplate the heavens and the beauty of the universe and to bring an inquiring mind to bear on its various features or to study nature and search out the mysteries of knowledge still unexplored by scholars. There is no ban on researching into the causes of things and striving to penetrate the secrets of this world of ours. God has, in fact, entrusted such matters to the investigations of the learned. By all means, let us within our human limits be philosophers or theologians and exercise our powers of reasoning in the study of natural and supernatural phenomena. But let this be always with the proviso that we remain dutifully submissive, ready to subject our intellect to a superior wisdom and to bring it under the yoke of sincere obedience.

People who are loyal to the faith glory in being not only free to exercise their natural powers of perception but also able to refer their

findings to the authority of the church. Freethinkers depend upon the evidence of their senses and believe only what these tell them. Secular philosophers look for visible proofs, which they maintain can alone convince and satisfy their intellect. Independent-minded scholars yield only to arguments that satisfy their reason; they set up a supreme tribunal within their own mind and there pass judgment on all matters according to their own insights. But those who have faith and humility keep control of their intellectual findings and know how to submit them to the authority of the church, which Jesus Christ bade them heed under pain of being classed with the pagans and tax collectors.

We may say that a submissive disposition is simple and unquestioning when it eschews mere reasoning, critical examination, and argumentation. Whoever employs his reasoning powers only to bring himself in line with the infallible authority of the church deserves to be called unquestioning in his attitude. Such a one condemns absolutely everything that the church condemns; he gives unreserved approval to whatever the church approves; he is wise enough to tolerate what the church tolerates.

But if anyone begins to reason about the church's decisions before submitting to them, he is forthwith beset by doubts, or at least his confidence is shaken, as to whether the church may somehow have strayed from the truth. The more he reasons, the more he goes astray and the greater risk he runs of losing sight altogether of what is true; all his pondering produces only truth-obscuring mists. But if he uses his reason properly and decides in favor of the church's judgment, it is not so much the church as his own intellect he is deferring to, in which case he is simply paying the church the tribute of having in his opinion delivered a sound verdict!

As for anyone who disputes and examines after the church has spoken, his attitude is less dutiful because such disputation and scrutinizing imply that she is subject to correction. Such a person demonstrates his belief that the church may have erred, for his intention is to examine the judgment she has made. Whoever accepts the possibility that she may have made a mistake can arrive by his reasoning at a conviction that she has in fact done so. He will then believe himself entitled to appeal against her decision and reject the judgment she has made. It follows that such questioning is an infringement of the church's authority, and the intellect that perpetrates it makes itself the arbitrator in matters of controversy, arrogating even the right to rule against the church.

Once someone is prepared to examine into what the church has said and argue about what she has decided, decreed, or forbidden,

there is no end to the matter. It is like entering a labyrinth from which there is no exit or drifting in a boat without pilot or helm on a sea made stormy with novel teachings and endless rationalizations, all leading to shipwreck of the faith. "Why this? How that? On what basis has such a matter been settled? Intrigue has had a hand in it! It has been done to show who is in charge, a case of wielding the big stick! There's some clique behind the condemnation of such and such a book, people who have something to gain or are prejudiced!" Words like these are destructive of faith; people who use such language lead us to fear that their own faith is dead or dying. "Why did the Lord forbid you to eat of the fruit of that tree?"<sup>33</sup> This was the fatal question the devil put to Eve, and it was her misfortune and ours that she took notice of it. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink?"<sup>34</sup> There you have the language of dissenting spirits!

But for our part, let us glory in submitting without question. Let us not in any way scrutinize the decisions of the popes and bishops, who are the natural arbiters of doctrinal matters, the only persons having the right, as established by Jesus Christ, to make such decisions. Children are right to trust themselves unquestioningly to the guidance of their parents, in the same way that sheep follow the shepherd they know. No less rightly do the faithful accept the lead of the head and the princes of the church. Necessity, as well as the spirit of religion, must prompt us always to pay the church the due tribute of a sincere, unhesitating, and limitless acquiescence. If anyone should say that such obedience is naive, my reply would be, "Happy naïveté, which thus arrives at truth without labor or risk!"

Is someone who submits unquestioningly to the church going to be faulted by Jesus Christ, by the one who pronounced an anathema and sentence of excommunication against all who refuse to heed her? Are those who append no reservation, no stipulation, to their obedience to be told that their docility is overdone? Will those who cavil at the church's rights and set limits to the compliance she asks of them be deemed more innocent for being more arrogant?

We come now to the third quality of submission: that it be prompt and unhesitating. The Apostle Thomas was the most hesitant of all the disciples to believe that Jesus was risen and the last to be given sight of him. His persistent misgivings held back his weakening faith, which would have perished completely had not Jesus taken pity on him.<sup>35</sup>

What purpose is served by delay in rendering to the church the obedience she asks of us? Hesitation suggests that we are either de-

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33. Gen. 3:1.

34. John 6:52.

35. John 20:24–29.

luded or defiant or are likely to become both. To permit ourselves to entertain doubts about something the church has made known is to risk our faith, and to waver in acquiescing to her decrees is to lose the merit of obedience. It is also tantamount to accusing the church of injustice and bad faith: of injustice by implying that she could exceed her powers in what she requires of us and of bad faith by suggesting that she could deceive us as well as herself in what she proposes to us. To hesitate is to give scandal to the faithful and to endorse by our example a spirit of indocility on their part. The kind of Catholicism practiced by John, the Patriarch of Antioch, and by the notorious Theodore needs people to defend it down to this day for no other reason than that they stubbornly delayed in condemning Nestorius and, therefore, in submitting to what Pope Celestine I and the Council of Ephesus had decreed.

Finally, the obedience we owe to the church must be total and without reservation; it must match our compliance with the truths of our faith. It must admit no stipulations, no fine distinctions, no mental reservations, and no modifications in whatever concerns religious practice, morals, or discipline. Whoever has faith believes all the truths that God has revealed, as presented to us by the church. The good Catholic is ever attentive to the church, to whatever she tells him, and in accordance with the injunction of Jesus Christ, he classes with pagans and tax collectors whoever closes his ears to her advice, teachings, and decrees.

It is an affront to a judge to seek to reverse or amend a verdict he has given, which is what anyone does who tries to add a clause to it or remove one from it, to explain or interpret it on the grounds of making it more intelligible, or otherwise to change the form of it. Thus to presume to improve the judgment amounts to saying that the judge is liable to be wrong or that he has badly delivered or formulated his verdict.

To believe 100 articles of faith but to withhold belief from one is to declare ourselves heretics. To defer to the mind of the church in all matters except one is to proclaim ourselves rebels. From the moment we deem that she has erred on a single point, we no longer accept that she is infallible. This refusal of assent even on one matter means that we think she has or may have made a mistake. If the church has received from Jesus Christ overall authority concerning the deposit of faith, the integrity of religion, and the sanctification of the faithful, who can claim the right to set limits to that authority or to modify it? Saint Augustine could hardly have expressed more forcibly his own spirit of submission, his belief and trust in the church, than by openly declaring that his faith in the Gospel was based on her authority.

## [CHAPTER 5]

*His courage in openly professing his faith; his reaction to attempts to win him over to the Jansenist sect; his respect for the Constitution Unigenitus; examples of his attitude to the Holy See; his alarm at the damage wrought by the sect in Paris; his intercessions and penances for peace in the church; his consternation when his name is included in a list of appellants and his letter on this occasion*

De La Salle was a lover of silence and peace, careful to avoid the least occasions for contention and argument, concerned rather to maintain an attitude of meekness and charity. Hence, he never spoke about the controversies of his time when circumstances did not oblige him to do so. He was convinced that little was to be gained and a great deal to be lost by conversations of this kind, which usually develop into quarrels with sharp, unmeasured speech on both sides. Such exchanges, being inspired either by vanity or by misplaced zeal, produce only harsh and bitter feelings and a stubborn refusal to give way.

There are occasions when silence is not permissible, when conscience obliges us to declare our convictions openly and freely. There are times when faith could seem to be betrayed or damaged if we wavered in professing it, even to the point of sacrificing our reputation, plans, or interests. On such occasions it is not sufficient to have faith; we must profess it. Interior belief is the foundation of righteousness (*corde creditur ad justitiam*), but the outward profession of that belief is necessary for salvation (*ore autem confessio fit ad salutem*).<sup>36</sup>

Every Christian is held to give a reason for his faith and to make a public declaration of it to those who ask him.<sup>37</sup> He would be deemed to have denied or been ashamed of it if he lacked the courage or assurance to say what he believed and to bear witness to the truth. His silence would be a type of crime, and he would stand accused before the Founder and Perfecter of our faith of having made truth a captive of unrighteousness. Jesus Christ would in his turn be ashamed of him and refuse to acknowledge him before his Father.<sup>38</sup>

De La Salle took every possible means to keep apart from and unknown to the worldly life around him. But he was not an anchorite, and he was obliged in the interests of his Institute or for some other compelling motive to go out occasionally and transact business with various kinds of people. Thus it often happened that he was drawn

36. Rom. 10:10 (Vulgate).

37. 1 Pet. 3:15.

38. Luke 9:26 and Matt. 10:33.

into conversations about the disputed issues of the day, some people wanting to sound him out on these matters and others seeking to win him over to their point of view. To get him to join their party, they would tell him that it could be useful for his work as well as gain a good name for himself—two arguments that usually manage to shake people's resolution and then trap them.

Such situations obliged him to speak out and bear witness to the truth, and he did this so earnestly that none of his hearers was left in any doubt about his orthodoxy or with any hope of winning him over. If he had chosen in certain awkward situations to dissimulate or maneuver, to seem more compliant or be less outspoken and adopt a neutral stance, he could have quickly gained advantages for his Institute and saved it and him many problems. He could have had the powerful patronage of people who were to become his worst enemies; men who persecuted him would have been the champions of his undertakings.

In Paris, Provence, and elsewhere, members of the faction made many attempts to cultivate his friendship or to make contact with his disciples to gain them to their side. If he had been less aloof with these people, he would have wanted for nothing; they would have come running with offers of houses, furniture, money, and patronage. We should not be surprised at anything in all this if we bear in mind the kind of zeal the new doctrines inspired, zeal that everything served to inflame and nothing to quench. Two motives that made the partisans keen to win De La Salle to their cause were his reputation for holiness and his great ability to train devoted and competent teachers. These persons hoped that if they could attract him to their side, his name would shed honor on their party and make it highly commendable to right-thinking people. But this was not all: their hope was to have at their beck and call teachers of superior ability and notable piety to teach their doctrines.

We well know that there is no shorter, easier, or more effective means of spreading false doctrines than by first sowing the seed, securely and unobtrusively, in the primary school. Children at that age are susceptible to all the impressions we care to give them; they take in good and bad with equal readiness. Once they receive this early taint of error, it becomes almost impossible to eradicate it. Their first sip of poison is swallowed without any misgiving and penetrates so deeply into their system and so corrodes their faith that a cure is almost impossible.

Because the Protestants were well aware of this, in their burning enthusiasm to spread the new heresy, they composed catechisms of their own and recruited teachers to teach them to children. Port-Royal

was a center that followed this pattern and compiled a catechism based on its own doctrinal ideas, although without finding many teachers to propagate it.<sup>39</sup> Only a Community<sup>40</sup> can recruit and train teachers in suitable numbers, and De La Salle's was now developing rapidly. The Brothers had become so noted for their piety and professional skill that the Writing Masters in Paris had been sufficiently jealous and alarmed to take them to court over the fact that their own classes were becoming deserted and that their pupils were flocking to those of De La Salle's disciples.<sup>41</sup>

So this is why the advocates of the new theology were so keen to win De La Salle over to their side to have access to his Community.

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39. Blain begins this sentence with the discreet use only of the initials *P R*, but his first readers would have had no trouble in identifying the reference to the convent of Cistercian nuns established at Port-Royal des Champs, some eighteen miles southwest of Paris, in 1204, but transferred in 1625 to a site in the Faubourg Saint-Jacques in the capital. The convent became a principal center of Jansenism—*la citadelle et cité sainte* of the sect, as Rigault calls it (p. 376). For a readable account in English of the history and significance of Port-Royal, see Ronald. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford, 1951) chaps. 9 and 10. A principal exponent of Jansenistic doctrine, whose name was closely associated with the place, was Abbé Saint-Cyran. In the Lasallian library in Rome is a copy of a catechism entitled *Instruction sur la Doctrine de la Grâce*, published at Brussels in 1719; the title page is inscribed, seemingly by a contemporary reader: "*Ce livre a été condamné par M. de Noailles. Il a été fait par M. l'Abbé de Saint-Cyran.*" If the inscriber is right, the book is either not a first edition (but there is no printed indication to this effect), or it was retained unpublished for a considerable time after its composition; Saint-Cyran died in 1643. However, he had published in Paris, the year before his death, an earlier catechetical work, *Théologie familière ou brève explication des principaux mystères de la foi*.

40. Where this word appears with a capital initial, Blain uses it for a religious institute as a whole, following the accepted usage of the time. De La Salle apparently preferred this term to *Société* or *Institut* when referring to his own disciples. Hermans compiled a list of the three terms as they appear in the legislative and spiritual writings of the Founder: *Communauté* appears 197 times; *Société*, 58 times, and *Institut*, 179 times. In *Mémoire sur l'Habit*, *Communauté* is used 40 times, to the total exclusion of the other two terms. *Société* does not seem to have been used before 1694; *Institut* is found principally in the two known manuscripts of *Règles Communes* (1705, 53 times; 1718, 61 times) and in *Règle du Frère Directeur* (44 times); (CL 11, 51).

41. The *maîtres écrivains* formed a corporation of handwriting experts whose services were used in the law courts. They also claimed the right to teach calligraphy, together with grammar and arithmetic. They were an independent guild governed by their own statutes. (Poutet and Pungier, *Un Educateur et un Saint aux prises avec la société de son temps*, Quimper, 1976, 7; English translation by Edwin McCarthy, London, 1979, 8).



But they were wasting their time; the more they tried to find a way in, the more firmly he kept the door closed on them. Nothing could tempt him to budge on this matter; for the sake of his faith, he was quite happy to forego all the advantages he was offered. Moreover, he courageously risked all sorts of hostile measures from people who were not so much friends to be favored as enemies to be feared, people who could do him far more harm than good.

When they gave up hope of getting the saintly Founder to join them and of having the services of his Institute, these people tried another scheme to achieve their purpose. They decided to set up a teacher-training center on the model of De La Salle's, although with a much different lifestyle. Rich and influential as they were, they lacked neither funds nor other resources and soon launched their venture in Paris. Candidates were quickly forthcoming, and everything at first seemed set for success with the prospect of first-class teachers for the whole of France. But the Lord's hand was not with them, and it was not long before the enterprise, so well begun, was in ruins. An undertaking of this kind needed a De La Salle, and it did not take long for people to realize that a spirit of mortification, humility, docility, prayerfulness, meekness, charity, and disinterestedness does not enter into a group of people as a result of rhetoric on the part of the one in charge unless he also sets the example.

Candidates for the new "community" had at their head a man no different than they were; hence, there was no change in their moral outlook. They failed to discipline the defects and prejudices they brought with them, and at the end of their course, they were still what they had been at the beginning: self-willed, haughty, and eager for what they could get. So these first entrants both initiated the enterprise and brought it to an abrupt end because they offered no hope that any successors would be any better.<sup>42</sup>

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42. Modern biographers (such as Rigault, Battersby, and Gallego) tentatively identify the experiment described here with the enterprise of a certain Abbé Tabourin. According to Battersby, Tabourin organized a volunteer group of teachers to provide free education for the poor, emphasizing Christian doctrine. Their system resembled the one already in use by De La Salle's disciples and may have been modeled on it. They adopted the name, Brothers of the Christian Schools of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, spent a year in the form of a novitiate, but did not wear a religious habit or make vows. The principal distinction between them and the Lasallians was their adherence to Jansenism. Blain's implication that the enterprise was short-lived is exaggerated; the Frères Tabourin remained in existence until the French Revolution; they were suppressed along with all religious congregations. After the Revolution they reorganized themselves and continued to exist for another eighty years. (Battersby, *De La Salle, A Pioneer of Modern Education*, London, 1949, 58–59).

We have earlier described how the supporters of the new doctrines in Provence made a renewed attempt to gain De La Salle for their cause when he was obliged to quit Paris in 1711 and betake himself south to avoid persecution.<sup>43</sup> From the moment he appeared in a certain famous city in those parts, he was treated like an angel from heaven—nay, like Jesus Christ—by the citizens of every social rank, including the highest.<sup>44</sup> But there was a wide divergence in the motives and attitudes that prompted this reaction. The genuine Catholics welcomed the visiting priest with sincere and reverent esteem for his virtue. But the Augustinus faction<sup>45</sup> only put on a show of respect, a pretense of friendliness. They, however, made a point of seeming to honor him the most. Their aim to win for the party a man renowned for his virtue prompted them to pay him the most graceful compliments and to make proposals of the greatest advantage to him. They overlooked nothing in their efforts to ingratiate themselves with him and to make him one of their own. They placed their financial resources at his disposal and suggested projects for new schools, complete with plans for the buildings. They translated their words into deeds, and they partially fulfilled their proposals by founding a new center for the training of Brothers.<sup>46</sup> Everything was provided and given free to De La Salle: house, furniture, and funds; candidates were even recruited for him. They left him no opportunity for practicing virtue because there was nothing for which he had to put his trust in Providence! The undertaking advanced so quickly and with such success that the saintly priest's main fear was that he would see it all collapse as swiftly as it had begun. Every day he was honored with more visits; people sought his advice, and his replies were treated as oracles.

But once they had made these initial advances, they began to sound him out on the controversial issues of the day. They admitted him to their private meetings and invited him to conferences that began with devout discourses and ended with verbal attacks on the Jesuits, the decline of morals, the pope, and all bishops opposed to the

43. The circumstances of what Blain calls “the flight” are chronicled in book 3, chapter 10 (although the year given there is 1712).

44. The story is told in book 3, chapter 10, of the Founder's mixed fortunes in Marseille—cryptically referred to there, as here, simply as *une ville célèbre*, a surprising reticence on Blain's part, especially because Maillefer, avowedly discreet on matters concerning Jansenism, had not hesitated to identify the city in his 1723 biography of De La Salle (CL 6, 202).

45. Another name for Jansenists, from the title of the work recognized as the classic presentation of the sect's doctrine; see above, note 5, chap. 1.

46. The novitiate, as De La Salle remarked in a letter probably written from Marseille in July 1712, was needed to supplement the only existing one, at Saint Yon, because of language differences in Provence (*Letters*, 30).

new theology. In due course they called upon him to speak, to say what were his own thoughts and views on these topics.

We have already said more than once that the saintly man had no time for quarreling, that total silence was his rule on these matters, and that he broke his silence only when charity or the need and obligation to profess his faith required him to do so. But the situation in which he now found himself of having to state his views in public was a particularly awkward one. He could see what the likely damaging consequences would be. He was in no doubt that his wholehearted profession of faith would cause his apparent friends and benefactors to have a change of heart toward him and his Institute. He foresaw that his newly established novitiate would collapse as quickly as he had seen it rise and that a storm of fury would burst around him and his work.

In such circumstances, anyone less virtuous, sincere, and disinterested in his faith might perhaps have felt justified in equivocating, might even have felt convinced that common sense and the welfare of the Christian Schools forbade him to be frank or that he could simply withhold his approval of the views of people needed for his work while stopping short of condemning those views outright. But De La Salle's conscience would have nothing to do with this false prudence and dangerous rationalizing. For him it would have been a betrayal of his faith, or at least a stain on it, to maintain a deferential silence on this occasion or otherwise avoid stating what he was, a Roman Catholic submissive in mind and heart to the decrees emanating from the head of the church and the corps of its bishops, a man firmly attached to the See of Peter. He did not hesitate to make all this clear; he went even further in courageously speaking out against the people who were stubborn in their enthusiasm for doctrines so often condemned by the church. In acting thus, he was sacrificing to the defense of the faith his new novitiate, the plans for new schools, other potential benefits to his Institute, and all the praise that had been heaped upon him. These consequences did not exist only in his imagination; the novitiate collapsed, the plans for new foundations disappeared, existing establishments crumbled, his reputation was mercilessly torn apart, blackened, and slandered, and a revolt against him was even instigated among his own disciples. Finally, he had to yield to circumstances and leave the town, but at least he had the consolation of knowing that he left with his faith untarnished and unconquered by mere self-interest.

He went to Grenoble to take refuge with the Brothers there and had not been with them long when the Constitution *Unigenitus* appeared, condemning Quesnel's book.<sup>47</sup> It was promulgated by the

bishop of the place,<sup>48</sup> a man who later appeared to go back on this gesture of acceptance that had done him honor and secured his conscience by placing him with the head of the church and almost all his fellow bishops. The supporters of Quesnel's book were reduced to despair at finding that not just a few isolated propositions were condemned outright but the party's entire system of dogma, morality, and discipline, as set out in the 101 articles. A storm of protest broke out in Grenoble, as it did throughout the length and breadth of France.

Because De La Salle had gone to Grenoble precisely to stay out of sight, he did not at first have any occasion to give public witness to the truth by outwardly showing his adherence to this decree from the Holy See that was received by the hierarchy almost without exception.<sup>49</sup> He was content to have it read in the community and to assure the Brothers of his personal, wholehearted acceptance of it, pointing out as he did so the errors and ambiguities contained in the propositions and couched in persuasive, apparently devout language. Later on, when people came to know of the holy life he was leading there in quiet retreat, he had more than one occasion to profess his faith, both in writing and by a public statement of his acceptance of the Constitution *Unigenitus*. The party bitterly resented this, but loyal Catholics felt proud to have as their leader a man considered to be a saint, not an uneducated saint but a learned, enlightened theologian.

In the same city of Grenoble, he had occasion to administer a sharp rebuke to a devout lady who had shown him the confidence of asking him to look through her books and to remove any that had been condemned or were suspect. The good lady's collection included Quesnel's *Moral Reflections*; when De La Salle saw it, he was quite perturbed. "What have you here?" he asked. "This is a book that the church has just forbidden and condemned! Are you not afraid of

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47. See above, chapter 1, note 7. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London and New York, reprint, 1966, 1132) gives examples of the condemned propositions: that no grace is given outside the church; that grace is irresistible; that all acts of a sinner, even prayer and attendance at Mass, are sins. The French version of the Bull *Unigenitus* is reproduced in full in *La Querelle de l'Unigenitus*, by J. F. Thomas (Paris, 1950). Quesnel never accepted the condemnation of him or of his book, and although he requested and received the last sacraments on his deathbed, he never withdrew his appeal to a future Council for the vindication of his teaching.

48. Blain named him in book 3, chapter 6, as Ennemond Alleman de Montmartin, consecrated bishop of Grenoble on 6 May 1708. His role in establishing a community of Brothers in the city that year is described in the same chapter, but Poutet's study of the circumstances (vol. 2, 183–85 and 253) elucidates and corrects some details in Blain's account.

49. See below, note 59.

the anathemas that have been pronounced against anyone who keeps it in his possession? This is a book likely to inspire contempt for a sentence of excommunication because the author has shown such contempt. Are you going to be like so many others and learn to scorn the dread warnings of the church and act as if the fear of those warnings were a matter for the imagination?" The lady was embarrassed and upset, and she excused herself on the grounds of ignorance. She was unaware, she said, that the book had been condemned, and as proof of her acceptance of the church's judgment, she promptly handed the volume to De La Salle for him to burn.<sup>50</sup>

Incidentally, John Baptist had already given an example in this matter of the dutiful attitude he inspired in others. He had not, in fact, awaited the sentence of the universal church before declining to read the book. Archbishop de Noailles, of Paris, had expressly forbidden it before the Holy See gave judgment,<sup>51</sup> and immediately De La Salle had withdrawn the book from his library and sent it to the parish priest of Saint Sulpice. The Brothers protested that as a doctor of theology, he was entitled to retain and read such works, but this did not deter him. His respect for the Holy See was such that he blacklisted any writings condemned by it. He would not allow the Brothers to buy such works even on behalf of someone else. One of them purchased the works of Père Maimbourg<sup>52</sup> for a community in Provence

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50. Poutet relates this anecdote in "*L'influence grenobloise des ouvrages de Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*," an article in the series *Cahiers d'Histoire*, published jointly by the Universities of Clermont, Lyon, and Grenoble (vol. 7, 2, 1962). He comments that there is reason to believe that De La Salle's peremptory attitude regarding the condemned book was not widely imitated. Poutet's study of a large number of inventories of private libraries of the period had shown him that Quesnel's *Réflexions morales* was kept in many of them, "especially those of the clergy and of religious communities" (196).

51. In the same year but prior to the promulgation of the Constitution *Unigenitus* (1713), De Noailles had been placed in a dilemma concerning his earlier (1695) approval, as bishop of Châlons, of *Réflexions morales* and his condemnation the following year, as newly promoted archbishop of Paris, of a work by Abbé Barcos. An anonymous author, later identified as Benedictine monk Thierry de Viaixnes, in a book entitled *Problème Ecclésiastique*, posed the ironical question as to which De Noailles was to be believed, for the doctrine he approved in 1695 was the same as the one he condemned in 1696. The prelate's continuing embarrassment about this matter led to his proscription of Quesnel's work in advance of *Unigenitus*, which, however, he did not accept. (Rohrbacher, *Histoire de l'Église Catholique*, Paris, 1859, vol. 26, 147.)

52. The 1685 work of Louis Maimbourg (1610–1686), French Jesuit historian, *Traité historique de l'établissement et des prérogatives de l'Église de Rome*, constituted a defense of the claims of the Gallican church and led to the author's withdrawal from the Society of Jesus.

and received a severe reprimand for doing so, together with an order to get rid of the volumes regardless of the financial loss. De la Salle sent this instruction from Saint Yon, and it was duly obeyed.

The saintly Founder was so uncommitted to his own opinion and so cautious about anything suspect in a doctrinal matter that he excised a sentence that had been included in the Brothers' community prayers: "I declare, O my God, that even if there were no life to hope for after this present one, I would not cease to love you." A devout priest had pointed out to him that these words savored of Quietism<sup>53</sup> or seemed to be linked with ideas condemned in a book titled *Maxims of the Saints*.<sup>54</sup> The priest concerned was not well informed on the Quietist teaching, and John Baptist certainly knew that the words questioned by him were in no way intended to express a willingness to forego salvation or to reflect any other notion contained in *Maxims of the Saints*.

What the sentence in the Brothers' prayer book was meant to convey is an attitude of mind appropriate for any creature in relation to his Creator and even more suitable for Christians, especially those aspiring to become perfect. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that when we die, everything else also dies, as far as we are concerned, and that there is no life at all after this one. Nevertheless, the countless benefits that result from creation, the infinite manifestations

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53. Quietism asserts that human effort must be reduced to a minimum in pursuit of spiritual perfection. Complete passivity and the annihilation of the will are to be such that a person becomes indifferent to personal salvation. Such complete passivity is achieved by a form of interior prayer that eschews discursive meditation or formulating acts of faith, hope, charity, and so on. Such passive prayer renders the corporal and spiritual works of mercy superfluous, and because the will is deemed to be in a state of annihilation, sin is impossible, and resistance to temptation, uncalled for. The principal exponent of the doctrine is Miguel de Molinos, whom Blain names later (see below, chapter 17, note 77).

54. The full title is *L'Explication des Maximes des Saints sur la vie intérieure*, a work of Archbishop Fénelon, published in 1697 as a response to Bossuet's *Instruction sur les états de l'oraison*, which had attacked the Quietist teaching of Madame Guyon, whom Blain also names later, alongside Molinos. The result was a sustained polemic between the two great churchmen that culminated in the condemnation of Fénelon's book in 1699 by Pope Innocent XII. Fénelon accepted the censure, and during his remaining sixteen years as archbishop of Cambrai, he vigorously defended the church's infallibility against the Jansenists, as well as did much by his generous charity to relieve suffering among his flock. Fénelon was born in the same year, 1651, as De La Salle, who survived him by four years. For a recent evaluation of the doctrine of Fénelon and Guyon, see Dupré and Wiseman, eds., *Light from Life: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 324–49.

of God's love, are sufficiently compelling motives for the human heart, in turn, to love its divine benefactor, the source of all perfection. Even in this hypothetical situation, no creature could refuse the Creator the tribute of his love without failing in piety, justice, and gratitude. But for De La Salle it sufficed that the words mentioned could appear suspect to less-instructed minds for him to cut them out. He preferred to make an erasure that would harm no one rather than give cause to believe that his obedience to the church was in any way doubtful or not absolutely total.

When he returned from the south to Paris, he felt that he ought in gratitude as well as for the sake of the interests he had at heart to call and present his respects to Cardinal de Noailles, who had a particular regard and affection for him.<sup>55</sup> A word to His Eminence about the cruel harassment he had endured for so long, together with a mention of the names of those responsible, all of them just then on the archbishop's blacklist, would have put an end to his troubles and tied his enemies' hands once and for all. His feelings prompted him to make this visit, but his faith was against it. He sensed a reluctance within him to seek the help of a prelate who, after all, had come out in favor of the appeal against the Bull *Unigenitus* and whose temporizing in the matter had annoyed many people on both sides.<sup>56</sup>

While still in the south, John Baptist had felt alarmed about the scandalous disturbances caused throughout the kingdom by people appealing against a doctrinal constitution that had been solemnly promulgated in France and received elsewhere with total accord. His fear of the harmful effects that must follow had prompted many a prayer and sacrifice on his part. But hidden away as he was in a corner of distant Provence, he was aware of only half the trouble. He got the full picture only when he returned to the capital and was amazed and appalled at the zeal, not to say the fanaticism, of the innovators flooding the market with the bitter spleen of their many writings urging the ordinary people to revolt against the church. His alarm grew at the advances impiety and irreligion were making as a result of the division in the church and the stubborn resistance shown towards her.

He was prompted to engage people of known holiness and influence with God to offer prayers that heaven would heal the great harm being done. One of the persons he involved in this saintly enterprise was the celebrated Sister Louise, of whom I have already spoken.<sup>57</sup> He regarded her as one of those vessels of election whom God

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55. See above, chapter 1, note 6.

56. See chapter 1, note 7. De La Salle makes a passing reference to the archbishop's indecisiveness in his letter of 5 December 1716 to Gabriel Drolin (*Letters*, 32).



chooses from time to time to add luster to his church. De La Salle wrote to her in emphatic terms to enlist her interest in the present need of our Lord's spouse, the church. He shared with her his personal concern to obtain through fervent prayer the peace that only a humble submission to the Magisterium could give. The saintly woman was all for his idea and began to add her pleas to his in the sight of God that the conflagration threatening to engulf the church might be extinguished. She sent him a reply to this effect, saying that she feared no less than he did the harm that the French church would surely suffer from the lack of submission shown precisely by people who should be inculcating it and giving the example. At the same time, she added, he should console himself, as she did, with the hope that the storm would gradually abate as God had made known to her that it would. This assurance, in fact, cheered him considerably.<sup>58</sup>

A year after this, the faction dealt him a treacherous blow, wounding him to the heart or rather wounding his love of the pure faith. People still remember the endless agitations, intrigues, and trickery used by the innovators to recruit supporters for their appeal. Their duplicity led some persons who were not sufficiently on their guard to add their signature to a copy of the appeal, thinking it to be a different document altogether; they were cajoled into doing it with the assurance of prospects attractive to anyone with ambition. In this way the list of appellants<sup>59</sup> was filled out with names that did the party no good, however, except in places where the signatories were unknown or where no one knew how the signatures had been obtained. Such facts are common knowledge, but here is a story relating specifically to De La Salle that is as yet not generally known.

The name De La Salle appeared on the list, and there was a Canon de La Salle of Reims, a brother of the saintly Founder, who had

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57. Blain's account of De La Salle's discovery of the hermitage of Parménie and his visits to its saintly custodian, Sister Louise Hours, is found in book 3, chapter 11. The known history, dating back to Roman times, of the mountain site of Parménie (*per moenia*), thirty miles northwest of Grenoble, has been studied by Leo Burkhard in a doctoral thesis (University of Grenoble, Doctorat-ès-Lettres, 1964). In 1976, Burkhard published, again in French, an illustrated presentation of his study for a general readership, calling it simply *Parménie*. This formed the basis for a version in English by Luke Salm entitled *Encounters: De La Salle at Parmenie* (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Conference, 1983). Salm's adaptation concentrates on the saint's association with the mountain retreat, and the story is deeply interesting.

58. Communication with Sister Louise must have been through a third party, perhaps the director of retreats at Parménie, because her biographers assure us that she could neither read nor write. Blain mentions her inability to read in his earlier account of her.



supported the appeal.<sup>60</sup> The coincidence gave the members of the faction in the diocese of Boulogne the chance of putting it about that the Superior of the Brothers was one of the most committed opponents of the Constitution. The group, not a very large one, claimed to be greatly honored to have so distinguished a name on their list and made great use of it to enhance the party's standing. Ordinary people were disconcerted by this, and it was a scandal to loyal Catholics. The Brothers themselves were in consternation about it, and to put a stop to the calumny and dispel the misunderstanding caused by this misuse of De La Salle's name, they lost no time in letting their Superior know what was being said about him and the credibility this use of his name was giving to the appeal. The news caused intense sorrow to a man who had given so many striking proofs of his catholicity and had sacrificed the most sensitive interests of his Institute to defend the integrity of this faith. It was an extreme test of his patience to be told now that his name was being used to sanction a doctrine he abhorred and to bolster resistance to the high priest of the New Law and to the bishops. Never had an insult stung him so sharply. Humble as he was, grown familiar with affronts for over thirty years, and schooled by himself to oppose lies and calumnies of the most atrocious kind with only invincible patience and heroic silence, he could not ignore this occasion when the orthodoxy of his faith was in question. He answered the false claim with such earnestness and modesty as to satisfy even the most zealous Catholics. He refuted the calumny with a response worthy of him and sent it to the Brother who had written to him,<sup>61</sup> instructing him to make it public. Here is the document verbatim; it is too fine to omit any of it.

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59. The appeal was led by four bishops who lodged a formal act at the Sorbonne on 5 March 1717. The prelates concerned were Jean Soanen of Senez, Joachim Colbert of Montpellier, Pierre de La Broue of Mirepoix, and Pierre de Langle of Boulogne. Many members of the secular and regular clergy, as well as several corporate societies, among them the Sorbonne, adhered to the appeal, which finally assembled twelve bishops and about 3,000 priests and religious from a total of approximately 100,000 clergy in the French church of the time (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967, vol. 1, 703).

60. Jean-Louis de La Salle, thirteen years younger than John Baptist and, like him, canon of Reims and doctor of theology (but of the Sorbonne). Aroz provides biographical details (CL 41, vol. 1) and devotes ten pages of CL 27 (86–96) to the circumstances of Jean-Louis' alignment with the appellants.

61. Identified as the Director of the Calais community in 1717, Brother Norbert (André Desbouvés); see *Letters*, 132. References to Norbert in a letter of De La Salle dated 2 October 1710 suggest that he was a headstrong character, critical of the Rule, and at loggerheads with his Director, who, as the letter implies, was not without blame for the situation (*ibid.*, 12).

Rouen, 28 January 1719

I do not think, my very dear Brother, that I have given the Very Reverend Dean any reason for saying that I am one of the appellants. It has never been my intention to appeal, any more than it has been to embrace the doctrines of those who appeal to a future council. I have too much respect for our Holy Father the Pope and too great a submission to the decision of the Holy See not to give my assent to them. In this matter I wish to follow the example of Saint Jerome, who was caught up in the difficult situation brought about in the church by the Arians. When they insisted that he acknowledge three hypostases in God, he considered it his duty to consult the chair of Saint Peter, on which, he said, he knew the church was founded. Addressing Pope Damasus, he declared that if His Holiness ordered him to admit three hypostases in God, notwithstanding the difficulty he would find in so doing, he would have no fear in acknowledging three hypostases. This is why he closed his letter by begging His Holiness in the name of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, and in that of the Holy Trinity of divine Persons in one same nature, to be pleased to write to him, authorizing him either to affirm or to deny that there are three hypostases in God. Neither the Dean nor anyone else ought to be surprised if following the example of this great saint who was so enlightened in matters of religion, I consider it sufficient for myself that he who is today seated in the chair of Saint Peter has declared by a Bull that is accepted by almost all the bishops of the world his condemnation of the 101 propositions taken from Père Quesnel's book. After such an authentic decision by the church, I say with Saint Augustine that the case is closed. Such are my sentiments and such are my dispositions, which have never been different and which I will never change. I am, in our Lord, yours. . . .<sup>62</sup>

The publication of this letter greatly embarrassed the appellant party and certainly put a stop to their libel. Contrary to what they had intended, their duplicity served only to discredit their appeal, which had shown its need of lies and pretense to obtain a hearing. The Dean of Calais,<sup>63</sup> who had started the rumor in the first place, was all

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62. Despite Blain's remark that the letter is "too fine to omit any of it," he does omit the three Latin quotations appended to the letter in the only other known source of the document (*Letters*, 132).

63. Pierre Caron, canon of the Boulogne Chapter and chaplain to the Jansenist bishop, Pierre de Langle, who had appointed him Dean of Calais.

the more guilty because he was well aware of the inviolable attachment the Founder of the Brothers had for the traditional teaching and for the church of Rome. He could not have forgotten the just reprimand the saintly man had courteously addressed to him on the subject of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin. I deliberately omitted to mention this incident when writing of De La Salle's visit to Calais<sup>64</sup> because I wanted to include it here. It constitutes yet another proof of the holy priest's zeal in opposing the new ideas.

The Dean of Calais was in the forefront of all the people who flocked to show their esteem and veneration for the servant of God when he visited Calais. He invited him to celebrate the liturgy on the feast of the Assumption, and John Baptist did so to everyone's satisfaction except his own. For he had a shock when the Dean entered the pulpit to deliver his sermon and left it without so much as a word about the solemnity being celebrated that day. After Mass the displeasure on his countenance was too evident for the Dean not to notice it, but he did not even give the latter time to ask the reason for it. His fervent attachment to the privileges of the holy Mother of God prompted him to utter words of reproach so touching that the embarrassed parish priest promised to preach on the Assumption the following Sunday and so repair the scandal he had given by his studied silence. He kept his word and gave a clear explanation of the church's teaching on this mystery, astonishing his congregation, who were not used to hearing him speak so well about the Most Blessed Virgin! He was known as one of those carping people who want her privileges played down and who mistakenly think they are following the Apostle Saint Paul in boasting that they preach Jesus Christ alone,<sup>65</sup> as if the honor given to the Mother did not redound to that of the Son!

#### [CHAPTER 6]

*His advice to his disciples on fidelity to the church's teachings; the effectiveness of his instructions as seen in the Brothers' inviolable attachment to sound doctrine; further examples of his courage in defending his faith*

The church cannot be divided in two. The loyal Catholic has only to cling to the Roman church and to have nothing to do with anyone who seeks to separate him from the center of unity, as a branch from the trunk of the tree. Nevertheless, the ordinary faithful are sometimes

64. Blain, book 2, chap. 16; book 3, chap. 14.

65. Col. 1:27–29.

disturbed by the arguments and differences of opinion that arise in matters of religion.

The ever-luminous truth that is found in the See of Peter and the pastors of the church is sometimes obscured in the eyes of persons who are weak in their faith or who seem to have forgotten the catechism lessons of their youth. This situation is brought about by the number and prestige of innovative theologians and the persuasive eloquence of their writings. The weaker members of the faithful, not knowing any better or because they have been seduced and led astray, come to think that the church has two ways of looking at things; they are left in a state of doubt, wondering which way to follow.

It seems to have been people like these who came to De La Salle for advice, asking him to tell them which was the right view to adopt and which one he adopted. His reply amounted to this: I am on the side of whoever is attached to the See of Saint Peter—*Ego interim clamito, si quis Cathedrae Petri jungitur, meus est*.<sup>66</sup> It was with these words that Saint Jerome made it understood that only those who were united with the See of Saint Peter were on the right side. It was the one answer that those who consulted De La Salle on the matter received. He did not have two different ways of replying. What he said to people outside the Community who sought his advice was what he endlessly repeated to his own disciples, whom he went to great pains to convince on a subject of such importance. “The pope is the Vicar of Christ,” he would say to them. “He is the visible head of the church and the successor of Saint Peter. His authority extends over the whole church. Hence, all the faithful should regard him as their Father and you particularly, who have the task of teaching Christian doctrine, must honor him as the shepherd of the flock that is the church. You must respect his every word, and it should suffice that some instruction comes from him for you to accept it.”<sup>67</sup>

This was the great principle he gave his Brothers in the meditation he composed for the feast of the Chair of Saint Peter at Antioch. He wanted it to serve as a kind of anchor holding them fast to the center of the true church amidst the repeated furious agitations of the innovators. Because they repudiated this term as applied to themselves and appealed to ancient practice to justify their new teachings, the saintly Founder gave his disciples another principle to prevent them from going astray, as in the article on faith in his *Collection* :

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66. Blain's reference is simply “Q. ad D.” The sentence is quoted verbatim from Jerome's Letter 16, addressed to Pope Damasus (PL, vol. 22, col. 359).

67. The purported quotation is a free rendering of the second point of De La Salle's meditation for the feast of the Chair of Saint Peter at Antioch, subtitled “On the submission we owe the church” (*Meditations*, 106.2).

Hold fast in all things to what is of faith; shun novelties; follow the tradition of the church; accept only what she accepts; condemn what she condemns; approve what she approves, whether by her councils or by the sovereign Pontiff. Render her prompt obedience in all matters.<sup>68</sup>

In the meditation mentioned above, he writes in similar words:

The church is our mother, and we are obliged to defer to her in all things and must depend on her for all that concerns religion. We must be submissive to all her decisions, treating them as oracles. It is her place to teach us the truth. We must receive that teaching from her lips without doubting or questioning what she says. Our only response to what she proposes to us should be “I believe,” and this without hesitation, let alone doubt.<sup>69</sup>

Yet a third principle of conduct that he offered the Brothers and anyone else who did not claim to have the key of specialized knowledge in these matters was to deny themselves the liberty of conversing on doctrinal matters, above all on those impenetrable mysteries relating to predestination and grace. These are subjects on which scholars themselves have fallen headlong into pits they have dug when rash presumption or overbearing inquisitiveness has led them to probe too deeply. They are topics in which people get entangled, losing their way in a maze that has no exit and into which foolish vanity has made them venture. He used to say, speaking about all of this:

There are persons who are not satisfied just to challenge the teaching and sayings of Jesus Christ and to show scant respect for the decisions of the church. They must also join in discussions about predestination and grace, subjects on which they should maintain a lasting silence because they are outside their competence.<sup>70</sup>

It is a fact that all the reading matter and all the debates on these topics never produce any benefit but almost always do harm to those

68. This quotation, from the article on faith in “The Principal Virtues That the Brothers Should Strive to Practice,” is verbatim except for the omission of “and perfect” after “prompt” (*Collection of Various Short Treatises*, 67).

69. Quoted, not verbatim, from point one of the meditation indicated by Blain but the four variants do not affect the meaning (*Meditations*, 106.1).

70. This quotation is included without comment in CL 10 (197) among the “sayings” attributed to the Founder, but Blain’s passage is a fairly close quotation from point one of De La Salle’s meditation for Sunday in the Octave of Christmas (*Meditations*, 5.1).

who allow themselves to indulge. Discourse of this kind leaves the heart dry, arid, tepid, and indisposed for prayer. It gives rise to fruitless speculation and endless argumentation, which do nothing at all for our trust in God, our charity, or our fervor. Quite often this sows the seed of pusillanimity, discouragement, and even despair. Almost always it ends by causing us to slacken off in the practice of virtue and the fulfillment of our duties, and it leads us back to our former failings and wayward impulses and to a revived taste for the world and its attractions. To say no more, it disturbs our peace of mind and leaves there only anxiety or indifference about our salvation.

All this explains why in the various writings he left the Brothers, De La Salle frequently stresses the need to make daily progress in the practice of the Gospel virtues and in the imitation of Jesus Christ, but then to leave everything else to God. Our salvation is in God's hands and depends immeasurably more on God than on ourselves. Our eternal happiness is his concern much more than it is our own. But if it requires his grace, it also requires our fidelity to that grace. Grace is never wanting to us; if anything is wanting, it is our response to it. Fervent and humble prayer draws down upon us an abundance of grace, and if we are careful to put aside our self-will and make generous efforts against our fallen nature, we will develop the fidelity to grace that leads to final perseverance.

Whatever the doctrine of predestination connotes, it is a matter of faith that salvation is contingent on good works. We may waste our time studying the finer points of this doctrine, a dangerous and presumptuous thing to do, but we will never uselessly strive to curb our self-will and practice virtue. We are assured of our salvation if we seek to pattern ourselves on Jesus Christ. The rule, then, is to do courageously all that depends on us and to look to God for what does not depend on us, leaving ourselves in his care. What we must fear most is to lose confidence in his goodness and be unfaithful to the graces he gives. We must work for our salvation as if it depended solely on us but leave its achievement to God as if it depended only on him. The Founder inculcated these principles with the object of fostering humility, fervor, prayerfulness, and self-denial. In several of the works he wrote for the Brothers, he returned to the same idea:

All you have to do is to try to be better, to use the knowledge you have to make a success of your work, and to make progress in virtue. After that you need only say, "I believe all that the church teaches. I accept whatever she ordains by the lips of the pope or of the body of bishops united with him."<sup>71</sup>

Teachings like this one on submission to the church that he left in his writings are only what he had never ceased to instill by his conferences and in conversation. He had a habit of saying<sup>72</sup> that all who have the responsibility of instructing children and bringing them up in the faith of the catholic, apostolic, and Roman church must above all things keep clear of new notions and support by personal example whatever they teach about the respect due to the Holy See and to the bishops in union with it. The spread and preservation of true religion, he would add, depended to some extent on educators of the young, and it was a fact of experience that heresy, no less than faith, owed its propagation and progress in large part to schoolteachers.

So many instructions on these matters did not fail of their purpose. He had the consolation of seeing throughout his life that all the Brothers persevered in obedience to the decisions of the church and religiously spurned any teaching that savored of novelty. For the period of nearly forty years during which De La Salle governed the Institute he had founded, it was his joy to see his spiritual children content to imbibe the milk of his instructions, sharing his outlook and united to one another by the great principles he had inspired in them, namely an unquestioning acceptance of the decrees of the church, an uncompromising repudiation of all innovative doctrines, and an unswerving loyalty to the church of Rome.

There was only one Brother who seemed to show a leaning towards the new ideas, but De La Salle brought him back to his duty by showing him that the only reasonable option for him, as for all the faithful, was a totally trustful spirit of obedience, a firm stance in favor of the highest of all visible authority, and an open declaration of loyalty to the church's hierarchy united with the pope. This, he assured him, was a safe rule, the only safe rule for the preservation of faith: all others led astray. The Brother concerned kept to these principles, which gave him peace of mind for as long as De La Salle remained alive, but he forgot them after the latter's death. His early leaning toward the new teaching became a temptation that led to the loss of both his vocation and his faith. He left the Institute because he found

71. Despite the vagueness of his reference, "in several of the works he wrote for the Brothers," Blain places the passage in quotation marks, but because the vocabulary of the passage is quite untypical of De La Salle's known works, Hermans doubts that the biographer is using an actual writing of the Founder (see CL 10, 105, for examples). *A fortiori*, adds Hermans, the paragraphs without inverted commas that precede the quoted passage and that Blain says he has drawn from "various writings" of De La Salle owe as much, at least, to the biographer as to the Founder.

72. But Hermans notes three expressions in what follows that are alien to the Founder's written vocabulary (CL 10, 200).

himself isolated in his views and because he would have been dismissed from it had he ventured to air his opinions. He was not given time to change his mind. He boarded a ship at Marseille to go to a foreign country where he could enjoy liberty of conscience and perished when the ship sank with all on board. His loss of faith thus led to the loss of his life. May God grant that a special grace undeceived him at the last moment and that his abuse of graces already received was not punished by the deprivation of the grace of a happy death.<sup>73</sup>

In bringing this section of our account to a close, let me quote an extract from a letter that De La Salle wrote to M. Gense, mentioned earlier, a zealous defender of the Constitution *Unigenitus*, to congratulate him on the heroic ardor with which he had fought the appeal and those responsible for it:

It gives me great pleasure to hear of the zeal you show for the defense of the Catholic religion, which is at present a prey to so many disorders in this country. You would like me to join you in this issue to which, with the aid of God's grace, I have up to now been devoting my attention. I will not fail to pray earnestly that God may bless your zeal with success which will counteract all the efforts of the devil to destroy the peace of the church at this present time.<sup>74</sup>

I will not detail here what the saintly priest did to disabuse his brother, a canon of Reims, who was as drawn to the new teaching as he was repelled by it. He was grief-stricken to find his brother's name on the list of appellants and did everything his zeal could inspire to

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73. Félix-Paul, editor of the *édition critique* of *Letters of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (*Letters*, 10–12), suggests in his volume (298–99) that the Brother referred to here is Norbert, recipient of the letter quoted above in chapter 5 (Félix-Paul, note 26). Norbert's involvement with the Dean of Calais would have led him (surmises Félix-Paul) to “show a leaning toward the new ideas.” Corroborative of this theory is the fact that Norbert was a member of the Saint Yon community in 1719, where he signed the parish register as witness of the burial of De La Salle on 8 April 8. The Founder would have had Brother Superior Barthélemy recall the erring disciple from Calais to be near himself at Saint Yon as a means of bringing him “back to his duty.” Blain's statement that the Brother lapsed again after the Founder's death coincides with the entry in *Catalogue des Frères des Écoles Chrésiennes* (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and published in CL 3) that Norbert was dismissed from the Institute in 1720 (see CL 3, 35).

74. Blain has provided an extensive penned portrait of the recipient of this letter in book 2, chapter 16, which relates the beginnings of the Brothers' work in Calais (see *Letters*, 121).



have him remove it and withdraw his support for a movement that was proclaiming freedom to favor the less sure and less probable view in matters of doctrine—an idea, of course, vociferously disclaimed in speech and writing by the entire sect. John Baptist left nothing undone to open his brother's eyes and show him the pit he was digging for himself by opposing his archbishop, the pope, the clergy of France, with the exception of a minute number of prelates, and all the bishops of the world, for no one has been able to name a single bishop outside this kingdom who has rejected *Unigenitus*.<sup>75</sup>

The canon turned a deaf ear to all the advice and pleas of his brother, preferring the authority of the tiny faction he belonged to, his “church,” to that of the Holy See.<sup>76</sup> John Baptist talked and reasoned with him to the point of exhaustion, showing him why the orthodox view was the safer and even more probable one, reminding him where the highest earthly authority was to be found, pointing out to him that he was foolishly cutting himself off from the tree of life and the center of unity, and stressing the need to follow as a sure rule of faith the teaching of the great majority of bishops united with the pope.

All these were salutary and well-considered reflections, but the canon finally told him to hold his peace and stop bothering him. The saintly man did, in fact, just that and maintained total silence concerning his brother, never speaking about him and never wanting to hear anyone else speak about him.<sup>77</sup> The only consolation he had in this matter was that he had nothing to do with his brother's becoming

75. “It was not only in France that the Constitution [*Unigenitus*] was published by authentic mandates, but likewise in the Low Countries. All the dioceses there vied with one another in fulfilling this duty. . . . The Bull was also circulated wherever there was a papal commissary or nuncio, not indeed in a formal way; such was not required in those countries, but it was printed and distributed without the slightest opposition on the part of anyone” (D. Vincent Thuillier, *Rome et la France: La Seconde Phase du Jansénisme*, Paris and Lyon, 1901, 348–49).

76. Jean-Louis' entrenched attitude is discernible in one or two of his corrections of Bernard's manuscript biography of the Founder. Where, for example, Bernard in a preliminary note acknowledges the exclusive right of the Holy See to pronounce infallibly on the sanctity of a person, Jean-Louis has crossed out the adverb; the adjective *incomparable*, applied by Bernard to the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, receives the same treatment (CL 4, XVI).

77. A letter addressed by Jean-Louis from Reims to his brother at Saint Yon on 3 January 1719 begins with the words, “Although it would appear that you are determined to forget this part of the country completely and that you have decided to cut off all communication with us for a year or even several years—so that I have only with great difficulty been able to get a reply from you in matters of great importance.” For the complete letter, with commentary and bibliographical references, see *Letters*, 133(A).

a canon<sup>78</sup> and that he had been firm in ignoring the public outcry and the appeals of his family and friends when they urged on him the obligation of making over his own canonry to his brother when he had resigned it.<sup>79</sup>

## SECTION 2

### HIS SPIRIT OF FAITH

[CHAPTER 7]

*The spirit of faith by which he lived; his supernatural view of things and his noble sentiments; his spirit of faith the key to the heroic quality of his virtue and his elevated idea of the Brothers' vocation; his teaching on the spirit of faith*

To have the faith and to live by the faith are two different things, and it is true to say that the latter is as rare in the church as the former is common. To keep our faith is to be a Catholic; to live by it is to be a “just man,” a saint. “*Justus meus ex fide vivit*—The just man lives by faith.”<sup>80</sup> He lives a life of purity, a supernatural life, a life elevated above that of the senses, natural motivation, and merely human reason. His life is that of interior souls, between whom and the ordinary run of Christians the difference is almost as wide as that which separates the latter from nonbelievers.

To live by faith is to make faith the rule and guiding principle of our conduct and outlook. It is to let faith govern all our purposes and undertakings, to make it the criterion by which we act and think, the ruler of our heart. A life of faith means consulting our faith when facing problems, doubts, and difficulties; it means, in a word, making no judgment, taking no resolution, doing nothing at all except from a motive of faith, a consideration truly worthy of a Christian.

78. Except indirectly, if Blain is correct in saying, in book 1, chapter 13, that Archbishop Le Tellier conferred the canonry on Jean-Louis with the words, “I am offering you this gift to make reparation for the foolishness of M. de La Salle, who gave his benefice to someone other than his own brother.”

79. Blain devotes chapters 13 and 14 in book 1 to the story of De La Salle’s resignation of his canonry, his decision to give it to a poor priest, Jean Faubert, rather than to his brother, Jean-Louis, and the consternation this caused in Reims. Aroz supplies the historical details in CL 42, 479–90.

80. Heb. 10:38.

People who are not motivated by this spirit of faith live a kind of animal existence, obeying only what their senses suggest; they are simply epicureans, whose rule of life is to go along with whatever affords most pleasure. If not this, then they are at best like philosophers and good-living worldlings, who boast that in all things they follow their reasoning powers or the principles of a purely human ethic. But the spirit of faith is quite another kind of driving force. It elevates the Christian above his natural level, fills him with the spirit of Jesus Christ, with his thoughts, feelings, and dispositions, and so enables him to live in a manner worthy of God, *digne Deo*.<sup>81</sup> In other words, it divinizes him.

This description of the life of faith fits John Baptist de La Salle in every respect. He was one of the “just men” of this last century, one who well reflected the life of Jesus Christ in his own life and was abundantly filled with Christ’s Spirit. Hardly anyone has ever been more entitled to utter those words of Saint Paul, “*In fide vivo filii Dei—I live by faith in the Son of God.*”<sup>82</sup> De La Salle looked at things only as faith sees them; he judged everything only by the light of faith. The value he put on things was measured by faith; he esteemed only what faith deemed worthy of esteem. He desired only what faith could offer him and treated all else as worthless. He feared only what faith told him was to be feared and loved all that faith showed him to be worthy of love. His way of thinking rose always above the false ideas of this world, and he was ever on his guard against the promptings of fallen nature and of merely human reasoning. He was like a sentinel ever on the alert against being taken by surprise by a movement of self-love or self-interest. He was always immune to the false slogans and lifestyle of the worldly wise, making his whole study the Gospel and his only rule of conduct the life, dispositions, and virtues of Jesus Christ.

These noble aspirations gave rise to his confidence in God and his heroic trust in Divine Providence. They prompted his generous determination, in spite of his family and friends and the whole city of Reims, to leave everything and surrender all his possessions in order, like the Apostles, to follow Jesus Christ. His spirit of faith explains why he was compulsively drawn to poverty of the most austere kind, to the most rigorous penitential practices, to a desire for total seclusion and uninterrupted communing with God. It was the source of his liking to be out of the public view and unknown, the basis of the mean opinion he had of himself and of his ready acceptance of humiliations. It made him look for opportunities to practice obedience

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81. Col. 1:10 (Vulgate).

82. Gal. 2:20.

and show dependence on others, preferring the last place in everything and choosing whatever is most demeaning in the eyes of men. For forty entire years of his life, he gave moving examples of all this. It was because of his spirit of faith that he was able to absorb endless insults, indignities, and contempt and to bear crosses and sufferings and everything that repels and pains fallen human nature. It explains why he was able to maintain complete silence in the midst of his difficulties and tribulations, his misfortunes and hardships, never giving way to the least sign of resentment against the enemies who slandered and otherwise persecuted him.

Never, whether publicly or in private, not even in the presence of his most trusted disciples, did he allow himself the slightest word of complaint, the least sign of sadness or ill humor, however harassed he was. He recalled Job in the way he accepted his physical ailments, the desertion of his friends, the treacherous revolt of several of his earliest and most competent disciples.<sup>83</sup> His faith, nourished by love, made such acceptance possible. What else could have enabled him to overcome with invincible patience the almost daily assaults and attacks directed against him with unrelenting and constantly renewed fury by the devil, the world, and the flesh?

Saint Paul attributes to faith all the miracles of virtue worked by the saints in their lifetime.<sup>84</sup> We are entitled to say, therefore, that it was faith that made De La Salle seemingly insensible to the most cutting insults and the most blatant acts of injustice. It was as if he were immune to doubt, anxiety, or any other such natural reactions, even in

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83. Blain's terminology suggests that he is thinking of Nicolas Vuyart (book 2, chap. 15) and Ponce Thiseux (below, chap. 28). There were other notable withdrawals among the earliest disciples. Of the twelve who made the temporary vow of obedience in 1686 (Hermans proposes this date against Blain's 1684), four chose not to renew it the next year (a decision Blain describes as "scandalous" in book 2, chap. 11). Of the twelve Brothers who pronounced the first perpetual vows in 1694 (CL 3, 7), only six (Drolin, Patois, Henri, Compain, Jacquot, and Jacquinet) certainly persevered (Gallego, 537). *Catalogue des Frères des Écoles Chrésiennes* (CL 3) lists the names of entrants to the Institute prior to 15 August 1725. Hermans explains in the introduction that the list is seriously incomplete for the years up to and including 1714 but "almost complete" from January 1715 onward. From this date up to and including 1718 (therefore within the personal experience of the Founder), 102 entrants are named; of these thirty are indicated as having withdrawn (CL 3, 29). Blain readily uses such words as *trahisons* and *desertions* for such withdrawals, but the wonder in human terms, considering the austerity of the Rule, the nature of the work, and the fact that the Institute had no official ecclesiastical or civil status, is that some 70 percent (for 1715–1718) persevered.

84. Apparent allusion to chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews (then attributed to Saint Paul), to which Blain will refer a few paragraphs later.

the most trying circumstances and in situations that seemed critical for his Institute. He remained undaunted and steadfast amid the greatest perils, onslaughts so violent that they often brought to the brink of ruin his good name, himself, and his work. His spirit of faith made it all possible, just as it made him envy people who had the greatest share of crosses and afflictions in this world because to him they seemed most closely to resemble Jesus Christ. When his Brothers received their share of our Lord's opprobrium, his reaction was to congratulate them, saying with Saint Peter, "Happy are you thus to be suffering for the cause of righteousness."<sup>85</sup> "Affronts," he would add, "harm only those who do not suffer them for God. Persecutions become dear to us, precious even, when they are sanctified by patience and accepted with joy and love; then they become the richest jewels in the crown of glory that awaits us. People who mean to humiliate you are only making that crown richer."<sup>86</sup>

The saintly priest explained this sublime doctrine more by example than by word. He used every occasion to show the Brothers his desire to share the contempt and insults they suffered by wearing the same kind of robe as theirs, with their form of rabat, their thick-soled shoes and broad-brimmed hat. He took charge of their classes when they were absent and walked through the streets with them, the butt, as they were, of the hooting citizenry, the scornful worldly wise, the disdainful intelligentsia or else an object of pity and compassion to people who thought it more charitable to assume that his mind was beginning to fail. A latter-day Moses, he opted to suffer with God's people rather than shine in the court of Pharaoh; he preferred the ignominy of Jesus Christ to the treasures of the Egyptians.<sup>87</sup>

His spirit of faith made him take a special delight in Saint Paul's magnificent eulogy in the well-known chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews on the faith of the patriarchs and saints of the Old Testament. When this was read in the refectory, he listened with the closest attention and seemed like a man enraptured. In 1692, again prompted by his spirit of faith, he made a rule of a devout practice he had introduced among the Brothers, following the example of Saint Cecilia<sup>88</sup> and many other saints, a rule now faithfully observed. This is to

85. 1 Pet. 3:14.

86. Hermans comments (CL 10, 196) that the word jewel (*joyau*) occurs nowhere in De La Salle's writings. The Founder refers elsewhere to the Brothers' "crown of glory" but identifies it with the students who persevere in the practice of the faith they learned from their teachers (*Meditations*, 207.3).

87. Heb. 11:25–26.

88. "*Absconditum semper evangelium Christi gerebat in pectore*" (Acta S. Ceciliae, quoted in *Histoire de Sainte Cécile, Vierge Romaine et Martyre*, by Dom P. Guéranger, Paris, 1853, 54).

carry a personal copy of the New Testament at all times as a precious sign of their faith in Jesus Christ, an authentic witness to their love for the holy precepts contained in its pages, and a powerful protection against the spirit of the world and the impulses of fallen nature.<sup>89</sup> The same article requires the novices to learn a page or so by heart every day and all the Brothers to read a passage daily on their knees.<sup>90</sup>

His spirit of faith gave him such an elevated idea of the work accomplished by the Brothers that he took special delight in replacing one or another in class.<sup>91</sup> When this happened, his concentration, quiet enthusiasm, and patient dedication were such that anyone watching could not help feeling not only singular respect for the substitute

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89. The prescription is article 3 of chapter 2 of the Rule, "The Spirit of this Institute," in the 1705 manuscript: "In order to live in this spirit [of faith], the Brothers of this Society will have a most profound respect for Holy Scripture; in proof of this, they will always carry with them the New Testament and pass no day without reading some of it through a sentiment of faith, respect, and veneration for the divine words contained in it." In his final revision (known from the 1718 manuscript), the Founder added to this article the words "looking upon it as their first and principal rule" (CL 25, 18–19). Blain's indication of a date for this specific article of the Rule seems arbitrary but was presumably based on a reminiscence of one of the Brothers present at the retreat of 1692 in the newly established novitiate at Vaugirard.

In an early study of the Rule, *Pour une meilleure lecture de nos Règles Communes* (Paris–Rome, 1954, 16), Hermans writes: "Without forcing the thought of the writer of chapter 2 of our Rule, we can express the essence of it in the form of a double equation: the spirit of faith is to be the fruit of a devotion to Scripture, especially to the New Testament; the New Testament is to be considered the principal rule of the Brother. Expressed in such terms, the key idea of the chapter is closely in line with a most authentic tradition; it can claim a place among the most constant directives of the monastic legislators." Hermans substantiates this claim in twenty pages of documented discussion.

90. If the requirement that the novices learn a page or so by heart every day belonged, as Blain implies, to the same article of the Rule in 1692, by 1705 it had been transferred to the chapter prescribing the daily timetable for the novitiate (CL 25, 148). The detail that the daily reading was to be done kneeling appears in article 29 of the chapter of the 1705 manuscript entitled "Daily Exercises for the School Communities" (CL 25, 101).

91. Blain describes in book 2, chapter 3, the first occasion when this apparently happened, the school concerned being that of Saint Jacques in Reims. The biographer there (and later in the present work, chapter 40, note 8) says that the Founder adopted the dress of the Brothers for this purpose and that he was subjected to mockery and ridicule by the people who saw him in the street. An earlier biographer, Bernard, had already provided more than a page about the episode (*John Baptist de La Salle; Two Early Biographies*, 320), but in contrast with Blain, he describes the reaction of the citizens of Reims as one of edification and admiration.

teacher but also high esteem for an employment poorly regarded by the world. While making his formal visits to the communities, he often spent two or three hours in a classroom, quietly observing the Brother and his pupils and mentally noting how the lesson could be improved. The fetid atmosphere of a room packed with poor, and not very clean, children seemed not to bother him at all.<sup>92</sup>

The work of the catechist and of any teacher in a Christian school is necessary for the church. It is a noble employment in the sight of God, one commended by the councils and by the most celebrated Fathers of the Church, one also that many saints zealously practiced. Because De La Salle was convinced it was an employment that more than any other needed a living faith if it was to be carried out with ardor, cheerful acceptance of its frustrations and fatigues, and resolute determination to keep at it with constantly renewed zeal, he made the spirit of faith the identifying characteristic of his Brothers, destined as they were for this work.

He knew that when a spirit of faith is lacking and only the human aspect is taken into account, the sublime and godly task of education seems just a menial occupation. He was aware that if those engaged in this employment grow weak and tepid in faith, they will see it as the world sees it and lose interest. Those who apply themselves to it as being the spiritual fathers of neglected children and see themselves as coworkers with Jesus Christ and successors to the Apostles and outstanding doctors of the church—who deem it an honor to do this work as their principal task and see their schools as seeding grounds where future servants of church and state begin to grow, young shoots destined to be transplanted to various vocations in life and where there are teachers for whom a school is a place where young Christians are trained in the worship of God and the practices of religion, a place of shelter and safe refuge for innocence away from the world's corrupting influence, a center of holy learning where the science of salvation is studied alongside the practice of Christian virtue—such persons never grow weary of their task but rather find delight in it.<sup>93</sup>

Let us hear De La Salle speak on this spirit of faith that he possessed in such abundance and that he was so concerned to instill in his disciples. He made it the subject of chapter 2 of his Rule:

92. Blain's comment that the children were not very clean has a confirmation as well as a modification in a prescription of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* (207): "The inspector shall take care to assign the places in an orderly and prudent manner. Those whose parents do not take good care of them and who have lice are to be kept apart from those who are clean."

93. In writing this paragraph, Blain seems to have had in mind the seventh of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (*Meditations*, 199.1–3).

The spirit of this Institute is a spirit of faith, which ought to induce those who compose it not to look open anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute everything to God, always entering into these sentiments of Job: “The Lord gave me everything, and the Lord has taken everything away from me; nothing has happened to me except what pleases him.” The Brothers of this Society will animate all their actions with sentiments of faith, and in performing them, they will always have in view the orders and the will of God, which they will adore in all things and by which they will be careful to guide and govern themselves. They will make it their study to exercise continual watchfulness over themselves so as not to perform, if possible, a single action from natural impulse, through custom, or from any human motive, but they will act so as to perform them all by the guidance of God, through the movement of his Spirit, and with the intention of pleasing him. They will pay as much attention as they can to the holy presence of God and take care to renew this from time to time, being well convinced that they ought to think only of him and of what he ordains.<sup>94</sup>

He develops the point with equal emphasis elsewhere:

Always remember these words, “The just live by faith.” Let your first care be to act by the spirit of faith and not by caprice, inclination, or whim. Do not let yourself be governed by human customs or even by mere reason, but solely by faith and the words of Jesus Christ, making these the rule of your conduct. Let your faith be an active faith, enlivened by charity and detaching you from all things, disposing you to lose all rather than God, to abandon all rather than what you know to be his will, to sacrifice all, honor, health, and life itself, for God’s glory and interests, imitating Jesus Christ.<sup>95</sup>

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94. Blain has a marginal reference for this passage (“*Règles Communes*, chap. 2, p. 16”) that shows he is quoting from the first printed edition of the Rule (published in 1726, seven years after De La Salle’s death), not from the manuscript version of 1718, which represents the Founder’s ultimate revision of the text following the 1717 General Chapter. Hermans notes six “not negligible” departures from the text, including the non-indicated omission of two entire sentences and two functional clauses (CL 25, 18–19; CL 10, 93–94).

95. Quoted (indicated in a marginal note) from *Collection*, “The Principal Virtues That the Brothers Should Strive to Practice,” the article on faith (CL 15, 80–81; *Collection*, 66–67). There are six variants, none of which affects the meaning (CL 10, 85). Blain omits one passage that he uses a few pages earlier



Such was the spirit that this man, so full of faith, inculcated in his spiritual children. He gave the spirit that animated his own conduct to them as the rule of theirs. He founded his Institute on the spirit of faith, assured as he was that it would thereby thrive and give hope of success. Faith was the wellspring of the sublime exhortations to perfection that he addressed to his disciples, exhortations quite different from what the world and the flesh would look for. It was the voice of faith his sons heard when he beckoned them to walk the narrow path traced out for them in the Gospels.

Nor was he satisfied to exhort the Brothers as a group to live by faith; he urged them to it individually and in his conversations with them. He made it his business to keep track with them of their progress in this sure but abstract and intangible way of faith, giving them rules by which they could check whether they were moving forward or slipping back. His sole object was to encourage them to press on, regardless of the protests of their own natural inclinations and those of a scornful world:

The first effect of faith is to lead us efficaciously to the knowledge, love, and imitation of Christ and to union with him. Faith leads to the knowledge of Christ, since eternal life is knowing him. Faith leads to love of Christ, since anyone who does not love him is a reprobate. Faith leads to the imitation of Christ, since the predestined ought to conform to him, and to union with him, since we are to Jesus Christ like branches to a vine, dead when separated from him.<sup>96</sup>

To one of the Brothers he wrote:

The spirit of faith is a sharing in the Spirit of God who dwells in us, which leads us to regulate our conduct in all things by the sentiments and truths that faith teaches us. You should, therefore, be wholly occupied in acquiring it, so that it may be for you a shield against the fiery darts of the devil.<sup>97</sup>

He wrote to another person:

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(above, page 69, “Hold fast in all things to what is of faith”), which in *Collection* comes between the two paragraphs quoted here.

96. The context seems to suggest that this quotation is from a personal communication to an individual Brother, but it is the remaining paragraph of the article on faith already quoted from *Collection*. The transcription is exact except for one insignificant variant (CL 10, 86; *Collection*, 67).

97. The letter, known only from Blain’s citation, is number 100 in *Letters*.

Faith is the way by which God wishes to lead you to himself, and by following this way, you will please him most. Perhaps human nature will feel repugnance, but what does that matter? Is it not enough for you to know God alone? Surely this is of more value than all the other knowledge of the most learned men. Not only is the way of faith which God wants you to follow most advantageous for you; it is also very necessary, for you are well aware that other ways almost led you astray and caused you to lose God, once you abandoned the way of faith.<sup>98</sup>

He wrote to the same person on another occasion:

The Most Blessed Virgin lived her whole life by the spirit of faith, and it is this spirit that God wants you to have. That is why you would derive much benefit from asking her in prayer to lead you to our Lord along this way which is the one most pleasing to him.

The holy priest had been directing the person concerned for a long time, and he was aware of her excellent disposition for a virtuous life. At the same time, he knew that she found it difficult to walk blindly in the way of faith, especially at the level of perfection he expected of her. He kept on encouraging her in his letters but made no concessions about following a different way. On one occasion he concluded the recipe for holiness he had given her with these words:

Look on everything with the eyes of faith. You must never fail to do this, no matter what the reason. Viewing things with the eyes of faith will earn for you in one day more good, more interior application, closer union with God, and greater vigilance over yourself than a month of those penances and austerities to which you are attracted. Believe me, you will see its effect, though perhaps for the present you will not understand it. Let me repeat; the more uncomplicated your view of faith, the more surely you will be disposed to simplicity of action and conduct, which is the disposition God wants of you.

These few words had the effect he intended, and he expressed his joy to the person concerned in a letter that begins:

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98. For this and the following three extracts from letters known only from Blain's quotations, see *Letters* (234–35), where the editor remarks that it is of interest to compare De La Salle's remarks to this laywoman about the spirit of faith with his instructions to the Brothers on the same topic.

I am very pleased to know, Madame, that your life is more peaceful now and more in keeping with the spirit of faith. You are right in saying that in the light of faith, you see things quite differently from when they are looked at in themselves without going beyond the natural view.

I would never finish if I wanted to refer to everything the zealous servant of God said or wrote on this all-important subject. The selection offered sufficiently entitles us to conclude that the authentic disciples of John Baptist de La Salle, according to him, are those who live by faith, who are guided in all they do by a spirit of faith. If they live by this spirit, they are living according to that of their spiritual father and are growing all the time in the spirit of Jesus Christ. But they lack the spirit of both if their faith is not manifest in their active charity and in their eagerness to make progress in holiness.

[CHAPTER 8]

*His deeply religious spirit, evident, for example, from his demeanor in church; his always reverent awareness of God's presence; his recollection when at prayer; his respect for all objects related to religion*

A religious spirit is inseparable from a spirit of faith; in fact, it is a sign and an effect of it. Both were evident in De La Salle's respect for the places consecrated to the worship of God and for everything enacted in them. No one in his lifetime surpassed him in his concern that the sovereignty of God and all matters pertaining to it be worshiped and venerated with sincere devotion shown outwardly. When he was at prayer, whether vocal or interior, his recollected and unself-conscious bearing not only prompted in others a sense of respect for him but also inspired them to share his overflowing religious spirit before the grandeur of God.

When he entered a church, the modest, reverent, in some sense awed, demeanor he showed caught the attention of whoever saw him. It reminded them of the respect due to the holy place and seemed to reproach their own lack of faith and spirit of religion in the presence of God, whom they were there to worship. The saintly man could not help becoming noticed; without his wishing it, people felt they would like to know him personally. In the distant region of France where he went to hide himself way and be unknown,<sup>99</sup> his religious spirit and piety in church gave him away because he did not

think it right to act differently. People could not stop looking at this unknown priest who had the devotion of a saint and the recollection of an angel in their church, and they inquired about him until they learned that he was the Founder of the Brothers and one of the greatest men of the century.

What then are we to say of the edification he gave when he knelt at the altar or approached the sanctuary to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the Mass? Let me venture an opinion. If Calvin, Beza, and the other heretics had seen him celebrating and if he were the only priest they had ever seen, they would have burned all they had written against the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and admitted to being heretics.<sup>100</sup> At least they never would have succeeded in making other people believe their errors if they had always witnessed Mass being offered as De La Salle offered it.

No priest was ever more imbued with a sense of awe at the grandeur of the sacrifice he was celebrating. He made himself one with the Victim of the offering and was conscious of his own nothingness in the presence of the Supreme Being to whom the sacrifice was offered. His rapt awareness of the mysteries being wrought in the Mass, his recollection and his concentration on God's presence, and his sustained devotion throughout the sacred liturgy—all were incomparable. We cannot say it too often: he seemed more like a seraph than a man. It was as if the eternal aura of the blessed in heaven was his already, as if he already shared the glorious attributes of the risen body. It was quite usual for his face to take on a luminous glow so that even the coldest hearts felt something of the devotion he radiated.

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99. An allusion to what Blain calls the "flight" of the Founder to the south of France (see book 3, chapter 9). A principal witness at the Paris diocesan tribunal for the Cause for the beatification of De La Salle was Brother Patrice, Antoine Radier. He testified that he had been appointed to the Grenoble community in 1780 and had been able to speak to some aged men who had been pupils at the school when the Founder was there. They told Patrice that people used to follow De La Salle through the street saying, "Come to Mass; that's the saintly priest who is going to say it!" (*Bulletin*, 1965, 150).

100. "On the question of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper, Calvin attempted a compromise between Luther's belief in the Real Presence, expressed in the doctrine of consubstantiation, and Zwingli's view of a mere symbolism. His language is at times ambiguous, but his thought seems to tend more in the direction of Zwingli" (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1966, 221). Theodore Beza, friend and biographer of Calvin, published in 1560 *Confession de la foi chrétienne*, a popular exposition of Calvinist beliefs. His own theological opinions, contained especially in *Tractationes Theologicae*, published successively from 1570 to 1582, "are permeated with the Calvinist spirit" (*ibid.*, 165).

Sometimes he noticed people failing in respect for the divine majesty that so filled him with awe. If their behavior seemed deliberately distracted and heedless, he appeared to forget his customary mildness and would rebuke them sharply without regard to what anyone might think of him. When he saw people breaking silence or otherwise lacking the modest recollection befitting the presence of God's Son on the altar, he was filled with a holy indignation and showed his distress and pain at seeing creatures failing in due reverence there in the very presence of their Creator. "Do you not know that you are in God's house?" he would say to them, and there was a certain severity, as well as charity and humility, in the way he said it. It was the same with the Brothers if they were out of order in this matter; he would rebuke them in front of others if need be. In the slightest case of forgetfulness on their part, he would recall their obligation to be reverent in their demeanor, an obligation of which they were well aware both from his teachings and from his personal example.

On one occasion, a Brother who was accompanying the Founder on one of his journeys allowed himself to snatch a brief rest in a church. The way he did this was not allowed to pass without a reprimand. John Baptist had stopped at the church to say Mass; while he was getting ready and vesting in the sacristy, the weary Brother leaned against the altar rail for support. When De La Salle emerged to approach the altar, he was quite shocked and said in a tone loud enough to be heard, "Brother, is this the way to behave in this holy place?" The people present were impressed to hear this public rebuke, which as it happened they deserved more than the Brother did. Perhaps John Baptist intended it for them in the person of his disciple, and they certainly took the point and adopted an unusually correct attitude throughout the Mass. Maybe what had happened had really inspired them to greater devotion, or else they were afraid they might get a similar rebuke themselves!

He had succeeded so well in instilling in his disciples the sense of reverence and religious awareness that he felt for the Lord's temples that they, in turn, conveyed it to their pupils and indirectly to anyone who saw them and their boys in the holy place. Their demeanor in church impressed a nephew of the parish priest of Calais and led to the foundation of a school in that town.<sup>101</sup> People often

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101. Blain relates in book 2, chapter 16, the story of the Calais foundation in 1700. The Dean of Calais at the time, André Ponthon, took measures to have a community of Brothers as a result of an enthusiastic message he had received from his nephew, studying in Paris, who had been deeply impressed, says Blain, by the modesty and reserve of the pupils in church and by the devout air of the Brother accompanying them.

stopped, whether in Paris or elsewhere, to admire hundreds of youngsters—by nature restless, hard to control, light-headed, and giddy—walking two by two in good order to assist at Mass and entering the house of God in silence. Those who observed them were amazed at the quiet modesty and piety with which the boys conducted themselves; they could only stop gazing at them to turn their admiring attention to the men in charge of them. Times without number, these simple Brothers have preached a sermon without saying a word. Like their Founder or like Saint Francis,<sup>102</sup> they taught a lesson by their exterior bearing, recollection, reverence, and devout manner. This wordless preaching, so to call it, produced such an effect in one of the parishes at Chartres, when the Brothers were assisting at Mass with their pupils, that the late Mgr. Godet Desmarets<sup>103</sup> did his best to have De La Salle place some of the Brothers in other parishes of the city. He wanted such reserved behavior in church to put a stop to the talking and other unedifying conduct that went on there.<sup>104</sup>

However, it was not only in the places where Jesus resides in the Blessed Sacrament that John Baptist maintained a recollected and respectful attitude. It was everywhere, because he knew that God is present everywhere. In whatever place he was, his devout exterior recalled the presence within him of the Holy Spirit; it showed that he was wholly taken up with adoration and love, an awareness of his

102. An allusion to the story related in chap. 157 of the second biography of Francis, written by his disciple Thomas of Celano, entitled “How he preached to some poor Sisters more by his example than by his words.”

103. This is the first mention in the fourth part of Blain’s work of Paul Godet Desmarets (Des Marais seems to have been the more correct form of his name, though Rigault follows Blain for a reason he gives on page 201 of vol. 1 of *Histoire Générale*), but this important person has made a number of appearances in the biography proper. Though four years older than De La Salle, he was still a student at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice when John Baptist went there in 1670, and a life-long friendship was formed. Desmarets was made bishop of Chartres in 1690, and his beneficence towards De La Salle and his disciples was such that Blain could write that his death in 1709, at the age of 62, “robbed the Brothers of a true father and a powerful defender of their Institute and deprived De La Salle of a faithful friend” (book 2, chap. 15). He was also the first bishop ever to request the services of the Brothers for his diocese—the first of countless prelates who have done so in the three centuries of the Institute’s existence. Blain’s account of the Chartres foundation is given in book 2, chap. 15; Poutet supplements the information in vol. 2, 153–62.

104. In mentioning this earlier (book 2, chap. 15), Blain says that the bishop’s idea was not acceptable to the Founder; it “did not correspond with the end of the Institute, nor did it sufficiently safeguard the Brothers’ own spiritual good.”

own nothingness, and all the religious sentiments prompted by his consciousness of the divine presence. We could say that he regarded the whole world as an august and immeasurably vast temple built by the Creator for his own glory so that he might be worshiped there in spirit and in truth by his creatures at all times and places.<sup>105</sup> Hence, our servant of God was imbued with the same religious spirit wherever he went, prompting him in every place to pay homage to the divine majesty. When he was in a community house, it did not suffice for him to render this tribute only by an interior respect. Because he wanted to show it also by an exterior gesture, whenever he entered a room, he would kneel for the space of an *Ave Maria*,<sup>106</sup> adoring in spirit and in truth the heavenly Father, who seeks such adorers.<sup>107</sup>

He recited his breviary kneeling or, on rare occasions, standing or walking, always bareheaded however cold and inclement the weather. He seemed wholly absorbed in the beauty of the Divine Office and happy to be thus cooperating with Jesus Christ and the church in offering on behalf of all peoples the prayers and praises due to the majesty of God, happy also to be favored with those devout impulses and feelings of joy that the Holy Spirit produces in pure souls. He used to recite the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin with the novices, always like them with head uncovered and standing without any form of support, in fact, *digne, attente ac devote*, as the church wishes it to be recited.<sup>108</sup>

There was dignity in the way his exterior comportment showed that he knew whom he was addressing; he never forgot the reverence due to God's majesty. He showed his attentiveness by the way he seemed to savor the language of the Psalms and to identify with the various sentiments they suggest to the soul and with the inspirations the Holy Spirit offers to those who see themselves as his instruments

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105. John 4:23.

106. His custom became a rule for his disciples, worded thus in the 1705 manuscript Rule: "All will kneel to adore God in all rooms of the house on entering and leaving, except in the yard, the garden, and the parlor, where they will only raise the calotte and bow to the crucifix" (CL 25, 25; Rule of 1705, chap. 4, article 13).

107. John 4:23.

108. An allusion to the prayer, *Aperi, Domine, os meum*, formerly recommended (but not prescribed) as a preamble to the recitation of the Divine Office and included in editions of the Roman Breviary prior to the reform decreed by the Second Vatican Council. The prayer included the petition "*ut digne, attente ac devote hoc officium recitare valeam et exaudiri merear ante conspectum divinae majestatis tuae*—that I may worthily, attentively, and devoutly recite this Office and so deserve to be heard in the presence of your divine majesty."

and willingly accept to be such. That his recitation was devout was evident from the delight he clearly took in it, for his joy was never greater than when he was speaking to God or about God. I can add that he also recited slowly, and it is thanks to the standard he set from the beginning that the novices still recite the Little Office so distinctly, with such carefully timed pauses, and with such religious feeling that it takes the same length of time as the normal breviary Office.<sup>109</sup> Whenever he believed he had made a mistake in the recitation, he went and knelt in the middle of the oratory, just like the least of the novices; he had introduced this sanction to help the novices recite the Office faultlessly, and he wanted to show fidelity to the practice.<sup>110</sup>

Even at his busiest times, he used to spend with the novices the major church feasts as well as all those of the Most Blessed Virgin and of certain saints for whom he had a special devotion. He was with them for their spiritual exercises from the first thing in the morning (the day began at 4:30) until the evening, and throughout he never relaxed his attitude of deep respect for the sovereign presence of God. In the successive exercises of piety, his comportment provided a sustained example for the novices of certain customs he had introduced, such as always standing or kneeling for the prayers, never sitting or leaning against the bench.

He clearly shared the concern our Lord once manifested so dramatically for the respect due to his Father's house.<sup>111</sup> The Brothers' oratories had to be spotless and always entered with reverence. He liked churches to be well decorated, the altars to be tastefully prepared, and the general appearance of the sanctuary to reflect the greatness of God adored there and the grandeur of the mysteries enacted there. It pained him to know that some private residences were more magnificent in their appearance than our churches, and when he saw people showing off their fine clothes before the altar of God, it seemed to him as if mere creatures were insulting with their eye-catching luxury the poverty of him who reigns in heaven. He had

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109. The *Officium Parvum Beatae Mariae Virginis*, with a history going back to the tenth century, was so-called because, although modeled on the Divine Office, it had fewer Psalms and readings. Its daily recitation in full by Lasallian novices (a custom once common to most religious congregations) is attested by the 1705 manuscript of the Rule (CL 25, 147–49). The tradition was maintained up to the 1966–67 General Chapter of the Institute.

110. The sanction was prescribed for the first time in the 1718 manuscript of the Rule (CL 25, 25), but no doubt Blain is correct in implying that the practice was already well established by then. Hermans sees in it an example of the influence of Saint Benedict's Rule (chap. 45) on the Institute's legislation (*Pour une meilleure lecture*, 9).

111. Mark 11:15–17 and parallel texts.



personally chosen to be poor and was a lover of poverty, but he had retained the oratory furnishings that belonged to him, which were rich and very beautiful.<sup>112</sup>

The same religious spirit inspired him with great veneration for other holy things like relics, the sacred vessels, pictures and statues and anything which had been set apart from profane use by a special blessing, such as holy water. He used holy water continually, and the Brothers have followed him in this pious practice; no room or frequented area of their houses is without its holy water font and no Brother would omit to use it when entering or leaving without feeling guilty of disrespect. It was a habit they learned from De La Salle, who believed in the power of holy water to keep the tempter at bay and to protect the Brothers from his wiles. He sometimes even sprinkled it over any of them who seemed to be particularly troubled by the common enemy, and this always succeeded in restoring calm to the sufferers.

[CHAPTER 9]

*De La Salle's sense of his priestly vocation, attraction  
for this calling from his childhood, contentment with seminary  
life, preparation for ordination with great care  
and awareness of the importance of the step, dedication  
as a priest marked by a generous spirit of sacrifice*

A religious spirit has its source in lively faith and develops strength in proportion to it, but both the one and the other combine to form the spirit proper to those called to the clerical state. What are the unmistakable signs that a person possesses this spirit and has been called to share the vocation of the high priest Aaron?<sup>113</sup> They are a sense of holy awe, an elevated idea of the majesty and sanctity of God, a sustained reverence for the sacred mysteries, a sovereign esteem for the

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112. A document in the Founder's handwriting, bequeathing to his successor, Br. Barthélemy Truffet, "all the furnishings of the house of Saint Yon," is preserved in the Institute's Rome archives. The text is reproduced in CL 26, 307–8. Unfortunately, as Aroz notes (*ibid.*; 292), no inventory is known of what the said "furnishings" comprised. Concerning the sacred vessels belonging to the sacristy at Saint Yon, surely included in the present reference by Blain, they were inventoried by the revolutionary commissioners on 12 December 1792 and then confiscated and dispatched to the Paris mint for melting down (Farcy, *Le Manoir de Saint-Yon au Faubourg Saint-Sever de Rouen*, Rouen, 1935, 112–14).

113. Exod. 28:1.

clerical state, a special leaning toward the practice of the virtues proper to that state, and a genuine love for carrying out the priestly tasks. These signs will demonstrate how abundant was the spirit of a sacerdotal vocation in the servant of God who is the subject of our account.

Such a spirit implies a generous sharing in the sovereign priesthood of our Lord, and it derives from a lively faith, a profoundly religious temperament, and a genuine vocation. It is a spirit that was strikingly manifested by John Baptist de La Salle in a number of ways: by the high esteem he always showed for the clerical state, the way he prepared himself to enter it, the dispositions with which he received Holy Orders, the spirit of self-sacrifice that informed all he did, the special attraction he had for the virtues befitting the priestly state, the love he brought to his sacerdotal duties, and the invariable reverence he showed for the eucharistic liturgy.

There is no doubt that a true calling to the clerical state inspires and confers the spirit of that state. It would be an insult to the wisdom, goodness, and providence of God to believe that he would ever call a person to a particular state and not grant that person the spirit and grace proper to it. When he looked to Bezalel for the construction of the Tabernacle, did he not confer the temperament and skill needed for the task?<sup>114</sup> When he called successive leaders to replace Moses at the head of the Jewish people, did he not also bestow on them Moses' gifts of wisdom and enlightenment?<sup>115</sup> When summoning the incarnate Lord to redeem the human race, did he not give him the fullness of his Spirit?<sup>116</sup> Did not Jesus Christ, when choosing the Apostles to be his coworkers in the salvation of the world, fill them with his own Spirit before sending them out among the nations to labor for the conversion of souls?<sup>117</sup> It is right to conclude, then, that a priestly charism is both an effect and a sign of a true vocation to the clerical state.

We have already seen how the signs of a disposition and calling for the priesthood showed themselves in the young John Baptist de La Salle almost from infancy.<sup>118</sup> His interests as a child were precociously sacerdotal, if I may put it that way. He liked nothing more than to

114. Exod. 35:30–33.

115. Alluding to the Book of Joshua and the Book of Judges.

116. Luke 4:1.

117. John 20:22.

118. Blain develops this theme at length in book 1, chapter 1, setting the tone with the words, "From the cradle, he seemed to have been singled out by grace, which appeared determined to make of him one of its masterpieces. In him nothing childish could be observed." Later commentators, such as Battersby, Aroz, and Gallego, suggest that this hagiographical approach exaggerates reality: "A child is a child, even if destined to be a saint" (Aroz, CL 41, vol. 1, 7).

arrange a room as an oratory, set up a table to serve as an altar, and then go through the motions of celebrating Mass. He learned to serve Mass almost as soon as he could speak, and then the one favor he sought was to be taken to church to practice what he had learned, to serve his apprenticeship, as it were, for the priesthood. He was early indifferent to worldly pleasures and the usual pastimes of the young. Listening to people sitting around and talking bored him, as did festive parties, and to escape his boredom, he would ask someone to take him to a quiet spot and read a life of a saint to him.<sup>119</sup> Already his great delight was to go to church for divine service. His father used to take him as a treat, the one thing he liked above all others. As he grew older, he needed no prompting to think about the priesthood. He expressed a wish for it, and at the age of fourteen, he seemed to feel ashamed not to have taken any step yet toward becoming a minister of the church.<sup>120</sup> Because he was the eldest child and greatly loved by his parents, naturally they did not find it easy to give their consent. But they would have felt they were resisting God's Holy Spirit if they had opposed the desire of their child, who was so obviously born for the service of the church and so graced with the right disposition for it.

This became even more evident when he had received the tonsure,<sup>121</sup> Devout, sensible, and steady though he had always been, he seemed transformed once he had donned the surplice: the clerical costume seemed to make a new person of him. The distinction of the canonry did not go to his head.<sup>122</sup> His devout disposition remained

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119. According to the first biographer, Brother Bernard (CL 4, 11), the chosen reader was his grandmother (Perrette Lespagnol; his paternal grandmother, Barbe Cocquebert, had died when he was only two). Poutet comments about this incident that there was nothing particularly virtuous about a child's wanting to escape the boredom of grown-up company; it is the grandmother's virtue that the story manifests, as well as her tender love for her grandson (vol. 1, 58).

120. He had, in fact, taken such a step (the reception of the tonsure) three years before, at the age of not quite eleven; see the following note.

121. He received the tonsure from Bishop Jean de Malevaud on 11 March 1662. The ceremony, which included cutting a portion of the hair and vesting him with the surplice, symbolized entry into the clerical state. It was not unprecedented for a boy of John Baptist's age to take this first symbolic step toward the priesthood: the only condition required of the candidate was to have been confirmed and to have been instructed in the first principles of the faith. The document recording John Baptist's tonsuring has been published, with a commentary, by Aroz in CL 41, vol 2, 141–43.

122. Canon Pierre Dozet, Chancellor of the University of Reims and one-time vicar-general of the diocese, named his young cousin, John Baptist, to succeed him in the canonry; the boy took formal possession on 7 January

the same: he did not consider himself in any way superior to his young fellow clerics, although he did stand out from them by his piety. His application to study and his prayerfulness made him a model for the other students at college,<sup>123</sup> and his decorum in the cathedral choir was a source of edification to the other canons. He was noted both for his piety at the Divine Office and also for his attentiveness during lectures. He delighted his teachers by the way he worked at his studies and by the progress he made in them, as well as by his willing responsiveness to their guidance. As for his companions, he was accepted by them as a model because of his steady good sense and winning disposition. At home he was a comfort for his parents because of his happy and even-tempered nature and his predisposition to virtue. He added distinction to the illustrious chapter of Reims by his attraction for public prayer, his assiduous presence at the canonical offices, as far as his studies permitted, and his modest and reverent demeanor.

This religious disposition enabled him to be affable without being overly familiar, courteous and refined without being worldly. It gave him a liking for a quiet and secluded way of life without making him unsociable. He worked hard at his studies but always with due measure, as common sense dictated. He was staid and serious, but others never found him look gloomy. He liked to be at his books but without overdoing it. He had a way of dividing out his time, so much for study, so much for prayer, and so much for attendance in choir. It was not easy, indeed, to decide whether he was a better canon than a student, more exemplary in class than in his choir stall.

He was well disposed, then, to absorb the fullness of the sacerdotal spirit when with joyful eagerness he chose to proceed to a rich

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1667 at the age of fifteen years and eight months. Aroz (CL 41, vol. 2, 168–94) presents a 1773 manuscript relevant to this moment in De La Salle's life, together with a commentary that includes details of the duties imposed by the canonry, a chronology of notable events in which the young canon may have taken part in that capacity, and an itemization of the income derived from the canonry. Blain's account of the event is in book 1, chapter 2, where, however, he mistakenly gives 17 January as the date and estimates John Baptist's age as "around seventeen." His remark here that the distinction conferred on the teenager did not go to his head has added force if John Baptist was aware that his predecessors in the Reims chapter included four popes, twenty-three cardinals, twenty-one archbishops, eight bishops, and a canonized saint: Bruno, the founder of the Carthusians (Aroz, *ibid.*).

123. His application to study at the *Collegium Bonorum Puerorum* is attested by the *summa cum laude* diploma of his pre-university examination, conferring the title Maître-ès-Arts. The parchment is preserved in the Institute's Rome archives (see chapter 1, note 2).

source of it, the celebrated Seminary of Saint Sulpice.<sup>124</sup> The fact that he was not able to spend the ten or twelve years there that many others have done was a matter of much regret to him, but Providence did not allow this.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, his subsequent life made it quite clear that in the space of the one and a half years that he was at Saint Sulpice, he had made such progress in the virtues of his calling that he amazed those who had been his tutors there. They were masters of the spiritual life and were so used to witnessing virtuous behavior that only heroic signs of it caught their attention. But when De La Salle later returned to Paris,<sup>126</sup> they were astonished to see what progress he had made in the science of the saints. He had become firmly established in the spirit of his vocation by the time he had to leave the seminary where the lessons he had learned and the good example he had seen all served to this end. So it remained undiminished even when he had to assume the busy guardianship<sup>127</sup> of the family that had been entrusted to him. The Holy Spirit seemed to lead him by the hand and to teach him the secret of caring for others without fussing, watching over them without getting worried, and doing what had to be done for them without rushing around. He seemed able to attend to these domestic duties in every detail without cutting down on his studies, his prayers, or his attendance at the Divine Office.

Our young cleric's vocation was clear for all to see. He had entered on this career with the holiest intentions, and his life so far had

124. Battersby (16) and Poutet (vol. 1, 228–29) have suggested differing reasons for the switch to the Paris seminary after a year in the theology department at Reims (a year not mentioned by the source biographers); see above, chap. 1, note 1.

125. An allusion to the premature decease, first, of his mother on 19 July 1671, at the age of thirty-eight, and then of his father, on 9 April 1672, at the age of forty-seven. The latter in his will named John Baptist guardian of the six other surviving children of the family. The original document, bearing Louis de La Salle's signature, is in the Archives de La Marne, and was first published, with photographic reproduction of the four pages of the text and a commentary, by Aroz in CL 26, 195–204.

126. Poutet (see above, chap. 1, note 1) provides biographical information about all the tutors who, at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice or at the Sorbonne, would have influenced John Baptist's formation. Blain's remark here seems to relate specifically to a testimonial written after De La Salle's death by François Leschassier, the original of which is in the Saint Sulpice Archives. (Poutet, *Lasallian Digest*, Fall 1965, 32–35; Aroz, CL 41, vol. 2, 266–73; Blain uses the document in book 1, chap. 2.)

127. “. . . une tutelle embarrassée d'affaires.” Thanks to brilliant research by Aroz, incorporated in *Compte de Tutelle*, CL 28 through 31, 1967, we are able to appreciate the aptness of the biographer's phrase; for his earlier reflections on the theme, see book 1, chap. 3.

been one of constant fidelity. He had shown also a rare gift for combining his love of prayer with his zest for study. He already exemplified to perfection the spirit of the sacred ministry. What, then, would he be when in a spirit of obedience, he accepted the laying on of hands and thereby attained the most eminent of the orders he aspired to? “*Quis putas puer iste erit?*—What sort of boy will this one be?”<sup>128</sup> What was his way of reaching the goal? By careful stages, guided by obedience, thinking much about each step, testing himself over a long period, growing strong in the practice of virtue—in a word, making all the attentive preparation that an affair of the highest importance demands. He advanced by degrees, not by sudden impulsive spurts, to the altar. He was punctilious in observing the intervals that the church has chosen to require between one stage and the next.<sup>129</sup> He took the prescribed time to exercise the functions of each order as he received it, practicing as he did so the virtues appropriate to it. All this was his way of making a lengthy novitiate in preparation for the priesthood, for he was convinced of the truth of Saint Gregory the Great’s saying that those who seek ordination in too great haste will fall away in time.<sup>130</sup> He was mindful also of the advice of Saint Paul, “Receive not the grace of God in vain.”<sup>131</sup> Hence, he made sure he was properly disposed to receive the priesthood when the time came

128. Luke 1:66 (Vulgate).

129. The Council of Trent prescribed intervals (or, to use the technical term employed in the decree and that Blain uses here, *interstices*) from one minor order to the next without specifying their duration. It stipulated a minimum of a year between the reception of the last minor order and the sub-diaconate, and the same length of time to the diaconate and then to the priesthood. The decree, however, left discretion to the bishop on this matter “according to the needs and benefit of the church” and did not expressly forbid the existing custom of conferring all four minor orders together. (*Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique*, edited by De Maillane, Lyon, 1776, vol. 3, 380–81). De La Salle received all the minor orders on 17 March 1668, the sub-diaconate on 11 June 1672, the diaconate on 21 March 1676, and the priesthood on 9 April 1678. Aroz presents and comments on relevant documents in CL 41, vol. 2, 195–203, 302–06, 383–406, and 419–27. Blain’s statement that John Baptist “was punctilious in observing the intervals” is well attested, but it is characteristic of the biographer’s insouciance about details (to say nothing of his facility for self-contradiction) that in book 1, chap. 3, he misinforms his readers that his hero received the minor orders and the sub-diaconate on the same day.

130. Without reference, but it is an evident simplification of a passage in Gregory’s Letter 49, *Ad Adeodatum episcopum*: “*Et ad sacros ordines aspirare, nisi protectiones aetate, et mundos opere, nullatenus admittatis, ne forte semper esse desinant quod immature esse festinant*” (PL, vol. 27, col. 644).

131. 2 Cor. 6:1.

and to derive from it all the benefit it brings. This is why he carried out as often as possible the functions prescribed for each of the preceding orders. He had loved to serve Mass as a child, but when the minor orders made him a cleric, the service of the altar became a sacred duty for him, indeed a veritable passion. He loved to be the crossbearer or to carry the candle, the thurible, or the holy water container during liturgical ceremonies. It was a joy to him to keep the vestments in good order, to see that the altar and the sacred vessels were kept clean, and to look after the decorating of the church. His piety and reverence matched the pleasure he found in all this.

Before entering the major orders and thereby binding himself irrevocably, he thought long and sensibly about the implications. Not that he had ever felt any inclination for a secular career or ever had any other wish than to serve the church, it was simply that he wanted to be quite sure he was in the right vocation. Circumstances combined to enable this period of self-examination to achieve its purpose. When he was at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, his spiritual director was the celebrated Father Tronson, one of the most enlightened and saintly priests of his time, who was also Superior of the seminary.<sup>132</sup> The rather sudden decease of each of John Baptist's parents had left the young cleric wondering about his initial intention. His position as the eldest son and the responsibility for bringing up his brothers and sisters—all the heavy business, in fact, of the guardianship that would fall on his shoulders—put the thought into his mind that he should leave his present state and return to secular life. He was still quite free to consider what was best for him and to think about adopting an honorable career in the world.

It was a matter of common sense to ponder carefully whether the attraction for the altar and the sacred ministry that he had felt from the beginning and that had continued to grow on him was only a natural impulse rather than a prompting of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps his parents had some hidden human motive for favoring his wish for an ecclesiastical career? Perhaps the prospect of a canon's prebend had

132. Louis Tronson's first appearance in the biography is in book 1, chap. 2. Extensive information about him and about his influence on De La Salle is supplied by Poutet in vol. 1, 322–38, and by Aroz in CL 41, vol. 2, 82–94. Blain's reference here to Tronson as "Superior" is correct only in that this title was applied in a general way to the spiritual directors of the seminary, of whom Tronson was the senior. The Superior General of the Society of Saint Sulpice (and therefore superior of the seminary) when John Baptist began his studies there in 1670 was Alexandre Le Ragois de Bretonvilliers (1621–1676), who had succeeded the Founder of the Society, Jean-Jacques Olier, on the latter's death at the age of forty-nine in 1657. Tronson became Superior General in 1676 (Aroz, CL 41, vol. 2, 85).

influenced his choice of vocation and made him cling to it? If he had determined to enter into the ministry of the church, was it really to become a servant of the faithful, a victim of charity, a zealous worker for the glory of the Most High? A self-scrutiny of this kind, carried out under the eyes of Father Tronson—the eyes of a seer, to use the term in the Scriptures for a man of great enlightenment<sup>133</sup>—served, however, only to confirm our young Samuel's aspiration for the service of the altar.<sup>134</sup> It gave him the merit of renewing a choice he had already made and established him in his priestly vocation with more goodwill, generosity, and spirit of sacrifice than ever.<sup>135</sup>

It was obvious that this was his vocation, and yet he did not feel entitled to hasten the moment when he would officiate in the sanctuary. He did not think he should hurry things along or take the initiative. He was wise enough to consider that the same spirit in which he had tested his initial entry to the clerical state now obliged him to make a long preparation for the moment of receiving the imposition of hands. He had a twofold duty to purify still more his intentions and to be as well disposed as possible when the moment for ordination came. He acted accordingly. He left it to his spiritual director<sup>136</sup> to decide when he should present himself for the final step; meanwhile, he went on preparing himself well for it. His great certainty that God had called him to the priesthood no less than he had called Aaron<sup>137</sup> did not make him feel any less daunted as the moment approached.

He quaked at the thought of the holiness it called for, and consciousness of his sins made him want to avoid adding to them by entering the service of the sanctuary without the sense of awe that God requires in the words "*Pavete ad sanctuarium meum: ego Dominus*—Reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord."<sup>138</sup> His own inclination was to hold back rather than go forward, and he would never have reached ordination had not obedience put a stop to his hesitations and imposed the command "*Go higher—Amice, ascende superius.*"<sup>139</sup>

133. 1 Sam. 9:9.

134. 1 Sam., chaps. 1–3.

135. Gallego (84) contrasts the quieter, more analytical tone of this paragraph with Blain's dramatized treatment in the biography (book 1, chap. 3) of the same juncture in the Founder's life. For a brief but valuable analysis of John Baptist's state of mind in the presence of this dilemma, see Campos, CL 45, 99–101.

136. Nicolas Roland, whose crucial role in the story of De La Salle's life Blain outlines in book 1, chaps. 3–4. Aroz devotes a richly documented volume of *Cahiers Lasalliens* (no. 38) to the subject; Poutet includes in his vol. 1 an extensive section (535–622), "*Sous la conduite de Nicolas Roland.*"

137. Heb. 5:4.

138. Lev. 26:2 (Vulgate).



In John Baptist's case, the ease with which people in our day are admitted to the service of the sanctuary did not embolden him to approach it thoughtlessly and without due preparation. Therefore the habit of carrying out the duties of the priesthood afterward never diminished their majesty and dignity in his eyes. His faith always dominated his senses and kept before him the holiness of the sacred mysteries. He achieved the principal role within the sanctuary only by careful stages. It was not eager ambition that brought him to this honor; like the young Samuel, he listened for the voice of the Lord;<sup>140</sup> like Aaron, he awaited the call.<sup>141</sup>

It is an immense honor to be ordained to the priesthood and given the care of souls, and John Baptist did not push himself forward to achieve it. He was diffident, rather, in aspiring to it and was guided by obedience throughout so that no merely human consideration might tarnish the grace of his ordination. He took no step merely by his own decision; each was the result of careful thought and prolonged prayer for the guidance of God. He did nothing without the advice of wise counselors and the consent of his superiors. Recollection and the practice of virtue were his means of preparing for the first step. In a word, he showed all the signs that according to the saints distinguish a true vocation to the priesthood.

The dispositions they say should mark the preparation for ordination were visible in him, especially his great innocence of life. For the edifying childhood and adolescent years of John Baptist de La Salle give reason to suppose that his baptismal innocence was still with him when he entered Saint Sulpice and remained with him afterward if we may judge by the great virtue of his life between when he left that holy place and when he became a priest and devoted himself to the task of establishing his Institute. The perfection of his entire subsequent life entitles us to suppose that he preserved his innocence to the end of his days. Certainly, if he did have the misfortune to lose it, he made ample reparation with prolonged and austere penance.

It need hardly be said that once he had become a priest, De La Salle had no intention of taking life easy and putting on weight in idle luxury. He had no wish at all to let his position as canon be an excuse for doing no work in the Lord's harvest field.<sup>142</sup> He knew that his canonry obliged him to attend choir; he was also convinced that as a priest and a doctor of theology, there were other duties he must fulfill in the church. De La Salle had in full measure the grace of vocation,

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139. Luke 14:10 (Vulgate)

140. 1 Sam. 3.

141. Heb. 5:4.

142. Matt. 9:37.

which vivifies and makes fruitful the zeal of those who have ardently sought the priesthood. Ordination did not mean for him an end to his studies or a slackening off in the practice of virtue. He did not, however, throw himself headlong into work for which he was still somewhat young. He proceeded in stages as he grew older and more experienced. It was soon evident to everyone that he had received an abundant share of the Spirit of Jesus, the Sovereign Priest and that he was totally disposed to follow the divine example in sacrificing himself to the point of sweating blood, even dying, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

The first sacrifice that was asked of him was his place in the cathedral choir and the life of ease that is commonly thought to be that of a canon. I refer to his spiritual director's wish that he exchange his canonry for parish work. All that was needed for him to accept this wish was the consent of the archbishop of Reims, which was refused, to the disappointment of the spiritual director and, still more, of the parish priest with whom the exchange was to be made. De La Salle had accepted the idea only because it had seemed to be God's will that he should do so. When it was rejected by his principal superior, he remained quite content. He had the merit of the sacrifice in the sight of God, even though the sacrifice could not be carried through.<sup>143</sup>

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143. Blain's account of this incident is in book 1, chap. 5. Modern research has shown that he (as well as Bernard and Maillefer) oversimplified the historical details. All three biographers emphasize De La Salle's ready compliance with the suggestions of his spiritual director, Nicolas Roland, and his equally prompt recognition of God's will in Archbishop Le Tellier's veto. The transaction was more complex than a simple exchange of John Baptist's canonry for the pastoral charge of Reims' largest parish, Saint Pierre le Vieil, whose curé, André Clocquet, aspired to a more tranquil and contemplative way of life. Clocquet did not envisage a canonry, with its obligation of choir attendance and of residence in the city. The intervention of a third party was needed for the ideal solution. Remy Favreau, the beneficiary of the chapel of SS. Pierre et Paul in the Reims cathedral, who naturally had hopes of receiving a canonry one day, learned (presumably through Roland) that De La Salle was willing to cede his prebend in return for parish work but that Clocquet was not interested in the canonry. A three-point agreement was entered into: Favreau would make over his chaplaincy to Clocquet; Clocquet would cede his pastorate to De La Salle; the latter would resign his canonry and name Favreau as his successor. Agreements were signed before an attorney named Rogier at Châlons. But either Clocquet was unbusinesslike or Favreau was less than frank because the former discovered, after the papers had been sent to Rome for ratification, that the obligations of Favreau's chaplaincy entailed more than simply celebrating Mass twice a week at the altar of SS. Peter and Paul; it also involved daily attendance in the cathedral at Matins, Lauds, High Mass, and Vespers. Clocquet took immediate steps to ensure that even if the

As we have seen, this particular sacrifice was, in fact, only postponed and was made sometime later and in circumstances that made it far more meritorious. But it was not the first sacrifice or the last to be made by the saintly priest. Several painful ones preceded it, and many bitter, humbling ones came after—as many, we might say, as the days of his life. Indeed, there can hardly ever have been a priest more imbued with the spirit of sacrifice, more like the divine Victim that he offered daily on the altar, than John Baptist de La Salle.

If we compare him, not with those lazy and idle ministers of religion whose number saddens the church and shames their fellow clergy but with the busiest and most zealous, we can say that hardly anyone was more deserving of the claim that the tireless Apostle of the nations made in the words “I labored more than all the rest”<sup>144</sup> or in these: “I sacrifice myself unceasingly for you, brethren, that you may enter into eternal glory. I make myself a victim for the salvation of your souls.”<sup>145</sup> What priest has ever had more right to say with Saint Paul that he bore continually in his body the marks of Jesus’ death or to say with more conviction. “For your sake I deny myself everyday; I make myself a victim ready to die for you.”<sup>146</sup> What priest has ever succeeded better in combining the role of victim, which belongs to Jesus Christ and to his ministers, with that of the one who offers the victim? De La Salle was in agreement with one of the church’s most noted teachers, one of her most illustrious martyrs, in thinking that the office of the priest is to prepare victims worthy of the Lord while offering him each day the divine Victim.<sup>147</sup> He was not satisfied to seek such victims in the souls he won for God; his first concern was to offer himself as a victim by rigorous penance and a life of suffering.

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ratification came from Rome, the archbishop would withhold his approval. The documented story of this strange episode in the life of John Baptist de La Salle is related by Aroz (CL 26, 245–59) and Poutet (vol. 1, 370–72). Not the least surprising feature of the incident is that at the time of the agreement, 20 January 1676, De La Salle was still a subdeacon. He was to be made deacon in March of that year, well within the time a reply could be expected from Rome, and the diaconate (provided certain other qualifications were held) sufficed for assuming charge of a parish according to canon law (as is clearly demonstrated in an article in the April 1964 issue of *Bulletin*, 80–87).

144. 1 Cor. 15:10.

145. 2 Cor. 12:15 (Blain is paraphrasing freely here despite the implied claim to be quoting).

146. Blain’s adaptation of Rom. 8:36.

147. Blain gives a marginal reference, “S. Cyp., Ep. 57.” The passage, from a letter of Saint Cyprian to six fellow bishops, is: “[. . .] *episcopatus nostri honor est . . . ] ut sacerdotes, qui sacrificia Dei quotidie celebramus, hostias Deo et victimas preparemus*” (PL, vol. 3, col. 857).

Piety for him was not just a matter of standing each day at the altar in the disposition of tender devotion. He sought to identify himself with the Man of Sorrows expiring on the cross; he aspired to participate in his sacrifice by a sincere and continual struggle against his fallen nature with its wayward inclinations.

De La Salle knew better than anyone that a spirit of sacrifice is the characteristic spirit of any priest who has a right understanding of the Mass, what takes place during it, and whom he represents when he stands at the altar. He fully understood that a priest cannot “announce the death of the Lord”<sup>148</sup> and renew his self-immolation in the celebration of the Eucharist without taking his own part in the sacrifice by penance and mortification. He knew better than anyone else that if the Hebrew people had to leave Egypt and move out into the wilderness to offer God their sacrifice, the obligation was still greater for one who daily offered the sacrifice of the New Law to prepare himself for it in the desert of quiet seclusion, away from the pleasures and comforts of a worldly life. Those two striking images of what takes place at our altars, the paschal lamb and the manna in the wilderness, conveyed to him the same lesson; the former was to be eaten with bitter herbs;<sup>149</sup> the latter fell only on arid land, where all other food was wanting, and it ceased to fall as soon as the people of God set foot in the land flowing with milk and honey.<sup>150</sup>

De La Salle, being convinced of these truths, lived a life of total sacrifice. He saw himself as a member of that body whose head is crowned with thorns, and he sought only to be like him. Once ordained as dispenser of the mysteries that renew the mystery of the cross, he waged against flesh and blood a war as protracted as his life itself. He was like a man governed at every moment of the day by his wish to crucify his flesh as Jesus Christ was crucified. His priesthood seemed to remind him unceasingly that having been ordained to perpetuate the mystery of the cross, he had a duty to attach himself to it and be able, like Saint Paul, to say, “*Christo confixus sum cruci*—With Christ I am nailed to the cross.”<sup>151</sup>

The consideration that priests must bear the burden of other people’s sins as well as their own nourished the spirit of sacrifice in John Baptist, together with the thought of the nature of the victim whom priests offer in sacrifice, the memory of his sacrifice that they renew, and the obligation they have to share his sufferings. There was nothing, in fact, that he did not sacrifice to the Lord. His possessions, rank,

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148. 1 Cor. 11:26.

149. Exod. 12:8.

150. Exod. 16:35.

151. Gal. 2:19 (Vulgate).

comforts, and convenience, his rest, health, and good name—he gave up everything, spared nothing, begrudged nothing. The holocaust was complete and perfect. God’s all-demanding love was content with it, finding in it no rival claimant, no divided mind. The former canon of Reims deprived himself joyfully of all these things, deeming their loss as so much gain, so many means of arriving at the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ and the honor of resembling him.<sup>152</sup>

I say nothing here about his zeal for God’s glory and the salvation of souls because I will later give it the special consideration it calls for. Nor do I go into detail at this point about his penitential life and austerities and his love of interior prayer because these also will be treated later. I turn my attention now, by way of showing the fullness of his sacerdotal spirit, to his perfect practice of the virtues appropriate to his state: his high esteem for the sacred duties of the priesthood, his zeal for ecclesiastical discipline, his angelic purity, and his love of the church.

[CHAPTER 10]

*His assiduous application to acquiring the holiness befitting a priest; his understanding of the dignity of the priesthood; his correctness in the matter of clerical dress; his showing as confessor of both respect and gentleness to sinners; his respect for his ecclesiastical superiors*

One of the most essential characteristics of the priesthood, showing most clearly that a calling is from God and derived from an authentic sacerdotal spirit, is an elevated idea of the service and holiness the vocation entails. Yet this is usually the characteristic least in evidence because the manner of response to the calling is so often defective. There is the element of wanting to become important in merely human terms or of looking for what is to be gained out of the service of the sanctuary. People seek the priesthood for the distinction that goes with it and view it askance if there is no prestigious role attached or if it lacks a benefice. Piety for its own sake is held cheap; zeal, hard work, and spiritual fervor are thought poorly of if there is no temporal advantage to back them up. There is little esteem for liturgical functions offering nothing in the way of personal remuneration or honor. No worthwhile advantage is seen to accrue from just being a saintly cleric full of the spirit of religion, retiring and prayerful, dedicated to the service of the church, self-sacrificing, mortified, indifferent to

152. Phil. 3:8–11.

worldly ambition, and imbued with the spirit and dispositions of Jesus on the cross. Such austere and demanding virtues have little appeal for the worldly minded; their practice is left to those who aspire to be perfect. An exterior show of suitably clerical virtues is sufficient for some; they would as soon be described as secular-minded and worldly ecclesiastics as devout ones.

But in the case of John Baptist de La Salle, grace had always had the initiative, ever since he had begun to examine his motives, and it had given him a sublime idea of the clerical state and all its duties. It had shown him that priests must be the salt of the earth, a light and example to the faithful,<sup>153</sup> almost always to be found at their tasks in and around the church, frequently holding the body of Jesus Christ in their hands, dispensing the sacred mysteries, and ranking thereby above the angels themselves. He knew that priests are called to these ideals by God and that such glorious advantages impose an obligation to be saints, that nothing is more earnestly recommended to priests by the Scriptures, by the Fathers, and by canon law than the attainment of high holiness.

De La Salle did everything to achieve this ideal of priestly sanctity. He abhorred the slightest sins and sedulously avoided even trivial faults. He shunned the very shadow of what could be offensive and would have nothing at all to do with anything that only seemed wrong. For him the only misfortune was to displease God. Even when he was already fully occupied in doing what Divine Providence had charged him with, he was still prepared to take on any other good work. There were no limits to his desire for perfection, no slackening in the effort needed to reach an eminent degree of virtue. He had taken Jesus Christ as his model, and he was not satisfied just to share some points of resemblance with him; he strove mightily to become a living image, a perfect copy of him.

He studied the virtues that have shone in the lives of saintly priests, and by a literal imitation of those virtues, he became an example of them. He pondered endlessly and with ever-fresh insights such passages from the word of God as "Be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy;"<sup>154</sup> "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect;"<sup>155</sup> "I sacrifice myself for them."<sup>156</sup> Such words of our Lord intensified his longing for perfection because they showed him the gap that separated him from the perfection of God, of Jesus Christ, and of the saints and told him what remained for him to do.

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153. Matt. 5:13–14.

154. Lev. 11:44.

155. Matt. 5:48.

156. John 17:19.

He saw all things in this supernatural light, and he was horrified to think that he who was called upon to represent Christ in the exercise of his ministry and as the dispenser of his mysteries was yet, as it seemed to himself, so stained and tarnished in his sight. He had neither the courage to raise his eyes toward him whose very being is holy nor the desire to direct them to any other object. He remained as one cast down, confused, reduced to nothing, unable to lift his gaze, inwardly overwhelmed by the thought of God's holiness. A holy fear held all the powers of his soul in check, now refusing them free play and reducing them to stillness and a profound sense of reverential awe, now releasing them in a fervent outpouring of tender love, gratitude, and devotion.

From such convictions came a respect that never waned for all that concerned the worship of God and the priestly duties. He never got used to renewing his contact with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The sacred mysteries always remained holy and awe inspiring to him; he never learned with the passing of time to treat them with less reverent fear and purity of heart. The profound impression made on him when he first entered the service of the sanctuary remained with him always. Nothing had changed in what had caused that impression, so neither did his feelings and dispositions towards them. Nothing served to make him blasé in this matter. The more he had to do with sacred things, the more his veneration for them grew. His intimate association with his Lord, so far from blunting the lively tenderness of his piety, caused it to grow each day in luminous understanding and a humbling sense of his unworthiness.

Thus he had a deep sense of the grandeur of the priest's calling and spoke of it always with great respect. The way that many clerics discredit it by failing to live up to the holiness it demands caused him much grief. He was often heard to deplore in figurative speech the temerity of people who enter the sheepfold by a gate other than the one opened by the chief shepherd.<sup>157</sup> He lamented the misfortune of sheep entrusted to the care of hirelings, whose only concern was to steal their wool for clothing and to fatten them for food. He could not hold back his tears at the thought of men everywhere rushing into sacred orders with inconsiderate haste and lacking due reflection about the awesome thing they were undertaking—hence, without suitable preparation, men complacently taking upon weak shoulders a burden calculated to frighten the angels themselves.<sup>158</sup>

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157. John 10:1–2.

158. "At this time the state of the clergy had fallen so low that the name of priest hardly stood for anything but ignorance and moral laxity, to borrow an expression of Père Amelote" (Cognet, *La Spiritualité Moderne*, quoted by

But it did not fall to him to be a reformer of the clergy or to train its aspirants; therefore, he concerned himself with setting a standard in his own behavior. He gave the example of a well-regulated life, of zeal for the church's discipline, shown by his careful observance of its sacred laws and of all the prescriptions laid down by the councils. He deemed all of these a matter of duty, even the most trivial, if such a word can be applied even to minor regulations governing a state of life where everything should conduce to holiness. The minutest rubrics and least important ceremonials were for him regulations to be observed with exact obedience. The reason he usually gave for being so meticulous is that it was a matter of the right attitude of submission to the church; if we honored and religiously observed even her minor regulations, there was less likelihood of being tempted to disobey her in more important matters. His genuflections meant touching the floor with his knee; when making a ritual bow, he did so fully and with grave devotion, taking all the time befitting the act; his signs of the cross were never skimped. In short, his way of carrying out all the ceremonies, bringing the same attention, distinction, and grace to the least as well as to the most important, showed the interior dispositions that motivated him, especially his religious spirit. This behavior served to edify the people and give them an esteem and reverence for our holy religion. The high regard he had for the majesty and holiness of the mysteries enacted at the altar made any shabbiness in the articles used there unbearable to him. Torn vestments, soiled linen, vessels not properly cleaned, tasteless pictures, dust-laden tabernacles—such things caused him great pain.

With regard to clerical dress, he was correct in wearing it himself and felt a sort of pity, which he sometimes expressed by way of kindly reproof, for clerics who had become worldly minded and had adopted secular garb, for example, replacing the long soutane with a short tunic on the slightest pretext or with no pretext at all. He was never seen without the soutane from the moment he entered the clerical state or at least from the time when his status as canon made it an obligation. He did not consider his many long journeys on foot or on horseback a reason for dispensing with it or even for hitching it up above his knees to make it less inconvenient. He was so consistent in this matter that his disciples living in close familiarity with him, free to approach him day and night and with every opportunity to take him

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Rideau, in *Nicolas Roland*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1975, 25–26). This apparent overstatement perhaps needs to be balanced by a remark such as the following by Rayez: “De La Salle was one of the finest priestly figures of the eighteenth century, among so many examples” (Rayez, “The Spirituality of Self-Abandonment,” in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 139).



unawares, never saw him without his soutane. It was the first garment he put on when rising and the last he took off at night.<sup>159</sup> He was so used to wearing it that he did not dispense with it even when ill. He could hardly be persuaded to leave it off, even in his last illness, which ended with his death, and he yielded only a matter of hours before the end.

Any other form of dress had no appeal for him; it would have embarrassed and irked him to wear a garb other than the one he was used to. Fastidious clerics who find the soutane inconvenient do so because they are not accustomed to wearing it. It feels strange to them, and they could well say—and to their shame—what David said about Saul's armor: "*Usum non habeo*—I am not used to it."<sup>160</sup> Such people seem as uncomfortable and ill at ease when wearing the soutane as others who are faithful to it are when they are not wearing it.

John Baptist was no less strict about wearing his stock. Heat, perspiration, fatigue, discomfort—none of these seemed to him a good reason for taking off this exterior sign of his clerical status. It grieved him to see others unmortified or frivolous enough to dispense with correct and modest behavior in this regard.

Another thing that distressed him was when some clerics adopted long, wavy, and powdered hair styles or the use of modish wigs. It saddened him to see clergymen taking pains thus to disguise themselves as if competing with vain women in keeping up with the latest fashion. Carelessness about the tonsure, letting the hair grow over, and not keeping it properly trimmed also upset him. He could not help wondering about the attitude to clerical discipline of anyone who seemed ashamed to wear this symbol of Jesus Christ's crown of thorns and was indifferent about having this mark of resemblance with our Savior. For this reason he did not favor the use of a calotte, which hides the tonsure and also leads to the shaven patch being reduced in size. He followed the principle himself and never used a calotte throughout his life. He also kept his hair short, as did the Brothers. His mental attitude was that of a penitent. His soutane symbolized for him the sackcloth of the repentant sinner. This is why he liked it to be made exactly according to the church's prescriptions,

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159. This custom early on became a rule for the Brothers, as is testified by the manuscript Rule of 1705 (CL 25, 72). Was the prescription influenced by the older monastic rules? That of Saint Benedict required the monks to sleep in their habits so that "being clothed they will always be ready and rising at the signal without delay hasten to forestall one another to the Work of God; yet all this with gravity and self-restraint" (*The Rule of Saint Benedict*, edited and translated by Abbot Justin McCann, London, 1952, 71).

160. 1 Sam. 17:39 (Vulgate).

neither too long nor too short, not too ample and not too skimpy; he could be so particular about this as sometimes to test the patience of the tailor!

Another mark of his religious spirit was his concern for the proper care of the altar. He was shocked by anything cheap, unseemly, in bad taste, or soiled that was placed on it. It hurt him to see an altar that was shabby and unworthy of the adorable majesty of God and of the sacred mysteries accomplished there. He was hardly consolable when he entered a church and found empty the dwelling of the Prince of all the ages, around whom the angels are gathered in adoration. It was the same when a church was so poor that it reminded him of the stable at Bethlehem. In all this he shared our Lord's own zeal for the reverence due to God's house. He wanted to see in churches only what inspired devotion, only what edified. Everything must be rich, magnificent, and worthy of him who is infinitely rich but who made himself poor for our sake here on earth, where he deserves now to be always gloriously enthroned. It is we, he thought, who should now choose to be poor and contribute our wealth or at least a part of our wealth to enrich our tabernacles. His conviction about all this led him to take care of the altar himself or at least to ensure that it was properly looked after in a manner worthy of our Christian faith. He spent money freely for this, and when it was once suggested to him that the poverty of the community hardly warranted such expense, he good-humoredly replied that he did not mind if the kitchen went short so long as the needs of God's house were taken care of.<sup>161</sup>

John Baptist's priestly spirit gave him a share in our Lord's gracious gentleness toward others, and he manifested this in his dealings with hardened sinners. His attitude was that he was worse than they were and that he needed to grieve as much over his own sins as over theirs. His mind dwelt on his own spiritual poverty as he looked with sorrow at the state of their soul. He deemed himself less innocent than they were and was able to make them feel at ease in telling him of sins that caused them to be ashamed. He never rebuffed them, never appeared shocked or even surprised at the number or gravity of their misdeeds. What they told him wounded him to the heart, but he listened as calmly as if he were listening to someone reading the

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161. According to Bernard, when the Founder gave away his personal wealth to the poor in 1684, he accepted the advice of his spiritual director and retained enough capital to yield an annual income of 200 livres, which he used for the journeys he had to make, the purchase of books, and the provision of vestments and sacred vessels, "all matters in which he was deeply interested" (*Two Early Biographies*, 316).

life of a saint. If the penitents themselves seemed dismayed or overwrought, ashamed almost to the point of desperation, he gave them reassurance and comfort; his encouragement sustained them at the very brink of despair into which the enemy of mankind strove to plunge them. Thanks to his enlightened and wise understanding, the most inveterate sinners left him humbled at the thought of their guilt but not discouraged, full of sorrow but free from mental stress. He had given them courage to change their lives, confidence in God's mercy, and determination to serve God better, together with a salutary disgust with what they had been.

He had a different approach when dealing with his disciples. He wanted them to be perfect and was intolerant of any habitual fault or voluntary failing or any slackness at all in the service of him whose angels are aflame with fervor. But he was well able to temper his strictness with gentleness as the occasion required; like the Good Samaritan, he knew how to mix oil with the wine he poured on their spiritual wounds,<sup>162</sup> and his corrections were welcomed and put to good use.

Another sign that he had the spirit of his vocation to a perfect degree was his profound respect for ecclesiastical superiors. No one had a greater regard for the institution of the hierarchy or more esteem for the submissive obedience that is necessary for peace in the church, for peace derives from the people's spirit of dependence on their appointed leaders. For him the principal pastors of the church were the successors of the Apostles and the direct representatives of Jesus Christ, and he put no limits or exceptions to the reverent obedience he deemed their due. Never did the princes of the church come across a more humble and self-effacing disposition than that of De La Salle. It was an attitude he inculcated in his disciples also, and he would have disowned any of them who showed a lack of it. This explains the singular affection and esteem in which he was held by all the bishops who knew him. They granted him full powers in their respective dioceses because they had complete confidence not only in his breadth of knowledge and enlightened judgment but also in his deferential attitude to their position; they shared with him the authority that heaven had conferred upon them.<sup>163</sup> John Baptist deemed it

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162. Luke 10:34.

163. The Institute archives in Rome hold four original documents conferring on De La Salle the right to preach and to hear confessions (with powers to absolve even in reserved cases) in three dioceses: Reims, in 1678 and 1680, granted by Archbishop Le Tellier; Paris, in 1696, by Archbishop de Noailles, and Marseille, in 1712, by Bishop Belsunce. For texts and commentaries by Aroz, see CL 41, vol. 2, 461–67, 474–78, 491–508, and 509–24. Of

one of the greatest wounds in the body of the church that the spirit of obedience is so lacking among the clergy today and that their respect for hierarchical authority is so conspicuously deficient. He saw this as one of the most pernicious effects of the newfangled ideas and one of the most obvious dangers threatening religion.

In the spirit of his calling, our holy priest respected every word that came from the successors of the Apostles; the only right he claimed was to put into practice whatever they decided. A Brother consulted him one day by letter on a matter that troubled him in this connection. Here is what he replied:

You ask me, my very dear Brother, to settle a difficult question for you. In this matter, the only answer I can give is that since the bishops are our leaders and I am only a simple priest, I cannot be the judge. It is to the pope and the bishops that such questions should be addressed to find out their opinion and decision on what you ask me.<sup>164</sup>

The reply shows how far De La Salle was from intervening in matters that he deemed outside his competence. In another letter, this time to a close friend,<sup>165</sup> he expressed his horror at the latter's show of

some relevance here is another archived document testifying to the fact that the Founder was himself "offered a miter." The document, dated 6 May 1742, is a sworn statement written and signed by Brother Bernardin (Pierre-Martin Ronsin), Director of the Saint Martin parish school at Marseille in 1712. Bernardin's testimony evidently relates to this period because he mentions in the same context the Founder's retreat at Saint-Maximin. Bernardin says, however, that De La Salle refused the offer "because the persons who made it opposed the Constitution [*Unigenitus*]." Perhaps the Jansenist faction in Marseille, in their eagerness to win the Founder of the Brothers to their side, offered to use their influence to obtain him a bishopric—which is not quite what is conveyed by the phrase "he was offered a miter."

Gallego (486) considers that the phrase is valid but that the thirty-year gap between the event and Bernardin's statement had obscured the details in the Brother's memory. The Constitution *Unigenitus* was not promulgated until September 1713, by which time De La Salle had already moved on to Grenoble. Gallego suggests that the "offer of a miter" was made by Cardinal de Noailles on behalf of the King, in 1711, shortly after the Brothers took charge of a school at Versailles, and that the Founder refused because a bishopric was not his vocation, not the way he could best serve the church. The fact that De Noailles later aligned himself with the appeal against the Constitution would tie in with Bernardin's version of De La Salle's motive for declining the offer.

164. *Letters*, 104.

165. *Ibid.*, 120. This letter is known only from the present citation by Blain and has been identified as one sent to a priest, Jean-François Maillefer,

insubordination in appealing to a civil court against an interdict his archbishop had imposed upon him. This is what De La Salle wrote:

This is the third time that I have taken up my pen to do myself the honor of writing to you since the beginning of the year. I hope that it will be a good and happy one for you. May I mention the sorrow you cause me by what you are doing? It arises from the fact that you have involved yourself in the suspension imposed on your colleagues and that you have taken the case before civil magistrates. By implication you consider these magistrates your superiors in ecclesiastical matters. I am surprised that you have not arranged that the chalice and the surplice be restored to you with appropriate ceremony by some officer of the court, as if recognizing in him as much right to restore to you your priestly faculties as your bishop had in bestowing them in the first place. How can you recognize laymen as your judges in a matter that is as surely the province of the church as ever there was? Indeed, how could you, who have a deep understanding of your vocation and are not indifferent to what concerns it, how could you have recourse to a purely lay and secular jurisdiction? Perhaps you will reply that many others have followed the same course. Are you then acting through human respect? And then you will add, I suppose, that you did it because your colleagues laid this responsibility on you. But surely you realize that they have no right to require you to betray the rights of the church and submit to the judgement of a secular court in a matter outside its competence. I know that Saint Peter and Saint Paul require us to submit to temporal authorities, but they never claimed that this should extend to spiritual matters. Furthermore, when an appeal is made to higher authority and jurisdiction, it must be a case *in eodem genere*, that is, solely for matters that fall within the province of that higher jurisdiction and not outside it. In this case the right to the chalice and surplice is outside secular jurisdiction. You could apply to this situation, though not quite in the same sense, what Saint Paul says in the sixth chapter of his first Letter to the Corinthians: “Dare any of you, having a quarrel with a fellow Christian, bring your case to be judged by the unjust, that is, the Gentiles, and not by the saints, that is, by Christians?” As for me, I am quite prepared to say of any cleric who brings legal proceedings against his ecclesiastical superior, “Does he dare to submit himself to civil rather than to ecclesiastical judges,

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son of De La Salle’s sister Marie and brother of Dom François-Élie Maillefer, an early biographer of the Founder.

who are his rightful judges in such matters?" "Do you not know," adds the holy Apostle, "that the saints will be appointed judges of this world?" And you, are you not aware that the bishops of the church have been appointed as the judges you must turn to in such matters as these?

Have we not good reason, by way of concluding all that has been said in this chapter about De La Salle, to quote these words of Ecclesiasticus: "There was not found anyone like him for keeping the Law of the Most High"?<sup>166</sup>

[CHAPTER 11]

*His sense of vocation shown by his love for the virtue  
of chastity; his sensitivity in this matter evident  
in his discretion toward women; the extreme precautions  
he took to safeguard his chastity; his teaching on the subject;  
his life, one of untarnished innocence*

John Baptist could hardly have carried further his esteem and love for the beautiful virtue of chastity and the means he took to make his own ever more resplendent. Faults against this virtue are never trivial, and the sanctions they merit are never light. At the same time, the unforeseen occasions of offending against it are not rare; hence, he believed that no care could be excessive in this matter. Throughout his life he was concerned to avoid anything that could put this virtue at risk; he was scrupulously careful and diligent in the extreme.

From being a child and an adolescent schoolboy, both prior to his consecration to the service of the church and ever afterward, he jealously cherished the virtue of purity. He was an example of it at every moment and in every situation of his life. He had no patience with mere scrupulosity in other matters, but in this one he considered it an advantage. At any rate, his own conduct in the matter seemed like that of a scrupulous person, seeing wrong in everything that approximately or remotely, directly or indirectly, threatened this virtue.

While still a layman, he honored chastity as a God-given virtue capable, as the Fathers of the Church have said, of transforming a person into an angel but one that when tarnished or lost altogether, leaves us more like a devil. Once he had entered the clerical state, he cultivated it sedulously as a specific and principal treasure of his vocation, convinced that the holiness of his calling required an extraor-

166. Sir. 44:20.

dinary degree of purity. In his opinion Saint John Chrysostom did not exaggerate when he said that those who are privileged to bring upon the altar and to touch the virginal body of the incarnate Lord, the spouse and glory of virgins, should be purer than the rays of the sun.<sup>167</sup> He believed that if a church can never be sufficiently rich and magnificent, an altar sufficiently clean and well adorned, and a tabernacle sufficiently resplendent and holy, then a priest, who embodies in his own person the church, the altars, and the tabernacle where the Son of the Most Blessed Virgin finds repose, must have a purity commensurate with his dignity. His purity would not be too great if it matched that of the Virgin Mother herself, for he shares her privilege because by his words he brings her Son onto the altar and then touches him, takes him into his hands, shows him to the people, carries him to give him to them (having first taken him into his own body), and becomes one with him. To presume to have such contact with him, to be allowed to touch and hold him and enjoy such familiarity with him and not excel in purity, would be to risk dire chastisement.

The Holy Spirit says that there is nothing in the whole world that can match the worth of this virtue,<sup>168</sup> the virtue so pleasing to Jesus Christ that he calls himself the spouse of pure souls. Our saintly priest's great esteem and love for chastity was, therefore, such that he felt extreme repugnance for all faults that offended it and was most faithful in avoiding any of them, believing that all were significant and a danger to the soul. He could not tolerate so much as a shadow or appearance of impurity nor bear to be with anyone who was not above suspicion regarding it. This disposition made him delight in solitude, the refuge of chastity to which Jesus calls pure souls. He avoided all occasions, however remote, that might lead to this sin. He was well aware that the venom of impurity is a subtle thing that easily finds its way into the heart of anyone not firmly on his guard. Because he knew the weakness of human nature and the waywardness of the flesh, he was always mistrustful of himself about both. He did not count on the chastity he had always preserved as a sure guarantee for the future unless he also remained constantly alert.

This is why he was extremely careful not to have any dealings of a sentimental kind with persons of the other sex, however saintly and spiritual such persons might seem. He avoided their company as

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167. Blain's marginal reference, "Homil. 83 in Mat." leads us to the extract: "*Quanta ergo puritate oporteret eum esse qui hoc fruitur sacrificio? Quanto radiis solaribus puriorem esse oporteret manum illam, quae hanc carnem secat*" (PG, vol. 58, col. 743).

168. Blain quotes in the margin: "*Omnis ponderatio non est digna continentis animae,*" with a reference, "Eccles. 26:20."

much as possible, and to prompt himself to maintain a salutary distance, he kept in mind and encouraged his disciples also to keep in mind that the devils could use such persons to disguise themselves. He actually said on one occasion that in a sense a woman is potentially a demon incarnate for a man, able to tempt him, take his affections by surprise, and lead him into sin. "The devil can use any woman to ensnare without fail anyone not completely on his guard. Let us bear this in mind to protect our chastity and keep ourselves spiritually secure."<sup>169</sup> So his personal dealings with women were very rare, and he was never alone with one unless this was quite unavoidable, in which case he made the interview as brief as possible.

His conduct even appeared singular in this respect, so meticulous that people could have called it exaggerated. Yet he had the example of the saints to justify it and the words of the Fathers of the Church, not to mention on the other side the appalling instances of great men brought low. He did not agree even to allow his grandmother to enter his bedroom when she came to visit him during an illness, a story I have related in its proper place.<sup>170</sup> It was no use for her to seem hurt by this or to remonstrate; he was not to be persuaded. The concession he made to soothe her feelings and satisfy her wish to see him, but in a manner more acceptable to his sense of modesty, was to make the effort to get up, thereby risking a setback to his recovery, and to go down fully dressed to the parlor with a Brother on either side of him to help him.

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169. Hermans includes this among the sayings attributed to the Founder but without comment (CL 10, 194).

170. Namely, in book 2, chap. 9. The illness that befell De La Salle during a visit to Reims from Paris in 1690 was due, according to Blain, to sheer exhaustion and to the harshness with which the Founder treated himself. The concern of his maternal grandmother, Perrette Lespagnol, on this occasion, well conveyed by Blain in his earlier account of the incident, contradicts the biographer's own statement a few lines before that his relatives "had washed their hands of him." Maillefer (who, we should recall, was a member of the family, being the son of De La Salle's sister Marie) assures us in his 1723 account of this first recorded illness of the Founder that the family "overlooked nothing that their tender concern suggested for his recovery," and he conveys the same impression in his second version, although there he places more stress on John Baptist's reluctance to accept their "excessive attentions" (*Two Early Biographies*, 77; CL 6, 94-95).

Apart from this incident, Perrette Lespagnol is mentioned only infrequently by the source biographers, but a good deal more is known about her now, thanks to the researches of Aroz, who provides an attractive pen-portrait of her in CL 26, 152-54. Aroz calls her "the incomparable loving grandma" of the Founder of the Christian Schools. Her influence in the life of her grandson is also conveyed by Poutet (vol. 1) with numerous references.



If this was how he treated his own grandmother, who felt that her advanced age and motherly relationship entitled her to visit her grandson with less ceremony, he was unlikely to allow other women easier access. No one was allowed to get beyond the parlor. He even thought of various ways of making the house more difficult of access. It was not long before he began to reap the rewards of all these precautions. Early in his priestly life, he had found it difficult to refuse to give spiritual direction to certain devout ladies who wanted to entrust the care of their soul to him, having been struck by the angelic air with which he said Mass. Later on, at the very time when he was being discredited in Reims, the clear evidence of his saintliness led some other women to place themselves under his direction, and he did not feel able to say no. But in due course he contrived to put them off by giving them little of his time and allowing them only brief and infrequent visits. His own visits to them became rarer still, and a case had to be really urgent to make him feel bound in duty or charity to go to see anyone.

He showed the same reserve toward the orphanage Sisters, of whom, as I have related, he became the superior and spiritual director.<sup>171</sup> They saw him only when some real need required him to visit them, and then he stayed not a moment longer than he deemed necessary. He believed that the confessional sufficed for directing penitents or devout persons and that talking with them apart from that was usually a waste of time. To put it briefly, he developed such a tendency to avoid the company of women that he would leave or refuse to enter any place where he saw them. If people remonstrated with him about this and told him he was being scrupulous, he humbly replied that others more sure of themselves might not have anything to fear but that his own susceptibility warned him to be careful and to safeguard himself by a discreet aloofness.

In this same spirit of self-distrust, he kept careful watch over his senses, taking every precaution to keep them under control. He was convinced that giving them too much liberty would invite temptations to sensuality, with the danger that this entailed for purity. Anything

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171. See book 1, chap. 5. The allusion is to the Congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus founded by Nicolas Roland (see above, chap. 9, note 136). Blain's use here of the word *Superior* to designate De La Salle's role is correct only as a convenient term relating to the period when he was the joint executor of Roland's will, charged specifically with the task of ensuring "the complete and perfect establishment" of the Congregation. Because he had not reached the minimum age of thirty-five for appointment as Superior, Archbishop Le Tellier named Guillaume Rogier to the post. De La Salle, however, remained a counselor for the Sisters, and this service, in the designs of Providence, furnished the occasion for the germinative meeting with Adrien Nyel.

merely suggestive of impurity horrified him, and he kept as clear of it as he did of impurity. He was constant in the effort to keep his imagination free of the unbecoming thoughts that the unclean spirit tried to suggest day and night. He admitted no such ideas to his mind, no carnal affections to his heart, and he allowed none of those desires for illicit pleasure to which the flesh is prone to enter his soul.

To achieve this state of purity that in some way recalls the primitive innocence of man and matches that of the angels, there was nothing he was not prepared to suffer or sacrifice. When this virtue reaches such a perfect state, it divinizes a person; it renders a person wholly sacred. But what struggles it entails, what victories must be won over self! The soul must, if the expression be permitted, shed blood and the heart be torn asunder before the instincts of the flesh and its natural tendencies are finally curbed. The greatest distance possible must be put between the virtue of chastity and anything that might threaten it. The path of sensuality must be strewn with the thorns of penance and mortification.

A cautious self-mistrust is needed to safeguard this virtue. Whoever depends on his own strength and counts on having enough virtue to resist is soon overcome; presumption is almost always punished by a fall. That chastity is a virtue easily perturbed is understandable. It remains unsure of itself even after the utmost precautions have been taken, thrives only on prayer, spiritual reading, and austerity of life, finds contentment in being set apart from the world, sheltered by humility, fears idleness, and refrains from any unnecessary repose. This is why chastity, while being a virtue full of beauty and charm to behold, is yet achieved only by the laws of strict austerity. A person would have to discard his body and the wayward flesh entirely to be unaware of the difficulty of maintaining chastity intact.

According to the consensus of the Desert Fathers, as Cassian reports, the battle to be waged against the unclean spirit is the most sustained and arduous of all, and the triumph is not generally complete.<sup>172</sup> Other vices, says Saint Jerome, vary in strength with the passing of time. This one is born with us and scarcely dies before us. The soul, as long as it is not free of the body, is never fully exempt from concupiscence.<sup>173</sup> Only strong virtue and continual vigilance, says the

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172. No reference, but Blain is quoting almost verbatim from book 6 of John Cassian's *Institutes*: "*Secundum nobis [sic], juxta traditionem patrum, adversus spiritum fornicationis certamen est longum prae ceteris ac diuturnum et perpaucis purum devictum*" (PL, vol. 49, col. 265).

173. No reference; the statement seems to be a free treatment of the passage ("*Cultus corporis et habitus vestium unius horae spatio commutatur. Omnia alia peccata extrinsecus sunt; et quod foris est, facilis abjicitur. Sola libido*

same saint, can overcome a tendency we have from birth and enable us to live in the flesh as if without it, waging combat against ourselves day after day.<sup>174</sup> Saint Augustine maintains that of all the struggles Christians must sustain to win salvation, the most protracted, bitter, and perilous are those fought to preserve chastity. This virtue, he says, is opposed by a raging enemy who ceaselessly attacks it and puts it at risk. The sad thing is, he adds, that despite these daily combats, victory is rare: *ubi quotidiana pugna et rara est victoria*.<sup>175</sup> Saint John Chrysostom says that a species of sacrifice is involved in which the victim remains unsure of salvation until the sacrifice is completed with death.<sup>176</sup> According to Saint Bernard, the struggle is a martyrdom, bloodless but not therefore less painful.<sup>177</sup> All the other Fathers agree with Tertullian when he says, "It is easier to die for our chastity than to preserve it all our life."<sup>178</sup>

The fact is that chastity, although a most lovely and treasured virtue, is also one most frail and easy to lose. It is held in honor even by those who persecute it, and among its greatest admirers are those who assault it in vain. But the world at large conspires to war against

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*insita . . . redundat in vitium*") that precedes the following quotation from Jerome.

174. No reference, but Blain borrows the statement almost verbatim from Jerome's Letter 54, "*Ad Furiam*": "*Grandis igitur virtutis est et sollicitae diligentiae, superare quod natus sis; in carne non carnaliter vivere tecum pugnare quotidie*" (PL, vol. 22, col. 554).

175. Beside his partial citation in Latin, Blain gives a reference, "Serm. de Temp. 250," but in Migne this sermon is placed in an appendix of those dubiously attributed to Augustine. Blain is paraphrasing the passage "*Inter omnia enim Christianorum certamina sola duriora sunt praelia castitatis ubi quotidiana est pugna et rara victoria*" (PL, vol. 39, col. 2302).

176. Blain gives no reference, and the precise citation (if it is such) has eluded research; the idea expressed recurs more than once in Chrysostom's treatises, notably in book 6, *Concerning the Priesthood*, Homily 20 on Romans, and Homily 11 on Hebrews.

177. No reference, but the statement is suggested by a passage in Bernard's *Liber Sententiarum*: "*Martyrium sine sanguine . . . castitas in juventute qua usus est Joseph in Aegypto*" (PL, vol. 184, col. 1152).

178. Blain's marginal reference is "Exhor. ad cas." The passage concerned is in chap. 13 of the work entitled *De exhortatione castitatis*: "*Plura exempla curiosius de nostris invenias, et quidem tanto potiora, quanto facilius est vivere in castitate quam pro ea mori*" (PL, vol. 2, col. 929). As cited, the meaning is the reverse of that applied by Blain. Modern commentators prefer an alternative reading of *facilius*, namely, *maius*, and translate, for example, "*qu'il est plus noble de vivre dans la chasteté que de mourir pour elle*" (Moreschini-Fredouille, Paris, 1895), or "since it is much more remarkable to live in chastity than it is to die for it" (W. P. Le Saint, Westminster, Maryland, 1956).

it. Beauty tempts it; objects of delight lay snares for it; pleasure woos it; luxury aims to corrupt it; social gatherings weaken it; bad example undermines it. It can be taken by surprise and led astray by the attractions of created things because what charms the senses wins over the heart, and when the heart is won, chastity can be betrayed. Its wounds are never slight, and the perils that lie in wait for it are difficult to avoid. Its enemies are everywhere, but even without them a person could lose it all by himself. Solitude safeguards it, but even there temptation finds entrance. Prayer is its defense, and yet the holiest of spiritual exercises can be disturbed by harmful thoughts. No place or time and no occupation can ensure complete protection from the tempter. There is no power of the body and no faculty of the soul that may not cause it to be lost. It is at once the most beautiful of the virtues and the one that makes the most demands for its preservation. Only God, who created it, can guard and preserve it by his grace, even though we must cooperate with that grace by constant fidelity, profound humility, an assiduous prayer life, prudence in avoiding dangerous occasions, and a courageous and total self-abnegation.

There you have at once the teaching and the practice of John Baptist de La Salle. He recommended his disciples to cherish this virtue above any other and prescribed the strictest precautions for the preservation of it. Let us hear him on this matter:

*Brothers who have made the vow of chastity and those who are preparing to make it ought to be convinced that no one will be tolerated in the Institute in whom anything exterior against purity appeared or appears. For this purpose, their first and chief care in regard to their exterior will be to make chastity shine forth in them above all the other virtues. To preserve this virtue with all the care it requires, first, they will observe moderation in eating and drinking, especially with regard to wine, which is a danger to chastity and which they will take care to dilute with water; second, they will show great reserve in all things. The first garment they will put on when rising and the last they will take off on retiring will be their robe. When speaking to persons of the other sex, they will always keep some steps away and never look them steadily in the face. They will never speak to them except in a very reserved manner and far from the least liberty or familiarity; they will take care to complete their conversation with them in few words [this last refers to mothers of pupils].<sup>179</sup>*

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179. The text printed here in italics is from the 1726 printed version of the Rule; the rest of Blain's text agrees with the 1718 manuscript Rule; his final clause refers to mothers of the pupils. The marginal reference to chapter

The holy Founder's personal example was even more instructive to the Brothers than what he told them. He was prudent in this matter to the point of scruple. The least appearance of overfamiliarity, of taking a liberty, however slight, with regard to women, offended his sense of modesty. To witness any such behavior grieved him, and his disapproval could be seen in the severity of his expression and the cold reserve in his attitude; the way he looked spoke volumes even if he did not say a word. He was so fastidious about this that he would never accept any assistance that women might sometimes have rendered. He was traveling one day in company with other clergymen when they came to a stream running across the road. It was deep enough to prevent people from going any farther if they did not want to get their feet wet. But there was a woman there prepared to carry anyone across for payment. John Baptist's companions availed themselves of this needed help without hesitation and without so much as thinking there was any need for hesitation, but he, with his concern for chastity, preferred to walk across the stream, dressed as he was, rather than accept from the woman a service that offended his sense of modesty. Some of his fellow travelers laughed at him about this, although others were edified.

He did not like so much as to hear the word *impurity* and resembled Saint Paul in not wanting it ever to be mentioned among the Brothers.<sup>180</sup> He left them an instruction to this effect in his collection of subjects on which they were to converse during recreation. He recommended that they choose as one topic of conversation the different virtues, especially those that are most appropriate to their vocation. Then they were to speak about the opposite vices to make themselves aware of their ugliness and to foster a dislike for them, as well as to learn how to combat them and destroy them in their own conduct.

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20 shows that his text is from the 1726 printed version. In the 1718 manuscript Rule, the chapter on chastity is number 19. Hermans comments that Blain's claim to be quoting the Founder is badly misplaced because he includes clauses and phrases that are additions in the 1726 published version. Nor does Blain reproduce the 1726 text verbatim; he omits two clauses without indication (CL 25, 72–73; CL 10, 100–01). Beaudet questions Hermans' stricture and points out that the editors of the 1726 Rule were faithfully interpreting the mind of the Founder in adding, for example, an article recommending the Brothers to dilute their wine; this recommendation is expressed even more forcefully several times in the *Collection*, published in 1711 (CL 15, 94, 105, 131). "*La Règle de 1726*," writes Beaudet, "*ne fait qu'actualiser un conseil que La Salle avait maintes fois formulé dans le Recueil*." Hermans, if he were alive, would presumably reply that his quarrel was with Blain's claiming to quote as a text of the Founder one that was not strictly the Founder's.

180. Eph. 5:3.

But he made an exception of the vice of impurity, which he deemed it best to forget about, keeping it out of the mind and avoiding the recall even of its name.<sup>181</sup> Sometimes it was put to him that it could be useful to talk about how repulsive a vice this was, so as to intensify horror for it, but he would reply:

No, you are mistaken. You cannot touch pitch without soiling your hand, move ashes without getting some on your clothes, or go too close to a fire without getting burnt. So, we cannot speak about this dangerous vice, mention its name, or even think about it without leaving a regrettable impression on the mind. It is easier to forget about it altogether than to recall it without risk.<sup>182</sup>

Persons who suffered from temptations against purity were always sure of finding in him a tender father, full of sympathy for their weaknesses. He was a kind, patient, and understanding spiritual director who made it easy for them to open their heart to him and tell him about themselves with total trust, mentioning their failings and tendencies, however shameful. He was like an angel to them, as if his nearness scattered and put to flight the unclean spirit's fantasies. His penitents received from him words of advice full of light, grace, and sweetness. He taught them to humble themselves at the thought of the corrupt tendencies of their hearts, which inclined them to seek forbidden pleasures, and he gave them confidence and courage to purify themselves by generous and persevering self-denial. This was the aim of all the advice he gave in this regard.

Do battle with yourself, mortify your body, and you will then always be victorious in the combat against the unclean spirit. In time, by persevering effort you will rid yourself of his assaults

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181. "Collection of Subjects on Which the Brothers Should Speak During Recreation" occupies fourteen pages of the first edition (1711) of the *Collection* (CL 15) and is divided into thirty topics; Blain is referring to 23, "The virtues in general, and more especially those which are especially appropriate to religious," and 24, "The faults opposed to these virtues, the vice of impurity excepted" (*Collection*, 28). Hermans demonstrates the dependence of this compilation of topics on a list ("*Quibus de rebus nostri recreationis tempore colloqui possint*") circulated to superiors of the Society of Jesus in 1616. By a detailed comparison of the two texts, he shows the originality of De La Salle's use of the Jesuit source (CL 16, 21–39).

182. Hermans includes this saying (CL 10, 194) among those attributed to the Founder but does not comment—surprisingly, perhaps, because his usual vocabulary test is relevant: the word *pitch* (*poix*) is not to be found in *Vocabulaire Lasallien*.

and of all those natural instincts that provide him with weapons of attack. There is a definite link between a pleasure-loving and unmortified nature and this vice of impurity. But the attraction of sensuality is weakened by a contrite spirit, and the body that is disciplined by the practice of austerity ceases even to think about such pleasures. Saint Athanasius tells us that the great Saint Anthony used to say to his disciples, "The unclean spirit is afraid of vigils, fasts, voluntary poverty, and austerity of life." But when he finds someone who fattens his flesh, pampering and spoiling himself, his work is half done; the wood, the refuse, and the straw are all laid ready for the fire to be lit. All the devil has to do is to put a light to it from the flames and sparks of hell's fire ready to hand in the obscene thoughts that present themselves.<sup>183</sup>

Our servant of God was not one of those people who tone down for themselves the austere advice they give to others; he told them to do no more than he did himself. He was fully convinced that anyone who treats his servant, his body, in this case too leniently will not have to wait long for the latter to revolt. So he "crucified his flesh with its vices and concupiscences,"<sup>184</sup> and this so cruelly that he could have reproached himself at the hour of his death, as many saints have done, with having gone too far with his chastisements, with having been much too severe with himself. Mortification was the shield he used to counter the burning arrows of the spirit of darkness; because this shield was with him always, the enemy of purity found no way of wounding that virtue in him.

He made routine use of fasts, hair shirts, and the other forms of penance that the saints have used against the attacks of the unclean spirit, whose temptations readily succeed with those who pamper themselves but who steers clear of people fortified by austerities and a penitential life. Hence, there is every reason to believe that he is now among the number of those virginal souls "who sing the new song in heaven and who follow the Lamb wherever he goes."<sup>185</sup> The older Brothers who lived most closely with him and were the most intimate witnesses of his life are at one in claiming that he preserved his

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183. The sentence from Athanasius' *Life of Saint Anthony* is recognizably from section 30 of the work, although the wording is approximate (as would be natural in a spoken allusion). As for the remainder of the supposed saying of the Founder, Hermans doubts its authenticity, for it contains words such as "spoiling himself" (*délicatê*), "refuse" (*étoupe*), "sparks" (*étincelles*), and "obscene" (*obscènes*) not found anywhere in De La Salle's writings (CL 10, 195).

184. Gal. 5:24.

185. Rev. 14:3–4.

innocence untarnished, that he lived a chaste and virginal life without blemish. This impression was re-emphasized after his death. The Brothers were convinced, as they gathered to bury his body, so mortified as it was, so penitent and chaste, that they would one day witness him gloriously risen and taking his place among “the hundred and forty-four thousand who have not defiled themselves with women”<sup>186</sup> but have preserved their heart pure and undefiled.

To sum up this whole topic of John Baptist’s spirit of his priestly vocation, the ultimate proof that he possessed this spirit in an eminent degree is that he excelled in the practice of the virtues befitting it. There was, in the first place, the elevated idea he had of the sacerdotal state and of the sanctity it calls for, together with his attraction for the priestly tasks and his pleasure in accomplishing them. There was his ardent zeal for church discipline; his meticulous observance of all the church’s regulations; his love and practice of the virtues most becoming to the priesthood: namely, a perfectly religious spirit, an angelic purity, a burning zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls (I will say more about this in due course), a tender love for the church, and finally, a singular attachment to interior and vocal prayer, together with a conscientious application to the work he had to do. All these virtues shone in him, and all had their source in the spirit of his state, which he had in such abundance.

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186. Rev. 14:3–4.



## PART 2

### THE HOPE OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

[CHAPTER 12]

*De La Salle's total, even heroic, confidence in God; proven in the midst of the most serious crises; his spirit of detachment derived from this confidence; his work as Founder, providing many occasions for manifesting trust in Providence; the point in his life at which he received this grace of heroic confidence; examples of his practicing this virtue; how his disciples learn from him to trust in Providence*

Great confidence in God is a product of lively faith, and these two virtues might well have been treated together. But they are, in fact, distinct, even if they sometimes seem to be interchangeable in Holy Scripture and to form a single virtue. What I can say is that confidence is to faith what a ray of the sun is to the sun. The one is always the measure, as well as the sign, of the other. It is from faith that confidence derives its life, sustenance, and growth. If faith is meager and feeble, confidence in God will also be so, but if a fervent faith is the driving force, confidence may well reach a degree of heroism.

Who in the last century had more cause than John Baptist de La Salle to put his trust in God alone? Did anyone have more occasions to practice this virtue: desertions, misadventures, persecutions, frustrating situations, and the rest? Did anyone do so to a greater degree? He was scorned and insulted by so many, calumniated or otherwise persecuted, condemned at law, betrayed, and left defenseless. Relatives, friends, fellow citizens, benefactors, patrons, superiors, even spiritual directors, even his own disciples: so many people picked up the stone to throw at him or saw others do so, without coming to his defense or daring to declare themselves on his side.

I do not mean that he had no loyal disciples. He did—a great number whom nothing could induce to desert him. But in trying circumstances, even they often remained as silent as he did and offered no more defense of him than he did. His experience was like that of his divine Master, whom the Apostles deserted at the time of his passion<sup>1</sup> and who found no one to raise a voice in his defense among his disciples or the many people for whom he had worked miracles.

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1. Matt. 25:56.

But it was in such trials that De La Salle's heroic confidence in God came to his aid and shone forth for everyone to see. It was when all others failed him, when the world and hell were roused against him in times of venomous harassment, dire peril, and overwhelming misfortune, that he seemed most tranquil. His total trust in Divine Providence was a virtue most dear to him and also very characteristic. As we know, all the saints possessed all the virtues in an eminent degree, but there is always one that is particular to them, one that is so specifically characteristic that we might say that no one equaled them in their practice of it. Thus we can say that the meekness of Jesus Christ reappeared on earth in the person of Saint Francis de Sales; the pastoral solicitude of Saint Charles Borromeo made him a perfect image of the Good Shepherd, who gave his life for his sheep; zeal for the salvation of souls has shown us, in later times, an apostle worthy of his earliest predecessors, namely, Saint Francis Xavier; love transformed Saint Teresa into a seraph; the particular virtue of Saint John of the Cross, the first discalced Carmelite, was love of the cross; the spirit of penance achieved its masterpieces in Saint Peter of Alcantara and Saint Catherine of Cortona;<sup>2</sup> poverty made up the pattern of the lives of Saint Francis of Assisi and his followers. The same is true with all the saints: they excelled so notably in the practice of some particular virtue that it is regarded as the animating spirit of all they did, an effect of a special charism, the foundation on which their merits were amassed, the principle that guided them to high sanctity.

In line with all this, I believe that we can claim that abandonment to Divine Providence and a consequent detachment from all else constituted the special characteristic of John Baptist de La Salle.<sup>3</sup> This assessment agrees with the judgment of a saintly person who was asked to write down what he knew of the virtuous conduct of the founder of the Brothers.<sup>4</sup> He replied that although the servant of God had

2. An evident lapse on Blain's part, writing *Catherine* for *Margaret*. Eleven saints named Catherine are listed in the martyrologies, none of them associated with Cortona. Margaret of Cortona's penitential spirit had been legendary in the church from her death in 1297, when she was immediately proclaimed a saint by the voice of the people. Her formal canonization took place only as late as 1728 (which makes Blain's error more surprising).

3. A judgment endorsed by Rayez in his 1955 article: De La Salle is "one of the best representatives of the spiritual movement of self-abandonment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" ("The Spirituality of Self-Abandonment," in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 134).

4. Blain later identifies the "saintly person" as "a devout canon of Laon cathedral," previously named (book 2, chap. 11) as Canon Guyard (see below, chap. 13, note 42).

been a perfect model and an eloquent example of all the virtues, his detachment from all things and his heroic confidence in God had seemed to be his special characteristics; these virtues had shone in him so brightly that they had seemed even to eclipse all his others.

The fact is that De La Salle's complete trust in God kept him constantly humble, patient, meek, and submissive in all the events of his life, including the most trying. Nor was it unusual or exceptional for Divine Providence to require of him a sacrifice of his personal interests or even of his holiest purposes; it was a daily occurrence. I doubt whether for almost forty years there was a single day on which he was not called upon to make some sacrifice of this kind. It might be someone coming to the house to insult him or waiting at the door to hurl abuse as soon as he stepped outside. Or perhaps the church authorities had misunderstood the motives of some action of his. One day it was trouble with the Brothers or some other kind of upset within the community; another day it was annoyance from outside. Today, treachery or desertion by one or other of his disciples; tomorrow, false accusations and legal proceedings trumped up against him. One day it might be a case of indiscreet or downright foolish behavior on the part of some Brother, resulting in frustrating problems for him; the next, news might arrive of some fresh outrage suffered by his disciples somewhere. There were occasions when the authorities responsible for the maintenance of a school delayed payment to the Brothers or even stopped payment altogether; if not that, it was some other kind of trouble a well-established school had run into, perhaps a case of vandalism or else a community utterly without food, money, or resources of any kind.

It might be for a whole year on end that John Baptist found himself and his religious family confronted with famine conditions, without human assistance or hope of receiving any. It might be that he was arraigned before a court of justice with no one to defend him or show support for him, with the result that the verdict went against him and his reputation suffered. Quite often he had the experience of finding people who had befriended him turning against him and becoming his enemies because someone had prejudiced them against him. Every day saw more slanders and other humiliations heaped upon him. When he showed himself in Reims during the early days of the Institute, he was liable to be hooted at and forced to return to the community. Mud and stones were quite often thrown at him and the Brothers in Paris, Rouen, and elsewhere. The premature death of some of his most fervent disciples was another source of suffering for him, which was conducive to making him more and more detached from creatures.<sup>5</sup> As for his serious and painful illnesses, they also led

him increasingly to put his trust in God alone.<sup>6</sup> Times without number he witnessed disturbances to the life of his community, caused either by the thoughtless behavior of the Brothers or by the jealousy of rivals and the ill-will of adversaries. Repeatedly he saw his rules criticized, the community practices ridiculed, his entire way of governing censured by people who wanted to change the Institute and refound it according to their way of thinking. Worse still, it happened that his worst enemies took over the control of his community and made their own rules, changing his and introducing an altogether different way of conducting matters. They often got him out of the way by forcing him to withdraw and go into hiding or actually into exile.<sup>7</sup>

So there was no day from the time he inaugurated his life's work that was not marked by some particular misfortune. There was none on which he was not called upon to make a sacrifice to God of his own will, his routine, his health, his reputation, his position in the

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5. In book 2, chap. 4, Blain is specific about this, mentioning "over six" deaths from 1681 to 1688 and "at least forty-five" from 1688 up to the Founder's death in April 1719. An obituary register, preserved in the Rome archives, lists thirty-nine Brothers deceased up to and including 1713. *Catalogue des Frères*, published in CL 3, gives the names of six Brothers deceased from 1714 to 1717 (none is indicated for 1718 or the first three months of 1719). The total, therefore, is at least forty-five deaths (neither source pretends to be complete) during the lifetime of De La Salle. The obituary register does not include the ages of the deceased; of the six listed in *Catalogue*, Placide (Thomas Guyot) died aged 23, Maurice (Nicolas Robinet), 29; Pacôme (André Sceillier), 42; and Adrien (Étienne Le Narré), 43; the date of birth of the other two, Serapion (Pierre Gausset) and Stanislas (Pierre Jean), is not given. Blain's numerical estimate stands up well to the available documentary evidence. As for his epithet "most fervent," he justifies it in the above-mentioned chapter 4 of book 2 with his account of the deaths of Jean-François, Nicolas Bourlette, and Jean Morice, whom Blain calls simply "Brother Maurice," but whose burial certificate, reproduced in facsimile by Aroz (CL 37, 40), names him F. Jean Morice. In this connection the most notable name of all is that of Henri L'Heureux, the first *Frère Supérieur* (so to speak), a man of exceptional promise, whose premature death, in its interpretation by the Founder, left an enduring mark on the lay character of the Institute (book 2, chap. 9).

6. See below, chap. 37, note 687.

7. Blain is thinking, no doubt, of De La Salle's prolonged absence in the south, 1712–1714. At one point in his account, Blain speaks of the Founder as giving no sign of his existence to "the Brothers in France," as if they were in a different country. Twice in letters from Marseille to Gabriel Drolin, De La Salle mentions "France" in a similar way. As Poutet and Pungier say in their joint work *Un Educateur et un Saint aux prises*, "Compared with Paris, the South of France, with its provincial ways, was a world apart" (Salm, *Beginnings*, Romeville, 1979, 57). Blain even describes the Founder's withdrawal to Rouen from Paris in 1705 as a "self-imposed exile" (book 3, chap. 5).

community, or his rights in general. There was hardly a day that did not find him feeling obliged to put the work in God's hands and entrust it to the divine will, seeing it, as he did, endlessly disturbed, shaken, harassed, and threatened with ruin.

Yet, in all these different trials, which numbered as many as the hours of his life, he was never seen to be upset, worried, disconcerted, alarmed, or disconsolate. What enabled him to maintain his constant tranquility, his serene and joyful air, the peace of heart reflected in his countenance, and his wonderful evenness of temperament was his submission to God's good pleasure, his total abandonment to his guidance, and his perfect confidence in his goodness.

In one town where the Brothers are located, the community experienced such a great dearth of resources, such a dire state of need, that they began to despair of being able to continue where they were. They tried to convince their Superior, when he was with them and experiencing the same hardship, that it was necessary to move from a place where they could hardly survive and where no one appreciated their gratuitous and charitable work for poor children. De La Salle showed surprise at such talk. He asked the Director, who had spoken to him, "Do you believe in the Gospel?" Then, to the Director's reply that he did, he simply quoted these words of Jesus Christ: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things will be provided for you,"<sup>8</sup> and this closed the conversation. It was not long before the Brother concerned experienced the truth of the Founder's assurance. He has testified personally that from that time onward Divine Providence never ceased to supply the community's needs.

Countless times people knew that John Baptist was hoping against hope when all help of creatures failed, and he offered the Brothers Divine Providence as an infallible resource. His experience of God's care on past occasions of extreme need in his communities was the reason he gave for his confidence. In truth, his trust was never disappointed. We have seen in the account of his life how well this virtue of hope enabled him to triumph over all adverse circumstances, be they the result of cruel persecutions, tragic famine, or protracted and painful lack of resources—to triumph, in fact, against all that the world and hell could bring against him.

If we look for the starting point of this special grace he received from God, we will find that it was a reward for the heroic resolution he once took to beg for bread if necessity required it.<sup>9</sup> He made this

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8. Matt. 6:33. According to Lucard (*Vie*, II, 23), the story relates to Chartres, and the Director concerned was Hubert Gérard.

9. An allusion to the vow pronounced with Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart on 21 November 1691 (Blain, book 2, chap. 10). The formula used

vow at a time when the flesh, the devil, and the world were doing their worst because of his heaven-inspired decision to give away his possessions and make himself poor after the example of Jesus Christ and for love of him. From that moment his conquests of self matched the progress he made in becoming poor to the point of real hardship. Nothing from that point on seemed to upset or trouble him at all. He counted on God as on a most loving Father. He had no anxiety for the morrow or for the day. He rested in the arms of Providence like a child in the arms of its mother. The one thing he was concerned about was to remain faithful in allowing himself to be led without wishing to know where or how.

To place himself so completely in God's hands is to practice a virtue so rare that it is found only in perfect souls; we can call it the pinnacle of heroism. It brings to perfection the other virtues, sustaining and activating them. It presupposes in the person who has it death to self, complete mastery of the passions, renunciation of all selfish interests, indifference to life's vicissitudes, and total resignation to God's good pleasure. Yet, in De La Salle it seemed like second nature, so accustomed was he to practicing it and with such ease.

The first great test of his possession of this virtue came when he distributed all his goods to the needy and found himself having to depend on charity.<sup>10</sup> Having reduced himself to poverty for the love of God, becoming as poor as the people he had fed in their time of need, he wanted at least once to satisfy his wish to experience the humiliations that go with being poor. So he simply went begging from door to door. It was a triumph of poverty following on a triumph of charity, both achieved by a former canon reduced to penury. He regarded the bread he begged as a present from heaven and chose to eat it kneeling, as a mark of respect and an act of devotion. This was his beginning in the way of abandonment to Divine Providence, and the practice of it eventually became so easy to him that it was as if his Father in heaven had given him keys to open granaries and store-

contains the words "even if we were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone." We know this formula only from Blain's citation of it, but the phrase just quoted reappears in the formula pronounced in 1694 by the Founder and twelve companions, the original manuscript of which is preserved in the Rome archives.

10. Blain's account of this heroic gesture (book 1, chap. 15) is a watershed experience aptly placed by the biographer as the culminating chapter of book 1. De La Salle's distribution of his personal wealth, preceded by his resignation of the canonry, has been the subject of much informed commentary and critical insight in modern writing on the Founder; see especially Aroz, CL 26, 290–92, and CL 42, vol.1, 222–27; also, Sauvage and Campos, 51–57 (English translation, 22–38).

houses whenever he was in need. His trust in God provided and assured an inexhaustible source of everything that was needed, and he never turned away anyone wishing to join his community, being confident as he was that it was no harder to feed fifty than to feed two.

It happened, in fact, in a very few years that he had sixty people to feed at Reims, and he managed to do this solely by what Providence sent. The young people grouped in three departments, as I have explained, made up a large community, and they had no more anxiety for the morrow than he who had admitted them.<sup>11</sup> They were as poor as Job on his rubbish dump, but they were content to leave John Baptist to look after all that was needed to live. He in his turn left everything to Providence. All he wanted from them was fervor in the service of God, and their total concern was not to disappoint him. He was convinced that the necessities of life are freely provided for those who seek the kingdom of God and his justice.<sup>12</sup> His one fear was that spiritual tepidity and neglect might find their way into the community. His faith gave him a steadfast hope that when fervor is present in the midst of poverty, grace abounds and daily nourishment is assured. But he was no less convinced that negligence in God's service is always followed by a withdrawal of heavenly favors and a shortage of necessary resources.

The house at Vaugirard, near Paris, the second cradle of the Institute,<sup>13</sup> was soon filled with people who had nothing to depend on except De La Salle's confidence in God. Everyone who applied for admission was taken in, although only one in ten chose to stay. Yet the number of those who did persevere reached nearly forty, from which we may calculate that between four and five hundred came and left.<sup>14</sup> Who fed these hungry people at a time of disastrous want,<sup>15</sup> if not the

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11. Blain's reference is to book 2, chap. 6, where he tells the story of how the three departments (the Brothers conducting the Reims schools, the seminary for country schoolmasters, and the group of boys seeking to become members of the Society) developed. In putting the total personnel here at sixty, Blain is "improving" the situation somewhat. Bernard suggests a figure of "fifty" (CL 4, 86), and Blain, near the beginning of book 2, chap. 10, says that the three communities amounted to "about fifty persons."

12. Matt. 6:33.

13. The house in rue Neuve at Reims was the first cradle, a term Blain uses twice for it in book 1, chap. 10. He narrates the Vaugirard period of the Institute (August 1691–April 1698) in book 2, chaps. 10–14.

14. Gallego (301) draws attention to this statement as an example of Blain's tendency to inflate his figures, even when this involves contradicting himself. In book 2, chap. 11, Blain states, "there must have been three or four hundred who entered, since thirty-five persevered." Even this lower figure is inadmissible, as Gallego shows by reference to *Catalogue* (CL 3).

heavenly Father to whom the saintly priest commended their care? Poor house as it was, it became a shelter for the needy but also for some who had no reason to fear that they might have been reduced to penury. The latter had been comfortable enough, but they sought to follow Jesus in his nakedness and poverty, and these remained because it was grace that had prompted them to come. Others came only to spare themselves a few days' hunger, and these only passed through because it was not God's Spirit that had brought them.

I would also regard the so-called *Grand'Maison*, to which De La Salle went with the novices when they left Vaugirard, as a glorious monument to his trust in Divine Providence.<sup>16</sup> He was daring enough, with the needy group to look after, to rent this place for 1600 livres a year without knowing where the first sou was to come from.<sup>17</sup> But he acted without undue worry, confident that the one for whom he was doing it and in whom he placed all his trust would take care of the rent; he was not disappointed. God did more for his servant; against all human expectation, he provided the furniture and equipment needed for such a large house. The place was soon filled with applicants to join the community; their upkeep, which again depended on the bounty of the Father of us all, was duly and unfailingly provided.

Another effect of John Baptist's total trust in God's care was that his disciples developed the same kind of confidence in Divine Provi-

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15. Namely, the severe winter of 1693–94, described by Blain in book 2, chap. 12, with particular reference, of course, to its impact on De La Salle and his disciples. For the historical background, Gallego (267) refers his readers to R. Mandrou, *Louis XIV en son Temps* (Paris, 1978), and J. Wilhelm, *La Vie Quotidienne des Parisiens au Temps du Roi-Soleil 1660–1715* (Paris, 1977). The gravity of the situation is alluded to in Madame de Sévigné's correspondence. Her letter to Comtesse de Guitaut dated 12 February 1694, begins, "All too readily, Madame, do I agree with you, and I am deeply moved by what you tell me of those poor people dying of hunger. More pitiful stories still could be told, and about much greater numbers, but we have to think principally of those whom we can and must help" (*Madame de Sévigné: Correspondance*, Paris: Duchésne, 1978, vol. 3, 1024).

16. The circumstances of the transfer to the *Grand'Maison* are described in book 2, chap. 14. According to Blain, the initiative for the move came from the Founder, but Maillefer, in his 1723 biography, insists that the idea came from De La Chétardie, the curé of Saint Sulpice, and he does not modify this view in 1740; he is content there to take over from Blain such details of information as that the rent was 1,600 livres and that a charitable lady, Madame Voisin, made a donation of 7,000 livres for the furnishings (CL 6, 124–27).

17. Poutet (vol. 1, 64) notes the discrepancy between this statement and the Founder's own assurance to Gabriel Drolin in his letter of 4 September 1705: "As far as expenditure goes, I want to look ahead, not behind me" (*Lettres*, 19). The source of the 1,600 livres payable as rent is unknown.



dence, a result he had dearly wanted to happen. He had made himself resemble them by voluntarily and unreservedly depriving himself of all his earthly possessions; now he saw them become like him, content in their poverty and looking for no other income or guarantee of security than the promise of Jesus in his Gospel to all who leave everything for his sake. So long as he had retained his substantial benefice as a canon and the wealth he had inherited, his words had fallen on deaf ears when he preached confidence in God and indifference to material needs; his teaching had served only to increase their misgivings. But their anxieties disappeared when they saw their leader as poor as they were. His example assured them, and they stopped worrying about the future, living as they did alongside a man who before their own eyes had taken practical steps to reduce himself to the same penurious state as their own.<sup>18</sup>

The children of the family thus saw their father bereft of all earthly resources, his thoughts centered only on the heavenly kingdom that Jesus Christ promised to all who leave everything to follow him.<sup>19</sup> And so, like their father, they began to look for the spiritual treasures that lay hidden in their poverty, and they came to regard the accumulation of virtue as the only fortune worth seeking. Thus generously disposed, they became aware as time passed that poverty enriches and that those who cherish poverty are never in need. They learned by experience that God is good to those who hope in him and who seek him with a simple heart.<sup>20</sup> They witnessed personally that their Founder had reaped the hundredfold<sup>21</sup> in the life of poverty he had embraced. They saw that the joy in his serene and unclouded features reflected the joy in his heart, that his sacrifice was rewarded by an abundance of graces, and that his utter trust in Providence had brought him sure proofs of the heavenly Father's concern for him. With good reason they could say of him that he was blessed in having placed all his trust in God, in having made the Lord his one hope and support.<sup>22</sup>

Even though John Baptist was so evidently rewarded for his great confidence in God, always to the advantage of his disciples, some of them occasionally fell short of trust. They wanted to put limits to his confidence by saying that he should be guided more by what human

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18. The report of this dialogue between the Founder and his disciples is in book 1, chap. 11. For a discussion of the psychological and spiritual factors leading to the resolution of the dilemma, see Sauvage and Campos, 52–70 (English edition, 22–38).

19. Mark 10:21.

20. Lam. 3:25.

21. Mark 10:30.

22. Jer. 17:7–12.

prudence suggested. These individuals, with their assumed superior wisdom and also with an element of self-interest, grumbled about their Superior's charity when during the famine he was admitting to the community all who applied, provided they showed any sign of goodwill. They complained that he was sharing with strangers bread that did not suffice for his own children. In fact, he never did turn away anyone who seemed to wish to give himself to God. That the time was one of general food shortage and high prices did not seem to him a sufficient reason for refusing them entrance. This caused some Brothers to take umbrage and to be bold enough to point out to him that prudence should be a guide to charity. In this they were trying to make him share their own fears about the present and concern about the future, but neither consideration made any impression. He was too well aware that the necessities of life are refused only to those who are neglectful in the practice of virtue and confidence in God. His one reply to these Brothers, who were too cautious in his view, was, "He who sends us these candidates will provide the wherewithal to look after them."

[CHAPTER 13]

*Examples of his great detachment from all that was not related to God; tests of his confidence that God allowed him to face; his seemingly limitless trust in Providence; his instructions to his disciples on trust in God*

De La Salle's trust in Providence was matched by his detachment from the things of this world. Once he had disposed of his possessions, he was inwardly free of all things. It seemed as if the reward for his generous renunciation was a total absence of cupidity in him. But what is more surprising is that he was never afterward concerned about the temporal possessions of his Institute. At any rate, he never showed any desire to procure such possessions for it or any worry about making secure whatever it had. He left everything in God's hands, entrusting to him the welfare of the Christian Schools just as confidently as he had entrusted himself. For this reason in the various foundations he made, he was satisfied with what was offered for the food and maintenance of the Brothers—often not one-third, certainly not one-half, of what was needed. He was utterly disinterested and sought only God in everything. He deemed himself rich enough as long as he had occasions to render his Lord some service and procure his glory. He seized such occasions even when the material requirements for

the undertaking were not met. He left in God's hands the care of the Brothers he appointed, and they, inspired by his example, made light of even the most obvious deficiencies.

This was noticeable in the majority of the schools he established in various parts of France, but especially at Darnétal and Rouen. He provided two Brothers for the first of these places and accepted for them both the very modest stipend that had been paid to the one previous teacher, now deceased, and that had hardly sufficed to keep even one man in food and other necessities.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, after a short period of time, even this pay was stopped,<sup>24</sup> and the Brothers were left to the care of Providence by the same people who had called them to Darnétal. Even so, De La Salle would not withdraw them from a place where they were badly needed and where they were doing much good. He remained convinced that our Father in heaven, who provides for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field without their having to make provision for themselves,<sup>25</sup> would not fail to ensure the subsistence of people who were working for him. So to him he entrusted the welfare of the Darnétal Brothers, and there has been a community there from that time until the present, still dependent on the goodness of Providence.

As for the Rouen foundation, De La Salle seemed more disinterested. He agreed to staff a school in each of the parishes of Saint Maclou, Saint Godard, Saint Eloi, and Saint Vivien in return for the allowance offered by the managers of the Poor Bureau, which amounted to just six hundred livres. This meant, in fact, that he accepted almost full responsibility for the upkeep of the twelve Brothers whom he appointed for the education of the poor children of Rouen. He was content to have gained, even at the expense of his community, a chance to do such great good, and from then on it never occurred to

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23. According to Blain, telling the story in book 3, chap. 2, the salary was 50 écus (equal to 150 livres), which the previous schoolmaster had received in addition to his board and lodging. De La Salle normally requested 300 livres for each Brother as a modest means of subsistence, but in this case, as Blain stresses, he accepted 150 livres for two Brothers because he hoped to make a foundation in nearby Rouen.

24. The reason, as Blain had learned, is that the pastor of the parish where the school was situated had joined the appellants against *Unigenitus*, and the founders of the school therefore withdrew their support (but as Blain wryly comments, it was the two Brothers, not the curé, who were thus penalized). For the Darnétal foundation, see the two extant letters of De La Salle to Father Deshayes, who had requested the services of the Brothers, together with the commentary in *Letters*, 126–30. See also, *Darnétal et ses Communiqués*, by Hermans and Jacquesan, in *Bulletin*, 1963, 72–80.

25. Matt. 6:26.

him not to defray the cost from the Institute's resources. Nor has it since occurred to the managers of the Bureau to establish a better proportion between the salary they are paying the Brothers and the work the Brothers are doing.<sup>26</sup>

It is true that almost all the other towns where the Gratuitous Schools have been founded have shown a greater sense of justice, if not actual generosity, to the Brothers who labor in them. They have seemed to vie with one another in being kind to them and repaying with interest De La Salle's readiness to oblige. Christian Schools have sprung up in Reims, Avignon, Calais, Boulogne, Troyes, Marseille, and elsewhere, and the authorities have substantially increased the Brothers' salaries and enlarged their premises. It has seemed as if God in his goodness has felt obliged to ensure this just recompense for a man whose only interests were his, a man who worried not at all about the material needs of his religious family but counted on Providence to supply them all.<sup>27</sup>

Such detachment and total submissiveness to God's will left De La Salle so indifferent to material possessions that he was always ready to return with Christian generosity anything that had been given to him in charity. We saw earlier how, at Rethel, a counterclaim was put in for a considerable sum of money that had been left him in a will. His right to this was incontestable, but it was challenged by the deceased person's heirs. The case did not last long; John Baptist settled the matter in their favor by conceding his right to the money, which had been intended for the best of good works but which the heirs saw only as something they had been deprived of.<sup>28</sup>

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26. In the FSC Rome archives is a manuscript extract from the minutes of the Bureau's deliberations of 2 August 1702 that details the conditions laid down for the ten Brothers (not twelve as Blain mentions). The document is reproduced in facsimile in CL 40, vol. 2, 87–89. Blain devotes the greater part of book 3, chap. 2, and all of book 3, chap. 3 to the foundation at Rouen. His description of the difficulties encountered there by the Lasallians taxes belief, but in reading it, we have to keep in mind that the biographer was writing in Rouen, where he had lived since 1710, five years after the arrival of the Brothers. Rigault devotes some ten pages to the Rouen beginnings (vol. 1, 280–90), but an even more satisfying account (abundantly signposted with bibliographical references) is given by Gallego (390–96).

27. To supplement Blain's account of the foundations he mentions in this paragraph (Calais in book 2, chap. 16; Avignon and Troyes, book 2, chap. 17; Marseille, book 3, chap. 2; Boulogne, book 3, chap. 8) and those intended by his term "elsewhere," see the section of Poutet, vol. 2, headed "*Les Collaborations efficaces*," 142–225.

28. Blain mentions this episode in book 1, chap. 11, but in terms that suggest he is simply lifting the story from Maillefer's 1723 biography. Aroz es-

Another example of his lack of self-interest and his incomparable compliance with whatever God willed for the Founder was the Saint-Denis affair, which earned him a vicious court judgment and several other worries as well. He had used his own resources to purchase the house there, but he surrendered his claim to it.<sup>29</sup> Hardly less admirable was his willingness to part with a sum of fifty thousand livres bequeathed to him in a will for the purchase of a novitiate house.<sup>30</sup> He lost this as a result of a maneuver on the part of his rival and arch-enemy, who managed to divert the money into his own funds.<sup>31</sup> The

establishes the historicity of the incident and presents, with commentary, the legal documents concerned (CL 42, vol. 1, 347–71).

29. Blain provides, in book 3, chap. 9, a detailed and deeply interesting account of De La Salle's ill-starred involvement with Abbé Clément in a project for a teacher-training establishment at Saint-Denis. The biographer claims to be taking his information from the Founder's own memorandum of the episode—another precious document that like so many used by Blain, subsequently went astray. Legal documents in the case have survived in the Paris National Archives (CL 40, vol. 1, 171–73), and only their existence, remarks Gallego (468), imposes belief on a scarcely credible story.

30. Book 3, chap. 1; the house was the Grand'Maison, which the community had rented for five years from 1698 and which the owner had now decided to sell. Blain's figure of 50,000 livres for the legacy of which the Founder was deprived seems unrealistic when contrasted with the total of 5,000 mentioned by Maillefer in 1723 and maintained in 1740 (CL 6, 150–51). If Maillefer is correct, the legacy would have made a modest contribution to the sum of 45,000 livres needed to purchase the house (Gallego, 371).

31. The Founder's "personal enemy" has made frequent appearances in Blain's biography, starting with book 2, chap. 14. Blain uses various terms to refer to him ("adversary," "rival," "antagonist," "persecutor") but nowhere names him. On the contrary, he asserts (in book 2, chap. 18) that his intention is to avoid "giving any details which might arouse any suspicion as to his identity." This caution inevitably led to the laying, deliberate or otherwise, of various false trails connected with the mentions of this hidden foe. Subsequent biographers, by general consent, have allotted the role to Joachim Trotti de La Chétardie, who succeeded Henri Baudrand as pastor of Saint Sulpice in 1696, eight years after the Lasallians' arrival in Paris.

The most recent major biography of the Founder, however, that of Saturnino Gallego, proposes a different candidate for the role in the person of Antoine Brenier, a member of the Society of Saint Sulpice holding the rank of Visitor; Aroz outlines his career in CL 41, vol. 2, 308–18. Gallego presents a strong argument for his theory on pages 367–69 of his biography. What seems a fatal flaw in the hypothesis is that in book 3, chap. 13, Blain says that "his great enemy no longer lived" when De La Salle returned to Paris after his long sojourn in the South of France and that the Founder confided to a few of the Brothers that "he would not have dared to come back if that man were still alive." Blain says at the end of the previous chapter that De La Salle arrived back in Paris on 10 August 1714. Brenier died on 25 August (Aroz, 317);

latter wanted to use it for a project of his own that was not according to the pious intention of the donor. It was a crying injustice to the saintly Founder, and he felt it more deeply because he had considered the legacy a gift from heaven in answer to the prayers he had the Brothers saying for a long time. The money was badly needed for the purchase of the large house I have mentioned, which he was eager to acquire because of its secluded situation, the purity of the air, its extensive grounds, and the fact that although it stood apart from any neighbors, it was conveniently near Paris. But he offered the disappointment up to God, as he had offered so many others, in silent acceptance of the divine good pleasure.

There were other incidents in which De La Salle showed the same unconcern about himself, the same readiness to surrender his rights. There were the times, for example, when his own disciples, including some in whom he had shown special confidence, took over possession of schools for their own profit or claimed legacies intended for the schools. When the Brothers at Mende put him out of their house and claimed for themselves the revenue that had been given to the community in his name, he showed no emotion but remained his usual serene self.<sup>32</sup> He manifested the same heroic patience when the Brother whom he had appointed to direct the training establishment for country teachers claimed the money bequeathed for this excellent work by the good parish priest of Saint Hippolyte, thus diverting to him what belonged to the Society. Even when on this occasion the Brother compounded his sacrilegious theft by telling his Superior that he did not know him and wanted nothing to do with him, the latter maintained his usual meek demeanor.<sup>33</sup>

De La Chétardie had died six weeks earlier, on 19 June. Gallego takes this difficulty into account but leaves the reader to judge the case.

32. Blain's lurid account in book 3, chap. 6, of the happenings at Mende has provoked more discussion perhaps than any other part of the biography. Not only has his treatment been questioned at length in subsequent full-scale biographies, but there are in the Rome archives a half-dozen unpublished short studies of the problem. Reasoned argument with recourse to documented facts provides the needed balance. The crux remains (Guibert draws attention to it on page 535 of his biography,) as to why, if the account is the travesty it seems to be, the Superior General who commissioned Blain's biography allowed the passage to go into print. Brother Timothée had been a close associate of the Founder at the time of the events described and had, in fact, been personally involved.

33. Blain tells the story of Nicolas Vuyart's debacle in book 2, chap. 15. In contrast with their critical attention to the Mende episode, almost all later biographers have followed the line of Blain's unsympathetic treatment of the disciple whom De La Salle had chosen thirteen years previously (in 1691) to pronounce with himself and Gabriel Drolin the "heroic vow" (book 2, chap.

In situations as unexpected as these and faced with incidents so calculated to test even the staunchest virtue, De La Salle was never taken by surprise and never seemed to flinch. These occasions showed the man as he really was, possessing nothing, asking nothing, concerned only to do what God asked of him. Such losses left him content because God had permitted them; therefore, they seemed to him so many gains. He looked at things with the eyes of faith, and so life's rebuffs appeared to him like strokes of good fortune: they provided opportunities for self-sacrifice, thus making him richer in his possession of God the more they deprived him of all that was not God.

Far from contending with anyone who did him an injustice, De La Salle seemed by his humble demeanor, modest silence, and meek and gracious air to be the one who should apologize; he seemed grateful that the injustice had not been worse. He was always ready to practice the Gospel maxim about giving our tunic to the one who had stolen our mantle.<sup>34</sup> One day, in fact, he put this into practice quite literally. He was returning to the house at Vaugirard when he was confronted by two robbers who demanded his cloak. "Here it is," he said, taking it off and handing it to them. "It's yours if you want it." The two villains were taken aback by such an unexpected reaction but still more so when they examined the booty. The cloak was in such a wretched condition that they handed it straight back to the owner and went off, disgusted with themselves for what they had done.

De La Salle was no more attached to life than he was to material goods. His tranquility at the prospect of death was admirable; there was even an element of joy mingled with it. Several times he was dangerously ill, but he showed no concern about himself or about what might happen to his work. He seemed to give no thought at all to the likely consequences of his death and appeared quite unworried

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10). Rigault was the first to offer a more objective view and, in three eloquent pages (235–37), to enlist the reader's sympathy for the unfortunate Vuyart. The most persuasive apologia is to be found in Poutet, vol. 2, 103–06; the argument is that Vuyart's disassociating himself from De La Salle and the Institute (condemned at law a few weeks previously) may have been a temporary ploy to ensure the survival of the Saint Hippolyte teacher-training establishment and of the free school catering for the children of the parishes of Saint Hippolyte and Saint Martin. The training college collapsed, but Vuyart continued to direct the school during the remaining fourteen years of his life. Gallego (376–77) restates and endorses Poutet's argument. Against it seems to be the Founder's remark to Gabriel Drolin in his letter of 27 April 1705: "I am quite sure that you have no intention of following the example of Brother Nicolas and that is the reason I have placed so much confidence in you" (*Letters*, 70–73). But even this Poutet takes into account.

34. Matt. 5:40.

about the fate of his Institute or about the tearful sorrow his death would cause his spiritual children. He was constantly disposed to offer himself as a victim to God's good pleasure, ever open to what God willed for him. Like Saint Martin, he was equally ready to die or to continue his life in labor and suffering.<sup>35</sup>

It was not just in bouts of serious illness that this was shown. It is normal for such occasions to arouse in well-disposed people a pious wish to make preparation for death. But it was when he was in full health and was suddenly confronted with danger, the kind of situation that causes panic and leaves no time for reflection, that the holy priest "held his soul in his hands," as the Royal Prophet expresses it,<sup>36</sup> ready to surrender it to its Creator. There was an occasion when two brigands witnessed this attitude. They had stopped him with swords in their hands and looked like men out for blood and murder. But they found his reaction to their threats quite without fear, and their surprise increased when he calmly said, "You can kill me if God has permitted you to do so." They took to their heels, unable to bear the look of a man who clearly had nothing to fear from death but who reminded them that they had good reason to fear it themselves.

In the opinion of one of his disciples<sup>37</sup> who knew him best and has supplied the principal reminiscences on which this work is based, it would require a separate volume to record all the occasions that exemplified De La Salle's spirit of detachment and the perfect disinterestedness with which he managed the temporal affairs of the Society. When he was making a new foundation, the question of any material

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35. The reference to Saint Martin has its origin in the earliest biography of the Saint, written by his friend Sulpicius Severus. The eighty-four-year-old Martin's disciples, standing by his sickbed, implored him not to abandon them by dying; he, turning to the Lord, answered their tears with the words, "Lord, if I am still needed by your people, I do not refuse the labor; your will be done!" (*"Domine, si adhuc populo tuo sum necessarius, non recuso laborem; fiat voluntas tua!"*) (PL, vol. 20, col. 182). The words have a place in the office of the saint as the second antiphon of Vespers.

36. Ps. 119:109 (the "Royal Prophet" is, of course, King David, once thought to be the author of the entire Psalter).

37. Anonymous, in keeping with Blain's (self-imposed?) rule not to mention by name any Brother still living at the time the biography was being written. But the reminiscences here quoted identify the author as Brother Thomas (Charles Frappet), who entered the Society in 1690 at the age of twenty and became a right-hand man of the Founder for the practicalities of establishing the Institute. Rigault (215) outlines his curriculum vitae; *Rivista Lasalliana* (December 1937, 358–69) features an extensive pen-portrait of him by Fratel Remo. But the most sustained analysis of Thomas's complex character is to be found in Lett, *Les Premiers Biographes*, 210–32.



gain that might result concerned him not at all. He was more interested in how many Brothers were needed to work there and whether they would be able to lead a regular, unworldly, prayerful, and fervent life. He was less preoccupied about their material subsistence, confident that the Master of the vineyard in which they were going to labor would not forget them.<sup>38</sup> It was in such terms that he would answer those Brothers, less detached than he was, who would say to him that confidence in God does not rule out precautions dictated by common sense, that they should not leave everything to God when they could help themselves and take steps to ensure their daily bread, and that God, after all, has not undertaken to work miracles to supply their needs or to send a raven with food as he did to Elijah.<sup>39</sup> Cautious talk of this kind did not please him. "Stop worrying," he would say; "Providence will take care of us!"

Despite this firm reliance on the care of the Father of humankind, the God who sustains and governs the whole world, the Founder nevertheless recognized that his disciples' virtue would often be put to the test. He had no doubt that the Lord would sometimes seem to have forgotten about them and would thus give them and him serious occasions to practice patience, trust, and submission to Providence in circumstances of dire need. But when this happened, he manifested joy. He seemed happier when the sharp effects of poverty were felt by his communities and their virtue was thus put to the test than when they were materially well placed. In such circumstances he would exclaim with undisguised satisfaction, "Brothers, this is something to bless God for!" At other times of total want, happier again than any money-maker presented with all the gold of the Indies and Peru, he would jubilantly recall some words of Saint Teresa that he seemed to relish: "Brothers, what a joy it would be to die of hunger!"<sup>40</sup> Then he would urge them to put their trust in the one who never fails those who hope in him and who matches his care of people to the degree of their confidence in him. Practicing, as always, what he preached, he would go and ask God with the simplicity of a child to supply from his fatherly goodness the needs of the community. Because of the confidence with which he presented himself before the throne of God, he there found favor.<sup>41</sup> His prayers were heard, if not

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38. Matt. 20:1ff.

39. 1 Kings 17:4–6.

40. The allusion is to *The Way of Perfection*, in chapter 2 of which Teresa, having exhorted her poverty-stricken Sisters at Ávila to trust in Providence, continues, "If in so doing you were in fact to die of hunger, I would say, 'Happy the Sisters of Saint Joseph's Convent!'"

41. Heb. 4:16.

immediately, sooner or later because he persevered with them. The Brothers always knew he had been praying for them because the needed resources duly arrived in providential ways.

He was speaking one day with a devout canon of Laon cathedral, who was in the house making a retreat under his direction, when word was brought to him that there was nothing to provide supper for the large community. The Founder simply recollected himself in prayer, asking God not to fail his servants, and at that instant someone arrived at the house to offer a generous alms. The visiting canon was an eyewitness of this, and it is from him that we have the story, together with his personal comment that trust in Providence was the distinguishing feature of De La Salle's spirituality.<sup>42</sup>

On another occasion of still more urgent need, Providence bestowed an even more remarkable favor on this man whose trust was unlimited. The community had to vacate the house temporarily to carry out repairs, and the Brother in charge of the business had hired men to move the furniture. It was only when he came to pay them that he discovered he had not the required money. He went off in dismay to explain the problem to his Superior and begged him to find the cash needed to pay the men, who would otherwise be furious and be guilty of much wrongdoing. The Brother became more worried still when De La Salle lightly replied, "Gold and silver I have not,"<sup>43</sup> but grew calmer when the latter added that he would have to turn to God for help. The Brother had little confidence in his own prayers but much in those of his spiritual father, whose eminent virtue he revered, and he begged him to seek the answer with his own prayers. The day went by; no money appeared, and the Brother began to worry again. He went once more to beg the saintly priest to do

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42. The mention that the canon was making a retreat under De La Salle's direction identifies him as the "Father Guyard" (sic), a "canon of Laon," spoken of in book 2, chap. 11. As pastor of Saint Pierre at Laon, Pierre Guyart had been instrumental in obtaining from the Founder two Brothers of exceptional quality, Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Bourlette, to take over the school founded (independently of De La Salle) by Adrien Nyel (a native of Laon). Perhaps Guyart's principal claim to the grateful remembrance of the Institute is that it was his request for information that evoked the letter of his friend, Charles de La Grange, concerning the Founder's deposition from the superiority in 1702. Blain partially quotes the letter in book 2, chap. 20; such subsequent biographers as Lucard, Guibert, and Rigault quote it more fully (and accurately). The Founder's personal esteem for Guyart is attested by Bernard (CL 4, 68); Guyart's regard for De La Salle is evident from a letter he wrote to Brother Timothée on 26 October 1734, thanking him for the two volumes of Blain's biography that had been sent to him (CL 8, appendix).

43. Acts 3:6.

something about finding the means to pay the men he had employed, but he received the same reply: he must seek God's help. The Brother returned to his work; De La Salle went to place this need before the Lord. His prayer was not in vain. The Brother found the money he needed quite by chance; while gathering together the smaller items of furniture and moving them, he felt an interior prompting to look inside a cupboard that remained unlocked after having been carefully emptied of its contents. It had been standing outside in the courtyard, waiting to be taken away. No one had noticed anything inside it, and the Brother I am speaking of had looked more than once to make sure nothing had been left there. He had quite a surprise, therefore, when he followed the urge to check just once more and then found money there, especially because it was exactly the amount of forty écus<sup>44</sup> owed to the workmen. He did not doubt for a moment that this was a gift from heaven, sent in response to his Superior's prayers, and he went off to express his joyful appreciation to him, telling him that God had heard him and had provided what was needed. The humble man seemed uncomfortable with these complimentary words, and after hearing the full story of this act of divine goodness to his religious family, he simply replied that thanks must now be given to God and his Providence admired. "For you see," he said, "this is how God helps those who put their trust in him."

Another time, things were so short at the Vaugirard community that there was no way of providing for the Brothers, not even for the sick. John Baptist instructed one Brother to fetch an earthenware bowl and go with him. He took the Brother as far as the entrance to the great Seminary of Saint Sulpice and told him to wait there while he went to ask the Father Superior the charity of some broth for his sick Brothers. He had no difficulty in obtaining this obvious need from a man compassionate by nature who devoted his personal resources to helping the poor. In fact, this kind of help was repeated often during subsequent years. It was Father Leschassier,<sup>45</sup> who was then at the head of the great Paris seminary, Tronson having gone to live in retirement at Issy.<sup>46</sup> His continuing charity provided much relief for the

44. The écu was worth three livres.

45. François Leschassier (1641–1725) had been associated with the Seminary of Saint Sulpice from 1660, when he began his theological studies there. He received his doctorate in 1668 and remained on as a junior member of the seminary faculty. As such, he would have known De La Salle during the latter's brief period at the seminary (October 1670–April 1672). Leschassier succeeded Tronson as Superior General of the Society of Saint Sulpice in 1700. For his important testimonial concerning De La Salle, see chap. 9, note 126.

46. The Seminary of Saint Sulpice had a country house of studies at Issy, southwest of Paris, and it was there Tronson had gone when he retired in

sick members of what was certainly the poorest community in Paris, relief especially welcome during Lent and other periods of fasting.

The community was so poor that only forty sous a day could be afforded for meat for the seventy members. Still less could be spent on wine, and the normal drink, as I pointed out earlier, was water. Illnesses, of course, occurred there, but they were neither prolonged nor frequent—and what place in the world is without illness? The astonishing thing is that De La Salle managed to feed such a large community on such a small outlay and keep it in good health amid the kind of austerities that are practiced in the most penitential communities. There is only one thing to be said about it: “*Digitus Dei hic est*—The finger of God was there!”<sup>47</sup> The same Brother<sup>48</sup> relates this story:

When I was bursar at the Grand’Maison in Paris, it often happened that there was either a complete shortage of bread or meat or an insufficient amount for the whole community. On such occasions I would speak to our good Father, who simply told me to serve what God sent; his goodness would provide, and so it did. At the end of the meal, there was as much left over as on days when more ample quantities had been served. When this happened, both the cook and I, knowing that we hadn’t felt able to provide half of what was needed for sixty people, looked at each other in wonderment, each asking if someone had brought more food without telling us. The phenomenon happened three or four times, and we noticed that on each occasion the kindly Father of our community had spent almost the whole day in prayer.

When the Brothers first began to live at Saint Yon, our saintly Superior appointed me to the community along with two or three other Brothers. He sensed that I was not keen to go to a place where there was a shortage of everything, and to encourage me, he said as he gave us his blessing, an unusual thing for him to do, that Divine Providence would not fail us. Some time later, we wrote to tell him that the extreme poverty of the house was causing us much suffering. In his reply he said he believed that to provide for our subsistence, God wanted us to take in boarding pupils at low cost and to give them a sound education and a good upbringing.<sup>49</sup> “By doing this,” he wrote, “you will

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1697 at the age of seventy-five. Two years earlier, he had participated there in a series of discussions concerning the Quietist doctrines. Taking part with Tronson were Bossuet, Louis de Noailles (then bishop of Châlons), and Godet Desmarets. Their adverse judgment was given in the so-called Issy Articles.

47. Exod. 8:19 (Vulgate).

48. Thomas (Charles) Frappet; see above, note 37.

gain the affection and esteem of the people of that town where so far you have not been shown any. You may still have to suffer a little, but it will not last long. Meanwhile, be sure that God will always give you what is necessary to live if you serve him well." Time has proved the truth of his words.

One day, I was working in the garden at Saint Yon, preparing the ground for planting vines, trees, and other things. He stopped me from doing this, saying that he had strong hopes that God would put the Brothers in possession of this house and that to beautify it or otherwise improve it would only add to its value and make it dearer to buy.<sup>50</sup> Experience has shown the wisdom of this precaution. Several people came to look at the house with a view to buying it but found it in such poor condition that they went away in disgust. Nevertheless, the devil wanted to keep us and our Superior out of a place where God would be served "in spirit and in truth,"<sup>51</sup> and he tried all imaginable means to get rid of us once and for all. His method was to encourage people who were hostile to our Brothers to post notices all over Rouen saying that the Saint Yon property was available on lease. But he didn't stop at that. While these "For Rent" signs were confronting the public everywhere, notice was served on the Brothers to vacate the property as soon as possible because it was not available either for sale or for lease to them. It was a worrying situation, and M. de La Salle had recourse to his usual weapons to resolve it. In other words, he turned to prayer with his usual confidence in God, and thus invincibly armed, he triumphed over all the efforts of his enemies. They brought all their cunning to bear and at first were successful in influencing Madame de Louvois, the owner of the Saint Yon property, to withhold sale from the Brothers or, at any rate, to put so high a price on it that we could not think about buying it. But God holds in his hands the hearts even of this world's mighty ones and directs all events to their proper

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49. Blain gives his account of the beginnings of the *pensionnat* at Saint Yon in book 3, chap. 4. The pioneering nature of the foundation is discussed by Battersby in chap. 16 of his biography and by E. A. Fitzpatrick in *La Salle, Patron of All Teachers* (Milwaukee, 1951, 390–91). The present reminiscence of Brother Thomas was to have the unexpected distinction of being quoted in the great *Dictionnaire de Pédagogie*, by Ferdinand Buisson, vol. 2, 1518 (although secondhand via Lucard's biography of the Founder).

50. Aroz draws attention to the fact that the terms of the lease of the property specifically prohibited the "uprooting and transplanting of any trees" and suggests that this may have been in John Baptist's mind at the time of the incident recalled here (CL 42, vol. 1, 307).

51. John 4:23.

ends. He caused it to happen that his servant was able eventually to purchase on very favorable terms a place that he both wanted and badly needed.<sup>52</sup>

I may say in conclusion that M. de La Salle never had reason to regret having despoiled himself of all his goods for the love of one who, being infinitely rich, made himself poor for us. His Society never lacked what was necessary, and he never went into debt. Oh, there was one occasion when he owed a certain baker a hundred écus, but he gave him an assurance that the bill would be settled at the end of three weeks. The baker duly agreed not to insist on being paid before then, but he went back on his word and served a demand note for payment at the end of the week. This sort of compliment was the last thing our gentle Founder expected, but taken by surprise as he was, he showed no more embarrassment than if he had a large capital to draw from. In a sense he had, but it was his great trust in God; after all, trust is a key that for those who know how to use it opens all the treasures of our heavenly Father. In this particular situation, our Superior, after celebrating his daily Mass, took me with him to call on two or three persons, who readily opened their purses for him. It was now the baker's turn to be taken by surprise at being paid so promptly; he had not expected it at all, and when his demand note was duly settled, he felt ashamed at the shabby way he had acted.

Another Brother<sup>53</sup> relates the following story:

For several years, it was my job to take care of the material needs of the community. The house was so poor that I often found myself in the predicament of being short of everything. When such a crisis occurred and we were without resources of any kind and without any hope of obtaining any, I would explain the situation to our kindly Father. It was not that I expected to receive any money from him, just a word of encouragement and perhaps a glimmer of hope. His usual response was that I must be patient

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52. Blain describes the circumstances of the acquisition of the Saint Yon property in book 3, chap. 16. The transaction took place the year after Brother Barthélemy replaced De La Salle as Superior; the deed of purchase was signed (on 8 March 1718) not by De La Salle but by Barthélemy and the bursar, Brother Thomas. The original document is in the National Archives, Paris (CL 40, vol. 1, 201).

53. Blain's wording gives the impression that he is using the reminiscences of another witness, but the context suggests that it is still Brother Thomas he is quoting.

and that God would provide. But these words told me that he had no more funds to dispose of than I did, and I would feel more worried than ever. Any hope I had disappeared altogether. Our need became more urgent as time passed, and my anxiety drove me back to his room. His door was closed, and although I knocked more than once, he did not open it. I finally looked through a crack in the door, and there I saw him in prayer. I grew tired of knocking and waiting, and I went off with nothing in my pockets but feeling I would have to go and try my luck somewhere. I went out to see if I could obtain any of the needed goods on credit. When I returned to the house, the Brother in charge of the door told me I had to go and see our dear Father in a certain church—Notre Dame, perhaps, or maybe it was Saint Geneviève. I found him in one of them, and he handed me the money I needed. I never found out how he came by it.

The Saint Yon community was one day without either food or money, and De La Salle told Brother Joseph<sup>54</sup> to go with another Brother and beg charity at the nearby Carthusian priory.<sup>55</sup> They went but were sent away feeling ashamed. Their request was refused, and the justification given for the refusal was that they should not have come to the town if they did not have a sufficient income to live on. So the two Brothers went off to seek help at a dozen or so important houses in Rouen because they had fared so badly at a monastery that had been established and enriched, as others have been, by the generous alms of the faithful. They were even more ungraciously received so that the only consolation they had was to have shared the experience of Jesus in being despised and rejected by everyone. The total

54. Brother Joseph (Jean Le Roux) entered the Society in 1697 at the age of nineteen and died in 1729 (CL 3, 34). He has a special place in the history of the Institute as being the first to hold the administrative post of Visitor whose letters of appointment, written and signed by the Founder, have come down to us. They are preserved in the Rome archives (*Letters*, 159–60, and the illustration on page 65). Joseph was later elected Assistant to Brother Barthélemy. The present mention of him by name is the only one in Blain's work on the Founder, but he makes a prominent appearance in the biographer's *Life* of Brother Barthélemy (CL 8, 28).

55. The site of the priory is commemorated by Place des Chartreux, shown on present-day maps Rouen at the end of rue Saint-Julien, which forms one side of the Saint Yon property and terminates in the other direction at the Place de l'Église Saint-Sever. The priory (named for Saint Julien) was of relatively recent foundation at the time about which Blain is writing, dating only from 1667. It was suppressed in 1790 together with some eighty other Carthusian houses distributed throughout France, victims of the French Revolution (*Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, Roma, 1975, vol. 2, col. 828).

receipts of all their visits amounted to seven or eight livres, and this meager sum had cost their self-esteem a great deal. Those who had given them money added so much abuse that it seemed as if they wanted some return for their almsgiving or to get even for the annoyance they had suffered by being approached for charity.

The Brothers got back to Saint Yon very weary and told their good Father about the insulting refusals they had met with and all the ill-treatment they had collected instead of alms. They then handed over to him something they had found in the street quite near the entrance to their house, a thick packet of documents that someone, evidently connected with the Carthusian priory, had let fall. "God be blessed," said the saintly Superior. "It seems that it is his will for the Carthusians to help us after all. Take them this packet you have found." He was not disappointed in his expectations; the Carthusians expressed many thanks that the documents had been found and returned, and now they felt due compassion for their neighbors and had three or four sacks of grain delivered to them.

De La Salle's zeal for the salvation of souls made him turn his house into a refuge for any young people who happened along and showed some sign of goodwill. The poorer and more destitute they were, the warmer the welcome they received. As long as they seemed to be seeking God, they found the door open to them. He closed his eyes to mere human considerations and took in these people in their rags and with nothing to call their own. He did not worry about how they would be fed. He left that in the hands of Providence and simply took on the task of instructing them and bringing about their conversion. He never asked them for any return but was happy to practice purely gratuitous charity toward them. If they chose to leave the house, even though it was in their interest to stay, his paternal heart felt sad for them because he foresaw the dangers to their eternal salvation that they would confront in the world.

The same zeal for the salvation of everyone would have made him admit the whole world, if it were possible, into his humble community house, but especially the poor, who are born and grow up in a deplorable ignorance of the eternal truths. Those whom he met in the street were welcome, if they took him at his word, to follow him and find a place in his house, the shelter of all and sundry. As soon as they arrived, he gave them some clothes. More often than not, his efforts and generosity were wasted. People like these were used to an idle life and could not accustom themselves to a regular routine. They would walk out, wearing the clothes he had given them and without so much as a word of thanks. But this did not make him change his attitude. He believed he had achieved much in getting them to make



a general Confession or learn something of the truths necessary for salvation. The Brother who tells us all this adds the following story:

I forgot to mention one incident that showed the extent of our dear Father's detachment from the things of this world and of his trust in Providence. He took me with him one day in Paris to exchange some out-of-date coins at the Mint. When we arrived, he told me to see to the business while he went to say some prayers in the church of Saint Leu.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, I made a bad job of the transaction, and the amount I received in exchange for our coins was forty livres short of the correct total. But I had not noticed this until I handed the money over to M. de La Salle. He sent me back to the Mint immediately to ask for the deficit and explain my blunder while the incident was still fresh in their memory. But I was not well received. I went back to Saint Leu, where he was waiting for me, and told him there was nothing to be done about the loss because no notice had been taken of my explanation. "God be blessed," he answered, "but I am not pleased with you about this; the money was needed to clear a debt."

His extraordinary confidence in God led him to discount human support of any kind. It is quite astonishing to study his life closely and realize how little he depended on such help. The initiative was always with Providence. He followed unresistingly to wherever Providence led him and with equal readiness left places when Providence called him away. He let people leave him, gave up tasks he was engaged in, abandoned plans and projects he had formed, and even enterprises already under way, whenever Providence seemed to want this. His wish was not to take a single step to advance his work unless Providence was leading him, as it were, by the hand.<sup>57</sup>

We have seen how he agreed to being deposed as Superior when his enemies brought this about and how he did everything to have his disciples agree to it, even rebuking them in public for their resistance to higher authority.<sup>58</sup> We have observed him a thousand

56. Before its transfer in the 1770s to a new site and a freshly built grandiose edifice across the Seine, the Paris Mint was situated on the right bank near Pont Neuf, a few minutes' walk from the church of Saint Leu.

57. A statement that has the support of a passage in the Founder's letter of 28 August 1705 to Gabriel Drolin: "As for myself, I do not like to make the first move in any endeavor. . . . I leave it to Divine Providence to make the first move, and then I am satisfied" (*Letters*, 18.17).

58. An allusion to the occasion described in book 2, chap. 19, when the Brothers vociferously protested to the vicar-general, Abbé Pirot, that they would not accept the new Superior he sought to impose. The Founder, says

times refusing to defend or justify himself against calumny, brute violence, blatant injustice, and harassment of every kind. He went to Paris at the request of M. de La Barmondière, but not long afterward he showed that he was quite willing to leave it at the request of the same person. He freely accepted that he must return to Reims and let his hopes fade of establishing his Institute in the capital. When about to depart, he went to say goodbye to the man who had asked him to come to Paris; no word of complaint or reproach crossed his lips; no sign of discontent or annoyance showed in his demeanor.

As we have seen, only Divine Providence had made it possible for him to organize the classes in the parish of Saint Sulpice; worldly considerations did not enter into his procedures at all. His predecessor in charge of the school was left quite free to obstruct him, spread false tales about him, turn people against him, and generally make life impossible for him. John Baptist bore in silence and complete serenity the maneuvers, intrigues, tricks, and deceits employed to get rid of him and the Brothers. He offered no defense whatever. He was like a second Jonah and seemed to slumber amid the dreadful storms<sup>59</sup> that buffeted his little bark and threatened to wreck it right at the start of the Paris venture. He left God free to act in this crisis as in so many others; the fate of the enterprise was in his hands, and for his part he was content to see it stifled at birth if that was what God wanted.<sup>60</sup>

But where am I to stop? It would be necessary to go over the whole life of the saintly Founder if I wished to detail all the incidents that bore witness to his utter trust in God and his perfect resignation to whatever God willed for him. What other explanation can there be for his refusal of the gracious and advantageous offer of the late bishop of Chartres, a person of much influence at the court of Louis XIV, to obtain letters patent for him from the king?<sup>61</sup> Anyone else, less detached than he was from merely human considerations, would have jumped at the offer because it would have meant security for the Institute against a thousand reversals of fortune. But De La Salle's thoughts ran only on what God willed, and he had no wish to anticipate the divine moment; because that did not seem to him to have yet arrived, he was content to wait. Moreover, he wanted Providence

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Blain, "appalled at their resistance to superior authority, called for silence and, in his turn, spoke to the Brothers, trying to make them obey."

59. Jon. 1:5.

60. Blain recounts the episode in full, with much psychological insight and more than one touch of humor, in book 2, chaps. 7–8.

61. Bishop Godet Desmarets (see above, chap. 8, note 103) died twenty-four years before Blain's volumes were published. His offer to obtain the letters patent is mentioned in book 2, chap. 16 (although Blain's stated intention there to relate the circumstances later on is nowhere implemented).

alone to have the honor of winning this favor from the monarch, which is what happened after his death.<sup>62</sup> It was to this effect that he formulated his reply to the prelate who had wished to render him this service. He thanked him for the extraordinary kindness with which he had honored himself and his society, but then he said that he did not think it opportune to take any steps at that time; the Institute of the Brothers was a work of Divine Providence, and it was Providence that would take care of the letters patent. Much the same answer was what he gave certain Brothers who wanted, some years before the Founder's death, to set in motion the procedures for obtaining the document.<sup>63</sup> "Be guided by Providence," he told them. "You can apply for the letters patent after my death if you want."

Here, then, is an example of why he declined offers of human help. God was the sole object of all his desires, and God's will was the only rule for all his undertakings. He took God's way of acting as the guiding principle of his own and let himself be led by Providence. If he ever seemed concerned, it was when nothing was lacking in the community, for then there was no opportunity for making sacrifices; if the poverty of the house was less than total, the means were diminished of practicing confidence and entire trust in God. One day, he showed two of his senior Brothers a trifling sum of about twenty écus, which was, in fact, the only money in the house. "Look," he said, seeming quite upset; "what will we do with all this money? You can see that we are not really poor people." What poverty in a house where sixty livres was deemed a kind of treasure! What a spirit of poverty in a man who felt too rich with twenty écus in front of him to provide for the needs of his religious family!

Poor for the sake of Jesus Christ, there was little he omitted to say or do to inspire the same spirit in his disciples. His most earnest and frequent instructions turned on this subject. He wanted all his spiritual sons to be men who would put their trust in Providence. If they fell short of what was needed on their journeys, which they normally undertook, like the Apostles,<sup>64</sup> without money, satchel, or food

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62. In September 1724; Blain narrates the procedures adopted and the difficulties encountered in the closing chapter of book 3, chap. 19; his information is presented and supplemented with a commentary by Rigault (*Histoire Générale*, vol. 2, chaps. 2–3). The parchment of the Letters Patent is kept with that of the Bull of Approbation in a display cabinet in the Rome archives.

63. A document preserved in the Archives départementales de la Marne proves that between 1712 and 1715, the Brothers at work in Reims addressed a petition to Le Tellier's successor as archbishop of Reims, François de Mailly, asking him to use his influence to obtain the letters patent. The text of the petition is quoted with commentary by Hermans in CL 11, 86–88.

64. Mark 6:8.

rations, he told them it was because of their insufficient trust in God. He wanted them to share his own trustfulness when traveling across country to wherever they were sent. Even the fifteen-year-old boys who made up the junior novitiate I have mentioned were to travel in the same spirit.<sup>65</sup> All went from Reims to Paris, from Paris to Reims, or elsewhere without money or provisions; their Father in heaven, who looked after them when they were at home with John Baptist, would continue to care for them when they left on a journey. This attitude filled right-thinking people with admiration, a fact I have more than once noted. Brothers who set off to start a school in one or another part of France undertook the journey in the same spirit of dependence on Providence. It did not occur to the authorities who were establishing the school to provide traveling expenses for its first teachers,<sup>66</sup> and De La Salle did not think of asking them to do so, although the community they were living in was too poor to provide for them.

The saintly priest, in fact, would not have recognized as his own disciples any he did not see fully trustful in Providence or showing anxiety about material needs. Nor was it only in the matter of food and other general material needs that he wanted them to be indifferent and detached. He wished them always to be resigned to God's good pleasure<sup>67</sup> in every situation without reserve, in sickness no less than in health, in misfortune no less than in success. His desire for them was that in all life's troubles, in all their setbacks, they should be like Job, contented with everything, resigned to all that happened, ready to praise God always and to say with joyful acceptance, "The Lord gave; the Lord has taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord!"<sup>68</sup>

Here is something he wrote to one of the Brothers: "Do not have any anxiety about the future. Leave everything in God's hands, for he will take care of you."<sup>69</sup> He advised the same Brother in another letter:

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65. The Founder's decision, in 1690, to transfer to Paris the young postulants (*les petits Frères*, as Blain calls them) and the disappointing result of the transfer are dealt with by Blain in book 2, chap. 6.

66. An exception was provided by Grenoble, as recorded by Blain (see the letter of Abbé Canel quoted in book 3, chap. 6). He adds that De La Salle was agreeably surprised by the terms of this letter, above all by the offer to pay the Brothers' traveling expenses. An article in *Bulletin* (July 1952) provides documentary evidence that the three Lasallians who established the school at Mende in 1707 were also reimbursed for their journeys (that of Ponce from Avignon, 9 livres, and that of Mathias and Sebastien from Paris, 60 livres).

67. Commenting on this passage (in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 148), Rayez notes that the word *resignation* as used by Blain here has the specific seventeenth-century connotation of a loving acceptance of God's will (more, that is, than simply an uncomplaining stoicism).

68. Job 1:21.

Make sure, I beg you, that in spite of your illness, you leave yourself entirely in God's hands, for it is his right to dispose of you as he wishes. Take care not to let yourself be discouraged by anxieties and ailments; life is full of them. While you are young, you should prepare yourself to accept them courageously and, as you have already been doing, make use of the maxims of the Gospel to welcome them and draw profit from them.<sup>70</sup>

The acceptance he called for in the case of physical sufferings he required no less in the spiritual domain. Here, for example, is what he wrote to a Brother who had told him he was troubled in this way:

If God through his divine and adorable Providence wishes you to remain in your present state, my very dear Brother, you ought to will what he wills and give yourself up entirely to his guidance. We are committed to this by our religious profession, and we ought continually to adore the plans that Providence has for us. If you wish to leave the state you are in to seek consolations, it is to be feared that you are seeking your own consolation rather than the God of consolations.<sup>71</sup>

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69. *Letters*, 101.

70. *Ibid.*, 102.

71. *Ibid.*, 83.

## PART 3

### THE CHARITY OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

#### [CHAPTER 14]

*De La Salle's charity shown by its fruits, not by miracles  
and visions; the first such fruit, his attraction for God  
and the things of God; his inclination toward solitude  
and silence as a sign of this virtue*

*"Filioli mei, non diligamus verbo, necque lingua, sed opere et veritate,"* says the beloved disciple, the Apostle of charity, as we may call him. "Little children, let our love not be just in words but shown to be true by deeds."<sup>1</sup> Charity that is not practical, that is not shown in acts, is false. True love is manifested by what it does; its works bear witness to it. To make us understand this, the spouse in the Song of Songs tells his beloved how she must show her love for him: "Make me as a seal for your heart," he says, "a seal for your arm,"<sup>2</sup> meaning that when her love for him burned brightly in her soul, it would enable her to do great things for him. Her heart would strengthen her arm to act for him, and she must gauge the ardor of her love by the excellence of the deeds it inspired. "When love is great," says Saint Gregory, "when it is strong, it accomplishes great things and readily suffers much, but it is seen to be weak and languishing when there is no quality of the heroic in its deeds."<sup>3</sup>

This is the criterion by which we must judge John Baptist de La Salle's love for God; any other standard would be suspect. His actions, undertakings, sacrifices, and sufferings—all these are the only witnesses I will call upon to prove the excellence of his charity. They are, after all, the only witnesses that Jesus Christ admits. He told the Apostles, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word."<sup>4</sup> "He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me."<sup>5</sup> The

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1. John 3:18.

2. Song of Sol. 8:6.

3. Blain's marginal reference, "Hom. 50 in Evang.," is a misprint for "Hom. 30 in Evang." (only forty of Gregory's homilies on the Gospels are extant). Blain is here elaborating the following text from the homily on Jn. 14:23–31: "*Numquam est amor Dei . . . otiosus. Operatur etenim magna, si est; si vero operari renuit, amor non est.*"

4. John 14:23.

5. John 14:21.

great proof of love is to sacrifice ourselves for God. Love holds nothing back. "Ardent love accomplishes great things but esteems them as small," says Saint Thomas. "It never grows weary, and the most prolonged labor seems to it but brief."<sup>6</sup> A love without limits sets no limits to its deeds. It achieves all things and endures all things. Its sacrifices are endless, but it holds them all of no account. It is ever conscious that more is required of it, and it seeks only to give more. To think of God, to act, suffer, and die for God, having sacrificed everything for him, is proof and evidence of the love he deserves and of the love that makes people saints.

It is not miracles, therefore, or visions, or any of the other extraordinary gifts with which the life of most saints is replete that prove the eminence of De La Salle's love of God. It is well known that such favors have nothing to do with perfection, that a person can be a saint without them and may be granted them without being a saint. Saint Paul implies this when he says that all such prerogatives of grace will come to an end but that charity will never do so. "*Caritas numquam excidit*—Charity never fails."<sup>7</sup> Jesus Christ says as much specifically in declaring that on the last day he will reject many who will have worked miracles.<sup>8</sup>

It may well be that John Baptist de La Salle was favored with such graces as these, which people esteem so highly and take as signs of holiness. But if so, God has left us in ignorance about them.<sup>9</sup> If any of his spiritual directors had left us some such testimonies about him or if any mention of such things had escaped him in speaking to his most trusted disciples, no doubt I would be able to enrich my narrative with detailed accounts of divine communications. But no, his interior life, like that of countless other holy persons, will be revealed only on the last day; until then it must remain hidden and unknown.

We would, indeed, know nothing about De La Salle if he had not been observed by others, if a great many people had not witnessed with their own eyes the endless examples of his virtuous conduct,

6. Blain's marginal reference, "Opusc. 61" (a misprint for 60?), leads to the passage from "On the degrees of love: third degree"—". . . *operatur magna et reputat parva* . . . *operatur diu et reputat breve*" (Paris: Vivès, 1858, vol. 6, 458–59).

7. 1 Cor. 13:8 (Vulgate).

8. Matt. 7:22–23.

9. But in the chapter immediately following the present one, Blain will be quoting testimonies relating to De La Salle's extraordinary gift of contemplation. He will devote an entire chapter (25) to examples of the Founder's charism for converting sinners, and in an appendix to the present work, he will relate "certain incidents that seem to have contained an element of the miraculous," some of which occurred during the Founder's lifetime.

and if his disciples had not watched his every move to study how he behaved. But if all these have been able to tell us what they have seen, they have not found it possible to disclose anything about his interior life, for the simple reason that he took such pains to conceal it. The sustained and total silence he observed on everything concerning it made it impossible for anyone ever to penetrate its secret. This is why I had to say in the foreword that there was nothing to go on regarding his interior life in the way of revelations made by his spiritual directors, personal writings found after his death, or confidences made to persons nearest to him.<sup>10</sup>

We know only what his actions tell us, and we would know nothing at all if those actions had not had witnesses in the persons of those who lived with him for a period of forty years and who were entitled to use the beloved disciple's words about what they have told us: "What we have seen and heard and touched is what we declare unto you."<sup>11</sup> Their witness is above reproach; it is free of indiscretion, prejudice, illusion, and error. If not, we would have to accuse the witnesses of deliberate lying and duplicity, in which case we might as well say the same thing about everything we know of history. We must limit ourselves, then, to facts and deeds to judge De La Salle's love for God and for his neighbor; it is the effects of his charity I will record, for they are the true signs and incontestable proofs of it.

In the religious instructions John Baptist wrote for the use of the Brothers, the saintly Founder enumerates as part of his explanation of the first commandment these five marks of an authentic love of God: first, to think often of God; second, to speak often of him or to wish to hear him often spoken about; third, to be faithful in carrying out our duties as thereby fulfilling God's will; fourth, to be well disposed to everyone but especially to our enemies; and fifth, to exercise ourselves in the love of God by frequently expressing our love for him and repeatedly directing our attention to him.<sup>12</sup>

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10. The statement is made and developed at length in an article entitled *Dessein de cet Ouvrage* and somewhat misleadingly printed as if it were the concluding section of *Discours sur l'Institution des Maîtres et des Maîtresses d'Écoles Chrétiennes et Gratuites* (CL 7, 1–115). Having stated there that the life of a saintly person is normally based on testimonies provided by confessors and spiritual directors and on self-revealing writings of the person concerned, Blain concludes: "But nothing of this kind has served for [a biography] of M. de La Salle." Campos, in the introduction to his doctoral thesis, takes Blain to task for this statement and its development. Campos's discussion not only provides the necessary groundwork for his thesis; it also has the effect of enhancing our appreciation of the value of Blain's two volumes. (CL 45, 45–85)

11. 1 John 1:3.



In all this, more than on any other topic, John Baptist spoke from the abundance of his heart.<sup>13</sup> In this enumeration of the marks of perfect charity he painted a self-portrait. It is a fact of experience that when love takes possession of the heart, it also assumes control of the mind and directs the thoughts of the latter as surely as it prompts the desires and inclinations of the former. People's thoughts dwell on what they love; they think much about what they love much, increasingly so according to the intensity of their love. Love establishes such a close relationship between mind and heart that the surest way of knowing what anyone loves is to find out what he frequently and readily thinks about. His thoughts are drawn away only with difficulty from what his heart is attached to. The accurate measure of a person's affections is the continuity of his thoughts. "*Vis nosse quid amas; attende quid cogitas*—If you want to know what you love, pay attention to what you think about,"<sup>14</sup> says Saint Lawrence Justinian. Richard of Saint Victor aptly remarks in his admirable explanation of the degrees of perfect charity:

Does it not seem that the heart is well and truly pierced with love when the flame of divine charity penetrates to the essence of the soul and takes total possession of the mind, when it fills our thoughts and binds them so closely to the Beloved that we cannot forget him or think of anything else but him? Whatever the lover says or does, his mind is always imbued with the thought of the loved one, is always engraved with the loved one's image, so that all else fades from memory. By night as by day, in sleep as when the reasoning faculty is active, the mind is occupied and held fast by the Beloved.<sup>15</sup>

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12. The paragraph is taken from *The Duties of a Christian to God*. Hermans remarks that it is quoted "very freely, to the point even of considerable distortion" (CL 10, 76), but his comment seems somewhat severe if we compare Blain's words with the source, especially the reply to the question "*Pouvons-nous avoir quelque marque que nous aimons Dieu?*" (CL 21, 74).

13. Matt. 12:34 (Douai).

14. Blain's marginal reference for this citation is *Lignum vitae*, Justinian's treatise on charity, chap. 4.

15. Blain gives the marginal reference "*De gradibus violentae* (misprinted *violenta*) *caritatis*." He is freely adapting two separate passages: "*Nonne tibi corde percussus videtur; quando igneus ille amoris aculeus mentem hominis medullitus penetrat, affectumque transverberat interim ut desiderii sui aestus cohibere vel dissimulare omnino non valeat?*" and "*Nonne vere et absque ulla contradictione animus ligatus est, quando hoc unum oblivisci, aut aliud meditari non potest? Quidquid agat, quidquid dicat, hoc semper mente revolvitur perennique memoria retinetur hoc; dormiens somniat, hoc vigilans omni hora retractat*" (PL, vol. 196, col. 1209).

Because the continual thought of God is an effect of great love for him, we may gauge De La Salle's love by the care—rather, if the expression be allowed, by the holy obsession—he had to occupy his mind only with God, the reason for his strong desire for solitude and silence.

The Book of Job speaks of kings who mastered their passions and raised themselves above all earthly desires to make solitary dwellings within themselves and abide there with God.<sup>16</sup> John Baptist de La Salle was like one of them. First, he rid himself of the burden of wealth to run more freely in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Then he retired to the solitude of the small property he had rented and tried to hide there from the attentions of his fellow clerics, friends, and townsfolk. People had to take him by surprise to find him; they had to watch for the right moment to be able to speak to him. He never left his haunt without necessity, and his reluctance to appear in public made his obligatory visits brief. He was like a bird of passage that alights unwillingly on the ground and is off again in a moment. It was useless for his friends, whenever they managed to catch him, to complain that he was unsociable; it did not make him any more familiar with them or happier in their company, or cause him take leave of them without a renewed wish not to see them again.

This is how he spent the years between establishing his Institute in the town in which he was born and moving to the capital city of the kingdom. In Reims he was like an anchorite who chooses to dwell in a cave. The desert Father, Arsenius, was not more careful to flee the company of town dwellers.<sup>17</sup> This was so because he knew that to think only of our Creator, we must not think of his creatures and that the surest way of not occupying our thoughts with people is to avoid meeting them. If persons arrived at the house likely to interrupt his communing with God, he withdrew to some remote corner to get out of their way; this he managed so effectively and for such lengthy periods that he was found, if at all, only after a prolonged search. He was hardly more accessible even to his own disciples. Of course he led and inspired with his presence the community exercises and rendered the other services to them that charity required, but oth-

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16. Job 3:14. Blain gives this reference, basing it no doubt on the Vulgate, but the relative clause is his own.

17. "Arsenius never visited his brethren, contenting himself with meeting them at spiritual conferences. The abbot Mark asked him one day why he so much shunned their company. The saint answered, 'God knows how dearly I love you all, but I find I cannot be both with God and with men at the same time, nor can I think of leaving God to converse with men'" (*Butler's Lives of the Saints*, edited by Thurston and Attwater, New York, 1956, vol. 3, 147).

erwise he kept to himself and continued to converse with God. His room was a hideout where others could not conveniently join him because there was hardly space in it for him to kneel down there.<sup>18</sup>

It was the same in Paris as in Reims: love of solitude, a passionate attraction for a secluded life. The house at Vaugirard was for him, as for his disciples, a place of continual silence where they were allowed to use their voice only to praise God or to speak about him. At that time his combining the duties of bursar with his responsibilities as superior and confessor did not make him any less fond of solitude and recollection. The extreme poverty of the house, in fact, saved him much worry about the housekeeping or the temporal needs. There were few business dealings to distract him.

The transfer from Vaugirard to the Grand'Maison caused neither him nor his disciples to lose their spirit of recollection. The closer proximity to Paris did not cause him to go out more or to start visiting. His whole concern, here as elsewhere, was to live alone with God. His fear of losing this love for solitude led him to make frequent and prolonged retreats, at times in the community house, at times in the nearby friary of the Discalced Carmelites,<sup>19</sup> sometimes alone, and sometimes with the Brothers. Such retreats usually lasted ten days but often went on for fifteen days, sometimes for a month or more.

De La Salle's liking for solitude was never fully satisfied until Saint Yon became his home.<sup>20</sup> There he found complete freedom to live alone with God. It was situated at the entrance to one of the largest and most populated cities of the kingdom, to which all kinds of strangers came to do business, but he lived there as hidden and unknown as Saint Benedict in his cave. If he had occasion to go into Rouen, he found compensation for the loss of his beloved solitude in

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18. Maillefer, not given to exaggeration, had already in his first version conveyed a similar impression: De La Salle had "chosen for himself a little hideaway capable of accommodating only one person at a time" (CL 6, 72). Bernard's description is "a little garret right at the top of the house" (CL 4, 65). Visitors to rue Saint-Laurent in Grenoble can still see the "most remote and elevated" part of the house where, says Blain, "three people could not have managed to squeeze together" (book 3, chap. 11).

19. In his first reference to the Grand'Maison (book 2, chap. 14), Blain mentions that it was situated "a little above the tollgate, near the Carmelites, on the main road leading to Vaugirard."

20. In August 1705, although his presence in Paris continued to be frequently required and the capital remained his official address. The document detailing the terms of the lease of the Saint Yon property by the Marquise de Louvois to De La Salle is in the National Archives in Paris. Aroz includes it in facsimile with a commentary richly supplementing Blain's information (CL 42, vol. 1, 296–317).

the unkind behavior of the people, who were unfriendly to the Brothers and therefore to him.<sup>21</sup> But he had little to do with anyone and was recognized only by those who saw him in company with the Brothers. He was hardly bothered at all by visitors to the Saint Yon house; few, if any, called to distract him and interrupt his communing with God. He gave his attention to the training of the novices there, but as soon as one of their community exercises was over, he either went off to his poor room or else stayed in the chapel to continue his devotions before the Blessed Sacrament. Only the call of charity made him interrupt his conversation with God, for love of whom he gave his attention to the sick members of the community, the confined students, the young boarders, or the Brothers. Only they could feel able to call him from his cell and make him surrender his silence and peace for a work of mercy.

When obedience or some business matter took him away from Saint Yon, it was no small source of mortification to him. His only consolation was that it was God's will that required him to go and that he could be sure of finding God everywhere. But even this thought did not prevent him from using all diligence in dispatching the business that had taken him from his solitude; he wanted to be free as soon as possible to go back there. If the matter kept him away for a long time, he made up for the interruption by retreats of several days' duration; the loss had to be made good.

When De La Salle, late in life, made a lengthy stay at the Grenoble community, he visited the nearby Grande Chartreuse<sup>22</sup> and almost yielded definitively to the desire to be done with mundane affairs. At the sight of this famous monastery, sanctified already for more than seven centuries<sup>23</sup> by the holy presence of the many solitaries who had spent their lives there, he had difficulty resisting a sweet longing to remain there forever. During his visit to this celebrated place, we could say of him what Saint Luke says about Saint Paul during the Apostle's stay in Athens: "His spirit was stirred within him."<sup>24</sup> John

21. Blain describes in book 3, chap. 3, the rough treatment accorded the Lasallians in Rouen—in terms, remarks Gallego (392), that are hard to swallow—and returns to the topic in chap. 33 of the present work.

22. Nearby, relatively speaking—some fifteen miles uphill, not a deterring prospect for De La Salle, even at the age, as he then was, of sixty-two.

23. The buildings that De La Salle saw in 1713 (and that remain today) were relatively new at the time of his visit, the construction having been begun in 1676 after a fire had destroyed the existing monastery. Saint Bruno had founded the Carthusians on the site as early as 1084 (not quite, therefore, the "more than seven centuries" asserted by Blain). Unique and striking photographs of the interior of the Grande Chartreuse are included in Rousset, *J. B. de La Salle: Iconographie*, Rome, 1980, plates 126–30.

Baptist's spirit made him feel that he would never again find rest away from the silence of this monastery. As he watched the Carthusian monks in their recollection, he felt envious of them; he wanted to be like them and become one of them. Only a feeling of doubt as to whether this would be in line with God's will prevented him from taking the necessary steps.<sup>25</sup>

He would dearly have liked his desire to be ratified by an inspiration from above or by the approval of holy and enlightened persons. He gave up his aspirations only when the celebrated Sister Louise, about whom I have already spoken, assured him that it was God's will for him to continue his care of the Institute, telling him at the same time that he must bear the sufferings and cross of this responsibility up to his death. He yielded to her words, believing them to be prompted by the Holy Spirit, and made a sacrifice to God's good pleasure of a desire that had seemed to him to promise heavenly manna in the desert to which he had come.

He had the consolation of being able to make a long retreat at the mountain hermitage, which was under the care of Sister Louise.<sup>26</sup> He came from there aglow with fervor, like Moses descending from the mountain,<sup>27</sup> and returned to the lowly dwelling of the Brothers at Grenoble. God seemed to wish to compensate his servant for the sacrifice he had made of his longing for solitude. When he returned from the South to Paris and thence to Saint Yon, he was able to resign his superiorship and be completely free to enjoy the seclusion and give his entire attention to the work of his sanctification. Even the visit that obedience required him to make to Paris at this time to claim the legacy he had been left did not interrupt his retired existence.<sup>28</sup> It meant only a change of place from Saint Yon to the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, where he was free even of the company of

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24. Acts 17:16.

25. Blain relates the visit to the Grande Chartreuse in book 3, chap. 11. The testimony of Brother Patrice at the Paris diocesan tribunal (see chap. 8, note 99) includes an account of a personal visit Patrice had made to the monastery. The prior assured him, he said, that the lapse of seventy years had not dimmed the impression left by De La Salle's saintliness on the corporate memory of the community. Their tradition was that the monks had urged their visitor to stay permanently among them (*Bulletin*, 1965, 151).

26. See above, chap. 5, note 57.

27. Exod. 34:29–30.

28. Blain's account of this visit to Paris is in book 3, chap. 16. The legacy in question was conscience money left to the Founder by Louis Rogier, the friend who had let him down in the Clément lawsuit, described in book 3, chap. 9. Aroz quotes the relevant clause from Rogier's will (the manuscript is in the Archives de la Seine et de la Ville de Paris) in CL 42, vol. 1, 421.

his own disciples.<sup>29</sup> The swallow's young in the nest were not more hidden from view than he was at Saint Nicolas. When he returned to Saint Yon, his seclusion was more complete than ever, and for the two remaining years of his life, he was able to satisfy his desire to think of God to the exclusion of almost everything else.

De La Salle's wish to be unknown matched his love of solitude. He wanted not only to be hidden from people's sight but also effaced from their memory. To be treated with honor was odious to him; he could not bear to be given marks of special esteem or attention. He wanted only to be where people thought little of him; he would have been happy to have them walk over him and treat him as trash. He avoided appearing in public at all unless an absolute necessity or some duty of charity or courtesy required him to do so. Calls on bishops or other important people in the interests, it might seem, of his Institute he avoided altogether, even when visiting his communities. His procedure on these latter occasions was to go directly to the Brothers' residence as soon as he arrived in the town and after a shorter or longer stay there, depending on the matters to be dealt with, to leave as unobtrusively as he had come. Meanwhile he would have spoken to no one outside the community unless he had been obliged to.

On one journey to visit a community, he called at a convent to celebrate Mass, but because he was careful to conceal his identity, his request was met with a blunt refusal on the part of the Sister sacristan; she demanded written proof that he was a priest. The Brother traveling with him, who had gone into the sacristy to prepare the vestments while De La Salle remained in the church to dispose himself before the Blessed Sacrament for saying Mass, was quite taken aback by the Sister's ungracious reception. He went to report the matter to John Baptist, who simply replied in his usual mild way, "God be blessed. I haven't got my document; I don't usually carry it with me." "Well, Father," replied the Brother, "I am afraid in this case that you won't be able to say Mass," to which the saintly man's answer was simply, "Oh well, God be blessed." To console himself for what was a severe blow—for to miss saying Mass on a single day was a dreadful thing to happen to him—he prolonged his interior prayer. God was pleased with the way he accepted his humiliation and the spirit of sacrifice he

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29. Blain explains in book 3, chap. 16, that during this visit the Founder chose to reside at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet rather than with the Brothers because he feared "the tokens of submission, respect, and confidence" they would render him despite the fact that he was no longer their Superior. He also, adds Blain, "wished to avoid reawakening the animosity of some of his rivals."

had shown. By a providential intervention, he gave him the consolation of saying Mass after all. The convent chaplain, who knew De La Salle, arrived on the scene and explained to the Sister sacristan that this was a saintly man and a great friend of the bishop of the diocese, whereupon the Sister duly apologized, and to make up for her lack of respect, she put out the richest vestments for him.

God seems to have favored his servant's love for retreat and a secluded life because he permitted so many repeated contradictions and persecutions to be his lot in the world. In fact, the saintly man was appalled at the way people obstructed God's work by the vexations of every kind directed against his own person. The opposition to his work would have sufficed to make him regret having to go out. He saw the world outside only when he had to and then in the reluctant, troubled, and fleeting way in which a man glances at an irreconcilable foe. He would give this as his reason to anyone who remonstrated with him for keeping himself hidden away. "What do you expect?" he would say. "When I go out, I have to watch every step I take."

In this frame of mind, when he was in Paris he often disappeared from the community, and his disciples would not know where he was or what was happening to him. When they complained about this and asked him why he took himself away from the midst of his family, leaving his sons orphaned and worried about his absence, he would reply that both necessity and charity required it. Necessity required it, he would explain, because he personally needed a period of retreat to recuperate his diminished spiritual strength; charity, because his presence in the community was only bringing the Brothers trouble, annoyance, and incidents they could well do without. When there was any harassment, off he would go, and his answer to people who expressed surprise was, "I get out of the way for two reasons: first, to grieve over my sins, which are the cause of this hostility, and second, to pray for my persecutors and to rid them of my presence, which is an occasion of wrongdoing for them."

This habit of disappearing happened first in Paris and thereabouts, but when he went south to Provence to be out of the way there, he found the same reasons to keep hiding. More enemies attacked him there and forced him to stay out of sight. Even so, the devil, the great enemy who was behind all the others, found ways of making his whereabouts known, and he was forced for the sake of peace to find some secret place to be. He found one in the hermitage near Saint-Maximin,<sup>30</sup> and the joy he felt in having no more to do with people and in being able to give all his attention to God tempted him

30. It would seem near only to someone used to covering long distances on foot. Gallego points out (488) that the hermitage was twenty kilometers

to stay there for the rest of his days. There is reason to believe that he would have yielded to this temptation that appealed so much to his attraction for a hidden life if the Brothers had not found out where he was and obliged him to return to them and not leave them in their disconsolate state. The hand of Providence brought him later to the solitude of Parménie, and he was once more tempted to give way to his strong desire to live in seclusion, but he found the same insuperable obstacle in the fact that his disciples were opposed to it.<sup>31</sup>

As I have said, De La Salle finally had the satisfaction of returning to Saint Yon and of being able to resign the superiorship before ending his days there. He was thus left free from any preoccupation other than ceaseless prayer, disposing himself here on earth for the union with God that he was soon to enjoy to the full in heaven. At Saint Yon he was at rest in God's company, and the least distraction that drew him therefrom upset him. When he was asked to take up again some duties he had resigned from, he replied with good humor, "Someone who is of no importance has nothing useful to say and has no business getting involved in anything. The best thing for me, I think, is to keep well out of sight as someone of no account, forgetting the world and forgotten by it, with my thoughts on God alone." The impression he made is that everything he had undertaken so far had served to interfere with his spiritual life and that the time remaining to him before his death needed to be used to make up for this. He would point out that because God had granted him this period of time, it was up to him to make good use of it. He had occasion to write one day to Brother Barthélemy, giving an account of his spiritual state, as to his Superior whose election had been brought about by his own resignation. The following passage occurs in the letter:

I seriously think that since I have given but little time to prayer for so long, it is right that I should now spend more time in prayer to learn what God wishes of me. To my mind, what I must ask of God in prayer is that he tell me what he wants me to do and that he inspire me with the dispositions he wants me to have.<sup>32</sup>

from Saint-Maximin. Built to cater for pilgrims to the mountain cave of Saint-Baume, where the tradition was that Saint Mary Magdalene had spent her later life in penance, the hermitage was some forty kilometers from Marseille. It was after the collapse of the novitiate in that city (1713) that the Founder sought out this particular place of retreat (book 3, chap. 11).

31. An allusion to the letter of 1 April 1714 by which the "principal Brothers" of Paris, Versailles, and Saint-Denis "commanded" the Founder to resume "the care and general government" of the Society. Blain quotes the letter in book 3, chap. 12. For the significance of this document in De La Salle's spiritual journey, see Sauvage and Campos (448–56; English edition, 205–11).



Nor was he satisfied to cultivate a hidden life for himself; he did everything he could to inspire a similar attachment to it in others. In particular he urged the Brothers to return to the solitude of their interior life as soon as the distracting tasks of the day were over, thereby repairing the injury that other preoccupations may have caused to their practice of virtue. He had the utmost esteem for the Brothers who acted in this way because, he said, it proved their love of God and their desire to advance in the spiritual life. He wanted them to have a high regard for the grace God had given them in withdrawing them from the hurly-burly of the world and from the dangers to which they were continually exposed there. He showed surprise to find some who occasionally admitted that they did not much care for such a secluded existence, finding it, they said, too constraining. One day he went so far as to impose a penance on one such Brother who lacked a true interior spirit and complained that the novices were being kept too confined. The penance was to spend a few months with those whose misfortune he lamented to learn with them to develop an affection for what at present he thought a kind of torture!<sup>33</sup>

Nothing seemed to John Baptist so conducive to salvation as this love of retreat. He tried to convey this thought in a letter to a niece of his who had invited him to assist at her religious profession ceremony. His letter explained quite frankly why he could not accept.

My very dear niece, on Ascension Thursday I answered the letter that you kindly sent me but, as it may not have reached you, I am writing a second time. I am very grateful to you for letting me know the date of your religious profession and share with you your joy and your ardent desire to consecrate yourself entirely to God. It will win for you in this life a foretaste of life eternal. How fortunate I think you are in separating yourself from the cares and anxieties of the world! I will not fail to unite myself with you in prayer to ask God to give you the grace to make this sacrifice wholeheartedly. I would very much like to be present at your profession, but I am prevented for two reasons. The first is that I am the only priest here to hear the confessions of fifty people, and it is difficult to get another for this community, which is

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32. *Letters*, 127.

33. Gallego suggests that this may have been a certain Br. Étienne Le Loutre, mentioned briefly by the Founder in his letter of 1 June 1706 to Brother Hubert (*Letters*, 8). An eighteenth-century manuscript in the Rome archives, purporting to supply details of information not found in Blain, says that this Brother Étienne was recalled to the Saint Yon novitiate around 1708 because the Founder considered that he seriously needed to renew his religious spirit. He eventually left the Institute at some time before 1712. See Gallego, 444.

far from the town. So, I can't abandon them just now. The second is that, since I have a Superior, I am not my own master. So, I ask you, please be satisfied that I join with you in this holy action in the same dispositions as those with which, by God's grace, you will make your profession. With my best regards and all my affection.<sup>34</sup>

This is an example of how the saintly priest was able to add humility to all his other virtues by pointing out that he was now dependent on and under obedience to a simple Brother.

Silence is the friend of retreat and recollection; it is, as Saint Scholastica expressed it, the guardian angel of a community.<sup>35</sup> Words, therefore, can hardly describe how much De La Salle loved it and commended it to his disciples.<sup>36</sup> His own strict observance of silence made people think of Saint Arsenius. He spoke rarely and in few words because, as he said, it is a good way of preserving interior recollection as against speaking too much, which is distracting and makes us forget God's presence. He inspired his Brothers with the same esteem for this virtue; it was a point of rule he recommended above any other, his reason being that too much talking is the usual cause of irregularity in a community. He was quite strict about this and would not tolerate any relaxation in the matter. Writing to one of the Brothers he had this to say:

Be very exact with regard to silence. It is one of the principal points of fidelity to the Rule, and without it a community soon falls into disorder. You will tell me perhaps that you very much want to observe it, but that the situation in which you continually find yourself of having to answer those who ask you questions does not allow you to do so. What a trifling excuse! Don't you know the occasions when you should reply and those when you should remain silent? It is only for the sake of charity that you should reply; on all other occasions you should remain silent.<sup>37</sup>

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34. The niece to whom this letter (known only from this citation by Blain) is addressed is Jeanne Remiette, Sister Françoise of Saint Agnes, a religious of the Congregation de Notre Dame and a daughter of De La Salle's brother Pierre (*Letters*, 131; commentary, 249–51).

35. The saying is not found in the sole source of what is known of Saint Scholastica, namely, a brief passage in *Dialogues* of Saint Gregory the Great (translated by O. J. Zimmerman, New York, 1959, 102–05).

36. *Vocabulaire Lasallien* (vol. 6, 239–41) has over one hundred occurrences of the word *silence* in the Founder's writings, used in the sense indicated here by Blain.

37. *Letters*, 85.5–8.

In the *Collection* he wrote:

Silence is to be greatly esteemed in a Community, for it is the guardian of all the virtues and an obstacle to all vices because it prevents detraction and all language contrary to charity, truth, and modesty. We must use language only for necessary things and not distract ourselves with worldly conversation and useless words. One who is not reserved in speech cannot become spiritual, and a sure means of attaining perfection rapidly is to avoid sins of the tongue.<sup>38</sup>

Although silence is so essential to the regularity of a community, it would be less productive of good if it were no more than an external show. It would not suffice just to put a seal on our lips, as the Royal Prophet expresses it,<sup>39</sup> and then allow useless thoughts to enter the mind, for these do spiritual damage all the more deplorable for being less evident. This is why De La Salle concluded that we must always try to join interior silence to that which is exterior, that is, to forget created things and to remember only God and his holy presence, for these should be the soul's unique occupation.<sup>40</sup> Interior silence is in fact the principal and best kind of silence; it gives rise to exterior silence and so regulates it as to produce excellent results. As he wrote to a certain devout person:

It is this sort of silence that ought to be the portion of every soul that really loves solitude and has withdrawn herself from the love of the world. She ought to remain composed and silent because in this way she will always be able to rise above herself. There is nothing more dangerous for her than to allow herself to be torn away from conversation with God and to stoop toward conversation with men.<sup>41</sup>

In another letter to the same person, De La Salle wrote:

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38. *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, "Silence," under "Means That the Brothers of the Christian Schools Should Use to Perform Their Actions Well." Blain's text is faithful to the meaning of the original but with four verbal alterations that exemplify the biographer's lack of rigor when quoting. For example, his version begins "*Le silence est ce qu'il y a de plus estimable dans une communauté. . . .*" The passage in *Collection* begins "*Estimez et gardez volontiers le silence. . . .*" (CL 10, 85; *Collection*, 63–64).

39. Ps. 141:3.

40. This sentence is an indirect and free quotation of the conclusion to the previous passage from the *Collection*; see above, note 38.

41. *Letters*, 112.1–2.

Now is the time for little speech and much action. Let your aim be to become very silent and very humble and to apply yourself very much to prayer, for this is what God wants of you. To do this you need little thinking, little desiring, and little understanding, yet it is the way to live at peace.<sup>42</sup>

He then gave the same correspondent several pieces of advice about acquiring the habit of silence. He began by reminding her:

You will find silence a very useful, even a very necessary virtue, if you are to adore God, serve him in spirit and in truth, resist temptations, and save yourself from falling into sin. You must learn how to be silent, to conceal your feelings, and to speak only when necessary.<sup>43</sup>

He continued:

So that you may not fall into the habit of excessive talking, try to observe strictly the following rules:

Do not speak at all outside of recreation time unless the need is urgent, and even during recreation speak but little. The present state of your soul demands that you be faithful to this. And you must not make even a single comment about what goes on, remembering, however, that your silence is not to spring from pride.

Take care never to justify yourself, but, on the contrary, admit that you were wrong, without of course telling an untruth. If you cannot speak without justifying yourself, remain completely silent. I do not see that you ever have any reason to justify yourself.

You are not to talk of what happens in the community or of the disorders that you think exist in it. Under such circumstances be satisfied with offering a prayer to God. When matters of importance, and even unimportant ones, are spoken of, never offer your opinion, being convinced that you have little understanding or sense of judgment.

Always remain silent when others annoy you, and let God alone be the witness of your innocence. Lastly, if after you have held yourself in check, you do in the end speak of what you have with difficulty concealed, and even of the graces that God has granted you, you will lose what your silence has won for you, and you must set yourself a penance for your failure.<sup>44</sup>

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42. *Letters*, 113.1–2.

43. *Ibid.*, 113.3–4.

Such was the edifying advice De La Salle gave this person about not offending by speech. It corresponded to the rules he gave his Brothers, which they continue to observe with great care.

[CHAPTER 15]

*Second effect of his great love for God, his delight in prayer;  
the admirable consequences of his spirit of prayer*

The love of God, as if admitting no other love, leads the human heart to become detached from created things and teaches it to build solitude within, where it may be more sure to find God and unite itself with him. Merely to withdraw from the company of people to have greater freedom of action, merely to indulge our own thoughts or simply to lead an idle life doing only what one finds agreeable, is to cultivate a worthless kind of seclusion and to act through self-esteem, emotion, or whim like a philosopher or a misanthropist. To keep clear of people just because we have been unable to gain favor with them or make a good impression on them, or even just to avoid clashes with them, is to act only from peevishness, spite, or despondency. It is no more than ill humor, which causes us to avoid others just because we find their company boring, because it suits our purpose not to mix, or because we are feeling depressed. For a love of seclusion to be meritorious, it must be prompted by love of God; only then does separation from the world become something holy. If a desire for solitude is inspired from above, it is because it seeks to empty the heart of created things and fill it with the presence of the Creator. People in love desire to see, speak to, listen to, and converse with the one beloved. They are restless, sad, and sorrowful when the loved one is absent, and with an impatience commensurate with their love, they await the return of the one whose presence fills them with joy.

Hence we find that the saints had an insatiable desire for prayer and contemplation. The purer and more ardent their love for God, the more eager and aflame they were to converse with him. The spirit of contemplative prayer grows as love increases and diminishes as love grows weaker. The early Christians, formed as they were by the Apostles, prayed almost without ceasing, so great was their fervor.<sup>45</sup> If today the spirit of prayer has almost died away, it is because love has grown cold, as Jesus Christ predicted it would.<sup>46</sup> Love of God generates

44. Ibid., 113.4–9.

45. Acts 1:14; 2:46–47.

46. Matt. 24:12.

a desire to possess him and therefore an attraction for prayer because prayer enables us to hold him in our thoughts and so makes up for our not being able to possess him fully on earth. This is why prayer provides all at once the dwelling place, the nourishment, and the center of attraction for pure souls; they look to it for repose, life, and sustenance. They cannot bring themselves to leave God's presence unless it be to serve him elsewhere. When they have rendered their charitable services, however excellent these may have been, they return to their prayer as eagerly as the fish to the water from which it has been taken.

The devout author of *The Imitation of Christ* has this to say about the solitaires of old:

Every hour seemed short that they spent with God, and even their necessary bodily nourishment was forgotten in the sweetness of their contemplation. . . . They were aliens to the world but familiar and favored friends of God.<sup>47</sup>

Saint Anthony was not the only one who spent his nights in such sweetness of contemplation that the sunrise found him the same as the sunset had left him.<sup>48</sup> How did such people spend their time, thus removed as they were from dealings with their fellowmen and more at home in the forests and caves of the mountainside than were the animals with whom they dwelt there? It was happily taken up with God in endless conversation with him, in undiminishing enjoyment of his infinite beauty. Saint Augustine says as much in his panegyric of the desert fathers,<sup>49</sup> and Saint Chrysostom bears similar testimony in the following words:

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47. The quotation is from book 1, chap. 18, "Examples of the Holy Fathers" (translated by Abbot Justin McCann, OSB, London, 1952). The "devout author" of this most famous of spiritual classics has been generally identified as Thomas Haemerken, more usually called Thomas à Kempis, from the Rhineland town where he was born in 1380. A personal reading in *The Imitation* is a Lasallian custom dating from the beginnings of the Institute, as attested by the manuscript *Pratique du Règlement Journalier* (CL 25, 96).

48. Blain's source for the phrasing is John Cassian, who relates in *Conference* 9, paragraph 31, that Anthony remained all night long in contemplation and was aroused from his ecstasy only by the rays of the rising sun, to which he would complain saying, "O Sun, why do you disturb me? You rise so early only to draw me away from the brightness of true light!—*Quid me impedis, sol, qui ad hoc iam oriris ut me ab huius veri luminis abstrahas claritate!*" (PL, vol. 49, cols. 807–08).

49. Blain gives a marginal reference: "*Liber de moribus ecclesiasticis*, chaps. 31–32," where Augustine, contrasting the life of the Desert Fathers with

They fixed their abode in deserted places and on mountaintops, and their whole occupation was to converse with God, to praise and bless him, to express to him their love and gratitude, not just on their own behalf but on that of all their fellow beings. For this they rose during the night, and in order that they might do so more promptly, they lay down in their clothes and slept lightly and briefly, for their spirit of reverence for God prevented them from sinking into a deep sleep.<sup>50</sup>

Such a love of prayer was not confined to the early centuries or found only in the desert solitudes. It was handed on with the faith from century to century and was known in every period and in every place. Fervent Christians of all ages, occupations, and conditions in life have assiduously cultivated it. Saints of every era have made prayer their way of life, the energizing force of everything they did. In this, as in all else, John Baptist de La Salle strove to imitate them.

De La Salle's life was an unbroken exchange with God. He was already a man of prayer when he left the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, practicing it as faithfully as he had been trained to do in that holy establishment. The farther he advanced toward the priesthood, the more he increased his prayer and spiritual exercises. To make more time for them, he progressively grew to love seclusion and to avoid visiting people. The studies he undertook at the University of Reims did not detract from his practices of devotion or in any way reduce the time he gave to their fulfillment. He exemplified what the seraphic Saint Francis intended when he advised his disciples that a love of study must never harm in any way their love of prayer.<sup>51</sup> John Baptist knew the secret of combining the one with the other so that far from conflicting with each other to their mutual detriment, they combined to further his progress in perfection.<sup>52</sup> He applied himself to his studies

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that of the Manicheans, writes of the former as "*perfruentes colloquio Dei, cui puris mentibus inbaeserunt, et ejus pulchritudinis contemplatione beatissimi, quae nisi sanctorum intellectu percipi non potest*" (PL, vol. 32, col. 1338).

50. Blain gives two marginal references: "Homil. 69.70 in Mat." and "Homil. 4 (misprinted 44) in Ep. 1 ad Tim.," but the passage, despite Blain's citation, is a composite of Chrysostom's praise in those two sources of the monastic life.

51. "[The blessed Francis] was wont to say, 'My brethren who are led by desire of learning shall find their hands empty in the day of tribulation. I would, therefore, that they be strengthened in virtues, that when the time of tribulation shall come, they shall have the Lord with them in their straits'" (*The Mirror of Perfection*, translated by Steele, Dent, London, 1925, 243).

52. According to the biographer's assertion, the young De La Salle was already exemplifying in his behavior a principle he would later inculcate in

in a prayerful spirit, and he returned to his prayer all the more eagerly at the end of each well-spent stint of intellectual labor. The science of the saints was his objective, and the glory of God the sole end of his academic pursuits. Study distracts and becomes a passion, thereby gradually extinguishing the spirit of piety, when it is motivated by self-esteem and aims only at vainglory. But John Baptist advanced in the spirit of prayer according as he received each of the successive sacred orders, and the achievement of the diaconate only intensified the fervor of his interior life. He was now close to the moment for which the previous orders had prepared the way, and to use the Royal Prophet's expression, he disposed himself in his heart to ascend the steps to the priesthood.<sup>53</sup> This he did by an ever greater withdrawal into seclusion and even more profound recollection, more assiduous application to the Divine Office, and more prolonged periods of meditation within the privacy of his home.

As a priest, De La Salle's entire personality reflected his interior life, his unworldliness, his extraordinary attentiveness to the presence of God, his concern to guard the purity of his life, and the sustained recollection that kept his heart disposed for the daily offering of the Mass. He celebrated the holy sacrifice each day with a devotion that was always fresh because he took care to keep it aflame by daylong prayer. Spiritual exercises, mingled with works of charity, filled the intervals left vacant by the Divine Office and his priestly ministry. He was thus always occupied with God or with the service of God. The citizens of Reims saw in him a young priest who had come away from the presence of the ordaining bishop perfectly fitted for the sacred ministry, and they soon realized from the way they saw him assisting in choir and officiating at the altar, that his communing with God did not cease when he left the church building. His conversation was not with the common and ordinary ways of men but with the an-

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his disciples, formulating it in the *Collection* thus: "Do not distinguish between the duties of your state and what pertains to your salvation and perfection. Rest assured that you will never effect your salvation more certainly and that you will never acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your state, provided you do so with a view to accomplishing the will of God" (*Collection*, 78). John Baptist's application as a student is attested by a number of original documents held in the Rome archives: his *Maîtrise-ès-Arts* (*summa cum laude*) diploma (the parchment is reproduced with commentary by Aroz in CL 41, vol. 2, 211–16), two attestations of his "assiduous attendance" at the theology courses of the University of Reims (217–31 and 232–41), an attestation of his assiduous attendance at the Sorbonne course *De incarnationis mysterio* (242–61), and a similar certificate regarding the course *De Sanctae Trinitatis mysterio* (262–65).

53. Ps. 83:6 (Douai).



gels in heaven or with seekers of perfection on earth. These words of *The Imitation*<sup>54</sup> express what should be the life of every priest of the New Law, and John Baptist followed the counsel to the letter. His avoidance of visits and unnecessary conversations meant that his preoccupation with God became so assiduous and strong that he appeared totally absorbed and often in a state of ecstasy, especially when leaving the altar after celebrating Mass.

He was filled with the same Holy Spirit who came down on the Apostles at Pentecost, and he could say with them, “For our part, we will concern ourselves with prayer and the ministry of the word,”<sup>55</sup> for prayer and ministry make up the sum of a priest’s life. If this is what the Apostles deemed it to be from the origins of the church, those who see it otherwise and substitute another way of living their priestly life fall away from virtue and lose the spirit of their vocation. “We are Christians for ourselves,” Saint Augustine used to say to his people, “and priests for you,”<sup>56</sup> meaning that the twofold duty of priests is to work for their own salvation and that of others. Priests would sanctify themselves to no purpose if they did not serve others, but even more surely would their service of others be useless if they were not attending to their own spiritual needs. The one certain, almost the only, means of sanctifying ourselves and others is to have a spirit of prayer. Without prayer the sacred ministry makes holy neither the minister nor the faithful he ministers to. Without prayer the priest remains like a sapless tree bereft of its foliage; even if the external appearance of leaves is there, no fruit is borne. A priest who is not a man of prayer may cause a stir, but there will be nothing to show at the end of it.

If a priest devotes himself to prayer but without fulfilling the duties of his ministry, he will become simply a contemplative, if not merely a pious idler. His virtue will run the risk of becoming purely speculative, as will his prayer life, each dissolving into a mere conceptualization producing no effect. However, a ministry that is not preceded, accompanied, and followed by prayer will make the minister no more than a gadabout lacking interior life, unconvincing in what he says, and short of the saving graces. He may labor much but will achieve nothing, and when he comes to die, the most appropriate words for him to say will be those the Apostles addressed to

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54. Book 4, chap. 5.2.

55. Acts 6:4.

56. Blain’s adaptation of “*Vobis enim sum episcopus, vobiscum sum Christianus*,” from Augustine’s Sermon 340, preached on the occasion of his ordination as bishop (PL, vol. 38, col. 1483). The aphorism, incidentally, is quoted in *Lumen Gentium*, 32.

Jesus: "We have toiled all night and have taken nothing."<sup>57</sup> But John Baptist de La Salle knew well how to achieve the right balance: he was both one of the most devout and prayerful priests and one of the most hardworking and zealous that recent times have seen.

In this holy and continuous practice of contemplative prayer he found the strength of purpose needed to carry out the enterprise to which God called him. It was prayer that elevated his motives above human respect, giving him the magnanimity to act regardless of what people would think, of common gossip, of the opposition of his family and the reproaches of his friends, of the general outcry against his idea of associating himself with half a dozen penniless young nobodies aiming to be teachers. His intimate exchanges with God in prayer gave him strength to overcome his profound feeling of repugnance at the thought of living with people who had so little in common with him,<sup>58</sup> enabling him, for example, to master his natural revulsion for the poor food that was his torture when at table with his companions.<sup>59</sup> It was from his assiduity in prayer that he drew the heroic courage to respond to the Holy Spirit's inspiration to resign his canonry<sup>60</sup> and sacrifice his wealth to become poor for the sake of the poor.<sup>61</sup>

He made this last gesture in response to the Gospel's invitation to those who wish to be perfect.<sup>62</sup> This gesture was a practice common enough in the church for many centuries but had become a rare and difficult thing to do in our own times because of the changes that have taken place in the attitude of parents and in social habits. Strength to do it has to be found in prayer and contemplation, but when it is done, it has the effect of producing a still greater capacity for prayer. After De La Salle had offered everything to God in this way, he enjoyed for the rest of his days the happy and sublime state of a free mind that is obtained by prayer more than by any other means, according to the author of *The Imitation*.<sup>63</sup> The same author says that this state is the achievement of high virtue and that it makes

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57. Luke 5:5.

58. A repugnance attested by De La Salle in the lost manuscript that has come to be known as *Memoir on the Beginnings*, used first by Bernard and then by Blain, who quotes the relevant passage in book 1, chap. 9.

59. Bernard speaks about this, offering details (says Hermans) that the reader might well have been spared. But Bernard's account is "more discreet and probably more true" than Blain's in book 2, chap. 1 (CL 4, XXII).

60. See above, chap. 6, note 79.

61. See above, chap. 12, note 10.

62. Matt. 19:21.

63. Book 3, chap. 26, of *The Imitation* is entitled "The excellence of a free mind, which is to be got by humble prayer rather than by study." The rest of Blain's paragraph uses phraseology from the same chapter.

the soul capable of sustained attention to heavenly matters and able to pass through the cares of this life without being disturbed by them, not in an obtuse and stoic kind of way but lifted above ill-regulated desires by its untrammelled freedom in reaching up to God. John Baptist was so sheltered by the Lord from the stresses of this life (I am still following the thought of the author of *The Imitation*) that he was never worried or preoccupied. He seemed not to think about such things. His soul vivified his body but never became subject to it. Material needs did not seem even to enter his mind. Food and clothing and whatever else the body needs were burdensome to the fervor of his spirit. His way of using those things served to sustain his union with God because they provided him with occasions for penance and mortification.

[CHAPTER 16]

*His assiduity in the practice of prayer, both vocal  
and meditative; his recourse to prayer in all his needs;  
his dislike of being interrupted when at prayer*

Henceforth, John Baptist de La Salle was seen to be always joyful and content and ceaselessly praying, as Saint Paul urged the Christians of Thessalonica to be.<sup>64</sup> There is a natural sequence here, in fact, because prayer engenders joy. The pure delight of a heart that is content because it seeks to please God, a delight not found at all in the pursuit of pleasure, is given to the soul who refuses God nothing in the discourse it holds with him in prayer. To be preoccupied and imbued with God, to be possessed wholly by him, is to have an endless source of comfort, one enjoyed by the blessed in heaven but also by persons who pray on earth. De La Salle's experience of this joy increased his concern to spare all the time he could for meditative prayer. He applied himself to it with the constancy and eagerness recommended by the Apostle Paul to the Colossians.<sup>65</sup> The days were not long enough for him, and he spent nights in prayer, following the example of his divine Master.<sup>66</sup> Like the early Christians, he persevered in prayer,<sup>67</sup> beginning with the break of day and continuing to its end, and if a part of the day was spent in works of charity, like Jesus Christ he consecrated the night, wholly or in part, to prayer. Prayer is a form

64. 1 Thess. 5:16–17.

65. Col. 4:2.

66. Luke 6:12.

67. Acts 2:42.

of repose for apostolic workers, and from it they derive new strength to keep on toiling for the salvation of souls.

It seemed as if our saintly priest, while still in the vigor of youth, wanted to claim the tribute the Scriptures pay to Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, for her perseverance in prayer into her advanced years. The devout widow, at the age of eighty-four, never left the Temple, passing her nights and days there in fasting and prayer.<sup>68</sup> Anna's fervor was truly admirable, growing ever stronger at an age that might have dispensed her from any further effort and left her to await death in contented repose. John Baptist, in youth and in age, emulated her. He added fasting to prayer, and great austerities to his laborious ministry, initiating a life of penance and prayer that terminated only with his death.

In the early years of his Society, he used to pray during the daytime both with the community and alone. Then at night, when the Brothers had retired to their rest, he would quietly slip away to pray before the Blessed Sacrament at the tomb of Saint Remigius.<sup>69</sup> When the Brothers gathered in their oratory for morning prayer, they always found him there before them, and they little thought that he had spent in prayer the time they had given to sleep. He repeatedly practiced this pious deception on them, letting them think that he was always first at the community morning prayer because he had risen and dressed more quickly than they did. But in the end his disciples discovered the truth. They found out that the reason he was always first

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68. Luke 2:37.

69. Blain is the only source biographer to speak of De La Salle's nocturnal vigils at the tomb of Saint Remigius in the nearby Benedictine abbey named for the patron saint of Reims. In his earlier mention of this custom (book 2, chap. 1), he says that the "assistant sacristan" of the abbey church cooperated by allowing John Baptist to remain overnight with the door of the church locked on him. Poutet notes (vol. 1, 421) that the sacristan of Saint-Remigius from 1636 until his death in 1680 was Dom Paul Bayard, without whose authorization De La Salle's vigils could not have taken place. Bayard was a man gifted with a high degree of mystical prayer whose *Journal*, written in obedience to his superiors, influenced (according to Poutet) the Founder's *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*. The difficulty about identifying Bayard as the sacristan who allowed De La Salle to spend entire nights at the tomb is that the Benedictine's death in 1680 would limit the period of this custom to 1679–1680. But Blain says that John Baptist "made it a rule . . . for as long as he remained in the city" of Reims, which would be at least seven more years (before his departure for Paris in 1688). Either Blain exaggerates the duration of the Founder's custom, or (as Gallego suggests, 161), Bayard's unnamed successor as sacristan proved willing to continue his predecessor's cooperation.

in the oratory in the morning was that he had either passed the whole night in prayer or had spent some hours at interior prayer in the oratory before they arrived.

On all occasions when he felt the need to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit, he had recourse to prayer. He sought God's approval for everything he planned to do, never touching an enterprise unless he had consulted the Lord about it in prayer before the tabernacle, seeking his will and his assistance. In times of danger, worry, misfortune, and opposition, his refuge was God, and prayer was the only weapon he used to combat his enemies. When danger was at its greatest and harassment most intense, his prayer became more assiduous and prolonged, and he added to it fasting and other penances, sometimes for days on end, sometimes for months. This was the only means he employed to win God's intervention and cause men to show more understanding.

If he wished to obtain from God's bounty some special grace for his Institute, he withdrew, like Moses, into the wilderness, by which I mean into an extended retreat, where he communed with God for as long as the occasion demanded. If this was not possible, he used the time of sleep for his supplications and struggled valiantly against the effects of this privation. He spent a whole year in the latter manner when he was petitioning God for a house for a novitiate. If it happened that sleep gradually overcame him, it was evident that nature had to struggle to make him give in because he was found lying on the bare ground in a posture that showed he had nodded off and fallen into a deep sleep despite himself.<sup>70</sup>

It was through prayer that he reached the conclusion of each of his undertakings, triumphing over the opposition that hell raised against him. He had a saying that was deeply engraved on his heart and was frequently on his lips, one he repeated in all eventualities and difficult situations. "We must pray much," he would say, "both to know what God wants us to do and to obtain his help to do it."

70. Bernard's references to the Founder's difficulty in overcoming sleep, like those concerning his problem with food (see chap. 15, note 59), lacked discretion by the standards of hagiography of the time: "What shall I say of his efforts to conquer sleep, which he himself said was his greatest enemy, for it caused him to be late for the office of Matins? Often he had to be awakened several times, only to fall back into sleep, which caused him much concern. All his life he was to fight this battle against sleep, which nevertheless is so necessary to restore energy spent during the day" (*Two Early Biographies*, 282). Bernard follows this with the assurance that John Baptist's efforts "were not in vain, for many times in later years he would pass entire nights attending to the affairs of his Institute or in composing various books," but did Bernard perhaps get the cause and effect the wrong way around?

It was thanks to John Baptist's prayers that Brother Barthélemy, later to be his successor at the head of the Institute, was able to stay in the community when some of the senior Brothers thought he should be sent home. They had in fact come to a decision about it, and Barthélemy was due to leave on the morrow, but De La Salle intervened after spending the night in prayer. This is what happened. It was at the time the Writing Masters at Paris had confiscated the furniture of the classes. Several of the older Brothers were becoming weary of all the frustration they were suffering in their work and were leaving their vocation to find a more pleasant and tranquil way of life elsewhere; they had had enough. Brother Barthélemy received news just then that his father, the local teacher, had just died and that his post would be kept open for him at the same salary if he wished to take it. Because the senior Brothers still remaining wanted to be rid of Barthélemy because he suffered from quite serious attacks of a contagious ailment, they were quite pleased to hear his news. They saw this as an opportunity to beg him to leave in a perfectly acceptable way, for they respected his virtuous character even if his bad health made them feel uncomfortable.

To bring their Superior around to their way of thinking, they consulted some doctors to find out whether there were any known remedies for the scrofula from which Barthélemy suffered. The reply they received was that there was no certain cure and that the simplest and safest thing, both for Barthélemy and for the Society, was for him to be sent home. The Brothers reported this to De La Salle and urged him to follow this wise advice. The community, they said, would thus be relieved of the presence of someone whose chronic affliction could have unfortunate consequences for others, and at the same time the ailing Brother would be assured of an income and a secure situation for the rest of his life. The Founder saw that these senior Brothers were resolved on the dismissal of someone whom he personally believed to be of great value to his Congregation, but he wisely refrained either from acceding to their wish then and there or from rejecting it outright; he kept to his usual principle of not acting unilaterally if his personal view ran counter to the general opinion of his disciples. But eventually he saw that there was going to be no change in the community's determination, and much against his own inclination and his personal wish to retain Barthélemy, he gave in to them.

Once the decision had been taken, a Brother (the one who related the story for us) was told to pack some things for Barthélemy and send him on his way the next morning. But deep down John Baptist was not happy about it; he was loath to lose a disciple of such quali-

ty. He decided to spend the night concerned in prayer. The following morning, the Brother who had to see the dismissed member off the premises went to De La Salle's room to get the keys, and there he discovered that the Superior had not been to bed but had spent the entire night in prayer. Thereupon (it was the first effect of the night's intercession), the Brother changed his mind about asking for the keys. John Baptist told him to send Brother Barthélemy to him, and a prolonged interview took place, after which the Founder could not bring himself to let someone go whose disposition was so saintly and who was happy to forgo the advantageous offer he had received if he could stay in the community. He allowed him then and there to write a letter renouncing any claim to the post left vacant by the death of his father. The account I will later give of Brother Barthélemy as Superior in succession to De La Salle will show how well inspired the holy Founder was in not agreeing to the dismissal of so excellent a disciple.<sup>71</sup>

On another occasion the same Brother whose notes I am using caught John Baptist at one of his nightlong meditations. "The Superior," he writes,

did not sleep in the common dormitory, and because I needed to get the keys to the house door very early one morning, I went to his room for them. I knocked, but receiving no answer, I opened the door slightly to look inside. His kneeler was overturned, and he was lying on the floor beside it, fast asleep just where he had fallen when sleep overcame him. Brother Lazare,<sup>72</sup> who was due to go out with me, also saw him like this. We would not have disturbed him if we had not needed to leave the house as soon as possible. We closed his door and knocked more loudly. This woke him up, and he got on his feet, put the kneeler upright, and opened the door to us as if he had just got out of bed. He gave no indication that he had not in fact been to bed and did

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71. This episode of the near dismissal of the Brother who was to succeed the Founder as Superior is not referred to either in Blain's biography or in his life of Barthélemy (appended, with those of other Lasallians, to the present work in CL 8). The chronic ailment from which Barthélemy suffered is mentioned in the brief biography, but there are indications there suggesting the possibility that jealousy of the "neophyte" so highly esteemed by the Founder may, subconsciously at least, have motivated the senior Brothers' move to send him out of the Institute.

72. Gallego (307) identifies him as the Brother Lazare listed in *Obituaire de Saint Yon* as one of four Brothers (whose religious names only are given) who died at Chartres, victims of the plague, in 1705. A register of deaths for the city of Chartres, preserved in the Archives of Eure-et-Loire, lists these four

not seem to suspect that we knew. We in turn took no less care to hide from him the way we had found him; any mention of it would have met with a cool response. But we could not help smiling at each other, both of us feeling pleased that he did not seem to have suffered any ill effects.

De La Salle was so attracted to prayer that he could give himself to it in any place, even in the streets of Paris. Whether he was out of the house or in, walking in public places or at home kneeling before the crucifix in the oratory, anyone looking at him could see that he was a man whose thoughts were centered only on God. His usual prayer when he was out in the city was the rosary, and he wanted his disciples also to make a habit of praying everywhere and, like the Capuchin, Saint Felix of Cantalice, have their beads in their hands, their eyes lowered, and the thought of heaven in their hearts.<sup>73</sup> One day in Paris, he happened to meet the Brother Bursar, who was out shopping and not, it seems, thinking about God; he asked him where his rosary was, at the same time showing him his own in his hand. He always carried his beads when outside and recited them with a modest and recollected demeanor that impressed all who saw him.<sup>74</sup>

When matters concerning the good of the Institute were at stake, he had the Brothers unite their prayers with his in a continuous round of intercession, starting with their prayers in the morning and continuing with his into the night. Two Brothers took their turn kneeling before the altar and imploring God's mercy on behalf of the Society. Their places were taken by two more, and so on continuously, even during the time of meals and recreation. It was a matter of exerting a gentle pressure on God, begging him to be propitious and to disarm their enemies. This concerted effort of special prayer lasted sometimes

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by their secular name without mention of their religious name). According to Félix-Paul's argument in his commentary on De La Salle's letter of 28 August 1705 to Gabriel Drolin (*Letters*, 18), Lazare is Michel Loyson and corresponds to the victim of the plague described by Blain (book 2, chap. 15, where the biographer relates the tragedy without naming any of the four who died) as "an excellent penman and exceptionally talented teacher and—what really deserves special praise—a true disciple of De La Salle, filled with his spirit and the grace of his vocation"

73. *Bollandist Acta Sanctorum* relates that the Capuchin lay brother Saint Felix used to walk the streets of Rome begging for his friary and joyfully reciting the rosary. He was canonized by Clement XI some twenty years before Blain was writing (*Les Petits Bollandistes: Vies des Saints*, Paris, 1891, vol. 5).

74. A custom of the Brothers going back to the earliest days, as attested by *Pratique du Règlement Journalier*, was to recite the rosary when going from the community to school and returning (CL 25, 98).



for eight days and was often repeated because of the furious storms that often threatened with shipwreck the frail bark of the Institute.

When in later years the calls upon his time and the growing number of his concerns deprived the servant of God of his normal periods of prayer, he unfailingly made up for it during the night. His soul was thus compensated for its loss by the deprivation of sleep, often more than compensated when he continued his conversation with God throughout the night. We have testimony about this from a devout canon<sup>75</sup> who spent some time with him in the community:

Once when I made a retreat under the direction of the saintly Father de La Salle, then living with his Brothers at rue Princesse in Paris, I had a room over their oratory. Sometimes I had occasion to get up and go past this oratory, and I would see the holy man in there, prostrate in prayer. I have no doubt he remained there for the rest of the night. One day, at six o'clock in the evening, I happened to see him kneeling by the side of the table in his room, and at four o'clock the next morning, I saw that he was still there on his knees.

This canon was not the only person, nor the first, to witness such a prolonged period of prayer. Several other people, apart even from the older Brothers, have testified to having known him pass entire nights in prayer. He thought he could conceal it by returning to his room when the time was approaching for the community to get up; when the bell rang for morning prayer, he would emerge feeling quite sure that the Brothers assumed that he had just got up with them.

One way to please him was to avoid distracting him when he was in meditation. It was like dragging him from a peaceful repose to choose this time to ask him something or otherwise disturb his conversation with his beloved Lord. All his spirit of mortification was needed on such occasions for him not to complain or show annoyance. Sometimes the displeasure he felt did draw from him a mild reproof. This happened one day when a Brother went looking for him and found him prostrate and lost in contemplation before the Lord. It was to all appearances one of those happy moments when his soul found itself in the mystic wine cellar of the divine Spouse, imbibing deeply of the wine of wisdom stored there.<sup>76</sup> He had difficulty responding to the interruption, seeming to be completely absorbed. His flushed countenance showed that he was not pleased to be obliged to

75. No doubt Pierre Guyart, already mentioned twice as a source of information for the biographer (chap. 12, note 4, and chap. 13, note 42).

76. Song of Sol. 2:4 (Douai).

come away from the sweet repose he had been enjoying in the company of his beloved Friend. Perhaps he was upset to have been caught in this state of rapt absorption in God. While speaking of this, I should add that it was quite usual to notice a radiance transform his features whenever he approached the altar to say Mass, took his place before the Blessed Sacrament, or began his meditative prayer, entering into a state of profound recollection.

A Brother of the school in Boulogne, whose family name is Vigneron, had occasion to travel with De La Salle one day from Reims to Paris. He was asked by the latter to walk a little ahead of him, leaving him free to say his office. The young man walked on alone for some time, but then, missing John Baptist's company, he stopped to wait for him and turned around to see where he was. John Baptist was not in sight, so he retraced his steps and eventually was able to discern in the distance the figure of someone in an attitude of prayer. He drew nearer and now saw that it was his companion, standing with his face raised heavenward like a person in rapture. The sight might have been a happy experience of surprise for some people, but our witness felt a sense of fear; to overcome it, he tugged at the holy priest's cloak to rouse him from his ecstasy. This untimely service was not at all welcome to a man who seemed to be relishing the delights of the realm he saw in his contemplation. It was indeed with something akin to indignation that he rebuffed the one who had rendered the service, saying to him, "I told you to keep ahead of me!"

The poor Brother ought to have been pleased to see his Superior at such an edifying moment, but he did not benefit by the experience. The sense of fear remained with him at having witnessed a man in ecstasy, and he chose to separate himself from that man by leaving his vocation. De La Salle learned in due course that the young man planned to marry, and he wrote to dissuade him from doing so, telling him that God would not bless his marriage. But the recipient of the warning did not profit by it and found plenty of reason to regret not doing so, for he suffered much subsequently. His wife became blind, and some of his children were ailing from birth or developed distressing complaints later on. It was their father who told all this to the bishop of Boulogne, to whom he showed the letters he had received from De La Salle.

## [CHAPTER 17]

*De La Salle's prayer life, far removed from the false ideas of the Quietists; his care also to guard his disciples from their misleading notions; his zeal in imbuing the Brothers with a true spirit of prayer; his use of a favorite method in praying deemed necessary; examples of his teaching on prayer*

We can say nothing for certain about De La Salle's way of making meditative prayer because he, his spiritual directors, and other confidants have told us nothing about it. Nevertheless, we can hardly doubt that he possessed the gift of contemplative prayer to a high degree. Over and above the story just related, we have noted that he often spent days and nights in this holy exercise and that he was often found at four o'clock in the morning in the same place and position where he had been observed the previous evening. During these long periods of prayer, he was seen to be quite still, calm, and in a state of contented repose suggesting only the movements of his soul responding to the impressions of God at work in him. When he had to discontinue his prayer, he seemed to do so reluctantly, like a child unwilling to be taken from the nourishment it draws from its mother's breast.

But it is a well-known fact that human weakness cannot persevere long and constantly in such assiduous and sustained contemplation without having received to an eminent degree a special gift for it. Of course, a person could pretend to do so, like a Quietist waiting for God's action while suspending his own, remaining idle or asleep and generally acting like a dumb animal while thinking himself an angel. The extravagant ideas of Molinos<sup>77</sup> were in fashion at this time, even in France, where they had been brought from Italy by Father de La Combe<sup>78</sup> and other teachers of false spirituality. Thanks to the writings

77. Miguel de Molinos (1628–1696), a Spanish theologian, arrived in Rome in 1663 and soon became well known as a spiritual director esteemed by several prelates. His fame was further increased by the publication in 1675 of *The Spiritual Guide*, which embodied quietist teaching on prayer (see chap. 5, note 53). Its influence spread freely for a dozen years until Pope Innocent XI finally condemned sixty-eight of the propositions by the bull *Coelestis Pastor*, 19 November 1687. For a convenient discussion in English of Molinos's significance, see R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm*, Oxford, 1951.

78. François de La Combe (1643–1715), a Barnabite friar, became the spiritual director of Madame Guyon (see below, note 80) and accompanied her on the journeys she undertook to propagate her mystical teaching. La Combe published in 1686 a treatise in Latin, *Analysis of Interior Prayer*, first of a number of works of the period systematically designed to justify the theology of

of Malaval<sup>79</sup> and Madame Guyon,<sup>80</sup> and to other printed and manuscript material being circulated, the teaching was becoming well thought of both in religious communities and among devout lay persons who made a practice of prayer. De La Salle took great care, therefore, to shield his Society from the subtle attractions of this poisonous doctrine, which in reality encourages indolence and a natural inclination for an easy life while nourishing self-esteem and pride.

Contemplation, according to Malaval, is a gift that God bestows at birth. Children can practice contemplation, and their way of doing so should, in fact, be that of everyone. How is this sublime form of prayer to be practiced? Simply by doing nothing, leaving everything to God, remaining totally passive, awaiting God's moment and responding to it when it arrives; then, when it departs, return to the former state of inaction. According to the Quietist teaching, we can make excellent prayer when the mind or the body lapses into sleep, when distractions are running wild in the mind, or even when bad thoughts are befouling it. Provided we have the wish to pray, we are praying. If a person is in an attitude of prayer, awaiting the operation of the Holy Spirit, that person is at prayer. It is a matter of being like a beggar waiting at someone's door for it to be opened and an alms to be handed out. According to the Quietists, such a person in doing nothing does everything. He adopts the attitude he considers suitable and then waits for charity to come his way; his mere presence requests it. But someone may ask whether it is not the behavior of a dumb animal to present ourselves before God without speech and without feeling, uttering not a word, permitting no impulse of the heart, keeping Madame Guyon's doctrine. The Barnabite was imprisoned in 1687 on a charge of heresy and was released twelve years later (Knox, *Enthusiasm*).

79. François Malaval (1627–1719) was esteemed by some of the most learned churchmen of his time as a safe adviser in episcopal circles for the composition of pastoral letters and important discourses. His Quietist teaching contained in *A Simple Way of Raising the Soul to Contemplation*, published in 1664, caused the work to be placed on the *Index of Forbidden Books* in 1688 (Knox, *Enthusiasm*).

80. Jeanne Marie Bouvier de La Mothe (1648–1717) made an unhappy marriage, at the age of sixteen, to Jacques Guyon, an invalid twenty-two years older. On his death in 1676, she devoted herself to a life of prayer and penance. Her reading of Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life* and of a *Life of Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal* made a deep impression on her. But her mystical temperament took her beyond the orthodoxy of these two future canonized saints, and she fell under the spell of Molinos's Quietist teachings. She was a prolific writer; the series of her published works edited by one of her followers, Pierre Poiret, extends to thirty-nine volumes. The work by which she is chiefly known is *Moyen court et très facile de faire oraison*, published in 1685 (Knox, *Enthusiasm*).

our powers in check, suspending all activity. Is this not to be like the ox and the ass that according to the tradition stood by at the birth of the Infant God? It is indeed, but to hear a Quietist who is well informed about the principles of his belief and accepts their logic, this is a sublime form of meditation, the kind of contemplation extolled by the Psalmist in the words, “I am become as a dumb beast in your presence.”<sup>81</sup>

Such far-fetched notions are hardly calculated to impress people who have any expertise in the principles of authentic spirituality, persons who are enlightened and well informed. Hence they have not met with much success in male communities, where devotion is regulated by knowledge, or in places where the dire consequences of the doctrine have been seen to lie hidden in its very principles. But it is not difficult to recognize that a system of spirituality that favors our natural preferences, flatters our self-esteem, and makes every concession to laziness will be acceptable to people who like their so-called contemplation to be trouble free and to present no problems, with God doing everything and they doing nothing. We can only expect that ill-instructed persons who cannot tell the difference between good and bad should be fooled into being satisfied with a mere appearance of piety; likewise, that a religious community that does not go in for theological studies should be impressed by phrases like “the prayer of quiet” and “passive contemplation.”

Hence it was that De La Salle, without introducing his disciples to these false systems of spirituality and without offering them explanations of the difference between true prayer and the false prayer of quiet, between real and fictitious contemplation, kept them clear of any suspect or dangerous paths. He held them firmly to the common way marked out by the church and based his instructions on the following safe and sure principles:

1) We should never wish to experience extraordinary and elevated ways of prayer because to do so can be dangerous and it is quite easy to be misled.

2) The only sure means of preparing our soul for union with God is the constant practice of humility, mortification, obedience, and purity of heart.

3) It is an act of blind temerity and intolerable presumption to seek to achieve passive contemplative prayer on our own initiative, and it is not possible to succeed in this.

4) We should never seek or desire elevated forms of prayer because they do not constitute true virtue and can be experienced without having true virtue; to repeat, it is possible to experience the

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81. Ps. 72:23 (Douai).

privilege of such prayer without being particularly virtuous; a person may be well advanced in virtue and yet not experience lofty contemplation. The life of innumerable saints clearly demonstrates the truth of this.

5) Saint Paul has told us expressly not to attach too much importance to extraordinary gifts because they may be possessed without charity, whereas perfection is to be found in charity alone.

6) It is easy to be deceived in the matter of contemplative prayer and to be led astray by the angel of darkness, who assumes the guise of an angel of light and counterfeits God's ways. But we cannot go wrong by following the ordinary method of interior prayer and by practicing self-renunciation, mortification, obedience, and humility.

7) Many people waste the time of prayer and remain idle and profitless in empty and abstract speculation which they believe to be contemplation. They mistake a cozy indolence for spiritual quietude and repose in God.<sup>82</sup>

From all this he concluded that the Brothers should confine themselves to meditation and to ordinary affective prayer, practiced according to a method with acts, reflections, and self-examination leading to good resolutions. Such prayer is safe; it has been taught and practiced by the saints and approved by the church in all ages. John Baptist urged his disciples, therefore, to stay clear in prayer of any natural tendency to indolence and idleness or, worse still, total passivity. Prayer, he told them, is a demanding exercise; we cannot succeed in it without vigilant and constant effort.

He would often tell them bluntly that it is not repose they should be looking for in prayer but light to discern their failings and sinful tendencies, as well as strength and grace to correct themselves. He would say:

You should cultivate the kind of prayer that purifies. Union with God is the reward of a pure heart, and this in turn is the product of sincere self-denial. Perfect self-denial is the goal to which authentic interior prayer leads. You may consider that you have made prayer well when you leave it full of burning enthusiasm for the practice of virtue, utterly disdainful of self, and coura-

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82. Hermans lists a number of terms that are foreign to De La Salle's usage and therefore modify Blain's claim for this long passage as a summary of the Founder's doctrine on the subject (CL 10, 201). Rayez warns that Blain's presentation of the Founder's teaching on interior prayer (as summarized here) is distorted. Rayez says that the biographer was not well versed in the matter of contemplation and cites statements from the present chapter as evidence (Rayez, *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 164, note 71.

geously prepared to deny yourself. Contemplation that does not start and finish according to these principles is always suspect and usually a pure fantasy. Prayer, however elevated it may seem, is useless if it does not make you a better person, for the only reason to practice prayer is to make progress in recollection, humility, patience, obedience, fidelity to the Rule, meekness, and mortification. When the soul is well purified, it grows nearer to God, and with great ease it achieves union with him because he generously communicates himself to such a soul. Union with God is the ultimate goal of prayer; if you arrive there, nothing else matters. It is indeed possible to be led there by extraordinary paths, and these seem to be the more attractive way, but they are not the most sure. You can reach the goal quite quickly and can fly to it, so to speak, on the wings of ordinary prayer when the practice of the Gospel virtues accompanies it. This is a more laborious but also a more direct and assured way.<sup>83</sup>

In keeping with such excellent and sound doctrine, the wise Superior took special care to train his novices in the holy exercise of prayer and to inculcate the method of making it well. He took pleasure in explaining the method to them in detail, section by section, and he thought it a useful idea to compose and have printed a small book for them on the subject.<sup>84</sup>

John Baptist made it his business, in the first place, to forewarn his disciples against the claptrap of a false spirituality and the illusions of spurious contemplation. He then took every possible means to inspire them with a love for what is authentic, for he was convinced that if he succeeded in making them men of prayer, their progress in perfection was assured. To this end he would tell them that they should look upon prayer as the soul of all their other spiritual exercises, as well as the mainstay of the Institute. A Brother engaged in school work, he would say, who lacked a spirit of prayer was like a soldier without weapons, and it would be impossible for him to persevere in his vocation if he lost a taste for this food of the soul.<sup>85</sup> In

83. Hermans is also dubious about the authenticity of this supposed extract from the Founder's teaching. He lists half a dozen terms not found elsewhere in De La Salle's vocabulary (CL 10, 201).

84. The allusion is to *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* (presented in facsimile as CL 14), whose earliest known published edition is dated 1739, six years after the publication of Blain's biography. Hermans sees no difficulty about identifying the present reference with *Explanation*. He says that De La Salle must have left, if not the complete text as we have it, at least the various parts of it sufficiently worked out to be almost ready for the printers (CL 10, 77).

season and out of season, always and everywhere, publicly and in private, by word of mouth and in correspondence, he commended this holy exercise to them. Sometimes it was to give them advice on how to do it well, sometimes to reproach them for having been neglectful about it, sometimes to impose a penance if they had omitted the exercise, changed the time for it, or cut down on the time prescribed. To oblige them to be vigilant in the matter, he made it an expressed rule for them to give a weekly account to their Director of how they made prayer.<sup>86</sup> Brothers suffering from some indisposition were not exempt from making prayer, for as he said, the practice has excellent healing powers.

On one occasion he noticed a Brother busily occupied in removing stones from a garden when the rest of the community was at prayer. He asked him why it was so important for him to be engaged in doing something that was unnecessary compared with the exercise of prayer with which the community was then occupied. The Brother replied that he was carrying out the instructions of his Director, who had told him to do this work for the sake of his health. John Baptist found no fault with this reply and said no more. But he went immediately to put the matter right with the one who was at fault, reproving him for paying attention to the Brother's physical health at the expense of his spiritual well-being. "There are," he said, "more helpful ways of attending to the former without prejudice to the latter; you must use those in the future. It is not right for the soul to lose one of its greatest benefits in this life just so that a temporary and uncertain remedy can be applied to someone's ailment."

A Brother once wrote to him, mentioning that he found the time for prayer very long. Here is the reply he received:

My very dear Brother, I do not know why you say that you have an hour and a quarter of prayer instead of one hour. I think that prayer is carried out in the same way everywhere and ends at

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85. A sentence, Hermans notes, that presents the thought of the Founder but not in his terminology (CL 10, 201).

86. The 1705 text of the Rule (chap. 5, article 14) prescribes: "All the Brothers will have a day assigned in each week to give an account of their conscience and their conduct to the Brother Director, and they will do this according to the *Directory* that will be given to them for this purpose." This *Directory* appeared for the first time in print in the first edition of *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, dated 1711. Article 14 asks, "How do you occupy yourself during mental prayer? Do you make all the acts of the preparatory part? Do you find it easy or difficult to deal with the subject of mental prayer? Do you have distractions? Do you experience aridity in mental prayer, or do you rather have inclination for it, and what fruit do you derive?" (*Collection*, 17).



the same time. You are disturbed that the time for prayer is too long. That is a sign that you do not have much love for it. Ah, my very dear Brother, it is the mainstay of our spiritual life; would you want to neglect it? If you cannot keep your attention on one act, move on to another. In times of apathy, occupy your mind with reflections. At the thought of your faults, remain humbly before God. Your thoughtless behavior is the cause of the difficulty you experience in applying yourself to prayer and is both the sign and the result of the unsettled state of your soul. This is the reason why you must take strong measures to overcome this fault. Above all, make sure that you have a thorough knowledge of the method of prayer as it is practiced in the Society and follow it. I am not surprised that, since you do not follow it, you have difficulty in applying yourself to prayer. At the present time, you have the opportunity to think of God, and often to enter into yourself. Do this, I beg of you.<sup>87</sup>

We cannot say enough about the way De La Salle insisted on the use of the method and urged this upon his disciples so that they would not lose time or gain no benefit from their prayer. He was well aware that the experience of higher contemplation is a gift of the Holy Spirit and that it is granted as a reward for the faithful practice of ordinary prayer. He knew that the Spirit breathes where and when he wills<sup>88</sup> and that we do not come to the exceptional ways of prayer merely by asking to do so or by personal striving but only by being led to them by the hand of God.

I would never finish if I tried to record everything that the Founder did and said to form his Brothers into men of prayer. He did everything to make them eager for its practice, to treasure every moment of prayer as precious. Time and time again, he urged them to use these moments well. In the Rule he gave them he has this to say:

The Brothers of this Institute ought to have a great love for the holy exercise of interior prayer, and they ought to look on it as the first and principal of their daily exercises and one that is the most capable of drawing down the blessing of God on all the others. They will be exact to make it daily at the time indicated and for the full time prescribed by the Rule, and they will not absent themselves from this exercise without an urgent necessity that cannot be delayed.<sup>89</sup>

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87. *Letters*, 84.1–8.

88. John 3:8.

He expressed himself on this subject with even greater emphasis in the collection of spiritual counsels he gave his disciples.

Hold in high esteem the holy exercise of mental prayer, since it is the foundation and support of all the virtues, as well as the source of the light and grace we need both to sanctify ourselves and to discharge the duties of our employment.<sup>90</sup>

He proceeds to show how far removed he is from the attitude of those who pray only to satisfy their feelings and who remain in the rut of their defects.

Do not seek emotional consolations in the holy exercise of interior prayer, but attach yourself to what is of faith, to what tends to the detestation and destruction of sin, to detachment from created things, to the imitation of Jesus Christ, and to the practice of the virtues he practiced. Strive to imitate him as perfectly as possible. Take care to use well the time allotted to interior prayer. Devote more time to affections and resolutions than to reasoning and considerations. Do not make vague and general resolutions, but always make them specific, and take suitable means for keeping them.<sup>91</sup>

If this great man of prayer was truly convinced of its necessity, he was no less sure that those who practice it must be afraid of falling into sin if they do not watch over themselves and maintain themselves in a spirit of humility. To exhort the Brothers to be vigilant, he concluded the passage I am quoting thus:

When you converse with God in mental prayer, or whenever you think of God, always bear in mind your lowliness and infinite unworthiness, and this will keep you profoundly respectful and abased in his presence.<sup>92</sup>

The love for prayer that he showed in these instructions to his Brothers appeared no less in the care he took to inculcate the same

89. Blain refers his readers, in a marginal note, to page 20 of the 1726 printed Rule (published seven years after De La Salle's death), but the passage is identical with chap. 4, article 1, of the 1718 manuscript (revised by the Founder); Blain's transcription is verbatim (CL 25, 22–23).

90. Verbatim quotation from "Means That the Brothers of the Christian Schools Should Use to Perform Their Actions Well" (*Collection*, 55).

91. Verbatim except for four insignificant variants (*Collection*, 55).

92. Verbatim except for one insignificant variant (*Collection*, 56).

love in all who sought his advice. Here is how he addressed a Sister who had asked him in her letters to show her how to persevere in this holy exercise and not be put off by the various difficulties she experienced in it.

Frequently spend time in prayer, and during periods of aridity try to find your consolation in it, for it is there that you will find God most surely. In periods of dryness and darkness when you feel no attraction, remain constantly faithful to prayer. This is a good frame of mind to be in and a very sanctifying one.

Prayer, made the way I have taught you to make it, will lead you in a short time and effortlessly to live mindful of the presence of God.

Prayer is to be preferred to everything. After the Divine Office you should consider it an essential point of Rule.

Prayer of suffering is best of all, and when God lets you experience it, you must look upon it as most fortunate for you. Do not use a book during such times; you do not need one.

Do not be surprised if God seems to withdraw from you and if you experience aridity during prayer; you alone are the cause of this. Renounce your self-will, do violence to yourself, be faithful to whatever demands grace makes of you. Then, however unworthy you may otherwise be of the caresses and favors of the Spouse of souls, he will overwhelm you with them.

Be all the more faithful to prayer as you feel, on the one hand, God deep in your heart drawing you to it and, on the other, the devil making every effort to dissuade you from it.

Prayer should be your main support; therefore, you must never miss it except when you are ill. It is prayer that will dispel the darkness of ignorance from your soul. Live by the spirit of faith. You are in God's presence; that is more than enough for you. Do not give way to self-pity, but rather fear that and distrust it.

Your prayer is good just as you are making it; continue to make it that way. God is in your prayer, making it for you. All you have to do is from time to time disown with peace and tranquility of heart all the repugnance and the distractions that you experience, and put yourself completely in the hands of our Lord, so that he may come and live in you and himself master your inclination to evil.

You ought to welcome the state in which you find yourself during prayer as a penance God wants you to do for your sins. It will be quite some time before you recover from it. You must bear it patiently, even joyfully. Is it not enough for a wretched

soul to know that she is in God's presence? That is the reflection you should make from time to time during the day and also during your prayer in order to win for yourself some degree of interior and exterior recollection.

Your present state of prayer, as you describe it to me, is not the dangerous form of idleness that you think. Provided you hold on to the thought of God and make progress toward him, why should you be upset? He has no need of all your efforts. Idleness is to be avoided, but at the same time you must not hamper yourself with a great number of acts in prayer. All you need and all God wants of you is that you remain in his presence.

In a word, turn once again to prayer for help, and remain in an attitude of abasement before God, divesting yourself of all that is not God. In simplicity of heart, ask him to help you out of your present wretchedness. If you cannot pray, tell God that you cannot, and then remain at peace. He will not ask you to do the impossible. Or say to him, as the Apostles did, "Lord, teach me to pray."<sup>93</sup> Then remain humbly before him as one who is incapable of doing anything, and that will be your prayer.<sup>94</sup>

De La Salle's attachment to meditative prayer was not limited to the periods set apart for the exercise. He prayed at all times and in all places; nothing was able to prevent him from doing so. He was conscious of God's presence to the point of familiarity, and this kept him in a state of profound recollection and strikingly controlled in his demeanor. It made him punctilious about regular observance and continually attentive to making every least action something holy. Let us see in our next chapter how this was so.

#### [CHAPTER 18]

*His constant union with God, third effect of his practice of the theological virtue of charity; examples of his way of maintaining union; his habitual awareness of God's presence; his appearance of often being completely absorbed in God; his abhorrence of anything that might offend God*

When we study the life of De La Salle, we have the impression that he had made his own the counsel of the Holy Spirit, "Let nothing prevent you from praying continuously."<sup>95</sup> He seemed to have based his

93. Luke 11:1.

94. *Letters*, 111.

whole life on this advice, for he prayed without interruption, and his prayerful spirit never altered. The tabernacle was his recourse for every question, small or great. Like a second Moses, he presented himself before God on every occasion of difficulty, however slight. He sought constant union with God to be practically never unaware of his presence, which thus became habitual and familiar to him. At all times, in all situations, and in various ways he prayed, sometimes with words, sometimes with the heart alone. If he found himself with no particular task or business to attend to, he took up his prayers immediately, returning to contemplation as to his natural element. If distractions interrupted his absorbed attention, he countered them by reciting various vocal prayers. Whether he was at rest or busily engaged, he raised his heart unceasingly heavenward and sustained his conversation with God by the use of short prayers.

So it was that whether alone or in company, busy or not, he was with God; he managed somehow to be constantly aware of him and occupied with his interests, seeking always to honor and glorify him, ever present in his sight, never leaving his company. One of his most faithful disciples has given this testimony of him:

Our dear Father had the highest regard for recollection, both practicing it himself and wanting it practiced by his Brothers. The latter did not show any thoughtless behavior when he was present, or if they did, it was not with impunity. He relentlessly waged war with those who were thus inclined and made them resume recollection through fear of reproof or penance. He happened to see a novice one day stopping to look out into the courtyard as he was leaving the chapel, where he had just heard Mass and made his thanksgiving after Holy Communion. The incident upset our Father so much that in his zeal he went over to the novice and said with some heat, "If I were your Director, I would give you such a good penance that it would cure you for a long time of looking about you everywhere instead of keeping your attention on the One who has just come to you in Holy Communion!"

Love of God has this advantage over love of creatures, that God is present everywhere and can make his presence known by faith. It is not necessary to travel far, or at all, beyond the boundaries of faith to draw near to God. He is within us, and we are in him, living and existing by him.<sup>95</sup> We have only to enter within ourselves to find him.

95. Sir. 18:22.

96. Acts 17:28.

His kingdom is there. “*Regnum Dei intra vos est*—The kingdom of God is within you.”<sup>97</sup> The throne from which he seeks our adoration is our own heart; it is there that he reigns and there that we can pay him court. Nowhere else are we told to seek him. We are even bidden to hallow him in our hearts.<sup>98</sup> There is no need to cross the seas, no need to penetrate the depths of the earth, no need to soar to the skies or travel to the world’s end. God is to be found in every place where we are. There is joy and matchless comfort in this for saintly souls, who have grown weary of their exile on earth, where everything obscures their gaze on God and where they strive to compensate by a constant recall of him in endless prayer. We ought to pray always<sup>99</sup> and never cease to be aware of God’s presence. Such, to a perfect degree, was the practice of the Founder of the Institute of the Christian Schools.

We may apply to De La Salle what Saint Bonaventure said about Saint Francis, namely, that to console himself for lacking the visible presence of his beloved Lord, he prayed everywhere.<sup>100</sup> He made every place a place of prayer and every thing a subject of meditation. He sought to have God present with him at all times and never to interrupt his conversation with him. Entering or leaving his humble room, he armed himself with prayer. In whatever place he set foot, it was his custom to kneel and offer his homage to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>101</sup> He spent every free moment, however brief, with God. Even while walking through the streets of Paris, he continued his conversation with him. To avoid being distracted by people stopping him or offering him idle greetings, he had a habit of carrying his breviary open, and he came to be known, in fact, as “the breviary priest.” It was not that he affected singularity, but he kept up the unusual practice just to help himself be recollected; his only intention in seeming to be reciting his breviary was to be left undistracted from the prayer that welled up in his heart. Also, by thus not only praying but being seen in prayer, he had a self-imposed obligation to keep his eyes lowered in the midst of the many sights that present themselves in the streets of Paris.

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97. Luke 17:21 (Vulgate).

98. 1 Pet. 3:15.

99. Luke 18:1.

100. “Francis, the servant of Christ, feeling himself in the body to be absent from the Lord, so that he might not be without the consolation of his Beloved, prayed without ceasing, striving ever to manifest a spirit present with God” (Saint Bonaventure, *Life of Saint Francis*, translated by Gurney Salter, London: Dent, 1925, 365).

101. See above, chap. 8, note 106.

When he believed he was alone, observers often heard him give expression to the transports of feeling that the Holy Spirit prompts in souls he has made his own. He would say, "Lord, how happy is the man who places all his trust in you! Such a one has within him the way to come to you and to find comfort in this vale of tears by conversing with you."<sup>102</sup> Or else, "I will love the Lord, for he is my strength; he sustains me and sets me free, the all-powerful Friend who saves me!"<sup>103</sup> Or yet again, this aspiration was often on his lips: "You are the God of my heart and my portion for all eternity!"<sup>104</sup> Throughout his lifetime, according to the testimony of one of his most fervent disciples, he would often look heavenward so devoutly, his eyes so shining with celestial light, that those who saw him felt its rays enter their own heart and enkindle a loving devotion for God.

The intensity of John Baptist's suffering in his last illness stifled neither the aspirations in his heart nor the words on his lips. Repeatedly he uttered this prayer, "My God, I love you with all my heart; do not let me offend you." Or else he would keep saying, "Lord, you visit me at daybreak, and instantly you leave me again."<sup>105</sup> Another prayer he was heard to murmur was, "Lord, if you leave me to myself, I must perish!" But very often it was simply, "God be blessed!" This exclamation, so frequent with him, was his last utterance before his death.<sup>106</sup> In his final illness, when he was at his weakest and his mind seemed to be far away, he had only to hear the words, "Live Jesus in our hearts!" for him to rally his remaining dying strength and with a supreme effort answer, "Forever!"<sup>107</sup>

A remarkable thing about all this is that the humble servant of God deemed himself unworthy and unable to commune with God in a manner worthy of him, and he made a point of using only expressions and terms suggested to him by the Holy Spirit and rendered holy by the Spirit. Verses of the Psalms, so full of divine fire and so apt to enkindle that fire in the human heart, constituted his usual dialogue with God. He had found this way of praying so helpful that he made for his own use, and later made available to his disciples, a small collection of invocations and prayerful expressions, all drawn from the Psalms or from other particularly devotional passages of the

102. Ps. 83:6–7 (Douai).

103. Ps. 18:1–2 (Douai)

104. Ps. 73:26 (Douai)

105. Job 7:18. (Douai)

106. But according to Blain (book 3, chap. 18) and to Maillefer before him (CL 6, 256), the last words were, "Yes, I adore in all things the guidance of God in my regard!"

107. This form of greeting is defined in the earliest text of the Rule as "the signal of the Community" (CL 25, 95).

Scriptures.<sup>108</sup> By using these, they spoke to God in terms taught by God; their prayers were those composed by the Holy Spirit, the unique teacher of true prayer.

The thought of God's presence made such a profound impression on De La Salle's mind and heart, inspiring reverence in him wherever he was, that he believed others must experience the same effect. He thought that any faults they committed could only have been due to their having forgotten this divine presence and that it sufficed to remind them of it to make them behave as they should. Thus he used to say to offenders, "Have you no fear of God? Do you not know that he is looking at you?" To one of his spiritual sons he wrote:

It would appear that your love for him is very weak, and I'm not surprised, since you say that you rarely think of God. Well then, what chance have you of making progress in the virtue of holy love, if you never think of him who should be the sole object of your thoughts?<sup>109</sup>

Some of his disciples observed his way of acting so closely that as far as possible they hardly took their eyes from him. They wanted to be edified by seeing the signs in his countenance of the way the Holy Spirit was at work in his heart. These Brothers relate that he could often be heard sighing as if longing for God and expressing his heart's emotion with devout aspirations. Whatever care he took to suppress such external signs of the divine fire burning within, sparks from it escaped and showed the intensity of its heat. He was so abstracted, so preoccupied always with God, that he seemed unaware of his surroundings, as if his mind and heart were elsewhere even when Brothers were present. Often he failed to hear when something was said to him. His concentration during prayer was such that he once allowed himself the liberty of saying that he never had distractions.

108. Blain makes a previous reference to this compilation in the biography (book 3, chap. 17), but no copy of it has come down to us. Gallego (572) suggests a connection with the collection of passages referred to by Maillefer (CL 6, 173) that he calls *Maximes de Piété* and that he says was not made available to the public. But Hermans notes (CL 10, 84) that Blain's description brings to mind the *Collection* section, "Passages of Holy Scripture That May Help the Brothers to Perform Their Actions Through a Spirit of Faith," which has seventy-two scriptural quotations, ten of them from the Psalms (CL 15, 50–55; *Collection*, 38–44).

109. *Letters*, 68.2. Blain in the next chapter quotes the full letter of which this is an extract, incidentally providing a small but useful opportunity to check his way of quoting. There are three differences, but very slight, between his two versions, so that perhaps the test may be in his favor.



During the winter before he died, the bakery of the Saint Yon house caught fire and burned so fiercely that it threatened in no time to reduce the whole building to ashes. John Baptist, confined at this time to the infirmary, was saying his breviary. Brother Barthélemy told the novices, who were at their Divine Office, to run and try to get the fire under control. Meanwhile, the invalid in the infirmary went on calmly reciting his breviary. It was only some time after the noise of the fire had thrown the house into a panic that he left the infirmary to see what was happening. In all the commotion he appeared to have heard nothing, so absorbed was he in his prayer. When he had completed his office, he walked a few steps away from the infirmary, but then he saw the flames leaping out of the door and windows of the bakery. He returned to the infirmary as calmly as he had left it, got down on his knees, and joined his hands in prayer. This, at any rate, was what the Brothers deduced from the fact that the violence of the fire abated at that moment, and the overall damage done was not serious. Everyone attributed this to the prayers of their saintly Father.

Even when he was asleep, his mind was on God, and he was sometimes heard to murmur, "My God, you know that I seek only you!" His great spirit of recollection remained with him also at recreation. It is true that the way he had prescribed for fulfilling this exercise of Rule in his Institute was well adapted to preserving and encouraging recollection. At the end of recreation, the Brothers were to come away from it as if they had been listening to a spiritual conference, with hearts renewed in fervor and freshly inspired with a sense of God's presence.<sup>110</sup> Hence John Baptist was as free during this time as at any other to think of God and nourish his own soul with the bread of life he shared with his disciples; in speaking to them of God with ardent conviction, he renewed his own fervor. Refreshing his own soul and theirs with the waters of heavenly wisdom, he sometimes appeared to be so carried away by what he was saying that he became oblivious to all else, even to the point of not noticing untoward noise in the vicinity. The following incident bears this out.

It happened one day when he was walking with the Brothers out in the fresh air during the recreation period. As usual he was conversing with them about the reading they had listened to during the

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110. The primitive texts of the Rule for the recreation period can be read and compared in CL 25, 28–31. Blain devotes almost a full chapter (book 3, chap. 15) to the evolution of the relevant legislation and to the contention it provoked. A useful discussion of this topic in English can be found in Battersby, *De La Salle: Saint and Spiritual Writer*, 80–83, who says that the Founder was influenced in his formulation by *Règlement de l'Abbaye Notre-Dame de La Trappe*, by Abbot de Rancé.

meal. Just then, from the garden next door, there came such an unholy row that the Brothers fell silent, unable to hear one another speaking, and some of them even put their hands to their ears to avoid listening to the blasphemies and obscenities that were being shouted out. John Baptist became recollected at the first sound and appeared no longer to hear anything. The Brothers, following his example, gathered their thoughts in a silent act of reparation to God's majesty so outrageously insulted. Each was shocked by the commotion and so horrified at what they had heard that they expected their Superior to show the same reaction. But he said not a word and gave no sign of having been upset or grieved. The Brothers were surprised at this seeming indifference to the fact that many sins had been committed, and they asked him if he had not heard the scandalous things that had been said. But they already began to suspect the reason for his mysterious reaction.

He had seemed so abstracted and his attention so otherwise engaged that they concluded their Father had been communing with God in the depth of his soul. The noise that had caused him to recollect himself ceased forthwith to distract him, and he heard nothing of the uproar that followed. The voice of God within him had been too strong, had spoken too loudly, for him to hear anything else. In fact, when the Brothers expressed to him their disgust at having had to hear such impious and foul language, he showed surprise and said that he had heard nothing, but he immediately regretted saying this because he sensed that they admired him for it.

In other situations our servant of God became so absorbed in his loving discourse with God that he seemed lost in thought and unable to give his attention to anything else. For example, he went out one day to visit a Sister to whom he gave spiritual direction. Before asking for her at the convent, he visited the chapel, as was his custom, to pay his respects to the Blessed Sacrament. But on this occasion he became so lost in his loving contemplation of Jesus present there that he remained in the chapel two whole hours. Then he returned home, having quite forgotten the reason that had brought him to the convent or else under the impression that he had done what he came to do. The Sister concerned, who had been awaiting him with some impatience, was deeply disappointed. He did not realize his mistake until the next day, when he called at the convent again to see the same Sister and was greeted with her reproaches for not having kept his appointment and for having made her wait the previous day for a visit he had promised but did not make. "But Sister," he replied, quite surprised, "I thought I did see you!" It was Sister's turn to be astonished on hearing such a convinced assurance, but she insisted so strongly

that he had not seen her that in the end he had to admit she must be right, and he thereupon apologized, without, however, explaining what had happened.

He was habitually so taken up with God's presence that he could hardly bear to speak about anything else. Any other conversation gave him no pleasure, and his reticent and cool demeanor betrayed this when he could not without discourtesy change the subject. As for anything sinful, his horror was commensurate with his love for God. He was always alert to react against it, so much so that his own aversion for it inspired the same feeling in others. Yet this did not make him any less compassionate for sinners, not even for the most hardened, all of whom he loved and to whom he showed the utmost kindness, even while he lamented their misdeeds and sought to heal their moral wounds. Toward his own disciples he was less indulgent because he wanted them to be perfect, and his concern in their case was to instill in them a fear even of the slightest faults. He had to bring all his patience into play when they committed some deliberate misdemeanor in his presence. Normally they did not escape whatever suitable penalty the Holy Spirit inspired him to impose. His aversion for sin made him unable to witness any fault in silence if by his words he could check it or prevent the scandal it would give. If ever he did remain silent when he saw someone offending God, it was when prudence counseled him to say nothing lest he might cause more sins by provoking the offenders. But usually he manifested a holy anger with them, and while giving them to understand that what he said was prompted by charity, he pointed out in restrained and humble terms that they were forgetting God's presence and lacking the holy fear they should have of him.

[CHAPTER 19]

*His singleness of purpose derived from disinterested love of God; disinterestedness not excluding a holy fear of divine chastisement; his belief that love of God must be shown in practice by good works and self-sacrifice if it is not to be deemed a mere illusion*

Because De La Salle's life was quite governed by his pure love of God, which provided the motivation for all he did. God was the sole object of his desires; therefore, all his purposes and intentions were directed toward God. He had no other aim but to please God, to do his holy will in everything, to procure his glory—in a word, to show

his love for him and to inspire this same love in others. His happiness consisted in serving God for the love of God. The honor of serving God and the joy of pleasing him sufficed to spur him into action, his heart aflame with love. His soul was so imbued with perfect charity that merely human interests, the attractions of created things, and the subtle prompting of the ego found no place there. God's good pleasure and an ever purer love for him were the treasures he sought in undertaking anything. True, his fear of God was above the ordinary, as was his consciousness of the judgment to come. The thought of hell's pains filled him with dread, no less than the hope of eternal happiness filled him with longing. But these considerations were not the usual motives for his behavior or the guiding influences of his life. He invoked them only when he felt the need to do so, for no good person, however holy, may totally disregard them.

There are many situations in life when saints, like anyone else, must remind themselves of such things to counter the attractions of concupiscence and sinful passion. Saint Teresa did so;<sup>111</sup> she was only following the example of Saint Paul,<sup>112</sup> as all the saints have done. Apart from such moments, it was De La Salle's pure love of God that spurred him on; fear and hope were never wholly excluded, but personal interests were normally not the compelling motives for what he did. The Royal Prophet called upon God to grant him the gift of fear, and his reason for doing so was that it might make him faithful in observing God's commandments and that fear might control the basic part of his nature, which did not find it easy to observe God's law and responded insufficiently to the appeal of God's love. "Pierce my flesh with fear,"<sup>113</sup> he said. "My flesh," not "my heart," because in the heart love displaces fear. In the heart love is the law that governs all.

All this describes De La Salle's habitual disposition, which he sought to inspire in his disciples. He let the fear of God remain as a restraining influence on their fallen nature, dominating its tendencies to do wrong, but charity was to be the queen of the heart, holding sway over its affections, its inclinations, and its motives. Hence, everything he said or did savored of the pure love of God. To inspire it in others, he spoke vehemently and persuasively. His heart's fervor made him eloquent in speech and day after day suggested to him new arguments for loving God and new ways of bringing others to the practice of this love. He belonged to the heavenly company of those who

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111. An allusion to the celebrated chapter 32 of her autobiography, in which the Lord "favored" her with a vision of hell (English translation by E. Allison Peers, New York: Image Books, 299–303)

112. 1 Cor. 9:27.

113. Ps. 118:120 (Douai).

love God for his own sake and see in him the uniquely lovable Being, and apart from him, nothing worthy of love. His zeal, like that of Saint Philip Neri, made him wholly intent on bringing others to join this select company, especially members of his own Society. This was his purpose in constantly urging the Brothers to seek God alone in everything, to have him alone in view, to act only for him, and to make him the sole aim of all their aspirations, the unique object of their desires and thoughts. He had a way of reminding them of such considerations by saying to them, if he ever noticed them even slightly out of order, "Is it the love of God that makes you act like this?"

De La Salle never tired of repeating the lesson of love. He was like the beloved disciple, whose teaching was simply, "Little children, love one another."<sup>114</sup> For the Founder of the Christian Schools, the endless theme was, "Brothers, do everything for God alone. Let the pure love of him reign in your hearts. Let all your intentions have him in view, and let all your desires center on him." Because he did everything for God alone, he led others to do so and trained them to enrich their most trivial actions by doing them for the glory of God and with the intention of fulfilling his will. Saint Paul's words were often on his lips: "Whatever you do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him,"<sup>115</sup> and these others, "Whether it be eating or drinking, or whatever else you do, do it for the glory of God."<sup>116</sup>

A reputable person who knew him well tells us:

The servant of God had such elevated and disinterested motives for what he did that he spoke little about the rewards God has prepared for the good or the punishments he has appointed for those who have failed to love him. He believed that God is sufficiently lovable in himself without need of such motives, which are less disinterested and therefore less befitting to the divine majesty. He would have everyone love God without seeking any return for that love except God. If someone suggested to him that to rouse the negligent and rescue the lukewarm from the dangerous state in which they were, he should speak more often

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114. An allusion to the story about Saint John at Ephesus, related by Saint Jerome in the course of his commentary on the Letter to the Galatians. The Apostle's daily preaching consisted solely of the words, "Little children, love one another." His disciples grew tired of hearing the same thing day after day and asked John why he kept saying this. He replied, "Because it is the Lord's command, and if you fulfill it, it is sufficient" (PL, vol. 26, col. 433).

115. Col. 3:17.

116. 1 Cor. 10:31.

of rewards and punishments, his reply was that he did not think there were many among his Brothers who needed such motivation for their service of God. On the contrary, he would say that they were all eager, as he was, to follow the path of pure love.<sup>117</sup>

As I have already mentioned, it was not that he never appealed to those arguments if he ever found any Brothers growing sluggish in God's service. He knew that human weakness and a natural tendency to take things easy often needed prodding to keep them pressing on in the narrow way of perfection. He was aware that the greatest saints were those who meditated most on the four last ends and were far from keeping such thoughts out of their minds, as do the teachers of false spirituality. It was a positive joy for him to hear his disciples talk about death and show an interest in it and in the consequences, good or ill, that follow it. He was convinced that reflections of this sort provide a defense against sin and have a subduing influence on wayward tendencies. Even so, his desire was that such fear should lead to love, that it should serve as a key to open the heart to divine charity. Fear, as he understood it, is a breath of wind serving to fan the embers of charity by renewing the spirit of penance, compunction, and humility. Those who argued against the appeal to fear as a motive were, he believed, hindering the acquisition of pure love. But in the long run, what he wanted was for people to progress from the thought of their sins and of the punishment due to them to the point where the pure love of God was the dominant influence. He wanted people to profit even by the thought of God's dread penalties to grow in love, for he knew that God's threats were intended for those who persisted in their refusal to love him and that it was in the divine plan that such threats should bring even these to give him their love.

The ardor with which De La Salle spoke on the subject of loving God was sufficient to make others want to cultivate that same love. Frequently and with rousing words he urged his sons to seek only God, and he had the consolation of seeing that he did not speak in vain, for what he said served to kindle in their souls the beauteous fire that Christ brought upon earth and with which he desired to set all hearts aflame.<sup>118</sup> "My very dear Brothers," he would say, not once but many times, so full of zeal was he, "desire only God; seek only God; let God fill you with his Spirit!" Such words, replete as they were

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117. Whatever may be the accuracy of this witness, we have the Founder's written doctrine on accountability and reward in the last four *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (*Meditations*, 89–104). Campos has an illuminating commentary on these pages (CL 46, 290–343).

118. Luke 12:49.

with spirit and life, made so profound an impression on them that as he spoke they felt their souls melting as wax melts in contact with fire. The Brothers themselves tell us:

It sufficed to hear the words that came from his lips for us to be led to love God and for fervor to take the place of our sluggishness. Anyone of us who was troubled with temptations had only to seek the help of his advice; three or four words were sufficient to dispel our worries and make us turn to God in love. A Brother was tempted one day to leave the Society but was reluctant to tell Father de La Salle about it. He even avoided meeting him because, as he put it, he did not want to have his mind changed by Father's advice. Nevertheless, he did listen to him; he did change his mind, and he was by no means the only one to whom this happened. To coax those who were halfhearted to be more generous, he would usually say no more than, "Does not God deserve a greater effort from you to love him?" Sometimes, putting his arm around their shoulders, he would say, "Come, you are surely willing to do that for God, aren't you?"

A great number of those who were under his direction have spoken of him in such terms. Indeed, many secular persons have testified that it sufficed to hear him speak to be led to do what was right, and this as readily as the very thought of it had previously filled them with loathing.

However, the love of God that De La Salle wanted his disciples to have was not something abstract and speculative or just a pleasant, cozy feeling. It was to be a strong, generous, and effective love, practical and self-sacrificing, setting no limits, allowing no hindrance to their progress in the spiritual life. It was to be a love prepared, on the instant, to give God everything he asked for. This was the kind of love that governed his own life and directed the impulses of his heart, and it was this that he inculcated in others, bidding them be docile to the inspirations of such love and to refuse it nothing.

In a letter of spiritual direction to a Sister, he advised:

You may be sure that you will not make progress in the way of love except insofar as you are faithful not to harden your heart to the inspirations of grace. You know what the Holy Spirit says by the mouth of the Prophet, "If today you hear his voice, take care not to harden your heart," for this could bring about his withdrawal from you, perhaps forever.<sup>119</sup>

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119. *Letters*, 114.1.

To one of the Brothers he wrote:

You realize how important it is to follow the inspirations that come to you from God. They are precious, and it is to them that God ordinarily attaches his graces. He does not mean them to be given to you for no purpose. He knows how to punish those who are not faithful to them. So those inspirations that God gives us are to be valued, and he grants his graces only insofar as we are faithful in following them.<sup>120</sup>

To another Brother he expressed himself as follows:

Whenever you have something to do, remember that we are not happy in this life except when we do things with God in view, for the love of him and only to please him. It would appear that your love for him is very weak, and I'm not surprised, since you say that you rarely think of God. Well then, what chance have you of making progress in the virtue of holy love if you never think of him who should be the sole object of your thoughts? You must know that as long as you are in this frame of mind, you will continue to feel dislike for all the virtues. You see that you are not practicing even one in the apathy you are presently experiencing. Humble yourself often, then, before God. Tell him that you are as content as if you were enjoying consolations and that it is he whom you seek, not consolation. When you find yourself distressed by apathy during prayer, have recourse to God, and tell him that since he is your refuge, he must also be your consolation. Apply yourself to your spiritual exercises in such a way that you will not have to say that, though you began under the inspiration of the Spirit, you finish under the impulse of the flesh, that is, in a purely natural manner. We must practice mortification if we are to have God in view in all we do.

I am, my very dear Brother, devotedly yours in his holy love.<sup>121</sup>

A final testimony on this subject is that of a virtuous parish priest who knew the servant of God very well and had lodged for some time with him.<sup>122</sup> He says that his life was so perfect that we could say he was a man transfigured, that it was not an ordinary life he lived but one in which every single action was done in the sight of God and for God. These are the very words used by the parish priest.

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120. Blain quotes only a portion of this letter, which is found in full only in Ms. 22 in the Rome archives (*Letters*, 86.1–3).

121. *Ibid.*, 68.1–8.



Because full union with God in the light of glory was not yet possible for him, John Baptist made use of the light of faith to draw near him and to the extent possible stand in his presence. It is the privilege of the blessed in heaven to live in God, to have him ever present, to contemplate him with unclouded vision, to see him face to face as he is.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, what constitutes the despair of the damned and the punishment of hell is to be separated from God and to be without hope of ever seeing him. To live here below estranged from God without lamenting it, without even being concerned about it, is what makes the world so wicked and the lot of the sinner so deplorable. But to live in God and for God is the happy state of the just man, a grace to be cherished by him.

As for spending our life in this world in God's company, never leaving his presence, this is the desire of pure souls and the experience of the perfect. "Walk in my presence and be perfect,"<sup>124</sup> said God to Abraham, meaning that perfection would soon follow. This is why we can classify John Baptist de La Salle among the perfect. He had God ever present with him and could say with the Prophet that his whole concern was not to lose the divine companionship: "*Providēbam Dominum in conspectu meo semper*—I kept the Lord in my sight."<sup>125</sup> He was not yet in heaven, but his heart was there by anticipation, and all his aspirations kept his mind fixed on that which is the sole object of the vision enjoyed by the blessed. Although God still hid his face from him, he begged God not to deprive him of his divine company but to grant him the favor of his presence as continuously as human frailty allowed. Having been granted this favor, he treasured it with care. Nothing pained him so much as any interruption to his colloquies with God. Prayer, which is the soul of that discourse, was his spiritual nourishment, and recollection, which is its security, was his delight. He was content just to be able to keep on praying in silence; it was a matter for regret when he had to interrupt this sometimes, and he always returned to it with joy. To devote more time to it, he avoided any occupation, visit, or conversation that seemed unnecessary. In his timetable creatures had to take second

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122. De La Salle had established the custom of accommodating visiting priests even before his first meeting with Adrien Nyel, as he tells Nyel (Blain, book 1, chap. 8). He continued this practice of Christian hospitality for many years, for example, at Vaugirard (book 2, chap. 11) and at Saint Yon (book 3, chap. 4). But it is likely that Blain is here again using the reminiscences supplied by Canon Guyart (see above, chap. 12, note 4).

123. 1 Cor. 13:12.

124. Gen. 17:1.

125. Ps. 15:8 (Vulgate).

place to God. Whatever people might say, he had made it a rule to speak little with his fellowmen and much with God.

None of this should surprise us. Union with God is what constitutes the repose of the saints in glory, and it is this repose that saints on earth seek and find, as far as possible here below, in silent contemplation. This is how it comes about that the purer a soul is, the more it is able to converse with God, and the greater love it has, the more it is drawn to solitude and recollection. Such a soul is attracted to prayer as a lover to his beloved. Prayer nourishes it, keeps it safe, gives it repose. Such a soul feels itself a stranger on earth, a captive in Babylon, and its loving gaze is fixed on heaven. While it awaits the time when it will see God there, only the privilege of being able to converse with him now relieves what would otherwise be tedium. God alone can satisfy such a soul, and only what draws it nearer to him can afford it contentment. Its tears flow freely, and it is comfortless and bereft whenever it must ask itself, with the Psalmist, “Where is your God?”<sup>126</sup>—so great is its fear of losing him and so great the anguish of being separated from him. When God seems to draw away, the desire for him is intensified, and the soul is attracted all the more to silence, solitude, and prayer.

The disposition of such a soul is what characterizes all who have sought to be perfect. It was John Baptist de La Salle’s to an eminent degree. Prayer was the holy Founder’s time-bound substitute for the beatific vision; the practice of the presence of God was his anticipated heaven on earth. Precious benefits grew from his familiarity with God, among them luminous wisdom and power of discernment, striking distinction of manner, meticulous observance of the rules, and detailed care to accomplish all his tasks with the efficiency they called for, giving full value even to the least important. These qualities, admired in him by everyone, are much too significant to be passed over in silence. Let us look at them in our next several chapters.

## [CHAPTER 20]

*Remarkable wisdom as another effect of De La Salle’s constant union with God; his wisdom very different than that of the world; its consistency with the qualities delineated in the Letter of James; some examples showing how his great wisdom guided his conduct; his gift of discernment*

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126. Ps. 42:3.

Christian wisdom, a quality as rare as it is needful, constitutes the science of the saints and is the mistress of the spiritual life, the guardian and guide of virtue. Virtue without wisdom is only harmful, or at least it is of no use for salvation. This is why Holy Scripture has so many tributes of praise to wisdom and so many words of counsel on how to acquire it. Holy Scripture urges us over and over again to seek wisdom as a gift from God. Whole books of the Bible are devoted to inspiring a love for wisdom and to teaching the rules that govern it.

Worldly people pride themselves on being wise. We may say that they positively cultivate this quality and that they seek a reputation for possessing it rather than any other. The world, in fact, does have its sages; according to Jesus Christ, they are more prudent than the children of light.<sup>127</sup> He means that the children of this world are more vigilant, more cautious, and more adroit in finding ways of satisfying their desires and discovering appropriate means of achieving their ends than good people are in avoiding the snares of Satan and surmounting the obstacles to their perfection. But this prudence of the flesh is nothing else than a mundane constituent of our animal nature, a product of the devil's inspirations—I am using terms the Holy Spirit applies to it in the Scriptures.<sup>128</sup> In outward appearance it seems gracious and pleasing to view because it wears a mask of hypocrisy; its seemingly virtuous qualities are only an assumed disguise. Its sole objective is the satisfaction of self; whatever measures it inspires are all variations of cupidity.

Concerning this wisdom of the world, Saint Gregory says that it consists in being able to hide our feelings, in appearing different than what we really are, in using double-talk, in making what is true seem false, and vice versa. He adds:

Young people study this false kind of wisdom and learn it from the example of others. Their apprenticeship begins when they are mere children and have tutors for the asking. When they have acquired this wisdom, they feel pleased with themselves and take a dim view of those who lack it; however, those who lack it hold in awe and admiration those who possess it. According to the rules of this kind of wisdom, there must be no reluctance to seek honors or to accept them when they come along. Not to enjoy ourselves when we can is to lack an appreciation of good things. This wisdom has an artful duplicity that makes a person pretend to be humble to be praised, to be reticent to be listened to more eagerly when he speaks, to show indifference

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127. Luke 16:8.

128. James 3:15

about possessing something to make sure of obtaining it. It prompts us to seem patient in accepting troubles which we can do nothing about anyway. Acts of charity are performed for what we hope to receive in return. The all-important thing is to save appearances.

The same Father shows how different Christian wisdom is.

Christian wisdom will have nothing to do with deceit, pretense, or disguise. It hates falsehood and has a strict rule never to wound the truth. Its pleasure is to render service freely and without any thought of return. It readily accepts wrong from anyone, but will inflict it on no one. It promptly forgets offenses it has suffered and deems it a gain to be slandered. This wisdom of the saints is called simplemindedness and stupidity by worldly individuals who laugh at it and make fun of it. The latter regard as fools people who say what they think, have no use for guile or duplicity, or seem to show no reaction when they are harassed but on the contrary seem to love their persecutors, pray for people who harm them, and take revenge only by doing them a good turn. They mock anyone who prefers poverty to riches, who gives in to everyone and who “turns the right cheek when struck on the left.”<sup>129</sup>

We have to agree that when judged by the standards of worldly wisdom, John Baptist de La Salle was no sage; hence, the world treated him as a fool. His own archbishop called him just that,<sup>130</sup> for he considered him a man whose devout piety had weakened his brain when he wanted to resign his canonry in favor, not of his own brother, but of a stranger.<sup>131</sup> When he saw him determined on giving away his possessions and trusting completely in Providence, he felt sorry for him as someone who needed to be looked after, if not actually put away in a lunatic asylum.<sup>132</sup> John Baptist's fellow canons, his friends, and above all his relatives, not to mention most of the citizens of

129. Blain gives no reference, but the entire passage is from chapter 29 of Gregory's *Liber Moralium*. Although the biographer does not use quotation marks here, his text is very close to the Latin (PL, vol. 75, col. 947).

130. An allusion to the incident Blain mentions in book 1, chap. 15, when the Founder went with the Duke de Mazarin to request Archbishop Le Tellier's approval for a seminary to train schoolmasters for the villages of the Duke's domains. The archbishop's response was to say that they were a pair of idiots, to which John Baptist replied, “Pardon me, Your Excellency; there is really only one idiot,” meaning himself, as Blain makes a point of explaining.

131. See above, chap. 6, note 79.

Reims, had the same idea about him. In their view his virtuous and self-sacrificing procedures were all so many signs of mental derangement or at least of reckless imprudence.

Everything in the subsequent life of the servant of God provided amusement for the world and brought mockery on his saintliness. To the worldly minded, everything he planned, his way of directing others, and the Brothers and his lifestyle and dress seemed merely bizarre. Such people found it ridiculous that teachers should live the austere, silent, and recollected life of anchorites or that a retired canon should teach in a Charity School dressed in the same garb as the Brothers.<sup>133</sup> In their view both the disciples and their master needed to take advice and season their piety with the salt of common sense. Their immoderate fervor, according to these people, was what the Apostle had deprecated when he wrote, “Do not be carried away by an excess of devotion.”<sup>134</sup> Such zeal was not in accordance with sound knowledge; such virtue was bereft of the happy medium that prudence inspires. De La Salle went to extremes in everything; his devotion was extravagant, and he seemed incapable of striking the golden mean.

This is how the servant of God was thought of in the city of his birth, and he fared no better in the capital of the kingdom and other cities. Even those who respected his outstanding piety passed judgment on his way of directing those in his charge. Almost everywhere he was taxed with being imprudent. But it was his good fortune that there are very few saints who were not subjected to the same kind of criticism. The saints’ way of practicing virtue soars above the common level and leaves them open to the censure even of good people. Because even the latter do not see things in the same light as the saints, they find fault with the lofty principles of wisdom on which these base their conduct. Thus it was in De La Salle’s case. His kind of holiness came up against the opinion of respectable people, and he was made to feel the effects of their jealousy and criticism, if not their

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132. De La Salle’s decision to give away his possessions to the poor was a measure, says Blain (book 1, chap. 13), that seemed to Archbishop Le Tellier “a pious illusion, one of those romantic and devotional fantasies more apt to excite hilarity than to be put into effect.”

133. The Charity School concerned was in the parish of Saint Jacques in Reims (chap. 7, note 91). Blain is insistent that the Founder wore the Brothers’ type of mantle, hat, and shoes during the early years of the Society. He mentions it three times again in the present work and says that John Baptist discontinued the practice only when he went to Paris, and then only on the advice of “very prudent and saintly persons.”

134. 1 Pet. 4:12 (Blain’s personal interpretation, seemingly, of the Vulgate’s “*Carissimi, nolite peregrinari in fervore*”).

downright hostility. They treated him as a man who did not know where to draw the line; in their view he was obstinate and narrow-minded. This was all they could say about him, for the evident holiness of his life protected him from any other kind of reproach. His most outspoken critics considered him a saint even while they charged him with lacking judgment, for the accusation of imprudence hardly ever fails to be leveled at rare and heroic virtue and is the usual line taken by anyone who wants to attack it.

But now that we can look at the procedures of the Founder of the Brothers coolly without prejudice and without jealousy, we recognize that the Spirit of God was with him, that wisdom, understanding, and counsel were his, bestowed by him who is their source. It pleased God to leave him open to the jealous criticism of well-placed people who enjoyed a reputation for wisdom, but now he has vindicated his name at the expense of those who then denigrated it. The wisdom of John Baptist de La Salle, which was sublime, has finally triumphed over that of his rivals, and Divine Providence has shown by its effect that it came to him from on high.

What are the characteristics of this true wisdom of his? They are such as are described in the third chapter of the Letter of Saint James; I find in De La Salle all the qualities there delineated. The first effect of the wisdom that is from above, says James, is to inspire a singular attraction for purity of the heart, the body and the soul: "*Quae de sursum est sapientia primum quidem pudica est*—Wisdom from above is, first of all, innocent."<sup>135</sup> Our saintly priest made it a matter of special concern throughout his life to cultivate this triple purity. Nothing was closer to his heart than to keep very careful guard over this virtue, to keep clear of the least occasion that could tarnish it, and for the sake of it, to live a life of rigorous, total, and continual abnegation of the body and its senses. He maintained an unwearying watch over the impulses of nature and self-love, and he always remained humbly mistrustful of his own opinions and understanding.

The second characteristic of the wisdom that is from above is to be peace loving (*deinde pacifica*) and orderly in everything, regulated and moderate in all conduct, and seeking the will of God in all things. No one can fail to recognize the portrait of De La Salle in this analysis. He had made it his principle to give way to everyone, for example, even to the point of letting his property be vandalized by his enemies.<sup>136</sup> He refused to defend himself against anyone and would

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135. James 3:17; Blain's comments are based on the complete verse.

136. At the rue Saint-Placide school, he "happened to arrive on the scene just when this vandalism was in progress. . . . he said to his charitable rivals with his usual tranquil air, 'Here, take me along, too!'" (book 2, chap. 14).

not think of taking someone to court.<sup>137</sup> When his own disciples turned against him and claimed property and goods as their own, he let them have their way.<sup>138</sup> He submitted to the ratification of the Brothers the various rules that he had prescribed and that had become long established in practice.<sup>139</sup> He argued and contended with no one at all about anything, unless it was his claim to be treated as the least important member of the community! Thanks to him, good order reigned in his communities even when they had large numbers, as at the Grand'Maison in Paris and at the Saint Yon establishment. There were eighty persons living in the latter place, and strangers who visited thought it was unoccupied, so much did the silence and regularity reigning there do honor to the good order of the community and bespeak its fervor.

The third quality of heavenly wisdom, according to Saint James, is that it is modest (*modesta*), but because I will be devoting the next chapter to the way our saintly priest excelled in this, we will pass directly to the fourth quality, namely, that it is amenable (*suadibilis*). This means that the wisdom given by God renders the heart docile and the spirit submissive. It restrains the soul from following its own intuitions and will not let it refuse good advice when offered. The resulting flexibility enables good of every kind to be accomplished. It is a characteristic that De La Salle evinced from the cradle to the grave. He was a child of obedience at all times and in all places. If anything in his conduct could be deemed imprudent, the fault lay not with him but with his spiritual directors. He had placed himself entirely in their hands and had given them a right of control over all his plans and undertakings. He never embarked on an enterprise except with their approval; they added suggestions or modified his ideas with complete freedom. In his childhood he was docile; as a schoolboy, responsive to his teachers; as a seminarian, obedient; in his adult years, completely trustful of whatever his spiritual guides advised. His amenability was admired at every stage of his life. Even when he was advanced in years and had not long to live, his submissive attitude was noted with admiration at the famous Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet in

137. When the rival schoolmasters obtained the closure of the school in rue du Bac, De La Salle had to be pressurized to appeal at court. "Finally, his spiritual director told him it was his duty in conscience to uphold God's cause, which was also that of the poor" (book 2, chap. 8).

138. The classic case is that of Nicholas Vuyart; see chap. 13, note 33.

139. Blain reports the Founder as saying in his introductory address to the Brothers at the first general assembly of the Society, at rue Neuve, "Your heart will recognize your own work in the legislation which will be laid down, and the details it prescribes will seem agreeable to you because you yourselves will have been the lawgivers" (book 2, chap. 2).

Paris. He behaved there, at the age of sixty-six, the way he had behaved as a seventeen-year-old student at Saint Sulpice: unobtrusive, humble, deferential to all, seeking counsel for everything, asking permission for the most trivial reasons.<sup>140</sup>

His readiness to follow the advice of wise persons was particularly evident when he discontinued, in keeping with what they had counseled him, a great number of the practices of penance, mortification, and humiliation that he had introduced into the Community—as much, incidentally, by his personal example as by actual prescription. These practices led his enemies to accuse him of exaggerated and indiscreet zeal, and they also met with disapproval on the part of his ecclesiastical superiors. His spiritual directors, therefore, advised him to discontinue a number of them and to tone down the severity of the others. He did so but not, indeed, without reluctance; perhaps he never in the course of his humble life had to make a harder sacrifice than this particular sacrifice of his views to those of others. But he had made the mortification of his own judgment an established practice in his life and had expressed it in the form of a personal rule, as follows: “What I must attend to most of all is to renounce my own judgment and my own views and not let them be my guide in anything concerning myself.” He practiced this resolution as faithfully as if he had taken a vow on it.<sup>141</sup>

Heavenly wisdom’s fifth characteristic is a spirit of union and concord (*bonis consentiens*). This means that it prompts a person to be at one in mind and heart with God’s servants, to love good wherever it is done, to give at least his assent to good works no matter who is accomplishing them, to favor everything that can contribute to the glory of God and the salvation of our neighbor, and to rejoice at seeing others prosper in their undertakings, achieve great things, receive great graces, and excel in every kind of virtuous behavior. Anyone who has known De La Salle will recognize the man in these lines.

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140. Blain had two documents on which to base this statement: testimonies written from the Saint Nicolas seminary after John Baptist’s death and relating to the Founder’s stay there in 1717–1718 (see above, chap. 14, notes 28 and 29). The biographer quotes both extensively, the first (written, according to Lett, 76, by the bursar of the seminary, Gilbert Descouraux) in book 3, chap. 16; the second (the author, again in the opinion of Lett, 118, was the superior, Firmin Pollet) in book 3, chap. 18.

141. This personal rule does not appear in the list of twenty that Blain quotes as a self-contained document in chapter 22 of the present work. Introducing this document, the biographer laments the loss of other similar pieces that the Founder “in his humility made sure we would not see.” But the “resolution” here quoted by Blain, if we accept its authenticity (as Hermans does in CL 10, 116), must have escaped the loss in some isolated written form.



Although his attention was absorbed by his own undertaking and although he did not like to have to interrupt it or become involved in matters not related to it, he showed himself sympathetic to every good work and fostered its success everywhere, insofar as this was possible for him. Everything that concerned God interested him, and if he did not actually participate, it was not that he would not have liked to do so. When he did not succeed in getting his overzealous friends to see things from his point of view, he at least always maintained peace and union with them as far as it was up to him to do so. He went along with their suggestions whenever these did not conflict with the spirit and rules of the Society. For example, when he first went to Paris and took over the parish school at Saint Sulpice, he kept the manual training class simply to comply with the wishes of Father de La Barmondière, who was very eager to have it; he did not care for it and thought it detrimental to the welfare of the school.<sup>142</sup> In a similar spirit, he complied with the wishes of Father de La Chétardie, who was very determined to begin a Sunday School. To ensure the success of this, he put certain Brothers to the study of subjects that he felt could be a danger to their vocation.<sup>143</sup> He showed the same acquiescent spirit when some of his disciples remonstrated with him about the risks attached to these studies, which had already undermined the fervor of two Brothers who taught drawing, geometry, and mathematics.<sup>144</sup> When the late Monsignor Desmarests, bishop of Chartres, wanted him to make a change in the system he had adopted in the schools of that town, he found him ready to respect his wishes, but the prelate could not resist the convincing arguments John

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142. Gallego (221) considers this Blain's personal interpretation ("without foundation") of the Founder's attitude. For Blain's account of the way De La Salle dealt with the problem of the hosiery workshop, see book 2, chap. 7.

143. The circumstances of the foundation of the Sunday School at the Grand'Maison are recounted in book 2, chap. 17, but according to Gallego (319), Blain's date there of 1709 is a printer's error for 1700.

144. Not that these subjects in themselves constituted a threat to the religious vocation! As Blain shows in his extended account of the Sunday School venture (book 2, chaps. 17 and 21), the two talented Brothers whom De La Salle chose to direct the school and for whom he accordingly arranged more advanced studies allowed the resulting success of the enterprise to go to their heads, and they left the Institute, with the prospect of a good career in secular life. In book 2, chap. 21, Blain dwells at length on the effect these two defections had on the other members of the community: these mounted a strong opposition (including the drafting of a memorandum explaining their point of view) to the undertaking of studies that they said had led to the downfall of their two confreres. Blain's claim here that the Founder "showed the same acquiescent spirit" does not quite tally with his earlier account.

Baptist presented to him in the form of a memorandum.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, I would have to go over the whole life of the saintly Superior if I wanted to give the details of all the incidents that showed him yielding to the views and impressions of others and sacrificing his own cherished plans for the sake of peace and union, always provided, of course, that God's interests were not at stake.

The sixth quality of true wisdom, as delineated by Saint James, is an inclination to do good to others, an attraction for works of mercy (*plena misericordia et fructibus bonis*.) What I will say later about De La Salle's charity for his neighbor will demonstrate how compassionate he was for the unfortunate and how he sought to be of service to everyone, procuring God's glory and the salvation of souls wherever he could.

Let us pass, therefore, to the seventh distinguishing mark of holy wisdom. This is a well-disposed attitude that takes everything in good part and will have nothing to do with criticism and censure. So far from condemning anyone, it does not even scrutinize anyone's conduct with a view to passing a judgment on it, unless required by duty; it is *non judicans*. De La Salle excelled in this characteristic. He was a target of jealousy, contradiction, and criticism, but he let himself be thus blamed, judged, and condemned without murmuring or complaining and without adverting to the faults of those whose jealousy made them notice his and exaggerate them. He carried this charitable discretion so far as to make it a rule for him and for his disciples never to speak of anyone still living except to say what was good about them.<sup>146</sup>

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145. Specifically, the bishop was not happy that the pupils were being taught to read French before Latin. The Founder's memorandum has not survived, and for its contents we are dependent on Blain's purported summary of it (in quotation marks) in book 2, chap. 15. For Rigault (586), the "style, presentation, and argument of this memorandum are akin to those of the *Memorandum on the Habit*, of which we do possess the Founder's manuscript draft." But Hermans shows (CL 10, 112) why Blain's own contribution to the text must be suspect, especially after the first four points of the ten-point presentation.

146. The 1705 and 1718 manuscripts of the Rule have the same wording of article 6 (in chapter 6) on Recreation: "They will not speak about any of the Brothers, those who have been in the Society, or any other living person." Only the 1726 printed version has the addition of the words ". . . except to speak well of them." Blain asserts in book 2, chap. 5 that the Founder had felt obliged to add this modification for his disciples because as the rule stood, it was found a "burden which they found intolerable." However likely this may seem, it is strange that the 1718 text, personally revised by De La Salle, does not contain the clause (CL 25, 29).

The final quality that the Holy Spirit gives in the Letter of James as an identifying mark of supernatural wisdom is sincerity (*sine simulatione*), a characteristic infinitely opposed to the false wisdom of the world, which makes duplicity the life spring of its actions. The prudence of the saints is like themselves, straightforward, unconcerned about appearances, opposed to shame, cunning, or disguise of any kind, always favoring candor and openness. This was the kind of prudence people who knew De La Salle really well admired in him. Never was there any evasiveness, never any pretense in his actions, his words, or in anything he undertook. He spoke only what he thought. Truth came from his lips unclouded and unobscured. He remained silent about anything on which prudence had taught him to keep his own counsel. He guarded his secrets by a wise and firm reticence, not by recourse to duplicity or deceit. This openness and frankness made him liked by people who therefore favored and helped his undertakings, thus ensuring their success much more surely than any dubious maneuverings on his part would have obtained. “Yes” and “No”; “It is” or “It is not”—this was the sum and substance of his speech. He followed Jesus Christ’s injunction about this<sup>147</sup> and did not elaborate; hence, people believed what he said, and those who conversed with him, even the most wily, had to be sincere when dealing with a man of such patent good faith. Whatever worldlings may think, true wisdom is summed up well in the adage, “*Qui ambulat simpliciter, ambulat confidenter*—He who walks without guile walks securely.”<sup>148</sup> De La Salle was a man whose motives were so un-mixed that he never even sought to advance his projects with excessive zeal, preferring to leave their success to Divine Providence. He regarded everything that happened as ordained by God and coming from his hand, and he preferred the divine good pleasure to everything else. Such a man had no use for sharp practice in his dealings, no use for sly procedures or any of the tricks that belong to worldly astuteness. His love of truth and his humility were such that when he was left a legacy toward the end of his life, he was prepared to lose it rather than accept it in the capacity of Superior, a role he had resigned and that now belonged to Brother Barthélemy. As it turned out, he did not lose the bequest. The notary dealing with the matter was not used to such manifestations of virtue, but he finally agreed to let him have what was due to him without requiring him to sign as Superior.<sup>149</sup>

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147. Matt 5:37.

148. Prov. 10:9 (Vulgate).

149. This refers to the Rogier bequest mentioned earlier (chap. 14, note 28). The quotation in CL 42 (vol. 1, 421) confirms that Rogier’s will designated De La Salle as “Superior of the Christian Schools at Paris.” Blain assures us

It was in his faith, his prayer, his habitual recollection, and his union with God that the saintly man discovered this sublime wisdom, which is as far above human wisdom as heaven is above earth. Following its rules, he put the glory of God before all else, making this the sole object of all he undertook and fulfilling thereby the behest of Jesus Christ, "Seek first the glory of God and his justice."<sup>150</sup> He regarded his personal sanctification and that of the spiritual sons God had given him as the goal toward which he must always press, setting at naught all the advantages the world can offer and keeping in view these other words of Jesus, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world if he loses his soul?"<sup>151</sup> Creatures were as nothing to him. God is the sovereign Master who arranges all things; to have recourse to him, win his favor, and commit to him all undertakings—this was the best kind of wisdom of all. How he personally felt about anything, his own ideas, were not guiding factors in what he did. Faith was his great rule of conduct; faith advised him what to do when he was unable to seek counsel from his spiritual directors or from other saintly and enlightened persons. His sole ambition was to know and accomplish the divine will, and prudence, as far as he was concerned, consisted in learning to recognize that will by studying the words of the great servants of God and of those whom he deemed masters in the understanding of the Gospel.

The discretion he showed in whatever he said deserves special mention. He was so reserved in his speech, so circumspect in everything he said, so careful to speak to the point, so well able to give a precise explanation in a few words, and so unassuming in the tone and manner in which he did this that it was quite evident he had taken to heart a maxim he had learned from the saints, namely, to choose each word carefully and not let a single one slip that would later be a cause for regret. He was always ready to listen and slow to speak, as the Letter of James advises,<sup>152</sup> weighing his words so carefully that he was never heard to say more than was necessary or to utter useless, frivolous, or indiscreet things. Because he always had his tongue well under control and said nothing except what the Spirit of God prompted him to say, his words always gave edification and made people

(book 3, chap. 16) that the Founder's determination not to accept the legacy in this capacity caused the lawyer, M. Renard, to waive the title after a stalemate of three months. According to Blain, it was humility that motivated John Baptist's attitude. but we can speculate that his sensitivity to the implications of a legal document was also involved, a sensitivity awakened in the family home and become finely attuned over the years.

150. Matt. 6:33.

151. Matt. 16:26.

152. James 1:19.

think of God. Truth, wisdom, and charity served as a constant check on his tongue, a small organ, as Saint James again says, that is difficult to control and the source of most ills.<sup>153</sup> Truth governed all his words; wisdom seasoned them, and charity made them a source of edification. We can say with Saint James that because John Baptist did not sin by speech, he was a perfect man—“*Si quis in verbo non offendit, hic perfectus est vir.*”<sup>154</sup> It is indeed true that to master the tongue, we must first master the heart and the passions.

John Baptist required from his disciples the same circumspection in speech that his example showed them. He taught them how to say much in a few words, and if they ever let themselves go in an outburst of verbosity, he would check the flow with a well-judged reproof such as “So many useless words, when you could have said it all in a couple!” The rebuke was sharper if they took the liberty of speaking indiscreetly. He would raise his voice and make the offender feel ashamed of himself by asking, “Was it the Holy Spirit who prompted you to say that?” or he would even say, “You should learn to stay silent if you cannot speak better than that!” Charity, as we know, can have a point that makes an impression without inflicting a wound. It was this kind of charity that the wise Superior used in mortifying his disciples sometimes to correct their failings. They knew this very well, and so, although momentarily upset by something he said, they would soon regain their composure.

This is an appropriate place also to mention De La Salle’s discretion in speaking about the controversial issues of the day. He was convinced that the best way to support sound doctrine was to exemplify it by humility and charity. Hence, if he spoke about it at all, it was as if an angel from heaven were speaking. Never was there the slightest movement of anger, never a word more than was absolutely necessary, always with an air so humble, modest, and discreet that it was easy to see that truth came from his lips and that his only aim was to win the person’s heart.

If there were any occasions in his life when he seems to have been insufficiently cautious—for example, as I described when he became entangled with a young cleric over the purchase of the house at Saint-Denis—we will see, if we look closely at the circumstances, that he took all the measures that prudence dictated. But prudence is defenseless against bad faith, passion, and slanderous talk, and God often allows it to be thus ill used. In this case everything was against the innocent victim: the treachery of a friend, the malicious betrayal of men he had thought to be his protectors, the crookedness of the

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153. James 3:5ff.

154. James 3:2 (Vulgate).

lawyers who were consulted. The servant of God had made it a rule never to appear personally in court to offer a defense; he preferred to let his reputation be ruined rather than adopt that measure.<sup>155</sup>

But if we trace his career carefully, step by step, we find that De La Salle did not fail to unite the prudence of the serpent with the simplicity of the dove.<sup>156</sup> We become aware that he always acted according to the principles of the elevated wisdom that makes people into saints and that led De La Salle, so to speak, by the hand. The wisdom of men is folly in the sight of God, just as the wisdom of God is folly to the world.<sup>157</sup> We cannot expect that both kinds of wisdom will agree as to how objectives are to be reached. When John Baptist, as a canon of Reims, magnanimously resolved to give up the office and the prebend that went with it and then to dispose of his inherited wealth, the world called it folly. It is true that looked at from a purely human point of view, such a sacrifice was not called for. But the Holy Spirit provided the inspiration for it, demanded it, and then showed by the success that followed that it had been a product of high wisdom. If John Baptist had remained as he was, his Institute would still be waiting to be founded. He might have managed to train a few teachers for the city of Reims but not for the whole of France. As long as he remained rich and they remained poor, the difference between them would have stopped them from making the necessary progress in virtue and him from achieving the perfection he did.

Another way he showed prudence was his care to avoid disclosing to those disciples whom he did not consider suitable for positions of responsibility anything that was unnecessary for them to know or better for them not to know, even about matters directly concerning the Institute. He felt strongly that such information would only serve to distract, upset, or worry them and cause them to be worked up about things when all they should be concerned about was their progress in perfection. This wise reticence often offended the feelings of some of them, and they would remonstrate with him, wanting him to be more open with them. But he would silence them by saying that in a Society such as theirs, it was necessary for only one or two people to become involved in its business and to take care of its interests; the others should concentrate their efforts on their own duties and on their personal sanctification; any part they might take in running the business of the Society would only be a cause of worry to them. Likewise, the Founder avoided letting individual Brothers know what he had in mind for them or declined to speak of some journey they

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155. See above, chap. 13, note 29.

156. Matt. 10:16.

157. 1 Cor. 3:19.

would have to undertake, until it was near the time for departure. He took steps also to prevent the absence of a confrere from being a subject of speculation. These wise procedures served to maintain a spirit of silence, recollection, peaceful union, and tranquility. United in charity, the Brothers remained detached and disinterested, fearing nothing and desiring nothing except God.

Yet another example of the way this rare kind of wisdom guided De La Salle in everything he did was his refusal to accept the magnificent offer of his archbishop to guarantee financial support for the Community, to ensure its stability with a rich income, and to multiply free Christian schools all over his diocese. The only condition the archbishop attached was that the Society would not extend beyond the boundaries of the diocese. Such an advantageous offer would have spared the servant of God any amount of worries and troubles and could have given him the consolation of seeing his frail bark, threatened as it was with storms and shipwreck, brought safely into port. All this was true, but such a rapid, easy, and convenient consolidation would not have been founded on evangelical poverty and would not have borne the sign of salvation, which is the sign of the cross. All the honor of the undertaking would have failed to redound to Divine Providence. It would also have meant that the diocese of Reims alone would benefit by an Institute that God in his mercy was preparing for the service of the whole French church.<sup>158</sup> If De La Salle had agreed to restrict its development to the confines of a single diocese, its growth would have been stunted and its usefulness limited to a single ecclesiastical area to the detriment of the claims of all the others. It was a sign of his heaven-inspired wisdom that he judged the situation only by the criteria of God's honor and the salvation of souls; mere temporal advantages were not allowed to outweigh the serious deprivation the church as a whole would have suffered.<sup>159</sup>

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158. Blain thus stops short of what the subsequent history of De La Salle's Institute would unfold, its worldwide expansion, described up to the end of the nineteenth century in the later volumes of Georges Rigault's *Histoire Générale* and (including the twentieth century) in numerous monographs in various languages.

159. The earliest account of Archbishop Le Tellier's endeavor to persuade the Founder to limit his work to the diocese of Reims is given in book 2, chap. 7, with an extended analysis of John Baptist's motives for refusal. Gallego suggests (208) that Blain overstates the arguments, writing with the wisdom of hindsight many years after the event. He draws attention to Aroz's note (CL 40, vol. 1, 8) that there is no documentary evidence for the archbishop's offer other than the accounts given by the source biographers. That some such interview did take place has the authority of the "Memorandum on the Beginnings," the Founder's lost manuscript utilized first by Bernard and

No less enlightened was his constant refusal to admit another kind of habit and another system of government into his Institute. His best friends and the most enthusiastic supporters of his work were at one with the public at large in disapproving the adopted form of habit and in wanting it changed. Some wished to substitute the soutane and cape; in other words, they wanted to make clerics of the Brothers. According to these people, there were the best reasons in the world for making this change. But to be convinced by these reasons, we would have to avoid setting them against the arguments put forward by De La Salle for retaining the habit as it was. One reading of these suffices to make us feel that his insights on the matter were superior to theirs and had been inspired from above.<sup>160</sup> As for the changed system of government that found its way into the Society during his absence, those who introduced it had every reason to recognize from the resulting experience that their supposed wisdom had produced only great disorder.<sup>161</sup>

later by Blain; the common element between their accounts is discernible in the midst of Blain's amplifications.

160. All three source biographers mention the document that has come to be referred to as the *Memorandum on the Habit*, although only Blain names the person whose insistent attitude provoked the composition of the document, namely, Henri Baudrand, the pastor of Saint Sulpice. The episode relating to this is recounted in book 2, chap. 8. De La Salle's eight-page draft of the memorandum is preserved in the Rome archives. Surprisingly, Blain, Bernard, and Maillefer offer no quotation from this important statement of the Founder at a crucial moment in the development of his Community. Later writers have perceived its value as being more than a presentation of the case for retaining the Brothers' distinctive garb as it was. According to Hermans, "It is a judicious recall of the conditions according to which the Community existed and of the status to which it believed itself entitled to aspire." Hermans reproduces the document in CL 11, from which the above assessment is quoted (51). Other writers who quote it extensively or in full are Lucard, Guibert, and Rigault. Battersby presents it in its original archaic French with his own parallel English translation (*De La Salle: Letters and Documents*). Sauvage (*Catéchèse et Laïcité*, 497–98 and 513–14) shows its significance in the context of the lay character of the Institute. Campos presents a detailed commentary on the document in CL 45, 190–201. Hermans worked long on what he intended as a study of the Brothers' religious garb, to be published as CL 5, but died before completing the project. Sauvage published his confrere's unfinished work alongside an extensive biographical study of Maurice-Auguste Hermans, assessing his massive contribution to our knowledge and understanding of Saint John Baptist de La Salle's life and work (CL 5).

161. An uncharacteristically brief reference to the critical period of the Founder's departure from Paris in February 1712 for a prolonged absence in the south of France and the subsequent interference in the Society's administration that finally led the "principal Brothers" of the Paris region to write their letter



Again, his enlightenment and farsighted judgment were plainly seen when he blocked the plan to send Brothers to Canada in response to the request of M. Charon. The latter meant well, but he was taking advantage of Brother Barthélemy and his Assistants by concealing from them the way he intended to use the teachers he was asking for. The Founder, however, by an intuition prompted by heaven, saw what the intention was, and an admission subsequently made by M. Charon bore testimony to the inspired wisdom that had enlightened the servant of God.<sup>162</sup>

I have already described how another person also discovered, to his embarrassment, that the Superior of the Brothers had a gift of discernment of spirits and of spiritual insights of no common order. This was the parish priest of Versailles, a member of a religious community, a very fervent one at that.<sup>163</sup>

The town officials of Mende, jointly with the bishop of the place, held on to the Brothers who were teaching there, contrary to De La Salle's representations, and they too had no less reason to be sorry when they witnessed the trouble that befell these same Brothers; they saw when it was too late that in opposing the wishes of the Superior, they had caused the downfall of the inferiors.<sup>164</sup> This kind of discernment enabled John Baptist to discover lapses on the part of his disciples, a weakening of their fervor, their temptations (even the most hidden), or their secret intentions and other interior purposes concealed under an outward pretense of virtue.

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of 1 April 1714, ordering De La Salle to return and take up again "the general direction of the Society." Blain's account of the episode takes up chapters 10 to 12 of book 3, and subsequent biographers have applied themselves to the elucidation and interpretation of his sometimes obscure narrative. The significance of the events as a stage in the spiritual journey of the Saint is studied by Campos in CL 45, 288–312; see also, Sauvage-Campos, 442–56, English edition, 201–11.

162. The incident is briefly recorded by Blain in book 3, chap. 16, but the historical background has been studied in depth by Yves Poutet in contributions to *Bulletin du Comité des Études*, Paris, no. 33, 1961 ("La Compagnie de Saint-Sulpice et les petites écoles de Montréal au dix-septième siècle; 1657–1700"), to *Revue d'Histoire de l'Église de France*, 1963 ("Les Vœux des Frères Charon, Hospitaliers-Enseignants"), and to *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1964 ("Une institution franco-canadienne au dix-huitième siècle: Les écoles populaires de garçons à Montréal"). The first and third of these articles are reprinted in CL 48, 277–362.

163. The resistance of the Vincentian, Father Claude Huchon, to De La Salle's wish to change the Brother in charge of the school at Versailles receives extended treatment in book 3, chap. 8.

164. The story is told in book 3, chap. 6. For a commentary, including names not supplied by Blain, see Poutet, vol. 2, 195–97.

When considering the many requests he received for new foundations, he brought such enlightened wisdom to bear that he seemed to be able to see into the future and know which ones would succeed and which would fail. He could foresee what opposition would be encountered or what help might be expected. This is why he seemed reluctant to touch certain projects that seemed to be advantageous and to promise great results while in the case of others that bristled with problems, he showed a total readiness to comply and a firm confidence that the difficulties would be overcome. If he accepted the former requests, attractive and seemingly full of promise as they were, he did so reluctantly and almost in spite of himself, but for the others, which seemed likely to be a load of trouble from the start and anything but promising, he seemed quite enthusiastic. These varying reactions were noticeable in the case of the foundations at Chartres, Mende, Calais, Marseille, and Rouen.<sup>165</sup> Experience has since shown that those that had his full assent were those that God has blessed most abundantly, transforming the thorns that beset them into flowers. The others, on the contrary, which did not attract him at all, have by no means borne all the fruit they seemed to promise.

It would take too long to describe all the occasions on which it was apparent that the Holy Spirit was De La Salle's guide, the teacher who showed him what to do. The saintly priest was able to read hearts to their very depth and discover there what people wanted to keep from him or even to hide from themselves. It seems that it was quite usual for him to be able to discern clearly the interior dispositions of his Brothers and sometimes of other persons. The advice he gave them, the rules of conduct he laid down for them, his way of

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165. The initial foundations of Lasallian communities in the towns named are chronicled by Blain as follows: Chartres (1699) in book 2, chap. 15; Mende (1707), book 3, chap. 6; Calais (1700), book 2, chap. 16; Marseille (1706), book 3, chap. 2, and Rouen (1705), book 3, chaps. 2 and 3. With regard to the Founder's intuitive reaction to requests from these places, the biographer says that for Chartres he felt "that he should delay." For Mende, although desperately short of Brothers at the time, he was "delighted to find so much zeal in this great bishop" who wanted the foundation, and contrary to his usual strict rule, he sent a single Brother (Ponce, one of his best schoolmen) to make a start, pending the availability of others. For Calais the Founder responded with "alacrity and satisfaction." For Marseille, as soon as arrangements had been finalized, he "immediately sent from Paris two Brothers." With regard to Rouen, he "felt a holy desire to establish himself" there; "he had thought of that ever since the founding of his Institute." The historical circumstances of all these foundations (and of others belonging to the lifetime of the Founder) are presented, with abundant documentation, by Poutet in *Le XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*.

pointing out their faults to them, his ability to see into the innermost recesses of their conscience, his exhortations and the guidance he gave—all proved to them that he had the gift of discernment of spirits to a rare degree and that his spiritual direction was singularly perceptive.

This great gift of wisdom resulted from his union with God. Natural sagacity cannot attain to such a degree of spiritual insight. According to Saint Athanasius, Saint Anthony placed discretion at the head of all the virtues; he accorded it the first rank and deemed it the controller and guide of all the others. But we are not to think that it was natural prudence that he had in mind or the mere gift of an elevated power of thought, wide-ranging and penetrating.<sup>166</sup> He was referring to the supernatural prudence that is the product of union with God, the gift that according to Saint John Climacus<sup>167</sup> and other masters of the spiritual life, goes with the purity of a soul who maintains close communion and intimate companionship with God. Such wisdom is so much the result of a perfect life that it is not to be found except in those people who are far advanced in the way of perfection. Moses is not the only person to come away from familiar communion with the Lord, his mind alight with wisdom. It is impossible to draw earnestly near the Sun of Justice and not be enlightened: *Accedite ad eum et illuminamini*.<sup>168</sup> This Sun will fill with luminous splendor the soul who approaches it—*Implebit splendoribus animam tuam*.<sup>169</sup> This brightness will wax or wane according to the greater or less time spent in that presence and the nearness of our approach. The only difference in this respect between Moses and the other great servants of God is that the light that shone from him was visible and dazzling to the sight,<sup>170</sup> whereas the enlightenment of the others is interior and is usually hidden from view by the cloud of humiliation and disdain that envelops their life.

Our Lord wished to show in his own person the outpouring of light that results in pure souls from prolonged contemplation and intimate communion with God. This was when he appeared on Mount Tabor with countenance shining like the sun and his garments white

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166. The allusion is to Anthony's discourse on the nature of wisdom, in sections 72–80 of the *Life*, by Saint Athanasius (English translation by R. T. Meyer in the Ancient Christian Writers series, Westminster, Maryland).

167. In *The Ladder of Paradise*, Eighteenth Rung: "*Oratio familiaris conversatio et conjunctio hominis cum Deo . . . mentis illustratio est*" (PG, vol. 88, col. 1130).

168. Ps. 33:6 (Vulgate).

169. Isa. 58:11 (Vulgate).

170. Exod. 34:29–30.

as snow.<sup>171</sup> It was his will that the glory of this mysterious event should be seen to be an effect of his prayer. *Factum est dum oraret.*<sup>172</sup> Saint James bids us, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you, . . . but if you wish to draw near, purify your hearts.”<sup>173</sup> It is prayer that draws us near to God and brings him near to us, and the fruit of this union with him, as well as its source, is purity of heart and enlightenment of the mind. Hence it is that “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.”<sup>174</sup> This Gospel beatitude promises an abundant reward for the effort that may first have to be made to cultivate the practice of consciously living in the presence of God.

“The soul,” says Saint Bonaventure, “acquires incomparably more enlightenment and knowledge from an ardent love that unites it with God than from the most profound study, the most assiduous reading, the teaching of the most learned masters, and all the labor the intellect may undertake.”<sup>175</sup> Before him, the Holy Spirit had already declared, “You who fear the Lord, attach yourself to his love, and your heart will be enlightened and inflamed.”<sup>176</sup> The degree of our enlightenment will correspond to the degree of our love; the more we grow in holiness, the more enlightened will we become. A saint’s entire life is spent in this blessed flame, which sets alight his innermost being without consuming him. This was the source of De La Salle’s luminous insights. His soaring wisdom, which informed all he did, was the first effect of his prayer life and of his almost continuous union with God.

But there was a second effect also, and this was to be seen in the remarkable restraint in his bearing, his strikingly modest demeanor. It is this we will consider next.

171. Matt. 17:2.

172. Luke 9:29 (Vulgate). Blain has altered the Vulgate text slightly to suit his present purpose: by writing *factum est*, he makes the passage say, “It happened while he was praying”; the Vulgate has “*Et facta est, dum oraret, species vultus ejus altera*—And while he was praying, the appearance of his countenance became changed.”

173. James 4:8.

174. Matt. 5:8.

175. Blain gives an accurate marginal reference, “De Theol. Mis, c. 3, part. 2,” for this statement of Saint Bonaventure, and although he does not use quotation marks for the passage, his wording is quite close to the Latin: “*In anima incomparabiliter per amoris unitivi desideria perfectio amplioris cognitionis relinquitur quam studendo vel audiendo vel pro rationis exercitio conquiratur*” (*Omnia opera*, Paris: Peltier, 1866, vol. 8, 28).

176. Sir. 2:10.

## [CHAPTER 21]

*His intimate relationship with God, shining in modesty of demeanor; his reflection of all that the saints have said in praise of this virtue; his knowledge that modesty is a virtue particularly appropriate for a priest; the rules of modesty he gave his Brothers; his practice of these rules to a perfect degree; his modest air when in church; the advice he gave his disciples on the subject of modesty; his particular esteem for modesty of the eyes; the Brothers' conduct admirably reflects their Founder's teaching and example*

"The man who seeks an interior life," says the chief of the Apostles, "is made known by the integrity of his quiet and modest spirit, which is precious in the sight of God."<sup>177</sup> Such a man tries in vain to hide beneath a veil of silence, humility, and poverty of spirit. He is betrayed by his modesty, which, says Saint Ambrose, is like a ray of light, reflecting something of the divinity.<sup>178</sup> It suffices to look at such a man to know what kind of person he is: his wisdom shines in his countenance,<sup>179</sup> as the Holy Spirit tells us. It is reflected in his face and is unmistakable to all who look at him. We have only to see him to be favorably disposed toward him. His presence conveys a striking impression and inspires a feeling of deep respect. Everything about him speaks in his favor and declares his holiness. The moment we meet him, his demeanor, his dress, his serenity, his walk, his looks—everything about him proclaims aloud what kind of man he is and induces a feeling of veneration.

Such is the portrait of the modest man as depicted in the Scriptures, and in this portrait I recognize John Baptist de La Salle. His singular modesty, in keeping with the exhortation of Saint Paul to all Christians, was visible to everyone and made known to all that the Lord was near.<sup>180</sup> They saw in him a saintly priest who was conscious of God's presence everywhere and whose bearing was as it would have been if he had stood before Jesus in the flesh. His outward appearance faithfully projected an impression of his soul and the peace that reigned there. Modesty made him a person to be venerated and

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177. 1 Pet. 3:4. Blain paraphrases the Vulgate to suit his present purpose, without regard to the context of the passage in the epistle.

178. Blain's marginal reference, "1 Officiis 18," is accurate, but his citation does not appear there in so many words; it is his free interpretation of the sentence "*Dives est modestia, quia portio Dei est*" (PL, vol. 16, col. 44).

179. Sir. 8:1.

180. Phil. 4:5.

rendered his other virtues attractive and endearing while serving as their safeguard. Modesty, indeed, is a virtue of great charm, capable of making a profound impression on people's hearts. When Saint Paul wished to obtain something from the Christians at Corinth, he besought them through the modesty of Jesus Christ.<sup>181</sup> What this virtue wrought in the Master, it brings about in due proportion in his disciples. One such disciple was the Founder of the Brothers, and anyone would think that Saint Ambrose had him in mind and was tracing his portrait in the following description he gave of a just man.

Rich in blessings is the sight of a just man, who expresses by his rare modesty and controlled demeanor the image of God dwelling in him. To see him is to feel confusion and horror at the thought of sin, and this is the beginning of spiritual well-being. His very eyes inspire a love for virtue; his countenance alone serves to restrain the wayward and to fill with joy the seekers after perfection. What a beautiful thing it is that someone can thus benefit others simply by his presence! *Quam pulchrum est ut videaris et prosis!*<sup>182</sup>

People derived this benefit just from looking at De La Salle. His exterior appearance, so recollected as it was, so humble, mortified, and serene, made everyone realize that modesty, especially of such rare quality, is a principal fruit of the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is its source and origin—“*Fructus autem Spiritus modestia*”<sup>183</sup>—a mirror in which each one saw his own defects, the stains on his own soul, his spiritual deficiencies, and the conversion he must undertake. Even good people found it difficult in his company not to feel ashamed, so great was the distance they sensed between them and him in the way of perfection. It sufficed to look at him to feel moved to recollection. People were known to fix their gaze on him just to spur themselves to behave more virtuously, to feel regret for their shortcomings, or to arouse a keener sense of devotion. It was a routine practice for his spiritual sons to look at him to banish a distraction and gather their thoughts, to shake off torpor and sluggishness when they were at prayer, or generally to react against their feelings of indifference and lassitude.

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181. 2 Cor. 10:1 (Douai).

182. A marginal note refers the reader to Saint Ambrose's commentary on Psalm 118. Blain's purported quotation is a free paraphrase of the saint's reflections on verse 74, but the Latin sentence with which the passage concludes is correctly quoted (PL, vol.15, col. 1338).

183. Gal. 5:22–23 (Vulgate).

De La Salle again comes to mind when we read the beautiful words of Saint Athanasius, portraying Saint Anthony in the *Life* he wrote of that saint: "His countenance reflected a modesty so attractive that he was immediately recognizable wherever he was and no matter how many other people were present. The holiness and purity of his soul were visible in his face, which was joyful and serene at all times."<sup>184</sup> It was the same with John Baptist, a grave countenance tempered with a sweetness of expression, a joyful graciousness about him that placed him among the saints, in accordance with the saying of the Scriptures, "*Jucundus secundum faciem sanctorum*."<sup>185</sup>

So much, then, for modesty in general, but let me now say something more specific about this virtue and enter into some detail. Everyone knows that Christian modesty is a virtue that is practiced out of respect for the presence of God and that serves to edify the neighbor by maintaining due decorum in all the senses and generally regulating our outward behavior. It has to do with a person's exterior, with ensuring a becoming way of acting. But what motivates it is, I repeat, the presence of God. Its firm foundation is a spirit of self-denial. Because it draws its strength from habitual recollection, it serves to edify the onlooker; hence, its range of influence is wide. It applies compass and ruler, so to speak, to the behavior of all the senses and every movement of the body. It carefully regulates the turning of the head, the direction of the eyes, the composure of the countenance, the manner of walking, the words to be spoken, and the tone and style of their delivery; it imposes a becoming attitude and posture on the whole body. It does all this with no concern for making a favorable impression on others but only because a sense of God's presence induces a disposition of profound respect, holy fear, and a consciousness of being nothing before the infinite and sovereign majesty of the Lord.

It is not difficult to conceive how great a spirit of self-denial this virtue presupposes and what vigilance is needed to maintain this exterior recollection. We can truly say that it is a virtue so characteristic of the holiness of Jesus Christ that it is shared only by his most perfect followers. It puts the finishing touch to all the other virtues and is their brightest ornament. Without it perfection is never quite achieved. It may seem to be ordinary, but its nature is heavenly and divine. A priest may possess all the other virtues, but if he does not excel in modesty, he will fail in his duty and fall short of what is expected of him. His role in the church is to be a fiery beacon on a mountaintop

184. Blain's adaptation of a passage from paragraph 67 of the *Life* (English translation, Meyer, 77).

185. Jth. 16:24 (Vulgate).

to shed the light of his edifying life all around. All the virtues should appear in him, but he needs modesty to an eminent degree.

Experience shows, in fact, that nothing so scandalizes the people and does so much harm to the cause of religion, bringing the mysteries of our faith into disrepute, as a lack of modesty in the clergy. The holiness of their state of life cannot tolerate the least failure in this matter, whether in their exterior behavior or their interior disposition; it disapproves everything that is unseemly in their conduct. This is why the Council of Trent reaffirmed what previous councils and the popes had laid down for the clergy in this matter, declaring that all their exterior behavior should give evidence of a deeply religious spirit and that their dress, their way of acting, their manners and speech, should all bear the marks of the gravity and modesty required by their state of life.<sup>186</sup>

I do not know if there has ever been a cleric more faithful to this rule of the church than John Baptist de La Salle. Certainly I can say of him what someone has written of Saint Bernard, that his way of walking and his whole demeanor were so modest, so well-regulated, that the total impression was of humility, piety, and graciousness, inducing respect and infusing joy in all who observed him.<sup>187</sup>

To enter into further detail about the way he exemplified this virtue, I must now speak of some of the practices of modesty he prescribed in his Rule. What he wrote there is only what he practiced; as with all the other virtues, so with modesty, it could be said of him what was said of Jesus Christ, namely, that he began to do and then to teach.<sup>188</sup> Here is chapter 23 of his Rule, on modesty:

It can be said in general that it is necessary that the Brothers manifest in all their exterior actions great modesty and humility, together with the wisdom befitting their profession. But in particular to have the modesty that becomes them, they will especially observe the following practices. They will always hold their head erect, inclined slightly forward; they will not turn around or from

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186. The marginal reference is "Sess. 22 de Reformatione, c. 1." The sentence concerned reads, "*Quapropter sic decet omnino clericos in sortem Domini vocatos vitam moresque suos omnes componere, ut habitu, gestu, incessu, sermone, aliisque omnibus rebus nil nisi grave, moderatum et religione plenum prae se ferant*" (*Conciliorum Œcumenicorum Decreta*, Bologna, 1973, 737).

187. The marginal reference is "L3 ejus vitae, c. 2." The sentence is accurately quoted from *Vita Prima*: "*Incessus ejus et habitus omnis modestus et disciplinatus, praeferens humilitatem, redolens pietatem, exhibens gratiam, exigens reverentiam, solo visu laetificans et aedificans intuentes*" (PL, vol. 185, col. 396).

188. Acts 1:1.



side to side. Recollection will appear to the Brothers of such great importance that they will consider it as one of the principal supports of the Society and want of the custody of the eyes as the source of all kinds of disorders in a Community. To ensure recollection they will usually have their eyes cast down without raising them unduly or turning them from side to side.

They will walk sedately and in silence, with great reserve in their looks and in their whole exterior, without swinging their arms back and forth and without overhaste, unless some necessity requires it.

They will be careful that their gestures and all the movements of their body be such that they can edify everyone.

Finally, they will always keep their clothes neat and clean, and they will wear them with the dignity and modesty becoming a person of their profession.<sup>189</sup>

These are the rules of modesty the servant of God left in writing, but long before setting them down, he proved their worth in practice, establishing them as norms more by example than by instruction; he observed them all to the letter and with scrupulous fidelity.

With regard to the rules concerning clothing, his was always neat and clean but also extremely poor. The material was cheap and coarse, and he wore it till it was threadbare, but it was never torn or marked with stains that offend the eye. Throughout his life he wore the soutane at all times, taking it off only when going to bed. He wore it when passing through the countryside as well as when he was in

189. Blain is imprecise in calling this quotation “chapter 23 of the Rule.” The chapter on modesty in the 1726 version that he is quoting is indeed 23, but he does not cite the full chapter, as he seems to imply. In the Founder’s final revision of the Rule (the 1718 manuscript), the chapter on modesty (21) contains fifteen articles; Blain’s quotation represents seven of them, but presented in the order of the 1726 text, which differs from that of 1718. The chapter on modesty appears for the first time in the 1718 revision (Blain himself points this out at the end of book 3, chap. 14, and a glance at page 78 of CL 25 confirms it), but it reproduces in great part (changing the second person plural to the third person plural) the articles on modesty already published in the *Collection*. These articles, in turn, had been taken almost verbatim from the *Rules of Modesty* prescribed by Saint Ignatius for the Society of Jesus. Battersby has an interesting comment on this (*De La Salle: Saint and Spiritual Writer*, 85–86), and Rayez provides a list showing the concordance between the *Collection* articles and the Ignatian source (Rayez, 1952, 47, note 53). The most thorough study of the question is by Hermans in CL 16, 41–50, which includes a parallel comparison of the Lasallian text with the source articles in their original Latin, along with a commentary on the slight variations introduced by De La Salle.

town, in places where he was unknown no less than at home.<sup>190</sup> During all the journeys he made on foot, and they were often long ones, he never allowed himself the liberty of tucking it up above the knees for greater convenience. He kept it fully buttoned all the time so that the clothing underneath was never seen. He was careful about this even when feeling unwell and even in the presence of his closest disciples. His hair, as prescribed by the conciliar decrees, was always cut short, and the mark of the tonsure was kept well trimmed.

In keeping with the practices of modesty observed by the saints in general, he was never seen to run, to rush about, or even to walk too fast, unless there was a good reason to do so. Nor did he move too slowly, dragging his feet or not bothering to lift them properly, but at the same time not stamping noisily about. When walking, he avoided turning his head in every direction or gesticulating in any way with arms or hands. Such behavior he would have disapproved of in himself, and he could not bear to see it in his disciples. But there was nothing affected or too studied about his way of walking, nothing excessively solemn. Everything reflected the holiness of his calling.

Regarding the rules about facial expression and the position of the head, there was always a pleasant, serene, and candid expression on his countenance; he always looked calm, unaffected, and unworried. He had the gentle, kind, and devout look that draws people's hearts to the love of God. He normally held his head erect, not raising or lowering it unnecessarily, not moving it from side to side, not shaking it and turning it this way or that at the slightest provocation. Because control of the eyes was one of the things he attached most importance to and recommended most to his disciples, he was particularly careful about practicing it. We might conclude that he had made such a habit of keeping his eyes lowered that it had become second

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190. This statement by Blain, reinforcing one already made in chapter 10, became a focus of attention following the discovery in 1879 of the so-called "Gravières portrait" of the Founder, a discovery written about in all the full-length biographies since Lucard's. At a time when Blain's assertions (like those of most biographers and historians of a bygone age) were accepted less critically than they are now, some explanation was needed for the Founder's departure from his strict rule about dress, as manifested in the portrait. Lucard gave written form to the existing oral tradition that the secular garb was adopted on this one occasion as a safeguard against the anti-clerical violence rife in the Cevennes region, through which De La Salle had to pass for his visit to the community at Les Vans. Scientific examination of the portrait in 1951 revealed that it had been superimposed on an existing portrait with a title naming "M. J.-B. de La Salle"—wearing clerical garb. It is quite a mystery story, not yet finally resolved, and it has been well told by Félix-Paul Vandamme in the 1952 volume of *Bulletin*, 6–29.

nature to him. He never stared at anyone; there was nothing abrupt or inquisitive about his way of looking at people; his eyes simply reflected humility, gentleness, and respect.

There was the same composure about his whole person. He did not stoop or sway from side to side; he always held himself upright. Yet there was nothing studied or forced about his deportment. He did not lean against anything or keep changing his place or posture; nor was he ever seen resting his elbows on the table or crossing his feet or legs.

No less expressive of modesty was the way he spoke. He carefully avoided both saying too much and saying too little. He made this a rule for the Brothers, and as I have shown, he could not bear it when they used many words for what could be said in a few. Still less could he tolerate those great talkers who do not give others a chance to get a word in edgewise or those tight-lipped individuals who spoil a conversation with their awkward silence. He carefully avoided interrupting anyone who was speaking or throwing in a remark that forestalled what they were going to say. He was never the first to give an opinion, nor did he have something to say on every topic that cropped up. But he expected the same behavior from his disciples. He had an agreeable tone of voice, neither too loud nor too soft; it could be severe when the occasion called for it but never imperious or overbearing, still less sardonic or heated. There was nothing far-fetched in anything he said: no worldly information, no banter or flattery. Nothing vain, ostentatious, or reflecting credit on him ever came from his lips, nothing contentious or argumentative, nothing that could in the slightest degree offend against humility, decorum, truth, or charity. In brief, he never spoke a word that could cause offense to the person he was conversing with. He included in the Rule a chapter on recreation, which firmly precluded for him as well as for the Brothers all these faults and any others that are liable to be committed in speech and conversation.<sup>191</sup> We could say that he practiced to perfection the advice of Saint Paul, "Let your speech be always gracious and seasoned with the salt of discretion."<sup>192</sup>

De La Salle's modesty in church was particularly admirable. The moment he entered a church, his faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament was apparent in the profound respect and religious devotion of his whole bearing. His sense of the divine majesty dwelling there kept him, like one of heaven's pure spirits, in an attitude of self-forgetful love and adoration, expressed in prayerful homage that he was reluctant to terminate. It was plain to see that the

191. See above, chap. 18, note 110.

192. Col. 4:6.

holiness of a church always made a fresh impact on him and that the passing of time did not work its subtle influence, first on his senses and then on his mind and heart. Every day as he knelt before the altar, he discovered anew the depth of the humility and the love of the divine Victim offered there and found new reason to abase and humble himself, to be filled with awe, and to render fresh homage. It did not occur to him to support himself against the bench or kneeler, a concession he did not allow himself anywhere, let alone in church. He rarely sat, and he did not like to see anyone else making himself too comfortable in church; he used to say that God deserves that we should put ourselves out a little when praying to him.

Because modesty is the virtue that ensures decorum and propriety in everything, more than any other it inspires respect both for the sacred ministry and for those who exercise it, diffusing everywhere the good perfume of Jesus Christ. This certainly was its effect in De La Salle's case. Everything about his way of doing things was controlled and unaffected; an artless ease marked all he did and won people's esteem and respect. Everyone found him approachable, and everyone revered him—everyone, that is, who did not have something to gain by censuring him. He was loved by all who were not jealous of him or were his declared enemies; he won people's confidence by his kindly ways and their respect by the sheer authority of a virtuous life.

The biographer of Saint Martin says that he was never seen to be angry.<sup>193</sup> I think the same may be said of De La Salle, and indeed I have found the same assertion, word for word, in one of the testimonies I am working from. The Brother who wrote it did not know that it had been said of Saint Martin, or he would otherwise certainly have made the comparison. Here is what this Brother wrote:

He was never seen to be angry, never worked up about anything, never gloomy, although rarely given to laughter. He was always the same. There was a heavenly look of joy on his face, which made him seem something more than human. His constant theme was Jesus Christ. Piety, peace, and gentleness filled his heart.

We can see from this testimony that he was more like an angel than a man, but not in the sense that he had the kind of outward grace that impresses and attracts the worldly minded; his humility and poverty precluded this. No, it was that the holiness of Jesus Christ could be sensed in him, and the serenity of his looks, the tranquility that shone through him, quite opened the heart of his disciples to

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193. "*Nemo umquam illum vidit iratum*" (from *Vita*, by Sulpicius Severus, paragraph 27 (PL, vol. 20, col. 176).

him. The Brothers approached him as children draw near a father who is tenderhearted and has happy, affable, and winning ways. They never saw in him the changes of facial expression that denote now joy and now sadness, and they could never quite make out whether he was worried, on the one hand, or delighted, on the other, about something. They found him always the same, always even tempered, always himself. They did not have to study his mood and choose the right moment to approach him. This is why they were open with him and why their trust in him never diminished but remained always the same. A Director complained to him once that the Brothers of his community showed no confidence in him at all. He replied:

It is your fault. Why don't you take the trouble to acquire that evenness of temper that is so necessary for you? Your Brothers complain that they never see you in a good mood, and they all say that you look like a prison door.<sup>194</sup>

The response makes it sufficiently clear that those who are appointed to lead others in the ways of the Lord must be especially careful to try to control their feelings so that their looks reflect only the mildness of our Savior, whose place they occupy. It is true that those who are under their direction should not be influenced by how they look or how they behave and that it should suffice for them to know that it is to Jesus Christ they address themselves in the person of their Director. But not all have yet acquired the virtue to overcome themselves in this and to be able to confide in someone who is never the same from one moment to the next.

In what he said in this regard, John Baptist was following Saint Bernard, either because he had read it in this Saint's works or because he was inspired by the same spirit. This is what Bernard told one of his own disciples who had been raised to the See of Saint Peter.

Holiness dwells where you are. Let its home, therefore, be adorned with modesty; let its splendor consist in integrity; its safeguard, a regular way of life. . . . I commend to you gravity rather than austerity, for the former serves as a check to inconstancy, but the latter frightens off people who are weak in virtue. If you lack gravity, people will come to look upon you with disdain, but if you are nothing but austere, you will become odious to them. The golden mean is what you should aim for: be neither too severe nor too soft. Nothing is more engaging than evenness of temperament, which knows how to combine kindness with

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194. *Letters*, 96, with comment; see also the comment on *Letters*, 95.

firmness; it is a quality that makes a person liked because he is neither despised for being too familiar nor avoided for being too severe.<sup>195</sup>

If John Baptist had not actually come across these words in his reading, he certainly succeeded in reflecting in his own person the character they depict. He possessed to a perfect degree the art of being affable by seeming neither too austere nor too familiar. This is why he retained the respect that was due to him from his disciples and why they always showed him the candor, sincerity, openness, and trust that made his ministry to them so valuable precisely because it was so acceptable.

I must say, to the credit of his disciples, that if their Superior was an exceptional model of modesty, they copied him exactly and patterned their practice of this virtue on his. But he was not satisfied only to present a living example of modesty; he also took the trouble to give them instructions in it. The rules he gave them on the subject show how zealous he was to train them in the practice of a virtue that he believed to be essential to their profession. He was so particular about their faithful observance of these rules down to the least important one that anyone who fell short could expect a reproof if not a penance. If someone asked him why he was so firm about this, he would answer that modesty could never be sufficiently instilled in those who had to instill it in others. "Modesty," he would say, "is one of the most necessary virtues for a Brother of the Christian Schools. Nothing should ever be seen in his conduct that lacks due seriousness; behavior that is merely frivolous should be excluded from this Society."

He did not even want the conversations the Brothers had after meals to be too distracting. "It suffices," he would say, "that these conversations be pleasant and provide a little recreation for the body while also edifying the soul." Hence, he excluded any kind of game, however harmless, from their recreations, saying that modesty can easily be offended by them.<sup>196</sup> His ideal was for their recreations to

195. Blain's marginal reference, "L4, *De Consolatione*, chap. 6," points to Saint Bernard's treatise, in five books, addressed to the Cistercian Pope Eugenius III. The reference is accurate, and Blain's rendering is faithful to the Latin (PL, vol. 182, cols. 786–87).

196. Games were evidently tolerated in some congregations. Blain tells us (book 3, chap. 15) that the Brothers who wanted the rules for recreation modified at the 1717 General Assembly were allowed to seek the support of competent judges in the person of superiors of other communities. When he later pronounced against any change, the disappointed delegates pointed out that in the communities of some of the superiors, "even games are permitted,

consist in speaking of God and of the virtues proper to their state, and to do so in an agreeable manner. He disapproved of noisy outbursts of laughter and hardly ever let them pass without some sanction. There was to be no buffoonery under the pretext of having a bit of fun. Still less was anything to be said that might offend anyone present, either by contradiction or by banter. “All that,” he would say, “serves only to harm charity and offend against modesty.” What made him so exacting in all this was that as he saw it, not only did modesty thus suffer, but there was the danger that the Brothers might damage in one day virtues they had been striving to develop for years; in a single moment, fervor might be lost and replaced by tepidity and carelessness in the service of God. In brief, an untimely distraction could cause someone to forget the kingdom of God dwelling within his soul; true and enduring benefits could be left aside for the sake of seeking pointless amusement in jokes and witticisms—all so much vanity and deluding folly!

De La Salle was eager, therefore, that the Brothers remain within the bounds of modesty in their conversations, but the same applied to all other occasions. They were to walk with their eyes lowered and their arms folded. If ever he saw one of them looking distracted as he walked along, he would stop for a moment and watch him, seemingly amused, and then go over to him and say with a smile, “Oh, my dear Brother, your eyes! Do keep them under control!” He once saw Brother Barthélemy, who was the Director of Novices at the time, swinging his arms as he walked along. He said nothing to him just then, but some time later he reproached him for it in the course of a letter of advice he was writing to him. Here is the extract concerned:

At Saint Yon, I noticed you swinging your arms carelessly when you walked. This is a disgraceful habit in a master of novices who ought in all things to be a model for those whom he instructs. You must walk in a dignified manner, keeping your arms folded, and you must not let your novices do otherwise.<sup>197</sup>

Because Christian modesty is an effect of recollection and the practice of the presence of God ought to be the soul of modesty, the wise Superior hardly ever separated the two practices in his recommendations to his disciples. The majority of the instructions he gave them by word of mouth or in writing were fervent exhortations on

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such as bowling, tenpins, and quoits.” It can have been small consolation for the Lasallians to be told that such things were tolerated because the said superiors were unable to do anything about it!

197. *Letters*, 124.

the subject. "Be recollected," he would often say to them, "and you will experience the presence of God. But if on the contrary you let yourself become distracted, you will leave yourself open to all kinds of failings." In a number of letters he wrote to one Brother, De La Salle urged him to cultivate the habit of being recollected and to keep recalling the presence of God; in one we find this:

Thoughtless behavior and curiosity are grave impediments to the service of God. So, my very dear Brother, you must make an effort to become interiorly recollected once more. As you are well aware, recollection is fundamental and will lead you surely to God. Your eyes are your two worst enemies. That is why you must keep continual guard over them and let them see only what is necessary. The greatest good you can procure for yourself is recollection, and when you have achieved it, you can say what Solomon said of Wisdom, that all good things have come to you with it. Curiosity is one of the greatest obstacles to growth in piety. Therefore, you must be on your guard against it; and above all else try to be recollected and aware of the presence of God, for in this we have the surest means of becoming interior. Come now, for the love of God, make the effort. You know the harm thoughtless behavior does you. So, control your eyes and your tongue for this reason. There is nothing so important for you as this. In this way you will make your spiritual exercises with God in mind and will learn to make them well both interiorly and exteriorly. God, you see, not only wants your actions done well outwardly; he wants them also to be carried out with the right interior dispositions. You complain that you have to fight against a whole host of useless thoughts. If you really try to keep your attention fixed on God, you will not find it so easy to keep useless thoughts in your mind.<sup>198</sup>

Another Brother, in rendering an account of his spiritual state, had told him that his greatest defect was that in whatever he was doing, he did not keep sufficiently aware of the presence of God. Here is the reply he was sent:

Apply yourself often to remember the presence of God, my very dear Brother. Look upon this practice as your greatest happiness. Your recollection and self-control should be great enough for you to achieve this. They will be for you a means of overcoming yourself in times of temptation and will prevent you from acting

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198. *Letters*, 98.



from natural motives by inspiring you to have continually in mind the will of God, for this should be your sole aim. You are certainly right in saying that you are too thoughtless, my very dear Brother, for that is just what you are, since you so rarely think of God's presence even during the holiest of your exercises. Try, please, to perform all your actions with the thought of God's presence in mind and through sentiments of faith, for that is the spirit of your state. I am very sorry for you in the situation in which you find yourself and sympathize with you for the distress you feel, endlessly having to reject the useless thoughts that assail you. But, let me tell you this: they overwhelm you like this only because you do not make your spiritual exercises with sufficient fervor and because you occupy your time with a host of trivialities. I beg you then, in the name of Jesus Christ, make an effort to overcome this negligence of yours, for there is nothing that can do you so much harm in God's service as that. I am in his holy love. . . .<sup>199</sup>

Indeed, of all the practices of modesty, control of the eyes was the one our servant of God cherished most and considered the most important. There was nothing he so much tried to instill in the Brothers as this. He was convinced that guarding the eyes is the way to keep the soul free from harmful notions, temptations, and useless thoughts. This is why, for example, he stressed it in the *Rule of the Brother Director*, writing in article 22:

The practice of recollection will appear of such importance to the Brother Director, both for himself and for others, that he will consider it the principal interior support of piety, and will regard the uncontrolled use of the eyes as the source of all kinds of irregularity in a community.<sup>200</sup>

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199. *Letters*, 87; the English translation renders "*Je suis en son saint amour*" of the original as "Devotedly yours in Our Lord."

200. The Rome archives has a manuscript copy, dated 1718, of *Règle du Frère Directeur*, drawn up in accord with the intentions of the capitulants of the 1717 Assembly. It was not until the General Chapter of 1734 that a decision to print the Rule was taken; even so, according to Hermans, the earliest published edition was probably nearer to 1740. Blain seems to have known an early draft of what was eventually printed; in his few quotations from this Rule, he is nearer to what became the printed version than he is to the 1718 manuscript. A small example of this appears in the present case, where he refers to "article 22." In the 1718 manuscript, the articles are not numbered, but in the printed edition they are, and article 22 is the one cited by Blain. He introduces one seemingly deliberate "improvement" (influenced, no doubt, by

In his exhortations to the Brothers on the subject, he had the habit of recalling the passage of the Scriptures, “Death has come up through our windows,”<sup>201</sup> meaning “through our eyes,” and this other from the Song of Songs, “You have wounded my heart, my sister, my spouse, with a single hair,”<sup>202</sup> referring again to even a slight misuse of the eyes. He was visiting a community one day, and among the questions he put to the Director, he asked if the Brothers were cultivating an interior life. The Director replied that they were all making quite fair progress in this. “I will see it for myself today in the refectory,” replied De La Salle. He meant that he would be able to judge from the way they controlled or failed to control their eyes during the meal. He noticed that one of them was looking all about him, and he quietly remarked to the Director that this Brother, naming him, “has dreadful eyes,” the term he normally used to express his disapproval of the careless use of the eyes.

But if fidelity in this matter was something the saintly Founder stressed most strongly to the Brothers, he had the satisfaction throughout his lifetime of seeing them respond accordingly. When out walking through the streets, they used their eyes only to watch where they were going. It became such a habit with them to keep their eyes lowered that they walked past people without recognizing them or even noticing them go by. Hence, when they got back to the house, their minds were as free of distracting impressions as when they had started out, and they remained as recollected as if they had spent the time before a crucifix instead of out walking.

Such great modesty drew even more attention to them than their dress, which was conspicuous enough. People thought they must all be blind, deaf, and dumb, so silently did they walk along with their eyes seeming half-closed, taking no notice of any untoward noise. As far as the citizenry was concerned, they might as well have been anchorites in the desert as men out in the streets of Paris and other great cities of the kingdom.

Of course, within the community they were no less recollected. They carefully controlled their eyes, as their Father so often urged them to. They walked to and fro in the courtyard or garden without raising their eyes or wanting to look at anything around them, not

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the Founder's lists in chapter 16 of the 1718 manuscript of the Rule, CL 25, 65) by preferring “interior support” to the “exterior support” of both the 1718 and the 1740 text. The manuscript version of *Règle du Frère Directeur* is reproduced in CL 25, 154–62, and is briefly described by the editor (Hermans) on 10–11; see also the latter's comments in CL 10, 90–91).

201. Jer. 9: 21.

202. Song of Sol. 4: 9 (Douai).

even when their curiosity was aroused. There is an edifying story about this concerning the Brother who was in charge of the door at Saint Yon. He had only recently left the army, having been a professional soldier, but he was already so recollected and mortified that he carried out his duty of opening the door while managing to keep his eyes almost closed. He answered inquiries and spoke while scarcely looking at the person who had called. His self-control in this matter was so extreme that he did not even know the ecclesiastical superior who had been appointed to the community of Saint Yon from outside during the time, as I have earlier explained, when the Founder had gone to hide away in Provence. Yet this cleric often went to the Saint Yon house and sometimes called the Brothers together to speak to them as a group or individually. It seemed that he should have been well known, especially to the doorkeeper, who had often let him in and spoken to him. Nevertheless, the good Brother did not know him any more than he knew other callers, and the following incident bears this out. This clerical superior was taking a walk once in the Saint Yon grounds when the Brother we are speaking of approached him, eyes lowered as usual, and politely asked him to leave, saying that he had been instructed to clear the grounds of everyone in preparation for the arrival of a certain gentleman. The superior, taken aback by this unflattering request, suggested that the Brother should open his eyes and see to whom he was speaking. But he got a greater surprise when the Brother did look at him and said he still did not know who he was!<sup>203</sup>

This is an example of the extremes to which those Brothers who were fully imbued with the spirit of their Father carried vigilance over their senses, especially their eyes. John Baptist had so often impressed upon them that the eyes are the windows through which death—that is, sin—enters the soul that by way of sealing up all possibilities of entry, they made themselves, as it were, half-blind; they simply gave

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203. The “ecclesiastical superior” in the story is the biographer, appointed as such by Archbishop d’Aubigné as a result of the circular letter sent to all the communities by Brother Barthélemy, as described in book 3, chap. 12. Gallego (496) suggests that the Brother mentioned in the story is Hilarion Sceillier, a widower with four sons, one of whom had entered the Society in 1700 and another soon after. In 1705, the father, accompanied by his two remaining sons, followed their example and entered at Saint Yon, where Hilarion, according to Blain, became the doorkeeper until 1713. The curious account of this family (all of whom persevered in their vocation, having given much edification) is told in the brief life of Dominique Sceillier, one of the six early Lasallians whose lives were recorded by Blain and published as a supplementary section to the second volume of his biography of the Founder (CL 8, 76–80, supplement).

no liberty to their eyes beyond what was necessary to see where they were going.

Saint Jerome says that vices find their way into the soul through the five senses, as if flung through windows. The spiritual fortress cannot be taken if the enemy can be kept from these ways of entry. It may be attacked, but it can only be captured through the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch.<sup>204</sup>

Our daily experience teaches us the truth of this to our cost. Saint Ambrose, in turn, says:

If your sense of sight has been allowed undue freedom, it cannot fail to have tarnished your heart. If your hearing has been used to satisfy curiosity or the desire to be amused, your soul has surely been filled with distractions and alien thoughts. Has your sense of smell been gratified? Then your spiritual life has suffered a weakening. Has your sense of taste been accorded some special delight? Then your conscience is ill at ease. Perhaps you have allowed your sense of touch some uncalled-for gratification? This is how the fire of concupiscence is kindled. Nothing is more true than the warning of the Prophet Jeremiah, "Death has come up through our windows." Your windows are your eyes: close those, and you will guard your life.<sup>205</sup>

There is such an intimate link between control of the senses, especially sight, and purity of the soul that whatever is a danger for the former threatens the latter and may force an entry causing havoc and disorder. Modesty of the eyes is, therefore, of the utmost consequence for a soul wishing to develop an interior life and to make itself a garden of delight for the sacred Spouse. Such it will be, according to what the Holy Spirit says in the Song of Songs, if its entrances are firmly barred.<sup>206</sup>

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204. Blain gives no reference, but he is quoting almost verbatim from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, book 2: "*Per quinque sensus, quasi per quasdam fenestras, vitiorum ad animos introitus est. Non potest ante metropolis et arx mentis capi, nisi per portas ejus irruerit hostilis exercitus. Horum perturbationibus anima praegravatur—et capitur aspectu, odoratu, sapore, tactu*" (PL, vol. 23, col. 297).

205. Blain gives no reference, but the passage is evidently a free treatment of an extract from Ambrose's *De fuga saeculi*: "*Respexit oculus, et sensum mentis avertit; audiuit auris, et intentionem inflexit; inbalvit odor, et cogitationem impedivit; os libavit, et crinem retulit; tactus contigit, et ignem adolevit. 'Intravit more per fenestram,' dixit Propheta. Fenestra tua est oculus tuus*" (PL, vol. 14, col. 570).

206. Blain's reference for this is the Song of Solomon 4:12.

If De La Salle seemed to want to render all his disciples, so to speak, sightless, deaf, and without power of speech, it was because he wanted to help them to be spiritual men. He was following the example of the ancient desert fathers, who had a maxim, according to Cassian, that to reach perfection it was necessary to close the eyes, the ears, and the lips.<sup>207</sup> It was a way of saying that they used these senses only in a restricted and controlled way. Jesus Christ said of Saint John the Baptist that he neither ate nor drank, by which he meant that he took hardly any nourishment.<sup>208</sup> In the same way, we can say of those who aspire to a perfect life that they are without hearing, speech, or sight because they concede so little to these senses—nothing, in fact, except what is essential for daily living and courtesy to others. All of this shows how right De La Salle was to recommend so strongly to the Brothers the practice that Saint Paul seems to point to as a sign of predestination and of an extraordinary love of God when he writes to the people of Colossae, “Put on, therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, the raiment of modesty—*Induite vos sicut electi Dei, sancti et dilecti, modestiam.*”<sup>209</sup>

[CHAPTER 22]

*De La Salle's love of God shown by the perfection  
of his fidelity to rule; his concern for this reflected  
in his personal rules of conduct; his fidelity in small matters*

I regard perfect observance of the rule as a kind of global virtue that influences all the others, activates them, assigns to each the right moment and place for its exercise, and imposes an appropriate good sense on the way it is practiced. Fidelity to the rule decides the length of time for which another virtue is to be put into practice as well as the specific manner of its application; it arranges all the attendant circumstances. In this regard it seems to have an affinity with justice, which in scriptural language is nothing else but sanctity, the sum total of all the virtues. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice”<sup>210</sup> refers simply to those who have an intense longing to become a saint. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice”<sup>211</sup> means that

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207. The marginal reference, “L4, Inst. ch. 1,” should be ch. 41, where Cassian writes, “*Quae omnia ut possis consequi . . . tu quoque velut surdus et mutus et caecus incedas*” (PL, vol. 49, col. 200).

208. Luke 7:33.

209. Col. 3:12 (Vulgate, but Blain's printer repeated *electi* for *dilecti*).

210. Matt. 5:6.

we are to practice the virtues and good works that lead to holiness and to win it as a reward.

If, in fact, we examine the motivation, the nature, the object, the characteristics, and the effects of fidelity to the rule, we find that it is a generalized virtue embracing all the others. It is, as it were, the animating principle of the other virtues; its role seems to be to assign to them their rank, their order of merit, the precise details and circumstances of the way they are to function.

What motivates regularity is the desire to please God, to do everything, small or great, for love of him, to carry out his holy will in all things, to procure his honor and glory with each of our actions. It is of the nature of fidelity to rule when we impose order and method on what we do, to hold in check natural impulses and emotions, to correct failings and wayward inclinations and even to destroy them altogether by calling for a constant sacrifice of natural tendencies, self-will, and self-esteem. Its aim is to bring into subjection the free exercise of the will and its dominant impulses, and so to become master of our person and acts. It seeks to hold in permanent control the powerful human propensity to be independent; its ideal is to keep the soul to an exact observance of God's commandments and the evangelical counsels, thereby effectively closing off any approach by which sin may enter. The effect of fidelity to the rule is to leave no moment in a lifetime that is not made use of for eternity. It fills a life with merit, each day being fully used for heaven, every least action consecrated by obedience. It makes holy everything a person does, repose as well as labor, even the most down-to-earth activities, those that belong most closely to the animal and terrestrial nature of man. Finally, its identifying characteristics are recollection, interior spirit, concern to do everything with a pure intention, care to offer all our actions to God in union with those of Jesus Christ, joyfulness, fervor, and evenness of temper.

With good reason, then, do I claim that perfect fidelity to the rule is a virtue that influences all others, constituting their very soul and strength, and that the term *justice*, in its scriptural meaning of a combination of all virtues and saintliness, can well be applied to it. Even worldly people have this understanding of regular observance. They deem a person a saint who is faithful in this matter; their way of praising a religious community is to say that it is very faithful to the rule, meaning, very holy.

To give a full idea of the perfection of John Baptist de La Salle's appreciation of fidelity to the rule, I propose to consider it under three aspects, namely, the example he gave of it in his own practice, the in-

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211. Matt. 6:33.

structions and exhortations he delivered on the subject, and his zeal in ensuring its practice.

To begin, De La Salle was a perfect model of fidelity to the rule. It was in his nature to love good order and to do what he knew to be right. It would be difficult to spell out in detail the extent to which he satisfied this inclination and the exactness with which he subjected himself to discipline and rules. Some of the Brothers who knew him best and who had the good fortune to live the longest time with him suggest that perfect fidelity to the rule was his distinctive characteristic; nothing about him, they say, edified them more than his continual care to abide by the rule, never departing from it at all, letting it, so to speak, hold his self-will captive.

He had become imbued with this esteem and affectionate zeal for fidelity to the rule in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, a place where it is instilled and exemplified in abundance. When he left this holy establishment, he converted his own home into a kind of seminary, directing his younger brothers there in a life of fidelity to the rule.<sup>212</sup> A particular time was fixed for every activity: rising and retiring, vocal and interior prayer, studies, and meals, these last being sanctified by devout readings. The daily program was arranged to fit in with his own assistance in choir for the canonical office, for he was very exact in fulfilling his duties as a canon.<sup>213</sup> In this he was living up to the etymological origin of the title canon; in former times the clergy who were attached to the cathedral made a special study of the canons, or laws, of the church and put them into practice while living a community life. The idea was that they thus served as an example, a kind of a living rule, for all other clergy.<sup>214</sup>

This faithful way of life, in John Baptist's case, became even more pronounced when he brought the teachers to live in his own home, and it reached perfection when having made himself one with them as his disciples, his sole concern became to lead the way in every

212. In book 1, chap. 6, Blain uses this "seminary" analogy for the way John Baptist interpreted his duties as guardian of the orphaned family. Reading Aroz's commentary on *Compte de Tutelle* (chap. 9, note 127) leads us to question the aptness of the simile, especially in a seventeenth-century setting that may suggest something less than cordiality and empathy for the children John Baptist was called upon to care for, qualities clearly discernible in *Compte*. See Aroz's comments in CL 28, XLIV–LVI, and CL 42, vol. 1, 187–98.

213. Poutet (vol. 1, 241) considers this statement "manifestly erroneous" because John Baptist, as a student, was exempted (apart from certain special occasions) from his choir duties during the years 1672–78.

214. The reference books leave the impression that the origin of the use of *canon* in this personal sense is obscure, but Blain's explanation seems to be in line with the generally accepted opinion.

community exercise. To appreciate the extent to which he thus set limits to his personal freedom of action, we have only to read a set of rules he drew up for his own use. This document makes us regret all the more the loss of all those others that in his humility he made sure we would not see. Divine Providence left this one in the keeping of his disciples to be for them an enduring reminder, an ever-living example, a motive constantly renewed for them to imitate their Father's fidelity to the rule. Here it is just as he wrote it down:

#### Rules I Have Imposed on Myself

- 1) I will not leave the house without necessity and without spending a quarter of an hour considering, before God, whether the need is real or only imaginary. If it is urgent, I will take the time of a *Miserere* for that purpose and to put myself in the proper frame of mind.
- 2) I will take a quarter of an hour every day to renew my consecration to the Most Holy Trinity.
- 3) It is a good rule of life to make no distinction at all between the work of our vocation in life and the work of our salvation and perfection. We can be sure that we cannot work out our salvation better or achieve perfection more surely than by discharging our responsibilities, provided that we accomplish them in view of the will of God. We must try to keep this precept ever in mind.
- 4) When I pay anyone a visit, I will be careful to say only what I must and not chat about what is going on in the world or engage in any small talk. I will not stay there any longer than a half hour, at most.
- 5) At least twenty times a day, I will unite my actions with those of our Lord and try to make his perspective and intentions my own. To keep myself on track, I will pierce a small piece of paper as often as I perform this act. For as many times as I fail to observe this practice each day, I will say the *Pater Noster*, kissing the floor after each, before I go to bed.
- 6) When my Brothers come to me for advice, I will ask our Lord to give it to them. If the matter is serious, I will take a moment to pray about it. At least I will try to keep myself recollected during the interview while lifting my heart to God.
- 7) When they tell me their faults, I will hold myself blameworthy before God for my failure to prevent their occurrence, whether because of the advice I gave them or for not being attentive to them. If I impose a penance on them, I will inflict a greater one on myself. If the fault is serious, I will—in addition to the pen-



ance—spend some time in private, perhaps a half-hour or even an hour, for several days afterward, especially at night, to ask for God's forgiveness. If I consider that I am holding our Lord's place in their regard, this ought to be with the understanding that I must bear their sins as our Lord has borne ours. God has given me this kind of responsibility for them.

8) I will always regard the work of my salvation and the founding and governing of our Community as the work of God. This is why I will abandon the care of both to him to bend myself to his purposes. I will often seek his guidance to know what I must do for the one or the other. I will often repeat these words of the Prophet Habakkuk: "*Domine opus tuum*" ["This is your work, Lord"].

9) I must frequently remind myself that I am only an instrument, which has no value except in the hands of the Master Craftsman. For this reason I must await the promptings of Providence before I act but not allow them to slip by once I perceive them.

10) In whatever circumstance I find myself, I will always follow a plan and a daily schedule, relying only on the grace of God, in which I place full trust, to carry them out because I have never been able to accomplish this on my own. As my situation changes, I will adjust my plan and daily schedule. To make sure this happens, I will spend a day in retreat.

11) When I have to go to the country, I will spend a day in prayer and reflection to prepare myself and will firmly resolve to spend three hours daily at interior prayer during my trip.

12) When anyone, whether a superior or someone else, causes me pain and from a purely human point of view offends me in some way, I will be careful not to say a word. If someone asks me about it, I will excuse the persons who offended me and make it clear that they were right in doing what they did.

13) I must keep an accurate account of the time I have squandered and be careful not to do so again. Only constant watchfulness can ensure this; furthermore, only a long retreat will enable me to acquire this vigilance.

14) It is a good rule to worry less about knowing what ought to be done than about doing perfectly what is already known.

15) Every morning, I will devote fifteen minutes to prepare myself for the coming day, foreseeing the business I must attend to, so that I can act prudently, and anticipating the occasions when I may commit any faults, so that I can sidestep them. Thus, I will be able to spend my day well.

16) In the past, I have often neglected to say the rosary, even though it is a prescribed prayer in our Community. From now on, I must not go to bed without having said it.

17) In addition, I will never let a day go by, unless I am traveling in the country, without visiting the Most Blessed Sacrament. Even on the road, if I can pass near a village church, I will enter and kneel down to adore the Most Blessed Sacrament. I will do this as often as the opportunity arises.

18) I will make it a point to raise my heart to God whenever I begin some new activity. Whatever I undertake will begin with a prayer.

19) The Rule of our Community is not to enter the house or any room in it without saying a prayer to God and fastening our thoughts on him. I will make certain not to neglect this practice.

20) Once every day, I will recite the *Pater Noster* with as much devotion, attention, and faith as I can summon, out of respect for our Lord, who taught us this prayer and instructed us to say it.<sup>215</sup>

This is the *plan de vie* that John Baptist drew up for his own general conduct, and it is such as to make us regret the loss of the more detailed daily timetables he mentions in it, which were to regulate all his actions and procedures. We do not know whether he added any other personal rules later in his life, and it is better to avoid what would only be guesswork and conjecture about this. Besides, what we have quoted is more than enough to show how strictly De La Salle lived according to the rule. He had imposed a triple yoke upon himself: first, the Rule of the Brothers, which places a great constraint on natural tendencies and calls for a high degree of spiritual purpose; second, his personal daily program, arranged to fit in with the Institute's community observances, and third, his own general rule of conduct that we have just transcribed, which fetters and restricts still more his liberty and self-will when added to the previous two.

Saintly priest that he was, John Baptist had acquired an esteem and love for good order based on the observance of a rule, which he

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215. Blain alone, of the three source biographers, refers to this collection of personal rules, a document (now lost) that he seems to quote integrally and whose importance was first noted by Rayez in his 1952 article. "Rules I Have Imposed on Myself," says the Jesuit authority, is "extremely valuable" and "one of the rarest pieces of writing" (*Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 149). Campos selected the list as one of what he calls the *paroles-force* that mark the spiritual journey of John Baptist de La Salle. For his illuminating commentary on the document, see CL 45, 250–72. The English translation of these rules in this present volume is taken from *Rule and Foundational Documents*, 199–202.

regarded as a strong rampart against sin. He had derived this esteem and love from a continual study of the dispositions of Jesus Christ, for whom it was as if the most holy will of his Father was engraved on his heart because he made it the sole rule of his own conduct, calling it his very food<sup>216</sup> and the source of all his delight, which he preferred to life itself.<sup>217</sup>

In the matter of fidelity to the rule, we can say that De La Salle possessed the spirit of all other founders of orders, saints for whom he had a special devotion. The days on which the liturgy commemorated Saints Basil, Augustine, Benedict, Bruno, Bernard, Francis of Assisi, Dominic, Ignatius, Teresa, and the other founders were really feast days to him. He spent them in prayer, retreat, and silence, a profound recollection in which, no doubt, he asked God to grant him their spirit and thanked the divine Majesty for having given such persons to the church. Also, surely, he blessed the Most High for the graces conferred on these saints and placed his own Institute under their protection, begging them to obtain for it a spirit of fervor and fidelity to the rule.<sup>218</sup>

His life was linked with the Brothers for almost forty years, and throughout this time he was an accomplished model of fidelity to the rule that he so much commended to them. He was the first to obey with incomparable fidelity all the regulations he introduced among them. He made a point of giving these practices the authority of his personal example and prolonged use before establishing them as binding prescriptions. He sought no exemption for himself on account of his former rank, because of his present role as Superior, because of the eminent esteem in which people held him, or on the grounds of all the business he had to conduct. The rules that made the least concession to self-esteem and that were most unpalatable to human nature were the ones he was most zealous in observing. The least important prescriptions, no less than the most important ones, found him submissively exact and punctilious in observing them. He accepted with joy everything that was most humiliating or repugnant rather than miss out on the least significant article.

I have just noted how careful he was about the time, place, and manner of practicing the personal rules he had set for himself; no less admirable was his fidelity in observing all others without exception or

216. John 4:34.

217. Luke 22:42.

218. De La Salle's meditations for Sundays and principal feasts of the year include a meditation for each of the founders named in this paragraph (CL 12). The influence of other founders on his thought has been studied, notably by Hermans in *Pour une meilleure lecture de nos Règles* and, in English, by Battersby in *De La Salle: Saint and Spiritual Writer* (especially 71–91).

distinction. In all this he was following the example of his divine Savior, who was not only exact in obeying the will of his Father in all things but also attentive to the time, place, and manner in which this will was to be accomplished. Because Jesus acted only at the moment preordained, he even refused at first to perform the miracle his most holy Mother requested of him.<sup>219</sup> Similarly, he chose to confine his work to Judea because it was there he had been sent.<sup>220</sup> Again, he showed perfect obedience to his Father in the manner of his death.<sup>221</sup>

Following this divine model, the Founder of the Brothers was punctilious about carrying out each of the spiritual exercises at its proper time, proceeding without delay to the place appointed for it, leaving everything at the first sound of the bell as if it were the voice of God, even discontinuing a half-written word and refusing to add so much as a letter to a syllable already begun. What mattered to him was to go where God's voice called. He was like one of those fervent solitaries about whom Cassian has told us, whose punctuality was to serve ever afterward as a model for persons aspiring to perfection in obedience.<sup>222</sup> He was extremely particular about this, even in the midst of the most urgent business. Unless the matter was of the most absolute importance and just could not be put off, he left everything there despite the remonstrances of those who wished to detain him. He would silence their protests by saying that nothing must take priority over fulfilling God's will. Hence he was always present ahead of the Brothers at the community exercises, most especially at morning prayer, even though he might already have spent the night, or part of it, in this holy exercise.

Because he wanted every activity to be carried out in the place assigned to it, John Baptist was always careful to be there with the others, without privilege or distinction in this respect, any more than in any other. When the Brothers' house was not sufficiently large and commodious for each one to have his own small bedroom,<sup>223</sup> he re-

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219. John 2.4.

220. Matt. 15.24.

221. Phil. 2.8.

222. Blain's marginal reference, "L 4 Inst. c. 12," is accurate and shows that he is thinking specifically of the monastic scribe who, when summoned to prayer, "does not dare to complete a single letter that he has just begun—*quam repertus fuerit inchoasse litteram finire non audeat*" (PL, vol. 49, cols. 164–65).

223. This is an unexpected clause, considering that the 1705 text of the Rule prescribed, "All will sleep in the same dormitory or in common dormitories, if there be need of several" (CL 25, 21), a prescription maintained verbatim in the successive editions of the Rules prior to the 19th General Chapter, 1853, which voted a modification as follows: "By *common dormitory*

fused to have one for himself and insisted on sharing the common dormitory with them. The same respect for regular observance led him always to go to the refectory to take his meals exactly as the Brothers did, even when he was weak and ailing. He acted thus for several years prior to his death, when his declining health and failing strength, brought on by age and excessive austerities and labors, called for special consideration. He could not be prevailed upon to make any concession to himself or to allow the slightest distinction in the matter of food between himself, weak and ailing as he was, and the Brothers who were in good health. He would drag himself to the refectory in his feeble state and ask to be served the same as everyone else, refusing the offer of anything different that might be prompted by need or consideration.

As to the actual manner of fulfilling the rules, he was no less meticulous in following the procedure laid down for each one than he was in observing the rule as a whole. He was particular about maintaining the position and bodily attitude prescribed for prayer and the other spiritual exercises, be it kneeling or standing, with head uncovered, without anything to lean on for support. During the recreations he observed all the prescriptions he had laid down to make them a sanctifying experience. In his way of walking, in the refectory, in fact, in all he did, he kept all the rules of modesty he had proposed. If through inadvertence he committed some fault, he never failed to impose a penance on himself and to carry it out in shame and confusion. He applied this exactitude even in matters that people would call trivial, like kissing the floor if he let something fall, especially if it was in the refectory. He deemed it a matter of no small importance to be faithful in such things; he was not afraid of people's thinking that it was merely scrupulosity to be concerned about them, that such a meticulous attitude had nothing to do with progress in perfection, or that it was all right for pious young people to worry about such trifles.

The reader may recall an incident in this connection that I related in the account of his life. He made himself responsible over a period of years for waking the community in the morning, and he failed in this on one occasion. The penance he gave himself was to kneel during the midday meal, to eat nothing more than a piece of bread, and to make the round of all the Brothers and novices, kissing their feet and begging their pardon for the bad example he gave and for having caused an upset in the first exercise of the day.<sup>224</sup> Many other

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may be understood a series of small rooms opening on to a common corridor or area, so far as this is possible" (*Chapitres Généraux de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes: Historique et Décisions*, Paris, 1902, 96).

instances could be cited that would redound as much to his spirit of fidelity to the rule as to his profound humility. For the sake of brevity, we will now consider the instructions he gave on this subject.

[CHAPTER 23]

*His instructions and exhortations on the subject of fidelity to the rule; the conditions and characteristics he desired for this virtue; his firmness in maintaining this fidelity*

Virtuous superior that he was, John Baptist added frequent and persuasive exhortations and instructions to the many striking examples he gave of fidelity to the Rule.<sup>225</sup> He had nothing more at heart than to establish perfect fidelity in his Community and to base it on a firm foundation. Institutes flourish when fidelity to the Rule endures; they gradually fall into ruin when it declines. He omitted nothing in his endeavor to impress on his disciples the need to esteem and love good order and the Rule. Nothing went unsaid to make them appreciate that the smallest prescriptions of the Rule are more closely linked with God's law than people generally believe and that they must therefore realize the importance of fidelity in putting them into practice.<sup>226</sup> His aim was to bring the Brothers to make faithfulness in small things the basis of their religious devotion. He taught them the interior dispositions that give meaning and value to exact observance. He wanted them to make a habit of obeying the Rule as it stood and not to question the motives or reasons for this or that prescription. He showed them how pointless were the usual pretexts that an indocile nature finds for seeking dispensations.

To induce them to develop this spirit of perfect observance, John Baptist urged them to look on their rules not simply as products of a

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224. Blain's reference to this in the biography (book 2, chap. 11) differs somewhat from his present account. In the earlier version, the period of the Founder's responsibility for waking up the community was "several months," and he defaulted on more than one occasion. As the biographer says there, it was not surprising that this happened, considering how little sleep John Baptist allowed himself. But see also, chap. 16, note 70.

225. Hermans warns that "it is extremely difficult" to distinguish the teaching of De La Salle in this chapter from that of his biographer. Blain's contribution seems the more abundant, and certainly "passages in which verbatim teaching of the Founder is recognizable are very few" (CL 10, 208).

226. Hermans devotes a dozen pages (53–65) of *Pour une meilleure lecture de nos Règles* to a discussion of "The binding force of religious Rules" and to De La Salle's own position regarding this.

human mind but as laws written by the hand of God, borrowing a concept of the great reformer of monastic religious life, Abbot de Rancé.<sup>227</sup> He meant that their rules were inspired by the Holy Spirit and as such were orders representing the will of God. They were to be thought of as an outer wall and rampart, defending the soul against the inroads of a worldly spirit and the approach of sin. The rules were to be seen as excellent means, always available, of subduing the passions and practicing pure virtue unmixed with self-love, of gradually undermining the power of egotism and self-will, of weakening the fearful tendency that is in us to be independent and free of all restraint. Through the rules the Brothers were to acquire a spirit of total conformity with God's good pleasure, carrying their cross and practicing the self-denial called for in the Gospel,<sup>228</sup> and, finally, amassing a great store of merits and a rich treasure for heaven by having gently but unremittently thwarted their fallen nature. Article 19 of the Rule of the Brother Director is worded more or less in such terms:

The Brother Director will not tolerate in the conduct of the Brothers anything that is or could become contrary to fidelity to the rule and good order in the community of which he has charge. He will take a serious view of any failure in himself or others regarding a point of regularity, however small, wishing that the will of God marked out for him by the rules and practices of the Institute be fulfilled exactly, totally, and in every detail by him as well as by those whose direction has been entrusted to him. He

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227. Armand Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé (1626–1700). His early life was worldly, unchanged by his ordination to the priesthood in 1651, but he underwent a gradual experience of conversion that culminated in his entry into the Cistercian novitiate at Perseigne, at the age of thirty-seven. Within a year of completing his probation, he was appointed abbot of the monastery of La Trappe and forthwith set himself the task of bringing the community back to strict observance of the rules. Henri Brémond entitled his unsympathetic biography of De Rancé, *The Thundering Abbot*, but Daniel-Rops, in his multi-volume history of the church, concludes his discussion of the abbot with the words, "One may argue about Rancé, but there is not the slightest doubt that when he died in 1700, one of the great spiritual lights of his time was extinguished" (*The Church in the Seventeenth Century*, 281). Blain's esteem for him is evident from his references (more than a dozen) to him in the two volumes of his biography of De La Salle. The allusion here (Blain notes it in a marginal reference) is to De Rancé's *Traité de la Sainteté et des Devoirs de la Vie Monastique*, published in 1683, chap. 2, question 3: "*Les règles des observances religieuses ne doivent donc pas être considérées comme des inventions humaines?*" The abbot's reply begins, "*Non, mais comme des lois écrites du doigt de Dieu*" (Paris: Duprat, 1846, 6–7).

228. Luke 14:27.

will be convinced that his first responsibility concerning them is to instill and maintain in them a true spirit of faith so that they will consider the fulfillment of God's will in all things as the governing principle of their whole conduct.<sup>229</sup>

What the Founder says in chapter 16 of the Rule, on fidelity to the Rule, is even more forceful and impressive:

The Brothers will have a very special esteem for all that concerns fidelity to rule, however insignificant it may appear, regarding it as being for them the first means of sanctification. They will look upon it in this way because fidelity to rule furnishes them with the principal help to observe the commandments of God and the utmost protection against all the temptations of the devil, however violent these may be, and because God attaches his graces thereto in a special manner. Fidelity to rule is also the principal support of communities, and it is such as to make them immovable as long as it subsists, and infidelity to rule is the chief source of their destruction and of the loss of their members. In this view the Brothers will prefer the rules and practices of their Institute to all other practices, however holy in themselves, unless they concern the commandments of God and the Church. The Brothers will be particularly careful not to do anything that is, or might be, contrary to the rules and good order of the house. For this purpose they will make account of failing in the least point of the rules, wishing to do in all things, and very exactly, the will of God, which is marked out for them by the rules and practices of their Institute.<sup>230</sup>

We can judge from the above words of the servant of God what care he took to instill in his disciples an unshakable love and esteem

229. Blain quotes almost verbatim but from the printed text of *Règle du Frère Directeur*, not from the 1718 manuscript (see above, chap. 21, note 200). His omission of a sentence found in the latter text but not in the printed version suggests this, as well as his giving correctly the number of the article as 19 (CL 10, 91).

230. A verbatim citation of articles 2, 3, and 4 of chapter 16 of the Rule, entitled "Regularity." The chapter appeared for the first time in the 1718 manuscript and was evidently introduced by the Founder when revising the existing rules at the request of the 1717 General Chapter. The printed version of 1726 (from which, no doubt, Blain is quoting) is identical with that of the 1718 manuscript (except for the omission of a *by*). Hermans devotes over fifty pages of *Pour une meilleure lecture* to a wide-ranging study of this chapter. See also, Sauvage and Campos, 385–92, English translation, 154–59.



for their Rule and an appreciation of the fidelity due to it. He wanted them to realize that the slightest regulations observed for the love of God have great merit in the sight of the divine Majesty and that even if in themselves they did not bind under pain of sin, they could hardly be violated without some offense to God. For it is the teaching of the masters of the spiritual life and also of the greatest theologians that the cause of such infidelity is laziness, moral cowardice, idle curiosity, preference for our own point of view, or some such failing, at least when these are voluntary and deliberate.<sup>231</sup> John Baptist sought to convince the Brothers that the sacrifice they made by a perfect and entire obedience to all the rules would be less heroic if the importance of each point were obvious and easily perceived but that nothing was more true than that the practices seemingly insignificant in themselves led to great holiness when carried out solely from a desire to please God.

John Baptist also made the Brothers aware of something that sad experience has only too often proved true, namely, that the greatest disorders in religious communities have their origin in the failure to observe the Rule. Deviations from the more important prescriptions, he would tell them, begin with carelessness about the less significant rules; such deviations become progressively worse and end up in a scandalous abandonment of even the most essential points of Rule. His aim in making such reflections was to inspire new members of the Community to maintain all the fervor and precision that they found on entering and to encourage the older members to give good example. He sought to make them all feel responsible for maintaining a tradition of fidelity to the Rule and handing it on intact to others. They were never to damage it by personal laxity or by anything they might say; rather, they must have an infinite dread of doing harm and giving scandal by weakening in any way the spirit of faithful observance of the Rule. The thought of the disastrous consequences that must follow from neglect of the Rule should fill them with horror because such harm is often irremediable and always constitutes a grave responsibility for those who may have opened the door to allow it to enter.

He used to say that sometimes this or that breach of the Rule could seem to be a trifling matter but that the consequences could be serious; even if some points of the Rule seemed insignificant, it was a

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231. Although Blain has a marginal note indicating that this paragraph belongs to the Founder's instructions on the subject of regular observance, he seems (as Hermans points out in CL 10, 93) to be drawing its contents from the tenth paragraph of the preface to the 1726 Rule, a preface that is not a composition by De La Salle.

great thing to be subject to it for the love of God. It is precisely a mark of real virtue, he would say, in a person living in community not to regard any point of the Rule as being of slight importance. The sting of an insect or a pinprick does not hurt much, but a multiplicity and succession of such tiny wounds can mean great torment; some martyrs have even met their death in this way. He used this example to illustrate how fidelity to the smallest points of the Rule is heroic and meritorious in the sight of God. He would quote Saint Eucherius as having said that a day should be counted as lost that has been marked by some breach of the Rule.<sup>232</sup>

The Founder did not fail to point out to them that the innate desire we have to live as we wish and to be our own arbiter and ruler of what we do is a source of all kinds of worries as well as the cause of the wayward behavior of the human heart. What people call libertinism, he would say, has its origin in an unwillingness to abide by rules of behavior. A man who follows his own will cannot bear the burden it imposes; he wearies of it as soon as he has the full enjoyment of it, and the more he tries to cling to it, the more he is disgusted and bored. Hence, to sacrifice to the observance of a rule the right to be our own master is to relieve ourselves of a so-called boon that is both irksome and fraught with problems.

He would add that the greatest source of disquiet for well-intentioned people of solid piety living in the world is not to know for certain what God's will is in matters not specified by the commandments and the Gospel. Religious living under a rule, on the contrary, are sheltered from all such doubts and perplexities. They are exempt from having to work out what God wants from them and are safe from their own fanciful ideas, from their changes of mood and their inability to make up their mind. He tried to make the Brothers understand that most rules are simply ways of practicing the Christian virtues and that living in community makes such practice easy. Not that the fact of living a community life imposed on them the need to practice those virtues; they would still have been under an obligation to practice them even if they had remained in the world, but there they would have been exposed to moral dangers and scandal, and they would have been without the help of a secluded life, a rule, and the good example of others.

Yet again, he would say, community practices that might seem to be arbitrary and of no great importance, were not simply devised by saintly people but were inspired by the Holy Spirit. They had the

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232. Blain's marginal reference accurately indicates "Hom. 9 ad Relig.," but the source expresses the idea in positive terms: "*Quem sine ulla regulae transgressione duxisti, illum diem vixisse te computa*" (PL, vol. 50, col. 855).

backing of fourteen centuries of usage; the great masters of the spiritual life had made use of them with marvelous success; people who had tried to put them into practice with a sincere and humble disposition had drawn incomparable benefit from them; thanks to them, small communities had made great progress and become flourishing. Such practices, he would continue, are usually as needful for the preservation of true piety as straw is for wheat or as the bark is for the protection of a tree. If the world regards them as trifling and petty, it is because it does not know what they entail. The arrogant wisdom of men is a poor judge of what is great or small in the sight of God, and there are many things that worldly people laugh and joke about that are necessary for good order, helpful for progress in perfection, important for faithful conduct, conducive to fervor, and a precious means of acquiring true piety. The gradual falling away from fervor has often no other cause than small relaxations of rule, which at first seem little related to the result to which they lead but which have most certainly by gradual steps brought about that result. All voluntary infringements of the rule carry their own punishment, slight ones leading to serious ones, hidden ones becoming known by the exterior faults they entail.<sup>234</sup>

In sum, the saintly Founder wanted his disciples to regard their Rule as something whose provenance was heaven and, therefore, to respect, cherish, and obey it as the expression of the will of the Most High. We can say now that because that Rule has received the approbation of the Holy See, the Brothers have no option but to see in it the expression of God's law for them and the requirements of his holy will and to obey it as if it had indeed been delivered to them by an angel.<sup>235</sup> In connection with all this, I can borrow a saying here from the Saint Bernard of our age, Abbot de Rancé, who asked:

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234. Hermans quotes a substantial part of this and the previous paragraph and comments, "There is without any doubt an echo of De La Salle's teaching in all this, but it is no more than an echo" (CL 10, 209).

235. The text of the first printed edition of *Règles et Constitutions de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes, Approuvées par Notre Saint Père le Pape Benoît XIII* can be read in CL 25 alongside the text of the 1718 manuscript representing the ultimate revision of the Founder. It is interesting to compare the two documents and to note the modifications introduced into De La Salle's text. Thus, certain decisions of the 1720 General Chapter were incorporated; account was taken of the terms of the Bull of Approbation by the insertion of two new chapters, one on the vows and one on the obligations of the vows; the 1725 capitulants, or the commission responsible for the new edition, made some additions and modifications ("moins discrètes," says Hermans) of their own (CL 25, 3). Rigault, in *Histoire Générale*, vol. 2, 120–23, provides a convenient summary of these changes.

What is more holy than the teaching contained in the holy Rule? Only the maxims and teaching of Jesus Christ are to be found in it, a compendium, a résumé, of all that is most elevated, sublime, and perfect. In observing the Rule, we learn to be detached from what is earthly and to love what is of heaven. By means of the Rule, we attain to the purity of the angels, and we draw close to God. Those who observe it faithfully enter the royal road of humiliation and self-renunciation and thereby become true imitators of Jesus Christ.<sup>236</sup>

De La Salle's understanding was filled with these sublime notions, and he spared no effort to instill them in his disciples, desirous as he was to convince them that their sanctification was linked to their fidelity to the Rule and that they must never allow themselves to neglect, still less deliberately violate, any one item of it. He told them that they should on no account adopt a critical attitude to points that seemed of slight importance or were not to their liking; there was to be no setting limits as to what they would or would not observe, no paring down, no making exceptions in the way they obeyed them. Natural repugnance was not to be heeded nor a moody disinclination to conform. Never must they be ashamed to practice their points of rule before the eyes of worldlings or people who disdain such things. Rather, they were to be as careful to practice them when alone as when with the community or in the presence of their superiors. He would add that if they needed to be dispensed from some point, they must not take the matter into their own hands but seek the necessary permission, always with the intention of taking up again at the first opportunity the practice they had felt obliged to suspend.

It made John Baptist sad to see anyone approaching an exercise of rule in a dispirited, half-hearted way, slow of step and dragging himself to it rather than walking, looking as if he wished it were over before it had been begun and remaining throughout with a cold and uninterested demeanor, or dozing, distracted or daydreaming, present in body but with heart and mind elsewhere. He would put before the Brothers the example of the giver of the New Law, who submitted to the humiliating practice of circumcision,<sup>237</sup> to Baptism at the hands of Saint John,<sup>238</sup> and to all the prescriptions of the Law, never seeking dispensation or privilege. Likewise, they should regard with horror the frivolous pretexts that nature and self-love suggest for occasional ex-

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236. Blain's marginal reference, "L'Abbé de Rancé, 5, *Eclairciss.*, p. 9," is accurate, and the quotation is almost verbatim (Paris: Muguet, 1685, 79–80).

237. Luke 2:21.

238. Matt. 3:13–15.

emptions from the Rule. Let them never seek, he would say, reasons to be dispensed from the community observances on the grounds of seniority, personal qualities, services rendered to the Institute, or positions of authority held. He did not even like age or infirmity to be made a basis for claiming exemption or indeed any pretext whatever that cowardice or laziness easily make a plausible reason for lightly asking to be dispensed.

De La Salle was, however, well aware that the letter kills and that it is the spirit that gives life.<sup>239</sup> He knew that a faithful observance that is purely exterior and bereft of the right disposition is only a sort of Judaic conformity, neither Christian nor religious.<sup>240</sup> So he urged the Brothers, above all, to combine spirit with letter, to match their exterior conformity with their interior disposition, and to enhance the value of the slightest points of rule with such noble motives as the desire to please God, to do his holy will, and to manifest their love for him. He would tell them:

If you wish to make your observance of the Rule agreeable and precious in the sight of God, let it be not only punctilious in all things but also inspired from within by the purity of your motives. Make the least points of rule your offering to God just as much as the most important ones. Do nothing out of mere habit or routine, because it is the thing to do, or with a certain perfunctoriness that runs counter to a well-formed intention or purpose. Be careful, rather, to unite your dispositions with those of Jesus Christ to divinize them and give them all the value of which they are capable. Have the courage to do continual violence to yourselves to practice the rules with exact attention to the time, place, and manner prescribed; with promptitude, not delaying a single instant; with joy, making it a pleasure to practice them; with enthusiasm, to make others love and esteem them; with constancy, persevering in faithful observance until death and not contenting yourself with a transitory fidelity that depends more on your mood, whim, fancy, or fit of devotion than on solid piety.

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239. 2 Cor. 3:6.

240. Blain's attribution of this idea to De La Salle is supported by the opening words of the chapter on regularity in the 1718 manuscript Rule: "It is necessary that the Brothers apply to themselves and take for the foundation and support of their regularity what Saint Augustine says at the beginning of his Rule, that those who live in a Community ought before all else to love God and then their neighbor because these are the principal commandments given us by God and because any regularity whatever, if separated from the observance of these two commandments, is quite useless for salvation" (CL 25, 63).

For such were the dispositions of the heart of Jesus with regard to the will of God, his Father. Love was the mainspring of his obedience; his body was the victim of the sacrifice it entailed; his death was the culmination to which it led. He obeyed from the beginning to the end of his life, and he did so promptly, joyfully, and eagerly, his sole intention being the glory of God. From his entry into this world, he welcomed with fervent alacrity all the signs he recognized of God's will and made them the guide of his own. He responded to each successive manifestation of this will throughout his life, omitting not an iota and not refusing even the most demanding one, for he finally accepted with joy his death on the cross—*Proposito sibi gaudio sustinuit crucem*.

If you do not bring these holy dispositions to the observance of your rules, they will seem to you a burdensome yoke that you will carry fretfully and sadly, perhaps even complaining and grumbling, and always with a kind of lassitude, indifference, and lack of spirit likely to make others feel the same way. If you submit to the Rule only outwardly to save appearances or from human respect, with calculated hypocrisy to avoid reprimands and penances, you will certainly have the semblance of being faithful, but what people will see will be so many whited sepulchers and phantoms. You will be dissatisfied, even disgusted, with such behavior and will throw off the yoke of the Rule or else continue to endure it against the grain and with bitterness in your heart. In the latter case, it will come to seem galling, painful, and, finally, unbearable, so that instead of advancing along the way that leads to heaven, you will keep falling behind. It is the heart, not the hand, that God looks at. If you were to make any spurt forward it would not last because it is of the nature of violent effort not to endure. Sooner or later you would yearn for a life of freedom. You would look up to people who have no Rule to discipline them and who are quite free to follow their every desire and whim. Hence, all is loss for you if your observance of the Rule is no more than a shell, but all is gain if you bring to your observance total, prompt, and sincere submission, full of faith, purity of intention, love, and care to refer all things to God.<sup>241</sup>

The saintly man's high esteem for fidelity to the rule was matched by his zeal in maintaining it. He upheld it with a firmness that brooked no relaxation, yielded nothing to human respect, and was immovable in confrontation with anyone who sought to interfere

241. The attribution of this lengthy discourse directly to the Founder is, according to Hermans, dubious (CL 10, 209).

with it. Any influence or rank such a person might have made no difference nor did the respect he felt for the benefactors and protectors of his Institute. In this matter he had no fear of making enemies or of drawing persecution on himself, as often happened. No fault against fidelity to the Rule went unpunished if he had witnessed it. Publicly or else in private, he reproached the culprit, although in charitable terms. Because everyone recognized that his censures were just, they accepted them as being only what they deserved. The penances he imposed were in proportion to the greater or lesser seriousness of the faults committed. A carefully judged strictness on his part prevented many failings because the lukewarm and more sluggish brethren knew for certain that there would be a suitable penance forthcoming for any transgression, whether owned up to by them or otherwise made known; this made them think twice about committing any.

Some may say that this firmness on his part cost him some notable temporal advantages. But such losses, in his way of reckoning, were gains because for him there was nothing greater, more important, or more precious than the accomplishment of God's will. A member of a quite strict order once met him in the sacristy, where he was preparing to say Mass. The religious, not meaning to give offense, remarked to him that he thought the Brothers' Rule was too oppressive, too restrictive, for men employed all day teaching children. John Baptist's reply was brief but sufficient to check any further desire to offer such comments. "Is that what your holy Founder would have thought?" he asked.

On the one hand, the example John Baptist gave his Brothers by his own exact observance of the Rule he had drawn up for them served as an incentive to them not to slacken off. On the other hand, his vigilant care constituted a strong barrier against transgressions because he called to order without fear or favor anyone he saw committing the slightest breach of the Rule. He did not wait for them to fall into some serious fault before checking them. They had only to arrive late for the beginning of a community exercise to find themselves charitably reproved and, more often than not, given a salutary penance, especially when he saw that it was laziness or lack of goodwill that had caused the delay. He would tell anyone arriving late to remain kneeling at the door until the exercise was finished. His attitude was the same toward any other faults against the Rule, however slight they might seem. For him, nothing was trivial in this matter; he knew that small faults soon lead to serious ones unless they are put right at once.

He would not tolerate any infringement on the plea of some third party's convenience, even if the said party was a benefactor of the

Society. Those who wanted him to be more accommodating about this were told in no uncertain terms, "If you let your Rule suffer, not only will God withdraw his support from you but so will the people you are expecting to help you." Someone was pressing him one day to allow a slight dispensation that the person concerned said would not upset the Rule in any way. The reply he received was, "If I make this concession now, before long I will be asked another, likewise 'of no great importance.' After that, another case will arise, and then another. Little by little, the Rule will fall to pieces, and if you check back for the reason you will find that it all began with that first unimportant concession."

Such firmness in maintaining good order and observance of the Rule among the Brothers often aroused the indignation of those who wanted to take life easy; this used to upset him very much. People not belonging to the Community also abused him for being, as they said, too rigid altogether. But our holy priest was not concerned with pleasing men but only Jesus Christ. His way of looking at things transcended merely human considerations. He could often have said with Saint Paul, "If I yet pleased men, I would not be the servant of Christ."<sup>242</sup> He had occasion one day to visit a person of some importance who had so far honored him with his esteem.<sup>243</sup> The purpose of his visit was to request this person not to insist on certain relaxations he wanted, saying that they would be prejudicial to the good of the Institute; he mentioned also that some of the Brothers were as anxious as himself about this. The only reply he received was a haughty dissent, the person concerned so far forgetting who he was and who De La Salle was as to call the latter a hypocrite and a liar. John Baptist remained unruffled and mildly replied that although he was conscious of having innumerable faults, he did not think he was guilty of hypocrisy or lying. It was a meek response, but it did nothing to pacify his accuser, who was by now in a furious temper. He told the saintly priest to shut his mouth and dismissed him with shame. John Baptist went off to say Mass and did so with special fervor.

As long as he was Superior of the Institute, he never relaxed his firmness in this matter, whatever unpleasant consequences it had for him. When at his own wish he finally retired to the lowest place in the Community, there was no diminution in his zeal for fidelity to the Rule: he could not bear to see any sign of relaxation without immediately notifying the Brother Superior and asking him to apply a remedy

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242. Gal. 1:10.

243. Joachim Trotti de La Chétardie, the pastor of Saint Sulpice, if, as the corresponding details suggest, the incident is the same as the one that Blain reports in book 2, chap. 21, where the pastor is named.



without delay. Apropos of this, here is an extract from a letter he wrote:

I am writing to you, my very dear Brother, because I am astounded to see the sorry state of your novitiate; the two or three novices are receiving no formation at all and observe the rules no better than they did when they first entered the house. Moreover, there are five aspirants who are full of defects and who see almost no good example. The new master of novices, having received no training for his work, scarcely knows what he should do or what the novices should do. He says he has no rule to follow and neither do the novices. I do not think that I have seen, at least for a good many years, a novitiate like this in the Community, and yet, with such a situation, you hope to establish new foundations! There are even complaints that the novices at Rouen do not show much evidence of the spirit of their state and pay no attention to detail. I beg you, take steps to remedy this situation as soon as possible, for you know that the strength of the Institute depends on the formation of the novices in fidelity to the Rule.<sup>244</sup>

He concluded the letter in a way that showed clearly the love he had for faithful observance. He had been ill for some time and had been unable to be present for the community exercises, but having now recovered, he asked Brother Barthélemy to allow him to attend:

I am now well enough to take part in the principal exercises with the other Brothers, to sleep in the common dormitory, and to take my meals like the others in the refectory. Please do not raise any objections to this. We look forward to your return, for your presence is needed in this house.

I am, my very dear Brother, in Our Lord, . . .<sup>245</sup>

The joy he felt whenever he learned that the Brothers were applying themselves well to the observance of the Rule was no less than the sorrow he felt when he noticed some who were careless about it. He wrote to one Brother:

I am delighted that you take pleasure in observing the rules. The great love you show for their observance is a sure sign of your

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244. *Letters*, 126.1–6. For a commentary on this remarkable letter, known only from this citation of it by Blain, see 247–48.

245. *Ibid.*, 126.7–9.

vocation. You are right in being concerned that the rules are not observed. However, it will not be the concern which you feel that will remedy the situation. It will rather be the good example that you yourself give, for you have to be, as it were, the prime mover and bring about their observance by your prudent action. Come now, does that look so difficult? I would like you to let me know if it does. So now, make every effort to be devout, modest, and devoted to the observance of the rules. In doing so you will give good example to your Brothers. I pray that God will give you the grace to do this.<sup>246</sup>

To another Brother he wrote:

Have a great love for the observance of your rules, I beg you, for our Lord will bless you only insofar as you make an effort to observe them exactly. But if you ask me for an easy way to observe them as you should, I would say that you should look on them as the expression of God's will for you, and then you will find no difficulty in them at all. Of all the rules, the one you should observe most carefully is to be exact in doing nothing without permission. This is of utmost importance.<sup>247</sup>

In the *Collection* he wrote:

To acquire perfect regular observance of the Rule, never judge community practices by external appearances but look on them solely in their relation to the will of God, which is the same in all, whatever they may be.<sup>248</sup>

Here are some other remarks of his on the same subject:

It is unbelievable how serious and unfortunate can be the effects caused by things that in themselves seem of little consequence and how easy, therefore, it is to become lax in observance. A community becomes relaxed, first, because it is not well disposed spiritually; it is not serious enough about silence and recollection, especially about prayer; it is too interested in the outside world

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246. Blain quotes only the second part of a letter whose full text is found in Ms 22 (*Letters*, 67.5–9).

247. *Ibid.*, 103.1–3.

248. The concluding paragraph of the article on regular observance from the treatise "The Principal Virtues That the Brothers Should Strive to Practice," slightly adapted by Blain (CL 15, 83, and CL 10, 86; *Collection*, 69).

and too familiar with secular persons, becoming involved in their business, talking about trivialities and what is going on in the world, and it ends by having a high esteem for what worldlings consider important, such as rank, cleverness, and popularity.

In the second place, relaxation creeps in when there is carelessness about maintaining the original form of the religious habit, choosing finer and lighter material, or changing something in the pattern.

The way community houses are designed can also be a source of relaxation. These should be solid and durable, but they should also conform to the poverty of which a religious community makes profession. It is scarcely credible how abhorrent to the saints were religious houses that suggested anything but the spirit of poverty. Saint Francis de Sales, with a view to preventing such a disorder in his own congregation, laid it down expressly that his Sisters were to model their houses on those of the Capuchins. There is no doubt that the grace and spirit of God are to be found in greater abundance in communities that build their houses according to the requirements of poverty.

Another source of relaxation in communities is the desire to own things. This infiltrates first in matters that seem quite insignificant, but subsequently dreadful damage is done to the practice of poverty that religious profess by having all things in common, like the early Christians. Everything offered to a community and accepted must be for the use of all its members without distinction. Any member who is without relatives or friends who offer presents has a right to share what the others receive; otherwise, such gifts could not be said to be in common use. Similarly, the food and clothing provided must be the same for all. The one and only exception permitted relates to what the ill or infirm members require; in that connection, the one from the poorest background is to be treated no differently than the one who came from a well-to-do family.<sup>249</sup>

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249. Blain links this passage to the above extract from the *Collection*, almost as if it were a continuation or a quote from De La Salle. As Hermans remarks, it owes much to Blain, “who cheerfully takes the opportunity to make his hero speak out against one or another current abuse.” Hermans wonders whether the reference to the building of religious houses “according to the requirements of religious poverty” contains an oblique allusion to the Saint Yon community, engaged in constructing their chapel in preparation for the transfer of the body of the Founder from its first resting place in Saint Sever church. Whether in this case Blain was thinking of the undertaking as an example of how things should be done or was quietly reminding the Brothers of the need for restraint, the commentator does not pronounce (CL 10, 211).

These are some examples of De La Salle's instructions about the fidelity to the Rule to which communities must be faithful if they wish to be pleasing to God and useful to their fellowmen. Happy indeed would be the communities that never lost sight of such teaching! But sadly there are only too many where this fidelity does not prevail, a misfortune that in the past many saints had cause to lament—yes, John Baptist de La Salle too, who shared the saints' feelings about such things. He could not bear that any Brother would assume private use of anything not permitted by the Rule.<sup>250</sup> He did not even like to hear them using the words *yours* or *mine*; they were to say only *our* so that they would always remember that everything was common property.<sup>251</sup> If he noticed a Brother who seemed possessive about something, he would rebuke him severely and tell him that he was introducing new attitudes into the Community and infringing on the Rule. If any Brothers disguised their infidelity under the pretext that they had their superior's permission or that the superiors did the same things as they did, his answer was, "It is a poor excuse to say that your superior allows these exceptions, whether by his example or by his words, and that you act accordingly, as if superiors had any right to authorize what the constitutions and the spirit of fidelity to the Rule forbid." He would then speak with severity about lax superiors, who have been appointed precisely to maintain order and fidelity to the Rule and who are the first to offend, having no one over them to call them to order. This is how he would speak:

What blindness on the part of superiors who are placed over quite fervent communities and by their neglect and easygoing compliance and intolerable slackness let relaxation creep in. It is something that happens by small beginnings that seem insignifi-

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250. The 1705 text of the Rule (chapter 17, on poverty, articles 1 and 3) prescribes: "The Brothers will have nothing of their own; all things will be for common use in each house. . . . The Brothers will have nothing for their personal use except a New Testament, an *Imitation of Christ*, a rosary, and a crucifix" (CL 25, 70).

251. The use of the term *ours* rather than *mine* or *yours* was a monastic custom of long standing. Saint Basil prescribed: "The use of *mine* or *yours* is to be absolutely rejected because the Scriptures say that 'the faithful had but one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own'" (Saint Basil, *Les Règles Monastiques*, Maredsous: Lèbe, 1969, 110). Hugh of Saint Victor's commentary on the Rule of Saint Augustine says: "It is not good to employ the terms *my* or *mine* about any article for our use; we should always refer to it as *our*" (art. 1.4). The practice was never incorporated into the Lasallian Rule, but as Hermans remarks, Blain refers to a custom certainly honored in the Institute for a very long time (CL 10, 100).

cant to anyone who is not filled with the Spirit of God. Such superiors will have reason to lament their state on the day they come to die unless they change their ways.<sup>252</sup>

He was so intent on this question of fidelity among the Brothers that he never ran out of new ways of encouraging it. His ideal would have been to see it reach perfection in everyone. But knowing that it is impossible for a great number of people to go to God at the same pace, he was content to express regret over such differences in religious communities. Here is how he spoke about this:

The degree of fidelity to the spiritual exercises and other practices of community life is what differentiates a large number of persons living in the same community under the same rules. All have the same way of life, the same exercises, and the same things to do, yet hardly two of them are exactly alike in the way they practice the duties and virtues of their community life; the reason is the difference in their fidelity. Those who fall short in this lose the benefit of many actions that are holy in themselves. Negligence can mean that in some people's life there will be found hardly a single duty perfectly fulfilled. An exact account will have to be rendered at the moment of death for a person's lack of fidelity to the spiritual exercises, to the practice of silence and prayer, and for failure to use the sacraments profitably.

To this he added three suggestions for those who wish to lead a faithful life and make progress in fidelity to the community exercises.

The first is to disregard our natural inclinations in what we should do; obedience and the will of God must always be the motive. Second, at the end of each week, a careful examination of conscience should be made about that week's infidelities to the Rule, and sincere resolutions should be taken to do better. Third, there must be a continuous effort to pray well. It may be taken as an infallible law that anyone living in community and not exerting a real effort to pray cannot be faithful to the other holy practices expected of him.

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252. Despite Blain's use of quotation marks, Hermans questions the attribution of this "saying" and the preceding one to De La Salle, noting words in the French text not found anywhere in the Founder's writings. He points out also that the word *constitutions* is found only twice in the writings, both times with reference to the Society of Jesus, and that it would be astonishing to find De La Salle criticizing the Jesuit superiors (CL 10, 211).

His conclusion was to propose three rules of conduct useful to anyone living in community but offered specifically to his own Brothers; if they let themselves be guided by these, he told them, they would find it easier to make progress in fidelity to the Rule:

The first rule is to keep aware that God is always the same, that he never changes, and that he must, therefore, always be served with the same degree of fidelity. The second is to develop a conviction that even the pains of hell are more to be tolerated than the least infringement of the exercises and duties of community life. The third rule is never to lose a moment in the service of God because as Jesus Christ tells us, the time will come when no one can work any more for his salvation.<sup>253</sup>

A devout religious Sister once asked De La Salle's advice about overcoming the obstacles and difficulties she encountered in living her religious life. He replied to her request, and throughout the letter we find this insistence on fidelity to the Rule. This is what he wrote:

You should be guided in what you do by your rules, not by the example of those who transgress them. If you have read thoroughly the work of the Abbot of La Trappe, you surely have realized that it is not singularity to observe your rules in a community in which several others do not do so. Let people think what they wish of you, and do not be troubled, provided that you are doing what you ought. Be zealous against your faults and for your own advancement, and if you wish to show zeal for others, let it be simply by giving them good example. Look upon yourself as a novice, and act as a fervent novice in the matter of faithful observance of the Rule. How carefully and with what loving ardor she follows the rules in the smallest details and watches over herself so as not to omit even one of them. This is what you should be like, and perhaps you are not. Think about this, I beg you. Slackness and rationalizing will lead you into many faults. From now on, look on your rules as an explanation and an application of what is contained in the Gospels. Observe them as such. The spirit of faith will lead you to give

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253. Hermans remarks that this seemingly quoted passage and the two preceding ones (all printed in the French text within quotation marks) give the impression that Blain has some written work of the Founder in front of him from which he is freely selecting what he needs. Here and there, Hermans adds, we are reminded of ideas contained in the *Collection*, but the vocabulary of the passages makes their authenticity suspect (CL 10, 212).

practical application to this frame of mind. Just as you must not easily follow all your impulses to do something good nor lightly take them to be inspirations from God, so you must have a great aversion for those that lead to laxity. For those you should even have a holy abhorrence, and with regard to impulses of both kinds, you must take advice before coming to any decision. But if you do not have the time or the opportunity for this and it is a question of something to be done or not done on the spur of the moment, you must ask God's help. Then with resolution, courage, and singleness of heart, do what you think would be in accordance with the advice you would get under similar circumstances. Natural repugnance for a course of action should induce you to follow it rather than abandon it. In all matters concerning the observance of your rules, I advise you to act as being in the presence of God and not to please others, because you know that to take pains that others have nothing to reproach you with and not to be concerned about God is to act as a Pharisee, a hypocrite, and not as a Christian. In a word, dear Sister, keep to your rules and your daily regulations. Look upon both as being of primary importance for you. That will be better for you than working miracles. Above all, out of love for God, be all the more exact in carrying out what is most opposed to human nature and causes you most pain rather than what pleases you most. I am glad that your health permits you to follow the community exercises. That is what you must cling to and what I most want of you because it is an excellent means of making yourself pleasing to God, in whose love I am. . . .<sup>254</sup>

[CHAPTER 24]

*The proof of his charity seen in all that he did for God;  
his zeal for God's glory; his zeal compared with that  
of Saint Paul; the effects of this zeal on his spiritual life*

The proof of genuine charity, according to Saint Gregory the Great, is doing great things for God; where there is ardent love, nothing is too much to ask.<sup>255</sup> Happiness, for one who loves, is laboring much, wearing out in the service of the loved one. According to the Bible,

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254. *Letters*, 106.1–8. A portion of this letter is quoted also by Brother Bernard (CL 4, 77), and the almost verbatim agreement between his and Blain's text encourages confidence in the authenticity of the latter's citations of other letters known only from him.

Jacob's seven years of hard and unremitting toil, added to the seven he had already spent, all to win the beautiful Rachel, seemed like so many days, so great was the love he bore her.<sup>256</sup> The terms of that contract would have seemed intolerable to anyone less in love, and Laban's unjust and cruel demand would have been indignantly rejected. But Jacob's passion for Rachel enabled him to accept it gladly; his heart triumphed over the servitude imposed upon him, and he could not even begin to bargain over the proposition put to him.

What John Baptist de La Salle did for God proclaims and does honor to the love he had for him. If love is measured by deeds, John Baptist's love was of an eminent degree because his actions were heroic in quality. The story of his life seems like the story of charity itself. In the years of his life, love has traced its own portrait in him and has shown thereby just what a man is capable of who is guided and governed by love.

We have seen how generously the saintly priest opted for the sole glory of being totally devoted to God, of pleasing him and serving him in a state of life that was the poorest, the most despised and humiliating, and dishonored in the eyes of worldlings, in the minds of the wise, and in the mocking cries of the vulgar populace. We have observed how he preferred ignominy and crosses to riches, ease, comforts, rank, honor, and all the advantages the world can offer. We have watched him ready to leave the place of his birth, like Abraham,<sup>257</sup> to break connections with his relatives, friends, and all with whom he had close links. Not just ready, but actually doing so, exactly like that patriarch of our faith, leaving home, exiling himself from his native place, repudiating all the appeals of flesh and blood, bidding total and everlasting farewell to all he knew, and seeming to know them no more. All this he did rather than fail in fidelity to his vocation, to the duties to which God called him.

John Baptist's life has shown us a man who attained to the eminent degree of love that according to Saint Augustine in *The City of God*, is the special characteristic of the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, the perfect achievement of those who there will hold the highest rank.<sup>258</sup> Their perfection consists in a love of God that transcends their love of all else, including themselves. They have loved God only,

255. The marginal reference is "Homil. 30 in Evang." Blain is interpreting Gregory's aphorism, "*Probatio ergo dilectionis exhibitio est operis*" (PL, vol. 75, col. 1220).

256. Gen. 29:20.

257. Gen. 12:4.

258. Not a quotation but a synthesis drawn from the concluding chapter of *The City of God*. See the translation of the work in the series, *The Fathers of the Church*, New York, vol. 24, 505–11.



and themselves only in him and for him. They have counted themselves as nothing, detached themselves utterly from whatever was to their own advantage, effectively freed themselves from the demands of self-love, and arrived at the disregard and even hatred of themselves that the Gospel sanctions.<sup>259</sup>

We have seen in De La Salle a man whose love of God was so void of self-interest that he sought God only for God, took delight only in what was pleasing to him, ambioned nothing but to serve him, cherished only his holy will. Although he did not exclude from his intentions and desires the prospect of the rewards of everlasting life, for it is never permitted to do so, his striving was constantly for the greater glory of God; the object of his love was Love itself.

To record now something more specific about what the saintly priest did for God, we must look at the zeal he showed for his glory and for the salvation of souls. Then we will consider the different works of charity he rendered to others, works that formed the very texture of his life to the end.

Zeal is to love what light is to the sun, the flame to the fire, the effect to the cause. Zeal is what love produces; it is love's work. Love is a spiritual fire that cannot fail to radiate its heat when well kindled from within. It would, in fact, die away within the heart if it could not blaze forth in a burning desire to honor and serve the beloved. What ardent love produces is fervent zeal, and where zeal is lacking, love becomes weak. Absence of zeal signifies love grown cold, and we can conclude without fear of error that love for Jesus Christ and his spouse, the church, has languished in any soul that feels no concern to serve their interests.

But in De La Salle's case, there was nothing his zeal did not cause him to undertake. Zeal made his whole life a holocaust, totally consumed for the honor of God, but by slow and successive stages until the consummation took place with death. What sweat it drew from his body! What long and grueling journeys it made him take, and on foot! What anxious vigils it led him to keep! What comforts it denied him, and what protracted fasts it caused him to undertake. Zeal made him a victim, now of charity, now of penance. It obliged him to show compassion for his neighbor at whatever cost to him. It led him to withdraw from the sight of men to do penance for their sins and then to appear again, only to receive their contempt. It took him into classrooms to teach children and into prisons to give comfort to the inmates and to urge them to return to God by making a salutary penance of the punishment they were obliged to endure. Sometimes his zeal drew tears from his eyes in the presence of hardened

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259. Luke 14:26.

sinners, and these, on seeing them, were moved to repentance. More often he inflicted cruel disciplines on himself to atone for their sins. Stubborn sinners found him kneeling at their feet, seeking to atone in their place for their proud refusal to submit. His own disciples who had become unfaithful to grace and to their vocation had the experience of being begged by him on his knees to put off their departure for a while in the hope that the temptation might pass.

The poor knew his compassion from his early years. Children later came to look upon him as a father; such warmth and welcome they found in his kindly manner. People in trouble learned to admire his patience and gentleness. The sick received from him endless care and assiduous service. Persons oppressed with temptations or other afflictions, weak and pusillanimous souls, found their courage and joy restored when he drew near. He could have justly repeated the claim made by Saint Paul in the apologia he addressed to the Corinthians: "I think I have not done less than the great Apostles,"<sup>260</sup> meaning in John Baptist's case, the most zealous clergy of the last century. If there was a fault in his ministry, it was what the same Apostle spoke of when he asked whether he had done wrong in humbling himself so that others might be exalted.<sup>261</sup> If self-humiliation could be pushed too far in a mission based on humility, De La Salle was open to blame on this score. Like Saint Paul again, he announced the Gospel of the Lord without pay.<sup>262</sup> The service of the altar, so far from enriching him, deprived him of everything. It was not for a life of ease that he became a priest. Rather, he resigned his Reims canonry to live as a poor man able to serve the church more effectively. In all his needs, he preferred not to trouble people for help but waited patiently for the attentive care of Providence, care that Providence sometimes delayed to manifest to test his patience further. The words of Saint Paul fitted him well: "When I was in want, I was a burden to none of you."<sup>263</sup> Totally devoted to the service of his neighbor, he was not ashamed to be or appear to be poor. When he had reduced himself to penury by his generosity to those in need, he deemed it an honor to receive charity from others.

All this was a shining proof of his wholehearted zeal. There was no way he could have better shown that the glory of God was the sole object of all his aspirations and that the reward he looked for belonged to another life than this. Can anyone have labored more than he? Can anyone have led a more secluded life, whether to separate

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260. 2 Cor. 11:5.

261. 2 Cor. 11:7.

262. Ibid.

263. 2 Cor. 11:9

himself from the world or to shelter himself from the persecutions of men? No one had more often caused the blood to stain his body from self-inflicted wounds. No one more often put his life at risk, either from the illnesses incurred by his labors and excessive austerities or from such dangerous undertakings as his journeys through the Cevennes region when the heresy of Calvinism was making its final frantic effort to survive.<sup>264</sup> “*In laboribus plurimis, in carceribus abundantius, in plagis supra modum, in mortibus frequenter*—In many more labors and imprisonments, with far worse beatings and frequent brushes with death.”<sup>265</sup>

Thus did the different degrees of suffering measure out the zeal of this minister of a suffering God, a minister whose only ambition was to wear himself out in his service. He journeyed often, in constant danger from robbers and enemies, in solitude or in the city, in peril of imprisonment<sup>266</sup>—he was threatened with this in Paris after an outrageous verdict delivered against him<sup>267</sup>—in danger from false brethren,<sup>267</sup> some of whom betrayed him, several of whom deserted him, some rebelling against his authority, others insulting him, not to speak of one who actually struck him.

May I not claim, concerning the holy priest I am portraying, that God has raised up in our times a minister after the model of Saint Paul? He underwent the same dangers, faced the same degree of opposition, took the same route to bring souls to God, showed the same courage in enduring to the end: constantly wearied and in want, enduring sleepless nights, hunger and thirst from frequent fasting, cold, and nakedness.<sup>268</sup> Such things his zeal led him to accept; such was the cost to him of establishing the Institute of the Christian Schools. True,

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264. Blain is referring (as he does in book 3, chap. 10) to the Camisards, militant French Protestants “who rose in revolt in the Cevennes district in 1702 after the rigorous steps taken by Louis XIV to suppress their religion. They often fell under ecstatic inspiration and fought with a frenzy that neither gave nor expected quarter. Considerable cruelty was shown on both sides, and the revolt was suppressed in 1704. A further outbreak in 1709 was quickly checked.” (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1966, 224).

265. 2 Cor. 11:23 (Vulgate).

266. Ibid.

267. According to Blain (book 3, chap. 9), the threat of imprisonment was present in the Clément affair (see above, chap. 13, note 29). Documents relating to the case, discovered in the Archives Nationales in Paris and quoted by a number of biographers (notably by Guibert, 478–79, and Rigault, 252), make no mention of the possibility of imprisonment, but no doubt the danger was spoken about at the time and presumably appeared in one of the reminiscences available to Blain.

268. 2 Cor. 11:27.

he did not die in spreading the teaching of Christ, but he was in some sense a martyr to it because of the trials and tribulations he bore over a period of nearly forty years to establish the Institute and the Gratuitous Schools. He could certainly have said to his disciples and their pupils, borrowing words of Saint Paul, that each day called for new sacrifices and that he was a victim sacrificed afresh each day.<sup>269</sup> There was not one of those poor abandoned children whose soul was not dearer to him than an only son is to a loving father. For their salvation he was ever prepared to offer himself with joy, to add fresh sacrifices to those he had already made for them. Once again he could have said with Saint Paul, "I will offer myself gladly for the salvation of your soul."<sup>270</sup>

In all things he showed himself to be what he felt he should be, a zealous servant of God, full of patience in tribulations, in want, in distress, a victim of blows, of sedition, caught up in toil, in watchings, in fasts; led on in chastity, spiritual knowledge, long-suffering, meekness, the power of the Holy Spirit, a sincere charity, the word of truth, the strength that comes from God; armed with justice, honored here, disgraced there; now slandered, now spoken well of; a friend of truth but treated as a liar; a man known to everyone but whom no one wanted to know; one more dead than alive, savaged by men who yet stopped short of killing him; seeming outwardly to be sad but always full of an inward joy; utterly poor but able to enrich others with the treasures of grace; owning nothing of this world's goods but possessing all things because of possessing God.

All these marks of a zealous minister, which Saint Paul exemplified in his own person, can be recognized also in De La Salle. In him we see a priest who sought nothing in his service except the glory and interests of him whom he served. For himself he expected only the sufferings and humiliations that are rarely absent from holy deeds done with holy dispositions. Such sufferings identify a zeal that is sincere; they prove that the one who welcomes them and bears them with courage has true purity of intention and genuine love. It is of more value to suffer gladly for God than to undertake great things for him; the latter may be alloyed with self-esteem, but the former can only be the effect of pure love. In the crucible of ignominy and persecution, true zeal is tested and purified. Never does a minister of God serve him and his church better than when he as a person is hidden beneath a cloud of contempt and is known to others only by what he does and by the virtues he practices. Vainglory seeks a great name, and false zeal has always an eye to fame, but when a minister

269. Rom. 8:36.

270. 2 Cor. 12:15.

of God achieves this great name, he finds that he has only himself as the reward of all his troubles. At death he discovers that he has labored all through the night of this unhappy life and caught nothing for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.<sup>271</sup>

De La Salle was a servant of God who hardly ever took a step without meeting with difficulties. It was his lot to see all his planning opposed on every side. Only his patient long-suffering enabled him to perceive any progress in his undertakings. Laboring like the Apostles, he found himself, also like them, harassed by persecutors and made to bear his cross. His work caused no stir, but it bore great fruit; it was void of glamour but rich in merit. His was the kind of life that all the zealous servants of Christ and his spouse, the church, have led: a life made up of daily deaths. They spared themselves in nothing, wearing themselves out in labor and suffering, thinking of themselves always as victims being prepared for the sacrifice. If they were not martyrs, it was because the opportunity of martyrdom did not come their way. John Baptist de La Salle was not a martyr, but his daily sufferings added up to a martyrdom. No one who has read his life will deny him a place among those zeal-driven workers whose portrait we have outlined in terms borrowed from Saint Paul.

He lived no longer for himself but only for God. He longed only for God's name to be extolled and the number of his servants to be increased. His one desire was to see God known, loved, and served. Contentment for him meant finding means of making God blessed and honored and of winning every heart for him. It would have given him satisfaction, even if only partial, to see all people on earth united in the true religion and submitting to the yoke of the faith. To complete his joy, they would all have to become saints as well. His desire for this was so great that he counted the loss of a life of repose, of his good name, and of his earthly goods as a great gain if it contributed to the growth of God's kingdom. He would have liked to see countless more people fired with the same zeal as his to spread that kingdom in all parts of the world and to win for God true worshippers to adore him in spirit and in truth.<sup>272</sup> No cost was too great when there was question of serving his Master; every moment found him ready to sacrifice his life to extend his glory. This desire was at the base of his concern that churches and altars be well and tastefully adorned and that the vestments and sacred vessels be richly made. It explains his saintly passion to see everything connected with the worship of God, everything to do with religion, worthy of its purpose and suitably dignified. It tells us also why he was so saddened to think of

271. Luke 5:5.

272. John 4:23.

the way God is offended in the world, of how few his true servants are, and of how inadequately he is served even by those who are considered most faithful.

The honor of God, indeed, was so near to his heart that he was ready to sacrifice himself wholly for it, binding himself, with his disciples, to foster it by every means within his power. This was the inspiration of the formula of vows that he drew up for his Community and that he pronounced at the head of his disciples before the altar, wearing his surplice and holding a candle, his countenance reflecting the fervor within his soul. This is how the formula begins:

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 will be able and as you will require of me.<sup>273</sup>

He intended by this prelude to show his disciples what was the unique object of their Institute, the purpose of their vows, the animating principle of all their actions, and the focus of all their desires. Every year on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, he had the ceremony renewed with the same solemnity, the same undiminished desire to see himself and his disciples as victims consecrated to the greater glory of God.<sup>274</sup>

When his own interests were at stake, he never had anything to say; he seemed incapable of defending his rights. But when those of

273. Although Blain quotes in full (book 2, chap. 10) the formula of the secret “heroic” vow of 1691 pronounced by the Founder with Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin (the latter, suggests Hermans, having perhaps put his personal copy at the disposal of the biographer after his return to France from his long exile in Rome; CL 2, 39–40), his only citation from the 1694 formula is the preamble given here. Surprisingly, he gives no extract from it in his detailed account in book 2, chap. 13, of the circumstances of the 1694 vowed commitment. Writing principally for the Brothers, he presumably considered that they were familiar with the formula from their annual recitation of it. Fortunately, the Founder’s own manuscript of the formula is preserved in the Rome archives. It has been frequently reproduced in facsimile and print by various biographers (for example, Battersby, *De La Salle: Letters and Documents*, 258). Hermans devotes CL 2 to an exhaustive technical study of *Les Vœux des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes avant la bulle de Benoît XIII*. A discussion of the 1691 and 1694 formulas, showing their significance for our understanding of De La Salle’s spiritual journey, is provided in Sauvage-Campos, 371–79; English translation, 144–51; see also, Campos, CL 45, 202–22.

274. Evidence for the early practice of renewing the vows every Trinity Sunday is provided by the 1713 manuscript copy of *Pratique du Règlement Journalier* (CL 25, 133).

God were in question, he spoke with eloquence; no one could resist the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke.<sup>275</sup> This was shown on one occasion, among others, when two of the Brothers were summoned to appear in court in Paris and to say by what authority they had opened a new Gratuitous School there. He went with them and calmly observed as they made their rightful defense of what they had done. But as soon as they began to falter in their statement, he took over from them and argued their case to such effect that the matter was immediately concluded in their favor, despite the protests of the teachers, who, to counter this verdict against themselves, made the false claim to the judge that their case had nothing to do with the one who had made the defense.<sup>276</sup>

Many were the occasions when he brought about a change of mind in people who had disapproved of his way of governing and objected to the unusual lifestyle and dress of his disciples, always provided such people were prepared to listen to him with open minds and to acknowledge the truth of what he said. On such occasions the Spirit of God placed enlightened and convincing arguments on his lips because he spoke only when there was a need to defend his position. Some persons were so presumptuous, so full of their own importance, that they grew quite annoyed with him for not yielding submissively to the advice they gave him, even when they had no authority over him. But even these were sometimes quite overwhelmed by the evidence he produced in support of the reasons he gave for acting as he did, and they had to admit that his arguments, once he chose to put them forward, were quite irrefutable.

The vicars-general of the diocese of Reims knew what they were doing when they sent him, in 1684, with a number of other clergy to conduct a mission in a small town that had been long neglected and, like the mountains of Gilboa,<sup>277</sup> seemed doomed never more to receive

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275. Acts 6:10.

276. Gallego (229) identifies this case with the successful appeal of the Founder in the *Parlement* court against the decision of the Precentor, Claude Joly, on 23 February 1690, to close the newly established school in rue du Bac, opened the previous month at the request of Henri Baudrand, pastor of Saint Sulpice. Blain's sketchy account of the affair is in book 2, chap. 8. Documents in the National Archives in Paris enable us to identify the two Brothers referred to above: Nicolas Vuyart and Bernard Legentil, appointed by De La Salle to run the new school (Aroz, CL 42, vol. 1, 254–55). Gallego rejects Blain's dramatization here of the Founder's intervention in the court proceedings. Maillefer says (CL 6, 91) that De La Salle submitted his case in writing—a more likely procedure. The document recording the court's verdict in favor of De La Salle and the two Brothers, dated 18 March 1690, is listed as no. 107 in Aroz's inventory of bio-bibliographical documents in CL 40, vol. 1.

the rain or dew of heavenly grace.<sup>278</sup> At this time, John Baptist was fully occupied with the care of his tiny, newborn Society, which had an absolute need of his presence.<sup>279</sup> It made a heavy demand on his obedience to leave this little flock, so recently gathered under his charge, and go off in search of wandering sheep belonging to someone else's pasture. But for him the wish of his superiors signified the will of God; despite his intense desire to procure the glory of his Lord in the sheepfold that Divine Providence had placed in his care, he knew that he could not procure this glory independently of what God willed. So he went where obedience and God's interests now summoned him.

The idea the vicars-general had in sending John Baptist particularly was that the hardened people of the place would be moved to repentance by the presence and example of a canon of Reims who freely and for the love of God had made himself the lowliest and poorest priest of the diocese. They also wanted their saintly envoy to raise his hands to heaven in prayer and penance to bring down grace and blessings on a soil so long uncultivated. They were not disappointed in their expectations. The self-evident holiness of the young preacher, more effectively even than what he said, struck these people who had become used only to wayward and sinful ways in their own pastors' life. They almost ignored the fact that some other workers besides John Baptist had been sent to labor in their corner of the vineyard and that it was not right to leave them idle. They brought their problems to him and made him bear the burden of the day and the heat.<sup>280</sup> The bulk of the work fell to him, and he could not but see with his own eyes the fruit of his labors develop beyond the expectations of those who had sent him. People of the place who have survived him bear witness that they revered him as their apostle and that the edifying effect of his heroic zeal and charity in their regard proved to be lasting.

It would be no exaggeration to say that zeal for God's glory quite consumed our holy priest and that everything he did when he was not actually at prayer alone with God was aimed at procuring this glory. An instance of this was the way he watched, when on a journey,

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277. 2 Sam. 1:21.

278. The town has not been identified. In the chronology published in CL 41, vol. 1, Aroz suggests 1 April 1684 as the date for the start of the mission, but he omits this mention in his later version of the chronology published in CL 41, vol. 1; see below, chap. 27, note 358.

279. 1684 was only the second year of the group's residence at rue Neuve.

280. Matt. 20:12.



for an opportunity to speak of God to his fellow travelers and to put to them convincing reasons for living virtuously and turning away from sin. Such zeal was not deployed in vain; it sometimes produced results that were truly miraculous, as we are now about to see.

[CHAPTER 25]

*His incomparable zeal for the salvation of souls; his charism  
for the conversion of hardened sinners; striking examples  
of this gift; his advice sought by other pastors of souls*

John Baptist's overwhelming zeal for the glory of God made him passionately concerned for the salvation of souls. These two objectives cannot be separated; they merge and are mutually inclusive because the salvation of souls means glory for God. For this reason, when love of God is more fervent, so also is zeal to win souls for him. To make us understand this, Jesus required from the one who was to be the chief shepherd of his flock an eminent love surpassing that of the other Apostles before he would confide to him the care of his sheep and his lambs. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," was the reply; "you know that I love you!"<sup>281</sup> It is only on such a reply as that, coming from the heart and not just from the lips, that true zeal is founded. Only those people can claim to have true zeal who have given visible proof of their love for God.

Love for the divine Spouse presupposes love for the one to whom he is espoused. Whoever loves Jesus Christ must love his flock, must love his sheep in the way that he, the Good Shepherd, loved them;<sup>282</sup> that is, he must be prepared to do anything for them, to endure anything, even death, to save them. The salvation of souls cost Jesus Christ dearly, and so the more love for him grows in the heart, the more brightly does zeal for souls burn there. John Baptist de La Salle would not have considered himself a friend of Christ if his love for him had not been matched by his zeal for the salvation of souls, who were bought at the cost of his Savior's blood. He well knew that in the words of Saint Gregory, no sacrifice is more pleasing in the sight of God than to save souls,<sup>283</sup> or as Aquinas, the Angel of the Schools, expressed it, "The universe has no more impressive spectacle than that of a single soul being saved."<sup>284</sup> The fact that every soul has cost the blood of God gives it an infinite value; the price that God has put

281. John 21:15.

282. John 10:14–15.

283. See below, note 285.

on it should be the measure of its worth in our eyes. The limitless love that made Jesus Christ suffer all things and then die for souls should be a sufficient motive and model for our love of them. We may well conclude, again with Saint Gregory, that in heaven there will be a difference between the reward given for charity of a material kind and that given for charity that sought to save souls, as great a difference as that between body and soul.<sup>285</sup> De La Salle practiced both kinds of charity in a heroic way, as we will see; he exemplified to a rare degree an apostolic zeal to win souls as well as charity for his neighbor's welfare here below. His zeal, which was as boundless as the love that inspired it, envisaged two objectives in particular, and these preoccupied him throughout his life: first, the conversion of hardened sinners; second, the instruction and Christian education of poor and neglected children.

Because he possessed in a high degree all the virtues needed by apostolic men, John Baptist had a rare and precious gift for winning souls to God; his majestic Lord had granted him a particular charism for leading back into the way of salvation those who had strayed from it. This charism was based on a tender and paternal love for even the greatest sinners, on an enlightened prudence, on the illumination afforded him by the Holy Spirit, as well as on his sublime gift of contemplative prayer, his profound humility, his detachment and spirit of total poverty, his self-denial, patience, and meekness, which were proof against all trials. It is common knowledge that all these virtues combine to make an apostolic man and that from them zeal draws its strength and efficacy. The fact that De La Salle possessed all these qualities as fully as he did made him powerful in act and in speech: it made him appear in the eyes of sinners as an apostle of Jesus Christ, as a man sent from heaven especially for them.

We could say of him what was said of his divine Master, that he loved sinners and made profession of being their friend.<sup>286</sup> Sinners found in him a tender father, a kindly physician, an enlightened guide, a zealous advocate with God, a veritable guardian angel. His very look drew them to him, and his gracious manner won their confidence. They kept no secrets from him because they believed that his

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284. Blain gives no reference; perhaps he is thinking of a passage in *Opusculum*, LIX, art. 18 (Aquinas attributes it to Saint Bernard): "*Totus siquidem iste mundus ad unius animae pretium aestimari non potest*" (Vivès, vol. 6, 268). *Angel of the Schools* is an extension of the title *Doctor Angelicus* applied to Saint Thomas Aquinas from the fifteenth century.

285. Blain gives no reference for this quotation or for the preceding saying attributed to Saint Gregory, and both have eluded research.

286. Luke 15:2.

affection for them was genuine. They saw him full of compassion for their condition, moved to pity by their misfortunes, and grieving for the sins for which they had not grieved. They were led by all this to regret and lament their state and to seek in his charity a remedy for their ills.

According to the Book of Proverbs, prudence is the science of the saints;<sup>287</sup> together with the guiding light of the Holy Spirit, this made John Baptist accomplished in what Saint Gregory the Great<sup>288</sup> and, before him, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>289</sup> called the art of all arts, referring to the gift of directing sinners with gentle firmness and an enlightened kindness, obliging them, as it were, to escape from the captivity in which they were held by the devil, to break the bonds of their vices and passions. He had the gift of making sinners see that they must not expect his healing hand alone to restore their spiritual health; they must also join their own prayers and penances to those he was offering on their behalf. His union with God, an effect of his almost uninterrupted prayer, filled him with the spirit that gives life. From it derived a charm to win hearts, a holiness able to influence others and transform the most defiant dispositions. It made him an instrument of salvation in the hands of the Almighty, effective in bringing the most hardened souls to repentance and a change of life. His apt and persuasive words began the process; his prayers and penances completed it. Generally speaking, no one, however entrenched he might be in his sinful state, could hold out against the grace he brought them or the example of virtuous living they saw in him. All were individually persuaded that he was doing more for their conversion than they were, that their salvation was costing him dearly in sorrow and mortification. So they became ashamed of their cowardice and found courage in his example to do their part and win their salvation at some cost to themselves.

The humility, disinterestedness, patience, and sweetness of temper that animated everything De La Salle did inspired such trust in him that it became almost a joy to tell him their sins, to uncover for him the most shameful wounds of their soul. Great was their surprise, as well as their edification, to find him whom they revered as a saint professing to be a great sinner and seeking to assure them after they had confessed the most abominable crimes, that they were less guilty

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287. Prov. 30:3 (Douai).

288. There is no reference, but the relevant passage is in book 1 of *Regula Pastoralis*: “*Ab imperitis ergo pastorale magisterium qua temeritate suscipitur, quando ars est artium regimen animarum*” (PL, vol. 77, col. 14).

289. No reference, but Blain is thinking of a sentence from *Orationes II Apologetica*: “*Nam profectos ars quaedam artium, et scientia scientiarum*

than he was. This humility humbled them and made them realize what horror and regret they should feel for their sins, what spirit of penitence should be theirs. But it was also a humility that took from them almost all the shame they would have felt in confessing their different sins and the circumstances that made them more serious and vile.

Let us look now at some examples that bear out the truth of what we have been saying.<sup>290</sup> Our saintly priest usually traveled on foot,<sup>291</sup> alone or accompanied by a Brother, and read a book or prayed as he walked along. Occasionally he would find a place to kneel and would remain absorbed in prayer, sometimes for hours on end. But apart from such occasions when he was totally occupied with the thought of God, he lost no opportunity to exercise his zeal for souls. He would enter into conversation with people traveling in the same direction, taking occasion to speak to them about God and about virtuous living. It happened one day that he thus encountered in the forest of Villers-Cotterets a noted criminal, who was disguised as a clergyman. He was one of those types whom the Scriptures describe as being sold to sin and drinking iniquity like water.<sup>292</sup> No crime was too grave for him to commit. Although not a priest, he had no fears about pretending to say Mass. He was versed in the occult arts and had initiated into its diabolical lore two young aristocrats whose education had been entrusted to him as a private tutor.

It did not take John Baptist long to realize what kind of man it was whose company he had thus joined on his journey. But his zeal to convert him was equal to what he saw would be the difficulty involved. He set himself to the task with total confidence in God and without stopping to think of the insuperable obstacles that made the case seem hopeless from the start. In his conviction that nothing is impossible with God and that it is the divine pleasure to show mercy even to the greatest of sinners, he turned to him for help on behalf of this one. He disposed himself to act only through the Spirit of God in

*mibi esse videtur, hominem regere, animal omnium maxime varium et multiplex*" (PG, vol. 15, col. 426).

290. If the examples to be related by Blain seem far-fetched, it is worth bearing in mind that Maillefer recounts a few of the same stories with hardly less circumstantial detail, and the Maurist claimed to include only stories that he had found to be "based on sound proofs" (CL 6, 15). The fact that three of Blain's anecdotes relate to the Founder's failures in this sphere encourages credulity. It is of interest also, in this connection, that Maillefer's examples of De La Salle's charism for healing souls are related to passages in the main narrative, thereby suggesting a chronology for them.

291. The 1705 manuscript Rule has a chapter on travel, which begins, "The Brothers will usually travel on foot" (CL 25, 88).

292. Job 15:16.

attempting to influence the depraved and corrupted heart of this man. And succeed he did, first in moving him to repentance, then in gaining his confidence and drawing from him an ashamed and humiliating account of his entire abominable life.

The moment came when he had to part company with this new conquest and continue his journey alone. He placed his convert in God's care and took steps to ensure that he would remain free of the ancient serpent's coils. He made him promise to go to the Brothers' community when he reached Paris and there devote himself to prayer, habituating his soul to being in the state of grace by practicing virtue and following the exercises of the community. The man, in fact, did go to the Brothers' house when he arrived in Paris and handed the Director a letter that John Baptist had given him. Following the instructions contained in the letter, the Director welcomed him and gave him a small room to himself.

Nevertheless, when the latter told him of what had happened between him and Father de La Salle and mentioned the kind of horrible life he had hitherto led, the Director felt some alarm at the presence of this strange guest in the house. He feared that it might be in the devil's murky plans to make use of this man to do his diabolical work in the community. He could not be too careful. It was possible that the man's repentance was not wholehearted and that under the appearance of having returned to God, he might attempt to lead astray one or another of the weaker members of the community. The Director, therefore, kept him locked in his room pending John Baptist's return and gave him no opportunity to speak to anyone except him and the Brother who brought him his food.

When the Superior got back to Paris, he brought the man's conversion to a happy ending. He heard his general Confession, continued to strengthen him in the practice of virtue, and finally obtained a post for him as a teacher in a hospice for the poor. Even there the vigilant pastor did not lose sight of him but continued to give him solicitous guidance. The former sinner, happy in his conversion, now led an irreproachable life, and when he came to die, his dispositions gave reason to think that God had indeed been merciful to him. The whole story was told by De La Salle to the Director who had been involved in the episode.

John Baptist's zeal did not meet with quite so successful a result in the case of a certain priest he met, someone who seemed more like a soldier than a clergyman. He had served in the army, and there was still something of the barracks about his demeanor and way of acting. He was as ignorant as he was rough; the New Testament was a closed book to him; Latin, a foreign language. We do not know how

it came about that our servant of God tried to turn this soldier-priest, or rather this priest who seemed more like a soldier, into a good cleric. The man arrived at one of the communities with a letter from De La Salle and so began what turned out to be a two-year stay. He was employed in the school to keep him busy and save him from tedium and boredom and from the sinful behavior that results therefrom. John Baptist's desire was to turn this unworthy servant of the church into someone capable of being useful to her, but he did not succeed. A fighting man's spirit is not easily lost, and in the case of this person, it was only temporarily shed, not completely got rid of. According to all appearances, his vocation and certainly his inclination were for the business of war. Yet this was not what he finally hoped to obtain. He hoped that by wearing his soutane and carrying a breviary, he would eventually get a benefice for which there would be no other applicant, at least no one better qualified applicant than he was.<sup>293</sup>

But many other erring people did approach John Baptist to ask for the cleansing sacrament of Penance and to confess to him their sins. It was not his sermons or any show of brilliance on his part that drew them, for as we know, he led a hidden life in his community, like Saint John the Baptist in the desert,<sup>294</sup> and did not seek to cut a figure in public. It was because he was what he was supposed to be, a living example of the penitential spirit, not an eloquent preacher or a celebrity, that sinners approached him and even soldiers came, as to his namesake, to ask what they should do to be saved.<sup>295</sup> All found a welcome with him that quite won them over. He would take them to the community chapel and there hear confessions for hours on end. However precious time was to him, he never begrudged it where they were concerned; he gave them freely as much as was needed for their complete conversion.

When they reached that happy point, he did not leave them to their own resources. He required them to come back and see him occasionally, and in his charity he used these visits to strengthen them in good and affirm their attachment to virtue. Because they had given him the key to their heart, he spared nothing to open them to grace and give admission there to the love of God. He made no distinctions among them, unless it was that the worst offenders seemed to receive special marks of his charity. His humble and gentle attitude toward them evinced only respect and tenderness, and so he won their con-

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293. Félix-Paul (*Lettres; édition critique*, 165), followed by Gallego (439) and Loes (*Letters*, 114), identifies this character with a M. Celisier, alias Saint-Georges, mentioned by De La Salle in a letter to Gabriel Drolin.

294. Luke 3:2.

295. Luke 3:14.

fidence. They were quite overwhelmed to have found a confessor who seemed to them as holy as the saint whose name he bore and who yet treated them with honor and esteem, after they had laid open to his judgment consciences as black as the coals of hell, instead of spurning them in disgust.

Of all the people he rescued from the clutches of Satan, one is particularly worth our attention. If I were to give the full account of his life, according to what he told some of the Brothers, I would have to write a history of all the vices and passions. It is impossible to say what was his dominant vice because he seemed to be under the sway of them all. Intemperance, sensuality, impurity, impiety, profanity—they were all part of his sinful makeup. He was offended by any mention of God, goodness, the Scriptures, or anything at all to do with religion. Only one thing remained to plunge him deeper into the satanic depths and initiate him into hell's most fearful and somber mysteries. This was to add to the character that Baptism had imprinted on his soul, that of Holy Orders so that he might bring his appalling dispositions to the service of the altar. It was no thanks to him if the church did not find this agent of iniquity among her ministers, for he did everything in his power to have himself ordained a priest. He would have succeeded if the evidence of his debauched life had not blocked the way for him. He had come from a family of some standing and had brains and ability—in fact, everything needed to serve the devil well in God's house and to be an efficient instrument of evil. Happily for the church, when he presented himself as a candidate whose way of preparing for the priesthood had been to rival the prodigal son in riotous living,<sup>296</sup> he was rejected ignominiously. His physical condition, trembling as he was in every limb, was sufficient to show the extent of his dissolute life.

But the wretched fellow was not to be put off. With the same purpose in mind, he now took on the pretense of being a priest and of carrying out the functions of the priesthood, without bothering about ordination. The visible chastisement of God, which we have just mentioned, instead of touching his conscience served only to harden it further. Because one criminal act had become impossible for him, he substituted another one of the same kind. He forged his document and looked for chances to pretend to say Mass. But it often happened that even when he had the vestments and was ready to approach the altar and put on his performance, he still found himself prevented by an intervention of a Providence ever attentive to thwart such hidden iniquities. Among so many transgressions, there was only one thing in his life he felt sorry for, namely, that like Esau of old, he had sold the

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296. Luke 15:13 (Douai).

birthright of a benefice worth 800 livres a year for a mess of potage.<sup>297</sup> His regret for this was genuine enough, and he groaned and lamented about it a great deal, not that it made any difference.

At last, having allowed the wretch to have his own way for many years, God took pity on him. The way he chose to bring about his conversion was to deliver him up to remorse of conscience. The roué found that in the quagmire in which he had long slumbered, there lurked the gnawing worm that sin inevitably produces in the soul, tormenting it either in this life or in the next. Thenceforth he found no rest where he was. He became bored with the path of iniquity, worn out by a life that was more truly a kind of death, a foretaste of the life of the damned. He began to turn his gaze heavenward and to think about the everlasting life that waited there to put an end to this brief and evanescent existence here below, which is no more than a life of suffering intended to prepare us for a life of joy.

Thoughts like these, salutary but disturbing to a pleasure-seeking man, filled his heart with bitter anxiety. His sinful condition, combined with the memory of past gratifications, became a source of torment to him. He became unbearable to himself, but the more he tried to escape his thoughts, the more he found himself returning to them. He sought repose and found none; it was as if he were lying on a bed of thorns, feeling their sharp points whichever way he turned. Sins that he had forgotten the moment he had committed them found their way back into his memory and forced him to recognize his responsibility for them. Their number appalled him. He now saw the world for what it was, and it held no more attractions for him. Its amusements and delights made him think how hollow they were, how deceptive. He was a burden to himself and took to hiding away, not daring to mix with others lest they would notice the bitter anxiety and restless strain that gripped his soul. But this threw him back onto his own thoughts, and he found life even more burdensome because silence and solitude left him a prey to his great enemy, conscience.

He finished by sinking into a state of profound melancholy that was very close to despair. There was only one possible remedy for his condition: to make a general Confession, which he was advised to do. But to whom could he turn? Was there anyone in the world capable of hearing the story of his life without being horror stricken and reacting accordingly? Did anyone have sufficient patience to listen calmly to him to the end as he told the long tale of sins that differed only in their kind and circumstances? Such questions he put to himself and to those who urged him to seek the remedy for his sinful state in the cleansing power of Penance to which all sinners may have recourse.

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297. Gen. 25:29–34.



He was prepared to go to Confession if he could find a confessor to his liking, but he could not bring himself to do this as long as he had no hope of finding such a person. To his way of thinking, the man to whom he would make his Confession must be either a saint or someone who would die immediately after hearing his story. He could not bear to think that anyone who thus became secretly aware of a life so dissolute would continue to live on afterward. So pride, the most pernicious vice, held back the healing of his soul. The same evil spirit that had robbed him of all shame when he was committing his guilty deeds now restored it to him to block his approach to Confession. But his anxiety grew worse every day, and the delay in applying the remedy only increased the seriousness of his situation and made the cure more difficult. The one redeeming feature of the whole business was that he really desired this cure and that if he put off having recourse to the physician, it was only because he did not know where to seek the one who was destined to heal him.

Without doubt, no one was more fitted for this role than Abbot de Rancé, the famed reformer of the Trappist Congregation.<sup>298</sup> Heaven had endowed him with a gift for turning the greatest sinners into the most illustrious penitents. Someone told the distressed miscreant of our story about the abbot and assured him that here was the saint he needed. No sooner was he told this than he hastened to seek a welcome and forgiveness. But it seemed that the abbot, saint and all as he was, was not the physician God had wished to use for restoring to health our despairing sufferer. Either that or the devil, seeing that his prey was about to escape, renewed his efforts to secure his grip. Whatever the reason, the unhappy man, having arrived at what could have been the gate of salvation for him, would only stay a short time and then left, despite the earnest and kindly remonstrances of the saintly abbot, who warned him, but to no purpose, that he would be lost if he left the monastery in this way.

But God was still looking after him and led him by sure but hidden ways to the turning point of his life. After leaving the Trappist house, he heard about a virtuous priest by the name of Aubery, and he set off for Moulins with the intention of making his Confession to him there.<sup>299</sup> When he arrived, he learned that this zealous clergyman

298. See above, chap. 23, note 227.

299. Louis Aubery appears in book 3, chap. 8. He had the principal role in bringing the Lasallians to Moulins in 1709–10 to take over the work of Christian education that he had pioneered and conducted personally for more than twenty years. Rigault supplements the information in a detailed account (296–310), a treatment merited by this contemporary of De La Salle (Aubery was born the year before the Founder), who sensed the need for Christian education of the poor long before he heard of the Brothers' work and who

was much devoted to the task of instructing children and giving them a Christian education and that he was looking for someone to help in the humble and demanding work of the classroom. His would-be penitent went forthwith to offer his services, but without mentioning the reason that had brought him to Moulins. It seems that he even resorted to subterfuge to make his offer more attractive to Father Aubery, saying that it was his intention to enter a monastery. The good priest told him not to do this; he judged him suitable to help him in his work and offered him a wage in return for his services.

Our man was further able to improve his situation by obtaining a post in the city as tutor to the children of the king's attorney there. Thus he had his meals at this official's residence and his pay from Father Aubery. It was all sufficient to make him very comfortable, if only his conscience would let him be at peace with himself. But all his moving about did nothing for his worries; a change of place did not change his conscience, and wherever he went, this tormentor went with him.

So he decided to quit Moulins and make for Paris. Someone had told him about Father de La Salle, saying that he was a great servant of God and the one whom God surely intended to be his liberator. The pretext he gave for resigning his posts at Moulins was that he wanted to go to Sept-Fons, a famous center of penitential pilgrimage not far from that town.<sup>300</sup> But this was not his intention at all, and he took the road, not for Sept-Fons but for Paris. There he made many inquiries, and eventually he found himself with an inward feeling of assurance in the presence of the physician who was destined to heal him. He was received with all the kindness and friendly cordiality he could have hoped for, the like of which he had never experienced before. The gracious air of the saintly priest, his affable demeanor and winning manners, and especially the charity that inspired the welcome he gave—all served to gain the man's confidence. Here before

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strove to meet the need—"a modest rival of De La Salle," Rigault calls him, "and in some sense a precursor." Poutet gives due weight to Aubery's role, filling out the details from his own research (vol. 2, 212–21). Rigault and Poutet comment on the resemblances and the differences between Aubery's methods, outlined in a *Règlement* drawn up by him in seventy articles, and De La Salle's *Conduite des Écoles Chrétiennes*.

300. A Cistercian abbey some twenty miles from Moulins and founded in the twelfth century, it was enjoying at the time of Blain's writing new fame as a center of monastic fervor, thanks to the reform of Abbot Eustache de Beaufort, whose inspiration derived from the more famous Abbot de Rancé. In 1717, the reigning abbot of Sept-Fons, Dom Joseph de Hargenvilliers, obtained letters patent giving royal backing to the school entrusted to De La Salle's disciples by Louis Aubery (Gustave-Marie, *Louis Aubery*, Moulins, 1914, 26).

him was the perfect embodiment of the image he had formed of the kind of saintly man he could confess to. He saw that there did exist in this world a confessor such as he had imagined and longed for.

He made no delay in asking De La Salle to hear his Confession, but yet his courage failed him on each of the first three occasions he presented himself at the sacramental tribunal. Every time he came to the point of making known his worst excesses, the false shame that comes from pride made him tongue-tied and mute. At the fourth attempt, like a man testing a dangerous pathway and moving forward step by step, he chanced one of his grosser offenses, watching out for any signs of horror his confessor might show. But he saw that the latter remained tranquil and no more disturbed than if he had told him of some virtuous deed he had done. The success of this first tentative step encouraged him to confess a second similarly grave delinquency, and then a third. Then, totally surprised that De La Salle was not astonished at what he had told him but had listened quite coolly and with no sign of horror, he freely poured into his ears all his other sins, making a complete and sincere avowal of them all. This man related this account to a Brother who accompanied him on a journey from Paris to Guise, where De La Salle had sent them.

This humble and integral Confession was the saving of the troubled sinner, who had been so long at the mercy of the gnawing worm of conscience. It gave him peace of mind, but to receive absolution, he was obliged to hand over to his confessor any of the forged papers he had used in perpetrating his misdeeds, among them his counterfeit permission to say Mass. It was a victory for God that infuriated the spirit of darkness. In rage at seeing such a prey snatched from him, the demon took revenge by openly tormenting the new convert. It seemed to the latter as if all the devils of hell had come out to take over his room and with implacable hostility to fling him from its window. Their assaults on his conscience were even worse than their physical attacks. He felt within him a fierce rebellion of all his vices and passions. All his past transgressions became renewed temptations to him. The attraction of pleasure, the delight that goes with sin and draws a person to it, had never seemed more sweet and seductive. By an effect of divine mercy, he remained close to the one who had set him free, and because he was faithful in making known to him all his temptations, he came through all victoriously. The temptations continued long and persistent, but the more they challenged him, the more triumphs he won.

John Baptist knew better than anyone what furious efforts the unclean spirit makes to re-enter a heart from which he has been driven, the assiduity he brings to reawaken old ideas, his facility in using

vicious habits to reopen wounds, however well they might be healed. He was, therefore, watchful to ensure by every possible means the perseverance of his convert. He used the same charitable approach to sustain him in the path that leads to God as he had used to draw him away from the road to hell.

The death of this repentant sinner came not long after his conversion, and it seemed by its edifying nature to confirm that salvation was his. It occurred in the poor hospice at Soissons, where John Baptist had gotten him a teaching post. The edifying death redounded to the honor of the saintly priest, despite all his humility. The one who owed him so much could not restrain himself, as death approached, from acknowledging the debt he owed him, saying openly that Father de La Salle had snatched him from the very jaws of the infernal lion of eternal damnation and that if God had shown him mercy, it was because of the charity of this priest. Word of this conversion got around. The name of De La Salle became known to people caught up in a life of sin, and they began to come to him from every quarter, hoping to have the joyful experience of his gift for touching hardened hearts and drawing away from hell people who were already over the threshold.

Another sinful person, a similar case to the one I have just described, was likewise indebted to John Baptist for his conversion. He had served in the army, but only after he had been ordained subdeacon. He had enlisted not to recite the divine office, certainly, but rather to dispense himself from it and lead a free and easy life. He dismissed from his mind the thought not only of his breviary but also of his clerical status. Forgetting about his obligations to God and the church, he valued only the freedom he had acquired to be as wayward as he liked without suffering the consequences. Such evidence of ungodliness suffices to show what the conversion of this impious clerical renegade cost De La Salle. But he finally succeeded, and death, which was not long delayed, seemed to confirm and set the seal on the change that had been brought about. The man ended his days at Rethel in saintly dispositions.<sup>301</sup>

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301. *Historique de la Communauté de Rethel*, in the archives of Hôtel De La Salle (the Founder's birthplace) in Reims, supplies details about this conversion. The young man concerned, ordained sub-deacon of the diocese of Lisieux, was called Philippe Deshayes. To strengthen his good dispositions following his change of heart, John Baptist sent him to live with the Brothers at Rethel; he died there on 21 February 1693, only twenty-six years old (Gallego, 295). Blain's references to the breviary derive from the fact that the sub-diaconate was the first step to the priesthood with the obligation to recite the Divine Office in full every day. The order of sub-diaconate was suppressed in the 1983 revision of the Code of Canon Law; canon 1009 states simply, "The orders are the episcopate, the priesthood, and the diaconate."

Parish priests and other confessors came to know of the good that God was thus effecting through the ministry of De la Salle, and they frequently consulted him on the thornier and more problematical cases they met in their dealings with people who were far gone in wrongdoing and whose conversion needed some kind of miraculous grace. Otherwise, they simply sent to him such people for him to complete what they had begun or to do what they had not dared attempt.

Once, when De La Salle was making the visit of his communities and was on his way to Soissons, he met a young Scotsman whose personality seemed something out of the ordinary. The young man was heading for Paris, hoping to make his fortune there. He made an approach to our saintly priest to ask for something to help him on his way and got more from his request than he had bargained for! John Baptist did, indeed, give him an alms, but then he did not miss the opportunity of speaking to him about God and prompting him to think about his salvation. Unfortunately, being a foreigner, the young man did not understand French, so to get around this, John Baptist put some questions to him in Latin.<sup>302</sup> He discerned from the answers he received that he was speaking to an adherent of the so-called reformed religion. This made John Baptist feel sorry for him, and he felt inspired to try to convert him, bringing to the task everything that a disinterested charity could suggest. He paid the young foreigner's way for the rest of the journey and then took him to the novitiate house, where he provided generously for his needs.

The gentle and happy nature that he perceived in his guest made John Baptist hopeful, at first, that it was a simple task he had taken on and that he would easily win over to the true religion a man about whom there seemed to be nothing wrong, except for the misfortune of having been born into the wrong faith. But it was not long before he realized that he was dealing with an intelligent and well-informed youth and that he needed to use other weapons besides charity to combat his errors. He would have to make the truth convincing by learned argument; this the saintly priest set himself to do by day and by night with unflagging zeal. He had long interviews with the young heretic over a period of some three months. He made known to him

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302. In the 1718 revision of the Rule, provision is made for just such an exceptional use of Latin for the sake of charity. In the 1705 manuscript, article 2 of the brief chapter entitled, "The Latin language," states (with reference to Brothers who have acquired a knowledge of the language before entering the Society): "It will not even be allowed for anyone to read any Latin book or to speak a single word of Latin without an absolute and indispensable necessity by order of the Brother Director." In 1718, this article continues "when, for example, an occasion presents itself to speak to a stranger who does not know the vernacular and knows Latin" (CL 25, 93).

methodically all that could possibly be said that was most convincing and most capable of freeing him from his prejudices, but it was all to no purpose. He found that he was dealing with a young man of subtle intelligence who was stubbornly attached to his convictions, someone unlikely to yield until reasoned argument had done all that it could and there was no further answer possible.

John Baptist began to lose hope of ever convincing him, but his zealous efforts met with no rebuff, and he kept on trying ever harder to overcome the resistance to his arguments. But the conversion of sinners in general and of heretics in particular is the work of grace, and whoever attempts it is laboring in vain if God does not come to his aid. So he intensified his prayer and mortification along with his apologetics, seeking in the power of the Almighty a victory that the light of truth itself was not achieving. He prayed and had others pray for this stray sheep, and to make his prayers efficacious, he imposed severe penances on himself.

Finally, his zeal had its reward. After three months of stubborn resistance, the heretic laid down his weapons and surrendered in good faith to the truth that had been demonstrated to him. He admitted that there was no other church than that of Rome, and he declared his determination to live and die in its fold. The fact that he had not submitted except after many a struggle meant that his conversion would now remain steadfast. The more entrenched he had seemed in falsehood, the more attached he now became to the truth he acknowledged. Having been finally undeceived by the exact knowledge he had sought concerning all the points of contention between Catholics and the adherents of the reformed sect, he was in a position to enlighten others. His reconciliation to the true faith had not been lightly achieved; accordingly, it now grew in sincerity and constancy.

John Baptist was overjoyed at this conversion and duly knelt before the altar in praise and thanksgiving to him who had brought it about. He took due time and trouble to instruct the new convert thoroughly about the principal obligations of the Catholic faith; finally, he presented him to the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, who received his submission to the satisfaction and edification of all who were present. The consolation of the one who had made it all possible could not have been greater. He brought his proselyte back in a kind of triumph to where he had won him for God, and he kept him there some time to complete his formation in solid piety and to make him proof against relapse in face of the temptations he would confront on returning to his own country. When he was thus firmly grounded in the faith, John Baptist let him leave to return to Scotland, whence he had set out to seek his fortune in Paris and whither he would now return

from Paris, having made a better fortune than he had foreseen. His “father in the faith” saw to the expenses of his journey and had the comfort of learning subsequently that his spiritual son not only persevered within the bosom of the Roman church but also labored successfully for the conversion of all his family, as well as that of some other persons. Thus were crowned the zeal and charity our saintly priest exercised toward this foreign adherent of a false religion.<sup>303</sup>

But even more marvelous was the conversion of a young clergyman of high birth who had been referred to De La Salle by the very people he had been sent to in a desperate attempt to bring him to order. The idea of referring him to the saintly priest was prompted by the known success of the latter in his dealing with young people, whether training them in solid piety or bringing them back when they had gone astray. At the age of eighteen, the young cleric was already experienced in sinful ways. Only the usual few outward marks identified him as a cleric, but he had nothing of the spirit of the vocation his parents had intended for him; it was a case of flesh and blood calling him to a state for which he seemed in no way fitted. His self-interest and ambition obliged him to remain what he had no wish to be, and he manifested tendencies that made people blush for him and tremble for the church. Every possible means had been tried to keep him to his duty, but it was all in vain; they served only to aggravate his wayward spirit. His parents were finally obliged to use restraint, and they more or less confined him in the house of the Oratorians, near the Faubourg Saint-Jacques gate in Paris. They hoped he would be brought to a more disciplined way of life by the quality and quantity of instructions and good example he would receive there.

But these were remedies that made things worse. The young scapegrace felt himself a prisoner, and the more this feeling grew, the more violent he became to recover his liberty. He grew cunning in deceiving those who were watching over his conduct, and he found

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303. Maillefer relates this episode, likewise at some length, in both his 1723 biography and in that of 1740 (CL 6, 120–25). In both his accounts, the nationality of the young man is Dutch, but the details resemble one another so closely that all three narratives, Blain's and Maillefer's, must relate to the same incident. Gallego (294) gives the benefit of the doubt about the nationality to Blain on the grounds that our biographer, later in the present chapter, tells another conversion story about a Dutchman. Maillefer specifies that the novitiate house in question was at Vaugirard, dating the incident about 1697. Poutet (vol. 1, 359–60) refers to this episode as illustrating John Baptist's zeal for the conversion of non-Catholics and also his ability to meet the objections and present the arguments entailed in the process, and he suggests that De La Salle owed both to the influence of his professor of theology at the University of Reims, the Irishman, Daniel Egan.

ways of escaping their vigilance. When they thought he was in bed or certainly in the house, he had gotten over the walls and gone off to a dance, to a play, or to a gambling or drinking party. The patience of the superiors of the house was finally exhausted, and they looked for an opportunity to get him off their hands. The scandal of his disreputable behavior was embarrassing them and doing their own reputation no good at all. Besides, they were tired of supervising the conduct of a young fellow who was so clever at getting the better of them. So they came to an agreement with his family to have him placed in the care of a man who had a special grace for getting young libertines to give up their wayward conduct. It was common knowledge that God had often made use of this person's ministry to bring about such conversions, and they hoped that in his community of Brothers, the young cleric would obtain the victory of grace that he had not found at the Oratory.

Their devout hope was fulfilled beyond all their desires. In the first place, the young man was struck by the rigorous silence that prevailed among the Brothers and by the great regularity of life he saw there. Then he felt moved by the fervor of the novices and the eminent piety of their Director. Everything they did reproached his own ill-regulated life, and their silence, combined with their good example, rebuked his delinquencies and urged him powerfully to change his ways. In such good company, he learned by the force of example and the promptings of grace to go against his passionate nature and to do violence to his disorderly tendencies. He proved docile to these initial inspirations of the Holy Spirit and so received still more potent ones. God in his goodness rewarded his cooperation with the early movements of grace by granting him more powerful graces, and eventually pure love found entry into a soul that had so far been dominated by sensuality. Talks with John Baptist completed the process of his conversion, and the evidence of his sincere return to God was the transformation in his way of life.

It was a case of a wolf being changed into a lamb. The young cleric attended the spiritual exercises of the community as eagerly as he had previously gone after the vain pleasures of the world. The fervor of the novices at these exercises made him want to imitate them. Indeed, God worked so ceaselessly on his heart that he made visible advances to the point of becoming an example for the novices. He became eager to do the most menial tasks in the house and to carry out the practices of humiliation that he saw the novices doing, such as kissing their Brothers' feet, taking their meals kneeling, and so on. The only favor he sought in all this was to have no limit put to his mortifications. All signs of his high station in life became embarrass-



ing and distasteful to him. He dismissed his manservant and asked to be given a place at the common table with the Brothers. The only distinction he wanted between himself and them was to be even more fervent, humble, and obedient than they were. He had begun by walking in their footsteps, becoming like them recollected, penitential, and mortified, and from thus following their example, he became a model for them.

The fervor now dominating his heart, so recently given over to mundane pleasures, made him strongly attached to the community where he had found grace. Nowhere else would now satisfy him. It had been chosen by his parents as a place of confinement for him, but it had become his paradise. He was now as anxious to spend the rest of his life there as they had been to have him taken in. His mind was made up never to leave it, to consecrate himself unreservedly to the service of God there, and to make up for the delinquencies of his youth by a life of humility and self-denial. He felt that there was just one thing missing for him in this place where he wanted to dwell for the rest of his life: he was not dressed like the Brothers. The more fervent he became, the more keen he was to wear their habit, and finally he found the courage to ask for it.

The request caused no small surprise to John Baptist, who had not expected the young cleric to carry his fervor quite so far. Because it seemed only prudent to test the spirit that had prompted this request, he let the matter drop, apparently not wishing to pay much attention to it. There were, in any case, a number of things to be taken into account before he could give his consent. He feared that the wish that had been expressed was only an example of what Saint Paul calls *juvenilia desideria*—youthful enthusiasm.<sup>304</sup> Perhaps it was a whim, the product of a fit of fervor that would prove to be like burning straw, which dies out as quickly as it takes fire. What he feared still more was that all Paris would be roused to indignation by the protests of an illustrious family, disgraced, as it would seem to them, by the spectacle of their son in the habit of a Brother, a young man destined one day to wear one or other of the richest and most distinguished miters in the kingdom. Yet our cleric persisted in begging for the Brothers' garb, no less ardently than he might one day have sought one of the principal ecclesiastical promotions that France could offer.

To avoid having to grant his request, John Baptist made it a condition that the family give their consent. This would not be easy to obtain; rather, there was no hope that it would be obtained at all. A family of distinction believes it right never to yield when its reputation is at stake, and this family would consider itself disgraced if its scion,

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304. 2 Tim. 2:22 (Vulgate).

destined as he was to take his place among the princes of the church, finished up being a mere teacher. Even so, the postulant, distinguished though he was, spared no effort to get his people to agree. He especially tried to obtain the agreement of an uncle of his, who was a bishop. He wrote him one letter after another to try to persuade him to agree. Most of his letters remained unanswered, and any replies he did receive contained only refusals or evasive considerations intended to dampen the nephew's ardor. Another relative, acting apparently on behalf of them all, visited the young man at the Brothers' house expressly to talk him out of the idea. He discoursed at length on the contemptible nature of the state of life he wanted to take up and the disgrace it would be for the family if one of its sons took employment in a school. He suggested that it was frivolous to entertain a wish of this nature, a wish that could lead to unfortunate results one day; the boy would only be storing up regrets, remorse, and shame for himself if he persisted. But everything the eloquent relative could say to belittle the Brothers' way of life in no way shook the constancy of our cleric. The greater the effort to turn him against the idea of this vocation, the more attached he became to it.

When a person is eager to obtain something, he is prompted to use any means possible to succeed; when the young man's relatives began studiously to leave all his letters unanswered, he chose to interpret this as tacit consent. He insisted with the Superior that it was no longer necessary to await a formal, affirmative reply. Finally, he succeeded in persuading him to agree to his wish. Words cannot express the joy and contentment of the postulant when he saw himself wearing the humble garb that during this period was looked upon by outsiders as an apparel to be ashamed of. He chose to wear the oldest and most worn habit available, and never in his life had he felt so jubilant as when he now looked down at the heavy, thick-soled shoes on his feet or put on a hat that his menservants would have refused to wear but that he preferred to the one worn by a cardinal!

When De La Salle informed the family of this development, they were duly seized with alarm and took steps both to prevent news of what had happened from getting around and to stop things from going any further. Just when the fervent novice thought they had forgotten him and he could satisfy his fervor in peace, they came, removed him by force from the Brothers' community, and transferred him elsewhere. At least they removed him bodily, but they could not transfer his heart's affection. There was never to be any change in the longing he felt for the place from which he had been torn away. He pined so intensely for it that he died within a couple of years—from regret, it is thought, at not having been able to end his days with the Brothers.<sup>305</sup>

The great concern of the saintly John Baptist with regard to all the sinful people who approached him was to instill in them a spirit of repentance and to have them spare no effort to obtain this. Before granting them the grace of absolution, he wanted to see them, in scriptural terms, nourished with the bread of tears.<sup>306</sup> Those who found it difficult to develop a humble and contrite heart became an object of compassion to him. He offered his prayers and penances especially for them, for such were the means he normally employed to gain for them a gift so precious and necessary for every sinner.

One person, among the others who especially tested his patience and zeal, approached him, laden with sin but showing little sign of humility or contrition. He was a man whose heart had become hardened and without feeling; he found no difficulty, let alone any horror, in declaring the most appalling sins without so much as a blush of embarrassment. He admitted quite openly that his soul was immune to any sensation of sorrow, that he just did not feel burdened by his load of sins. It was a misfortune for him not to be able to feel any regret for having offended God, for this misfortune makes all the sinner's other ills incurable. To awaken a feeling of regret in him, John Baptist called him from time to time to the novitiate house at Vaugirard. There he would talk firmly to him, putting the most forceful considerations to him in an effort to break through his hardness of heart, to inflict the blessed wound that is a sovereign and infallible cure for all the other wounds of a soul. He would then send him to the chapel to assist at Mass while he withdrew to the sacristy behind the altar, where he was free to prostrate himself on the floor, remaining in this humiliating position throughout the time of the Mass, seeking to obtain for his hardened penitent a humble and contrite heart.<sup>307</sup>

Whenever he had brought to bear on these brazen spirits all the resources his zeal suggested and they still, despite it all, remained the

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305. Maillefer includes this conversion story, placing it immediately after his account of the visit to the Grand'Maison by the exiled King James II, that is, about the year 1700.

306. Ps. 41:4 (Douai).

307. This sentence makes it possible to date the incident as 1697 or 1698. Permission for a chapel at the Vaugirard novitiate (and to offer Mass there) was granted by Archbishop de Noailles of Paris on 27 March 1697. A French translation by De La Salle of the Latin document is preserved in the Rome archives (the text is in CL 11, 59). The fact that John Baptist could withdraw to the sacristy while his client assisted at the Mass reminds us that the Founder (as Blain says more than once) customarily gave accommodation to poor priests (and the document just mentioned extends to other priests besides De La Salle the permission to say Mass in the newly established chapel). The move from Vaugirard to the Grand'Maison took place on 18 April 1698.

same as he found them, laden with sin and quite unconcerned, he sought his consolation in God. "We have done all that depended on us," he would say. "It is for God to do the rest; the work of conversion is his, and we must await the moment he chooses to act. What he expects from us is to care for the ailing soul, not to heal it."

A man who gave the holy Founder more trouble than anyone else was a certain sly and hypocritical Dutchman.<sup>308</sup> At first, he was a source of consolation to De La Salle, who had devoted himself assiduously and perseveringly to giving him instruction, for he not only renounced his Calvinism but requested lodging with the Brothers. The request was granted, but he was an impostor, whose only reason for the supposed conversion was to insure himself against material want. Astute self-interest made him pretend to be a Catholic while he remained at heart what he had always been, a Calvinist. When he felt it safe to do so, he was bold enough to try to win some proselytes to his heretical beliefs, there in the very house where he had supposedly abjured them. But his hypocrisy was not so clever that John Baptist was not able to see what he was up to. Our saintly priest, who always tried gentle persuasion before resorting to severity, used both approaches with this pseudo-convert without effect. Hence, he gave in to the pleas of the Brothers and dismissed from the house a man who was only a disguised heretic and whose presence was doing no good and growing more dangerous every day.

The impious fellow, having put on his act of being a Catholic at Paris, tried it again some time later at Marseille. De La Salle was in that city at the time and was very surprised when the dissembler turned up, seeking his forgiveness and abjuring with a fresh show of horror the errors he had already renounced in public. The holy man took him at his word and received him with joy, being moved to tenderness by the thought that this was a lost sheep returning to the fold. Or perhaps it was that he was anxious for his real conversion and thought that he should try again with renewed zeal in the hope of succeeding. Whatever his motive, he once more took the man into the community, and the rogue was astonished himself at a charity that so overlooked the past and showed no misgiving about the future.

The servant of God in his charity did not stop to think that he might be giving hospitality to a thief who wanted admission to the house only to look around and seek an opportunity to rob his benefactor. By an unfortunate chance, John Baptist had received, a few days previously, a sum of money that was considerable for such a poor community. It was the pay of the Brothers who were working in the schools and their only means of subsistence for some time to

308. See above, note 303.

come. The ungrateful wretch found a way of getting into the Superior's office, where he seized the entire sum in cash and made off, leaving the small community in dire want. But the discovery of the loss did not upset John Baptist. As usual, his only reaction was to say, "God be blessed!" To calm and console his disciples, he pointed out that God permits nothing except for his greater glory. John Baptist would not let them give chase to the thief.

Anyone who does not know to what depths Satan can lead people and to what corrupt limits he draws those who heed him would think that this world could have no worse villains than the ones we have just described. But the fact is that there are people who seem to have made a pact with hell itself and to have given themselves over to the evil spirit to outrage God and push their criminal behavior to its utmost limit, sinning more like demons than like human beings. With horrifying perversity, such persons make friends with the prince of darkness, and they enter into an alliance or contract with him. They deliberately surrender themselves to his sway, give him possession of themselves, and receive some bodily mark that is a sign of his dominion over them.

Their purpose in all this is to be able to achieve their objectives and satisfy their evil passions. There is no deeper abyss of sin. Those who sink into it should no longer be thought of as human but rather as demons in human form. The devil is their master; he leads them on, keeping them under his control. They take their instructions from him, and under the influence of his malice, they can be said to become as proficient as he is in the art of sinning, as wicked as he is and perhaps more guilty in the sight of God. But through the ministry of John Baptist de La Salle, the grace of God was able to succeed even with such creatures as these. Because he was unbelievably reticent about such matters and no information was ever forthcoming from him, it is impossible to say how many people of this kind the saintly priest converted.

Here is one such instance that Providence has allowed to come to our knowledge. It is the story of an unhappy priest who had played fast and loose with the devil and had finally made a pact with him. By the mercy of God, he happened to come into the care of De La Salle—how, we do not know. It may have been that the man was prompted by a miracle of grace to seek conversion. Perhaps he was disillusioned with the devil, having received no return for his pact and feeling that the impious surrender of himself, body and soul, had been a total loss as far as he was concerned. Yet again, John Baptist may have won his confidence and been entrusted with the secrets of his evildoing. Certainly the servant of God knew that he was dealing

with an agent of hell, a man who had sold himself to the devil the way someone might sell an animal in the market.

We can only imagine how painful it must have been for our great friend of God to read the abominable contract this man of sin had drawn up with the demon, whom he named in it "Prince Babel." I have no intention of soiling these pages with the contents of this hellish document, much less of quoting it verbatim. It demonstrates, to the shame of human nature, to what depths of perversion a man's passions can lead him. This person not only sought to satisfy the evil desires that are the source of all others, what Saint John calls the concupiscence of the eyes, the concupiscence of the flesh, and the pride of life.<sup>309</sup> He reached the ultimate point of evil by imposing a monstrously hypocritical condition. While demanding from the devil enormous sums of money, honors, and dignities of every degree of eminence, together with pleasures in abundance, he stipulated that he would gain for him a reputation of being a saintly person, an eloquent preacher, and a famed poet and orator. All in all, this man was possessed by insatiable cupidity, diabolical pride, and unlimited desire for sensual pleasures. He counted on the father of lies<sup>310</sup> to secure for him Mohammed's paradise on earth for a span of sixty-five years.

He was certainly asking much more than the devil could give. The ingenuity with which he worked on the terms of his contract, specifying every minutest detail to guard against the wiles of the seducer, only fooled himself. The Almighty alone, who rules the world and to whom all things are subject, can accomplish the things he was asking of the spirit of darkness, but this is the sort of spiritual blindness to which the tyranny of the passions leads. This foolish man filled several pages with his infernal terms of contract, concluding with the despicable surrender of himself, all written and signed in his own blood. The bargain stopped there because it was not possible for the devil, even if he had wanted, to keep his part of the contract and fulfill its conditions.

There are good grounds for believing that having thus sold himself to the demon at so high a price, he remained what he had always been: poor, miserable, despicable, and wretched; that having gained nothing of what he had wanted but only the guilt of his crime, he now gave serious thought to revoking his sacrilegious self-donation and wiping out with his tears a contract written in his blood at the cost of his eternal salvation. Doubtless, John Baptist brought many tears and prayers, and much blood, to bear on gaining grace for such a miscreant. But he succeeded, and that is all we have been able to

309. 1 John 2:16.

310. John 8:44.

find out about it. By some strange chance, the detestable document that he took from the one who had written it was found among his papers after his death.

The saintly priest's reputation for being able to win back to Jesus Christ souls thus abandoned to the devil caused him to be consulted by others concerned with similar cases. One parish priest used to go to De La Salle for Confession and had consulted him on such matters. In a testimonial he wrote after the latter's death, he says this:

The saintly Father de La Salle was once of great help to me in dealing with some troubled souls of whose cure I had personally despaired. When I explained the cases to him, he told me that all the signs of diabolical influence were present, and he indicated to me the rules I should follow. Some of the persons concerned, whose obsession was no more than a trial, were soon restored by prayer, acts of humiliation, and, above all, by frequent Communion. The life of these was relatively innocent. But there was one person whose life was gravely sinful and who put up a prolonged resistance to all attempts to heal her. Father de La Salle advised me to make this person receive Communion like the others. It was a serious sickness of the soul, he said, and the most powerful remedies must be applied. The person concerned indeed had plenty of goodwill and was exteriorly well behaved.

Father de La Salle told me that one of two things would happen: the obsessed person would either benefit quickly by her Communions and would be seen to do so, or else she would become worse than she was. The latter, in fact, was what happened, as I soon realized. He then told me to forbid her to communicate, but this I had already done. He said that the only thing now was to enjoin penance and practices of humiliation on her, together with prayers. He also advised me to recommend frequent Confession to her, but warned me that she would often tell lies in the process, accusing herself falsely of many things and hiding her real sins.

For more than four years, I failed to discern when she was deceiving me, but when I finally discovered that she was inventing the sins she was confessing, I doubled the humiliating penances I was giving her. She continued boldly to tell me lies, but yet she obeyed me in everything I prescribed, making no difficulty about practicing the most extreme humiliations capable of making her ridiculous in everyone's eyes. It was by this means that she gained the grace of recognizing her deceitfulness. She thereupon confessed a great number of her deceptions and went

on to accuse herself of sins she had concealed in all her confessions since childhood.

Following Father de La Salle's advice, I then told her to make a concise general Confession and then to receive Communion. Never have I seen a more distinct example of the effects of Holy Communion in one to whom I had forbidden it for seven whole years. So long a period may seem surprising, but it was necessary. Everyone knows that Father de La Salle, more than anyone, favored the frequent use of this sacrament, but always as long as no serious obstacle stood in the way. In the case I have described, the person concerned has since made very good progress and is now almost completely free of her troubles, apart from a few unfortunate aftereffects that Father de La Salle told me would be with her until she died.

I have often said that I was indebted to his advice and prayers for the conversion and deliverance of this soul, and there were others who were not so problematical but who would have exhausted my resources if I had not been helped by his wise counsel. The person in my story was once kneeling before me in Confession, rambling on in her crazy way, when Father de La Salle happened to enter the church. I immediately asked him to take my place, and as soon as he did so, all the woman's anxieties ceased. She remained there for an hour and a half in a state of extraordinary calm, maintaining complete silence for an hour while he said nothing to her at all but just prayed.

Such is the testimony left by a virtuous parish priest about De La Salle's skill, or rather, the grace he had received from God for this kind of spiritual healing. The person in his account was one of those monstrous creatures of iniquity who seem to have been born only to bring shame on human nature and to exemplify the uttermost depravity of the heart. She had had dealings with the devil, who had appeared to her in human form and had marked her bodily with his sign. His relationship with her was established in a kind of marriage contract, drawn up in terms that literally exemplify these words of Jesus Christ: "*Unus ex vobis diabolus est*—One of you is a devil"<sup>311</sup> and has the mind and heart of a devil.

I know that we are living in times when skepticism is in vogue and people think it sensible to treat certain well-attested facts as so many fables and children's tales, but I would merely say that I am willing to maintain that the story just related belongs to the category of those, according to Saint Augustine, that only the arrogant will

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311. John 6:71 (Vulgate).



deny.<sup>312</sup> There are parallel cases in the life of Saint Bernard<sup>313</sup> and of Saint Peter of Alcantara,<sup>314</sup> and we can find one also in the biography of Msgr. Jean Darenthon d'Alex, bishop of Geneva, although the circumstances are different.<sup>315</sup>

I close this chapter by quoting an extract from a letter that De La Salle wrote to a religious Sister, who was as blameworthy in her life as her calling required her to be holy. By all appearances she owed her conversion to him.

Always remember that all you have to do is try to save your soul, since you are in this world only for that purpose. Remember, too, that the Savior, who knew all your weaknesses beforehand, died only to win for you the graces and the means to help you work effectively at your salvation. You must, then,

1) overcome this wretched human respect, for a sinner like you should no longer be concerned about her good name and reputation. They have been lost in the sight of God and of the saints, so she ought to have no other desire than to be known for what she is—that is, an object of disgust to heaven and earth.

2) It is most important that you learn to know yourself better than you do, because, I tell you honestly, you have not the slightest understanding of the sinfulness of your life. As long as you persist in this blindness, you will be living a lie and therefore alienated from God, who is truth.

3) I pray that God will make you humble, chaste, and penitent. You have equal need of all three. With tears and moans, ask him for these virtues every day. Above all, distrust yourself and put all

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312. No reference, but Blain seems to have in mind *De quantitate animae*, chap. 15: “*Et affert argumenta, nisi fallor, certissima, quibus quod fuerit inventum atque confectum, impudentem habeat dubitationem.*”

313. Blain's marginal reference is “Vie de S. Bern. 1.2 aut. Ernard c. 6.” The story of the “*Femina ab incubo daemone mirabiliter liberata*” is found in chapter 6 of the second of the four early versions of *The Life of Saint Bernard*, that by Ernardus (PL, vol. 185, cols. 287–88).

314. The marginal reference, “Vie de Saint Pierre d'Alc. L. 1, c. 22,” points to the biography by an Italian Oratorian, P. Marchese, of which a French translation had been published at Lyon in 1670, the year after Saint Peter's canonization. Book 1, chap. 22, records the “*Histoire épouvantable d'une femme séduite par le Démon et délivrée et convertie par le Saint*” (78–82).

315. Jean d'Arenthon d'Alex was the ninety-seventh bishop of Geneva, successor in 1661 to Charles-Auguste de Sales, nephew of the most famous of all incumbents of the see. Blain's brief reference, “L. 2, c. 9,” indicates the *Life* by Dom Innocent Le Masson, where the story of the possessed girl is related on pages 170–72.

your hope in him who can lift the poor man from squalor and, as the Prophet says, seat him with the princes of his kingdom.

4) Although you have little natural liking for virtue, yet God wishes to imbue you with it through the power of his love.

5) You will not find it very difficult to give yourself to God if you have a little generosity. I hope he will give it to you. Take courage, my dear Sister; just begin to want suffering, and all will be smooth and easy for you.

6) Realize that your vocation comes from God, and it would therefore be acting against his will to grow weary of it. Bless him daily for having called you to share in the various aspects of his passion, and be really ashamed that through your infidelity you have not done so.

7) Is it not an honor, a very great honor, for you to give yourself entirely to God? This, I think, is the one thought that should occupy your mind.

8) If you seek God and not consolation, you will find peace of mind.

9) Sometimes it seems that our Lord is asleep, but then he awakens and sets us on our way. We must not go faster or at a different pace from what he wants of us, and we must rest when he wishes it.

10) My dear Sister, do you have to experience consolations to remain in God's service? Are you not prepared to be his simply out of love for him? Throw yourself into his arms; he is your Father, and he will carry you when the road is rough, that is, in time of temptation.

11) It is not from men that you must expect your salvation when you ask for their help; it comes from God alone. Perhaps it is because of the lack of this spirit of faith that God does not give you the help you need.

12) In short, I pray that God will open your eyes more and more so that you will realize on the one hand the depth of the abyss from which you have been saved and, on the other, the infinite love that has lifted you from it. May this twofold realization lead you to repay him with a love and fidelity that are in proportion to your sinfulness and his mercy. Amen.<sup>316</sup>

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316. *Letters*, 110.1–13, which omits the paragraph numbers in Blain.

## [CHAPTER 26]

*His zeal for the education and Christian formation  
of neglected youth; selflessness and generosity  
as distinguishing marks of his zeal; his constancy despite  
much opposition; his zeal exercised according to sound  
pedagogical principles; his perseverance even when success  
seemed unattainable; his desire to make his disciples  
men fired with zeal*

Zeal is the product and the sign of an ardent charity, and as such it is as boundless as love itself. It seeks, like the charity from which it springs, to love God without limit and even to an infinite degree, if such were possible. Zeal longs to procure infinite glory for God and to win all hearts for him. We must recognize, however, that zeal is drawn into various directions and that the Spirit of God moves it toward objectives in keeping with the vocation he has inspired. This movement of the Spirit made the object of Saint Paul's zeal the conversion of the Gentiles because it was for this he had been called.<sup>317</sup> Likewise, the conversion of the Jews was the work that chiefly occupied Saint Peter, work for which he had been given a special grace.<sup>318</sup>

In recent times apostolic men have devoted themselves in ways that accorded with the divine inspiration and with the particular calling given them. Some have combated heresy and unbelief; others have sought to restore ecclesiastical discipline and renew the pristine glory of the clerical state. Some have recalled the people to a holy and frequent use of the sacraments, to a spirit of prayer and Christian fervor. Others have worked for the restoration of practices of devotion, adapting them to various ages and states of life. For some their vocation summoned them to the reform of the clergy and the sound training for the priesthood in the seminaries. Others were moved by compassion for the people in country areas, whose lack of education and of the means necessary for salvation is so great a misfortune; they made missions and retreats the great object of their zeal. Yet others deplored the sad condition of the children of light who were buried in the darkness of ignorance concerning the science of salvation; they were seized with zeal for inculcating Christian doctrine, and they made it their principal task to teach it even to those who, to the shame of the title they bore, did not know so much as the first elements.

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317. Gal. 2:7.

318. Gal. 2:9.

Because the work of the catechist, although truly meritorious in the sight of God, is without glamour and little esteemed by men, it was not long before it was linked with, or rather reduced to, mere formal preaching. What should have been simple and homely instructions became pompous sermons that failed to produce any fruit corresponding to the effort put into them. Moreover, even those whose vocation it was to teach Christian doctrine by way of simple and intimate lessons on the truths of salvation and who devoted themselves accordingly failed to reach the source of the trouble. They did not concern themselves with the Christian education of poor and neglected children. We could say that this particular corner of the heavenly Father's harvest had been left to lie fallow.

For this reason, praise is due to the saintly Minim, Father Barré, who was the first to be inspired by the Spirit of God to found Gratuitous Christian schools and who succeeded in doing this for girls.<sup>319</sup> Praise, of course, is due to John Baptist de La Salle, whose success in the same enterprise for boys was of a quite different order. Both these men put their hands to an undertaking of the greatest necessity and advantage to the state and to the church. Because their zeal was brought to bear on the instruction and Christian education of the most neglected young people, they healed the church's most shameful and deadly wound. I have already described and need not go over this ground again. The instruction and Christian education of the most delinquent and neglected children was the great object of the zeal of the former canon of Reims. The story of his life, from the first chapter to the last, has demonstrated this.

Here I must draw attention to the glorious qualities of the zeal of the saintly priest, John Baptist, and also speak about the workers whom Divine Providence destined for the cultivation of the part of the Lord's vineyard that had been so long neglected. De La Salle's zeal was pure, disinterested, generous, and proof against all natural repugnance; it was constant amid all the difficulties of the work and all the obstacles the world put before it; it was enlightened and pedagogically sound; it was sustained to the bitter end, almost against any hope of success. An institute of teachers to conduct Gratuitous Christian Schools<sup>320</sup> was certainly a highly desirable thing, but like all other

319. The role of Nicolas Barré as educational pioneer is given due attention by Blain in the lengthy "*Discours*" on the origin of the Gratuitous Christian Schools that he places at the beginning of his biography of De La Salle (CL 7, 1–115), but Rigault (82–106) gives a more informative assessment of the Minim's contribution; Poutet provides still greater detail, especially in vol. 1, 504–34. *Rivista Lasalliana* published in its issue of March 1936 (40–54) an exhaustive bibliography by Fratel Dante of the information available at that time on Père Barré.

undertakings of great importance for the good of religion, it offered anyone with the zeal to attempt it only what Jesus Christ had promised to his disciples: crosses and contempt.<sup>321</sup>

Success in an enterprise of this kind was not just a matter of having an overall control of teachers intended for the Gratuitous Schools. Merely being a superior with authority to govern such a society could have been combined with a canonry and would have done honor to this title. Neither reputation nor personal comfort and convenience would have been involved, nothing but financial resources. If De La Salle had kept his role within these limits, he would not have ceased to be what he had been, and the world would have praised his zeal for Christian doctrine instead of judging it an aberration, as it did when it saw him making himself one with the teachers, living like them, and reducing himself to penury to be the same as they were in everything.

Zeal that goes so far as to sacrifice rank and possessions, a good reputation, and the other pleasant things in life, such zeal has to be pure indeed, not to be matched except by that of Jesus Christ and his Apostles and by anyone else prepared to imitate them. This was the kind of zeal of the Founder of the Brothers. By linking his life with theirs and devoting himself to them, showing what it meant to live a life that was poor, humble, despised, and mortifyingly austere, he demonstrated that he was establishing his institute solely on trust in Providence. It was to teach them this same trust that he accepted the generous renunciations that Jesus Christ requires of those who would be perfect. John Baptist carried out to the letter the injunction, "Sell what you have, and give the proceeds to the poor."<sup>322</sup> The cross became his only patrimony.

Nothing like public acclaim, brilliant success, or any other kind of human compensation nurtured his zeal. It was never favored by the kinds of situations that encourage self-confidence. Yet it grew more intense in proportion to the opposition, criticism, and condemnation that he experienced; all "the waters of tribulation"<sup>323</sup> failed to quench

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320. In book 2, chap. 3, Blain says that "*Frères des Écoles chrétiennes et gratuites*" became the official name of the disciples of De La Salle and that from this point on in his biography, he will use no other term to describe them. He does, in fact, vary between this term and simply "*Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*," but as Gallego points out (177), there is no evidence anywhere to suggest that the addition of the words "*et gratuites*" had its origin with the Founder. The 1705 manuscript of the Rules begins: "The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a Society" (CL 25, 16).

321. Matt. 10:17, 22; John 15:18ff.

322. Matt. 19:21.

323. Ps. 68:2 (Douai).

or even subdue its ardor. Anyone else would have thought he was doing much for God had he confined his zeal to the demanding tasks of preaching or hearing confessions, certainly if in addition he had undertaken the labor of giving missions and retreats or of assuming the spiritual direction of communities and devout individuals. All these great means of exercising zeal can bring prestige, pleasant compensations, and reasons for self-congratulation. Successful public missions and retreats win acclaim. The spiritual direction of communities or devout persons can be a thorny business, but there are always flowers to cover the thorns. Honor is reflected on a spiritual director if the persons he directs have a high social rank or are noted for their virtuous life; it is, in fact, rare to find a spiritual director who is not perfectly content to carry the burden of his task, for it is one that many other priests would like to undertake.

But De La Salle, his virtue being above the ordinary run and correspondingly enlightened, sought other ways of exercising his zeal. He was more drawn to the conversion of great sinners than to the direction of devout souls, who usually take up a good deal of time without showing much return for it. As for the training within a hidden community life of teachers of catechism and other subjects to poor and neglected children, this labor promised much for the glory of God but nothing at all for self-esteem. This is why De La Salle was drawn to it. His zeal was generous enough to combat and repress the strongest feelings of natural repugnance; it surmounted in him attitudes long fostered by the education he had received, not to mention things like the disgust for cheap and coarse food that was part of his physical makeup. Such matters placed obstacles in the way of God's designs for John Baptist de La Salle. It was certainly not by attraction or natural inclination that he was brought to undertake what he did. Everything in him ran counter to the kind of work it involved. The very thought of having to rub shoulders with men whom he rated below his manservant alarmed him.<sup>324</sup> He was certainly a devout person, but his heart was still that of a well-bred man of the world for whom polite manners and etiquette counted for something, a man who enjoyed agreeable conversation and for whom, therefore, the society of the teachers he had taken in charge was a kind of torture. The influence of our education and the interests of our family normally govern our reasons for doing things and make us act accordingly. But all these factors went clearly contrary to what the zeal of our servant of

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324. An allusion to a phrase in the "Memorandum on the Beginnings" (quoted by Blain in book 1, chap. 9): "Naturally speaking, I considered the men whom I was obliged to employ in the schools at the beginning as being inferior to my valet."

God urged him to do. To bury himself with a group of nobodies, exchanging security for the opposite, quitting a well-established and honorable position in one of the most illustrious cities of the kingdom for an undertaking that was still far from being a concrete reality and that sensible people looked upon as a flight of fancy—this was what he set himself to do. It meant putting his fellow canons, his friends, and his relatives against him and making a general break with the world he knew. It meant condemning himself to a way of life in which the body and the senses would undergo crucifixion. Before taking such a step, he had to silence completely the voice of nature and that of human prudence; he had to set aside everything his education had taught him, together with the interests of his family and the opinions of other people.

Such a decision called for heroic courage and a generosity equal to all demands, and it was zeal that supplied all this to our canon of Reims. He presented the spectacle of a man who in the midst of life surrendered himself daily to a kind of death, one accompanied by the most cruel agony and the experience of a new way of life that afflicted every one of his senses. He condemned himself to a real martyrdom in deciding to throw in his lot with the first band of teachers who came under his protection and in adding to so poor, humble, and crucifying way of life all those other mortifications favored by the saints. This martyrdom extended even to the very actions that human nature depends on for rest and consolation. Going to the table was for him like going to a place of torture because the sickening nausea he felt for the food that was put before him and to which he was so unused was a real torment.<sup>325</sup> Recreation was another source of mortification to him because he had to make it with uneducated people whose manners, speech, and conversation were all at odds with his refined nature. His natural antipathy for all this could only have been overcome by a zeal as strong as death<sup>326</sup> and by a charity able to absorb every blow.

Such zeal was not the kind that like burning straw at first throws out a vivid light and warmth and then immediately dies away. It remained constant in the face of all difficulties and all the opposition of the world. Never was an undertaking more fraught with problems than De La Salle's. In his case the founding of an institute was not at all a matter of doing what Saint Bruno did, going off to an isolated place with seven companions who were moved by the same spirit, completely disillusioned and disgusted with the world, and all equally determined to devote themselves to a life of penance. Nor was he

325. See above, chap. 15, note 59.

326. Song of Sol. 8:6.

like Saint Bernard, arriving at Citeaux with thirty young men who felt a heavenly calling and a burning desire to seek perfection. He was not a Saint Dominic or a Saint Francis, who were soon to find followers like themselves, saints already or determined to become so.<sup>327</sup> John Baptist was a man who found himself alone, without support or help, without collaborators, needing often to put in their place indiscreet disciples whose imprudent actions were blamed on him and who were enough to turn his protectors against him.<sup>328</sup> He was a man who had to defend himself alike against irreconcilable rivals, powerful enemies, and false friends, against sowers of discord and misguided, zealous meddlers, who wanted to change everything in the rules and in his way of governing. He was one who after enduring countless sufferings from persecutions and other sources, had no sooner got his Society on the footing he desired than an enemy found a way into the fold, forced the shepherd to flee, and took over the flock.<sup>329</sup>

We need only reflect a little, in fact, on all that has been related in the life of this former canon of Reims to realize that any zeal less constant than his would soon have succumbed under the difficulties that beset him as he struggled to establish what he had undertaken, an enterprise that God seemed to want to hover between strength and weakness, prosperity and ruin, for a period of some forty years. Whatever aspect we look at—recruitment, formation, running the schools, poverty, worldly influences, enemies, and pretended friends—the work presented problems that would have been insurmountable to a less indomitable zeal.

But let us hear John Baptist himself on the subject. The occasion was a visit of M. Gense of Calais and M. de La Cochérie of Boulogne to Rouen to see the servant of God.<sup>330</sup> These gentlemen questioned

327. A significant passage for the biographer's estimate of his hero; he is here implicitly placing De La Salle with four of the most illustrious founders in the history of the church—and to his advantage.

328. Notably the novice master Michel (Lequeasse) and the Director of the rue Princesse community, Ponce (Thiseux), whose imprudent actions and their consequences Blain records in book 2, chaps. 18–19.

329. John 10:1ff. Blain is referring to De La Salle's flight (the biographer's term) to the South of France and its consequences, described in book 3, chaps. 10–12.

330. Blain describes the visit in book 2, chap. 16, in the context of a lengthy eulogy of Louis Gense, who has already made an appearance in the present work as the recipient of a letter from De La Salle (see chap. 6, note 73). The principal reference to Jacques Abot de La Cochérie occurs in book 3, chap. 8, in connection with the Boulogne foundation. Blain gives no indication of the date of the two devout laymen's visit to De La Salle at Saint Yon, but subsequent biographers and commentators have exercised themselves



him closely on everything concerning this new Society in which their charity had made them become deeply interested. Finally, they asked him how he had found it possible to undertake such a work, so useful, no doubt, to the church but one that bristled with problems and difficulties. “I will tell you this, gentlemen,” he replied in his usual frank and straightforward way:

If God had told me what sufferings and crosses were to accompany the establishing of this Institute at the same time as he was showing me the good it would do, my courage would have failed me. I would not have dared to touch it with the tip of my fingers, let alone accept responsibility for it. It was an uphill struggle all the way. Several bishops opposed me, including some I had counted on for help. The spiritual sons I had begotten in Jesus Christ and cherished with tender affection, whom I had trained with the utmost care, hoping for great services from them, even these turned against me and added much harder trials than those coming from outside the Community.

In a word, if God had not visibly put forth his hand to sustain the undertaking, it would long ago have been buried under its own ruins. Civil magistrates sided with our enemies and lent authority to their efforts to destroy us. The work we were doing upset the teachers in tuition schools, who therefore declared themselves, one by one, our irreconcilable foes. By concerted action they put weapons in the hands of the world to destroy us. But despite all their efforts, the edifice stood firm, however often it seemed at the brink of destruction, which gives me hope that it will survive, that it will finally triumph over persecution and render the services the church rightly expects of it.<sup>331</sup>

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over the question because of the significance of the Founder's words reported by Blain in the present context. There is diversity of opinion about the month but consensus that the year was 1716—the year between the Founder's definitive retirement to Saint Yon (November 1715) and his replacement as Superior by Brother Barthélemy (May 1717).

331. Hermans' comments about this quoted extract from the Founder's conversation that the opening words have the ring of authenticity but that the list of difficulties that follows owes more to Blain than to De La Salle, at least from the way it is worded. No doubt (adds Hermans) the substance corresponds to what was spoken in confidence to the two visitors, but nowhere in the Founder's writings is there anything resembling the comments that Blain attributes to him here about the schoolmasters, the magistrates, or the Brothers (CL 10, 170–71).

There are other qualities of the servant of God's zeal to be considered: it was soundly based on a knowledge of what was needed, and it was guided by a supernatural wisdom. He was inspired to do all that was most effective for the spread of Christian doctrine and the knowledge that leads to salvation. If we examine his procedures, we have to acknowledge that his ideas and insights could not have been more apt and effective for the sure and unerring diffusion of the knowledge of God's law and of Christian doctrine among the uninstructed. To achieve this result, he set himself two aims: first, to combine religious education with profane instruction in a school setting; second, to attract many pupils and make the schools flourish.

These two objectives were the fixed points to which he constantly looked and that governed every step he took; we need only reflect a little to realize that he never swerved from this double aim. Ignorance of Christian doctrine among the lower classes and country folk is due either to the lack of persons willing and able to instruct them or to the neglect of the people to attend whatever instruction there is. To remove any excuse for this, it was necessary to provide capable teachers to establish Gratuitous Schools and to attract pupils by making it worth their while to attend. Such conditions did not exist until John Baptist de La Salle provided them.<sup>332</sup> He founded a company of men trained to run good schools, men dedicated by their state in life and their vocation to fulfill this ministry of charity. He established Gratuitous Schools and threw them open to those whom poverty excluded from the establishments run for profit. He discovered the secret of attracting great numbers and of filling his schools with pupils, thus making them prosper.<sup>333</sup>

The means he applied to bring about this result were of three kinds; they related, respectively, to his school system in general, to the pupils, and to the teachers. Concerning the system, he established the schools on charity alone and introduced into them a sustained atmosphere of silence, together with a careful discipline suited to checking the frivolous nature of children and winning their attention. He established a method of learning unique in its brevity and facility. A further step was to introduce inspection visits to forestall any breakdown in the system.<sup>334</sup> In his zeal he frequently made these visits himself,

332. Sauvage and Campos quote this and the preceding paragraph with approval at the beginning of their discussion of the Lasallian school apostolate (250–51; English translation, 48).

333. Sauvage quotes these last three sentences on page 485 of *Catéchèse et Laïcat*, commending them as an apt summary of De La Salle's achievement.

334. A chapter on "The Inspector of Schools" appears in the 1705 manuscript of the Rule (CL 25, 48); it consists of only two articles, but the whole of part 3 of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* (some forty pages) is devoted

examining the work and seeing for himself what was being done. On such visits he gave his attention equally to pupils and teachers. He observed how the latter went about their job, noting whether they kept strictly to the rules laid down for maintaining good order, silence, and a recollected atmosphere.<sup>335</sup> He watched that they did not tire themselves out in work that is best done with a calm spirit, evenness of temper, quiet dignity, gentle firmness, and vigilant zeal, without fretfulness and excitability, without moving about or talking except when absolutely necessary. From thus observing the teacher, he turned his attention to the pupils, studying their character, noting their progress, encouraging some by kindly looks, subduing others by assuming a severe expression, keeping all to their duty for hours just by his silent presence. The effect of these visits was to renew the zest both of teachers and of pupils, to spur both to do well, to provide the opportunity for them to learn what needed to be put right, and to leave them all buoyed up by his patience, gentleness, and kindness.

With regard to the children, John Baptist wanted no sharp distinction to be made between book learning and character training or between the sacred and profane elements of their education. His ideal was that both would be achieved under teachers who were at once devout and professionally competent. It is true that his principal aim was that the pupils should know their Christian doctrine, but it would have defeated his purpose if the teaching had been limited to this alone. Parents, being people of flesh and blood and earthly minded, needed a motive of self-interest to send their children to school. The opportunity for training pupils in the knowledge that leads to salvation was to be found in teaching them also, free of charge, the things they wanted to learn. The necessity, excellence, and advantages of Christian doctrine make little appeal in themselves to youngsters or to the duties of this important facilitator and overseer of the Lasallian system of pedagogy (CL 24, 249–90).

335. Rules laid down not only in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* (CL 24) but also in the Rule (CL 25, 34 and 42–43). One of the most influential nineteenth-century French writers on education, Gabriel Compayré, disapproved in sharp terms of the importance De La Salle attached to silence in the pedagogical process: “What is the meaning of this distrust of speech?” he wrote, “and what are we to make of these schools of mutes where teachers and pupils proceed only by signs . . . a complete system of pedagogy which is afraid of life and liberty and which, under the pretext of making the school quiet, deadens it and, in the end, reduces teachers and pupils to mere machines?” (quoted by E. A. Fitzpatrick in *La Salle, Patron of All Teachers*, Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1951, 18–19). Compayré’s philosophy of education was purely secular, and such judgments as the one quoted serve to enhance the value of his not infrequent tributes to the innovatory insights of De La Salle. Fitzpatrick’s discussion is on pages 15–20 of his work.

their parents. To enhance their appreciation of this subject, it had to be packaged with the attractions of learning reading, writing, and arithmetic.

It is true that teachers have always existed, but it is also true that they have always worked for pay and that poor people, who could not afford their services, found their classes closed to them. Moreover, the lack of good order and silence and of a good method of teaching made the lessons given by these teachers of little use. To make any headway in their classes, a pupil had to remain a long time, which proved expensive. The Gratuitous Schools, animated by pure charity, have advantages over those that charge fees. They are better organized, have a more attentive discipline, and in general are better run. From the Brothers the children gain something that they do not get from teachers who are paid, namely, Christian training combined with their other studies. Certainly they spend time learning to read, write, and do arithmetic, but if they wish to learn these things, they must also advance in the knowledge of their religion. The two kinds of instruction are never separated in the Charity Schools.<sup>336</sup>

De La Salle took means to ensure that the teachers conducting his schools would be well trained and have all the qualities desirable for such an important task. He paid special attention to four points. First, he sought to make them constant in their way of life, proof against natural instability; second, he weaned them from any idea of personal gain; third, he kept them clear of anything that might disturb their regular routine; fourth, he kept in check any ambitious feelings they might have for a more prestigious kind of employment and forestalled any disaffection for their humble and laborious ministry.

To make them strong in their vocation and guard them against shallow-mindedness, natural inconstancy, and temptations to leave, he first of all deemed it necessary to have them take vows, thereby becoming like religious. Because the taking of vows is a delicate matter, he proposed it to them only after due deliberation and permitted it only to those whom he saw to be of mature disposition and solid virtue. To avoid any risk in this matter, for it is not without great danger, he limited the period of the vows to three years and allowed renewal of them only to those who were notably fervent.<sup>337</sup> His wish was that they would eventually pronounce the three solemn vows of

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336. Another term sometimes used by Blain when referring specifically to the Lasallian establishments (see above, note 320). This paragraph is also commended by Sauvage (492) as capturing the essence of De La Salle's thought on the particular question of uniting the sacred and the profane in the educational process. For Sauvage's seminal discussion of this aspect of Lasallian pedagogy, see pages 668–707.

religion, but this was a matter that would require the permission of the Holy See following the approbation of the Institute and its Rule. His zeal was enlightened enough for him not to rush this, and so he left the question of religious vows to Providence. It has, in fact, been resolved since his death, and in the way he had desired. Even so, it is in keeping with the saintly man's views that not all the Brothers are allowed to make the vows of religion, only those who give evidence of a solid vocation, of suitable talents, and of a determined will to give themselves to God without reserve. Furthermore, none are admitted to vows right after the novitiate but only after a probation of several years. Those who take no vows at all are at liberty to leave the Institute, and those who take simple vows for only three years can leave at the end of this period. In both cases the superiors are free to send away any who are not suited for the life or are discontented in it. In this way the good grain is separated from the chaff.<sup>338</sup>

To wean his teachers from any idea of personal gain, the Founder required them never to desire, request, or accept anything from the children or their parents, either for themselves or for the community; they were to give their services charitably and gratuitously without expectation of any human reward.<sup>339</sup>

337. Blain's account of the circumstances of the first vows in the life of the new Society is in book 2, chap. 2. His version differs from those of Bernard and Maillefer. In CL 2 Hermans has a detailed comparative study of the four texts and offers a solution to the problems raised by the variants. He prefers the year 1686 (given by Maillefer in both his biographies) to Bernard's 1687 and Blain's 1684. Both Bernard and Maillefer say that the vow pronounced on this occasion was one of obedience for one year, renewable on each successive Feast of the Blessed Trinity. Blain's version is that the vow was taken for three years but was likewise renewable every year subsequently (this renewal entailing, therefore, the addition of a year to the two remaining from each triennial cycle). Hermans thinks that the balance of probability is with Blain here. All three biographers state that the Brothers present at this first assembly urged the Founder to allow them to make perpetual vows. John Baptist dissuaded them from this, but by agreeing to a three-year vow renewable annually, he was to some extent meeting their wish to bind themselves perpetually. On the other hand, his own preference for caution would be respected because any Brother who so desired could release himself from the bond simply by absenting himself from the renewal on two successive occasions. Hermans notes that no Institute document relating to the period concerned makes any mention of "annual vows" but only of "perpetual vows" and "vows taken for three years." Blain's repetition of "three years" in the present context suggests that he felt confident he had it right (CL 2, 30–36).

338. Hermans (CL 2, 74–76) critically examines this paragraph.

339. The earliest texts of the Rule prescribed that the Brothers were not to accept from the pupils or from the pupils' parents either money or any gift, however small, on any day or occasion whatever (CL 25, 36).

To ensure that the Brothers maintained regular observance in school as well as in community, the Founder prescribed rules concerning silence, modesty, and their behavior toward their pupils. These rules were intended to guard them against distractions, wasting time, useless talk, overfamiliarity, and all the other faults that weaken the interior life. Apart from this, he instituted the visitation of the schools to help maintain good order or to restore it if necessary. He appointed inspectors to watch that nothing went amiss on the part either of the teachers or of the pupils.<sup>340</sup> He also introduced the custom of rendering a monthly account of conduct to the Superior as an opportunity for the Brothers humbly to admit their faults and seek the remedy.<sup>341</sup> In brief, everything was provided for in the rules John Baptist gave the Brothers concerning the way they were to behave in school with regard to their pupils, themselves, and people from outside; the days and times were indicated when they were to teach school, even the manner in which they were to correct their pupils.<sup>342</sup> The Brothers thus have the advantage now of being able to sanctify by the practice of virtue every moment of what seems to be a distracting employment. In addition the vigilant Superior used to call all the Brothers back to the novitiate on their free days so that they could take part in the spiritual exercises there. Those who were too far

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340. The Institute tradition is that the post of Inspector (together with such other administrative responsibilities as Bursar, Secretary, and Infirmarian) was created at the time of the move to the Grand'Maison in 1698. Guibert (291), followed by Rigault (214), names as the first Inspector Jean Jacquot, one of the twelve who had pronounced perpetual vows with the Founder four years before. Jacquot would have been twenty-six years old at the time of his appointment, having been born in 1672 (CL 3, 32). In 1717 he became one of the first two Brothers in the history of the Institute to be elected Assistant to the Superior General (see above, "A Word of Explanation," 24, note 2).

341. The 1705 manuscript Rule has a chapter on letters, the opening sentence of which says simply: "All the Brothers will write at the beginning of each month to the Brother Superior of the Institute" (CL 25, 90). The 1711 *Collection* includes a "Directory according to which each Brother is to give an account of himself to the Brother Superior;" six of the thirty-one articles relate to school duties (CL 15, 128–30).

342. In this sentence Blain summarizes the contents of four chapters of the Rule as they appear in the 1718 manuscript and also in the 1726 printed version (the text used by the biographer): chapter 7, "How the Brothers ought to conduct themselves in school with regard to their pupils"; chapter 8, "How the Brothers ought to conduct themselves when correcting their pupils"; chapter 9, "How the Brothers ought to conduct themselves in school with regard to themselves, their Brothers, and outsiders"; Chapter 10, "The days and times when the Brothers will teach school and the days on which they will give a holiday to their pupils" (CL 25, 34–45).

away he assembled at the novitiate during the vacation for a renewal session.<sup>343</sup> He liked the Brothers to be always well disposed to go back to the novitiate, whether it was because obedience called them or because they personally felt the need to do so.<sup>344</sup> Wise direction of this kind was aimed at making the Brothers regard themselves as novices all their lives, never losing their novitiate spirit of fervor and faithful observance of the Rule.

De La Salle's way of forestalling any thoughts on the part of his disciples in the direction of a more dignified kind of employment and ministry was to forbid them any of the studies that prepare the way for being able to say Mass, hear confessions, and preach the word of God. He even forbade those who had any knowledge of classical studies<sup>345</sup> to make any use of it.<sup>346</sup> Service within the sanctuary was without exception excluded by formal and invariable rules. To render the Brothers immune to temptation in this matter, he allowed none of them under any pretext whatever to receive the tonsure or even to wear the surplice or sing with the clergy in church.<sup>347</sup> Hence, those people who express fears that the Brothers will one day change their status, wanting to upgrade themselves and aspire to the functions of the priesthood, only show that they are not well informed on the matter: they have a better chance of seeing Jesuits become Carthusians, or Carthusians become Jesuits, than they have of seeing the Brothers become priests!<sup>348</sup>

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343. A custom dating from the establishment of the first formal novitiate at Vaugirard, as Blain describes in book 2, chap. 11.

344. But the custom was not to the liking of all the Brothers, as Blain relates in book 3, chap. 10.

345. Blain's word is *lettres*, reflecting the medieval term *litterae humaniores* for Greek and Latin studies.

346. See above, chap. 25, note 302.

347. In the 1705 text of the Rule, the article appears as number 2 of chapter 1: "They cannot be priests or aspire to the ecclesiastical state, or even sing, wear a surplice, or exercise any function in church." The 1718 revision adds these words at the end: "except to serve low Mass" (CL 25, 16).

348. The lay status of De La Salle's Institute has been the subject of much study in recent decades. Michel Sauvage devotes two chapters of *Catéchèse et Laïcité* (1962) to it (845–81); Sanchez-Moreno Izaguirre's dissertation on the topic for his licentiate in religious studies at the Lateran University is in the first issue of *Lasallianum*, Rome, 1963 (64–133), where, incidentally, he quotes the present amusingly expressed assurance of Blain; the response of the General Chapter of 1966–67 to the 428 notes (for and against) submitted on the possibility of introducing the priesthood into the Institute was published under the title *The Lay Character of the Institute*. The Lasallian Seminar held at Narragansett, Rhode Island, in January 1975 returned to the subject in a series of papers published under the title *Priestly Brothers*.

From what I have said, it is easy to conclude that no one has succeeded better than De La Salle in banishing from a Christian milieu its shameful ignorance of Christian doctrine. No one has employed more sure, succinct, and efficacious means for training neglected children in the science of salvation.

It remains to be said that the saintly Founder's zeal stayed constant to the end, against almost any hope of success. A hundred times he saw his work on the verge of collapse. He saw it often shaken to its depths when several of the more senior and responsible Brothers, those foundation stones on which the structure was built, deserted him, leaving him at times of dire need.<sup>349</sup> What of the performance he witnessed in his own community house, directed against himself and his way of running things, all due to the maneuvering of his secret rival, who had succeeded in turning the archbishop of Paris against him?<sup>350</sup> Often it happened that spying messengers were sent by his influential enemy under the cunning guise of friendship for the community but really to create dissatisfaction with John Baptist's way of doing things and so create division among the Brothers. Frequently, just when there seemed to be real evidence of success, he saw the Institute suddenly reduced to near collapse. To shore it up and stave off the threatened crash, he felt obliged on one occasion to make a vow with two others never to abandon the work and to spare themselves no effort, even until death, to set the Society on a firm footing.<sup>351</sup> The astonishing thing is that of the two men concerned who were thus to be the supporting columns of the enterprise, he was to see only one remain faithful to this vow and to his vocation.<sup>352</sup>

The effort to have De La Salle removed from his position by the authority of the archbishop proved abortive, as did the frequent attempts by secret intrigues to force him to quit his post. But the people behind these moves were not put off, and they finally had their way. Yet they did not exhaust the zeal of a man whose only weapons of defense were silence, humility, and patience. Almost every day he had to struggle against ill-fortune, which it seemed would leave him in peace only when his Institute was brought to the ground. Sometimes it was famine he had to contend with, sometimes the jealousy of

349. See above, chap. 7, note 83.

350. See above, chap. 13, note 31.

351. See above, chap. 12, note 9.

352. Namely, Gabriel Drolin, details of whose personal history are provided by Blain, in book 2, chaps. 10 and 17, and by the twenty known letters written to him by the Founder and the two received from Brother Barthélemy (*Letters*, pages 55–125). A scholarly article was published in *Bulletin*, 1953, 149–285, under the title “*La Vie Héroïque de Gabriel Drolin*.” On Nicolas Vuyart's withdrawal from the Institute, see above, chap. 13, note 33.



people taking legal action against him. Sometimes he had to deal with acts of injustice, such as the diversion of bequests left to him or the disturbance and disruption of the schools. On some occasions it was a case of calumny damaging his own reputation and blackening the good name of his disciples. At other times he was contending with enthusiasts for the new doctrinal ideas who were seeking to ensnare him and lead him astray. At times it was the indiscretion or the opposition and treachery of his own disciples that he had to deal with; at other times, problems raised by supposed patrons—all to sustain an enterprise against which the wicked spirit armed all sorts of foes. Persecution harried him up to his very death, but death found his zeal unconquered. At the final reckoning, the victory was his against all that hell could do because he had remained constant in suffering all things and in sacrificing himself for the work.

Zeal must be the animating force of an undertaking that is purely charitable and that offers those embarking on it nothing throughout their life except grueling toil of a kind that is mean and contemptible, humanly speaking, and that promises nothing to cupidity, vanity, or self-esteem. Hence the saintly Founder overlooked nothing in inculcating this zeal in those whom God called to the work. In the Rule he gave them, he wrote:

The spirit of this Institute consists in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear of God, inducing them to preserve their innocence if they have not lost it and inspiring them with a great aversion and a very great horror for sin and for all that could cause them to lose purity. To enter into this spirit, the Brothers of the Society will strive by prayer, instruction, and their vigilance and good conduct in school to procure the salvation of the children confided to them, bringing them up in piety and in a truly Christian spirit, that is, according to the rules and the maxims of the Gospel.<sup>353</sup>

Where there is living and enlightened faith, it is easy enough for zeal to remain constant in the face of worldly and human prejudice. But when faith is weak and readily succumbs to the impressions of the senses and to earthbound ideas, we can expect that zeal will disappear, especially for a task that the world looks down upon and that offers nothing to vanity and self-importance. Hence De La Salle made

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353. Blain refers to page 17 of the 1726 Rule; the passage differs in two small respects from the Founder's text in 1718. It is slightly misleading of Blain to have omitted the word *Secondement*, which introduces the passage in both texts (the spirit of the Institute being *primarily* the spirit of faith).

a point of instilling in his disciples his own high esteem for their vocation. In this connection the argument he believed most persuasive and effective was to manifest the singular pleasure that he, a former canon of one of the most illustrious churches of France, a priest, and a noted doctor of theology, took in substituting for a Brother in school. He treated it as an honor to take over a class, which was something he did quite often and whenever the need arose.<sup>354</sup>

As well as giving this example, the Founder showed his disciples by reasoned arguments the importance and advantages of their profession. There is nothing to be said on this topic that he has not touched upon in the meditations he wrote about the Brothers' work in school. In them he recalls the example of Jesus Christ and the Apostles, the first catechists of the New Law. He shows the excellence of the task of teaching Christian doctrine by referring both to the praises lavished on it by the most noted doctors of the church and to the zeal shown by the greatest saints in studying it themselves or in explaining it to others, young and old. His meditations prove the importance of this ministry on the premise that a knowledge of religion and of the truths of salvation is an indispensable necessity. They demonstrate its advantages by cataloging the vices and sins that result from a shameful ignorance of the duties of a Christian and also by detailing the good effects produced by offering instruction and a devout upbringing to children who are the Christian people of the future. The Founder encourages the Brothers by the prospect he puts before them of the rewards that heaven has in store for those who acquit themselves with persevering zeal of a task made holy by the Son of God. He points out the divine origin of the teaching that Jesus Christ derived from his Father and that he came on earth to give to others, teaching that they, the Brothers, were now giving after him. He recalls the dread chastisements and maledictions with which the divine justice punishes those who do this work negligently. He suggests devout ways and means of winning the respect, esteem, and trust of the children and of establishing silence and attention in class and ensuring steady progress in piety. He encourages the Brothers to persevere in the love of their employment by showing what graces are attached to it and what consolations follow when self-love and natural inclinations are sacrificed. Finally, he spares no pains to make plain to his disciples the glory and dignity of a vocation that brings the Gospel to the poor and to little ones, for such, he reminds them, are the words with which the Son of God defined his own mission on earth.<sup>355</sup>

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354. Blain records two such occasions, the first at Reims (book 2, chap. 3) and the second at Grenoble (book 3, chap. 11).

355. Luke 7:22.

There, in substance, are the truths that our saintly priest bequeathed to his disciples for them to meditate on.<sup>356</sup> By such meditation they were to keep the flame of their zeal<sup>357</sup> burning and constantly renewed throughout their life for an employment that is divine in nature and of supreme importance to the church. But the success of the Christian Schools depends on the teachers who conduct them. It is a normal dispensation of Providence and typical of the way grace works that a necessary connection exists between the holiness of young Christians and that of the Brothers entrusted with their training and education. Thus it was that his disciples' growth in holiness exercised the zeal of the Founder more than anything else, as we will now see.

[CHAPTER 27]

*His zeal for the sanctification of his Brothers; the means he used for this: first, leading the way by his example; second, establishing a fervent novitiate; third, praying and doing penance; everyone not profiting by all this; a sad example related of one Brother who failed to respond*

It is not at all surprising that a man as zealous as De La Salle for the salvation of souls and the glory of God appeared so little in public and concentrated on communicating his fervor to the Brothers. He was convinced that everything he did for their sanctification was done also for that of poor and neglected children and that the spiritual advancement of a single Brother would ensure the salvation of many souls. He had conducted a mission at the request of the vicars-general in an area of the diocese of Reims that most needed it, and this had shown what a gift he had for this way of exercising his zeal.<sup>358</sup> It had

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356. The preceding paragraph is closely based on De La Salle's *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, published about 1730 at Rouen. Hermans analyzes the paragraph into twelve articles, and he provides a copious list of corresponding passages from the *MTR* (CL 10, 79–80). CL 13 has the facsimile reproduction of the first edition of these sixteen meditations; two English translations have been published: by Battersby (*Meditations*, London: Longmans, 1953) and by Richard Arnandez and Augustine Loes (*Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1994).

357. The word *zèle* appears forty-six times in the sixteen meditations (*Le Vocabulaire des Méditations pour le Temps de la Retraite*, Rome, 1965, 239–41).

358. This is Blain's second mention of this episode (see above, chap. 24, note 278), which seems to have some factual basis even though subsequent research has so far failed to ascertain any details. There is a document in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de plusieurs*

demonstrated the power heaven had given him over the most hardened of sinners, and anyone could have seen from it what a harvest of souls he would have reaped by this laborious ministry if he had devoted himself to it. The purity of his life, his penitential austerity, and his sustained application to prayer would have made him seem like one of the first Apostles wherever he went. His poverty, mortification, and charity would have been a re-enactment of theirs. Like his divine Master, if he had gone from one town or village to another preaching the kingdom of God, a man seen to be humble, poor, and mortified, he would undoubtedly have been widely regarded as a saint on the evidence merely of his actions.

But grace summoned John Baptist elsewhere and destined him for one of those enterprises that have a certain resemblance to gold mines in that those who work in them are hidden from view although gaining rich returns. In works undertaken for God, some are, as it were, the generating force of a great number of others. A single such undertaking is sometimes a fruitful nursery of great promise for the church, which gains from it a thousand and more like it. Consider a fully grown tree loaded with blossom or fruit. Its appearance is a delight to the eyes, but whence does it draw its life, its nourishment, and its beauty except from its roots buried deep and widespread in the bosom of the earth? The roots provide the sap for the tree's trunk and branches. Cut away the roots, and the tree wilts, dries up, and dies; almost in a single moment, it loses all that adorned it, all its riches. But if you take the trouble to keep the roots healthy, the tree will keep its beauty and fruitfulness indefinitely.

All this is symbolic of what the effect is when a Christian School is established in a town. The town is provided with a nursery of good Christians to populate it. Its children are brought up in the fear of God and in the knowledge of the truths of salvation, and in due time they bear the fruit of the good training they have received. Thus the

*personnes illustres pour leur piété et leur vertu*, whose author is an Augustinian priest, Léonard de Sainte-Cathérine, a contemporary of De La Salle, whom he mentions in *Mémoires*. One reference runs: "I have learned that the Superior of the Brothers is a Reims man named M. de La Salle, who has always busied himself giving missions." Sauvage quotes this sentence in *Catéchèse et Laïcat* (477) but adds that it is impossible to establish the worth of the testimony. *Bulletin*, April 1911, in a brief article (139–41) on *Mémoires*, refers to Père Léonard's mention of De La Salle's mission work, but the anonymous author of the article dismisses it as being based on a confusion of names, saying that "without doubt" the reference is to Abbé Jean de La Salle of Bonfleur, who conducted parish missions with Abbé de La Pinsonnière around 1669—but we are given no further information about these two. Blain's insistence seems to leave the question open regarding at least one mission.

salvation of the citizens of that town has its origins in its Christian School.

In devoting himself to the sanctification of his Brothers, De La Salle was working for the salvation of countless souls throughout the kingdom. The Gratuitous Schools he established were like so many missions to the young, but instead of lasting for only a brief period, they remained stable and permanent. They were seedbeds for the propagation of Christian doctrine. Our Lord's training of his Apostles certainly had as its aim the conversion of the whole world. In their persons he was preparing teachers of all nations, preachers of his word, leaders of his religion, prelates of his church, commanders destined to conquer the world. The Apostles were the collaborators of Jesus Christ in the saving of humankind, and they themselves were masterpieces of his grace. Through their ministry Christ accomplished all things, and their achievement was the product of his.

John Baptist de La Salle exercised his zeal in accordance with this divine model. Bearing in mind the infinite difference between the creature and the Creator, we can say that just as Jesus Christ, while remaining within the confines of Judea, extended his infinite zeal over the whole world by training disciples destined to convert that world, so the saintly Founder exercised his zeal throughout the realm of France while still remaining within the seclusion of a community house. For it was there he tended his nursery of laborers destined to instruct and educate poor children in the Christian faith. This was the principle according to which he made the main object of his zeal the spiritual perfection of his disciples. His whole concern was to train them in holiness of life and to lead the way therein. Self-sacrifice, good example, instructions, tears of sorrow, penance, and prayers were all brought to bear on their progress in the way of perfection. He was convinced that they would be capable of sanctifying others only to the extent that they were sanctified themselves.

I do not need to repeat that it was to remove from them any pretext for growing slack in following the ways of God that De La Salle made himself like them in surrendering his benefice and patrimony; what occasioned this great act of sacrifice was their reproach to him that he was not poor like they were, a reproach that made him realize that his great lessons on trust in Providence would never reach them unless he added his example to his words. The effect of the blunt and perhaps too frank words that escaped their lips on this occasion makes us think that they were not uttered without an inspiration from heaven, for they led the wealthy and comfortably placed canon to deprive himself of everything to bring his disciples along with him more quickly on the rough and thorny path of perfection.<sup>359</sup>

From this time until his death, he seemed to have no thought except for his own spiritual advancement and that of his disciples; it was as if he believed that he had been sent into this world only to achieve this twofold end. The general means he employed for the purpose were good example, exhortation, prayer, and penance.

The Founder's first significant step toward this goal was to associate himself with his disciples; he wished to live with them and be like them. But this new way of life was a real torture for a man brought up as delicately as he had been. As one part of their lifestyle, he adopted their form of dress, which he wore constantly until he gave it up in Paris after several years on the advice of very prudent and saintly persons.<sup>360</sup> The new kind of teachers could truly say that their Superior, a canon, had become one with them, knowing the better and the worse aspects of their way of life, experiencing all their hardships, and suffering the same needs. Henceforward, he never made any difference between them and himself unless it was in eminence of virtue, where all were fervent. He was the first at all the exercises, the last to retire to bed, and then the first to get up. Often, after continuing the day's contemplation throughout the night, he was nevertheless present for the morning interior prayer, like a man leaving the table still hungry after a long and sumptuous repast!

The life of his first Brothers was extremely austere and mortified, but his own was a martyrdom. In this respect, more than in any other, the difference he made between them and himself was that he practiced personally all the ways of crucifying the flesh that they shared among themselves. It was a case of sons finding it hopeless to try to follow their father as he walked the thorny path, seeming to feel nothing. They had to resign themselves to letting him disappear from view ahead of them in the penitential race or else try to keep up with him at the risk of exhausting their strength or even losing their life, as happened to several. They all regarded him as a man come down from heaven and living the life of an angel in a mortal frame, esteeming virtue only at its most perfect, speaking only to commend its practice, and giving the example of it in everything he did.

The second means he adopted to train his sons in holiness was to establish a fervent novitiate. It is true that the Institute did not need a novitiate at its beginning. Grace abounded so much; fervor was so keenly felt, and good example so uplifting that anyone entering the Community immediately found that any disinclination he felt for the practice of virtue had quite disappeared. If anyone did continue to

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359. The dramatic exchange between the Founder and the Brothers at rue Neuve is in book 1, chap. 11; the sequel is in book 1, chaps. 12–15.

360. See above, chap. 20, note 133.

feel halfhearted or pusillanimous, he could not bear to stay long. The ambience he found himself in drove him away as soon as he joined, or else it made him fervent. It was hardly possible to find contentment in the company of those who lived there without becoming like them.

Later on, however, it became necessary to establish a good novitiate to train the postulants and imbue them with the spirit of the saints. As is only too well known, there is no place on earth to which the infernal serpent cannot find entry. Let a place be as holy and privileged as the garden of Eden, he will open its gate and spread his poison in its precincts. Spiritual laxity is always a close neighbor of even the greatest fervor in men of flesh and blood, subject to temptation. The most ardent love has no worse threat to fear than that of tepidity. Experience in this matter taught the saintly Founder what it had taught all the founders before him, namely, that all hope of a fervent institute is based on the formation of its novices.

It was in Paris that De La Salle felt this need and conceived a desire for a fervent novitiate, with a view to his Institute's well-being, but when he wanted to take steps about it, he found himself held back by Father Baudrand, the pastor of Saint Sulpice. It cost him many tears, prayers, fasts, and other penances to obtain from heaven the consent of this person, who was at the time his spiritual director. Finally he succeeded and was able to establish in the house at Vaugirard the academy of virtue and school of perfection of which I spoke in the biography.<sup>361</sup> There our saintly priest occupied himself exclusively with his great design of leading his disciples along the path of high perfection, living there with them at the edge of Paris, in a little world in itself, as if the city did not even exist. All his efforts were concentrated on showing them by his example how to trace the routes that would lead them to God.

Wishing to grow in holiness, whatever it might cost him, and to make saints of the young men heaven sent him, he made an intense study of the life and writings of holy people: for example, the works

361. The inauguration of the Vaugirard novitiate is reported in book 2, chap. 10. There Blain gives a precise date for what he calls the "*premier essai de noviciat*," 8 October 1691, a date that the biographer, suggests Gallego (242), doubtless had found in the "Memorandum on the Beginnings" and that therefore may be taken as exact. This was nine years after the Founder's "exodus" with his first schoolmasters from his own home to rue Neuve. Because of the spontaneous fervor reigning among the early Brothers, a novitiate had not seemed necessary during this period—a topic to which Blain devotes the entire chapter 4 of book 2. As for Baudrand's objections referred to here, Blain says that no one seemed to know the reason why the pastor had acted thus, although the biographer suggests three hypothetical motives, each of which seems likely enough.

of Cassian, *The Life of the Desert Fathers*, the chronicles of religious orders, and especially the historical records of new institutes, such as the Society of Jesus, the reformed congregations of Saint Teresa and of Saint Peter of Alcantara, and others.<sup>362</sup> He studied the spirit of the saints, their counsels, their dispositions, their way of governing, and the practices of mortification, obedience, humility, and fervent piety that they introduced into their novitiates. His aim was to borrow from these examples in shaping his own novitiate.

In fact, the novitiate the servant of God established at Vaugirard and later at the Grand'Maison, closer to Paris, was a true, perfect replica of all the admirable examples of fervor that religious institutes have given to the world at their origin. Like them it was built on the direst poverty, a disdain for the world's values, and the most complete trust in Providence. All forms of humiliation and practices of mortification, all the various ways of testing obedience, and all the means of perfection most repugnant to nature were in common, daily usage there. Custom developed into a species of law. The eagerness of the novices for all this was almost insatiable, to the point, indeed, that it led, as we have seen, to criticisms leveled against John Baptist. But he was consoled beyond words to witness the ardor he had inspired in his children. His novitiate was for him a paradise of delights, a delectable Carmel, where flowers were seen to bloom among the thorns. No wonder that we have seen him secluding himself there and leaving it only when he had to. No wonder that all his pleasure was to tend this garden himself, to care for the young plants that the Lord had sown there and to foster their growth by his prayers and solicitous attention.

362. The two celebrated works on monasticism of John Cassian, *Conferences* and *Institutes*, were available in print from the fifteenth century. Similarly, *The Life of the Desert Fathers* and the writings attributed to them and to such early founders as Saint Pachomius, Saint Basil, and Saint Benedict would be readily accessible (Rayez, 1952, 28). For the three Spanish saints alluded to here by Blain, Gallego (193) gives a list of published works, one or other of which could have been available to De La Salle: for Saint Ignatius Loyola, a biography in Latin by Ribadeneyra (1572) and biographies in French by Favard (1599), Bussi re (1660), and Bouhours (1679); for Saint Teresa, French translations of biographies by Ribera and Yepes; for Saint Peter of Alcantara, his canonization (which took place in 1669, during De La Salle's lifetime) gave rise to numerous biographies, including three in French by Courtot, Fauvel, and Talon, all published in Paris in 1670. A recent work of scholarship, as yet unpublished, by a French Lasallian, Br. Adrien Roche, identifies 686 references in the works of De La Salle to fifty-five authors and reproduces the relevant extracts from the works concerned. As long ago as 1954, Hermans (*Pour une meilleure lecture*, 10) drew attention to the importance of this paragraph by Blain ("*trop peu regard *") as pointing to the influence of traditional thought on Lasallian texts, especially on the Rule.



Because no undertaking seemed as important as this for the salvation of the poor, no task within the Institute was dearer to the Founder than the formation of saintly novices. He never handed over this work to anyone else except when necessity obliged him to, and then he always came back to it with renewed zest. He was a tender father whose heart had room for all the novices. He seemed to have no other concern but their interests. He foresaw all their needs, was prompt to render them a service, and had ears only to listen to what they wished to say and eyes only to watch over them. His kindness, sweetness of temper, and charity drew them to him, won their confidence, and imbued them with a childlike disposition toward him. Once he thus had the key to their hearts, he spared no effort to rid them of self-love so as to let the love of God take its place. To teach them how to progress with great strides in the ways of perfection, he would point out to them the obstacles they would encounter arising from their own hidden tendencies, their secret longings, and their natural disposition and temperament. But he would show them also what help they could count on from the goodness of God, the grace of their vocation, the force of good example, their preparation for the sacraments, and the advantages of a secluded life, regular observance, and obedience.<sup>363</sup>

The third path his zeal inspired John Baptist to follow to ensure the Brothers' progress in perfection was to strive to win for them an abundance of the choice graces reserved for souls of goodwill. This he did by his prayers, penances, and fervent and frequent exhortations. He was quite at the mercy of his zeal when it was a question of their spiritual advancement. His vigilant concern, the proofs he gave of amicable esteem, his acts of charity—all these failed to satisfy him. He had to add fasting to prayers, vigils, and tears to obtain from the Father of all mercies the graces he needed for his task. Some showed a headstrong resistance; they had to be won over. The Founder had to recall to duty some who had grown fainthearted and had strayed from the narrow path. Others had a wrong idea of what spiritual progress

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363. In book 2, chap. 10, Blain says that "the entire day [of the novitiate] was devoted to exercises of piety." The 1705 manuscript of the Rule has a chapter on the "Daily exercises of the novitiate house," which shows that the biographer was hardly exaggerating: rising at 4:30, vocal and interior prayer from 5:00 until 6:00, Matins and Lauds of the Office of the Most Blessed Virgin at 6:00, study by heart of a passage of the New Testament at 7:00, recitation of the Litany of the Child Jesus at 8:00, followed by Prime and Terce of the Office of the Most Blessed Virgin, Mass at 8:30, and "after Mass" breakfast. A similar sequence of prayer and study continued throughout the day, apart from two meals, each followed by forty-five minutes of recreation. Night prayer was at 8:30 p.m. and retiring at 9:00 p.m.

meant, and they had to be shown the right way. The courageous ones had to be spurred to even greater effort, and the wavering had to have their courage renewed. He spared himself in nothing to sustain the weak, to console the pusillanimous, to steady the steps of those who faltered, to lift up those who fell, to give strength to those who were tempted, to rouse the lukewarm and urge on the fervent, to be a guide and leader for all along the thorny paths of pure virtue. He became all things that zeal inspired in order that, as Saint Paul expressed it, he might gain all to Jesus Christ.<sup>364</sup> Teacher, spiritual physician, director, confessor, pastor, superior, and father—John Baptist rendered with active concern all the charitable services these roles entailed.

A zealous Superior, the Founder used every available resource to lead his sons to God: counseling, teaching, exhortation, penances, warnings, reproaches, prayers, tearful entreaties, and acts of humility. When his advice was not effective, he used reproofs. When his instructions went unheeded, he tried coaxing. If his remonstrances did not succeed, he reinforced them with his tears, and to make their appeal still stronger, he sometimes went down on his knees, humiliating himself before the ones concerned. He seemed to assume responsibility for their faults to make them feel the shame and sorrow that their misdemeanors caused him. All the Brothers were present in his mind and heart, whether he was with them or not. He never lost sight of their needs or of the help he owed them. Whether near or far, he kept watch over them, followed their every move, studied their progress, and by his letters supplied what he was not able to do by word of mouth. In this he was like another Saint Paul, bodily absent but ever with them in spirit to console, encourage, and help them and to render them every service of a good shepherd.

De La Salle constantly urged them to keep going forward in the practice of virtue, saying that God would bless their labors only to the extent that they were faithful in doing what was right. They must not, he told them, expect to achieve anything with the children entrusted to them if their own life was lacking in fervor. If it looked as though they were doing some good without being fervent themselves, it would be in appearance only, not the real thing. It was only with difficulty that he put up with those who did their work perfunctorily. He upbraided them sharply to make them change their ways, and if he found them resentful about this, he would warn them of God's anger, telling them bluntly, "I assure you that if you do not change your ways, God will leave you on your own." He often made it a penance for such recalcitrant members to reflect that the slackers and negligent would be excluded from the kingdom of God or to meditate on the

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364. 1 Cor. 9:22 (Douai).

words of Jeremiah, “Woe to him who does the work of the Lord negligently.”<sup>365</sup> By such means he often made them show greater fidelity in carrying out their duties.

John Baptist often went into the classes, partly to see if the children were benefiting from the lessons they were receiving but also to note how the Brothers were acquitting themselves of their tasks, his purpose being to encourage them in the exercise of their ministry and also to point out to them defects that he noticed.<sup>366</sup> Because he wanted them to be able to maintain good order and conduct in their classes, he undertook to compose a kind of directory explaining how everything was to be done, a task he achieved in such an agreeable and stimulating way that the Brothers have always taken pride in observing it as exactly as possible.<sup>367</sup> Yet he did not want them to be so concerned about what was only accessory that they neglected the essential. This is why we can see in this book of school rules that although he has dwelt at length on the procedures to be observed for teaching reading, writing, and other such necessary things, he insists particularly on the way the children are to be taught their religion and how to lead a good Christian life. All the saintly priest’s devoted care to ensure that the children were trained in piety was not wasted. He had the consolation of seeing the youngsters clearly profiting by the instructions they were receiving, much to the edification of everyone.

De La Salle spared no effort to encourage the Brothers who were finding the life hard and were tempted to give up. He wrote letters full of affectionate feeling, and he pointed out the harm they would do themselves by abandoning their calling because of a small difficulty

365. Jer. 48:10.

366. The Italian artist, Mariani (1826–1901) has imagined such a visit in an attractive painting now in the Vatican collection (Rousset, *Iconographie*, plate 145).

367. Hermans comments (CL 10, 75) that Blain is so obviously referring to *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* that it is surprising he does not give the title. The work had been published thirteen years previously, at Avignon in 1720 (an edition reproduced in CL 24). The impression conveyed here by Blain that the Founder composed the work single-handedly needs modifying in the light of Blain’s own earlier information and of a preface to a manuscript copy of the work, dated 1706, information conveniently assembled by Pungier in *Comment est né la Conduite des Écoles* (Rome, 1980; English translation Oswald Murdoch, Rome, 1984). Studies in English of *The Conduct* can be found in Battersby, *De La Salle, A Pioneer of Modern Education*, 76–102, and Fitzpatrick, *La Salle, Patron of all Teachers*. The English poet and critic, Matthew Arnold, summed up *The Conduct* as “a handbook of method of which later works have little improved the precepts while they entirely lack the unction” (*Popular Education in France*, 15). See *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996.

they were experiencing. If this did not succeed in recalling them to their duty, he would set out forthwith to try by a personal interview to do what his letters had failed to do. Thus when he learned one day that a certain Brother was determined to quit despite all the good advice he had given him, John Baptist immediately made plans to visit him and duly set off in pouring rain. When he arrived, the Brothers wanted him to change so that they could dry his clothes at the fire, but their request went unheeded; he told them they could do this only after he had persuaded the would-be wanderer from the sheepfold to stay. When he was asked why he had started out in such bad weather, he replied, "Charity doesn't worry about what the weather is like when there is question of preventing a soul from going astray." He then spoke to the Brother concerned, earnestly pointing out to him the danger to his salvation if he abandoned a state of life to which he was so manifestly called. He succeeded in dispelling the temptation, but although his words were so vehement, what made the greater impression on the Brother who was tempted was the charitable concern his Superior had shown in hurrying to him in such bad weather to save him from becoming a lost sheep.

John Baptist was so zealous in seeking the spiritual advancement of the Brothers that when he was not praying for them, he was exhorting them either by word of mouth or in writing to keep forging ahead in the path of virtue. In a letter to one of them he wrote:

I am delighted to know of your good dispositions, my very dear Brother. I am very happy that you have a high esteem for your vocation. Try to preserve this grace and take the means to see that there is among you a great love for seeking the salvation of your neighbor, and that all is done with kindness and propriety, as among Brothers who should have a mutual love for each other and bear with each other's faults. Often ask God for this peace and union. As you say, it is true that you have great need for charity in order to keep yourself in peace, but be assured that you have no less a need for the excellent virtue of obedience, that noble achievement of charity.<sup>368</sup>

The same Brother had given him a detailed account of his conduct, mentioning the many defects he had and wanted to correct. This was the reply he received:

I am very pleased, my very dear Brother, with your intentions to work hard to remedy your faults and overcome yourself when

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368. *Letters*, 74.1–3, 5–6; the full text is in *Letters*.

the occasion arises. Let your part in this be frequently to seek God's help. Humble yourself at the sight of your weaknesses when you fall into faults. Faithfully admit them and be assured that the shame you feel in doing this, together with the penance you are given, will be of great help to you in correcting your faults. You are right in saying that the thoughts you indulge in from time to time about the difficulties of your vocation are nothing but a deception of the devil, who seeks only to discourage you and to prevent you from lovingly bearing the hardships that are part of it. Be convinced that your happiness as a Christian consists in overcoming yourself and bearing all the difficulties God sends you. I pray that he will give you the grace to do this.<sup>369</sup>

The same Brother had for a long time concealed a temptation that was troubling him, but he finally made it known, mentioning at the same time his conviction that what he was suffering in his vocation was of no merit before God. John Baptist responded with some vehemence, reproaching him for his lack both of faith and of common sense.

I cannot understand why, my very dear Brother, you did not tell me earlier of the temptation you experienced. Don't you know that an illness is already half cured when you tell the doctor about it? You see how weak you are even after renewing your protestation that you belong completely to God. It is not true that in your vocation suffering goes unrewarded. Every state of life has its own difficulties. You must not be surprised at having to suffer. This is part of the plan of God, who wishes us to gain merit in this way.<sup>370</sup>

The same zeal that made him so concerned for the spiritual advancement of his disciples filled him with joy when he saw them making progress. He wrote to one of them:

I am delighted that you have recovered from the wretched state that you were in for so long and that you acknowledge the change God has brought about in you. I assure you that I feel no greater joy than when I know that those whom I direct walk courageously in the path of virtue. I pray that God may continue what he has begun in you, my very dear Brother, and I thank

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369. *Ibid.*, 73.1–7; note the comment about the two different sources.

370. Blain here quotes the first portion of a letter of which he will give the rest (or almost the rest) later (*Letters*, 75.1–3).

him for having given you a love for the holy virtue of mortification. And now that you recognize your faults, for example, your failure to be obedient and to observe your rules and so on, I beg of you, think before God how you are going to correct them. I am really pleased with your self-renunciation, which leads you to do whatever is required of you.<sup>371</sup>

When the same Brother made known to him that by God's mercy he had made up his mind now never to look back, De La Salle expressed his joy in the following letter:

I have received your letter, my very dear Brother, and am very happy that you have great peace of mind. I pray that God may keep you in that state. I am also delighted that you say you are determined to persevere in the Institute to the end of your life, and my joy is much greater because of your desire to return to the novitiate. This is a sign that you are really desirous of advancing in virtue. This gives me great pleasure.<sup>372</sup>

Here we must discontinue our quotations because it would take too long to include all the extracts we would wish from the instructions their master in spirituality gave the Brothers or from the ardent letters he wrote them, urging them on in the way of perfection.

I will conclude this chapter by relating a remarkable incident, one calculated to make anyone tempted against his vocation to realize the importance of remaining faithful and abiding by the advice he is given. One of the Brothers who knew the Founder best tells us that it was his custom to spend entire nights in assiduous prayer and in addition to wear a hair shirt, to take the discipline, and to practice other forms of bodily mortification that usually render petitions brought before the throne of God efficacious and all-prevailing.<sup>373</sup> This was his practice especially in the case of those of his sons who were wavering under temptation and on whom advice and pleas were having no effect. As long as he was petitioning God to grant them the grace of perseverance in their vocation, the saintly priest steadfastly refused to give any one of them secular clothing in which to leave,

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371. *Letters*, 46.1–4, 6. Here again the biographer is quoting a selected portion of a letter of which he will give the remaining sentences later. For the identity of the recipient of this letter and of certain others now to be quoted by Blain, see the commentary in *Letters*, 136.

372. Again, an initial extract from a letter Blain uses later (*Letters*, 38.1–3).

373. The biographer here expresses a concept of seventeenth-century spirituality that Campos discusses in *L'Itinéraire évangélique* (CL 45, 270–72).

unless it was evident to him that God had not called such a one to the life. Generally his petitions were heard, and his fasting and prayers put the tempter to flight. After all his intercessions and penances, if he saw the Brother concerned still wavering, he tried to strengthen his resolution by instilling a fear of God's chastisements, uttering vehement warnings and seemingly able to predict what would happen.

One Brother we are going to speak about learned the truth of this by sad experience. He refused the advice of his zealous Superior and for six whole weeks kept stubbornly asking for his secular clothing. John Baptist no less insistently refused, believing that it would be a misfortune for the Brother to be granted his request. His fear turned out to be only too well founded. The unfaithful disciple obstinately disregarded his words and, like the prodigal son,<sup>374</sup> determined to quit the house. He forced his Superior to open the door for him to leave by wickedly threatening not to make his Easter duties<sup>375</sup> unless he obtained his liberty from what he called a prison. Such a deplorable attitude and such unchristian language made it impossible for John Baptist to detain the man any longer. He had the secular clothing given to him, but he was grievously afflicted at his disciple's scandalous persistence and full of grave misgivings about the consequences. Indeed, these proved even more disastrous than he had feared. After leaving the community, the renegade fell ill of a high fever on the Tuesday of Holy Week, and he was taken to the charity hospital and died unhappily there on Holy Thursday without having received the sacraments. The sad news of this was brought to De La Salle after Easter Sunday by the young man's parents, who came to retrieve the instruments their son had formerly used in the practice of surgery. On hearing from them the story of his unhappy death, John Baptist heaved a great sigh and wept bitterly at the thought of a lost soul.

[CHAPTER 28]

*His love of neighbor as well as of God; his charity for others, originating from the heart and free of self-interest; tender and generous charity; his charity sometimes abused; his lack of concern about this*

Love of neighbor and love of God have the same origin, the same basic character, the same roots. They are two distinct but not different

374. Luke 15:11ff.

375. The popular term for the church law requiring the faithful to receive Communion at least once a year and to do so during the Easter period.

manifestations of love, two inseparable branches of the one tree, two ways of exercising the same virtue. The one and same object of all charity is God, in himself and in our neighbor. God alone provides the motive as well as the principle of this queen of virtues. Charity may envisage the neighbor as its object, but it does not stop there. It reaches out to God, who wills to be seen, honored, and loved in our neighbor. Charity looks to the neighbor as taking God's place and loves only God in him because as the Angel of the Schools says, it is of the one nature of charity to produce both love of God and love of neighbor.<sup>376</sup> Both these ways of exercising love envisage only God. It is true that God and the neighbor constitute two different objectives in themselves, but charity brings them together in its purview; it looks to both as one. As Saint Thomas again expresses it, to love God for the sake of God and to love our neighbor for the sake of God is nothing other than to love one God only for himself.<sup>377</sup> Saint Gregory the Great had already explained that love of God and love of neighbor are indeed two parts of love, but they are parts of the same whole. They are two links of one chain, two ways of practicing the same virtue, two acts that have the same source and objective, two inseparable means of gaining merit.<sup>378</sup> Let me add that they are two streams flowing from the same spring and forming the one river, two flames leaping up from the same fire.

This is why our Lord, in reply to the question, "What is the first commandment of the Law?" joined the precept of loving our neighbor to that of loving God, saying that the former is like the latter—*simile huic*—to show that both come to the same thing.<sup>379</sup> It follows that we cannot love God without loving our neighbor, a truth that Saint John in his New Testament letters teaches in various ways, for example,

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376. Blain's marginal reference is "2.2 q. 103." The relevant passage from *Summa Theologica* is, "*Ratio diligendi proximum Deus est; non enim per charitatem diligimus in proximo nisi Deum; et ideo eadem charitas est qua diligitur Deus, et proximus*" (Rome: Marietti, 1952, vol. 2, 490).

377. The marginal reference is "2.2 q. 25 art 1." Blain is paraphrasing the words "*Manifestum est quod idem specie actus est quo diligitur Deus, et quo diligitur proximus. Et propter hoc habitus charitatis non solum se extendit ad dilectionem Dei, sed etiam ad dilectionem proximi*" (ibid., 130).

378. Blain's marginal reference, "L. 6 mor. c. 10," indicates the section of *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job* dealing with the nature of charity, but he give a personal summary of Saint Gregory's discussion there (PL, vol. 75. cols. 922–23). It is surprising that Blain does not prefer this earlier passage from the same work that he could have translated as it stands: "*Quia autem duo sunt praecepta charitatis, Dei videlicet amor et proximi, per amorem Dei amor proximi gignitur, et per amorem proximi amor dei nutritur*" (ibid., col. 780).

379. Matt. 22:35–39.



when he writes, “If anyone says he loves God but does not love his brother, he is a liar.”<sup>380</sup> According to Saint Paul, the whole law is fulfilled in the love of our neighbor.<sup>381</sup> Therefore, we can gauge the eminent degree of John Baptist de La Salle’s love of God according to the way he fulfilled the precept of loving his neighbor.

What are the characteristics of this love of our neighbor? Saint John gives us the answer: “My little children,” he says, “let us love not only in word and in speech but in deed and in truth.”<sup>382</sup> But it is easy to be mistaken about this very important matter and, as the devout author of *The Imitation of Christ* expresses it, to apply the divine name of charity to what is merely natural affection.<sup>383</sup> It is a rare thing, this love of our neighbor as ourselves to the exclusion of no one and with no limit as to time, with no distinction in our motives. It is even heroic to love our neighbor without regard to our personal feelings, without considering his qualities, good or bad, and to love him not for natural motives or for personal gain but only for God’s sake, loving him in God and loving God in him.

Love of this kind is like the love Jesus Christ has shown to us. It comes from the heart; it is pure, tender, and strong. It has compassion for the poor and sincere charity for enemies. It is happy to bear with our neighbor’s failings, to assist him in his difficulties, and generally to foster and maintain a spirit of union. To love thus, in a word, is to make ourselves victims of love after the example of our Savior. In thus describing perfect charity, I am presenting a portrait of the holy priest whose virtues are the subject of this work.

John Baptist de La Salle’s charity was practical and heartfelt. Rarely has anyone been known to contribute more wholeheartedly to the interests of others, to make their concerns more fully his own, to participate more thoroughly in procuring their well-being, to react more sensitively to their sufferings, and to show greater joy at their good fortune. Has any father taken better care of his family than De la Salle took of his, a family composed of the children of humble folk and of the teachers who were to train them? Has anyone sought more effective ways of helping these people, more solicitously foreseen their needs, or rendered them more services? The Founder carefully avoided causing offense or displeasure to anyone in all the various transactions in which he became involved, in the disputes that others raised against him together with the legal actions they brought, in his conversations, and on every occasion. His dealings with others were

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380. 1 John 4:20.

381. Rom. 13:10.

382. 1 John 3:18.

383. *The Imitation of Christ*, book 1, chap. 15:2.

always marked by great deference, a truly Christian desire to please, and a humble and respectful demeanor.

The reputation of his neighbor was dearer to John Baptist than his own. Even while he was letting wicked and lying tongues do what they wanted with his own good name, bringing him into public dispute, he was defending the name of others with every means at his disposal. As far as he could without compromising his conscience, he covered over their failings, finding excuses for them and making their faults seem less serious or turning the conversation aside from them if he could not very well silence the talkers.

For his Community he established certain holy rules for the recreations, designed to foster this charity toward the neighbor; they provide a strong bulwark against all the faults that could damage it. The Brothers always found him a faithful and sincere friend, a zealous and charitable pastor, ever concerned about their health, which he watched over with care. When they were ill, he would render them the humblest services, ministering to all their needs with Christlike compassion at whatever cost to his own feelings, and he spared no expense to obtain their cure. But what he had at heart more than anything else was their sanctification; his prayers and intercessions for this were continual. Their faults and failings could draw tears from him, but when he saw a response to grace and an advance in virtue, he was beside himself with joy.

If he discovered that some Brother living elsewhere, getting no benefit from the good advice he was sending, was wavering in his vocation, John Baptist would set off immediately, whatever the weather, good or bad, in the hope of effecting by personal contact what his letters had failed to do. I recounted an example in the previous chapter; here is another, reported by a Brother who witnessed it, concerning a community in a certain town that John Baptist visited frequently because all was not well with his flock there. Moved by charity for them, he made this journey on foot, traveling through the night. What made a lasting impression on the mind of the witness was that far from showing the least displeasure with the Brothers who were causing him all this trouble, he manifested nothing but the most winning kindness, which had more influence over their state of mind than anything he could have said, however forceful, to make them change their ways. He did, in fact, succeed in returning them to their duty.

When the Founder learned that this particular community was in material difficulties, he showed the same alacrity in coming to their assistance. At the beginning there were only two Brothers there. Even these did not have everything they needed, and De La Salle would deprive himself of necessary things to relieve their want. When either

of them was ill, he would go to their help, humbly serving the patient, watching over him during the night, and personally consulting the doctor. If he took any rest, it was on a chair because at the time there were only the two beds for the Brothers. While he was thus caring for them, he often had only bread and water for food.<sup>384</sup> This was the sort of help, both corporal and spiritual, the worthy Superior gave to those whom God had placed in his care. Thus did he follow the example of Jesus Christ, the great Pastor of souls who, as he said, was in the midst of his Apostles as one who served.<sup>385</sup> There was another occasion also when he was in a community where there was a sick Brother. He insisted on giving his own bed to the patient, despite the objections of the other Brothers, and he remained up all night. But this was something he was happy to do anyway. Nothing gave him greater satisfaction than an occasion to combine mortification with extra prayer.

His charity made him compassionate to a degree beyond measure. In keeping with the teaching of Saint Peter, he could not bear to see people in pain or tribulation without trying to help them in some way, even if it involved some risk to his good name.<sup>386</sup> He was traveling one day when he met a woman who was having difficulty carrying a heavy burden that quite weighed her down. It was, however, a precious burden to her because the bag was loaded with money, and for this reason she had avoided asking anyone to give her a helping hand, for fear she might be asking a robber. For the same reason, she was traveling on foot, not daring to risk her possession to carriage transport. John Baptist was also traveling on foot and already quite weary from the length of journey he had covered. But he approached the lady and in his usual kindly way remarked that she seemed to be having some difficulty. The lady was reluctant to explain the situation and did so only after John Baptist asked her again. He finally persuaded her to trust him with her treasure, which he forthwith charitably carried all the way to the entrance of the town to which the woman was going. This act which provided the latter not only with relief but also with edification; it left her deeply impressed by the holiness of the kindly priest, who was quite unknown to her and who left her as soon as he had rendered her this charitable service, not wanting to be either praised or thanked.

The more we study De La Salle's charity for others, the more we appreciate how disinterested, tender, and strong it was. He loved his

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384. Gallego (440) suggests that the place referred to here may have been Darnétal, where resources were minimal (see above, chap. 13, notes 23, 24).

385. Luke 22:27.

386. 1 Pet. 3:8–9.

neighbor as Jesus Christ loved us, without thinking of himself but only of his neighbor's salvation and the glory of God. It was a love full of holy tenderness, almost maternal in its nature, although there was nothing mawkish about it. On the contrary, it was a love marked by courage and strength, proof against all difficulties.

The people to whom he directed his services were, on the one hand, the poor and their children, or, on the other, hardened sinners, persons likely to be a source of mortification. His charity, therefore, had little scope for becoming debased with selfish interests as kindness to others so easily can and so often does become. Faith alone made lovable in God and for God people who in themselves had nothing with which to win his heart and affection. Love of neighbors such as these offered no return from the natural point of view. There was no expectation of personal satisfaction, gain, or glory from the genuine esteem and warmth he showed for them. There was nothing to be got from exhausting himself in the desire to please them, to treat them with courtesy, to adapt himself to their moods and whims, no return for giving way to their opinions and ideas, for going along with their views and wishes whenever he could do so without failing in his duty. In a word, there was no place for self in the way he made himself affable, obliging, gracious, and kindly to all who approached him for some service.

Because he thus found in the persons to whom his charity was directed none of those attractions that appeal to natural feelings of affection, it was a simple matter for him to love them only in view of God. His sole desire was to win them for Jesus Christ and to work for their sanctification. All his conversations with them turned on topics likely to inspire a distaste for worldly things and an esteem and love for virtue; his aim was to center their thoughts on heaven and eternity. If he cultivated a friendship with any of them, it was only so that he could better inspire them with the Gospel maxims and the Christian truths or else gain their interest in devout pursuits. He loved others only for God and in God, without regard to their good qualities, their talents, intelligence, rank, or personal charm, their empathy and similarity of temperament, the good that they had done or that could be expected of them. He loved them disinterestedly, always keeping a balance, avoiding the dangers of becoming too attached to any of them, always being the same toward them, showing no signs of favoritism; in short, he loved them in a manner worthy of God<sup>387</sup> and in a way that honored Jesus Christ, who loved us thus.

John Baptist was one of those compassionate men whose heart, like that of his Savior, responded to all the misfortunes of his neigh-

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387. Col. 1:10.

bor, making them his own. Compassion was innate in him, and it had become still greater as he grew older. When he was still a child, he was always wanting to show some kindness to any poor people he saw. He would do anything he could for them, and if he had nothing to give them in the way of alms, he became upset, and tears came to his eyes. It hurt him not to be able to help someone he saw in need; the sufferings of others went to his heart. To be poor was a claim to special respect as far as he was concerned. Poor people were always sure of a welcome from him; they were the treasure of the church,<sup>388</sup> and he would even go looking for them. While he was a canon, he used to visit them, for he firmly believed that in their person he was honoring Jesus Christ. He used the stipend from his canonry only for their benefit, and anything that remained over from the annual income produced by his patrimony was likewise theirs. Wherever he distributed alms, he also left an example of humility and zeal, his meekness and patience serving as a model to those he helped. Ordained a priest, he not only gave the poor devout and salutary instructions to benefit their souls but also concerned himself with their corporal well-being, giving them material help. He taught the ignorant, consoled the sorrowing, comforted the sick, restored confidence in God to those who had lost hope, and moved all to the practice of patience and to a concern for their salvation.

Another work of mercy that he did not overlook was the practice of hospitality, a form of charity much recommended in Holy Scripture, honored in the fervent days of early Christian practice, but little known today. Like Abraham of old, he was outgoing to strangers; he would put them at ease with his gracious manners and then welcome them into the house.<sup>389</sup> In this way his home became a hospice for poor priests and eventually a regular residence for them. Whatever his own lack of resources might be and however straitened the Community's circumstances, people in need always found shelter with him, especially the clergy. It was to this readiness to practice hospitality, shown in the case of Adrien Nyel, that the Institute owed its origin, as we have seen.<sup>390</sup> In receiving this particular guest into his home, the

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388. A reminiscence of the story in the earliest accounts of the life of the martyr Saint Lawrence that when the Emperor Valerian demanded to be shown the treasures of the church supposedly entrusted to the care of Lawrence, the martyr gathered the poor of the city before Valerian, saying, "These are the treasures of the church." De La Salle uses the story in his meditation on the Saint (*Meditations*, 154.1).

389. Gen. 18:1ff.

390. See above, chap. 19, note 122. Blain is referring here specifically to the Founder's pressing invitation to Adrien Nyel, quoted by the biographer (in book 1, chap. 8) from the "Memorandum on the Beginnings."

devout canon was only thinking about his duty of charity, but God had other plans in view, and the strange visitor was the instrument for setting them in motion.<sup>391</sup>

The story of his life has shown us that John Baptist was inspired to practice charity for the rest of his career in founding, developing, maintaining, and perfecting that most excellent and necessary of all the spiritual works of mercy. There is no need to go over the same ground again. I would only comment here that the triumph of his charity to the poor was achieved when, following that Gospel counsel, he disposed of all he possessed to benefit them. On this occasion Reims witnessed the fact that faith could still practice the virtues of a bygone age. It saw a new Joseph replenishing the famine-stricken land of Canaan with corn from Egypt,<sup>392</sup> supplying from his own home to the dwellings of the poor the bread that is essential to life. He was seen sharing out to the penniless, systematically and with good management, the money that came from the sale of his possessions. He was like a mother providing milk for her babes and depriving herself of bread so that they would not go short. We may say that Saint Jerome drew John Baptist's portrait with these words referring to one of the saintliest bishops of our own France: "He fed others and went hungry himself; his entrails were dried up with fasting, but still more with compassion."<sup>393</sup> These words were literally fulfilled in the former canon, who had become a poor man and a companion of the poor. He went without bread himself but distributed it liberally to the needy, and he was compelled one day to practice the trade of the needy, which is to beg.<sup>394</sup> I will say nothing more here about his char-

391. This is Blain's only mention of Adrien Nyel in book 4, but he figures prominently in all three source biographies as being, according to Bernard, "the man whom God made use of to bring into being the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools" (CL 4, 68). All three biographers stress Nyel's temperamental shortcomings to the point (suggests Gallego, 146–47) of caricature. A first attempt to assess Nyel at his true worth was made in an article by two Lasallians, Yves Poutet and Charles Vermeulen, in *Revue des Sociétés Savantes de Haute-Normandie*, no. 27, 1962, later reprinted in *Bulletin*, 1963, 146–54, and translated in *Lasallian Digest*, Spring 1964, 80–90. Poutet extends and deepens this study in vol. 1, 494–500 and 628–45.

392. Gen. chap. 42.

393. The reference is to Saint Exuperius, bishop of Toulouse at the beginning of the fifth century, praised by Jerome in the letter to the monk Rusticus. Blain gives a free rendering of the tribute, "*Esuriens pascit alios, et ore pallente jejuniis, fame torquetur aliena*" (PL, vol. 22, col. 1085).

394. See above, chap. 12, note 10. In book 1, chap. 15, explicitly, as here by implication, Blain says that the Founder gave away *all* he possessed. Maillefer in 1723 makes the same assertion, "*il donna tout*," reinforcing this in 1740 with "*il donna tout sans se rien réserver*," despite the fact that the pre-

ity either to great sinners or to poor and neglected children; enough has been said already. Likewise, concerning his love for his enemies and persecutors and his goodness to persons in the most wretched circumstances, I say nothing here because I will be speaking of this later and do not want to fall into mere repetition.

So his charity was quite devoid of self-interest, but it was correspondingly full of tenderness. He was moved by the needs of others as a good mother is moved by the needs of her children. His compassion for those he saw in poverty or pain was such that it could have been said that he felt their sufferings more keenly than they did. People who approached him for help never had to face a moody reaction, bad temper, rebuffs, a haughty or disdainful attitude, arrogant or scornful words. He invariably received them with kindness, and his demeanor, far from being ruffled, reflected only genuine affection. There was never any brusqueness in his manner when dealing with people who were at some disadvantage in his regard or were in some way under his authority. Far from adopting an imperious tone or domineering attitude to them, he seemed rather to defer to them, acting as he did to his own superiors. In everything he showed the spirit of humility recommended in the letters of Saint Peter and Saint Paul.<sup>395</sup> Anyone seeing him in his own community house and not knowing who he was would have taken him for the general manservant of everybody. They would have thought him particularly answerable to certain Brothers, who without intending it or noticing it themselves, adopted a superior attitude toward him and spoke to him as if he were a novice.

He fully understood persons afflicted with temptations, scruples, or other spiritual ailments. They found him always ready to listen to them, to strengthen their resolution, and to console them with the kindly tenderness that people thus troubled need. Like the great Apostle Paul, he made himself lowly with the lowly, weak with the weak, poor with the poor, infirm with the infirm, all things to all men to gain them all for Jesus Christ.<sup>396</sup>

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decessor of both, Bernard, says (CL 4, 61) that John Baptist, "on the advice of his spiritual director," retained sufficient capital to yield an annual interest of 200 livres. Blain alone offers an estimate of John Baptist's *patrimony*, which he puts at "about forty thousand livres." The question has given rise to a good deal of speculation and discussion, conveniently summarized by Gallego (175), who says that it is almost impossible to arrive at a sure calculation of what De La Salle gave away. But a reflection by Aroz seems very much to the point: "It is of little importance what the total amounted to. It was the intensity of the love with which he gave that provided the theological dimension of his self-improvement" (CL 26, 292).

395. 1 Pet. 5:5–6; Rom. 11:30, 12:3, 12:16, and so on.

We are told by the Brother who was the first person to take pen in hand and write his life<sup>397</sup> that he cherished all his Brothers tenderly and seemed even to have more affection for those who appeared less agreeable. He was always ready to listen to them, give them any advice they needed, or comfort them in their difficulties. Business, however pressing, never prevented him from giving them all the time they required. This great kindness produced excellent results. Brothers who were on the point of quitting their vocation had only to listen to his gentle and winning words to change their mind and then make great advances along the right path.

But the tenderness he showed them was never overdone, a somewhat rare phenomenon. It is easy to exaggerate in this matter and to be moved by what passes for tenderness to grant things that real charity would take care to refuse and to approve things that rightly deserve censure. It was not this kind of affection that he showed to those whom God had given to him. He certainly proved his kindly feeling for them by the tender words he used, but he was far from conniving at their faults and shortcomings. On the contrary, he reprimanded them with firmness and made them feel the sting of his rebukes, inspired though these were by charity. He studied their wayward inclinations to check them and to provide plenty of occasions for self-denial and therefore plenty of opportunities for gaining merit. His great aim was to make new men of them, men who would have no thought but for God alone and his service, who would raise their ambitions above the things of this world and surmount their own natural desires. He showed one day the way he thought by a smiling reply he made to someone who suggested he should let some of the ailing Brothers visit their native places, where the air would do them good. "The native climate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools," he said, "is paradise." We need not imagine, therefore, that his kindness was a form of softness, that his heart was tender because his character was weak, or that he accommodated himself only to people who liked him or to whom he felt drawn. He was open to everyone; if he had any favorites at all, they were persons who were unprepossessing by nature.

Courageous generosity was another characteristic of his charity. The more he sought to follow the example of Jesus Christ, the strength of whose love left him vulnerable to all kinds of humiliations,

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396. 1 Cor. 9:22 (Douai).

397. Br. Bernard Dauge. Hermans quotes this paragraph by Blain (and the first sentence of the next) as an appendix to the edition of Bernard's biography published as CL 4, heading the passage, "Testimony rendered by Brother Bernard to the charity of M. de La Salle" (CL 4, 104).



scorn, insults, and torments, the more urged he felt to suffer all that a limitless charity demands of those who possess it or aspire to possess it. His charity had already obliged him to sacrifice his possessions, his health, and his reputation for the benefit of others; every day provided fresh occasions to renew this sacrifice. Yet he felt ashamed of what little he deemed he had done. His one wish was to give his life for souls who had cost the life of Jesus Christ. No difficulty stopped him from rendering a service. There was never anything cold or halfhearted about the way he did it; it was always full of goodwill, wholehearted, even joyful. Instructing the poor, consoling the afflicted, visiting the sick, relieving distress—all were made agreeable to him by his charity; all were carried out with affability. No form of illness or physical wretchedness was repulsive to him; never did he betray a sign of repugnance, whatever the nature of the ailment or the condition of the sufferer. It was not that he was insensitive to such things. He had the same natural feelings as any other human being, but his charity, combined with his habit of self-denial, prevented him from showing any reaction. He was like the great saints; because they were on fire with divine love, they never ceased to lament and expiate the sins of others. As with the saints, John Baptist's love was manifested in his spirit of penance offered for sinners.

I need not recall examples I have already given of this heroic aspect of his charity, but there are one or two further instances to mention here. A young boy, aged fourteen or fifteen and suffering from ringworm, came under his care. The boy's head was so ravaged by the disease that pus was oozing from it and creating such a stench that people in the same room, even those farthest away from him, could not bear it. His presence was a source of mortification to anyone who merely had to be there, and such a person might well have felt pleased with himself for his charitable forbearance had he not witnessed the extent of John Baptist's charity. The boy was repulsive to everyone else, but he inspired only compassion in our saintly priest, whose heart was moved at the sight. His love went out to him as someone resembling Jesus on the cross, disfigured, and treated like an outcast leper. He assumed personal care of him and undertook to cure him. To begin with, he decided to cut the boy's hair and wash the filth from the scalp, not an easy thing to do. The ulceration and pus had caused the hair to stick together, becoming like a stinking skullcap unbearable to the sight. Despite the generous courage he brought to the task, John Baptist just could not hide his revulsion. One of the Brothers noticed this and felt obliged to offer to do the disgusting job himself. He tried to take the scissors from his Superior's hands, saying by way of persuasion that consecrated fingers, which

every day touched the glorious body of Jesus Christ, should not be soiled with putrefied flesh. But the servant of God, who never heeded his feelings of repugnance for anything, clung to his right to make a sacrifice to charity. Rather than hand over to someone else the merit of this work of mercy and act of mortification, John Baptist replied that Jesus had touched sick and sinful people much more revolting than this youngster; he then proceeded with his task with fresh courage. When he had finished, the entire skull was seen to be one suppurating ulcer that looked as if only the skill of a highly qualified surgeon would be able to cure it. But cured it was, at much less expense and, moreover, in a few days, all because of a linen dressing John Baptist applied to it, the first and only dressing he used. It would seem as if the linen acquired its healing power from the charitable hands that put it on. Anyone who refuses to see anything supernatural in the cure must at least concede that no surgeon could have accomplished it so speedily or so completely.

A request came to John Baptist one day on behalf of a priest who for many years had been held in close confinement at the Bastille prison. The priest had somehow got to know about De La Salle's great holiness and wanted him to come and hear his Confession. Charitable as always, John Baptist hurried off to the prison and there found a spectacle fit to draw tears: a minister of the Most High reduced to the most deplorable condition, utterly woebegone, wearing a tattered soutane and a torn shirt, black with filth and full of vermin. It was indeed a sight deserving of compassion, and it wrung the heart of the servant of God, who was affected by the slightest misfortunes of others. He embraced the penitent and was unable to hold back his tears of sympathy. He heard his Confession and comforted him as well as he could, and then, to share his sufferings, he suggested that they change clothing. The convict priest, as surprised as he was edified by such charity, quickly took off his rags while John Baptist at the same time removed his own clothing to hand over to him.

It would be difficult to say which of the two derived more pleasure from this exchange! One accepted with eager joy the clothing he so badly needed; the other deemed himself honored to wear the cast-offs of one who was a member of the body of Jesus Christ, poor and humiliated. One was delighted with his good fortune and struck by the saintly act of his charitable confessor. He had witnessed an example from which he learned, even more than from the words of counsel he had heard, to put to good use the imprisonment and misery he had to endure. He learned to transform his enforced punishment into a voluntary penance and to accept as his purgatory a place that was well suited for the expiation of his sins. His eventual death there was

more edifying than his life, which to all appearances had by no means been as holy as his sacred ministry required. John Baptist left the Bastille, wearing his mantle over the trophies of the charity that he was overjoyed to have satisfied at the expense of his self-esteem and natural feelings. He returned to the community, wearing the spoils of a victory over self that the vermin covering him, which were not easy to expel, did not let him forget for a long time! But the true reward for his act of charity was to learn that his penitent had died a few days later in dispositions of great piety.<sup>398</sup>

The charity of our servant of God knew neither limits nor exceptions; hence, it gave anyone who so wished plenty of opportunities to play him false. But those who did so were merely excused by him, if not shown additional marks of kindness. At about the time he was with the novices at Vaugirard, that is to say, at the period of the Society's greatest material want, a young swindler from Paris applied for admission to the Community. He assumed a most deceptive appearance, looking devout enough to inspire devotion in others and seemingly the personification of suffering and humiliation. He made an immediate impression on John Baptist and promptly won his heart. He was not admitted, however, without careful questioning. The Superior was wise enough not to be influenced by his own initial favorable reaction; he was afraid of making a judgment well-intentioned but too hasty, as good people are wont to do, often with unfortunate consequences. He made the young man visit him three separate times to test his dispositions. But the youth was already so adept at shamming that he seemed each time to have the same saintly air, or at least the air of someone wishing to become a saint.

So John Baptist duly agreed to admit him and fixed a day and time for him to come. The youth arrived as arranged and continued his playacting so well that when he announced that the bulk of his possessions were in pawn and that he needed only seventeen livres to redeem them, John Baptist believed him. To make his story even more convincing, the youth handed the servant of God, as a token of good faith, a watch that he said was gold but that was only a cheap

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398. Maillefer, who recounts this episode in his two biographies (CL 6, 156–57), places it during the Founder's residence at rue de Charonne in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, which would date it 1703–04. Poutet (vol. 1, 406) suggests that the priest concerned may have been François Maillefer, a Premonstratensian prior (and a relative of De La Salle) condemned to the Bastille on a false charge in 1700. But Aroz has shown (CL 27, 27–28) that the prior's innocence was established quickly and that he was released in 1701 and lived until 1716—details at variance with Dom François-Élie Maillefer's dating of the episode and with Blain's comment (not in Maillefer) that the priest died a few days after John Baptist's visit.

thing made of brass. John Baptist accepted the pledge and, looking at it in the rather poor light, deemed it a more than sufficient proof of the postulant's sincerity. So he gave him the seventeen livres needed to redeem his goods. The rascal went off well pleased with himself and was seen no more. John Baptist awaited his return in vain, but when he saw that he had been fooled, all he said was, "Thanks be to God that the young man did not ask me for more than he did. The favorable impression I had formed of him and the apparent sincerity of his words would have made it impossible for me to refuse him. He must have been in desperate need of money to have played a trick of this kind!" Such was his charity that it even found an excuse for the young rogue's behavior.

The house at Vaugirard was once in a state of absolute need, having no resources whatever. The Brother Bursar was given a letter by the Founder to take to Brother Ponce instructing the latter to give the bursar a sum of money that had been placed in his care. Ponce, a haughty individual who was later to cause such trouble for his Superior, refused to hand anything over, saying that he was not in the least interested in the directive that had been brought. When the bursar reported this remark in the presence of several others, John Baptist simply commented, "God will not bless him." It was a prediction only too well verified subsequently, indeed, almost immediately, because the disobedient Brother fell ill and showed no more willingness to obey the doctor than he had to obey his Superior. He preferred to listen to some misguided people, who told him that the real remedy for his illness was some gold dust. So nothing would do but for gold dust to be obtained for him at whatever cost. In vain did John Baptist try to disabuse him and convince him that the supposed remedy would turn out to be a kind of poison. The obstinate man refused to listen to his Superior or heed the good advice he was giving him. So John Baptist yielded and gave instructions for the remedy to be bought. The bursar, who knew full well how poor the house was, reacted with surprise to this instruction and tried as hard as he could to have it canceled. But he finally gave way to what he realized was prompted by the servant of God's charity and bought a bit of the powder at a cost of seventeen livres. This was quite an amount of money for the community, which it would have kept in food for a week. But if it cost the community dear, it cost its maverick member dearer still! It caused him to swell up so much that it seemed as if he would burst asunder. John Baptist, finding his recalcitrant disciple in this state, looked pityingly at him, raised his eyes heavenward, and heaved a great sigh. He then gave instructions for some ordinary medicine to be brought, the kind that costs no more than four or five sous and

that the community doctor usually prescribed for people who could not afford more expensive remedies. This had all the desired effect and restored the troublemaker to full health. Far from profiting by the good advice his Superior then gave him, he became a cross for him to bear. It was he who was the cause of the cruel persecution at Paris, which I have already described, when as Director of the school community, a position for which he was not fit, he outrageously mistreated a novice in the absence of De La Salle. It was he also who, when he was in Provence, whither he had forced his Superior to send him, carried rebellious insolence to the extreme limit and finally cleared off in shameful and scandalous circumstances.<sup>399</sup>

But the charity of the servant of God was by no means quenched by such disgraceful behavior. He became only more ardent and eager to render service to those who acted similarly. Brothers who left the Society against his wish and who had often tested his patience while they were in it before finally dishonoring it with a mean desertion did not lose their place in his heart. It seemed rather as if all his tender feelings were reserved for these ungrateful and unnatural sons. The majority of them fell on hard times when they left, and he, forgetting all the trouble they had caused him, went out of his way to obtain some employment for them to enable them to subsist, sometimes uncharacteristically using influence, if the expression be allowed, for the purpose. One such person had been a Brother and now lived in Dunkerque. John Baptist happened one day to be at Saint-Omer and thought in his kindness of visiting Dunkerque to offer his help to the former member. He would have done so, despite all the objections of the Brother who tells us the story, if the latter had not informed him that the deserter was now married.<sup>400</sup>

399. The part played by Ponce (Poncelet Thiseux) in the events that led to De La Salle's being deposed as Superior by the archbishop of Paris is related in book 2, chap. 18, although there he is referred to simply as "the Director of the Paris schools." It is only in the present context that the biographer identifies him by name. His *curriculum vitae* is conveniently summarized by Félix-Paul in his critical edition of the Founder's letters (257–59) and also in *Letters*. Gallego (490) thinks that Blain has been somewhat heavy-handed in his treatment of the Brother in the present context. Ponce had rendered valuable service to the Founder who had sufficient confidence in him to give him the direction of the Paris community and to send him to establish new communities at Darnétal, Rouen, and Mende (responsibilities that he fulfilled with notable success, as we learn from Blain). He seems also to have been made Visitor of the communities of the south at the same time (1708) that Br. Joseph Le Roux was appointed Visitor of the north (*Letters*, 158–60). Ponce's withdrawal from the Institute in the circumstances related in book 3, chap. 10, and recalled here must have been as great a disappointment to the Founder as that of Nicolas Vuyart had been.

## [CHAPTER 29]

*His charity exercised no less sincerely in the case  
of his enemies; his practice to the letter of the words of Jesus  
on this; some examples of the heroic degree of this virtue*

The real triumph of charity is love for our enemies; this is charity's noblest achievement, the proof that it has been stamped with the seal of Jesus Christ. This is charity of a heroic kind, which does honor to the Gospel<sup>401</sup> and manifests the spirit of the law of grace. It is the characteristic sign of true Christians, for only they, says Tertullian, can find a place in their heart for their enemies.<sup>402</sup> It is natural to love our friends, but only grace can lead us to love our enemies. A perfect Christian may have enemies, but he is an enemy to no one. This statement describes De La Salle perfectly: he did indeed have enemies, but he was an enemy to no one. There are few servants of God who had more adversaries than he had, but there are few also who in their behavior toward their adversaries proved themselves truer disciples of Jesus Christ. Has anyone ever had so many people against him as our saintly priest or suffered more cruel persecution at their hands? He had good reason to say with the Royal Prophet, "Whence is it, O Lord, that so many seek to do me harm?"<sup>403</sup> "Why is it, O my God, that ever since I undertook to carry out your designs, I see on all sides so many critics, rivals, false friends, enemies both secret and open—all rising up against me and my work, which is really your work? Why do they say that the undertaking does not come from you but springs from my vanity, is directed by my personal fancies, and is doomed to ruin because of my imprudence?"

De La Salle was esteemed, honored, and loved as long as he was a canon, but once he ceased to be one and put his hand to establishing the Christian Schools, he found the whole world against his work, a crowd of opponents and persecutors who struck him down as a victim of sacrifice is struck. He found his first enemies within the bosom of his own family, who were exasperated by the literal way he was putting the Gospel into practice. His nearest relatives turned against him and wanted no more to do with him<sup>404</sup> because they resented the

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400. Gallego (536) suggests that the Brother concerned may have been the one named Vigneron who figures in the concluding story of chap. 16.

401. Matt. 5:44.

402. Blain's marginal reference is "Tert. c. 1 ad Scapulam." He is rendering the aphorism, "*Amicos enim diligere omnium est; inimicos autem solum Christianorum*" (PL, vol. 1, col. 698).

403. Ps. 3:2 (Douai).

insult they said he had done them by failing to choose one of his relatives to succeed him in the canonry and then by making the poor the heirs to his patrimony. He found his fellow canons, all former friends, up in arms against him for what he had done. They could not forgive him for having dishonored their illustrious chapter by giving a place in it to a priest who, although admittedly a good man, was otherwise a nobody, without rank or wealth.<sup>405</sup>

Next, John Baptist experienced all the fury of the hostile townsfolk, who vented their spleen on him and his disciples, hooting at them, insulting them, and throwing stones at them. Throughout the time he remained in his native city, that is, for seven to eight years after the establishment of the Christian Schools, he could hardly appear in public there without confronting some sworn opponent. All his fellow citizens became his foes. It is true that his archbishop never directly opposed him, but neither did he at first show esteem for his virtue. It may even be that in the beginning he endorsed the outcry by suggesting that John Baptist was acting with misguided and exaggerated devotion.

We have seen that when there was question of starting classes at Rethel, Duke de Mazarin at first showed esteem for him but that this gave place to haughty disdain, and the project of a foundation was abandoned just when the contract was about to be signed. The duke's sudden and unexpected change of heart was brought about by certain malicious people whose only purpose in thwarting the benevolent project was to have the pleasure of a slap at a man whom they gratuitously disliked. John Baptist knew very well who they were, and later on he had favorable opportunities for getting even with them and making them regret the bad turn they had done him. But they had no need to fear such a thing from one who was a disciple of Jesus Christ, who taught the love of enemies from the cross by praying for those who had nailed him to it.<sup>406</sup> Our humble priest followed

404. This generalization needs to be modified in the light of Blain's own information about, for example, the visit of John Baptist's grandmother when he was ill (see above, chap. 11, note 170) and his brother-in-law's solicitude (book 2, chap. 1), referred to again in chap. 37 of the present work. Jean-Louis himself, the brother passed over (as the biographer recalls here) in the succession to the canonry, remained in contact with John Baptist, as witness the letter written to him on 3 January 1719, reproduced with commentary by Aroz in CL 41 (vol. 1, 304–19). According to Poutet, it was relatives of the Founder who came to his help in the famine periods of 1693 and 1709, help described by Blain simply as manifestations of the care of Providence without mention of the secondary causes employed by Providence (Poutet, vol. 1, 63–64).

405. Jean Faubert; see above, chap. 6, note 79.

406. Luke 23:34.

this example and never showed anything but benevolence toward the early enemies of his work. "When he was reviled, he did not revile; when he suffered, he made no counterthreats; he yielded himself to those who judged him unjustly."<sup>407</sup> He refused to allow himself the satisfaction of lodging complaints. When he came away from the Duke de Mazarin, although full of distress, he maintained perfect silence concerning what had happened. If he said anything at all about the people who had harmed him, it was only to excuse them. In fact, when another person in John Baptist's presence waxed indignant about those who had played this mean trick, he silenced him by saying that he should not look at things in this human way but adore God in everything he allowed to happen.<sup>408</sup>

France's capital city proved no more favorable to him. All the Writing Masters set themselves against him in aggressive rivalry; jealous people secretly and maliciously provoked lawsuits against him; false friends lent support to his declared enemies and thereby increased their number; persons who started by being his patrons turned into opponents. As if the ever-increasing number of enemies from outside was not a sufficient source of trouble, the Founder saw some of his own disciples turn against him and create problems within the Community. He had hardly set foot in the parish of Saint Sulpice when the same man who had urged Father de La Barmondière to call him to Paris and had gone to Reims to beg him to take over the Saint Sulpice school as soon as possible spitefully turned against him and spread the ugliest slanders to have him turned out. Nor were these calumnies whispered secretly in the ear. The person who started them wanted to spread them abroad, and he chose a well-attended meeting of lady charity workers at the presbytery as a suitable auditorium for making them known. The good parish priest heard him and was influenced by his slanderous talk to think of sending back to Reims in shame the innocent victim and his disciples. This first slanderous campaign was the beginning of a long series of deceitful and underhanded procedures that led to the storms that subsequently burst one after the other on the head of the servant of God.<sup>409</sup>

The falsehoods that led the archbishop of Paris, against his better judgment, to take steps against De La Salle were the most flagrant and dangerous because they put weapons into the hands of legitimate

407. 1 Pet. 2:23 (Douai)

408. Blain recounts this episode in book 1, chap. 11. The place in Lasallian history of Armand-Charles de La Porte, Duke de Mazarin, eccentric nephew and heir of the more famous cardinal of the same name, is studied in detail by Poutet (vol. 1, 677–706) and Hermans (*Bulletin*, January 1960, 55–63).

409. The events here summarized are related in book 2, chaps. 7–8. Poutet (vol. 2, 19–26) provides a corrective commentary to Blain's account.



higher authority and gave rise to endless vexations.<sup>410</sup> But more outrageous still were those that inflicted a shameless stigma on his reputation when a damaging court verdict forced him to flee south to Provence.<sup>411</sup> There again he found only new persecution and fresh harassment. When he returned to Paris, his old enemies were dead, but there were others to take their place, full of the same spirit and making a business of shaping crosses for him to the end of his life. In sum, from the time he dedicated himself to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, he found only enemies and persecutors in his path.

Now let us look at his behavior toward these people. It was that of a saint, a perfect disciple of Jesus Christ, a man in whom there was no sign of natural resentment, in whom self-esteem was quite dead, who was governed by the charity of Jesus Christ, and who triumphed easily over the wayward tendencies that look for revenge and maintain in the heart bitter feelings, aversion, and the smoldering remembrance of injuries received.

To love our enemies, to speak well of them, to do good to them, and to pray for them—such are four precepts of charity laid down by Jesus Christ and exemplified in his own conduct: *diligite, benefacite, benedicite, orate*.<sup>412</sup> They are of strict obligation, but they imply a high degree of perfection, and we must admit that to practice them literally, we have to be dead to our natural feelings! Charity indeed rules the heart and has its firm foundation on the ruins of self-esteem when it can sincerely forgive and entirely forget injuries received and even spare a feeling of tenderness for the offender. Charity has, in fact, reached such levels with many saints, but in the man we are writing about, it touched perfection. The most wounding thrusts of his enemies drew from him only shining proofs of charity. No man can ever have known better how to forgive. A sure way of winning his friendship was to do him an injury. Insults seemed to be the most direct way to his heart, and his kindness seemed to be reserved in a special way for those who inflicted them. Times without number, he was known to receive with respect and to charm by his winning ways people from whom he had received rebuffs. Repeatedly he calmed furious anger with a gentle word, causing people by his humble and friendly demeanor to withhold the flood of insults that came to their lips and showing himself ready to embrace those who did insult him.

410. The events concerning the deposition of John Baptist as Superior by Archbishop de Noailles of Paris occupy three chapters of the biography, book 2, chaps. 18–20. A critical study of Blain's narrative is in *Bulletin*, October 1963, 201–14, under the title, "*L'Automne de 1702 à la Grand'Maison*."

411. A reference to the traumatic Clément affair; see chap. 13, note 29.

412. Four imperatives from the Vulgate translation of Luke 6:27–28.

It is a well-known fact that honor is never more cherished than when it is threatened. Self-esteem immediately leaps to its rescue and is never short of reasons to justify its vexation and resentment. The good name of a priest, a religious superior, or a founder is a matter of public concern, and there are a hundred reasons that seem to authorize its defense. But De La Salle was trained in the school of charity, and the only revenge he was prepared to take was against himself. On a thousand different occasions, his reputation was attacked by the most atrocious slanders; it was torn to shreds in published libels, damaged by verdicts at law, blackened by calculated misrepresentations that the lying spirit is well able to color with an appearance of truth. He was attacked in his own person and harassed in the persons of his disciples. How often he was left in the lurch, betrayed, robbed, and maltreated! What weapons did he use to counter all this? Anyone less humble or less patient would have poured out written defenses, moved heaven and earth to justify himself, and striven mightily to vindicate his good name. But for John Baptist de La Salle, silence, patience, humility, and prayer made up his only apologia.

Silence was indeed his first weapon when slanders and other tribulations were heaped upon him. But we must admit that anyone who is capable of following the example of Jesus Christ, who stood silent before the lying accusations shouted at him by the Jews,<sup>413</sup> has to be master of his own heart as well as of his tongue; he must be able to control his own passions if he is to control the passions of other people. Such a man is always sure of one victory: over his egoism, a kind of victory that guarantees him peace that the world can neither give nor take away from him. His innocence, guarded by his humble silence, constitutes his true defense. Sooner or later, innocence will triumph, often even over the heart of the enemy. Silence, prompted from heaven, is a convincing proof of virtue. In the biography of God's servants, attention is always drawn to their constant and heroic observance of silence in certain testing situations. It is right, therefore, to propose for the reader's admiration some examples of De La Salle's inviolable practice of this virtue in all the circumstances that imperiled his good name and the welfare of his undertakings.

The first person who spread falsehoods about John Baptist in Paris was considered by him to be a man worthy of respect, someone to be esteemed and valued.<sup>414</sup> He took care to defend the good name of this would-be destroyer of his own good name; he excused his faults and pretended not to be aware of his backbiting. He required his disciples, who also suffered from this troublemaker's malice, to act

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413. Mark 15:4–5.

414. Abbé Compagnon; see note 409.

in the same way. A noted clergyman was asked by the parish priest of Saint Sulpice to intervene in the matter, to ascertain the facts, and to establish the truth or falsehood of the accusations.<sup>415</sup> Never once did this investigator hear from the lips of De La Salle a single word of annoyance or complaint; never did he notice a sign of displeasure with the calumniator. Of course, such constant and extraordinary charity was sufficient in itself to expose the intrigue and establish its victim's innocence. It taught the good clergyman that virtue is truly unalloyed when slander is unable to deprive it of its tranquillity, its silence, or its love for the slanderer.

Although in the eyes of Father de La Barmondière, John Baptist's innocence was convincingly established by this inquiry, that virtuous man did not completely shed the ill-feeling the slander had caused him to entertain toward the Brothers' Superior. God permitted this result to exercise the virtue of both men and to show that even the greatest servants of God can, without wishing it or being aware of it, help to purify one another's virtue. The saintly parish priest's doubts about the Brothers' Superior remained such that he decided to send him and the Brothers back to Reims, although he was the one who had brought them to Paris. This was a grave affront, potentially serious in its consequences. People would think it well merited because the man who inflicted it had such a reputation for holiness in Paris.<sup>416</sup>

But if it had any claim to be well founded, it seemed only right that John Baptist should be allowed to ask for an explanation and be free to give his side of the story. If the dismissal was not justified, he had a right to question Father de La Barmondière's good faith and protest at having been called to Paris only to be sent away now in disgrace. But John Baptist believed that it was always a good thing to be humiliated and that if he found himself in dispute with someone, it was always he who was to blame. Therefore, he showed neither annoyance with Father de La Barmondière nor disagreement with his

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415. Blain names the "noted clergyman" in book 2, chap. 8, as Abbé Janson, and adds that he later became an archbishop. Maillefer apparently did not know the clergyman's name in 1723 but amplifies Blain's information in 1740, saying that he is "Abbé Forbin de Janson, who was later to become archbishop of Arles" (CL 6, 88–89). Poutet identifies (vol. 2, 25) this as a case of mistaken identity: Jacques Forbin-Janson, future archbishop of Arles, was only sixteen in 1689. Subsequent biographers (Lucard, Guibert, Rigault, and Battersby) perpetuate the error. Poutet hesitantly suggests that the cleric may have been Abbé Besson, one of the Saint Sulpice parish clergy at the time.

416. Bossuet's reference to Claude Bottu de La Barmondière in his funeral oration of Princess Anne de Gonzague as "the saintly pastor" would perhaps suffice to justify this claim by Blain. For more substantial justification, see Poutet (vol. 1, 338–44) and Aroz (CL 41, vol. 2, 94–101).

decision. Manifesting no sign of offense at the insult he had received, De La Salle simply went to take leave of the one who had inflicted it, his attitude meek and respectful as if he were a gentle and dutiful son leaving home at the order of the father for whom his love and respect remained undiminished.

Soon after this he found himself attacked by the Writing Masters;<sup>417</sup> they declared a war on him that ended only with his death. They were obsessed with the idea that the Brothers of the Christian Schools had come to the capital to deprive them of their living. They felt justified, therefore, in arraigning the Superior before the courts, in inventing falsehoods against him when it suited their jealous and self-interested purposes, and in repeatedly creating alarm and trouble in the free schools, sometimes even disrupting and vandalizing the classes. But never did they see the humble Superior reacting in kind; never did he show stress at their behavior, allow himself a wounding word, raise his voice to object or complain, or even talk of his rights and demand compensation.

John Baptist knew quite well who was behind the bad treatment he had received from the archbishop of Paris, who deep down esteemed and liked him. It would have been easy for him to turn the tables on his persecutor by making known to the archbishop the latter's hidden motives. By revealing the intrigue at work, he could have sheltered himself from further harassment under the very authority of the prelate who had been misled. But he preferred to hold his peace and leave his cause in the hands of God rather than defend it by means that would have disturbed the delicacy of his conscience regarding charity to others. The person responsible for his troubles had no reason ever to be aware that the servant of God suspected he was the source. John Baptist maintained toward him the same attitude that he had shown from the beginning: cordial, open, frank, friendly, respectful, deferential to his authority, and trustful. It would be hard to say which of the two showed the greater persistence in his way of treating the other. One was the unrelenting persecutor unto death, sometimes cunningly disguising his procedures, sometimes being quite open and explicit. The other continued to make silence, meekness, patience, and humility his only defense. The servant of God never

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417. But not only by the Writing Masters (chap. 5, note 41). The first attack was launched by the Masters of the Little Schools, a corporation conducting private schools with carefully guarded privileges, including the right to exclude the opening of any rival school in their intake area (Poutet and Pungier, *Un Educateur et un Saint aux prises*, 7; English translation by McCarthy, 9). Blain describes this first clash in book 2, chap. 8. See Poutet's analysis (vol. 2, 83–130) of the persistent harassment by the two corporations.

appeared before his enemy with a frown on his face; never in his presence did he maintain a studied silence, looking sullen, annoyed, or upset. He never showed the slightest shadow of resentment; never in a pique avoided meeting him, speaking to him, or visiting him, and he never failed to greet him respectfully. He did not attempt to justify himself, to dispel the other's prejudices, and to open his eyes to the injustice of his behavior. He never even let anyone see what he had to suffer from so dangerous an adversary. He let all Paris believe that this enemy was his great friend, patron, and benefactor.

Yet the man I am speaking of,<sup>418</sup> full of zeal, so it seemed, for the welfare of the Institute but a secret rival of De La Salle, knew no restraint in his dealings with the servant of God. If he looked at him, it was with a haughty expression on his countenance; if he listened to him, it was only to reply in an offensive manner. He chose to use confidential exchanges to create problems and embarrassment for him, to damage his reputation, and to undermine his disciples' trust in him. Our humble priest suffered all this with steadfast patience, like a lamb for the slaughter, which cannot complain and does not even know the hand that strikes it. In his saintly way, he made use of all these things as means of merit, and this motive made him all the more careful to show respect for his persecutor and to have others respect him. It made him wish to embellish the latter's good name, to make excuses for his failings, to have recourse to his good offices, to seek his advice, and to show respectful dependence on him, together with a sincere readiness to obey him and an unshakable attachment to him. It could have been said that the Founder of the Brothers carried love for an enemy too far, if such a thing can ever be said where this virtue is concerned. We could, at any rate, claim that he should early on have severed any connection with a man who seemed sworn to destroy him, that he should have made people aware of his maneuvers and shown the man that he had no right to assume his overbearing and authoritarian attitude to someone who was in no way his inferior.

But John Baptist's behavior toward this personal antagonist was the same as he adopted to all the others, and they were not few in number but rather were to be found everywhere. No one ever heard him protest against the base conduct of the young cleric who yielded to his father's wrath and without regard to good faith, justice, or truth put his signature to a disgraceful summons charging the saintly priest with having suborned a minor. The court was completely misled on

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418. In intentionally cryptic terms! Is it Joachim Trotti de La Chétardie, as the biographers of De La Salle have traditionally supposed, or Antoine Brenier, the new candidate proposed by Gallego? See above, chap. 13, note 31.

this matter and pronounced a sentence that impugned the Founder's character, blighted his good name, and resulted in the forfeiture of his claims to a house bought in part with his own money. The cleric and his father were not the only ones with whom De La Salle had reason to feel aggrieved in this particular case, but he never complained about any of them. The lawyers who took bribes to side with his opponents, the impostor who was supposed to be looking after his interest, and the former friend who betrayed and left him—all played a part in this miscarriage of justice in spite of a statement of his case that he had put in their hands.

Reading this document, I cannot sufficiently praise and admire the way De La Salle managed to clarify the facts that malice had obscured and to separate truth from falsehood without letting one stinging or ironical comment escape his pen. There is a clarity and conciseness about this carefully composed statement, together with an almost naive directness that recalls the style of the Gospels. It puts the truth in its proper light without recrimination against his accusers, without imputing slander to them or suggesting any reason to suspect bad faith on their part. The charity of the servant of God was ingenious in finding ways of keeping a moderate tone in his defense and of asserting his innocence of the charges leveled against him in measured, modest terms respectful of the reputation of men who were blackening his good name with reckless unconcern.<sup>419</sup> When the verdict went against him because no one took his part in spite of his innocence, he accepted it in the way Jesus Christ accepted the judgment of Pilate: silently and with patient equanimity.<sup>420</sup> He made no complaint, no murmur about it. Not once was he heard to criticize the magistrates, inveigh against his accusers, or blame his lawyers; he said not a word about the person who was supposed to have acted for him in the case or the friend who had let him down.

As a virtuous priest, John Baptist was sensitive to the insults sinners offer to God, but he showed no awareness of any directed at him. He was so humble that he did not think he could be insulted; insults passed over him, and he never took umbrage. The poisoned darts of slander, outright injustice, and utter malevolence might wound his honor and damage his material situation but never the charity in his heart. Far from making much of the wrongs he suffered or even complaining to those who shared his interests, he avoided thinking or speaking about them at all. If his thoughts did return to

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419. This paragraph reinforces Blain's claim, in his earlier narrative of the Clément affair (book 3, chap. 9) to have had before him, as his source, the Founder's own written account of the episode. See above, chap. 13, note 29.

420. John 19:9ff.

the fact that he had enemies, it was only to pray for them before God and to implore the divine favor for them. He placed before God's majesty the interests of his foes as earnestly as if they were his greatest benefactors. His view of faith enabled him to see them as such because they appeared to him as instruments of sanctification. He looked on them as charitable friends to whom he was indebted for precious opportunities to imitate Jesus Christ nailed to the cross.

Charity had so taken possession of his heart and held such sway over it that I think John Baptist would have had to make a serious effort not to forget injuries done to him and not to pardon his antagonists and love them sincerely. He made no exceptions in this respect. All who despised, hurt, or abused him were equally his friends. All held the first place in his affections regardless of their personal worthlessness or the nature of the offense, injustice, ingratitude, bad faith, or sheer treachery. It might be one of his own disciples who did him harm, a penitent, a confidant, or someone greatly obliged to him. From the moment he received an act of injustice or an insult from any of them, they were sure of a special place in his affections. The story of his life has provided sufficient examples to prove this. He was abused, robbed, tricked, and even physically assaulted by disciples who resembled the son of perdition, Judas.<sup>421</sup> All he did when they deserted him was to weep for them, apparently oblivious of any injury they had done him. The Founder would kneel at their feet and beg them not to leave the Institute or implore them to return if they had already left. There were occasions when the Brothers had to take concerted action and put respectful pressure on him to dismiss renegades or decline to readmit those who had left in disgrace.<sup>422</sup>

Among the clergymen who were given hospitality by John Baptist without charge for as long as they wanted to stay was one young man who seemed to have come for no other reason than to test the servant of God's charity and to provide the devil with the satisfaction of scoring a victory over his humility and patience. The ingratitude of this person grew in proportion to the benefits he received from the Founder. His bad behavior kept ahead of the latter's virtuous acts; the more meekly, patiently, and humbly he was treated, the more proud and insolent he became. He was hotheaded, aggressive, and unbelievably arrogant, treating all the Brothers like servants and their Superior like a simpleton. He quite openly called John Baptist a dreamer

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421. John 17:12.

422. The most notable example concerns Nicolas Vuyart (chap. 13, note 33). According to Blain, Vuyart sought to be readmitted; De La Salle "opened his arms to this prodigal son" and "would have taken him back with joy" if he had not been dissuaded by "wise and prudent people" (book 2, chap. 15).

and treated everything he said as pure fantasy. He was invariably dissatisfied with what was put before him at table, although in fact he was given special treatment, receiving larger and better-prepared portions. He reacted with angry outbursts against those who served him, and if the Superior was not present, he would throw the soup and other things on the floor in front of everyone. Of course John Baptist soon heard about these scenes. He seemed to take notice only to redouble his efforts to be meek, humble, and gracious to this man, whose one object seemed to be to treat him with impertinent contempt. The Brothers were eager to get rid of this insolent and ungrateful guest, who was daily becoming more unbearable. They waited impatiently for the moment when their Superior would tire of his scandalous behavior and ask him to leave. But the holy man, although he could see that this clergyman was personally hostile and a cross for the community, showed no interest in getting rid of him. The man himself had no idea of departing, either because he was confident of John Baptist's continuing forbearance or because he was simply determined to try his patience to the bitter end. It was as if he found satisfaction in playing the devil's part in the community, and he stayed to torment it for six whole months.

[CHAPTER 30]

*His patience with the failings of his disciples; Saint Paul's praise of charity fully exemplified in De La Salle; an agent of peace and union, especially among his Brothers*

Among the Brothers who particularly tried their Superior's virtue was one who despite the great personal esteem he was shown, adopted an arrogant stance in his regard. He was insolent and demanding, and his manners were so rough and overbearing that the other Brothers were upset and embarrassed. It is not clear how this situation arose, for the man concerned, in his heart of hearts, considered his Superior a saint. He remained firmly attached to him and had no ambition to take his place, however much the idea was put to him by the Founder's enemies, who wanted to dispense with De La Salle or at least reduce him to a position of no importance. However that may be, he was an inconsiderate disciple, petty minded and lacking in virtue, and he made no small contribution toward purifying his Superior's virtue with his perpetual objections, outspoken criticisms, and domineering ways. But these characteristics seemed to command John Baptist's respect and affection. Far from getting rid of him, as the oth-



er Brothers begged him to do, he cultivated his friendship and made a confidant of him. It was with regret that he finally had to give in to the persistent representations of the community and change the Brother to a community in the south. When he had gone, the Founder missed him and reproached the other Brothers for having, as he said, taken a good friend from him.<sup>423</sup>

It is true that although John Baptist was treated in this way by certain inferiors, he was well compensated by the respectful affection and trust of the others. But I must at the same time admit that there were few of them who did not test his charity, patience, meekness, and Christlike humility, for the simple reason that there were few who, despite their progress in virtue, managed to correct and refine their rough and ready way of presenting themselves and their ungainly and disconcerting manners. Tolerance of other people's defects is one of the requirements of charity, but it is such a demanding one that it is rarely well practiced except by people who are virtuous. If we think about it, the cheerful acceptance of the shortcomings of our neighbor is even more mortifying to human nature than a tender and sincere love for our enemy, however heroic this may seem, for charitable indulgence toward those we live with has to be practiced every day and every moment of the day.

John Baptist de La Salle had been born into polite society. He was by nature cultured and refined. He had all the desirable qualities for mixing with people, all the characteristics that make for pleasant relationships. It was, therefore, no small cause of suffering to him to have to live with ill-educated people of no breeding and no great intelligence. When I think of this young canon of Reims, a gentleman's son used to mixing with the important people of the city, who were his relatives and close friends; when I consider his doctorate and the learning it stood for, together with the fact that he was by nature more inclined than the average person to prefer the conversation of people of quality and the company of wits and scholars, with a corresponding antipathy for uncouthness and vulgarity; when I think of all this, I seem to see—I have said it before—our Lord in the midst of his Apostles, bearing with the utmost gentleness and unwearying patience their weaknesses and imperfections, their crude ways of acting. Our long-suffering priest had plenty of opportunities for practicing charity when he found himself at the head of these poor teachers, oafish and coarse grained as they were. I know that later on some bright and well-bred young men of good families added to the number of his disciples. But with them came several others similar to the

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423. According to Remo and Lett, the Brother concerned was Thomas Frappet; see above, chap. 13, note 37.

earlier ones, and these provided John Baptist with endless occasions for practicing virtue. Perhaps nothing so increased his merits as this continual exercise of charity, which he personally considered one of the severest and most painful sacrifices he had to offer to God once he had given himself to the task of fulfilling the plan eternally laid out for him.

When he first associated himself with these men who were so different from him, De La Salle disregarded what they were and forgot what he had been. He was in their midst like a tender father, whose love blinds him to the shortcomings of his children or at least makes him see their weaknesses with an indulgent, patient eye. He never showed distress or seemed to notice anything amiss. Rusticity, superficiality, overeagerness, brusqueness of manner, petty-mindedness, moodiness, dirty habits—all these faults were found among them. He must have been keenly alert to them, but he managed to overcome his feelings so completely that he seemed to see nothing wrong at all. Not the least sign did he give of repugnance or natural aversion. He was a friend to all without exception, apparently able to accommodate himself to all kinds of moods without ever being moody himself. He avoided drawing attention publicly to their blunders, reproaching them when they acted indiscreetly, criticizing them, high-handedly scolding them for their shortcomings, or making them feel ashamed. On the contrary, he covered up for them as much as he could and found excuses for them whenever his duty as Superior and his concern for good order and discipline allowed.

His charity made it congenial and easy for John Baptist to listen to the endless worries of the scrupulous, to put up with the fretfulness of those who were ill, to lend a sympathetic ear to those who were troubled over something, to support and encourage the pusillanimous, and in general to be a source of comfort to everyone. It happened occasionally, especially during recreation, when the atmosphere was more relaxed, that some of the Brothers seemed to forget what he was to them and what they were supposed to be in his regard. They would become too familiar in their behavior toward him, a priest and their Superior, and even fail in respect. He seemed not to notice it at all. He was, to put it briefly, simply dead to everything that concerned his rights. He followed exactly those great precepts of Saint Paul: first, the one he calls the law of Christ, to carry one another's burdens;<sup>424</sup> second, to bear with those who are weak,<sup>425</sup> and third, to give comfort to all and render all the services called for by charity—*"supportantes invicem in caritate."*<sup>426</sup>

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424. Gal. 6:2.

425. Rom. 15:1.

To sum all this up, we may say that all the characteristics of perfect charity delineated by Saint Paul in his Letter to the Corinthians<sup>427</sup> were recognizable in John Baptist de La Salle. His charity was patient, bearing the fickleness and weaknesses of his neighbor without becoming annoyed or upset. Because it was kind and gentle, no hard or wounding words ever escaped him, and he was able to deal with a variety of temperaments with prudence and circumspection, never being heard to speak sharply or to give an acrimonious reply or a haughty command. His charity was not jealous or envious, worked no evil, was not vain or ambitious, not self-seeking or prone to anger, nor a friend to wrongdoing. This kind of God-given charity feels no envy at all for other people's good fortune, no umbrage at their success. On the contrary, it grieves for their misfortunes as if they were its own and deems itself blessed when they are blessed. Such charity is not subject to caprice or mood. It abhors sham and pretense, refuses to approve what it knows to be wrong or to encourage people to act according to how they feel. Because it is a charity that is firmly convinced of its own insignificance, it manifests only esteem, respect, and humble deference toward everyone. No task is too trivial, lowly, or humiliating to be undertaken for someone else. This charity is concerned for God's interests only; it readily sacrifices its own when a legitimate reason requires it to do so. It is never embittered against anyone and never even takes offense; whatever cause it has to be offended, it remains always tenderhearted and kind. Wrongs done to it are counted as nothing and are remembered only so that prayers may be offered to God for the wrongdoer. Far from rejoicing in iniquity or in the bad behavior of others, charity grieves over it and then rejoices when grace and virtuous conduct take its place. Charity is ready to endure all things, and its constancy in doing good is such that suffering, ignominy, or any other trial cannot cause it to waver—*omnia sufferet*. Charity is ever prone to think well of others and disposed to believe anything said in their favor, to rejoice in what pleases them, provided conscience does not object—*omnia credit*. Thus disposed never to relinquish its good opinion of others, it never despairs of the conversion of a sinner or the final perseverance of anyone whatsoever—*omnia sperat*. Finally, it shoulders all burdens with courage, never growing weary in the service of others—*omnia sustinet*.

This description of charity that we have from the hand of the great Apostle represents the lifelong charity of John Baptist de La Salle. The crowning touch was a concern for fraternal union. In the first place, John Baptist took great care to maintain it between himself and

426. Eph. 4:2 (Vulgate).

427. 1 Cor. 13.

everyone else, but especially with those whom Providence had made his companions. He did everything in his power to ensure that there would be one heart and one soul between them and him, as was said of the first Christians.<sup>428</sup> We have seen in his life that to ensure this he made every effort to accommodate his disposition to theirs, making it his pleasure to listen to their reasoning, to go along with their opinions, and to enter into their way of looking at things, always provided he could do so with a good conscience. He was opposed to confrontations and useless disputes and was never seen hotly defending his own views or stubbornly attached to his ideas and wanting everyone else to subscribe to them. Never was a more agreeable man known, one more ready to work with those whom God had given him to achieve the same end. He willingly fell in with their ways of doing things and put his own aside. We have seen how reluctant he was to arrange or decide anything on his own responsibility, how humbly he would await the views of others and obtain their votes so that he could adhere to the majority view. His advice never depended on the mood he was in, nor did he study a question only from a natural point of view. He tried instead to put aside any such consideration to leave himself responsive to God's touch and more disposed to follow other people's opinions.

It is true that he was often deemed to be an obstinate man, attached to his own point of view, unwilling ever to change course once he had undertaken something. But the people who described him in such odious and despicable terms were those who wanted to take over his Community and do things their own way, men who thought that they had a monopoly of wisdom and that anyone who did not agree with their point of view was unreasonable. They were, in fact, domineering types who wanted the servant of God to change the habit, rules, customs, and religious practices of the Brothers, to introduce innovations that would transform the Community to their liking. They had a perverse tendency to condemn and criticize anything that was not of their own doing. Nevertheless, John Baptist's conduct toward them was marked, as we have seen, only by steadfast charity, humility, meekness, respect, and a wish to be one in mind and heart with them as with everyone.

In the second place, the Superior was prompted by his charity to set a high value on peace and union in a community, and he took the greatest care to foster it among his disciples. He showed them that because they lived together, they ought to have the same spirit and to be, as the Royal Prophet says, of one mind in the house of the Lord.<sup>429</sup>

428. Acts 4:32.

429. Ps. 67:7 (Douai).

They were, he would tell them, built up on the one cornerstone that has brought heaven and earth together, by which Jews and Gentiles are made one and enemies are reconciled; as such, they should be bonded in an unchanging spirit of union.<sup>430</sup> Or he would say that they were all subjects of the one Sovereign, who gloried in the title of King of Peace and could not tolerate discord or division among his subjects;<sup>431</sup> that they were all children of the one Father, who wished to see peace and harmony ruling in his household; that being members of the one Body whose Head could not suffer dissension among them, they should have but one mind and one heart.<sup>432</sup> He liked to quote these words of Saint Paul to the Philippians:

In the name of the encouragement you owe me in Christ, in the name of the solace that love can give, of fellowship in spirit, compassion, and pity, I beg you: make my joy complete by your unanimity, possessing the one love, united in spirit and ideals. Never act out of rivalry or conceit; rather, let all parties think humbly of others as superior to themselves, each of you looking to others' interests rather than to his own.<sup>433</sup>

When the Founder noticed Brothers between whom there was any coolness, he took all available means to bring them together. If some of them told him about the trouble they were having with others, he tried to dispel their suspicions and heal their feelings of mistrust, gradually restoring peace where there had been resentment. If he perceived that there were misfits in the community, awkward characters given to sowing discord among the other Brothers, a thing the Lord detests,<sup>434</sup> he removed them as a shepherd separates a diseased sheep from the flock. His wish was to see all his disciples true children of God, loving peace, desirous of fraternal union, and making every sacrifice to obtain and foster it. "Cherish peace," he would say to them, "wherever you are; maintain it by your meekness and charity; preserve it constantly by means of self-denial and humility if you want the God of peace and charity to make his dwelling in your soul."

All in all, as the charitable father he was, John Baptist overlooked nothing to insure that charity reigned among his sons. He was attentive to this all his life, as we can see in the rules he gave them as well as in the practices of piety he introduced, which were imbued with

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430. Matt. 21:42 and Gal. 3:28.

431. Eph. 2:14.

432. Rom. 12:4–5 and Acts 4:32.

433. Phil. 2:1–4.

434. Prov. 6:16, 19.

the spirit of charity. His exhortations on the subject were frequent but not routine. He often reminded them of sayings of Jesus Christ on this virtue, telling them, for example, "It is by the love you have for one another that you will be recognized as disciples of our loving Savior."<sup>435</sup> To show how much he cherished union among the Brothers, I would have to quote long extracts from his writings and letters, in which he reinforced what he had already told them by word of mouth about the necessity and benefits of fraternal union and about the means of fostering it.

I limit myself here to one or two passages from his correspondence. To one Brother he wrote:

You are well aware, my very dear Brother, that we must have great love for one another, and for that purpose we must bear with one another in the mistakes into which we often fall through human weakness. It is in this way especially that we carry out the precept of charity, which we should all hold in great honor. We must love our Brothers in order to correct them with gentleness and affection, for otherwise a reprimand will not normally bear fruit. The Brothers have to overcome themselves to correct their faults. You too must do the same to correct yours and to give them good example. You will usually correct them more effectively in that way than by all the harsh reprimands that you can give. You must not be alarmed over those who fall into faults, but you have to draw attention to them with winning cordiality, and particularly by doing so in a few words. This is very important. Do, please, try to have an engaging manner, and make it one of your chief occupations to bring about union among your Brothers. I pray that God will grant you yourself this union.<sup>436</sup>

To someone else, not one of his own disciples, he wrote:

Dislike for our neighbor and resentment for wrongs done to us prevent our prayers from reaching God. If our hearts are torn by anger or hatred, it is impossible for us to maintain union with Jesus Christ; so, ceasing to be members of his mystical body, we cannot expect the Father to hear our prayers since he does not recognize the Spirit of his Son in us.<sup>437</sup>

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435. John 13:35.

436. *Letters*, 66.1–8.

437. *Ibid.*, 105.1.

He then offered some advice for fostering charity:

Adapt yourself with gracious and charitable compliance to all your neighbor's weaknesses, and in particular make it a rule to hide your feelings in many matters of an indifferent nature. Give up all bitterness toward your neighbor, no matter what, and be convinced that your neighbor is in everything better than you are. This will not be difficult for you if you keep even a little aware of yourself, and it will give you the ability to overcome your feelings of resentment. Each day look for every possible opportunity of doing a kindness for those for whom you feel dislike. After examining yourself on this matter every morning, form your resolutions, and be faithful in keeping them with kindness and humility. Be especially careful to anticipate the needs of those who are weak, in spite of the natural aversion you may feel. However, all must be kept within the limits of good order and the regular observances practiced in your community. If you have to refuse some request, make sure that your refusal does not cause unhappiness. Be sure to be warmly affable toward everyone, to speak to and to answer everyone with a very great gentleness and deference, keeping in mind the way our Lord spoke and replied to others, even when he was most harshly treated. Never comment on the faults or the behavior of your confreres. When others speak of them, put a good interpretation on their actions, and if you cannot, say nothing at all. Never let another take the blame in order to conceal your own guilt. Even if it was he who did the wrong and you were in no way guilty, through a spirit of charity and humility you should be quite content to let others believe it was you. Make it a habit never to defend yourself, much less conceal your guilt at the expense of others. Unless necessity obliges you, don't ever complain about others in any matter at all, and should you be obliged to do so, do not make it a formal complaint. However unreasonable the opinions and wishes of others may seem, if you cannot yield to them and at the same time keep your rules, try to satisfy them with words spoken with gentleness and humility. Should you happen to contradict someone or openly disagree with another's opinion, as soon as you realize what you are doing, if you are still speaking, stop; and if asked why, say that you had no right to speak like that. You commit plenty of more serious faults, which you will have to account for, without putting a wrong interpretation on what others do. You are full of zeal, but it is not well regulated because you want others to be reprimanded for their faults

but do not wish to be reproved for your own. Put up with the faults of others, and be generous in the interpretation you put on them. In short, take as your rule never to speak of the failings of others or to reprimand them, no matter how serious they seem to you. Whenever you see someone fall into some fault, call to mind what is said in the Gospel, “You can see the splinter in your brother’s eye, but you cannot see the beam in your own.”<sup>438</sup>

Such, in these brief extracts, is what the wish to foster union and charity prompted the saintly priest to write. Nothing seemed to him as necessary as this virtue. Every other virtue counted little for him, however attractive it might seem, if it was not inspired by charity.

[CHAPTER 31]

*His extraordinary love of God manifested in what he sacrificed and suffered for God; his admirable spirit of poverty; characteristics of poverty as he understood it; examples of his practice of this virtue; the rewards of poverty*

To be always thinking about God and constantly taken up with his interests, to be in our element when praying and continually aware of God’s presence—all this denotes an unquestionably high degree of perfection. The Lord has told us as much in these words: “*Ambula coram me et esto perfectus*—Walk before me and be perfect.”<sup>439</sup> Again, to do great things for God, after the example, say, of the valiant woman in the Scriptures,<sup>440</sup> to put our hand to heroic undertakings for the honor of God, the service of the church, and the salvation of souls, is a proof of great love. For love expresses itself in action, and when the heart is burning with love, the hands are never idle. Hence, Saint Paul refers to his apostolate in reference to the immense tasks his loving zeal led him to undertake: “*Plus omnibus laboravi*—I have labored more than all the others.”<sup>441</sup>

But charity taken to its limit is to sacrifice everything for God, to sacrifice even ourselves, and to take up our cross with a generous heart; love can go no farther, according to the words of Jesus Christ: “*Majorem hac dilectionem nemo habet*—No one has greater love than this.”<sup>442</sup> Death on the cross, the experience of Calvary, is made up of

438. Ibid., 105.2–13.

439. Gen. 17:1.

440. Prov. 31:10 (Douai).

441. 1 Cor. 15:10 (Vulgate).



three constituents: poverty, humiliation, and pain. Whoever is most deprived, most downtrodden, and most tormented is the one who most resembles Jesus on the cross. But such a person can claim to have gained the greatest fortune in the order of grace; it is he who gives God the most striking proofs of heroic love. These attributes, which are the glory of eminently perfect souls, are what we must look for in John Baptist de La Salle. Poverty, humility, obedience, mortification, patience, and meekness are all virtues abundantly exemplified and ceaselessly practiced throughout his life; they must serve now to put the final touches to our portrait of his saintly existence.

John Baptist's love of the poor was not something separate from his love of poverty. It is usual for persons who yield themselves unreservedly to the influence of grace to advance from one virtue to another. Thus John Baptist's love of the poor, which made him in some sense a father to them, led him to the further objective of a spirit of poverty. Having manifested in everything his compassion and generosity for the suffering members of Jesus Christ, he ended by becoming one of them. In him the city of Reims saw a canon reduced by his own volition to a state of poverty and destitution.

De La Salle was not one of those people who are careful and measured in their almsgiving, who keep an account of what they give to God and what they give to the poor, who bestow their offerings one by one and calculate what they need for their own use before making up their mind about what to give to others, who classify themselves as those first in need before recognizing that others are needy too, and who give away only what they have in excess. Our Reims canon was as committed to poverty as he was to the poor, and his liberality exhausted all his resources. His bounty was openhanded and he considered that he had not given away sufficiently as long as there was anything left to give.<sup>443</sup> As he understood it, the poor needed everything, but he would never need anything. Simple charity was not good enough for him; saintly prodigality was what he believed in. There was nothing in his house that he did not consider the property of the poor, and indeed he made them his heirs by passing on to them the wealth he had inherited, and this was after he had chosen a poor priest rather than someone well-to-do to succeed to his canonry.<sup>444</sup>

No age other than ours has witnessed such heroism in favor of the poor and of poverty. It was surely the source both of the blessings heaven reserved for the canon who deprived himself of all and of the high perfection to which God called him. We have the word of

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442. John 15:13.

443. See above, chap. 28, note 394.

444. See above, chap. 6, note 79.

Jesus Christ that his mercies are bestowed in the measure with which we bestow.<sup>445</sup> Divine favors follow in proportion to our generosity in almsgiving. What we give to the poor is an investment that yields interest a hundredfold: “*Foeneratur Domino, qui tribuit pauperi*—The one who makes a gift to the poor makes a loan with interest to the Lord.”<sup>446</sup> The recompense De La Salle received in this life was the great grace of seeing the condition of the poor as something to be valued, something worth striving for. He became jealous of their poverty; he wanted to become by choice what they were by a disposition of Providence, for this would give him a closer resemblance to Jesus Christ.

A compassionate disposition had been his from childhood, but it was left to the actual practice of poverty to complete the work of his sanctification. The virtue of poverty guarded him against the dangers of cupidity. Taking the Gospel at its word, he renounced the goods of this world as the first step required by Jesus Christ of all who would follow him and become perfect.<sup>447</sup> Considering the times in which De La Salle lived and the social class to which he belonged, the sacrifice he made while still in his native city, surrounded by his relatives and observed by his fellow canons and all the citizenry of Reims, was heroic, whichever way we view it. Real and effective poverty entails the experience of dire need, of shame and contempt, and of anxiety about the future. It is a virtue from which human nature recoils with horror; it takes more than ordinary grace to make a person desire to practice it.

There are certainly people who love the poor, but those who love poverty are rare indeed. To love the poor, a touch of humanity will suffice; they are our brethren, flesh of our flesh, as the Scriptures say.<sup>448</sup> Their condition deserves our compassion and inspires a tenderness for them; natural feeling speaks to us in their favor, and the plea of faith is stronger still. Jesus Christ is concealed beneath their wretched appearance, and he appeals to us in their person. Heaven has undertaken to reward with interest the least good that is done to them.<sup>449</sup> Considerations like these prompt us to love the poor and make the command to assist them easy. We would have to cease to be human, not to say Christian, not to love them.

But to love the poverty they endure is not so easy. Plenty of Christian people are naturally tenderhearted and compassionate; to them God has granted a noble and generous disposition, and they are

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445. Luke 6:38.

446. Prov. 19:17 (Vulgate), but Blain substitutes *tribuit* for *miseretur*.

447. Matt 19:21.

448. 3 John 5.

449. Matt.10:42.

openhanded in their almsgiving. But how many are there whose piety prompts them to desire the actual state of poverty, who are willing, for example, to follow the illustrious example of Saint Paula<sup>450</sup> by giving away everything they have to the poor and then begging for alms instead of bestowing them? Those dilapidated hovels that in pictures represent the stable at Bethlehem but look better suited to represent charnel houses are not to the liking of all devout people. The stark destitution that reigns there and that often is enough to draw tears is not something everyone is eager to share. The old rags that hardly suffice to cover bodies wasted with hunger and cold are not the sort of thing we are likely to envy.

It is true, of course, that no praise is sufficient for those people who charitably serve Jesus Christ in the poor, who visit them when they are sick, who comfort them in their need, and who assist not only those whose destitution is open for all to see but also, with discreet tact, those who are ashamed to let their poverty be known. We cannot speak too highly of those saintly souls who know their poor by name and are aware of their problems in detail, and so are able to help them with a solicitous but tactful charity that does not embarrass. No, let me say again, it is not exceptional to find friends of the poor among the rich, but it is exceptional indeed to find people of wealth who are eager to share the poverty of those whom they assist.

To help the poor, we need only respond to our natural feelings, but grace alone can lead us to want to share their lot. With this thought in mind, I invite the reader to reflect on the virtue of a man who at a mature age, enjoying an honorable place in society, comfort, and even wealth, opted for a life of poverty. Not the kind of poverty that people admire, like that practiced in monasteries, or a discreet poverty that stops short of real need and destitution. The poverty he chose was not the well-provided kind that can draw on resources held in common. It was the kind that entails shame, discomfort, and shortages of everything needed to live.

This is what being poor meant for the canon of Reims. It is well known that shame and embarrassment always go along with great poverty; they combine with it to make up the treasures that are found at the cross of Jesus. To be treated with honor, it suffices to be rich; to be an object of contempt, we need only to be poor. Pomp and circumstance are hardly separable from wealth, but they are likewise its

450. Blain gives no reference, but he is no doubt thinking of Saint Jerome's Letter 108, containing the "*Epitaphium aulae Matris*," in which he singles out Paula's heroic charity to the poor more than once (PL, vol. 22, cols. 878–906). See also, Thurston and Attwater, *Butler's Lives of the Saints*: "Everything it was in her power to dispose of she gave away to the poor" (vol. 1, 171).

greatest source of peril, a snare most dangerous for salvation. But humility, that rare but necessary virtue, follows naturally from the shame and destitution of poverty, certainly when this is freely chosen and inspired by the love of God. I use the terms *shame* and *destitution* to distinguish it from other kinds of poverty, less hard to bear and more likely to be admired. After all, the majority of those who make profession of poverty do so only on certain conditions and within certain limits. They have no personal possessions, but neither are they short of things held in common; they do without superfluities but not without what is necessary; they do not accumulate goods, but at the same time they do not reduce their means to the absolute minimum. I have no wish to belittle this kind of poverty; I readily grant that it derives from the Gospel and was the choice of many saintly people. But there is a more heroic way of being poor, a way that is honored by no one and entails every kind of wretchedness in this life.

It was this kind of poverty that our canon of Reims chose. He was not satisfied to be poor to gain merit for it. He wanted to have the shame of being seen to be poor, and what is still more repugnant, he wanted to be at the mercy of the benevolence of others, to eat the bread of charity, and even to go begging for it. He wanted to let the city of Reims see one of its canons voluntarily reduced to indigence and doing by choice what the poor must do by necessity. It was then that he adopted the dress of the Brothers (apart from the long soutane, which, as a priest, he always wore), a garb that at the beginning entailed a good deal of mockery for himself and for them. When De La Salle first appeared in public in this embarrassing outfit, a bizarre sight never seen before, he was treated the way that pleased him, namely, as someone whose religious fervor was affecting his brain.<sup>451</sup> Such behavior seems strange indeed to a world that disapproved of too much virtue, and if the former canon was looking for contempt, he got his fill of it. Everything he did was a reproach to the worldly spirit, and the unforgiving world accordingly ridiculed and scorned him. People who make a complete break with the world know all about this. They find they have an enemy who takes revenge by every possible kind of persecution against the virtuous behavior they hate. Such an enemy could never come to terms with a servant of God who in the century gone by openly challenged the spirit of the world.<sup>452</sup>

451. See above, chap. 20, note 133.

452. The doctrine of separation from the world in the writings of De La Salle has been the subject of renewed study in recent years, for example, by Sauvage and Campos (164–89). The Rome archive has a copy of an unpublished thesis, *Le Mépris du Monde chez Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, submitted in 1976 at the University of Louvain for the licentiate in religious sciences by Ernest Van Loo.

Surely no other man of our times has been known to adopt such a stance against worldly values, to act in a manner at such variance with the spirit of the world and with such disregard for its conventions. De La Salle's behavior was equivalent to a written condemnation of the ways of the world. His dress rebuked its luxurious fashions; his penances questioned its ways of pampering itself; the lowly condition he adopted censured its pomp and pride. He resigned his place on the illustrious chapter of Reims to take charge of a group of poor men. Penury became his lot and was destined to remain so. His poverty was of his own choosing, but it was not therefore less humiliating and shaming in human eyes. The vow of poverty now pronounced by his disciples is taken the way other religious take it, with ceremony and congratulations. Nowadays people are used to such occasions and take them for granted. This religious poverty is very meritorious, but even if it does not arouse feelings of envy in others, it can be a source of vanity in those who adopt it. But John Baptist's kind of poverty did him no honor at all in the eyes of men; only God was able to discern its worth. The surrender of his prebend and of his patrimony was an act of pure virtue, totally disregarding worldly opinion and his own natural feelings; it cut him off from any source of assistance on the part of his family, his fellow canons, and his friends. They took a poor view of his self-sacrifice; it was not the kind of thing that care for oneself and common sense approved of. Trust in Providence was now his only resource; because he had embraced poverty for the Gospel's sake, Providence was always careful to come to his aid. Yet neither he nor his disciples were spared occasions for suffering and for the practice of virtue consequent on poverty.

It was not only shame that De La Salle endured when he chose to follow Christ poor; for the rest of his days, he was to drink to the last drop the cup of suffering and hardship. Often his Community was without a bit of bread to eat, not only in times of public calamity and famine, when he and his Brothers often escaped death by starvation only because of some seemingly miraculous intervention of Providence or because they were conditioned to survive by their prolonged and rigorous penitential fasts. No, they were often short even when bread was in good supply and cheap. In saying they were short of bread, the staff of life, I mean, of course, that they lacked almost everything else needed by the human constitution. Never can there have been a poorer dwelling than the house at Vaugirard. Linen, clothing, blankets, beds, kitchen utensils, firewood, wine, all the things needed for day to day survival were either in short supply or of the quality found among the poorest of the poor. The Grand'Maison, near Paris, and the establishment at Saint Yon, the two places where

the Founder and his Brothers spent the longest periods,<sup>453</sup> were hardly any better off. Times without number, John Baptist had to put all his trust in Providence and go begging for help in his need. This might have been more bearable if his requests for alms had been received more kindly and if real help had been forthcoming. If he had caused purses to be opened in friendly sympathy when he held out his hand and explained the plight of himself and his religious family, he would have had some consolation; there would have been a few flowers amid the thorns of poverty. But such solace was rare, and when it occurred, he either could not take advantage of it or chose not to do so. We have seen in the account of his life that he was unjustly deprived of bequests and donations that Providence had arranged for him to have and that because his spirit of charity would have nothing to do with lawsuits, he simply surrendered such gifts to those who disputed his claim or who bluntly misappropriated them.<sup>454</sup>

Often when he was providing Brothers for a school somewhere, De La Salle had to leave their material welfare in the care of their heavenly Father. Some people actually thought they were already doing him a sufficient favor by giving the Brothers an opportunity to provide their charitable services to the poor free of charge. This is what happened at Rouen, as well as in other places mentioned in the biography. Matters have not by any means improved in this respect to this day.<sup>455</sup> There is no knowing what this father and his sons have had to suffer in such cases when the full implications of their destitution were felt. They were hardworking but had nothing to live on, short of everything although they never fell short in the accomplishment of their charitable services. They had to consider themselves favored if they received a shirt or two, more like hair shirts, or a few francs to keep them from starving altogether. John Baptist was often compelled by sheer need to go out and look for help at the doors of

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453. From the chronology provided by Gallego (604–13), a list of the Founder's residences can be conveniently constructed as follows: 1682–1688, Reims, rue Neuve; 1688–1691, Paris, rue Princesse; 1691–1698, Paris, Vaugirard; 1698–1703, Paris, the Grand'Maison; 1703–1704, Paris, rue de Charonne; 1704–1705, Paris, rue Saint-Honoré; 1705–1709, Rouen, Saint Yon; 1709–1711, Paris, rue de La Barouillère; 1711–1713, different communities in the south; 1713–1714, Grenoble; 1714–1715, Paris, rue de La Barouillère; 1715–1719, Rouen, Saint Yon. According to this chronology, Blain is right about Saint Yon (if the two periods are added together), but his period of residence at Vaugirard was two years longer than that at the Grand'Maison.

454. See above, chap. 13, notes 28, 29, and 30.

455. See above, chap. 13, note 26. The derisory stipend allotted in the 1709 contract was still in force when Blain was writing and for some years more, until 1744 (Rigault, vol. 2, 353–55).

people well off, a thing he greatly disliked having to do. More than once, he received short shrift and had to move off deeply embarrassed and ashamed. Then his recourse for his community's bread was at the foot of the crucifix, where he begged his Lord to keep his word regarding those who had left all things to follow him. It was his frequent experience to be in the utmost need, to go seeking help from others, and to be given only rebuffs and contempt. He could not have suffered much worse, and he must have foreseen and expected it when he opted to become a poor man. He had, in fact, foreseen it and steeled himself to it, as we have seen. He knew that the poorer he was, the more he resembled Jesus Christ. Poverty was less hard to bear when he thought of the Lord of the world, the divine Son to whom all creation was subject, being born in a stable, living a life of total destitution, and dying on the cross stripped of all things. Penury had only charm and attraction for him when he thought of all this. He felt indebted to it for the fact that he held cheap the goods of this world, that he felt free of the encumbrance of ownership and could concentrate his thoughts on heaven and occupy himself with God alone. He was able to know from experience that the hidden treasure of the Gospel<sup>456</sup> is the basis of perfection, and he considered he had obtained this treasure cheaply at the cost of his earthly possessions. He had come to know that those who are poor in spirit, who desire nothing that the world can give, are blessed indeed and that the kingdom of heaven is already theirs.<sup>457</sup> In a word, he had found the hundredfold promised in this life to those who leave all things for God.<sup>458</sup>

Poor as he was in spirit and detached as he was from the desire to possess things, John Baptist was not content merely with a poverty of high-sounding sentiment and esteem. He proved his regard for poverty by the faithful practice of what this virtue entails. The process whereby he reduced himself to a state of indigence was a first example of this, but it was by no means the last. Thus he was never ashamed of his new condition. He was delighted to appear and be treated as a poor man, and he made sure that his poverty was obvious to all. Everything used by him—clothing, furniture, room—was poor in quality and condition. His clothing had to be of the most common material, his food plain, his bed the least comfortable; nothing else would satisfy him. He did his own mending, cleaned his own room, made his own bed, whenever he used it, and did all the other menial jobs the poor have to do. Hunger, thirst, excessive cold or heat, weariness, labor, lack of essential things—all the worst effects of poverty—

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456. Matt. 13:44.

457. Matt. 5:3.

458. Mark 10:29–30.

were what pleased him and made him joyful and content. He became so used to being badly clothed, fed, and accommodated that he never gave it a thought except to thank God for it.

When De La Salle had to visit important people, he preferred to put on his most used clothing. In community the least convenient room had to be his, or he was not content. Whatever was cheap, in bad condition, typical of a poor man, was always right for him. In a word, he accepted joyfully all the occasions of suffering that penury entails. He had not looked for a kind of poverty that is short of nothing essential and is not looked down upon or otherwise disagreeable to bear, and this was not the kind he had found and come to cherish; his was nothing but shame, discomfort, and suffering.

He liked to say, with a touch of humor, that poverty is the best kind of wealth to have because it is of no interest to robbers. He accepted whatever was essential for his use as a poor man accepts an alms. This was his attitude when he came to the table, a beggar invited in and offered a meal in charity, happy with everything put before him and oblivious of anything missing. Thus he sometimes had nothing but soup because he was overlooked when the main course was being served; sometimes he was forgotten when the bread was given out, or if there was bread, there was no meat to go with it. To show that he owned nothing personally, the Founder used only terms employed in religious communities to signify common ownership—terms, in fact, that the Brothers now use.<sup>459</sup> He was not pleased if one of the latter spoke of something as if it were his. Thus, on one occasion a Brother brought back to him a pair of stockings the Superior had asked him to repair,<sup>460</sup> and he said without thinking anything about it, “Here are your stockings mended, Father.” “My stockings?” was the somewhat heated reply of the one who had taken the Gospel teaching on poverty quite literally. “Brother, there aren’t any stockings that belong to me!” He never had anything that he thought superfluous, which meant, for example, that if the community was extremely poor and the occasion arose when he needed to have his stockings repaired, he would wait in his room until they were brought back to him rather than use a second pair.

He wore his soutanes for as long as they could be worn at all, until they indeed began to fall apart. Anything he had for his use was only fit to be thrown away when he had finished with it. One day he traveled to Reims in his usual poor cassock and wearing his usual old hat with its huge brim drooping down all round. The hat was like

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459. See above, chap. 23, note 251.

460. Although Blain has assured us a few lines previously that John Baptist did his own repairs.



those worn by the Brothers, the sort of thing likely to make his relatives ashamed of him and to keep other people amused. So the Brother accompanying him persuaded him to buy another on the way and to leave his own behind in the shop to be thrown away. But when they got to Reims, one of the Brothers there heard about this, thought it a pity to lose the hat that had been used by John Baptist, and went to retrieve it. "There it is," said the hatter, showing it to him, hanging behind a door. "Take it, and get what you can for it!" The Brother gave it one look, changed his mind, and returned home feeling embarrassed. The hatter enjoyed the incident and amused people by telling them about it. The story got about the town, and one of the De La Salle relatives, all upset, called at the Brothers' house to complain that this sort of thing was a disgrace for the family.

When the servant of God spent some time at the Paris Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet a couple of years before his death, he left behind some underwear; it too was fit only to be thrown away. He never asked for replacements for anything. He left it to Providence to supply his needs through the Brothers; he accepted as a pauper receiving an alms and as an act of religious obedience whatever they gave him. The Brothers found it difficult, however, to get him to accept anything new. They had to use all their ingenuity and even a bit of force to take his old things away from him. "They are good enough for a poor priest," he would say, sometimes adding, "If we keep repairing things, we can get more use out of them. We are not trying to please worldly minded people." Some articles were repaired so often that they either had hardly any shape left or were uncomfortable to wear. This was especially the case with his stockings, which were made of the same coarse material as those of the Brothers.<sup>461</sup> They were so patched and stitched that they provided more mortification than warmth to his feet. His outer garments, that is, his soutane and his long cloak, although often repaired with large patches, were respectable enough but were of no use to anyone else when he had finished with them. The two soldiers who waylaid him one day to take these from him were trapped instead, and they gave him back both the soutane and the cloak, annoyed to find themselves with spoils a beggar would have scorned.<sup>462</sup>

461. The 1718 Rule of the Brother Director has two appendices: "*Des habits des frères*" and "*De la nourriture des frères*." Article 1 of the first reads: "The Brothers of this Institute will wear clothing betokening poverty and simplicity, although always decent and becoming. The habits will be made of common, rough, black serge, and the stockings will be of the same material" (CL 25, 160).

462. This is no doubt the same incident as the one related in chapter 13, even if the "robbers" there are now "soldiers" and the rejected spoils include the soutane with the cloak.

There was an incident in Calais on the feast of the Assumption, the day when, as I have related,<sup>463</sup> De La Salle was pressed by the dean to officiate at the parish liturgy and could not decently refuse. His soutane at the time was so threadbare that people could see what he was wearing underneath, which was no better! The clergy present were surprised to see a former canon of Reims dressed more poorly than even the poorest priest in their diocese; accordingly, another soutane was provided for him so that he could celebrate the liturgy becomingly dressed. He withdrew to a corner of the sacristy to change, and the Brother who was his traveling companion collected the discarded soutane to put it in their bag. John Baptist stopped him from doing so without saying why, but it was easy for the Brother to guess why, so he just put the garment in another corner, out of sight. On another similar but more auspicious occasion, he was forced to discard his old, worn-out cloak and accept a better one from a kind-hearted bishop,<sup>464</sup> who was touched to see a former canon of Reims, who had been his fellow student at Saint Sulpice, in such a pitiful garb.

When his clothes became so old that he was obliged to accept new ones, he agreed to do so only if they were poor in quality, that is, of cheap and rough material, sewn with plain thread, not silk. As for his sash, they had to go from one shop to another in Paris to find one suitable, that is, of poor enough quality; he had stopped wearing not only silk ones but even ordinary woolen ones, deeming them all too fine and rich. Any he accepted had to be short and narrow, and when they broke he tied the ends together. One day, when he was in need of a sash, one of the Brothers, who had worn one as a clerical student and knew about such things, offered to go to find a new one for him, saying that he would be able to judge the price and the quality. But his good Superior, being so truly poor in spirit and liking only what was simple and ordinary, was afraid this Brother would bring him something too good. He thanked him for his kind offer but said that he would ask another Brother to go, one who understood better what was wanted. He then called aside the one he considered best suited for the errand and gave him fifteen sous to buy the kind of sash he liked, telling him where he would find one and ordering him not to talk about this. After plenty of searching, one was found to his liking, but the first Brother did not like it at all. The sight of it offended his eyes, and he let his tongue run away with him so far as to say to his Superior, "What kind of imbecile bought that piece of string for you?" "He was someone who knows more about these things than you do," replied the holy priest, reducing him to silence.

463. In chapter 5 (see note 63 there).

464. Godet Desmarests, of Chartres; the incident is in book 2, chap. 15.

John Baptist's shoes matched the rest of his outfit. Their roughness and sheer weight, together with the leather laces he fastened them with, did honor at least to his poverty. He was once returning from Reims to Paris during a thaw, which had made the road almost impassable. His shoes came off in the mud, and he had to leave them, not that they were any loss, for they were completely worn out before he set off. But it meant that he had to walk shoeless to the next village. When he got there, he had the consolation of finding a pair of shoes that perfectly suited his liking for mortification. The uppers were as hard and thick as a board; the heels were meant for boots, and there were three thick soles stitched on top of one another and reinforced with over a hundred hobnails. In a word, they were just right for John Baptist. They might just as well have been made to his specifications! Of course, he bought them to finish the journey. When he arrived in Paris and the Brothers saw the fine pair of shoes he was wearing, they immediately found another pair for him to ease his feet. They were curious enough to weigh the ones they took from him and found that they came to about five pounds.

It was the same understanding of poverty that made De La Salle keep the same pair of breeches for fifteen years. They were so patched that the original garment had quite disappeared. But, as I have already mentioned, he took care to combine cleanliness with his poverty. Although all his clothing was cheap, of poor quality, and coarse, there was nothing dirty or unseemly about it; everything was neat and presentable. It pained him, in fact, to see any of his disciples negligent about their appearance. Such negligence may sometimes indeed be prompted by virtue, but often it comes from laziness and is offensive to modesty and a proper sense of decorum. John Baptist was opposed to any kind of affectation; an excessive concern for personal appearance met with his disapproval, just as much as would a secret wish to make a good impression with an exterior suggesting poverty and humility. To one Brother who seemed too preoccupied about how neat he looked, he said, "Are you trying to impress people? If you are, you are no servant of Jesus Christ. We have not withdrawn from the world to copy its ways but to discard them and its maxims." But he would not accept the spirit of poverty as a justification for too obvious a carelessness about how they looked; according to him, if laziness was not at the root of this, the cause was a wish to be different, a kind of vanity hypocritically concealed under an appearance of virtue.

The only articles the Founder kept for his personal use were a New Testament, *The Imitation of Christ*, a crucifix, and a rosary. These were all he allowed his disciples, so he did not want to have

anything more himself.<sup>465</sup> When it was sometimes pointed out to him that his room, if that word could be applied to the hole he chose to occupy, was too bare, he would reply, “My goodness, what are you saying? Isn’t a room well furnished when it contains a copy of the Gospels, where you can discover the treasures of eternal life whenever you wish? Was not this the rich furnishing of the anchorites, the store from which they drew the precious virtues adorning their life?”<sup>466</sup>

I have just remarked in passing that the rooms he chose to occupy hardly deserved the name, but it often happened that he had none at all for his personal use. If he was in a Brothers’ house where the accommodation was tight, he refused to have a private room and was content with the common sleeping quarters. In other houses he used some kind of cubicle that was fully occupied when he alone was in it or some other inconvenient and comfortless spot. The room he occupied at Saint Yon and in which he died was more like a small stable. Its floor was a foot below ground level, and its general appearance and shape, and also the odor in it, made a person think of a stable when he entered it. The impression was that it must have housed some animal before providing accommodation for the Founder of the Brothers. In fact, being immediately contiguous to where the animals were kept, it smelled like it.<sup>467</sup>

John Baptist’s powerful attraction for the holy virtue of poverty made him want to die in a hospital among the poor.<sup>468</sup> It was a wish that would certainly have been fulfilled in 1690, if his request at that time had been granted. This was during the serious illness that threatened his life. He repeated his request for days, with no lack of persuasive reasons for his wish or of insistence that it be granted. The only thing that finally stopped him from asking was the realization that his disciples were hurt that he should want such a thing.<sup>469</sup>

465. See above, chap. 23, note 250.

466. Modern commentators demonstrate De La Salle’s thorough familiarity with the New Testament (Sauvage, *Les citations néotestamentaires*, CL 1, 1961; Varela, *Sacred Scripture in the Spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*, 2000; Campos, *L’Itinéraire évangélique*, CL 46, 1974).

467. If this description seems overdrawn, bear in mind that the biographer knew the room at first hand.

468. The physically and spiritually insalubrious conditions of the hospitals for the poor at the time are reflected in the article introduced into the Rule in 1718 (chapter 22, articles 2 and 3): “It will not be allowed for sick Brothers to be taken to hospitals. Care will be taken that they have a very charitable infirmarian to minister to all their needs with affection and tenderness, who will give them exactly and at the proper time the remedies and nourishment that they need. When necessary, the sick will be looked after during the night” (CL 25, 81).

I must say in praise of evangelical poverty that De La Salle found already in this life the treasure hidden within it, the hundredfold promised by Jesus Christ to those who leave all things for his sake.<sup>470</sup> As I see it, the hundredfold consisted in the abundance of graces that made the way of perfection easy for him, in the supernatural strength that enabled him to rise above even the gravest afflictions of his life, and in the generous detachment of spirit that made him indifferent to this world's goods. Having shed the burden of wealth, he was able to run, or rather wing his way, along the testing route to perfection with an agility that we cannot but admire in studying his life. Well may we apply to him these words of *The Imitation of Christ*: "*Suaviter equitat quem gratia Dei portat*—He rides easily who is carried by the grace of God."<sup>471</sup> Having deprived himself of everything, John Baptist found the fullness of God's gifts, an attraction for retreat and prayer, so strong and delightful that he passed days and nights in the enjoyment of it, finding a kind of paradise in the midst of his daunting penances. Heaven-sent strength dominated the weaknesses of his human nature and enabled him to sense the presence and help of the Almighty in his worst misfortunes and most painful and humiliating trials. He could well say, with the Apostle Paul, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me."<sup>472</sup>

Because he had made the same sacrifice as the Apostles, his heart, we may say, became like theirs. He had no further concern, longing, or taste but for God, and he looked on the things of this world as so much dross.<sup>473</sup> He was interested only in the glory of God, the salvation of souls, and the welfare of religion; his one ambition was to grow more like Jesus Christ; the only good fortune that he recognized was what led to Calvary and the cross. Like others who preached the faith and reinforced their preaching by the example of a virtuous life more than by their eloquence and miracles, he showed

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469. The date 1690 should be 1691. As Blain relates in book 2, chap. 9, the Founder suffered his first bout of serious illness at Reims "toward the end of 1690." When he had partially recovered, he set off for Paris against the doctor's advice and was obliged to take to his bed on arrival. After a period of six weeks, his condition became critical, and it was during this illness that he "begged his disciples to have him brought to the charity ward" of the hospital "and thus be rid of him." It was also on this occasion that the celebrated Dutch doctor, Adrien Helvetius, made his first appearance in the Founder's life; his subsequent visits on behalf of John Baptist and the Brothers prompt a fervent eulogy from Blain in book 3, chap. 7.

470. Mark 10:29–30.

471. *The Imitation of Christ*, book 2, chap. 9.1.

472. Phil. 4:13.

473. Phil. 3:8.

no more anxiety for the welfare of his Institute than he did for his own life. He gave no thought to making it secure, putting it on a sound financial basis, or acquiring resources for it.<sup>474</sup> His one concern was to make it rich in holiness. He overlooked its material interests and seemed to give no more thought to them than to the mud in the street. He was content if he and the Brothers had some clothing to wear and some food to eat.<sup>475</sup> He wanted them to be detached from the goods of this world, which they had left behind, for he was convinced that the mere desire for riches is a way of being rich and that such a desire leaves them open to Satan's temptations and snares and to many of the vain and futile longings that draw a man to perdition.

From all this came his indifference to the wrongs that prejudice and injustice inflicted upon him. To those who stole his mantle, he gave his tunic as well.<sup>476</sup> He was so happy to be poor that on one occasion he would not let the Brothers give chase to some thieves who had robbed the community. In the same way, he showed no reaction when his classroom furnishings were pillaged, and he refused to go to law over what he had lost. When some Brothers told him how poor their community was and how much they were suffering as a result, he answered them with the words of the devout Tobit: "You must not be afraid or discouraged. It is true that we are poor, but do you not know that we will have plenty of good things if we fear God, avoid sin, and do only what is right and all that God asks of us?"<sup>477</sup> In such ways he encouraged the Brothers and himself to love holy poverty.

There was, for example, the case of a Brother who was sent to make a new foundation and who wrote back to him one day to tell him that everything was lacking. He encouraged the Brother to make the best of it in these words:

You must love poverty, my very dear Brother. Although he could have been rich, our Lord was very poor. So you must imitate this divine model. But it seems to me that you want nothing to be

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474. An attitude exemplified by his refusal of Bishop Godet Desmarets' offer to obtain Letters Patent (chap. 13, note 61). Another instance of the Founder's detachment in this respect (based on his trust in Providence) is related by Maillefer (in 1740) but not by Blain. When James II visited the Irish boys whom De La Salle had taken under his wing, the Brothers used the opportunity to ask the monarch to mediate with the pope for the Bull of Approbation. They had often conferred with the Superior, says Maillefer, about the need to obtain such a document, but his reply was always that they were worrying too much and that they should await the moment of Providence.

475. 1 Tim. 6:8.

476. Matt. 5:40.

477. Tob. 4:23.

lacking which will give you pleasure. Well, who wouldn't be poor under those conditions? Would not the great and powerful ones of the world give up all their riches to enjoy an advantage that would make them happier than the princes and kings of the earth? Please remember that you did not join the Institute to enjoy every comfort and satisfaction but to embrace poverty and its consequences. I say its consequences because there is no point in loving virtue unless you love all that comes with it and gives you the means of practicing it. You say you are poor; how much pleasure it gives me to hear you say that! For to say you are poor is to say that you are happy. "Happy are you who are poor," our Lord said to his Apostles. I say the same to you. How fortunate you are! You say you have never been so poor; so much the better. You have never had so many opportunities for practicing that virtue as you do now. In this regard I could say to you what a great pope once replied to a Jesuit who was explaining the great poverty of his community, which, he said, had never been so poor. "So much the better for you," he replied. "The poorer you are, the better off you will be." Riches have a corrupting influence on the hearts of good religious, and the careful observance of the vow of poverty is one of the greatest blessings a religious community can enjoy.<sup>478</sup>

In the writings he left his sons, the Founder has the following:

Let us cherish poverty as Jesus loved it, as the surest means we could take for advancing in perfection. Let us always keep ourselves disposed to beg, if Providence should so require, and to die in extreme misery. Let us possess nothing, dispose of nothing, not even of ourselves. Let us strive to be detached and to lose everything, that we may be like Jesus Christ, who, through love for us, spent his whole life in want. This has been the practice of all the great saints, such as the Apostles and a great many others, who withdrew from worldly society and labored for the salvation of souls. Let us imitate them in their contempt for temporal goods, since our state and duties resemble theirs. Let us have nothing of our own; let us look upon everything we have as being common to all our Brothers, give up or hand over whatever is asked for without a qualm. Let us deprive ourselves as far as possible not only of what is superfluous but even of what is useful and necessary, and be content when we lack something.<sup>479</sup>

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478. *Letters*, 38.4–9; the last sentence that Blain includes in his quotation is not in letter 38 in the English edition.

Saint Chrysostom, who had great admiration for the Prophet Elijah because of the vigor of his speech and the effectiveness of his warnings, said:

No one was poorer than Elijah, and yet he made impious kings tremble, and his word was law in Israel. He held off the rain or caused it to fall, closing and opening the heavens as if with a key. He was forced to flee to the wilderness and hide in a cave when he lacked everything. But how powerful he was! What fear he inspired! His words were like fire consuming his enemies, but his strength came from his destitution—*Omnia vincebat quia pauper erat*.<sup>480</sup>

Something of the same could be said of De La Salle, although there was a difference in that the victories he won by being poor were over hunger, thirst, nakedness, injustice, and all kinds of misfortune and misery. This was so because his poverty enabled him to be always content, always at peace in the midst of so many reasons for concern. An abundance of heavenly favors made up for the stings of destitution, for the heart is rich when it is content, and it is always content when it centers its longings on God. If it is true that there was no priest poorer than De La Salle, it is also true that none was happier. “Having nothing, he possessed all things—*Nil habentes et omnia possidentes*”<sup>481</sup> because he had God. A heart that would not be satisfied with possessing the sovereign good would be greedy indeed.

When all is said, then, there are two kinds of poor people: those whose perspectives are earthbound and those who are poor for the Gospel’s sake. The first are dissatisfied with their lot and jealous of their neighbor’s good fortune. They expect nothing from this life but fail to center their hopes on the next. They voluntarily surrender to cupidity and are therefore neither happy in themselves nor guiltless before God. The second have made themselves poor, shedding the burden of wealth and seeking another kind of riches in its place. They are satisfied to look to God alone. To seek him more freely, possess him more surely, and love him more sincerely, they surrender all things and make poverty their treasure. They have a patrimony all the more

479. The passage is the article on poverty in “The Principal Virtues That the Brothers Should Strive to Practice” (CL 15, 92–93; *Collection*, 75). Blain’s transcription is faithful in the main, except that for no obvious reason, he changes the Founder’s second person plural to first person plural throughout.

480. Blain gives no reference. The passage is a free conflation of an extract from Chrysostom’s second *Homilia de Statuis* with one from *Contra Anomoeos* 8 (PG, vol. 49, col. 46, and vol. 48, col. 768).

481. 2 Cor. 6:10 (Vulgate).



precious because it guarantees true security. It is difficult to be rich and to be attached to riches without failing in justice, whether by keeping everything for ourselves and giving nothing to the poor, by adding to our riches at the expense of the poor, or by callously spurning the poor as people whose presence is unbearable. When a rich man is wicked, it comes to this: he keeps his purse well closed against the needs of the poor, turns his eyes away from them, and feeds and grows fat on what belongs to them. Hardness of heart, injustice, and cruelty: these are the pitfalls of wealth, the dangers it threatens.

The fear of these dangers has led so many to holiness. They took the first step along this way by welcoming the poor and sharing their goods with them. Then with an ingenuity inspired by their charity, they reduced their own needs to provide for the poor. Finally, they deprived themselves of everything in favor of the poor, and as if envying their state, they made themselves poor like them. Those are the three stages by which perfect poverty is achieved, and they are those we have witnessed in practice in the Founder of the Christian Schools.

[CHAPTER 32]

*His humility as the second proof of his sacrifices for the love of God; his humility seen in the lowly way of life he adopted and the contempt it brought him; his tranquil acceptance of humiliations; his dismay with honors; the enlightenment he received because of his humility; examples of his humility*

How is it that persons who are most favored in the sight of God and most elevated in the order of grace are the least important people of all in their own eyes and always look to be placed after everyone else? They alone are unaware of their own virtues, and it bothers them if they find themselves considered virtuous by anyone other than God. If other people treat them like saintly persons, it makes them feel hypocritical.

Of course, this lowly opinion of themselves keeps faithful guard over their virtues. They are masterpieces of God's grace, but they are never more estimable in his sight than when they are without esteem in their own. Were they to change this idea of themselves, God would change his view of them; the higher he raises them, the more lowly does he wish them to regard themselves; the more he caresses them, the more they must condemn themselves. The profusion of heaven's favors ceases when it is no longer balanced by humility. Yet it is difficult for anyone who is esteemed by everybody not to think there

must be a reason for it! When God authorizes such esteem by granting favors and graces of the first order, how is the one concerned to contradict and disapprove of it, even in his own mind?

But in fact this humble opinion that the saints have of themselves and that seems an enigma to some people is not so difficult for them to cultivate. After all, the nearer they are to truth, the more do their grounds for vanity dwindle. Measuring themselves against the greatness of God causes them to diminish in their own estimation, becoming so small that they finally lose sight of themselves completely. If heaven and earth are awed in the presence of the infinite Being, we should not wonder if limited and imperfect human beings, however holy they may be, find that they are as nothing before him. The holiness of God makes them conscious of what they are; it serves as a bright mirror in which they see their own insignificance, their sins, and their wretchedness. The nearer they approach it, the more blameworthy they see themselves to be, the more aware of their uselessness, the more convinced of their unworthiness.

If this is the explanation of the mystery of the saints' humility, we need not be surprised to find that De La Salle, a man of distinction and merit, rich in grace and virtue, was always as nothing in his own sight, showed only disdain for himself, was always eager for the lowest place, was happy to be subordinated to others, and found contentment only in obscurity and humiliation. Five factors contributed to his training in this virtue of perfect humility, which places a person in the blessed state of self-annihilation deprived of self-esteem, or supposedly so. These factors are the lowly way of life he adopted, the contempt he suffered in consequence, his search for self-knowledge, his practices of self-humiliation, and the enlightenment he received from God. Humility is so rare and difficult a virtue that it does not normally take form in a soul except by a combination of these five factors. The only other way would be by divine infusion.

A mean and lowly way of life is not necessarily proof against pride, but we must agree that it hardly nourishes or encourages it and that it rather favors humility and the acquisition of this virtue by those who so desire. If it is true that honors change a man's way of behaving, that important responsibilities make a person haughty, and that a notable stroke of good fortune puffs up the soul with vanity, nothing can more suitably counter these effects than a way of life that is despised, humble, and abject. Those who live such a life learn to think of themselves as they should because they are in no position to hear praise of themselves, bestow favors on people, or otherwise make their authority or importance felt. But when people have an honorable place in life and are looked up to, they find vanity creeping in to

their heart, no matter how eager they are to keep it out. It is the lowly station that enables a well-disposed person to take a humble view of himself and shed self-esteem.

So it was that De La Salle, when deprived of his possessions and downgraded, so to speak, to the lowest rank in the church, found it easy to acquire the heartfelt humility that grace has difficulty inducing in those upon whom fortune smiles. He passed from the rank of canon of the cathedral of Reims to that of teacher, from wealth to penury, from what the world deemed a happy state in life to one it deemed miserable. Accordingly, it was easy for him to make his own the sentiments that Christian humility inspires. The Holy Spirit found no difficulty in bringing about in him a spiritual transformation corresponding to what had taken place exteriorly.

Because it is usually easy to subscribe to what people in general think, to side with the majority, it was no problem for John Baptist to add his vote to those of the world concerning him, to think of himself as the world thought of him. The world thought and spoke of him only with scorn; he was a target for its mockery, lies, wrath, and harassment. Everything about him was deprecated, called into question, and condemned. Every move was watched so that it could be ridiculed. Even those who were less hostile thought they were not being too hard on him if they just enjoyed the fun. But the saintly priest gained something from this general disfavor: he reconciled himself to God's purpose by hiding his heroic practice of virtue beneath a cloud of humility. He set his opinion of himself below the level of that accorded him by others. He capitalized on people's judgments of him by making them reinforce the adverse view he had of himself.

De La Salle gathered all their manifestations of disdain as so many flowers to form a crown of humility more precious to him than all the diadems of glory with which the world crowns its princes. From what people said of him, he sought to acquire perfect knowledge of himself, but because they said nothing to his credit, he grew to disparage himself. He excluded entirely the good opinion of self, the secret and excessive self-esteem, and the fatal attachment to excellence that we inherited from our first parents and that Baptism did not eradicate. The more he pondered before God what the world was saying about him, the more reason he found in it to humble himself. Even in their blackest calumnies and most blatant fabrications, he discovered elements of truth that convinced him that the ill spoken about him was less than it should be and that if people could see in him all that he saw himself, their contempt would be redoubled.

Because he was sure that people did not treat him as badly as he deserved, De La Salle added voluntary humiliations to their acts of

contempt. He made a thorough study of this and raised it to a fine art, reaching such a degree of perfection that he became able to turn everything to his disadvantage, to find opportunities of being scorned wherever he went, earning the taunts of all kinds of people. Grace prompted him to act thus, and to be faithful to it, he watched for and used every occasion that might offer a humiliation. He had an overpowering desire to be ranked lower than everyone else, and he greatly resisted any contrary moves. There was nothing he did not think of to damage himself in the eyes of people and to sink in their esteem. The only thing that made him willing to appear among them was the possibility of more insults. What he liked when he was out in the street with the Brothers was for people to throw mud and stones and to hoot at him. By such treatment, which was frequent, he felt that justice was done to him, and he was content to think that the world was avenging God for his sins. It was his pleasure to make known anything that could take away any esteem people might have for him. He was more forward in revealing his faults and more fluent in exaggerating them than the rest of us are to hide or make light of ours. He never failed to disparage himself when others tried to praise or honor him in some way. When he did speak thus of himself, he really wanted to be believed, and he omitted nothing that could convince people; he was quite different in this regard from people who speak ill of themselves only to provoke the praise of others!

For there is such a thing as false and hypocritical humility, which deprecates the self only to gain other people's esteem and, so to speak, uses a person's faults to buy compliments. Those who do this would be greatly annoyed if their hearers believed the ill they spoke about themselves! A genuinely humble person is not just using words when he says, "I am a sinner;" he believes it and wants others to believe and say it. When De La Salle used such words, they came from the fullness of his heart, but only as the occasion called for it. His general practice, instead, was to forget himself and cause others to forget him by never saying anything at all, good or bad, about himself. He ignored this rule only when someone failed to observe silence, as he desired, about anything redounding to his praise.

The abject way of life that he had adopted seemed to authorize everyone to humiliate him. Quite virtuous people, no less than others, often forgot themselves and took the liberty to treat with disdain this man who was worthy not only to be respected by them but also to serve as a model for their imitation. One such person was the parish priest of Saint Nicolas in Rouen. He was displeased because the Brothers in his parish did not assist at the ceremonies in his church on feast days and Sundays, and he wrote John Baptist a letter full of

offensive remarks about him and his Community. This gentleman, however, was not unaware of the legitimate reasons for the Brothers' absence from the parish services. He knew that on the days concerned the Brothers were engaged, as required by their Rule, in conducting their pupils to the parish churches where the schools were situated and that it was not possible for them to be present at his. His letter was so offensive that the servant of God seemed quite staggered when he read it, and he said that he would never have believed that this parish priest could allow himself to show such violent passion. However, respectful as always of authority and having no other will than that of his superiors, the Founder went to the archbishop's residence, not to complain but to submit the case to the vicar-general and to explain a matter that had caused such embitterment in a parish priest who was one of the most correct and zealous in the diocese. When the situation had been made clear, the question was decided in favor of the Brothers, and judgment was given that they should continue to follow a rule which was of such advantage to their pupils.<sup>482</sup>

About the year 1708, the royal Intendant at Rouen received a number of complaints against the Brothers with reference to their pupils and the interneers at Saint Yon. He decided to go there in person, together with the First President,<sup>483</sup> to put these complaints before

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482. The story is told in detail (and not without humor) in book 1, chap. 13, where the biographer also relates two other cases of similar dispute with the pastors of parishes in which the Brothers' community residences were situated. It seems that in each case the pastor was partly motivated by the wish to have the benefit for the good of the parishioners of the Brothers' edifying presence at the services. In John Baptist's view, the pupils in their parish churches had the first claim to the Brothers' edification and pastoral care.

483. Nicolas-Pierre Camus de Pontcarré. Aroz summarizes Blain's information about him thus: a fine type of magistrate, a wise counselor of the Brothers at Rouen, a defender and personal friend of their Founder, and a protector of their Institute. He defrayed the expenses of the transfer of the novitiate to Saint Yon, supported the introduction of the Brothers to Rouen in 1705, laid the foundation stone of the chapel of the Child Jesus, and advised in favor of opening the reformatory section at Saint Yon. He honored with his friendship Brother Joseph (Brother Barthélemy's Assistant) and showed esteem for the Brother in charge of the gardens. He made the grounds of Saint Yon his favorite place for a walk, relaxing there from his preoccupations and reflecting alone with God (CL 42, vol. 1, 421).

Pontcarré's official title was *Premier Président du Parlement de Rouen*, a parlement being the chief judicial body of each major city of the realm. A Royal Intendant was the direct representative of the King in a regional center; he had the duty of local oversight and implementation of royal decrees. When De La Salle's work was developing, there were thirty-one Royal Intendants distributed throughout France, ten of whom (those of Aix-en-Provence,

the Founder and to find out exactly what truth there was in them. At the time John Baptist was unwell and confined to his poor, small room, but the two men went in and stood before him. The President spoke first saying, "The Intendant is here to inform himself thoroughly on your establishment and about what is done here, especially to find out what truth there is in what he has been told. He has received several representations against your Brothers and regarding the boarding students you have here. It is said that some of your teachers are incapable of teaching, that you are harming the professional teachers, and that you feed your boarders very badly, even though you are receiving large fees from them." John Baptist, humbly self-possessed as always, replied:

Sir, I make bold to assure you that matters concerning this community are not at all as bad as you have been given to understand. We allot each member of the community the duties that suit him according to his area of competence. Some are novices, occupied only with their religious training and with acquiring the spirit of their vocation and the virtues appropriate for them. Others are serving Brothers, who attend only to the temporal business of the community, and because they are required to do only menial tasks, they are not expected to be versed in reading and writing. Third, there are young men who are beginning their training as teachers in the junior classes under the guidance of the more experienced masters, who are in charge of the seniors; these younger men are not fully entrusted with their work until they are quite competent, and then they come under the direction of an enlightened and prudent Director, who ensures that each carries out his duties well and who is required to furnish reports on their progress.<sup>484</sup>

With regard to our boarding students, the food they receive is related to the fees they pay. Some pay 100 livres; others, 150; there are some who pay two, three, or four hundred or even more. It is only right that the food of all these should vary accordingly. But in any case, all are in good health.<sup>485</sup>

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Amiens, Châlons-sur-Marne, Dijon, Grenoble, Montpellier, Moulins, Paris, Rouen, and Soissons) would have had firsthand knowledge of the Lasallian foundations. But only five cases are on record of a direct intervention by one of these officials in the business of the Institute, including the present incident at Rouen in 1708 (Poutet, vol. 2, 54–67).

484. The 1718 manuscript *Rule of the Brother Director* specified as one of the Director's duties that of rendering an account to the Brother Superior every two months of what concerned the administration of the school and the work of each of the Brothers individually (CL 25, 157–58).

To prove the truth of this last statement, the Superior wisely had all the boarders line up in front of the Intendant, who saw that they were indeed sturdy and healthy looking. He was thus convinced by his own eyes that the reports he had received were false. He was, in fact, so pleased with what he saw that he gave an assurance he would pay no attention to any further complaints he might receive. Whereupon the First President took the opportunity to say to him, "There you are, Sir. Did I not tell you that you would go away from here happier than when you came?" This was one instance showing how the Founder's humility triumphed over the accusations of his enemies.

I have already told the story of how dismayed John Baptist was to have been invited by M. Gense to dine with him merely to provide a Calais painter with an opportunity to do a portrait of him. I speak of the incident again because I have received another account of it.<sup>486</sup>

While De La Salle was at the table, the painter, who was hidden behind a tapestry, sketched the upper part of his countenance, but then, to get a clearer view of the rest of his features, he was obliged to raise his head. Because he was directly opposite the holy man, he could not escape being seen. Our Superior was shocked to the heart by the discovery, and as if he had seen a crime of which he had no wish to be a witness, he stood up from the table with a look of indignation on his face, coldly thanked his host, and left. He returned to the community quite upset, and in a burst of holy anger, he told the Brothers that M. Gense had made a fool of him by placing an artist in a position to make a portrait. The good layman, who regarded his dinner guest as a saint and therefore wanted a portrait of him, was put out also, not because the action had proved offensive to Father de La Salle but because the plan had failed.

During the time when the Founder had gone into hiding in Provence, the bishop of Saint-Omer conceived the idea of establishing the Brothers in his episcopal city.<sup>487</sup> He was humble enough to make

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485. Poutet comments that if Blain is here quoting his figures accurately, it would seem materially impossible for any kitchen to provide separate menus according to the fees paid by the pupils. What probably happened is that the Brother in charge of the boarders doled out proportionate amounts of pocket money. Obviously, the Lasallian educators duly attended to the need to maintain good companionship among the divergences of social status (Poutet, vol. 2, 94).

486. Blain reports this incident briefly in book 2, chap. 16; the present version is more circumstantial and particularly heightens the sense of the Founder's displeasure. On M. Gense, see chap. 6, note 74; chap. 26, note 330.

a personal visit to the Calais community to discuss the possibility, and then he went to Paris in the hope of speaking to the Founder and coming to an agreement. But because he did not find him there, he had to postpone this pious design. Any other prelate less eager to have a community of De La Salle's disciples would have thought no more about it and looked elsewhere. The novitiate at Paris had been disrupted, and the people who had taken over the direction of the community there had told the bishop of Saint-Omer that there were no novices and no hope of any in the absence of Father de La Salle and that the latter had kept his destination so well concealed that no one knew where he was. This was an answer well calculated to have the bishop forget about his plan, but it did not have that effect at all. He simply chose to wait patiently for the moment when Providence would enable him to have his community of Brothers.

When the Founder returned, one of the Brothers told him about all this, and the news pained him when he thought how near to destruction his Institute had come in his absence. But the Brothers were not looking for his tearful reflections on bygone misfortunes. They wanted him to go to Saint-Omer and call on the bishop, who had wanted so much to see him, or at least to correspond with a view to ensuring the proposed foundation. Now this was something John Baptist, in his humility, did not want to do. He no longer considered himself to be anything in his own Community, and he reserved the right only to obey even those who had usurped his authority. "What do you expect me to do?" he said. "You know that those who destroyed the novitiate in Paris while I was absent are now running the Community and allow me no say in it."

But the Brothers persisted until finally he said he would put the matter before God during Mass. Evidently he there had the inspiration to agree with the Brothers' wish, and after the Mass he wrote a letter to the bishop. The latter answered immediately, begging him to come to Saint-Omer to see him as soon as possible before he, the bishop, had to leave and administer Confirmation in some parishes of the diocese. But the Founder had to visit Calais before making his way to Saint-Omer, and he did not manage to reach the latter place within the time he had been told. When he arrived, therefore, the bishop was no longer in residence, even though he had delayed his depar-

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487. Blain reserves this piece of historical information for this place; he makes no mention of it in the three books of the biography. The bishop concerned is François de Valbelle de Tourves. Blain's sketch is filled out with more specific information by Rigault (*Histoire Générale*, vol. 2, 13–15) and in still greater detail by Abbé O. Bled, author of a monograph, *Les Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes à Saint-Omer 1719–1906*, Saint-Omer, 1906.



ture for a few days to await the servant of God, whom he so keenly wanted to see.

In the absence of the good bishop, John Baptist was received with honor by the vicar-general, Father Tissot, who had been briefed beforehand. The latter remarked how disappointed the prelate had been to have to leave without seeing his visitor, even though he had postponed his departure, despite the complaints of the people in the parishes who were waiting for him and voicing impatience about the delay. The Founder was shown the plans of the house it was proposed to build for the Brothers; then he was taken to the seminary to meet the people who were going to provide the funds for the foundation. After that, the virtuous priest withdrew from the company as soon as he could conveniently do so and went into the cathedral to pray, remaining there for quite a long time. He returned there the following day to celebrate Mass in honor of Saint Omer and to beg his protection on this new foundation, which was shortly afterward successfully concluded.

But all this had taken place with much reluctance on the part of the servant of God, who in his humility was convinced that it was not for him to intervene in the matter, for he was now a nobody in the Society. Admittedly, the letter he received from the bishop of Saint-Omer was a source of great joy, but it also pained him because the prelate had addressed it to him as "Superior of the Institute."<sup>488</sup> This was a title that he wanted everyone to forget and that upset the feeling he had of being of no importance. "It is not for me to deal with this business," he kept saying to the Brothers. "I have no authority for it. I am no longer anything in this Community, and it is not right for me to act as if I were the Superior." But he was wasting his breath, for the Brothers put so much pressure on him that he was more or less forced to negotiate the foundation, despite all the repugnance his humility made him feel in doing so.

Enlightenment from the Lord was the remaining factor that contributed to our saintly priest's interior annihilation and removed every trace of self-esteem from his soul, preparing it to be filled with the Spirit of God and his gifts. Without the help of this enlightenment, a soul sees itself only imperfectly; it cannot possibly have a true idea of its lowliness and insignificance. But when it is enlightened from

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488. In the concluding paragraph of book 2, chap. 16, Blain dates the first (and only known) visit of the Founder to Calais in 1716, the year, therefore, of his visit to Saint-Omer. Hence, the bishop was correct in addressing him as Superior because the election of Brother Barthélemy did not take place until the following year. Gallego (535) suggests that Blain is thinking of some later correspondence with the bishop.

above, the soul sees what it is in its origin, in its essence, and by birth, what its corporeal nature is capable of, what tendencies are concealed therein, and what those tendencies lead to. It is then honest enough to admit as true that it came from nothing, that sin is its occupation, that it has inherited corruption of the heart, and that its proper destiny is hell. It understands that it is nothing, has nothing, and can do nothing. It grows in awareness of its poverty, weakness, helplessness, and misery. It becomes an object of pity to itself and admits that its wretched state is worthy of all contempt. The more God reveals it to itself, the more discoveries it makes, finding in itself a veritable abyss of woes, the result of its sinful nothingness. This is what the soul sees of itself when it gazes into the mirror of divine holiness. It is an image that makes the soul feel shame, without, however, disheartening it; it makes the soul aware of its nothingness yet does not destroy it; condemns it but does not reduce it to despair. The soul recognizes itself as the deformed thing it is, but the self-abhorrence this produces serves as the beginning of a pure love of God.

Whatever effort John Baptist might have made to acquire self-knowledge, he learned more about himself in one moment, thanks to enlightenment from above, than he could have done in centuries of self-examination and endlessly repeated self-scrutiny. He saw what he had seen before but in a new way; he saw that sin reduces us to less than nothing because it compounds our nothingness into rebellion. Hence, deeming himself a sinner, a rebellious nobody capable only of opposing God's purposes, he perceived that he deserved to be deprived of all graces and left wholly to his own resources. He saw that having only deceit and sinfulness to call his own, he would be prey, if the hand of God did not protect him, to utterly corrupt desires, shameful passions, most abominable crimes, and the demons' fearful hounding. The Spirit of God, in a word, made him realize how basically corrupt he was, how prone to evil, how excessive his disorderly inclinations were, how frightful the precipices into which his passions could make him fall. This made him acknowledge that he was his greatest enemy and that both truth and justice obliged him to hold a poor opinion of himself, to treat himself with contempt, and to accept with joy the affronts that came to him from others.

The enlightenment that made John Baptist so perfectly humble derived from two sources, namely, his generous renunciation of this world's goods and his ceaseless prayer. The material poverty to which he had condemned himself for the love of God gained him the gift of spiritual poverty, which—as understood by Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, Saint Gregory, and several other Fathers—is nothing else but humility, which by depriving the soul of all self-esteem, leaves it with

nothing to call its own.<sup>489</sup> The eminent gift of prayer, the reward of his great sacrifices, was the other source of enlightenment from which he derived a profound and sovereign esteem for God, together with a deep fear of his own weakness.

This low rating of himself made John Baptist treat himself with disdain. His entire attitude reflected this estimate of what he was worth, and it pleased him that others would think the same about him. The story of his life is made up of ways in which his perfect possession of humility is shown in practice. Here are some examples of this. In the first place, he never spoke of himself or of his own interests. He had so utterly put out of his mind what he had once been that no one ever had an inkling of it from him. His humble and poor exterior, the way of life he had adopted, so mean and abject in the eyes of the world, gave people who did not know him the impression that he had been thus from birth; they thought that he had always been what he had chosen to become. Wherever he was unknown, he was usually looked upon and treated as just a penniless priest at the head of a band of followers whose appearance did nothing to suggest what their Founder had been but left people totally unaware that he belonged to one of the principal families of Reims, that he had been a canon of one of France's most ancient and illustrious metropolitan sees, and that following the example of the Apostles, he had sold what he had and given to the poor to follow Jesus Christ.<sup>490</sup> The saintly priest's profound silence about everything to do with himself was so complete that a person could have lived ten years in his company without ever hearing him say a single word about his family, birthplace, former social status, or anything at all that might reflect honor on him.

But not only did he maintain this silence himself; he imposed it also on those of his disciples who knew his history, made it a general rule, indeed, for them to say nothing about him, and gave a penance to any who did so in his presence. By this device of giving a penance,

489. Blain's marginal references for the three authorities cited in this sentence enable the passages concerned to be identified as follows: from Augustine's *De Virginitate*—"Beati pauperes spiritu, quoniam ipsorum est regnum coelorum, quos sine ulla controversia humiles intelligimus" (PL, vol. 40, col. 413) and *De Trinitate*—"Itaque ipse Dominus Jesus Christus . . . ut mirantes doceret ampliora, et temporalibus insolitis intentos atque suspensos ad aeterna atque interiora converteret . . . ait, Discite a me quia mitis sum et humilis corde" (PL, vol. 42, col. 957); from Jerome's *Commentary on the Book of Daniel*—"Cordis autem illa est humilitas quae in alio loco paupertas spiritus appellatur" (PL, vol. 25, col. 511); from Gregory's *Liber Moralium*—"Paupertatis namque nomine saepe humilitas designari solet" (PL, vol. 75, col. 1149).

490. Matt. 19:21.

his humility inspired him to check on the lips of his Brothers any words of praise that seemed to them so well deserved by the repeated examples of virtue they witnessed in him. These became a regular subject of conversation during their recreations, and it was to block still more effectively this edifying tendency of theirs that he made it a definite rule never to speak about any living person.<sup>491</sup>

His love for a secluded way of life was shown in all sorts of ways. In the cubbyhole he called his room, he was like Saint Anthony in his den, Arsenius in his desert hideout, or Benedict in his cave—like them keeping out of men's sight and trying to render himself invisible. He was so intent on being completely forgotten by everyone, totally effaced from their minds, that he could certainly be said to have taken to heart these words of *The Imitation of Christ*: "Seek to be unknown and accounted as nothing."<sup>492</sup>

After his return from the South and his move from Paris to Saint Yon, he had a great deal of trouble to obtain authorization from Msgr. d'Aubigné, then archbishop of Rouen,<sup>493</sup> to hear the confessions of the Brothers and novices. The prelate had withdrawn faculties previously given and now required any priest wishing to act as confessor to apply personally for a renewal, either to himself or to his vicar-general. What embarrassed John Baptist in this was not having to make this humble application but having to seem in doing so to be the Superior of the Brothers. He had resigned the title, as I have related in the biography, and he now found it unbearable even to seem still to hold it.

His humility prompted him to use a pious stratagem to obtain the faculties simply as the chaplain of the Brothers. He asked Brother Barthélemy to go in person as Superior of the Community to request the authorization, thus showing that it was he who, so to speak, was now employing his predecessor as chaplain and wanted him to be the Brothers' confessor. It was an errand no less humiliating for the one who had to undertake it than, by implication, for John Baptist himself. For it was bound to seem strange to the archbishop that a simple Brother should thus be in a position to obtain faculties and then confer them on the Founder and that the latter, a priest, should be dependent upon a Brother for the exercise of his sacerdotal functions.

The prelate was, in fact, quite taken aback, and John Baptist's humility was not appreciated at all. He was considered to have de-

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491. See above, chap. 20, note 146.

492. *The Imitation of Christ*, book 1, chap. 2.3.

493. A prelate who seems to have maintained an unsympathetic attitude toward the Lasallians and their Founder. For information about his life, personality, and dealings with the Institute, see Aroz (CL 41, vol. 2, 345–46; 528–30) and Poutet (vol. 2, 162–63).

meant his status as a priest by putting himself under the authority of a mere Brother, and it was deemed quite unfitting that the latter, acting as Superior, should seek priestly faculties for De La Salle or that the Founder should exercise these faculties under orders from Brother Barthélemy. The latter, in deep embarrassment, was sent away, and when John Baptist was thus obliged to present himself for the faculties he needed, they were certainly granted. But he also received a reprimand for having sent his so-called “Superior” to act on his behalf.

To give an accurate idea of his attitude toward praise or any marks of distinction or esteem shown him, it is not sufficient to say that he shunned them. I must further say that he held such things in horror and that to speak in praise of him or to honor him in any way was to cause him suffering. True, he was not often given reason to complain on this score; he had little need to take precautions against this particular threat, a real danger to superficial and ill-founded humility. Saint Bernard says that any genuine humility is a kind of prodigy and that it takes a miracle for humility to remain intact amid praise and compliments!<sup>494</sup> But De La Salle’s humility was well protected by the way of life he had adopted, so mean and miserable in people’s eyes. It was kept well nourished by scorn and insults, well exercised by continual maltreatment. So it had nothing to fear in the way of the subtle vanity that humility becomes when it is commended.

Nevertheless, there were occasions, especially in more remote parts of the country, when people showed their admiration for De La Salle and praised him. But he subsequently steered clear of such people and would have nothing more to do with them once they had offended his humility with their marks of honor. He always made up for what they had said by refusing to see them again, and when traveling, he would even make awkward detours just to avoid meeting them.

Singular behavior was something he normally disapproved of, but his humility made him occasionally act in a singular way just to disabuse people who had been told about his virtues. One day he was taking a meal with a kind parish priest who had a high regard for him and with whom he was lodging. Not knowing quite how to show this priest that his esteem was misplaced, he decided to play the glutton and pitch into the meal. But the ruse did not work. The pastor later told some visiting Brothers about the way their Superior’s humility had made him act; he said that the pretended gluttony had not deceived him. “He is and always will be a saint in my eyes,” he added.

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494. Blain gives no reference but is probably thinking of this aphorism from Bernard’s fourth homily on Luke’s annunciation narrative: “*Non magnum est esse humilem in abjectione; magna prorsus et rara virtus, humilitas bonorata*” (PL, vol. 183, col. 84).

Among the Brothers, the Founder acted as one of them, or rather as the least important of them. He took the greatest care to fend off any signs of special treatment from them, “*per omnia assimilatus fratribus*—making himself one with his Brothers in all things.”<sup>495</sup> The only difference he allowed between them and him was to seek to be the most fervent and the most eager for humiliations. The Brothers were much disconcerted to see him so completely indistinguishable from them, except in his way of abasing himself. He was so totally identified with them that a visiting stranger could never have picked him out. It is true that there was a distinction about him that commanded respect, but even this was successfully disguised by his way of acting with simplicity and submissive dependence on the Brothers.

An instance of this occurred a few days before the death of the saintly man. The Brother Superior was alone with him at the time, when suddenly the noise of what seemed like an argument came from the room. The Brother’s voice was raised, and he seemed to be agitated about something. It was all very surprising because everyone knew what profound veneration Brother Barthélemy had for the Founder. To find out the reason for it, one of the other Brothers went into the room and talked to Barthélemy, begging him not to speak in a way that could upset their Father. “Oh,” replied the Superior, “if you knew, Brother, why I was vexed, you would agree with me and protest even more loudly. Father has just said to me that his illness is ruining the community and that it would be better to let him die rather than go to such expense!” It summed up well what this man, who was so meritorious in the sight of God, thought about himself. In his own eyes he counted for nothing. He saw himself now as a father who had become a burden to his children; he believed that they were doing too much for him and that they should now forget him and show him the same unconcern as he had for himself.

#### [CHAPTER 33]

*Further aspects of his profound humility; his liking for advice before acting; his desire to be treated as a nobody in the Community; his silence amid slanders and insults accepted as deserved; examples of his teaching on humility*

John Baptist’s wish to be humiliated amounted to a saintly passion. It led him often to kneel in the presence of the Brothers and beg the favor of being told his defects, saying that he had so many he did not

495. Heb. 2:17 (Vulgate).

know what they all were. Such extreme humility on his part made certain tactless people feel free to tell him what they thought and to mention anything that came into their heads and could be counted a failing. He showed such satisfaction with this treatment that these people became bolder still. Their lack of consideration turned to insolence, and they took it upon themselves to treat their Superior as if he were a novice. They reprimanded him about faults against regularity, censuring him for things that were really acts of virtue, the circumstances about which they knew nothing. But as far as he was concerned, these Brothers were his real friends, and he kept them near him as much as possible. If they had to go elsewhere, he would write to them to ask the charity of their opinion about him. He addressed himself to them as to men of enlightened discernment and objective judgment, men who knew him well and would not be indulgent with him.

In a letter to an older Brother, he wrote one day:

Well then, my very dear Brother, so you still want me to be your spiritual guide. I will be glad to act in this capacity on one condition, however: that you tell me my faults without any flattery. It is fitting that you should do so, since you are the oldest of our Brothers.<sup>496</sup>

The Brother concerned was used to such marks of humility on the part of his Superior and had more than once had the experience of finding him kneeling before him and begging him to tell him his faults. So this letter did not surprise him at all.

Once, at the beginning of Lent in 1717, after the Founder's definitive return to Saint Yon, Brother Barthélemy, who was now the Superior, had occasion to be absent. John Baptist forthwith requested the Director of the community to allow him to take his meals at the lower end of the table, below the Brothers in charge of gardening and haulage. Despite all entreaties, this was the place he kept until the return of Brother Barthélemy, who obliged him to take a place more in keeping with the dignity that was his.

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496. *Letters*, 97. Leaving aside Gabriel Drolin, the doyen of the Institute absent in Rome, the most senior Brother, as well as the oldest, was Antoine Partois, born in 1666 and a member of the Institute since 1686, which would qualify him to be the recipient of the letter cited here. But Gallego (531) instead suggests Jean Jacquot, six years younger than Partois, but only one month less senior (CL 3, 32). The fact that Jacquot was the Director of the Paris community and had been so during the Founder's residence there supports Gallego's surmise.

His mistrust of his own opinion would not allow him to do anything without having taken advice. Like a child not yet able to reason and yielding to everyone, he had made it a rule for himself always to doubt his own views and to submit them on every occasion to someone else. The opinions of his spiritual directors, of church authorities, and of persons known to be holy and enlightened—all of whom he regularly consulted—were for him rules of conduct against which there was no appeal. He followed them blindly and to the letter, which is to say that he was a child of obedience, a truly humble man. Yet this is only what has been normal conduct among persons of solid virtue. What was less common in our saintly priest's attitude about this was that he believed that no insight was more to be feared than his own and that it was, therefore, only right for him to put it to someone else for an opinion.

I have several times mentioned that he did everything not just with the agreement of his Brothers but only according to what they advised. He was more their disciple than they were his. The rules, constitutions, and practices were their own work. His only part in them was to have provided the inspiration, to have made suggestions, to have supported theirs, and finally to have authorized a trial period for them. He left the Brothers otherwise free to discuss, criticize, and improve. He initiated the process, but the final result was not his. Even when he began to make a draft, he acted only in consultation with the Brothers and followed their advice. When they gathered to draw up a definitive version, he chose not to be present, nor did he submit any personal views.<sup>497</sup>

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497. Blain outlines in book 3, chap. 14, the circumstances of the 1717 general assembly, held at Saint Yon. That the Founder chose not to preside over or even to be present at the discussions has an indirect documentary attestation in the 1718 manuscript of the Rule, which concludes with the words in the handwriting of the newly elected Superior, Brother Barthélemy: "We, the undersigned Superior of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, hereby dispatch to our very dear Brothers of the town of Troyes the Rule transcribed above, containing thirty-two chapters, together with the Formula for the Renewal of Vows, duly certified by our initials as being in accordance with what has been decided and drawn up by us and by the Brothers Directors of the said Society in our assembly held at our house of Saint Yon, near Rouen, in the month of May 1717, to be put into practice and observed by our Brothers; in consequence of this, we declare null all other Rules that are to be found in any of our houses. In testimony of which we have signed. Done at the aforesaid house of Saint Yon, this 31 October 1718. Joseph Truffet, called Brother Barthélemy" (CL 25, 146). There is no mention of any kind relating to the Founder (no doubt in deference to John Baptist's expressed wish). Yet we have Blain's assurance in the earlier context that the capitulants decided unanimously to place their proposals for the revision of the existing



Indeed, in all the Brothers' assemblies, he left the business of the Institute open to discussion. He would sum up at the end and set out quite simply the reasons for and against such and such a proposal, but he then claimed no other right than to abide by the majority vote,<sup>498</sup> omitting to vote himself if this was feasible. If the Brothers insisted on his giving his own opinion, he did this so unassumingly and so objectively that they still felt free to argue against him and discard his view. In such cases he would put the Brothers completely at ease by readily adopting their ideas against his own and endorsing the arguments they had advanced, or else he would withdraw and leave them to conclude the business alone. But apart from these general assemblies, which could be held only at certain times, he used to consult his disciples by letter over matters of any consequence. Otherwise, he just sought the advice of those who were near at hand, including, incidentally, the less intellectually gifted because he believed that they were all more enlightened than he was or more open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Times without number, De La Salle in this way inverted the normal order of things, making it a case of a father obeying his children; a master of spirituality, his disciples, or a superior, those under his authority. There was the case of a novice who provided plenty of exercise for John Baptist's zeal and charity, since he had to be supported with prayers, encouragement, and good advice to overcome continual temptations against his vocation. He, in fact, finally yielded to these

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Rule in the hands of John Baptist for him to use as he saw fit. The biographer adds that the Founder "promised that he would work at the project, and in fact he applied himself to the task of revision with great diligence." Thanks to the parallel presentation in CL 25 of the 1718 manuscript and its predecessor, dated 1705, it is possible to discern the changes that may well have derived from the suggestions of the capitulants acting with the wisdom of experience. But, as Rigault notes (a comparative study of the 1718 text and its predecessors, 528–34), the brief period of the 1717 assembly would not have allowed for more than a draft of the proposed revision. The finished work, concludes the historian, "bears the seal of the Founder's spirit and sanctity." Hermans (*Pour une meilleure lecture*) traces evidence of De La Salle's contribution in such passages as the prologue to chapter 2 (The Spirit of the Institute) and the entire chapter 16 (Regularity). Campos shows the importance of these two additions for our understanding of the Saint's own spiritual development (CL 45, 319–25). See also, Sauvage and Campos, 388–403; English edition, 156–66.

498. Except on one occasion, the 1694 general assembly at Vaugirard. In a section of book 2, chap. 13, which demonstrates Blain's sometimes considerable narrative skill, the biographer relates how John Baptist, seeking to be replaced as Superior by one of the Brothers, insisted on a second ballot when the first unanimously confirmed him in the position. Even his acceptance of the second result, likewise unanimous for his continuation, was conditional.

temptations, since he was of a rather shallow temperament and did not carry out the advice he had received. John Baptist humbled himself before God as the one to be blamed for the defection, for he believed that his own lack of faith had made his prayers ineffective. However, the young man had hardly set foot outside the house when he felt a sense of shame at quitting in this mean way, and he returned to beg the Founder to take him back. This put the latter in an embarrassing position, for he was both humble and kindhearted. On the one hand, his charity inclined him to receive the youth back into the Community; he felt sorry for him, even though he had walked out against the advice he had given him. But on the other hand, his humility made him cautious about his own feelings in the matter, and he went to consult the Director of Novices, a young man, with the intention of doing whatever he advised. He did this in such holy dispositions that without expressing his own impressions or opinions, he accepted the decision of the Director of Novices that the novice be sent away as an unfaithful quitter, without another word said. As if this example of humility on the part of the saintly priest were not enough, he had to give an example of patience also, for he found himself being blamed for having let this novice approach the sacraments too often! Of course, he accepted this reproach with his usual sweetness of temper.

Nor did his humility stop there. He once consulted one of his disciples on a matter of conscience and placed himself under his spiritual direction. He laid open to him the secrets of his soul and asked him to note what faults he was committing in his spiritual life and to say what virtues he needed to cultivate most.

Yet another aspect of the same spirit of humility was his love for the company of those of this world who have nothing. He had sincere affection and respect for unimportant, simple, and uncultured folk, and he preferred to be with them rather than with people whose birth, social status, occupation, talents, or any other advantages placed them a cut above their fellowmen. Outside the community his special pleasure was to mix with the insignificant poor, who count for nothing in the eyes of the world. Within the community his favorite Brothers were those least endowed with intelligence and the social graces, the type it was a real penance to talk to. If a Brother took off his calotte before approaching him to speak, he would remove his own as if he did not like to tell the other to put his back on but at the same time could not carry on the conversation with his own head covered.<sup>499</sup> On one occasion, he needed the key to open one of the doors, and going to the Brother in charge of the entrance, he said, "Brother, may I please have the key to such and such a door?" When

he was given it, he went to open the door and brought the key back, having refused the Brother's offer to render this service.

Tasks that were particularly menial and mortifying were those he liked best to do and would not let others do for him. Serving at table, washing up, sweeping, cleaning the privy, rendering humble and unpleasant services to the sick—all were everyday jobs for him. Another thing he liked was the directive of Rule to kneel before his Brothers and kiss their feet, accusing himself of his faults in public, and requesting a penance to make reparation.<sup>500</sup> The Brothers became used to all this; they no longer felt any shame in having to do things they saw their Superior, spiritual director, and Founder so eager and happy to do. He applied himself to these lowly tasks with zest and would not let anyone help him unless it was something he could not do alone. He cleaned his own shoes, swept his own room, and attended to various matters about which we need not go into detail here.

Every Holy Thursday, John Baptist carried out the prescription of Rule he had introduced; he did so with such contrite and humble mien as to draw tears from those who watched him. First, he gave an exhortation to the Brothers on union and fraternal charity; then he went down on his knees to begin the exercise of pardon. He begged forgiveness for the supposed bad example he had given, moving on his

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499. The 1718 *Rule of the Brother Director*, indicating what articles of clothing the Brothers are to receive, includes “a cap (*calotte*) lined with wool and large enough to cover the ears” (CL 25, 160). The use of this protection against the cold seems to have been well established because the 1705 manuscript Rule, in the chapter “How the Brothers Ought to Conduct Themselves with Regard to the Brother Director,” says, “When the Brother Director enters any room, all the Brothers present will stand, greet him with a bow, and keep their calotte off until he . . . makes a sign for them to be seated, except in the refectory, where they will only remove their calotte, without standing up” (CL 25, 49). Did the Founder wear a calotte? Blain implies here that he did, although in chapter 10 he says that he never used one throughout his life. Either the biographer is contradicting himself, or the earlier reference is to a type of headgear worn by some clerics to conceal the tonsure patch. In the Rome archives is a woollen cap that tradition (authenticated by Brother Superior Philippe) claims to have been used by the Founder. The form of the calotte became in time a simple skullcap, the wearing of which was prescriptive until 1956, when the General Chapter of that year made it optional.

500. An allusion to the following exercise of Rule in the 1705 manuscript: “The Brothers will accuse themselves of their faults at least once a day, before meals, and the penances imposed upon them for ordinary faults will be some reflections, prayer, or humiliation to be performed at that same time or at another time that the Brother Director will prescribe for them” (CL 25, 26). In the earliest edition of the *Collection* (1711), this exercise (*l'Accusation*) appears as one of “the four exterior supports of the Institute” (CL 15, 6).

knees from one Brother to the next. With hands joined, he asked pardon of each for the trouble he had caused and for the faults of which he had been guilty in his regard; then he stooped to kiss his feet.<sup>501</sup>

No person, however ambitious, ever sought the top position as eagerly as John Baptist sought the lowest. From the earliest days of the Institute, he tried every way to have the last place. We have seen how he pleaded, argued, coaxed, used every possible means to achieve it, and finally succeeded. It is true, however, that the arrangement was countermanded, and he was soon put back where he belonged by the ecclesiastical authorities; their intervention pleased everyone except John Baptist. We could say that this was an occasion when his humility had to make a sacrifice to his obedience!<sup>502</sup> Having been forced to take up the role of Superior again, he was always ill at ease, and it caused him to suffer for as long as he was unable to resign it. When he finally managed to give it up, it seemed to him as if some bone in his body, long dislocated, had slipped back into place! Then at last the humility of the Founder of the Brothers triumphed, and he set about the business of making up for the opportunities to practice it that were lost while he was Superior. All he wanted now was to enjoy the advantages of being the least important member of the Community and to give free rein to his desire for humble subjection and dependence.

The new Superior had to concede the victory in this matter. He now occupied the foremost place in the Community, and he had to let the Founder occupy the last. John Baptist had seen himself as an un-

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501. The *Pratique du Règlement Journalier* (1713) contains the following articles under the heading "For Holy Week": "On Thursday, after dinner, starting at 12:45, they read publicly chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17 in the New Testament, the Gospel of Saint John. Then the Brother Director gives a conference, which continues until 2:00, on the union that the Brothers ought to have and to maintain among themselves. At 2:00, the Brothers ask pardon of one another, each one individually, for the trouble they have caused their Brothers and the bad example they have given them" (CL 25, 125–26). The origin of the custom dates from the beginning of organized monasticism.

502. Blain's account of John Baptist's briefly successful effort, as early as the rue Neuve period, to have one of his disciples (Henri L'Heureux) elected to replace him at the head of the Society is in book 2, chap. 5. Both Bernard (CL 4, 74–75) and Maillefer (CL 6, 76–79) relate the same incident; all three biographers dwell on the aspect of the Founder's humility manifested by it. But all three speak also of convincing reasons presented by the Founder to the assembled Brothers in favor of his replacement. Later commentators have stressed this second aspect of John Baptist's motivation. As Campos says, "He wanted to encourage the Brothers to take the enterprise into their own hands. He did not wish them to remain without a sense of responsibility for a task he and they had undertaken together" (CL 45, 185).

worthy priest deserving to be deposed, and the way he begged Brother Barthélemy to take the central place at table in the refectory while he sat below the serving Brothers was so touching now that he could not be refused. His resulting satisfaction was matched only by his successor's embarrassment. I must say in praise of both that the humility of the one meant suffering for the other, that the son was deeply troubled to find himself occupying the place that belonged to the father while the latter was in the lowest place of all.

Still greater was Barthélemy's embarrassment to see the Founder constantly acting as the least important member of the Community and declining any task that came under the Superior's responsibility. John Baptist wanted to dissociate himself completely from the role of Superior,<sup>503</sup> and when people sought to involve him in that way, he would reply, "But all I am fit for is to do the donkey work here at Saint Yon, and you want me to act in a way that does not blend with that at all. Divine Providence has arranged things so that I am now a nonentity in the Society, and I think Providence wishes me to remain so." When the new Superior begged him, as he often did, to take some business in hand, he countered with a new argument, prompted by his humility, of course: namely, that it would be against the interest of the Institute for him to accept. "If," he would say, "you want this community of Saint Yon and the Institute in general to thrive, it is important for me to have nothing to do with the business of either. I am better now at ruining things than at building them up."<sup>504</sup>

His humility was no less in evidence in the letters he was now writing, showing every kind of respect to Brother Barthélemy as his successor and, when writing to the latter, beginning always with the words, "My most venerable Brother, I tender you my most humble respects and obedience, as in duty bound by the command of God."<sup>505</sup> In letters to other persons also, words reflecting his humility were not lacking. A worthy gentleman of the town of Saint-Denis begged him

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503. But this did not prevent him from writing the sharp letter to his successor that Blain quotes earlier (see above, chap. 23, note 244).

504. An echo of what had been said to him (according to Blain in book 3, chap. 10) by the two Brothers conducting the school in the parish of Saint Laurence at Marseille, namely, that "he had come to Provence to destroy instead of building up."

505. The 1718 revision of the Rule introduced the prescription that the Brothers begin their letters to the Superior with this formula (CL 25, 93). The custom of doing so remained in force until the 1966–67 General Chapter. Despite Blain's assurance here that John Baptist always used this formula when writing to his successor, his only known original letter to Barthélemy, dated 17 January 1718, when the latter had been Superior eight months, does not include it. *Letters*, 125.1).

on one occasion to provide two Brothers to found a parish school there. This is how De La Salle replied:

May I say, Sir, that you were apparently misinformed when you were told that I am doing so much good in the church and that I send schoolteachers to towns and villages to teach the young. It is true that I began training Brothers to conduct schools gratuitously, but I was relieved of their direction a long time ago. It is one of the Brothers, Brother Barthélemy by name, who is now in charge. He lives in this house, and the Brothers, even those of Saint-Denis, acknowledge him as their Superior.<sup>506</sup>

In another letter, written to a person of some importance to request his good offices on behalf of Brother Barthélemy, we find this:

Though I am but a poor priest of Saint Yon, Sir, may I be so bold as to enclose this note in the letter from Brother Barthélemy, Superior of the Brothers, and beg you in your kindness to do on their behalf what he takes the liberty of proposing to you. I am so convinced of your zeal and affection for the Brothers that I am sure my poor request is unnecessary; his own letter would be sufficient, for I know your generosity so well. However, it does give me the opportunity of reassuring you that I always have for you the highest esteem and regard. This is so important to me that I beg you to let my note at least serve to tell you of my sentiments and to assure you that I am, Sir, with the greatest respect, Your very humble and obedient servant,  
De La Salle, a poor priest.<sup>507</sup>

We can see from these letters what care the Founder of the Christian Schools took to diminish himself in public opinion once he rid himself of the title of Superior. This title had displeased him when he had it because it carried a certain prestige in people's mind. Hence, he could not bear now for anyone to think he was still something he had never wished to be or even seem to be; still less could he bring himself to accept any mark of honor related to the title.

Our saintly priest favored and followed with great constancy another way of humility even more sublime: to accept willingly the forfeiture of his good name in the midst of all sorts of lies and envious calumnies. When he was contradicted, he made no reply; when people accused him of lying, he remained silent. He made no attempt to

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506. *Letters*, 123.1–3.

507. *Ibid.*, 122.1–3.

explain himself when he was criticized, and he offered no defense when condemned. He let people think and say what they liked about him and against him, without bothering to let the truth be known by publishing replies; he declined even to vindicate himself to persons whose good opinion he needed to cultivate.

It is obvious enough that this kind of humility is both rare and heroic, a product, in fact, of high perfection because any damning criticism entails unconscionable suffering for the ego and real torture when such criticism is without foundation and such condemnation is unjustified. If someone manages to remain silent just once in these circumstances, he believes himself to have scored a notable victory. But such a victory was an everyday occurrence with the man whose virtues we are describing. A thousand times he saw and heard himself blamed and condemned while he remained calm and unmoved like someone listening to a sentence being pronounced against a person unknown and of no interest to him.

When De La Salle was subjected to this kind of treatment, which reveals without their being aware of it people who are truly humble, an observer would have thought he was the judge rather than the accused. He always let it seem as if he was in the wrong and gave his critics the advantage of seeming to be justified in what they said. We have seen<sup>508</sup> that Father Pirot, in John Baptist's presence and under his own roof, conducted a lengthy and humiliating investigation, yet De La Salle did not have the curiosity to question what he had been told. The resulting order for the Founder's resignation was read out in the latter's presence, and it turned out that he was the only one who assented to it; he dissociated himself from the unanimous rejection of the directive by his disciples, who protested loudly against the injustice. John Baptist was appalled to find his Brothers less ready than he was to accept this condemnation of him, and he went off to the archbishop to apologize. So the good prelate, who had been misled in the matter, had the spectacle of the man he had deposed kneeling before him in tears, not to complain about having been condemned without a hearing and to beg a reexamination of the case but to ask his pardon for the opposition of the Brothers to a judgment that he found appropriate and that he respectfully accepted.

Anyone else in this situation would have bruited the thing all over Paris with his protests and well-founded objections. He would have charged with prejudice the judge who had condemned him without hearing his side of the story. It would have been easy for John Baptist to unmask his accuser and to expose the motives behind the calumnious reports, thus vindicating himself before the public as

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508. In book 2, chap. 19; see chap. 13, note 58; chap. 29, note 410.

well as before his superior, the archbishop. Men of the most dispassionate temperament would have proceeded thus, and right-minded people would have approved on the grounds that the good name of virtue should be vindicated. Only perfectly humble persons prefer to follow the example and pure doctrine of Jesus Christ rather than the reasoning of human wisdom or the arguments suggested by a virtue that is less than perfect.

It is true that in the case of the property at Saint-Denis, which had been acquired principally with his funds, De La Salle submitted a written defense.<sup>509</sup> But when he entrusted this memorandum to the treacherous man who was to represent him and, through him, to his spurious lawyers, he found it maliciously nullified by them and instead turned into a weapon against him. But he did not remonstrate, say anything to make this behavior public, or complain even to his disciples. He lodged no appeal against the disastrous sentence; he simply surrendered both his money and his good name to the injustice of his enemies, and the only claim he made was the right to redouble his charitable prayers for them.

He was often sent abusive letters, which he seemed to find pleasure in reading. He received one on a day when he happened to be confined to the sickroom, and he read it out to some of the Brothers who were there. He did this neither rapidly nor in a way likely to arouse his hearers' indignation against the person who had written the insulting things it contained. He read it quite calmly, pausing with apparent satisfaction and contentment at every offensive detail; he was like someone relishing what was said and wishing to convince his listeners that it was true. A few lines of the letter will suffice to give an idea of the rest. It quoted a statement of one of his own disciples, whose crassness was totally inexcusable. "Father de La Salle," it said, "no longer knows what he is doing or saying. He is in his second childhood and doting. He is in no condition to govern the Society and should no longer be left in charge. He is capable of nothing except, . . ." and so on.

Now the thing to note about this letter is that it was written several years before the Founder's saintly death. So he was not so old at all; in fact, he never reached such an advanced age as that suggested, for he died in his sixty-seventh or sixty-eighth year.<sup>510</sup> Throughout his last years, even during his final illness, he maintained the full vigor

509. Another allusion to the Clément affair; see above, chap. 13, note 29.

510. He died on 7 April 1719, just twenty-three days short of his sixty-eighth birthday. Blain accurately includes the dates of the Founder's birth and of his death in the biography. The vagueness of his reference here is characteristic of his insouciance about chronology.



and possession of his mental faculties right up to his last hours. Brother Barthélemy was deeply distressed to hear this letter read out; he felt the full impact of its shameful contents. "Oh, Father," he interrupted, "what need is there to read this kind of letter?" "But Brother," was the answer, "isn't everything it says true?" It was the reply of a man who counted himself fortunate to be treated thus by one of his own spiritual sons. He completed the reading, still with the air of contentment that the Holy Spirit inspires in perfectly humble souls when they meet with contempt. Then he put the letter on the table and went on with what he had been saying when it arrived; he was as undisturbed as if the insults he had been reading were intended for someone else.

Humility of this quality made everyone feel free to be rude or domineering to him; he invariably thought himself in the wrong and was ready to treat as his superior anyone who chose to act as if he were. Here again we have one of the mysterious things that only the humble of heart understand because the Holy Spirit enlightens them. People who are humble always take the blame, and what is more, their words truly express what they think. According to them, it is always they who are in the wrong; their conscience tells them this. It applies even to matters they have had nothing to do with, matters in which they have been entirely innocent. We are tempted sometimes to think that by thus accepting blame when they are completely blameless, they are failing to be sincere, that their excess of humility is giving their virtue of truthfulness grounds for complaint! But the fact is that humility is a virtue whose exaggeration need not be feared because there is so much evil in our fallen nature that we can never be sure of its full extent. Our actions may be innocent enough in themselves, but the motives prompting them may not be so. The plain truth is that there is no wrongdoing that could not be attributed to us and fill us with shame because there is none to which our nature does not urge us, none that the malice lurking within us might not cause us to commit. In this sense, there is no evil about which a person may plead not guilty.

This is why perfectly humble people can regard themselves as miscreants and consider themselves always in the wrong. This principle made Saint John Climacus declare that a truly humble person gives judgment against himself in all cases, believing himself guilty of all the wrongdoing he is accused of.<sup>511</sup> Few servants of God have so evidently reached this degree of humility as John Baptist de La Salle. This virtue never failed to make him bring in a verdict of guilty

511. Blain gives no reference, but the statement is from *Gradus XXV, Scala Paradisi*: "*Indemnatus et innocens semper seipsum velut nocentem condemnat*" (PL, vol. 88, col. 994.).

against himself, even in cases when he was not being condemned by others, all the more, therefore, when he was being accused. He had come to be convinced that he was responsible in the sight of God for all the persecution that he suffered, all the failings of those in his care, all the sins committed against him or because of him, all the misfortunes that befell his Community, all its missed opportunities for doing good, and all the imperfections in the good done. He believed it was up to him to admit all this frankly. Because he had a continual sense of shame in God's presence, believing himself an object of malediction, it was not difficult for him to be his own accuser before men and to admit guilt in all cases. Such an attitude was quite sincere on his part; thus he did justice to divine truth, and thus he made honorable reparation to God's holiness.

So imbued was he with these ideas about himself that it grieved him to be in a position of authority. His joy was never greater than when the Brothers, not many years after the founding of the Institute, put one of them in his place as Superior,<sup>512</sup> when he was removed from office by the order of Father Pirot, or, finally, when he was able near the end of his life to resign once and for all. How often he knelt at the feet of the Brothers, those who treated him badly and even betrayed him or were about to desert him, asking their pardon because he was inwardly convinced that he was to blame for the wrong they had done or were going to do. Often when the storms that buffeted his Society were at the height of their fury, he would urge the Brothers to throw him overboard if they wanted the tempest to abate. The words of Jonah exactly expressed his sentiments: "*Mittite me in mare et cessabit tempestas*,"<sup>513</sup> meaning that they should either let him resign the superiorship or else depose him. It often happened, indeed, that he went into hiding and relinquished the post of his own accord, hoping that his absence would restore calm.<sup>514</sup> This was his response to the refusal of his disciples to treat him as a scapegoat and send him off into the wilderness, bearing their sins as well as his own.<sup>515</sup> In his biography we saw that he fled to the South of France, not daring to have anything more to do with the Society because he was convinced that he was "spoiling everything" (his words) "and more apt at destroying things than at building them up." He had even made up his

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512. See above, note 502.

513. John 1:12 (Vulgate, adapted by Blain).

514. For example, when (as related in book 3, chap. 5) he spent two weeks at the Paris friary of the Discalced Carmelites in 1706, leaving his disciples quite unaware of where he was and much concerned about him. Blain uses the same Jonah analogy there.

515. Lev. 16.

mind to bury himself in solitude for the rest of his life, remaining completely unknown and free to bemoan his sins and the wrongs he imputed to himself in the sight of God concerning his government of the Institute. He would certainly have gone through with this intention if the celebrated Sister Louise, of whom we have spoken, had not turned him away from it.<sup>516</sup>

During his last retirement years at Saint Yon, he would sometimes in the same humble spirit take recreation with the serving Brothers after meals. This usually meant a little argument to begin with, not so much about who was to be in charge of the group as about who was to be considered the least important member; none of the Brothers was willing to preside when their Father and Founder was present. In fact, John Baptist himself wanted the oldest Brother to take charge, saying that he was now a nobody (this had become a common expression with him) or that he was the community ignoramus. In these skirmishes he always emerged victorious. I should add that there were also occasions when he would draw aside one of the boarding pupils when leaving the refectory and take recreation talking to him.

In the same humble spirit, he accepted the orders of anyone who chose to give them; he recognized as his superiors all who wanted to act as such. We have seen a number of examples of this in the story of his life. The young priest we spoke about, who at the instigation of John Baptist's rival had assumed the direction of the Brothers during the Founder's long absence, perceived that the latter on his return was as docile and submissive as a child to his domineering behavior. I use the word *domineering* because it is the only one suitable to describe the way this young cleric treated his venerable elder. He grumbled at him, kept finding fault with him, contradicted and scolded him, forbade him this and commanded that—all without the slightest authority to do so. Yet the Founder treated him with respect and spoke only with deference to this upstart who had usurped his place. He obeyed his orders as he would have obeyed those of the archbishop. The self-appointed superior blocked his every move, making him, for example, stay in Paris when he was about to leave, making him leave when he needed to stay, and in general humiliating him with irritating and contradictory instructions. But John Baptist was content to consider himself in duty bound to obey with docility and to the letter.<sup>517</sup>

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516. See above, chap. 5, note 57.

517. This "self-appointed" Superior was Abbé de Brou. Blain's portrayal of him here is less sympathetic than his earlier description of the Abbé's procedures (book 3, chaps. 12–14). The biographer is emphatic in the present context, dealing with John Baptist's spirit of submission, that De Brou had simply assumed the role of Superior of the Paris community. But apart from

A desire to be under authority and dependent on others is another sure sign that the virtue of humility is present in the soul. There is nothing in the world so opposed to human ambition than subjection to authority; nothing is more repugnant to pride than to have to depend on others. Man is born free, and he prizes freedom above everything else. People like their independence and guard it jealously. Anyone who is not in a position to carry out his own wishes is considered a slave; such a person may seem outwardly rich and content, but he is regarded as being only *a child of tutors*, and this, according to Saint Paul, is *a form of slavery*.<sup>518</sup> He is deemed to have nothing if he is not free to dispose of what he has as he wishes.

To heal this deep wound of human pride, Jesus Christ willed his own life to be an example of dependence, and it was by following his example that the saints maintained their effort to quell the rebellion of pride in their own heart. It was for this reason that the Desert Fathers gave such outstanding examples of blind obedience and why religious now make it the object of a vow. All religious congregations have their origin in the fact that their principal objective is to live in dependence on others. However, I will treat of this matter of obedience in subsequent chapters, where I will be looking at De La Salle's own attachment to the state of dependence.

If the ultimate and supreme degree of humility is to find happiness in being despised, we see that John Baptist also possessed this, and to perfection. He had no ambition at all except, it seems, to bring scorn upon himself. He was a saintly priest, but he had such a profound knowledge of himself that he was quite devoid of self-esteem. He positively cherished a sense of being insignificant and took delight in convincing other people of this. He treated himself with disdain, and the disdain of others was meat and drink to him. Humility can go no further than that. Never was the least sign of impatience seen in him, never any hint of anger, spite, worry, annoyance, sadness, or stress, no matter how badly treated he was, no matter how wounding the snubs and insults he received.

We have already seen many examples of this in the biography of De La Salle, but I will here add three or four, all of which happened in Rouen. That great city was for many years a scene of humiliation for him and for his disciples. They could not appear in public without being hooted at and mocked by the town's riffraff. Insults and abuse

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the fact that he earlier says that the appointment was made by the pastor of Saint Sulpice, De La Chétardie, it seems unlikely, as Gallego points out (500), that the Brothers would have accepted De Brou to the extent they did unless the archbishop had endorsed his nomination.

518. Gal. 4:1–2.

were a daily occurrence, and De La Salle's presence, far from checking them, served only to make them more aggressive. He was the leader of these new followers of a crucified Lord; therefore, it was he whom the local toughs liked to attack with their foul language and missiles. His apparent joy in receiving such treatment impressed and astounded the perpetrators while bolstering the courage of the Brothers who were with him. The fervor of his prayers (he was accustomed to say his rosary when walking through the streets) was by no means quelled by these stormy outbursts of vicious behavior but instead was intensified on such occasions. His manifest elation seemed to say that to share in the opprobrious treatment that had been meted out to Jesus Christ was reason for rejoicing and that he was happy to be insulted for Jesus' sake, for then God's Spirit in its glory had come to rest on him.<sup>519</sup> He could be seen at such times, precious to him, raising his eyes heavenward and smiling pleasantly as if to show his contentment with the abuse he was receiving and his joyful wish to thank God for it. He would arrive back at the community house in a state of euphoria, like a man who had been escorted by applauding people wanting to honor him. As for the Brothers who had been with him, they were both edified and amazed at the invincible patience he had shown in such humiliating circumstances and the jubilant demeanor he now manifested at the end of the grueling experience.

These disciples, who had to drink of the same cup of humiliation and abuse, wondered indeed that the Founder found so sweet what they had found bitter. Because they did not have the same degree of humility he had, they could not understand how he was able to savor the sour draft. The very thought that they were being treated so shamefully by an insolent rabble, who had such need of their services for the Christian instruction of their children, mortified them deeply. They were sometimes unable to conceal their resentment and restrain themselves from shouting back at the insulters. But their Superior lovingly sought to comfort them, saying, "Bless the Lord, dear Brothers, for allowing you to be treated like his own Son, who received worse than you although he was God." With encouraging words like these, he tried to make them see the advantages there were for them in this ill-treatment and the treasures of grace it contained. He also wanted them to be aware of the bad example they would give by showing resentment. To strengthen them in lovingly accepting insults as they occurred, he liked to remind them of these words of Saint Paul:

We are afflicted in every way possible, but we are not crushed;  
full of doubts, we never despair. We are persecuted but never

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519. 1 Pet. 4:14.

abandoned; we are struck down but never destroyed. Continually we carry about in our body the dying of Jesus, so that in our body the life of Jesus may also be revealed. . . . We do not lose heart, for our inner being is renewed each day, even though our body is being destroyed at the same time. The present burden of our trial is light enough and earns for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.<sup>520</sup>

He would quote all these words with an inexpressible air of contentment, not only during his discourses but also when he had personally suffered some vexation, or yet again when he was giving spiritual direction to the Brothers.

Being the saint he was, John Baptist not only suffered humiliations with joy, but in order not to lose any of the merit attached to them, he maintained complete silence about them. He wanted neither to make known who was responsible nor to invite people's sympathy. On one occasion when he was out in the grounds saying his office, the horse that he sometimes used for his journeys wandered into the garden next door. It did no damage there, but the owner of the property was so enraged that he went up to John Baptist in a fury and dealt him a blow on the cheek. The saintly man showed not the slightest resentment but immediately went down on his knees to ask pardon for the annoyance he had caused. The furious neighbor was taken by surprise to see such humility, and he withdrew, silenced and embarrassed. We would not know of this example of the Founder's long-suffering humility if a Brother who had witnessed the incident had not told the others about it for their edification.

Another incident happened when he had occasion to visit Msgr. d'Aubigné, the archbishop of Rouen. We have seen that this prelate let himself be predisposed against the Founder, and he now gave him a rude reception, uttering harsh words in the presence of several people and then abruptly dismissing him. John Baptist set off for home, elated and blessing and praising the Lord as he went. He told the Brother who traveled with him, who, not having been present, was surprised at the apparently successful outcome of the interview, that this was one of the happiest days of his life.<sup>521</sup>

520. 2 Cor. 4:8–10 and 16–17.

521. See above, chap. 32, note 493. There is much ambivalence in Blain's references to Archbishop Claude-Maur d'Aubigné. In a passage in book 3, chap. 17, he tells us that "among the many illustrious bishops whose virtue shone brightly, France contained no other more pious, more regular, more zealous, more laborious, or more exemplary" than this prelate but that it was he who treated the Founder with a harshness that has few parallels and that he "strewed De La Salle's path with sharp thorns" and "treated him as

A similar thing happened with another bishop, who nevertheless greatly admired the Founder's virtue and had rendered him notable services. On a visit John Baptist made to this prelate to tender his respects, he was received with such disdain and such humiliating words that the people present were both amazed and embarrassed. But our servant of God was neither; he simply returned home full of joy, and this was so noticeable that the Brothers thought that the bishop must have received him very favorably. They wanted him to tell them all about it, but this was just what he did not wish to do for fear of giving the Brothers a bad impression of the prelate; besides, he did not want to lose the merit of his humiliating experience. When any Brothers became aware of cases in which he was badly treated and then expressed their indignation, he would reply, "But don't you know that insults and persecution are what we must expect? It is something we accept when we enter the service of God. But what a happiness it is for us to suffer something for him who suffered so much for us! Don't you realize that it makes us agreeable to God when to please him we bear ill-treatment and sufferings unjustly inflicted on us? This is what our vocation is about." A man with such dispositions had nothing to fear from insulting words and harsh deeds!

It is not surprising that someone so humble spoke of the virtue of humility with eloquence, was full of zeal to make it loved and practiced, and was also ingenious in discovering ways of doing so. John Baptist had learned well the lesson taught by the Prince of the Apostles, urging Christian people to practice humility because "God resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble."<sup>522</sup> The examples he gave in his own life did not suffice for him; he had to inculcate it also by his teaching, and he had a potent gift for doing this, especially when giving spiritual direction. Because he was convinced that God receives glory only from humble souls, he overlooked nothing that would induce his disciples to acquire so essential a virtue, essential to them as Christians and also essential to their vocation.

He gave many instructions on the subject, and I quote here a few simple extracts from those he left in writing:

You should consider humility as the foundation of all the other virtues, without which there can be no true piety, for piety without humility is usually mere hypocrisy or an illusion. To acquire

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the most unworthy priest of this vast diocese." D'Aubigné had great personal esteem for Blain and favored his career in several ways. It is to Blain's credit that he does not lose sight of this relationship in referring to his patron but at the same time does not disguise the prelate's treatment of his saintly hero.

522. 1 Pet. 5:5.

this virtue so necessary for salvation, you must work hard at gaining self-knowledge. Often call to mind and convince yourself that you are the weakest and most imperfect of all persons, that nothing but pride can make you think differently, and that any wicked person you may hear of is far superior to you. To be able to do this, have a low opinion of yourself, and do not believe you are good for anything, considering that God uses you only as a vile instrument fit only to draw down his displeasure. Never say the least thing that might raise you in the good opinion of the world. Shun human praise and approval. When you hear anything said to your advantage, remember that the honor is due only to God while you deserve only disgrace. Remain silent, and humble yourself before God in the belief that you are only nothingness and sin. Let your joy be to suffer humbly and as most just the contempt and rebuffs that come your way. Always select what is least when choice is allowed. Do not be too eager to speak during recreation time or in conversation, and when you speak, do so in a simple and unaffected manner without trying to improve what others say or interrupting them, and talk in a low voice. Finally, when reproved or warned of your faults, do not attempt to justify yourself, unless your superior orders you to tell the truth. Remember without ceasing what you are capable of when left to yourself and what you have done when God has left you to yourself. Look upon yourself as being able only to lose yourself, and be apprehensive even of those actions that you think are the best.<sup>523</sup>

We can see from such useful, indeed essential, counsels as these how deep was the humility of the one who provided them. He advised, in fact, only what he practiced; his example, even more than his words, led the Brothers to develop this virtue and softened its forbidding aspects for them. In a letter to one of the Brothers, the Founder wrote:

I am sure, my very dear Brother, that you have no doubt that the one virtue most necessary for you is humility. As you can see, you are not entirely submissive in your mind. Come, my dear Brother, make an effort to acquire this virtue, I beg you, and re-

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523. The passage is the article on humility in the *Collection* treatise, "The Principal Virtues That the Brothers Should Strive to Practice" (CL 15, 89–90). Apart from the omission of eight lines, the article is quoted in full, although with twenty variants. These, in the opinion of Hermans (who identifies them all in CL 10, 88–89), "hardly affect the Founder's thought."



alize that you can be happy in this world only insofar as you practice humility, obedience, and patience. These three are inseparable, and you have equal need of all three. So do your best to acquire them, and you will see that you will experience peace of mind and contentment in your vocation to the degree that you possess them. There is nothing I will leave undone to relieve your anxiety, my very dear Brother, but believe me, the best way to overcome it is to make an effort to acquire the virtues I have just proposed to you. However, it seems to me from reading your last letter that you don't try hard enough to acquire them. Take good care to do this, I implore you, for without them you will never do anything that is good and agreeable in God's sight.<sup>524</sup>

This Brother had told him that he found it hard to have his defects pointed out with what presumably was less than the charity and tact that should be used toward people who lack humility. John Baptist consoled him with these words:

Take great care, my very dear Brother, not to take offense when your defects are pointed out to you. No matter how you are told them, our Lord had worse said to him, and you claim to be his disciple. If you really are, you will be glad to be treated like your master, who patiently bore all the insults that were offered him. So did the saints, his servants. So when your faults are pointed out to you in a way that shocks you and seems to show contempt for you, remember to adore God's justice in the one who does this. My dear Brother, you must have great love for this exercise and look on it as a means given you by God to rid yourself of your defects. Even if there were no other good in it but humiliation, you ought still to cherish and love it.<sup>525</sup>

This same Brother, however, continued to be sensitive when freely told his failings, and he had need of further help to bring him around to the view of his spiritual guide. The latter wrote to him again as follows:

You should be glad to be told your defects. Instead of being upset when your long-standing faults are pointed out to you, my very dear Brother, you ought on the contrary to thank God constantly for it. Try once again to turn this to your advantage. Indeed, what sort of humility have you if you cannot bear

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524. *Letters*, 80.1–5.

525. *Ibid.*, 82.1–5.

something that causes you a little confusion? Now I see quite clearly what you want, my very dear Brother. You very much like to profess that you are a great lover of humility and that you have great esteem for it just as long as you can avoid humiliations as much as possible. What good will it be for you to love the virtue and to refuse to practice it? What! You complain that others haven't enough charity, but you don't complain that you haven't enough humility. What good is that great desire you have for this virtue if it does not help you to be more aware that you are culpable before God? Don't give way, then, to any more complaints about the advertisements you are given, and don't think that your Director is in any way annoyed with you. If he is strict in reproving you and in giving you penances, though he doesn't treat others in the same way, it is because he sees that you are well-disposed and because he is more interested in your progress in virtue. Show by your attitude that this is true, and let your only wish in the future be to welcome joyfully the reproofs and the penances you get and to correct your faults. It is on such occasions that the means to do so are found. So watch over yourself, and do not get upset about something that can be only for your own good. I pray God to give you this grace, and I am, my very dear Brother,  
Devotedly yours in our Lord.<sup>526</sup>

With advice like this, the saintly priest led his Brothers to the practice of the holy virtue of humility. He let them see how much he esteemed it himself and how much they too should do so, stressing, however, that he would much prefer that they practiced rather than just spoke about it! Fine talk without practice is all right for philosophers, who are well able to hold forth on a virtue without being virtuous themselves, men who would have others do what they do not do themselves and are eloquent in teaching high spirituality but leave the demanding practice of it to their disciples. But let us conclude this chapter by quoting some advice De La Salle gave to a fervent Sister:

You must be convinced that your vocation demands of you quite a different degree of humility and quite a different renunciation of the world and its spirit, and even of yourself, so that what would be tolerated in another person should not seem tolerable to you at all. Looking on yourself as the lowest of creatures, you should place yourself beneath everyone else and be astounded that anyone can put up with you and that the earth is willing to

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526. *Letters*, 81.1, 3–10.

bear you on it. See how far you are from having such sentiments, and be ashamed that you know yourself so little. Ask our Lord to engrave this humility deep in your heart. You cannot go too far in humbling yourself in self-contempt and self-abasement, for this is the only way to salvation that is left to you.

If you wish to make great progress in the practice of this virtue, carry out the following directions. No matter what the source of the humiliation, accept it as what you deserve. Wait for humiliations to come, unless God gives you a special inclination to seek them out and the occasion presents itself naturally. Dear Sister, look on everything that happens as good, especially when it humbles you and is most opposed to your natural inclinations. There is no better way of destroying your deep-seated pride than the acceptance each day of humiliations. If you want them and love them because you wish to be completely united with our Lord, he will provide you with ample opportunity in addition to those already furnished by your self-will and your poor disposition. If you have such a hunger for humiliations and separation from the world, with the grace of our Lord you will succeed.

Your opinion of yourself should always be a lowly one. Humble yourself in everything and in regard to everyone. Humble yourself when you cause suffering to others, considering that this is all you are capable of; when you find others criticizing what you do, be convinced that they are right. It is good for you to be discredited in the eyes of others so that you may become more withdrawn from the world, opposed to its ways, and more closely united to God. When reproved for some fault you have not committed or when rebuffed, thank those who do this with the same gentleness and humility as if they were doing you a favor. At the same time, show that you are willing to correct yourself. You are well aware that you deserve no respect, no deference, not even any approval at all. You do not deserve that anyone should even listen to you. Let that be your frame of mind.

Always take the lowest and most inconvenient place, in spite of any repugnance you may feel, for this repugnance springs from your pride. It will always be much to your profit to be treated as the servant of the others. You should eagerly desire this, first, to destroy your pride; second, to overcome your laxity, and third, to acknowledge that your sins are so many and so great and should place you at the feet of everyone, especially of your Sisters. When you come to realize that you deserve nothing but contempt in the eyes of God and to look on all created things as

the instruments that in his mercy and justice he uses now to raise you up, now to humble you, and that Divine Providence makes use of them only for your salvation and his glory, you will be little affected by the harsh treatment that may be dealt you.

Keep yourself always in your proper place, that is to say, beneath the feet of the demons themselves, for that is where you have so often deserved to be and where perhaps you could still be forever. In this frame of mind, take your place beneath your Sisters without expecting others to show you any consideration or to treat you with any respect. You must be convinced that there is none who is not more virtuous and more spiritual than you. They could hardly be less so without putting at risk their eternal salvation as you have so often done. If, my dear Sister, you can engrave these sentiments on your heart and live by them, loving abjection, contempt and the rebuffs of others, seeking them and embracing them as being what you deserve, I think that you will have found an efficacious means, perhaps the only means, of drawing down God's mercy on yourself.<sup>527</sup>

In seeking with these words to direct the spiritual life of the Sister concerned, our humble priest was portraying his own. We can see that the letter faithfully reflects his own humility and the way he classed himself below everyone else.

#### [CHAPTER 34]

##### *Obedience as evidence of his love of God; necessity, excellence, and advantages of this virtue as taught by him*

To be obedient is a way of being humble. Obedience derives from humility as surely as a stream does from its source. No one has ever seen a humble person who was not at the same time willing to obey nor an obedient person who was not also humble. The greater or less degree there is of the one spirit, the greater or less is that of the other. The two virtues are always found to be at the same level, the one balancing the other. They are not the same, but they are inseparable. We may go so far as to say that obedience is humility in practice, and we can already guess, therefore, what must have been the spirit of obedience of a man whose humility was such as we have seen. But to demonstrate this spirit in all its aspects, I propose to treat it under certain headings: John Baptist de La Salle's esteem for the virtue of

527. *Letters*, 109.1–13.

obedience, his understanding of what it entailed, the practices of it that he inculcated, and the examples he gave of it in his own life.

He based the necessity, excellence, and advantages of obedience on the nature of God the Creator and the condition of his creatures, on the way the universe and society are constituted, on the value of obedience to mankind, and on obedience as the essential virtue of a religious community. Obedience renders the total glory to God that is his due. Obedience provides for man the surest, easiest, and shortest way to perfection. Obedience is the very soul of religious communities, their claim to honor and reward.

Our relationship with God is based on innumerable considerations. Our being, our life, our possessions, what we are and what we have, our hopes for the future—all derive from him and must revert to him as his property. God is the primary source of all that we are; to him, as to our last end, we must refer all things. He has rights over us, over our actions and our persons, that are inalienable, exclusive, and absolute. Hence, to presume to govern ourselves, to be master of our own actions, is to be guilty of usurping the Creator's rights. His authority over us is threefold in nature and constitutes a corresponding claim to our obedience. In the first place, we are his property: we belong to him in a truer sense than a child belongs to its mother, an artifact belongs to its maker, or a vassal belongs to his overlord. God is the ground of our being. All we are belongs to him: our thoughts, desires, intentions, affections, and deeds. In the second place, he has juridical rights over us, can deal with us in complete freedom, govern us, make laws for us, and require our total submission to his every wish. Third, his power over us is based on his surpassing excellence. His inherent perfections make him worthy of all love, honor, and service; as such, they constitute so many claims to our humble allegiance. The relationship that exists between him and us—he, the creator, preserver, universal benefactor, redeemer, and sovereign good; we, his creatures and servants made in his image, his children and disciples—establishes his unalterable claim to our subjection and dependence. From all this it inevitably follows that everything we do should be governed by his sovereign will and that we cannot dissociate ourselves from this will without proclaiming ourselves ungrateful, rebellious, and faithless—guilty, in fact, of what is called sin.

From this primordial state of subjection to God, which is inherent in our nature, follows the obligation to obey our superiors. Of course, we must not suppose that God makes himself visible to us to direct us or that he does this through his angels. Providence ordains that in the natural order of things, we be governed by our fellow humans, and it would be a sign of intolerable pride and gross self-delusion to gainsay

this. As for the supernatural order of things, God governs us through the superiors whom Jesus Christ appointed to rule the church. If we consider the end for which we and all other works of God were created, we must recognize the need to obey him, who for his own glory, brought us out of nothingness, kept us in being, redeemed us, justified us in his sight, and bestowed upon us an abundance of all good things. Only his own glory could have been the end God had in view in all this. If, then, we wish to enter into the designs of our Creator and fulfill our duties as creatures, we too must have his glory in view. He expects this of us; therefore, he expects our perfect obedience; this virtue alone renders the sovereign worship, the perfect love, and the honor that God requires from us.

God deserves our sovereign worship by all that he is; our nature demands that we render it to him. He has the right of life and death over us, and we have a corresponding duty to offer sacrifice to him. But what victim of sacrifice does he require if not ourselves? He is no longer satisfied, nor was he ever, with the victims prescribed by the Old Law. They were extraneous to what we are, and we must offer ourselves to him by rendering perfect obedience, which immolates us, whole and entire. This is how obedience becomes an act of religion, taking rank after the theological virtues. Adoration is the tribute of our understanding to God's greatness; obedience is the tribute of our will.

But if perfect obedience is our means of rendering that sovereign worship that is due to God, it is also an authentic proof of our love. "Whoever loves me," says Jesus Christ, "obeys my words."<sup>528</sup> It is not those who say, Lord, Lord, whom he recognizes as his disciples but those who do God's will.<sup>529</sup> The proof he gave of his own infinite love for his Father was to carry out his will. "*Ut cognoscat mundus quia diligo Patrem*—That the world may know that I love the Father."<sup>530</sup> Any other proof is equivocal or indeed illusory. Not that obedience is the only way of rendering God the homage he requires of us; he can be honored by many other means. But for persons who live in a religious community, there is no other way than faithful obedience. Good works can and do procure God's glory if they are motivated by the desire to fulfill his will. But they cease to be good works, as far as we are concerned, if God does not ask them of us, if religious obedience has no part in them. We do not honor God by choosing our own way of doing so but by following his. To know his will and to submit to it is the honor he requires from us; this is not only the greatest, it is the sole kind of honor we can offer him. We might accomplish all sorts of

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528. John 14:23.

529. Matt. 7:21.

530. John 14:31 (Vulgate).

striking and heroic deeds, but they would mean nothing for God's glory if he did not require them of us. If it is true that no one is honored by anything done contrary to God's desire, we must not expect God to be pleased with a sacrifice that is tarnished by our self-will.

The second argument on which De La Salle based the necessity of obedience was the need for good order. Good order is found only where a scale of subordination exists, and subordination presupposes obedience. If the political or family units of the world, or the members of the human body itself, cease to maintain the principle of subordination, which ensures order, they destroy themselves. "*Ordinatione tua perseverat dies*—According to your ordinance, every day keeps its appointed course," says the Royal Prophet.<sup>531</sup> The world subsists only by the order that its Creator has imposed upon it. This order depends on the interrelationship and harmonious agreement of its different parts. But the union that we admire in so many different entities is maintained only by the subordination of each to another. Every body politic, every society, every family, owes its continued existence only to this principle. If order is to reign, there must be a head to whom others accept being subordinated. Plurality without unity spells only confusion. Separation and division are the product of anarchy, which occurs when the principle of subordination is lacking. If the dispositions and goodwill of all do not converge in obedience to the head, government is thrown into disorder and ruin follows.<sup>532</sup>

Abbot de Rancé has written:

The Superior has charge of the congregation. He is the head of a body of which the brethren are the members. Now it belongs to the head of the human body to rule and guide, to control every movement and action so that they are dependent on it and nothing takes place that does not have its origin and starting point in the head. Likewise in a well-regulated community, everything is done by order of the Superior and in dependence upon him; he regulates everything for the general good as well as for the benefit of each individual; it is for him to dispose of the members of the community, assigning to each his particular duty.<sup>533</sup>

To sum up this second principle on which De La Salle based the necessity of obedience, we may say that it corresponds to what the

531. Ps. 118:91 (Vulgate).

532. In the margin, Blain indicates that his basis in this paragraph is partly Ecclus. 16:27 and Ps. 148, but the connection is hardly self-evident.

533. Blain's marginal reference is "To[me] 1. c. 8. p. 151 *des Devoirs de la Via Monastique*." The page reference shows that his source is the Muguet edition, Paris, 1683; his transcription is exact except for two insignificant variants.

Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: "All power comes from God. The order we see in the world derives from him. Hence, to oppose those who have authority is to oppose the order of things established by God."<sup>534</sup>

A third reason, according to our saintly priest, why obedience is absolutely indispensable is that the human heart is flawed and the human will vitiated. If we give way to our inclinations and longings, they will lead us fast along the road of wrongdoing, which ends in hell. This is why the Book of Ecclesiasticus warns us not to pursue the things we desire but rather to put a restraint on our will.<sup>535</sup> People who make self-will their guide deliver themselves up to degrading passions and shameful vices; they rush headlong into all the aberrations of which Saint Paul accuses the pagans in his Letter to the Romans.<sup>536</sup>

The logic of all this led the Founder of the Christian Schools to draw a convincing conclusion about the necessity of obedience, a conclusion as daunting as it is true. He says that we must resolve to obey either our superiors or the devil because whatever we do must satisfy the will of someone.<sup>537</sup> The choice of whom we are prepared to heed, of whose orders we are willing to fulfill, is ours. But the choice is limited to two: God or the devil. Even to set these two authorities side by side in this way inspires a feeling of horror and should suffice to instill a spirit of obedience. We must perforce accomplish either the will of God or that of the devil because there is no middle way between following our own will and following that of the devil, between obeying our superiors and obeying God. Superiors hold the place of God for us; they represent Jesus Christ, and being endowed with his authority, they speak in his name. Their voice is his; their words are the echo of his will. It is an inescapable conclusion that we cannot obey or disobey our superiors without obeying or disobeying God. On the contrary, our self-will and that of the devil become one; they ally themselves in opposition to the Law of God. To please one is to please the other, and it is fair to conclude that to do our own will is to render obedience to the devil.

Thus did De La Salle find strong arguments in favor of obedience from the contrast between what God is and what we are, and also from the design of Providence seen in the natural order of things. But he found further reasons for extolling the necessity, excellence, and advantages of this virtue on the grounds of its benefits to mankind.

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<sup>534</sup> Rom. 13:1–2.

<sup>535</sup> Sir. 18:30.

<sup>536</sup> Rom. 1:18–32.

<sup>537</sup> The syllogistic formulation is not supported by a consultation of *Vocabulaire Lasallien*.



Disobedience wrought the ruin of the human race, but obedience rescued it. Disobedience robs the soul of grace, but obedience is a source of grace. Disobedience blocks the way to perfection, but obedience provides the shortest, surest, and easiest way to perfection.

Initially, the disobedience of Adam brought about the downfall of all his posterity, but the obedience of Jesus Christ won salvation for humanity. All our religion is based on this fundamental truth concerning original sin and the redemption. "As by the disobedience of one man, says the Apostle Paul, many became sinners, so by the obedience of one, many will be found just."<sup>538</sup> We learn from these words what hell gained by the disobedience of the first man and what heaven owes to the obedience of Jesus Christ. We must understand, then, that it is by our submission and spirit of dependence that God wishes to guide us to salvation.

To be still more convinced of this, it suffices to develop further a proposition contained in the general statement we have quoted from Saint Paul. The disobedience of the first man spelled unhappiness for the human race. This is a general affirmation referring to mankind as a whole, but it contains within it the further truth that the disobedience of each individual leads also to his personal loss. Conversely, the obedience of Jesus Christ will bring about the salvation of many just, and this proposition extends to all the elect. But it further contains the truth that the obedience of each individual will bring about his salvation. In a word, man's salvation is linked with obedience. The Apostle says this explicitly in the Letter to the Hebrews: "Jesus Christ has become the source of salvation to all who obey him."<sup>539</sup>

Let us recognize, then, once and for all, the full extent of the value of obedience. It crowned the glory of Jesus Christ,<sup>540</sup> and it must crown the happiness of mankind. The death of our Lord would have lost its value if it had not been willed by his Father.<sup>541</sup> So much the more would our virtues be only make believe if they were not governed by obedience. We have to be holy in the way God wants us to be, not according to our own ideas.

In the second place, as *The Imitation of Christ* expresses it, disobedience robs the soul of grace.<sup>542</sup> Obedience is self-evidently a

538. Rom. 5:19.

539. Heb. 5:9.

540. Phil. 2:8–9.

541. Blain gives a marginal reference for this statement claiming Saint Thomas as his authority. The passage concerned seems to be: "*Obedientia vero omnibus sacrificiis antefertur, secundum illud 1 Reg. XV, 'Melior est obedientia quam victimae.'* Et ideo conveniens fuit ut sacrificium passionis et mortis Christi ex obedientia procederet . . . et ita homo Christus victoriam obtinuit per hoc quod Deo fuit obediens" (S. T. ed. Lachat, vol. 12, 479).

source of grace because grace is the help God gives us for the accomplishment of his will. The more faithful we are to obey this will, the more does his infinite goodness seek to communicate itself to us. Faithful obedience is always so powerfully helped by the grace of the Almighty that victory is never in the balance.<sup>543</sup> This abundance of grace makes the obedient soul strong, renders it superior to all its enemies, and matches its victories to the combats it must wage against its own desires. Is not this what Saint Peter means at the beginning of his first letter when he wishes grace and peace to “those who are sanctified by the Holy Spirit, that they may be obedient and be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ”?<sup>544</sup> These words merit more than passing attention. Our sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the object of this sanctification is to make us obedient. Then the effect of this obedience is that we will be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ, and what this blood procures is grace and peace. What it amounts to is that obedience sanctifies us, causing us to be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ, and so brings graces upon us.

A third consideration is that disobedience closes off the path to salvation, whereas obedience opens it up and levels it out because it is the basis of the abnegation that Jesus so often recommends in his Gospel and that presupposes the practice of all the other virtues. “Deny yourself.”<sup>545</sup> The whole essence of Gospel morality is contained in these two words; they provide the key to perfection and ensure all progress therein. For it is quite certain that the practice of high virtue calls for great effort and imposes painful renunciations. Heaven is the reward, and it can be won only at the cost of toil and suffering, at the cost, if the expression be allowed, of the soul’s blood. The path to salvation is so narrow that Jesus seems to speak of it with surprise in the Gospel.<sup>546</sup> The way of perfection is not only narrow but rough and thorny, and we advance along it only at the cost of self-denial. Every step requires an effort, and so close is the connection between this effort and progress that if there is any letup at all, we begin to fall behind. But the most perfect form of self-denial is obedience; all forms of abnegation are contained in and activated by this virtue. By obedience a person gives all his being to God, having given him all his actions. Hence, the author of *The Imitation* can say that to live in faithful obedience to a superior and to renounce our right to freedom of action is one of the highest and most heroic forms of virtue.<sup>547</sup>

542. Book 3, chap. 13.1: he who disobeys “withdraws himself from grace.”

543. Prov. 21:28.

544. 1 Pet. 1:2.

545. Matt. 16:24.

546. Matt. 7:14 (in the Vulgate it is exclamatory: “*Quam angusta!*”).

547. Book 1, chap. 9.1: “It is a very great thing to obey.”

In practicing other virtues, we give something to God, forgo some created object, sacrifice a part of ourselves. Keeping silence, for example, deprives us of the pleasure of conversation, and a hidden life precludes the joys of companionship. By fasting and abstinence, sensuality is mortified and temperance keeps the pursuit of pleasure in check. The rebellion of the flesh is overcome by austerity; lustfulness, by chastity. By the practice of poverty, finally, we deprive ourselves of this world's goods, but by obedience we renounce ourselves totally: our will, our desires, our moods, our most extravagant fancies, our intellect, our insights and judgment, our powers of reason, our freedom and the right to be our own master, all that we would like to plan and undertake. The soul is thus held captive, but the body is no less so, for obedience closes the eyes and ears; it checks the tongue and imposes its law on the hands and feet, holding them fast or putting them to work according to the will of the superiors.

Saint Gregory asks the question, "Is it so difficult to part with what we possess?"<sup>548</sup> He means, for example, that we can quite easily discard a garment because this covers the body but is not part of it. The skin is another matter! To be flayed alive is a form of torture because the skin is one with the body. Everything that is external to us can be sacrificed without too much trouble, but to sacrifice ourselves is to make God the most generous offering possible, the most perfect sacrifice, a holocaust in which the victim is wholly consumed for God's glory. The other virtues do indeed offer something to God, but they also withhold something. Because only obedience destroys all and leaves no portion of the sacrificial victim, it has the nature of a holocaust, all the more excellent because, as Saint Gregory the Great again remarks, it is the one who obeys who is the victim, not something extraneous to him.<sup>549</sup>

In the fourth place, obedience is the shortest, sweetest, and surest way to arrive at perfection. There are many other ways, but the shortest is certainly the way of obedience, the way marked out by Jesus Christ for those whom he invites to follow him. It is the path most trodden by the saints, the one that their experience and teaching assure us is the most direct and agreeable, and especially the most certain. Routes to perfection are not all free of danger. There are some wherein it is easy to go astray, to make a mistake, to wander off into

548. The marginal reference is "Hom. 5 in Evang." Blain enlarges on it: "*Multum ergo Petrus et Andreas dimisit [sic], quando uterque etiam desideria habendi dereliquit: multum dimisit qui cum re possessa etiam concupiscentiis renuntiavit*" (PL, vol. 76, col. 1093).

549. The passage concerned is from the same homily: "*Quid ergo isto holocausto locupletius, quando per hoc quod Deo immolat in ara cordis anima semetipsam mactat?*" (ibid., col. 1094).

detours, to take turnings that seem to be in the right direction but that take us the opposite way. Some are bestrewn with snares that cause us to stumble or otherwise hinder and complicate our progress. It is easy to go astray along such paths, and many do. But in the way of obedience, there is no fear of being misled at all; it is not the devil, not our ego, not the desire to please ourselves that draws us along this path. Every command of a lawful superior that is not in direct or indirect conflict with the law of God, conscience, or our known duty is a command of God. He speaks through the superiors, and we fulfill his will in fulfilling theirs.

In the matter of spiritual direction, I may add, it is always possible to be misguided. This is so today perhaps more than ever, either because directors are not sufficiently enlightened, learned, or holy or because they lack zeal and dedicated interest. Some, indeed, are like the blind leading the blind to the edge of a precipice.<sup>550</sup> Others only make fanatics of their clients or else fill them with false doctrines. But in the obedient following of wise and approved rules and the behests of duly appointed superiors, there is nothing to fear. This is the safest route, but it is also the gentlest. It dispenses with the worry of having to be our own spiritual guide and the heavy burden of following our own will, a heavy burden even for those who like it. Obedience frees us in many instances from concern about whether what we are doing is pleasing to God and in accordance with his designs. It precludes all those scrupulous and anxious self-examinations as to whether we have merely identified our own fancies with the divine will. It is easy and common to go astray in such matters if we are not acting under obedience. As the author of *The Imitation* says, "We are moved by passion, and we think it zeal,"<sup>551</sup> or as he says in another place, often what seems to be charity is prompted by nature: "Man's own inclinations, his own will, his hope of reward, and his self-interest are motives seldom absent."<sup>552</sup>

A great cause of anxiety for good people not living in a religious community is that they cannot subject their actions and purposes to the guidance of obedience. They have an ardent desire to please God and make progress in perfection, and they know that perfection means following God's will. Their whole concern is to know what this will is, and their one fear is to be deceived and to mistake their own inclinations and natural desires for inspirations of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing these people of goodwill would not do or give to know what God wants of them and when and how to carry out his

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550. Matt. 15:14.

551. Book 2, chap. 5:1.

552. Book 1, chap. 15:2.

designs. It is quite a problem so to arrange things that we do not do too much or too little, or act at the wrong time and in the wrong place, to be sure that it is not sluggishness or overeagerness that causes us to act, that what we do is not indiscreet or ill-considered. This is what makes it an advantage to be in a state of dependence and obedience. It makes for assurance about what God wills as to time, place, manner, and all the other circumstances that contribute to the perfect fulfillment of his will. It precludes all the faults that mar such an ideal because it regulates everything, preventing delay as well as impetuosity, deficiency of any kind as well as excess; therefore, it affords the soul the greatest consolation it can enjoy in this world, which is to be always in full accord with what God wishes.

Obedience, as Saint Thomas says, is the essence of the religious life.<sup>553</sup> It is the constituent element of communities, what provides their specific character and special advantage. We enter the religious life only, in our Lord's phrase, to "lose our life,"<sup>554</sup> meaning to give up our right to dispose of ourselves and act as we wish, to follow our own ideas and insights, to be guided by our own intellect, to be master of our own actions, to be dependent on no one else at all. We enter religion only to subject ourselves to superiors and to observe rules that starve our own will of nourishment and cause it to die. Whoever enters a community for any other reason does not understand what he is about. He will upset the order of things and put himself at variance with God's intentions. He will have chosen a prison rather than a paradise on earth. Anyone who remains in religion without this true spirit is a source of trouble and scandal, a problem for his superiors and a stumbling block for his confreres.

The spirit of obedience constitutes the honor and good name of religious communities. Without this spirit there is no submissiveness, good order, fervor, regularity, or piety. What we find instead is an unsightly indifference to rules, a shocking state of disorder, a community in confusion and exposed to all sorts of consequences. Suppose that there is no spirit of obedience to keep inferiors dutiful and superiors free to govern; suppose there is no willing acceptance of rules. All we hear will be grumbling against lawful authority and rebellious murmuring leading to open revolt. There will be nothing but continual infringement of the rule, hidden or barefaced cabals, blatant divisions,

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553. Blain gives no reference, but the source of his statement is in the *Summa Theologica*: "*Votum obedientiae proprie se extendit ad actus propinquos fini religionis. Quanto autem aliquid propinquius est fini, tanto melius est. Et inde etiam est quod votum obedientiae est religioni essentialius*" (Ed. Lachat, vol. 11, 183).

554. Matt. 10:39.

endless disputations, people of conflicting temperaments ever distressingly at loggerheads. There will be no silence or recollection, no charity unless it be to gain something, no union except among those of the same mind, no piety except to save appearances, nothing but hypocritical pretense. Authority will be turned upside down, with children giving orders for their father to obey, sheep leading the shepherd, inferiors seeming to have taken a vow of obedience only to give their self-will more strength.

Contrariwise, where a spirit of obedience reigns, with each member keeping his proper place, there will be a sense of order leading to regular observance, and this will mean fervor and the practice of all the virtues. The community will seem like a little family lovingly accepting the guidance of the father. It will be a heaven on earth with peace, union, joy, and charity ensuring that there is one heart and one mind,<sup>555</sup> that inferiors and superiors are a source of happiness to one another.

Because obedience is the principal and most necessary virtue for religious and indeed for all community groups, De La Salle believed it important to explain the scope, nature, and practice of this virtue. He did just that in a succinct but solid treatise on the subject<sup>556</sup> and also in a more developed way in the meditations he wrote for the Brothers. I conclude this chapter with just one extract from these; many others may be found in the published volume of his meditations. It is his excellent commentary on the words of the Gospel, "Jesus was subject to Mary and Joseph."<sup>557</sup>

What an admirable lesson for all those responsible for teaching Christian truth to others! Jesus Christ made himself ready by submission and obedience to carry out the great task of the redemption of men and the salvation of souls because he knew that nothing can ensure the success of this mission more certainly and more effectively than preparing himself for it by a long practice of a humble and submissive life. That was why in the early Church, especially in the East, it was customary to choose for bishops persons who had lived for a long time under obedience. You whom God has called to a ministry that requires you to labor for the salvation of souls should prepare yourselves by prolonged practice to render yourselves worthy of so holy a ministry

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555. Acts 4:32

556. The treatise in the *Collection* is entitled, "The Nine Qualities of Obedience" (CL 15, 23–31); it reflects the influence of Saint Ignatius's "Letter on Obedience" (Rayez, *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 29–30).

557. Luke 2:51.

and to be able to achieve great good in it. The more faithful you are to the grace of Jesus Christ, who wishes you to be perfect in this virtue of obedience, the more will God bless your work, for whoever obeys his superiors obeys God.<sup>558</sup>

[CHAPTER 35]

*The qualities of perfect obedience as delineated in his teaching: universal in scope, prompt, generous, blind, and interior; the spirit of faith as the basis of true obedience*

Having conveyed something of De La Salle's doctrine on the necessity, excellence, and advantages of obedience, it remains now for me to explain the scope he attributed to it and the qualities he viewed as necessary for its perfection. He enumerates nine such qualities. Obedience should be 1) Christian and religious, 2) universal, 3) indifferent, 4) exact and entire, 5) prompt, 6) blind, 7) simple, 8) humble and respectful, and 9) cordial and affectionate.

The first of these *qualities*, as De La Salle calls them, specifies the motive that should lead us to obey. The three following ones refer principally to the person to be obeyed and the subject matter of our obedience. The fifth relates to the time element; the remaining four, to the manner of our obedience. I believe, however, that these nine conditions can be conveniently reduced to five, and I now propose to explain these in accordance with the mind of the saintly priest and sometimes in his precise terms.<sup>559</sup>

In the first place, obedience should be universal, admitting of no exceptions, no restrictions, no personal interpretations, and no dispensations extorted for trivial reasons. All superiors must be obeyed, whether ecclesiastic, civil, or religious. Saint Peter says that we are to

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558. A quotation (verbatim except for two minor variants) from De La Salle's *Meditations for all the Sundays of the Year*. The first edition appeared in Rouen some three years before Blain's biography and from the same publisher, J. B. Machuel. A facsimile reproduction is in CL 12. Blain's extract, from the meditation for the First Sunday after Epiphany, is based as usual on the Gospel of the day (Luke 2:41–52). Blain justifiably speaks of the Founder's "more developed" treatment of obedience in *Meditations*; all six of those for the Sundays after Epiphany, as well as those for the three Sundays that follow, are devoted to the subject.

559. This chapter, then, purports to be a commentary based on the *Collection* treatise, "The Nine Qualities of Obedience" (see above, chap. 34, note 556), but as Hermans observes, the considerations are more Blain's than De La Salle's (CL 10, 81–82 and 199–200).

be “subject to every human creature,”<sup>560</sup> meaning popes, bishops, parish priests, spiritual directors, religious superiors and rules, princes, civil authorities, and anyone whose right to obedience is indicated by reason and common sense. This doctrine is based on the Gospel, and however forgotten, neglected, and opposed it may be, it was the spiritual nourishment on which Jesus and his Apostles fed their followers. Saint Paul worded it thus: “Obey your leaders, and submit to them, for they keep watch over you as men who must render an account. So act that they may fulfill their task with joy, not with sorrow, for that would be harmful to you.”<sup>561</sup>

There are mutual obligations on the part of superiors and their inferiors. It is a matter of salvation for the former to point out our duty to us and for us to heed them with docility. Authority is a heavy burden for superiors when the response of inferiors is lacking to ease it. Superiors, whoever they are, have the right to command if they do so in God’s name, and inferiors have the obligation to obey. Lawfully appointed superiors have such a claim to obedience that we must submit to their orders regardless of what kind of people they are. It is no use justifying our disobedience on the grounds of their unworthiness. They may not be holy people, but the one whom they represent is infinitely so, and we must see him in them. It is not the way they act that is to be our guide, but what they tell us to do. This is why Jesus told his disciples and the people in general, “The scribes and Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses; therefore, you should do what they tell you to do, but do not act as they do.”<sup>562</sup> Duly appointed ecclesiastical superiors are even to be regarded as the images and representatives of Jesus Christ, acting on his behalf. So truly do they take his place that he considers any response to them, respectful or otherwise, as directed to him. “Whoever listens to you listens to me,” he says, “and whoever ignores you ignores me, but whoever ignores me ignores him who sent me.”<sup>563</sup>

The ministers of Jesus Christ, whoever they are, are invested with his authority; they take his place. A sin of disobedience toward them is a sin against the one they represent. They may be personally quite unworthy, but the role they fulfill cancels this; whatever their faults, they have a claim to the obedience of their inferiors. Nor are ecclesiastical superiors the only ones to whom obedience is due. All who are invested with secular authority and a lawful right to govern us, such as monarchs and other civil rulers, have a similar claim. This

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560. 1 Pet. 2:13 (Douai).

561. Heb. 13:17.

562. Matt. 23:2–3.

563. Luke 10:16.



teaching is so clearly and formally laid down in the New Testament that no Christian may discount it. Thus Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

Let everyone obey the authorities who are over him, for there is no authority except from God, and all authority that exists is established by God. Hence, the man who opposes authority rebels against what God has ordained; those who act thus make themselves liable to condemnation. A ruler need not be feared when you are doing what is right but only when there is wrongdoing. He is God's servant appointed for your good. Hence, you must obey not only to avoid punishment but also, because it is an obligation, for the sake of conscience.<sup>564</sup>

The Apostle of the pagan peoples here establishes the principle on which secular authority is based, namely, that it is conferred by God who in his Providence regulates everything in this world. Because the order that God has thus appointed can only be maintained by the exercise of authority, which in turn calls for obedience, Paul can conclude by saying that to withhold submission from those appointed to govern is to oppose God and to disturb what his wisdom has ordained. The same teaching is to be found also in the Letter to Titus: "Urge the people to be loyal subjects of those who govern them, to observe the laws they impose, and to be prepared to undertake whatever is commendable."<sup>565</sup> Saint Peter expresses the same doctrine in these words:

With God in view, be submissive to the various human authorities, to the emperor as having overall dominion and to governors as his appointed representatives. Such submission is willed by God. Indeed you must honor all people, loving them as your brothers and sisters. You must be God-fearing. All must respect the emperor. Servants, you must render due service to your masters, not just to those who are kindhearted and treat you well but also to those who are exacting, for it is a meritorious thing to put up with harsh and unjust treatment for the love of God.<sup>566</sup>

The duty of obedience could not be more comprehensive. The prince of the Apostles would have us be submissive and respectful to everyone. He singles out the king and his representatives as persons

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<sup>564</sup> Rom. 13:1–5.

<sup>565</sup> Titus 3:1.

<sup>566</sup> 1 Pet. 2:13–19.

we are obliged to obey, but then he tells servants to be similarly docile to their masters, even the most exacting ones, all because it is, as he says, willed by God and meritorious.

There is no need for surprise that this duty of submission to lawful secular authority forms part of the Gospel's teaching, for such submission is basic to good order; it keeps society together, validates its laws and insures peace for a country. The reasons that monarchs can be sure of loyalty only from good Christians is that Christians see them as reflecting God's own majesty, being invested with his authority, administering his justice, and wielding his power. Only this faith can win for rulers such respect and loyal submission that is at once sincere, disinterested, convinced, and steadfast.

Therefore, the first quality that true obedience should have is universality; that is, it should envisage all lawful superiors, whoever they may be, and also all fellow creatures—*omni creaturae*.<sup>567</sup> It should accept every order given by persons in authority, presuming that the order is rational and in harmony with God's law; it requires that such orders be carried out to the letter, just as they are given, with every circumstance taken into account, without addition or diminution; it also respects the time factor so that the fulfillment of the order takes neither more nor less than the time prescribed and is neither advanced nor delayed but is accomplished at the right moment; it requires the order to be obeyed in the exact manner laid down. To sum up, true obedience binds at every stage of our life, as much when we are getting on in years as in our youth; it applies everywhere, to people who live a secular life as well as to persons in religion, and it includes every kind of demand, the hard along with the easy. I refer the reader to what De La Salle says on this aspect of obedience in his *Collection of Various Short Treatises*.

Our Lord obeyed the way we have described, and he taught us by his example to do the same. He submitted to the orders of his Father: "I do always the things that please him."<sup>568</sup> His obedience extended to the whole Law: "I am come to fulfill the Law, omitting not a single iota."<sup>569</sup> He obeyed at the right moment, without anticipation or delay: "It is written of me that I should do your will; I have inscribed it in my heart, and behold, I come that I may fulfill it in everything."<sup>570</sup> He comes at the moment willed by God, presuming neither to advance this moment nor to postpone it. This attitude of our Lord was shown also at the wedding feast of Cana. His holy mother want-

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567. 1 Pet. 2:13–19 (Vulgate).

568. John 8:29.

569. Matt. 5:17–18.

570. Ps. 40:7–8.

ed him to perform his first miracle, but however much he desired to please her and whatever it would mean for his reputation to work a wonder that was destined to reveal his glory, he put it off because, as he said, his hour had not yet come.<sup>571</sup> Jesus was exemplary also in the way he obeyed. He did nothing according to his own free choice. The divine will was so completely his own that he accomplished it in the manner prescribed: “As the Father has commanded me, so do I act.”<sup>572</sup>

To make exceptions about what orders we are to obey, heeding some but rejecting others, is to disfigure the virtue of obedience as De La Salle understood it. To impose restrictions by submitting up to a certain point but no further is to stunt it. To give an interpretation and meaning to what is commanded—for the purpose of convincing ourselves that no one could have wished, needed, or been able reasonably to require something that is more than we are prepared to do—is to change the nature of the order. To seek to be dispensed by offering a false pretext, reacting sharply, or exerting pressure is to extort rather than request. Obedience of this kind is no more than a hypocritical substitution of our own will for that of the superior, a show of submission when, in fact, we are refusing it.

True obedience has an even wider connotation: it not only carries out the order given; it anticipates the superior's wishes and intentions. Authority is exercised in two ways, by commanding and by correcting. The first kind includes any formally and clearly expressed order, as well as the simple manifestation, spoken or implied, of a wish; the second consists in remedial advice or a reprimand. All this calls for an unlimited, obedient response. There must be no excusing ourselves on the plea that we fail only in small and unimportant points; when a thing is insignificant and easy, negligence is all the more blameworthy. The sin of the first man made him all the more guilty precisely because the command he had received was easy to obey.<sup>573</sup> The simpler a precept is to carry out, the more serious, without any doubt, is its transgression.

But suppose a superior requires a task that redounds to our honor and flatters our natural inclinations. Should we not then refuse? It is quite true that if on such occasions we obey because we find the task attractive, there is no merit, for it is self, not God, whom we are pleasing. It is also true that when we obey only reluctantly and half-heartedly in matters that are uncongenial, difficult, and repugnant, obedience is without merit because it is not sincerely meant. It is correct to say that if a given order is something we would like to do,

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571. John 2:1–11.

572. John 14:31.

573. Gen. 2:16–17.

something that makes us feel pleased with ourselves and that suits our temperament, we should make the superior aware of this and ask him to excuse us; we should even delay our act of obedience until he makes the order explicit. In such cases the superior, far from being displeased, will be edified, always provided we are acting sincerely. This is borne out by the practice of the saints, many examples of which could be quoted. De La Salle applies all this doctrine to the Brothers in the following terms:

The second quality of obedience is that it be universal. We must obey all the superiors, our equals or inferiors, without distinction. We obey in all that is commanded, at all times, and in all places. The contrary defects are to obey one Director and not another, to obey the Director but not those who command in his name, to obey in one place or in one house but not in another.<sup>574</sup>

Next, perfect obedience must be prompt. Orders must be carried out without delay or hesitation and not in a perfunctory way. All the masters of the spiritual life and all the founders of orders mention this characteristic. Thus Saint Benedict says in his Rule, "The superior must be obeyed without delay once he has given the order. He must be obeyed as if God were speaking through him."<sup>575</sup> Saint Pachomius has this in his Rule: "The brethren are to rise at the first signal and hasten to prayer."<sup>576</sup>

The saints who made a special study of the virtue of obedience to practice it perfectly distinguish three degrees in this quality of diligence. First, there must be no delay. At the moment the superior opens his lips to give the order, the inferior disposes himself to carry it out. Regarding this, Saint Francis used to say to his disciples, "As soon as an order is given, obey. Don't wait for it to be repeated."<sup>577</sup> Saint Bonaventure comments that an inferior for whom a command has to be repeated is not obedient but negligent.<sup>578</sup>

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574. A verbatim quotation except for the omission (seemingly accidental) of the phrase, "to obey in one thing but not in another" (CL 15, 25).

575. Blain is interpreting a passage from chapter 5 of *Regula*: "*Et veluti uno momento praedicta magistri jussio et perfecta discipuli opera, in velocitate timoris Dei.*"

576. A summary of a portion of article 3 of Pachomius' *Regula*: "*Cumque audierit vocem tubae ad collectam vocantis, statim egrediatur cellulam suam, de scripturis aliquid meditans usque ad ostium conventiculi.*"

577. "The most holy Father was wont to say, 'Brothers most dear, fulfill a command at the first word nor wait until what was said to you is repeated'" (*Speculum perfectionis*, English translation, R. Steele, London: Dent, 1925, 221).

The second degree of promptitude requires us to obey by breaking off instantly whatever we are doing. This degree is closer to perfection than the previous one. A person can easily respond to an order when not otherwise occupied; he is more likely to do so reluctantly and carelessly if he is engaged in something else that he finds enjoyable and interesting. Yet obedience must be prompt in this sense if it is to be perfect; every other task must be put aside. As Saint Benedict again says in his Rule, the hands must be quickly freed for action—“*mox exoneratis manibus*.”<sup>579</sup> According to Blessed Giles, we must even discontinue a conversation with the angels if they happen to have honored us with a visit!<sup>580</sup> The Apostles left us a wonderful example of this diligence. At the first call of Jesus Christ, Peter and Andrew left their boats and nets to follow him: “*Illi continuo relictis retibus secuti sunt eum*.”<sup>581</sup> It was the same with James and John: “*Illi statim relictis retibus et patre secti sunt eum*.”<sup>582</sup> Matthew had more to leave, but he too responded at the first word of our Savior: “*Ait illi: ‘Sequere me, et surgens secutus est eum*.’”<sup>583</sup>

The third stage of prompt response goes still further, for it requires that a task be left unfinished and remain so if obedience calls elsewhere. Here again many are prepared to quit what they are doing at the first sound of the bell or at a word from the superior, provided they have either just completed it or have no chance of completing it at that moment. But if only a little remains to be done and they are keen to put the finishing touches, there is a strong temptation to keep at it. Nevertheless, the founders of orders also required immediate obedience in such cases. De La Salle only echoes them in his teaching

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578. “*Item non est obediens, sed negligens, qui secundum expectat mandatum*” (*Omnia opera*, ed. Peltier, vol. 14, 643).

579. The marginal reference is “Reg. 3” (misprinted for 5, as Blain recognizes lower down the page): “*Ergo hi tales relinquentes statim quae sua sunt et voluntatem propriam deserentes, mox exoccupatis manibus, et quod agebant imperfectum relinquentes, vicino obedientiae pede iubentis vocem factis sequuntur*” (ed. McCann, 32). All editions consulted, including the Maurist of 1663 (available to Blain), give the reading *exoccupatis*—not Blain’s *exoneratis*.

580. In the *Fioretti* story, a friar consults Giles as to whether he ought to remain at prayer in his cell rather than go begging for bread, as he had just been instructed to do. Giles tells him, “True prayer is to do the will of our superior.” The lesson concludes with the words: “I say unto thee, were there a man of such devotion and exaltation of mind that he spake with angels, and while thus speaking he were called by his superior, straightway he ought to leave his converse with the angels and obey his superior.” (Dent, 1925, 151).

581. Matt. 4:20 (Vulgate).

582. Matt. 4:22 (Vulgate).

583. Matt. 9:9 (Vulgate).

on the subject. Not only “*mox exoneratis manibus*,” says Saint Benedict, but “*quod agebant imperfectum relinquentes*—leaving unfinished what they were doing.”<sup>584</sup> An abbot of his order adds this comment: “Those who are engaged in other tasks must put them aside. Manual workers must leave their tools there; scribes, a letter half-formed; even whatever the whole community is engaged in must be interrupted.”<sup>585</sup>

It is true that an exception must be made in cases where necessity, charity, or any other legitimate cause would not make it feasible for a task to be left unfinished. Common sense must always govern the practice of virtue. But otherwise, diligence of the quality we have been describing is a source of good example in a community. Religious who are prompt in obeying contribute to good order as well as edify others and inspire them to be fervent, but those who are sluggish and careless only cause trouble in a community. The former are pleasing to all whereas the latter are looked at askance.

The Scriptures say as much in these words: “Have you seen someone who is prompt in his work? He pleases everyone, and kings would be glad to have his services.”<sup>586</sup> Saint Pachomius made a rule that if anyone came late to the refectory, he should, as a penance, either remain standing or be sent out without taking his meal.<sup>587</sup> Saint Basil even prescribed that such latecomers should have nothing to eat until the next day.<sup>588</sup>

Here, then, we have the quality of true obedience as recommended by the Founder of the Christian Schools. He would have the Brothers obey on the spot, not putting the thing off until the morrow, even for an instant, but anticipating what is to be done, practicing the kind of obedience that makes commands unnecessary. He wanted his disciples to be always ready, as Saint Bernard puts it, to see, hear, say,

584. See above, note 579.

585. The marginal reference is “Smaragde in cap. 43 Reg. S. Ben.” Smaragdus was a ninth century Benedictine abbot, of Irish origin, author of, among other works, a noted commentary on the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, from which Blain is using this passage: “*Cum index in oratorio percussus fuerit . . . laborantes opus projiciant, artifices ferramenta dimittant, scriptores litteram non integrent. Omnis fratris manus deserat quod agebat.*”

586. Prov. 22:29 (Vulgate).

587. Blain gives no reference, but he is borrowing from article 32 of *Regula S. Pachonii*: “*Si quis ad comedendum tardius venerit, excepto majoris imperio, similiter aget poenitentiam, aut ad domum jejunos revertetur*” (PL, vol. 23, col. 68).

588. No reference is given, except by implication. The relevant passage is in Saint Basil’s *Regulae brevius tractatae*, q. 136: “. . . *sin cum simul occurrere potuisset, non festinavit, culpa hujusce negligentiae cognita, usque ad constitutam horam sequentis diei maneat jejunos*” (PG, vol. 31, col. 1171).

and do whatever they were told and to go immediately wherever they were sent.<sup>589</sup> He has expressed it all in concise terms as follows:

The fifth quality of obedience is that it be prompt. We must obey in the place and at the moment a thing is commanded by a glance or at the first sound of the bell: leaving a letter half formed or a syllable half read, discontinuing what is one-fourth or one-half done to begin something else, breaking off our conversation at a word when the bell announces the end of recreation, leaving a person to whom we have been speaking when the bell rings for an exercise, and leaving all other things unfinished, however necessary they may appear, unless we have permission to continue them.<sup>590</sup>

The third characteristic of this virtue of obedience that he required of the Brothers was that it should be generous. Nothing requires more courageous generosity than obedience. Man is prone to evil from his youth,<sup>591</sup> as the Scriptures tell us, and he likes to do what he wants and follow his own will. This baneful tendency, like so many others, derives from our first parent, who preferred his will to God's and left us with the effect of his sin, an unhappy bent toward evil, the source of every wrongdoing. This tendency makes it very difficult for us to renounce our own will. As Saint Bernard says, "It is no easy matter to put aside what we would like to do in favor of what someone else would like us to do."<sup>592</sup>

Furthermore, this wayward disposition finds support in difficulties attached to the orders given: the thing commanded may be unpleasant, disagreeable, or humiliating; it may run counter to the mood we are in or to our temperament and natural bent. It may be that the order is given in a repulsive manner, expressed in overbearing, sharp, or brusque terms, showing no sympathy or understanding. Yet again, the timing and circumstances may be all wrong; perhaps we are not feeling in the right form at the time, or we are afraid of being mocked and jeeringly accused of obsequiousness. Finally, other people may be begging and imploring us to do something else just at that moment. A

589. The passage referred to is from no. 41 of Bernard's *Sermons on Various Subjects*: "*Fidelis obediens . . . parat oculos visui, aures auditui, linguam voci, manus operi, itineri pedes*" (PL, vol. 183, col. 657).

590. A quotation from the *Collection*, verbatim except for three insignificant variants (CL 10, 82–83).

591. Gen. 8:21 (Douai).

592. Blain's marginal reference, "Loc. cit.," leads to the following from the same sermon 41 of Bernard: "*Difficile est ergo suam relinquere voluntatem, et alterius voluntati deservire*" (PL, vol. 183, col. 656).

great deal of courage is needed to overcome these difficulties, to surmount the obstacles and obey joyfully, not sullenly and reluctantly, to do so without grumbling and without having to be coaxed but with wholehearted generosity that makes it as easy for the superior to command as for the inferior to obey.

De La Salle's words for what I have called courageous obedience are *cordial* and *affectionate* obedience. This is what he says:

The ninth quality of obedience is that it be cordial and affectionate. That is to say, we should receive every command joyfully and comply with it in a pleasant and unrestrained manner, without being troubled or upset by it, no matter how difficult or disagreeable it may appear. The contrary defects are, first, to receive the Brother Director's orders in a cold, indifferent, or melancholy manner; second, to be upset by the thing commanded, obeying without feeling, in a lifeless way, or murmuring and showing repugnance; third, to oppose the one who commands, those who make known his orders, or those who carry them out; fourth, to show displeasure or ill-will toward the Brother Director or anyone else on account of the order received—in a word, everything that shows we are not pleased with what has been commanded or that we find it difficult to carry out.<sup>593</sup>

When all is said and done, even in the most fervent communities not all the members bring the same constancy and generosity to their obedience. Some would like to obey, but they stop at that. Others show the desire, but they are weak and yield to the temptation not to obey. Others again are choosy with their obedience; they submit to what suits them but let the rest go by default. De La Salle has delineated these three types of disobedience in his meditation on the Gospel for Sexagesima Sunday.<sup>594</sup>

We come now to the fourth quality of obedience, which is that it should be blind—the most difficult characteristic of all, and yet the most essential if the virtue is to be practiced perfectly. Obedience is said to be blind when no fine distinctions are made, no questions are asked, no opinions are offered, and no arguments are put forward about what has been commanded. Those who have this kind of obe-

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593. Quoted verbatim from the *Collection* (CL 15, 30–31).

594. This paragraph is a fair summary of De La Salle's meditation, correctly referred to by Blain as that for Sexagesima Sunday (the sixtieth day before Easter, in the liturgical calendar prior to the Vatican II reform), based on Saint Luke's version of the parable of the sower and entitled by De La Salle "Three kinds of disobedient religious" (CL 12, 54–56; *Meditations*, 14.1–3).



dience submit their heart and intellect and surrender their views, opinions, and reasoning power; they are people described in the Apostle's phrase as *captivantes intellectum*.<sup>595</sup> John Cassian has some words apropos:

Above all else, if you wish to become truly wise, cultivate the folly that the Apostle Paul advocates. This will mean making no distinctions about what you are commanded, no judgments about it, but obeying with total simplicity and exactness. It will mean looking upon whatever God's law and your superior's command require of you as the one, holy, useful, and wise thing to do.<sup>596</sup>

Blind obedience means closing our eyes to everything about the superior personally: whether he is worthy of his post or not, his manner of acting, his age (Saint Paul expected the people to obey Timothy when he was still quite young<sup>597</sup>), his social origins (Jesus Christ bade us take heed of the Apostles, who were men of humble birth, as we would heed him<sup>598</sup>), his manner when giving an order (our Lord submitted to the edict of the Emperor Augustus, to Pilate's sentence of death, and to his executioners as readily as he did to Mary and Joseph<sup>599</sup>). We must pay no attention to whether the superior is equal to his job and disregard his intellectual acumen, learning, talents, experience, and even his virtue. We do not obey him because he is wise and prudent, learned and enlightened, kind and likeable, and holy but because he is God's representative.

We must not even take into account his moral behavior, the kind of life he leads with all its faults and shortcomings. A superior does not lose his authority just because he is unworthy of it. The world will never see worse people than Annas and Caiaphas<sup>600</sup> and the rest, who occupied the chair of Moses, men who persecuted, calumniated, and attacked Jesus Christ with such diabolical fury and who were satisfied only when they saw him die between two criminals,<sup>601</sup> covered

595. 2 Cor. 10:5 (Vulgate).

596. Blain gives an accurate marginal reference, "L. 4. c. 41". The passage from Cassian's *Institutes* reads: ". . . *hoc prae omnibus excole . . . ut stultum te, secundum Apostoli sententiam, facias in hoc mundo, ut sis sapiens; nihil scilicet discernens, nihil dijudicans ex his quae tibi fuerint imperata; sed cum omni simplicitate ac fide obedientiam semper exhibeas, illud tantummodo sanctum, illud utile, illud sapiens esse iudicans, quicquid tibi, vel lex Dei, vel Senioris examen indixerit*" (PL, vol. 49, col. 200).

597. 1 Tim. 4:11–12.

598. Luke 10:16.

599. Luke 2:51.

600. John 18:13.

with wounds, his last drop of blood shed,<sup>602</sup> overwhelmed with shame, and in terrible pain. Yet it was such people, according to Jesus himself, who were to be obeyed.<sup>603</sup> Saint Peter urged servants to submit willingly not only to kind and gracious masters but also to those who were harsh—*etiam discolis*.<sup>604</sup>

The manners of superiors must likewise be left out of account. They may be rough, eccentric, crotchety, disdainful, cold, imperious, peremptory, overhasty, or overhesitant. We must pay no attention to all this. Superiors are human and so have faults and weaknesses; they too are subject to emotional feelings. We would never obey them at all if we required them to be perfect first, for no one is perfect in this world. It is not the holiness of the minister that gives a sacrament its efficacy nor he his right to administer; neither of these is canceled by his unworthiness. The same applies in the matter of obedience; we must disregard equally the personal merits and the shortcomings of the superior.

Saint Paul reproached the Christians of Corinth with being earthly minded—“*adhuc carnales estis*.”<sup>605</sup> His reason was that they failed to see God in his ministers and judged them by their talents, preferring one against another:

When some of you say, “I am for Paul,” and others, “I am for Apollo,” are you not taking a human view? What is Apollo, and what is Paul? They are both servants of him in whom you have believed. I planted; Apollo watered, but it was God who made the seed grow. It is not the one who plants or the one who waters who counts for anything. The one who counts is God, for it is he who provides the growth.<sup>606</sup>

The same applies to anyone who holds a position of authority. With regard to what is commanded, we must leave the reasoning and the decision to the superior and confine ourselves to carrying out the order. Saint Bernard says:

It shows a poor spirit and a weak will when we start questioning the orders given by a superior, hesitating about every step that obedience requires to be taken, wanting to be given a reason for

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601. Mark 15:27.

602. John 19:34.

603. Matt. 23:3.

604. 1 Pet. 2:18 (Vulgate).

605. 1 Cor. 3:2 (Vulgate).

606. 1 Cor. 3:4–7.

everything, looking suspiciously at every behest, wanting to know the motives behind each, agreeing to obey only if we approve. This is a dubious kind of obedience or, rather, only a source of trouble.<sup>607</sup>

Finally, obedience should come from the heart, or, as De La Salle says, it should be Christian and religious. He made this the first quality of obedience. This is what he says:

The first condition of obedience is that it be Christian and religious; that is, we should obey through virtue and the spirit of religion, obeying God, whom we respect and honor in the person of the Director, who is invested with the divine authority. Thus our sole motive is to obey God and do his holy will. The defects opposed to this kind of obedience are, first, not to entertain the view and sentiment of faith that it is God whom we obey in the person of the Director; second, not to obey because of the shortcomings of a Director, for any reason whatever, even apparently good, or to prefer to obey another whom we like better or because he has more intelligence, learning, or greater ability to govern; third, to obey merely because we cannot do otherwise or to avoid a reprimand or some penalty; fourth, to prefer interior motions, imaginary inspirations, or even our inclinations and opinions to what is commanded, counseled, or of rule; in a word, to be guided by our own sense or the advice and opinions of others rather than those of the Director because we think them better.<sup>608</sup>

We see from these words that the saintly priest considered people to be obedient only if their outward submission was matched by their inward disposition. In other words, only someone who obeyed from a spirit of faith fostered by charity was worthy, according to De La Salle, of the glorious title of “an obedient man.” For him this spirit of faith, considered as the animating principle of real obedience, con-

607. The marginal reference, “De prec. et disp. c. 13” (misprinted for “10”), leads to the following passage from Bernard’s treatise, *Precept and Dispensation*: “*Porro imperfecti cordis, et infirmæ prorsus voluntatis indicium est, statuta seniorum studiosius discutere, haerere ad singula quæ injunguntur, exigere de quibusque rationem, et male suspicari de omni præcepto, cuius causa latuerit; nec unquam libenter obedire, nisi cum audire contigerit quod forte libuerit. . . . Delicata satis, imo nimis molesta est hujuscemodi obedientia*” (PL, vol. 182, col. 874).

608. This is a quotation from the *Collection* (CL 15, 24–25), verbatim except for a single minor variant (*règle* for *règles* near the end). A lapse causes Blain’s marginal reference to refer to page 42 of *Meditations*.

sists in seeing Jesus Christ in the person of the superior. It means adopting a supernatural point of view, a conviction that God can act through men and that it is he who commands and whom we obey in submitting to those who hold his place and represent him on earth—*“sicut Domino et non hominibus.”*<sup>609</sup>

Obedience of this kind is based on the Gospel, praised and affirmed in the Scriptures, and especially commended by the Apostles. It is meritorious and highly privileged, as well as being the only kind of obedience that can become quite easy, even sweet and agreeable to practice. Every other kind is inspired by natural motives and therefore imperfect; it either makes painful demands or is inconstant and short-lived; it is prompted, or at least vitiated, by the desire to please or the fear to displease, by vanity, self-interest, human respect, or some other motive. Only the spirit of faith, which sees the man as taking the place of God, instills a uniform respect for all superiors regardless of their talents, social background, worthiness, virtue, or personality.

Anyone who obeys from a spirit of faith honors all superiors as representatives of God, invested with his authority and dispensing his will. It is not they but Jesus Christ whom we hear when they speak—*“qui vos audit, me audit.”*<sup>610</sup> It was on this view of faith that the Apostles based the principles of obedience that they prescribed for all time and for people in every state of life. Saint Paul urges and inspires children to obey their parents as they would the Lord.<sup>611</sup> On the same principle, he bases his advice to servants: “Servants, obey your masters as you would Jesus Christ, not with the idea of gaining their favor, for they are only men, but because you sincerely wish to do God’s will. You are servants of Jesus Christ, and your service must be wholehearted, not as rendered to mere men but as rendered to the Lord.”<sup>612</sup> Elsewhere he tells them: “Carry out your tasks with a good heart, but for the Lord, not for men. . . . Let Jesus Christ be the master you serve.”<sup>613</sup> Saint Peter has the same principle in mind when he writes to the faithful in general, “With God in view, be submissive to the various human authorities, to the emperor . . . and to his appointed representatives. Such submission is willed by God.”<sup>614</sup>

According to this view of faith, all whom Providence has appointed to govern us have something of a divine character. It is the

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609. Eph. 6:7 (Vulgate).

610. Luke 10:16 (Vulgate).

611. Eph. 6:1.

612. Eph. 6:5–7.

613. Col. 3:23–24.

614. 1 Pet. 2:13–15.

sovereign Lord whom we are to recognize and respect in them. But submission to them is neither complete nor absolutely perfect unless inspired by religious motives. Men who obey for reasons of expediency see their superiors only as fellowmen; this sense of equality runs counter to the idea of subordination. People who think like this obey as slaves do, from a motive of fear; in their minds they reject the yoke of authority and rebel if they feel like it or if it is feasible to do so. Only the religious spirit, which keeps the passions in control, makes true obedience possible, for it recognizes that in Saint Paul's words, "All authority comes from God, and whoever opposes authority opposes the order intended by God."<sup>615</sup> So whoever lacks respect for his superiors lacks respect for Jesus Christ. Whoever tries to deceive them is trying to deceive God, according to what Saint Peter said to An-nas,<sup>616</sup> "Whoever rejects them rejects God, as the Lord told Samuel."<sup>617</sup>

When obedience is well founded on a spirit of faith, it has no difficulty in offering the tribute of total and unconditional submission. As long as we are convinced that it is God who acts, speaks, orders, and governs in the person of the superior, the intellect assents; reason is silent; the heart approves, and the result is obedience at once sincere, prompt, cheerful, unquestioning, and entire. It is no problem to withhold argument about orders that we respect as coming from the lips of Jesus Christ or to consider them possible, practicable, and even pleasantly easy, however tiresome and difficult they may seem to be. This is why the perfectly obedient man always succeeds, and his victories cost him little; the will of God, marked out for him by his superiors, carries with it the grace that raises him above what he is capable of and causes difficulties to vanish. There is a further advantage to obedience of this quality: it is always consistent because it is not influenced by how we happen to feel or by any merely human consideration. It is constant, courageous, and strong, like the love that enlivens it. It shows the same submission to an authority that is austere, hard, and imperious as to one that is lenient and gracious; it responds with equal docility to superiors who are cantankerous and difficult to please as to those who carry their authority in a way that draws people to them and wins hearts.

Whoever bases his obedience on faith makes use of his reason, critical faculty, and judgment only to bring them into line with what his superiors command. Thus he is always content with their requirements because he always finds them just, reasonable, and beneficial. He is never even curious to know why and wherefore such and such

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<sup>615</sup>. Rom. 13:1–2.

<sup>616</sup>. Acts 5:4.

<sup>617</sup>. 1 Sam. 8:7.

an order is given; he would certainly never think of asking this or of raising problems about how the thing is to be done. After all, in subjecting his judgment to that of his superiors and foregoing the claims of his own intellect and intuitive sense—surrendering, in a word, his powers of reasoning—he is behaving as rationally as possible. For then he is like a child trusting the care of its mother, confident that she knows what is best. He is aware that in submitting to those who take God's place for him, he is obeying the Lord of all truth, infinitely wise, just, and holy. So there is no room for questioning or reasoning about what is commanded.

[CHAPTER 36]

*His teaching on the practice of obedience; his regard of obedience as the most essential virtue for his Institute; his submission to Providence, making him exemplary in his practice of this virtue; his obedience to ecclesiastical superiors, spiritual directors, civil authorities, and disciples*

De La Salle was convinced that the perfection of any virtue consists not in any accepted theory about it but in its practice. According to him the important thing about obedience is not so much to have great insights and opinions about it as to put these into practice. He first explained the excellence of this virtue, its scope, qualities, and conditions, showing also that its basis is the spirit of faith, religion, and charity. Then he prescribed the way all this is to be fulfilled in practice, the way our motive of faith is to be brought to bear on each act of obedience so that the act will be carried out with love and joy.

He wanted persons under authority to collect their thoughts before presenting themselves to receive an order. He would have them bring into play, in mind and heart, the virtues of faith and love so that they would obey as true followers of Jesus Christ, sincere and inspired by supernatural and religious motives. According to De La Salle, an inferior needs to recollect himself in this way to prepare to obey well, disposing his will and his judgment to forego reasoning about what is ordered, to overcome any repugnance he may feel, and to ask God for the grace to carry out the command perfectly. He, the inferior, must act in a spirit of faith and see only Jesus Christ in the person of his superior. The Founder used to cite the example of the venerable old man spoken of by Saint John Climacus, who used to present himself before his superior with the same humble, modest, and religious demeanor as he would have adopted before Jesus Christ because, as

he said, “I see no one but Jesus Christ.”<sup>618</sup> He, the inferior, needs to summon all his virtue of charity to obey with a generous and joyful heart, making a ready sacrifice of his will for the love of God.

This attitude, according to our saintly priest, will ensure three other dispositions that faith requires regarding the superior, namely, respect, submissiveness, and trust. First, it will ensure respect as being due to Jesus Christ, who should be honored, adored even, in the person of the superior because, to borrow a thought of De La Salle, he is as truly present beneath the exterior appearance of the superior as he is under the sacramental species.<sup>619</sup> Second, it will ensure submissiveness because the superior is invested with the adorable authority of Jesus Christ. “*Haec dicit Dominus; Dominus locutus est,*” the ancient Prophets used to say—“Thus speaks the Lord: it is the Lord who speaks.” They used their own words, but they uttered them only as the mouthpiece of the Lord. God spoke through them—“*loquens in prophetis,*”<sup>620</sup> which is why these holy men were careful to remind the people of this, to divert their attention from them, mere human beings. Prompted by the same attitude of faith, a person who wishes to obey well must say to himself as soon as the superior begins to speak, “It is the Lord who is saying this to me,” and as soon as he has spoken, “This is what the Lord wishes me to do.” Third, it will inspire trust: trust in the goodness of Jesus Christ, who commands by the lips of the superior, and trust in his divine Spirit to be able to obey in a manner pleasing to him. It will mean begging him to give the courage needed to surmount the difficulties and repugnance that the devil and our own nature accentuate in any commands that fail to flatter our pride.

What all this means is to approach our superiors with the heart of a child, the docility of a disciple, the submissiveness of a servant. It means regarding them as masters, fathers, and rulers, respecting them as a good servant respects his master, heeding them as a responsive student heeds his teacher, loving them as a dutiful child loves his father. The inferior must see his superior as the vicar of Jesus Christ acting on his behalf, as speaking on behalf of our Lord and transmitting his wishes, as the hand of Jesus leading him along the right way.

If the practice of obedience of this kind has its difficulties, it also has inestimable advantages. For example, it is a safe way to follow. If

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618. The story of the octogenarian Laurence is told in the chapter on obedience (fourth rung) of *The Ladder of Paradise*.

619. Hermans cites this statement as one among a number in this chapter that despite their specific attribution by Blain, owe more to him than to De La Salle; this does not exclude some that have an authentic ring (CL 10, 19).

620. Heb. 1:1 (Vulgate).

an angel came from heaven to bring us God's orders, we might be free to doubt his word; it is easy to be deluded and take for a messenger from God the dark angel wearing the disguise of an angel of light. But there can be no mistake in heeding the voice of a superior and obeying his orders, always supposing that they in no way conflict with our conscience. The superior might be mistaken, even guilty of sin, in the command he gives, but whoever obeys him as he would Jesus Christ cannot go wrong in carrying out his orders, again provided they are not contrary to the law of God.

The obedience we are speaking of is a form of true wisdom. It sheds the light of faith, carrying the torch that guides our steps through places of darkness. It is for the superior to supply the necessary prudence; it suffices for the inferior to obey, and the advantage is with him. The superior may well act indiscreetly, but the inferior is safe from that kind of aberration. Obedience prepares the soul to receive enlightenment; it keeps us clear of Satan's snares and renders harmless all his tricks. For a fine picture of this kind of obedience, rather, of obedience admirably translated into practice, we need only read chapter 12 of the Rule the Founder gave his Brothers:

The Brothers will always see God in the person of their Director, and they will always be mindful to address themselves to him as one invested with God's authority. They will put themselves in this disposition before presenting themselves to him. . . . They will always speak to the Brother Director with profound respect, always in a low voice and in terms that show the veneration they have for him as holding the place of God, whom they ought to recognize and honor in the person of their Director. They will never pass before the Brother Director without making him a profound bow. They will have a humble and entire confidence in him, and they will make known to him all their mental and bodily infirmities, their problems, their temptations, and the attraction or ease and the difficulty they find in the practice of virtue. When they render an account of their conduct to the Brother Director, they will do so with the disposition and attitude of making it to God. They will receive with much respect the advice given them by the Brother Director as given to them by God, not looking on the Brother Director except as the instrument by which God makes known to them the means they ought to take to go to him. They will receive with the same sentiments of respect and submission all the orders and commands of the Brother Director, seeing in him only the authority of God that is communicated to him and his divine Majesty, which he represents for them.<sup>621</sup>



We can see from all that has been said that the loving esteem the saintly priest had for the virtue of obedience could hardly have been carried further. He had learned it, after all, from the heart of Jesus Christ, which he had made the object of his profound study, wishing to know it alone. He was convinced of the necessity of this virtue, its excellence, and its matchless fruits, and he sought not only to enrich his own conduct with its merits but also to inspire others to practice it everywhere and in all sorts of ways. Because he believed intensely that what gives value to our actions is the desire to fulfill God's will, he gauged the worth of any action by the spirit of obedience with which it was done. This is why in chapter 21 of the Rule we have just quoted, he urges his disciples to be "very exact to leave everything at the first sign of the Brother Director, with the view that it is God who calls and commands them. To be sure of doing the will of God in all things, they will not do anything without permission, however small and insignificant it appears."<sup>622</sup>

According to De La Salle, the practice of obedience is the royal highway to heaven and the shortest, most direct, and easiest route to perfection; it is the sure path that Jesus Christ traced out for us by his example; outside it is the likelihood of going astray, the risk of losing ourselves. In his view, obedience is so surely the essence of the spiritual life, so much the substance and pith of piety, so vital to all the practices of Christian discipleship, so truly the mother and guardian of all the other virtues<sup>623</sup> that he required the Brothers "not to enter any place without permission, except where the exercise is taking place at that time. They will not leave the house or even the room where they are without permission. They will not read any book or paper, and they will not copy anything without the permission of the Brother Director."

This latter point applied also to their spiritual reading; no Brother was allowed to choose books for himself or to read any without

621. Chapter 12 of the Rule is "How the Brothers Ought to Conduct Themselves with Regard to the Brother Director." Blain's citation comprises articles 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. As usual, he quotes from the 1726 printed edition, but the text of these articles is almost identical with that of the 1705 and 1718 manuscripts (CL 25, 49–51). Hermans notes six variants in Blain's transcription, three of them omissions of qualifying phrases (CL 10, 98–99).

622. The reference to "chapter 21 of the Rule" is correct for the 1726 printed version; in the 1718 manuscript, the chapter on obedience is number 20. Blain is justified in claiming the words as the Founder's because the two texts are almost identical (CL 25, 74–75).

623. More statements that fail to meet the test of authenticity, according to Hermans, who cites vocabulary totally absent from De La Salle's known writings (CL 10, 199–200).

permission. A similar restriction applied to all their needs, including those occasioned by bodily indisposition.<sup>624</sup>

It is evident that the Founder could not have gone into greater detail about these things or have extended the claims of holy obedience any farther. But if he thus imposed on his disciples a yoke that seemed so burdensome to outsiders, especially to those who believed in the right of personal choice, he did not think that he was being oppressive or was stifling their initiative. On the contrary, his intention was to open up to them the freedom of the children of God, of those who alone know the unique delight of doing here on earth the will of their heavenly Father in the way it is fulfilled in heaven. His own experience had shown him that true obedience holds the passions in check and tramples under foot both pride, the chief of all the vices, and the devil, the head and monarch of the proud. The Founder knew from experience that to enjoy freedom and live contentedly in the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit, we must accept a life of obedience. He was convinced that whoever does so is a child of grace; whoever refuses to do so is astray from the path of grace and is heading with the children of Belial<sup>625</sup> for hellfire, the destination and punishment of self-will. As Saint Bernard says, "Let self-will be no more, and hell will disappear."<sup>626</sup>

In keeping with all this, our holy priest said in his last conference to the novices, which was precisely on obedience:

If you are perfectly obedient, you will appear with confidence before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. For when the divine Judge asks you to give an account of your conduct, you will be able to reply, "Lord, if you please, ask my Director. I have done nothing except in obedience to his orders, believing that to obey him was to obey you, according to your own words in the Gospel." Answering thus, you will have nothing to fear.<sup>627</sup>

His horror for sin made this virtue still more dear to him. Obedience, according to the opinion of some saints, renders those who are

624. Having quoted verbatim articles 2, 8, 3 and 4 (in that order), Blain concludes with a summary of articles 6 and 7 (CL 25, 74-75).

625. Deut. 13:13 (Douai).

626. The marginal reference accurately indicates Bernard's sermon 3 on the Resurrection as the source for the statement: "*Cesset voluntas propria et infernus non erit.*"

627. Presumably Blain is quoting a reminiscence of one who, as a novice at Saint Yon, heard the conference. The quaint simplicity of the saying no doubt made a lasting impression on the young man's mind, as it has on those of subsequent generations of novices who have read it here.

faithful to its practice in some way incapable of sin. Consequently, it removes from them any fear of death or of God's judgment.

Yet another motive for practicing it and inspiring others to practice it was his love for Jesus Christ and his desire to belong to him. For it was the obedience of our Lord that was the source of our salvation and enabled us to enter into a relationship with him comparable to that of members of a family. Jesus said as much in the words, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and my mother."<sup>628</sup> De La Salle regarded obedience as essential to every creature, the law of Christians, the resource of sinners, and the gate of heaven. "He who does the will of my Father", says Jesus, "will enter the kingdom of heaven."<sup>629</sup>

Unless all these practices were prompted by obedience, the Founder put little value on all the prayers, fasts, and other austerities of people in religion or on the good works they perform. Only obedience could prevent these things from deteriorating into occasions of complacency, from being tarnished by natural motives and contaminated by self-will. Only obedience was able to impose prudent limits on such practices and guard them from such common and ordinary faults as choosing the wrong time, not knowing where to draw the line, overdoing things, or the opposite, and often doing what God is not asking for at all. It is certain that obedience protects us from all these snares because it prescribes not only what is to be done but also the time and manner of doing it properly. This virtue regulates and consecrates all the impulses of the heart, all human thoughts and undertakings. It sanctifies all that we do, repose as well as labor, sleep as well as waking hours, paying attention to material needs and comforts as well as practicing austerities. It keeps wrongdoing at bay, makes actions holy that in themselves are indifferent, perfects those that are good, and adds to each the special merit of being performed solely as a way of fulfilling God's will.

De La Salle considered also that obedience provides the impulse for all the other virtues because its practice involves humility, Christian self-denial and mortification, patience, faith, and charity—everything that is most holy, sublime, and heroic in Gospel teaching. In a word, it contains within itself all Christian perfection as expressed in these words of Jesus Christ, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."<sup>630</sup> This epitome of perfection, according to De La Salle, is contained in the practice of obedience because it calls for total self-renunciation, negation of personal

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628. Matt. 12:50.

629. Matt. 7:21.

630. Luke 9:23.

opinion and self-will, death to sinful passion, and destruction of all desires and natural tendencies. By the very fact, it constitutes the cross that must be carried daily, the discipline of fallen nature, the thwarting of rebellious inclinations, the narrow way that is to be followed as leading to Jesus Christ. He is the head of all children of obedience, the shepherd of the simple and docile flock, the perfect prototype who was obedient unto death, the death of the cross,<sup>631</sup> and who, as Saint Bernard expresses it, preferred to lose his life rather than that obedience should suffer.<sup>632</sup>

Our saintly priest, finally, gave his disciples to understand that although the virtue of obedience is a cross, it is one that bears along those who take it up. Far from overburdening souls of goodwill, the cross makes their journey to heaven easier, enabling them to run, and to run so quickly that they have no time to notice the thorns they pass through on the way. He told them that children of obedience are heading full sail for a blessed eternity, like passengers on a seagoing vessel making for port with a following wind, confident of arriving swiftly and smoothly, unworried even when they lose consciousness in a deep sleep. Saint John Climacus has a saying that for those who are perfectly obedient, life's journey is only a prolonged slumber.<sup>633</sup>

De La Salle was so imbued with this doctrine that he never tired of praising and recommending obedience in his general instructions and in personal spiritual direction. He used every opportunity to speak about it; he held nothing dearer than to urge its practice. Convinced that obedience should be the animating force of his Institute, he wrote:

No other virtue is so necessary for a Brother of the Christian Schools as obedience, for obedience is the essential virtue of his state, and it alone can sustain him therein. Even if he seemed to have all the other virtues, he would have only the semblance of them, for in persons who live in community, it is obedience that gives the rest their special character.<sup>634</sup>

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631. Phil. 2:8.

632. Blain gives no reference, but the statement seems to be his simplification of a passage in the sermon for Easter, which begins: “. . . *et obedientia consummata, cum inclinato capite tradidit spiritum, factus est obediens usque ad mortem*” (PL, vol. 183, cols. 275–76).

633. “*Obedientia est . . . dormiens peregrinatio*,” from *Scala Paradisi, Gradus IV* (PG, vol. 88, col. 679).

634. A citation from the *Collection* treatise on obedience, adapted to third person singular from second plural: “*Il n’y a point de vertu qui vous soit aussi nécessaire*” (CL 15, 81).

A Brother wrote to him one day and mentioned the great difficulty he found in doing what he was told and how he liked to lay down his own conditions. Here is the reply he received:

It seems to me, my very dear Brother, that you ought to be more obedient and submissive than you are. We didn't enter the religious life to bargain with anyone. We are not to make conditions at all; obedience should be our guiding rule. Be assured that God will bless you only insofar as you live by this rule. For the love of God, do not make statements like those you made in your last letter. They are certainly not becoming in a man of obedience. It is true that we must put our trust in God's grace, but in a religious community, we receive graces only to the extent that we are obedient. So ask God for an unquestioning obedience; there is nothing you need more. Listen to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and not so much to your dislikes and difficulties. It is not when you feel no repugnance that you show that you are obedient, but only when you overcome it. I am delighted that you feel motivated toward virtue. The main one you should practice is obedience.

Devotedly yours in Our Lord. . . .<sup>635</sup>

The same Brother apologized to him in another letter for having, as he believed, caused him some trouble. John Baptist told him that he was not to worry about this; all he had to do was to keep trying to become a model of obedience. Here is the text of his letter:

I am not at all upset by the trouble that you think you have caused me, my very dear Brother. The only thing that causes me concern is that you don't know what is good for you. Be assured that what is best for you is what obedience brings you. That is why you should pay attention to your behavior in what concerns not only yourself but others also. For it is impossible to please God if you do not live amicably with others, nor will you have peace of soul unless you show consideration for those for whom you ought to be a source of edification. Pray to God, I beg you, that he may touch your heart and make you docile to his will. Take pains to please him in all you do. For my part, I will also pray for this intention for you. Please do not let the troubles you experience prevent you from making your retreat and learning from them to be completely obedient.

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635. *Letters*, 45.1–8, and commentary on the recipient, Brother Robert.

I am, my very dear Brother,  
Devotedly yours in Our Lord.<sup>636</sup>

In yet another letter to this same Brother, who had told him he was ready to obey in everything, John Baptist wrote as follows:

Since you are prepared to obey in all things, never say “I want,” for that does not bear the stamp of obedience. I find no difficulty in believing that you have a dislike for obedience. All that is required is that you overcome this dislike. Remember that it is obedience that sanctifies the actions of a member of a religious community.<sup>637</sup>

Writing to another person on the same subject he told her, “It is only through obedience and total submission for the love of God that you will draw down on yourself the graces of our Lord.” He then indicated the way she must obey.

In order to seek God’s will, practice obedience with interior submission to the Spirit of our Lord, who dwells in those who take his place. Often adore the Spirit, by whose inspiration you must allow yourself to be led in all you do. Be faithful to ask permission for the slightest exemptions without listening to the arguments of self-will. Human nature craves nothing more insistently than to shake off the yoke of obedience. Be faithful to this practice, I beg of you. It is natural to find no difficulty in doing what we like to do, but doing only what agrees with our inclinations is not obedience. To carry out commands indiscriminately, no matter how opposed they are to our feelings and inclinations, that is the sort of obedience God wants of us. For our obedience to be pure, we must act through the spirit of faith. We must not examine the reasons or the purposes behind the commands we are given but surmount all questioning and all objections. Simply follow out the commands you are given; that is how you must act from now on. You are to carry out all the instructions you are given and always with unquestioning obedience. Whatever difficulty you find in doing what you are told, let nothing appear in your attitude that could call for an order contrary to the first one, unless you are convinced that it is a question of the glory of

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636. *Letters*, 47.1–6, and commentary. Blain omits the final sentence with its pleasantly human touch, “Make your retreat because I ask it of you.”

637. *Ibid.*, 46.7–8, a further passage from a letter Blain has already partially quoted; see above, 326, note 371.

God. In this case you may express your opinion without, however, requiring that it be followed. Never come to decisions on your own, for such a course of action is contrary to the obedience and dependence that members of a religious community should have. In all you have to do, you must follow the orders of your superiors. When they give you any instructions, directions, or orders, accept them, and carry them out without reply. Do this no matter how foolish what you are told to do or what is said to you may seem. Be assured that once you take reason as the basis for your compliance, you are no longer acting through obedience. A fine sort of religious perfection that would be, to be ready to do only what pleases you! Do not act like that, I beg you. Let there be no argument about what you are told to do or about who gives you the orders. In the sight of God, everything is good when seasoned by obedience. I pray that God will bring you to this frame of mind.<sup>638</sup>

But John Baptist de La Salle was not one of those people who say what is right but do what is wrong, who offer fine-sounding lessons on the virtues but do not practice them, who impose heavy burdens on others for which they are not prepared to lift a finger. Like his divine Master, he acted before he taught.<sup>639</sup> With regard to obedience, his conduct was wholly in keeping with his teaching. He practiced literally and perfectly everything he said about it. There are so many heroic examples of obedience in his life that we could well think he had made a special study of its practice. Indeed, if the Brothers were to lose all the excellent teachings on this point of such capital importance to their Institute, it would suffice for them to read his biography to learn the art of obeying well.

If I seem to dwell on this subject more than on any other, it is because the Founder considered obedience the essential virtue for his Brothers. I believe I am acting according to his spirit and intentions in placing before them what he said and did in this matter and in suggesting that they can honor a father such as theirs only by becoming children of obedience, as he was.<sup>640</sup>

638. Ibid., 107.1–8. This letter had already been substantially quoted by Bernard, and it is interesting to compare his extracts with Blain's. There are over a dozen variants between the two, none of which alters the Founder's meaning. It is fair to assume that the variants are Blain's because Bernard protests in his *Remarques* on his biography that he had scrupulously reproduced, word for word, the documents he cites (CL 4, 76 and 103).

639. Acts 1:1.

640. Hermans (CL 10, 200) contrasts the restraint of this summation with the frequently exaggerated terms Blain attributes to De La Sale in the preceding

Those of his disciples who have been particularly keen to benefit by everything reported about their Founder will have seen that the following points represent his views. First, the nature of his Congregation is such that it has more need than any other of the spirit of obedience. If it were possible to envisage any institute able to maintain itself in good order without the practice of a virtue that is the very soul of community life, such could not possibly be De La Salle's.

Second, although this virtue is so essential to their state, it is a problem for the Brothers to learn to practice it perfectly because the education of many of them is not very advanced when they enter; others have done no classical studies; furthermore, the tradesman background from which many of them come, governed by the urgent need to earn a living, conditions them to want to do things their own way. We must admit that cultured minds, disciplined by study and equipped with knowledge, have a certain tendency to obey if, as I understand it, such a tendency belongs to a well-trained intellect, a power of judgment, and a religious use of ideas—all combining to show the need of submission to a superior and to convince us that good order is possible only where there is recognition of rank and where the power of rationalization is controlled by sound reasoning.

Third, the greatest source of worry for the saintly priest arising from within his Institute was the need for submissiveness on the part of certain individuals who lacked the necessary docility because they had not the good sense to allow themselves to be guided. Intelligence there must be if a person is to obey, and obstreperous types are usually quite deficient in it; they may have a superficial cleverness, but there is nothing solid there.

Fourth, experience also taught the Founder that Brothers who lacked docility came to a bad end. They first gave him a lot of trouble and finally, to their misfortune, left the Society, which they had scandalized by their disobedient ways. This led him to the conclusion that the Spirit of God would depart from his communities if the spirit of obedience did not retain it there and that the Institute would grow relaxed and weak, would be ruined more swiftly and irrevocably than any other, if doing their own will became the order of the day. This was why his great concern was to inculcate in his disciples a horror of doing just as they liked. He sought to train the novices to have the docility of children; he wanted the Directors to be perfectly dependent on the Superior General for everything<sup>641</sup> and the inferiors corre-

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pages. Battersby devotes a chapter to obedience in *De La Salle: Saint and Spiritual Writer* (126–37), and an important discussion can be found in Sauvage and Campos (174–76, not included in the English edition), 380–384 (English edition, 151–54), and 396–98 (English edition, 161–63).



spondingly respectful of the authority of their Directors. In a word, he wanted all the Brothers to have a sense of dependence, a total disinterestedness regarding whatever orders were given, and a sincere readiness to obey without questioning.

This was how De La Salle acted; it was his own example that made his teaching effective. He was a child of obedience at every stage of his life. In boyhood his docility made him lovable to his relatives. At school the same virtue won the hearts of his teachers and made him a model for his companions. At Saint Sulpice he stood out by his obedient disposition, and he left the seminary so filled with the same spirit that for the rest of his days, obedience was the privileged hallmark of all his conduct. In the earliest years of the Institute, he already descended to the ranks, wanting to obey and be dependent on others.<sup>642</sup> Two years before his death, De La Salle—old, gray-haired, and a Founder and great master of the spiritual life—spent some time at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, obeying the regulations just as he had done as a student at Saint Sulpice.<sup>643</sup> Having claimed the lowest place in his own Society, he spent those two remaining years in the practice of the most perfect obedience. This virtue was his great concern. He made it “the object of his meditations,” as the Holy Spirit bids us all do,<sup>644</sup> and then he practiced it in all the ways that the eager desire for perfection inspires.

To begin with, God always found John Baptist ready to obey his adorable will, disposed to carry out his all-perfect designs, utterly attentive not to omit an iota of the divine Law implanted in his heart. Everything we have related about him has shown him to be a man dedicated to the service of his Creator in all things, completely submissive to the most demanding orders of Providence, as concerned to know the good pleasure of God as he was faithful to accomplish it, eager, in a word, to obey everything he knew God wanted of him, whether expressed in the commandments, the counsels, or the divine inspirations he received: at all times he was responsive to the divine guidance.

In addition, John Baptist's obedience to the church and to his ecclesiastical superiors knew no limits. He cherished this duty so much that he began the chapter on obedience in his Rule with the words, “The Brothers will apply themselves with care and in all things to be

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641. The opening paragraphs of the *Rule of the Brother Director* amply justify this statement (CL 25, 154).

642. An allusion to the Founder's brief replacement as Superior by Br. Henri L'Heureux (see above, chap. 33, note 502).

643. See above, chap. 20, note 140.

644. Prov. 15:28.

perfectly obedient to our Holy Father the Pope, to all the decisions of the church, and to their superiors.”<sup>645</sup> It was a prescription he had observed in an exemplary fashion. Thus, for example, no book had any interest for him if it had been condemned by Rome.

De La Salle's respect for and submission to the bishops could have gone no further. Have we not seen many examples of it in his life? Priests still make a promise at the time of their ordination to obey their bishop,<sup>646</sup> but there are some who regard this as a relic of the past, of purely ceremonial significance. But for John Baptist it was a promise to be kept, so much so that he refrained from taking any important decisions without the approval of the archbishop of Reims. When he was inspired to resign his canonry to associate himself with the poor teachers whom he had taken care of, he took no action until he had the authorization of the archbishop.<sup>647</sup> When De La Salle went to Paris, M. de Noailles had no priest of his diocese more obedient. Father Pirot was appointed by His Eminence to make an inspection of the Brothers' community, and he was able to witness for himself how unquestioning was their Superior's obedience. He found no resistance on his part to the steps he had come to take against him, no argument, no displeasure, not the least sign of distress, not even any curiosity as to why the steps were being taken. The vicar-general found himself quite free to make a lengthy examination of matters concerning John Baptist's position. He was able to ask searching questions about his way of conducting things and to make detailed inquiries about everything that went on in the community. The innocent man who was the object of the investigation made no move to ask Pirot what his business was or even to question the Brothers about it. He showed himself in complete accord with the shameful decision taken against him that he be formally deposed in the presence of the whole community and replaced by a man quite unknown

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645. In a marginal note, Blain indicates the source of this quotation as “Reg. Comm. chap. 21, p. 66,” a correct reference for the printed text of the Rule of 1726. But the words he quotes are found for the first time in 1726 and are, therefore, not attributable to the Founder (CL 25, 73). The quoted words came into the text following the obtaining of the Bull of Approbation in 1725, and Blain was well aware, of course, that the sentiments expressed were very much according to the mind of De La Salle.

646. The rite of ordination to the priesthood included the question put to the ordinands, “*Promittis Pontifici Ordinario tuo reverentiam et obedientiam*,” to which the reply was “*Promitto*” (*Pontificale Romanum Clementis VIII ac Urbani VIII*, Rome, 1849, 56).

647. He obtained the authorization with a good deal of to-ing and fro-ing, concluding with a session of “several hours” of prayer in the cathedral, to which Archbishop Le Tellier's residence was adjacent (book 1, chap. 13).

to him. The vicar-general was faced with the spectacle of all the Brothers objecting, resisting, and protesting against an act so insulting to the honor of their Superior, with only the Superior acquiescing and warmly approving the decision. The humble priest was embarrassed by the stance taken by his disciples and expressed his profound regret to Father Pirot. He went to offer abject apologies to the archbishop and to declare his own total acceptance of his decision.<sup>648</sup>

Other bishops who had Brothers in their dioceses always found their Superior more submissive than even the least important of the Brothers. The Founder accommodated himself to all the wishes of the bishops and fulfilled them with the docility of a child. Sometimes what they wanted did not fit in with the Brothers' Rule or with the system and methods adopted in their schools. In such cases De La Salle put the situation to the bishops with such respect and humble deference that they hardly ever failed to see his point of view and change their requirements.<sup>649</sup>

On one occasion, De La Salle was on the point of leaving for Rome, the city he had long wanted to visit to pay his respects to the Holy Father and to seek his approval for his work. His luggage was already taken aboard, and he was about to embark when the bishop of the place stopped him with a request to establish a school in a parish he mentioned. Immediately the would-be traveler gave this his attention, put Rome and his mission there out of his mind, and returned to the community. An example of blind obedience indeed!<sup>650</sup>

We come now to De La Salle's spiritual directors, where his obedience was more admirable still. He consulted them about everything and was faithful to follow their advice. He had been trained in this holy practice at Saint Sulpice, and he kept it up for the rest of his

648. See above, chap. 29, note 410.

649. A notable example being that of Bishop Godet Desmaret's acceptance of De La Salle's reasons for having the pupils begin their reading in French rather than in Latin (see above, chap. 20, note 145).

650. More details of this episode are given in book 3, chap. 10, but even there Blain does not name the place where the Founder was about to embark or the parish where the bishop wanted him to take charge of a school. Maillefer names the former as Marseille and the latter as the parish of Notre Dame des Accoules (CL 6, 214–15). Both biographers assert that the project was thwarted by the enemies John Baptist had made in the city. Poutet fills in the historical details and suggests that the Founder's ready abandonment of his plan to visit Rome was less an example of his "blind obedience" to authority than a manifestation of joy that the work was seemingly making headway in the important seaport city (vol. 2, 180–82 and 316–27). In a letter to Gabriel Drolin—the presumed date is July 1712—the Founder mentions this abortive plan for a journey to Rome but simply for the purpose of visiting his disciple; there is no hint of a wish to seek an audience with the pope (*Letters*, 30.1).

life.<sup>651</sup> He may well be regarded as a model in this matter. His attitude toward those to whom he had entrusted the direction of his conscience was as uncomplicated, sincere, and docile, as that of a child. He gave his directors such authority over his own person that he was like a slave in the way he obeyed all their wishes.

One example of this kind of obedience, not one likely, I think, ever to become fashionable, was to offer to exchange his canonry for the laborious and low-income care of a parish, just because his director suggested it. The exchange did not, in fact, take place, but this was because his higher superior, who did not agree with the director on the matter, refused his consent.<sup>652</sup>

Another of John Baptist's spiritual directors, a man quite different from the one just mentioned, had the same authority over him, although his way of exercising it was not at all similar.<sup>653</sup> For a long time, he was a restraining influence when John Baptist wanted to resign his canonry to devote himself fully to the care of the teachers and when he wanted to give away his possessions to live a life of poverty. Our saintly priest was strongly inspired to offer God this twofold sacrifice, and he was insistently urged to do so by the Minim, Father Barré, whom he considered a saint.<sup>654</sup> Nevertheless, John Baptist patiently awaited the consent of his spiritual director. He did not feel he could safely follow his own inspiration without the sanction of obedience.

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651. The clergy whom the biographers specifically name as De La Salle's spiritual directors or as persons whom he consulted at times of important decisions include the Sulpicians Louis Tronson, Jacques Baüyn, Claude de La Barmondière, Henri Baudrand, and François Leschassier; three diocesan priests, Nicolas Roland, Jacques Callou, and Nicolas Philbert; the Minim, Nicolas Barré; a Maurist Benedictine, Claude Bretagne, and two Jesuits, Pierre Louis Froger (named only by Lucard) and Paul Baudin. An important addition to this list is the Parménie mystic, Louise Hours (see above, chap. 5, note 57).

652. The higher superior was Archbishop Le Tellier; the director, Nicolas Roland (see above, chap. 9, note 143).

653. This was Jacques Callou, vicar-general of Reims and rector of the diocesan seminary. In contrasting him with Roland, Blain is not being uncomplimentary; he means that Callou was of a less impulsive temperament, inclined to foresee difficulties before they arose. Maillefer, in his 1740 biography, pays a glowing tribute to Callou as "one of those men of eminent virtue guided by no human interest but having only God in view in all he did" (CL 6, 63). The relationship between De La Salle and Callou, as his spiritual director, is developed by Blain in book 1, chaps. 12–15.

654. Barré's cause was formally introduced at the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints on 5 April 1976, and the decree of the heroicity of his virtues was promulgated on 21 March 1983. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 7 March 1999; his feast is celebrated on 21 October.

De La Salle made the same humble surrender of his judgment and personal inclinations to the advice of his director on the matter of moving to Paris. Father Barré wanted him to go there and was eager, before his death, to see him do so. He believed that Paris was the right place for the solid foundation and development of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.<sup>655</sup> John Baptist felt the same way; his intuition, as well as sound reasoning, had convinced him that this was the right thing to do. Besides, he had made a promise to Father de La Barmondière to take over a Saint Sulpice parish school as early as possible, and this seemed both a formal commitment and a favorable opportunity that he ought not to forego.<sup>656</sup> But his director disagreed,<sup>657</sup> and John Baptist obeyed him without question—an obedience that lasted for seven or eight years<sup>658</sup> because it was only then that his director allowed him to leave Reims and make a start in Paris.

When the Founder went to Paris, he again sought the guidance of his earliest mentors in the spiritual life, the Sulpician Fathers. They found him, fully mature as he now was, as receptive to their advice as he had been when a young clerical student. That admirable man, Father Tronson, his earliest spiritual director, was still living, and John Baptist made full use of his enlightened counsel.<sup>659</sup> I would venture to

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655. In book 1, chap. 14, Blain expresses the Minim's motives in Gospel terms—John Baptist was to transfer the light of his burning torch from the obscurity of Reims to let it shine over the whole kingdom from the mountain-top, which was Paris. Barré's biographer, Henri de Grèzes, says that an additional reason for the Minim's wish for De La Salle to go to Paris was that the "Brothers of the Child Jesus," whom Barré had founded and had established in various sectors of the capital, "had not fulfilled his expectations," and he wanted De La Salle to take over the classes they had initiated (*Vie du R. P. Barré*, Paris, 1892, 292; see also, Poutet, vol. 2, 19–20).

656. The circumstances of John Baptist's promise to the pastor of Saint Sulpice are related in book 1, chap. 13, where Blain implies that his information is based on De La Salle's memorandum on the beginnings of the Institute.

657. This was again the cautious Father Callou, whose arguments Blain records at length in book 1, chap. 14 (and approves, in spite of his persuasive presentation there of the reasons urging John Baptist to make the transfer).

658. In book 1, chap. 13, Blain says more accurately (but not completely) that the promise to La Barmondière could only be fulfilled six years later. The promise was made in 1683; in book 2, chap. 7, Blain says that the transfer to Paris took place in February 1688. His "seven or eight years" here is a further enhancement in the context of his praise of John Baptist's obedience to Callou. For the importance of the correct dates, see Poutet, vol. 2, 19–20.

659. Louis Tronson, Superior General of Saint Sulpice since 1676, retired to Issy-les-Moulineaux in 1697 (see chap. 13, note 46) and died in 1700. There were about nine years during which John Baptist could have consulted him at the nearby seminary, three more for the visits to Issy that Blain (book 2, chap.

say that it was from this venerable Gamaliel<sup>660</sup> that he achieved perfection in the science of the saints, all because of his unquestioning obedience to him. Admittedly, his blind obedience to a man of Tronson's spiritual stature was less to be wondered at than it was in the case of his other directors. However virtuous and enlightened they were, they could not match the superior of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. All who have known Father Tronson well will agree that it was not difficult to subject their reasoning powers to the authority of so worthy a man. His profound wisdom, eminent virtue, and great experience made people regard him as an oracle, a spokesman of the Holy Spirit, whom they never consulted without admiring his rare enlightenment and receiving words of life.<sup>661</sup>

After Tronson's death, De La Salle placed himself under the direction of Father Jacques Baüyn, the well-known spiritual director of the Seminary of Saint Sulpice.<sup>662</sup> To him also he brought a heart as submissive as that of a child, who hides nothing from his father and feels no reluctance to obey him. Baüyn was a saintly man whose memory is held in benediction in the place where he gave so many examples of a virtuous life.<sup>663</sup> He did not survive long enough for John Baptist to have the benefit of his counsel at a time when he

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8) says he often made. But Aroz (CL 41, vol. 2, 94) points out that a manuscript *Journal des Actions de M. Tronson*, kept for twenty years, from 1677 to 1697, by Tronson's secretary, G. Bourbon, makes no mention of any visits by De La Salle, for which there is no documentary evidence. Aroz thinks it uncertain that the modest beginning of the Lasallian work in Paris was known to any other Sulpician than the initiator, De La Barmondière. Blain (book 2, chap. 81) claims the Founder as his source regarding the consultations.

660. An allusion to the tutor of Saint Paul (Acts 22.3).

661. For well-documented discussions of Tronson's qualities, which corroborate rather than modify this eulogistic assessment, see Poutet (vol. 1, 322–38, and Aroz (CL 41, vol. 2, 82–94).

662. A chronological blunder: Baüyn (the most authoritative spelling of his name) died in 1696, and Tronson, four years later. Gallego suggests (215–16) that the error derives from Blain's persistence in claiming Tronson as one of John Baptist's spiritual directors (a claim that Gallego, like Aroz, doubts). Gallego suggests that from the Founder's arrival in Paris in 1688, his spiritual director, in the formal sense of the term, was Baüyn and that he remained so until the year of his death. (Incidentally, Gallego had earlier, on page 72, dismissed Blain's assurance in book 1, chap. 2, that Baüyn had been John Baptist's director during his student days at Saint Sulpice.) But Blain compounds the uncertainty by stating (twice) in book 2, chap. 8, that the Founder's spiritual director during the early days of the Paris apostolate was Henri Bau-drant, a statement repeated in the present work, in chapter 27.

663. For details of the virtuous life of Jacques Baüyn, see Aroz, CL 41, vol. 2, 361–65.

needed it most. But in due course he found a worthy successor in the person of Father Leschassier, who had succeeded Father Tronson, whom he resembled in wisdom and virtue.<sup>664</sup> John Baptist was careful to follow Leschassier's advice for as long as the latter was willing to help him with it. But after some time this particular counselor ceased to assist him, when for reasons of prudence he found it inexpedient to speak to him or offer him advice.<sup>665</sup>

Once the Founder had the approval of these directors, he stood firm and immovable in what he did. But because he did not name any of them, so as not to implicate them, the people who were jealous of him called him stubborn and headstrong, a man too sure of himself. They would not have spoken thus if they had known that the humble priest appeared so firm and constant in his procedures only because they had been suggested or authorized by Tronson or Baüyn. De La Salle, in consulting them, was so convinced that God spoke through them that nothing could make him release his grip on whatever he undertook by their advice. We have his own words for this: "I change nothing at all," he said, "in what I undertake according to their counsel because I consider what they advise as God's will."<sup>666</sup>

De La Salle's respect for the church's laws and disciplinary regulations, like his observance of his own Society's rules, was all embracing and punctilious. Outside his community he was admired as a priest so correct in his behavior that he made more worldly clerics feel that they should amend their ways or at least feel some shame at being so secular-minded, compared with him. Within the community he won the same admiration for a spirit of regular observance as exact as that of a fervent novice, as responsive to the sound of the bell, for example, as a slave to the voice of his master. He was seen at the first stroke to leave whatever he was doing and hasten to be with the Brothers at the beginning of each exercise. But I will say no more about this, having already devoted a chapter to the discussion of his perfect, regular observance.

664. Even though Blain assures us, a few lines before, that no one, however virtuous and enlightened, could match Tronson. François Leschassier (Blain spells it L'Eschassier) succeeded Tronson as Superior General of Saint Sulpice and held office until his death, at the age of 84, in 1725. Aroz provides biographical details in CL 41, vol. 2, 273–75. Leschassier's principal claim to the attention of readers of De La Salle's life is the testimonial he wrote after the Founder's death (see above, chap. 9, note 126).

665. Gallego suggests (368) that Leschassier's change of attitude may have been caused by the official deposition of John Baptist as Superior in December 1702.

666. For an enlightening discussion of the Founder's attitude to change, see Campos, CL 45, 198–201.



Another sign of his obedient disposition was the great deference he showed to lay persons in authority, even though he was often badly treated by them. He honored the divine authority invested in them because this was the right Christian attitude as taught by the Apostles. He was exact in his observance of the civil law, and in a spirit of faith, he readily and uncomplainingly went along with whatever the secular authorities required. He even accepted in silence and tranquility the legal verdicts they pronounced against him, however much these impugned his honor and the truth.

The spirit of obedience influenced him so much that he felt a kind of obligation to defer to everyone. His position as Superior and the authority invested in him as Father and Founder and as a priest and doctor of theology did not prevent De La Salle from acting toward his own disciples as if he were their inferior. He was ready to submit to any of them who assumed an air of authority in his regard. He made the same vow of obedience as the Brothers, a vow to obey the Superior as well as the body of the Society. It was in virtue of this vow that the Brothers felt free to command him to return to Paris from the South.<sup>667</sup>

We are right to admire Saint Francis of Assisi's heroic readiness to obey the youngest of his novices and the least important of his friars just as if they were the oldest, most learned, or holiest members of his Order.<sup>668</sup> De La Salle acted in exactly that way, especially during the last two years of his life, but also from the very beginning of his Institute. He liked so much to be dependent on others and to give way to them that he was ill at ease in the position of Superior. He left nothing undone to try to lose this role and have the happy freedom to obey. We can say that he was able to cast a spell over his disciples in this matter and, if I may dare to put it thus, to beguile their reasoning powers to persuade them to accept his resignation and elect a Brother as Superior. When he had succeeded in this, what examples of obedience did he not give, putting into practice what he had earlier preached!

What a blow there was to his love of this virtue when the vicar-general of Reims restored the status quo in the new Society by oblig-

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667. The letter with which they did so is quoted in book 3, chap. 12, complete with its date, 1 April 1714. In the terms of Campos's doctoral thesis, this document is a principal *parole-force* for our understanding of De La Salle's *itinéraire évangélique*. For a discussion of its significance, see Sauvage and Campos, 448–56; English edition, 205–11.

668. Blain is thinking of a passage in *Speculum Perfectionis* relating that Francis said to his disciples, "The Lord has granted me this grace among others, to obey as diligently the novice who enters the Order today, if he were assigned to me for warden, as he who is foremost and ancient in life and in the Order" (Translation, Steele, 221).



ing him to resume his place at the head! I cannot describe how saddened he was to be thus forced out of his position of submissive dependence.<sup>669</sup> A king deprived of his throne and obliged to vacate his palace would not be more afflicted. The sense of regret lasted all the time he remained Superior. It ceased only two years and a few months before his death,<sup>670</sup> when he once again obliged the Brothers to give him and them a Superior chosen from among them.

When this happened, he was once again free to obey and spend the remainder of his days in the most perfect practice of this virtue. He never stopped blessing God for having given him this modicum of time to prepare for a good death. Words cannot describe the respect with which De La Salle obeyed in all things the one who had succeeded him. He did nothing without consulting him and having his approval. If it was sometimes pointed out to him that as an ordained minister of the Lord, he ought not to defer so readily to someone who was in every respect inferior to him, he would reply with some vehemence, "Oh, what are you saying? Is it not the Lord's ministers who should be humble? Are they to teach only by words and not also by example?" It was his way of silencing those who were scandalized at his obeying a mere Brother. For him such obedience was a cause of jubilation, and he protested openly that he would always be proud to submit to those who formerly had been under obedience to him.

There was hardly a letter written to Brother Barthélemy in which he did not express his readiness to obey him. In one letter he wrote, "You know that I am always ready to obey you in everything since I am now subject to your authority, and I did not vow obedience to do what I like."<sup>671</sup> In another letter, he said, "If I am to be considered a member of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, it seems to me that my present position ought to be one of simple submission and that I should make no move in what concerns them except through obedience."<sup>672</sup>

He showed the same submissive spirit until he breathed his last sigh. One day during his final illness, the Brother Superior, not realizing he was as ill as he was, suggested that he might think of saying Mass. John Baptist was not equal to this, but he made a move to obey without saying anything. He had already dressed when the Superior sent word to him that now he did not think he was well enough to celebrate; therefore, he requested him to go back to bed. The patient did so immediately without so much as a word.

669. See above, chap. 33, note 502.

670. Actually just under two years: the act of Barthélemy's election was signed 23 May 1717, and De La Salle died on 7 April 1719.

671. *Letters*, 129.

672. *Ibid.*, 130.

Throughout this last illness, he obeyed with remarkable simplicity the Brother appointed to nurse him and a young novice instructed to remain constantly at his bedside. This novice often forgot his place and took liberties, bidding the Founder to do things without any justification. For example, he made him say some prayers out loud, especially the *Ave Maria*, and the venerable man did so, word for word, with the piety of a child. It was in such dispositions that he died.

Whenever he was to give a talk to the novices, which he did only in obedience to the Brother Superior, he would ask the Director of Novices what he wished him to speak about. The Director asked him on one occasion to speak about the method of interior prayer. After giving the talk, he compounded his obedience with humility by asking the Director of Novices, with wonderful simplicity, to tell him frankly if what he had said was satisfactory, whether it was suitable and what had been required.

A novice once asked the Founder to explain a passage of the New Testament. He told the novice to go and make the same request of the Director of Novices, saying that because he was the one who had charge of him, he would have the grace of state to explain it to him. Another novice appeared at the door of his poor room to do the cleaning, saying that he had been instructed accordingly. John Baptist asked, "Do you want me to leave?" Because the young man did not know what to answer, he told him, "Go and ask Brother Director."<sup>673</sup> Another Brother came to him one day when he was unwell and asked him at what time he would say Mass. He replied, "You must ask Brother François," that is, the Brother who was in charge of the house in the absence of Brother Barthélemy.<sup>674</sup>

The saintly man's spirit of unquestioning obedience was so well known that even the novices made bold to test it. One of them, who

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673. Blain has already told this story in book 3, chap. 16; in both cases his interpretation seems to be that the Founder's humility and spirit of obedience were such that he wished to know whether he should withdraw from his room to make it more convenient for the cleaning to be done. Gallego (556) prefers Maillefer's two versions of the same incident. 1723: "He rendered services to the community and through humility declined those that anyone wanted to render him. One day a novice went to his room to sweep it. 'I don't need anything,' he told him; 'do they want me to leave the house?'" 1740: "One day the Director of the community sent a novice to clean his room. [M. de La Salle] would not allow it; he sent the novice away, saying that such attentions made him think they wanted him to leave the house" (CL 6, 242–43).

674. Brother François (Georges Bertin) was in charge of the Saint Yon boarding students. He was a signatory of the act of 4 December 1716, delegating Brother Barthélemy to visit all the communities of the Institute to obtain the Brothers' consent for a general assembly (Rousset, *Iconographie*, plate 51).

had the duty of helping the infirmarian, said the same things to him about obedience that he was hearing in the novitiate. He talked as if he were the Director of Novices, giving instructions to one of his charges. When he gave him some particularly distasteful medicine or when he had to disturb him and make him change his position, something his great weakness made a very painful business, the young man would say, "Come now, Father, you must accept this or do that as a matter of obedience." At the word *obedience*, the dying man got new strength, or rather, he made such efforts to overcome his weakness that he summoned what strength was left to do what the novice asked.

De La Salle's profound humility put him at the feet of everybody and gave occasion to many people to order him about as if they were his superiors. But his obedient disposition was so complete that he received their orders with respect and carried them out faithfully. It was simply that he took pleasure in obeying anyone in anything. He looked upon all Christians as his superiors and even anticipated their wishes as far as he could. He made it seem easy to do whatever they requested within reason. *In obedientia caritatis, in fraternitatis amore.*<sup>675</sup> It must be said to his praise that he knew how to practice to perfection this maxim of the prince of the Apostles, "Be submissive to every creature for the love of God."<sup>676</sup> He made it a duty to obey all, to yield to all, to submit to their requirements, to subject himself to them, seeing in them so many instruments used by God to accomplish his designs and fearing only to follow his own will in anything. One day a Brother asked John Baptist to render a service that was not very sensible; seeing that he hesitated, he took the liberty of telling him that Saint Pachomius had once dutifully obeyed a child.<sup>677</sup> Nothing more needed to be said to one whose great desire was to imitate the actions of the saints as much as possible. He suppressed his own judgment of the service in question, and he obeyed the Brother; immediately his obedience received the reward that Jesus Christ promised in this life to those who wished to follow him. I mean that he

675. 1 Pet. 1:22 (Vulgate).

676. 1 Pet. 2:13.

677. The Brother had perhaps found the story in *Vie des Saints*, by the Minim, François Giry, published in 1683. A nineteenth-century edition of the work relates the anecdote about Saint Pachomius thus: "On a visit to one of his monasteries, the Saint joined in with the other monks at their task of weaving mats. A young helper of the monk in charge noticed that Pachomius was not using the normal method for this, and he made bold to say, 'Father, you are not doing it right. Father Theodore likes it done a different way.' 'Is that so, my child?' gently replied the Saint, 'Well then, you show me how to do it.' Having learned the new way, he continued accordingly" (Giry, Bar-le-Duc, 1859, vol. 2, 595).

was thoroughly humiliated before the many persons who witnessed what he had done, something ridiculous in human terms or, at least, ill-suited to someone in his position.

[CHAPTER 37]

*His spirit of penance, acceptance of suffering as a deserved punishment, love of the cross, and harsh treatment of himself*

It would be necessary to tell the story of De La Salle's life over again if we wished to have a detailed account of his penances and mortifications. What I have already related entitles us to conclude that he was one of the great penitents of the seventeenth century.<sup>678</sup> His readiness to chastise his body and suffer afflictions made him a true martyr to penance for forty long years. The astounding thing is that his rigorous treatment of his body not only did not destroy his health but actually seemed to fortify it and to prolong his life. He was of gentle birth and brought up with tender care, yet his constitution was toughened by his austerities. Sometimes he wilted under mortifications accumulated even at the risk of his life, but he would recover with renewed strength. He could never bring himself to relax in this matter. The longer he lived, the more strongly he experienced a desire, although well-intentioned, to treat his body as badly as possible.

His penitential spirit was passed on to his disciples in the way that the head influences the members, and a holy rivalry was to be seen among them in waging war against the body and dominating the senses. It seemed as if they had undertaken to reincarnate the ancient penitents of the Thebaid in their own persons. They were a Community of school Brothers rivaling Trappist monks; their life was as hard, if not poorer and more to be pitied.

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678. Battersby (*De La Salle: Saint and Spiritual Writer*, 171–75) takes Blain to task for this sentence in particular and for the biographer's general portrayal of the Founder as "a prodigy of austerity and severity," and he suggests that the resulting impression is "entirely false." Rayez, however (who has much praise for Battersby's book in his 1952 article), finds (in his 1955 article) that the English biographer's criticism of this aspect of Blain's work is too sweeping and answers it at some length (*Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 136–37). Gallego (593) thinks that we must acknowledge, due account being taken of Blain's over-emphasis and of the naïveté of some of his illustrative stories, that De La Salle was an outstanding example of the penitential spirit, however much at variance this may be with present-day sensibilities. See also, Campos (CL 45, 270–72) and Sauvage and Campos (171–73, not included in the English translation).

Several distinctive traits will serve to present in miniature the portrait of the true penitent that John Baptist de La Salle was. To begin with, he deemed himself a great sinner, and the need to expiate his sins and to satisfy the justice of God filled his soul with shame and his heart with sorrow; it made him condemn his body to a life of suffering. His life, as we have seen, was totally innocent, but this did not stop him from considering himself a malefactor. He classed himself among people guilty of the greatest crimes, and so he imposed upon himself the severest penances. He was full of this salutary notion and treated himself, and wanted others to treat him, as a great transgressor. He never lost sight of his sins; like the Prophet, he never ceased to lament and grieve for them.<sup>679</sup> There was no means he did not adopt to expiate them. Resolutions, sacrifices, tears, austerities—all were brought to bear, and he would have shed his blood to the last drop to bathe and purify his soul in it.

His sins were ever at the forefront of his mind. To his way of thinking, they made him horrible in the sight of God, who is holiness itself. He saw them as if in the infinitely clear mirror of God's sanctity, and hence none of them seemed trivial. He felt like a man who is obliged to admit to being the father of a brood of monstrosities gathered before him. In the presence of God he experienced shame and confusion. Like the holy penitent, King David, he blushed to appear before the divine majesty in all his deformity. The profound sense of confusion within him showed itself in his features and manifested to onlookers the kind of shame felt by a criminal before his judges. He deemed it a great favor to be allowed to stand at the altar to celebrate and even to be admitted into a church and there mingle with God's people. He believed he had forfeited the right to this august privilege, was unworthy to mix with others, and fit only for the lowest place in hell. Such a view of himself, although so painful and afflicting, was yet of precious value to him, and he constantly maintained a holy sense of shame about himself. This sense of shame was ever present to him, as with the Prophet, who said: "*Tota die verecundia mea contra me est*—All day long my shame confronts me."<sup>680</sup>

Seeing himself as guilty of treachery against God, John Baptist felt no surprise when people showed disdain for him or insulted and harassed his disciples, no surprise that calumnious talk blackened his reputation or that repeated attacks were made on his work. He believed these crosses to be well deserved. He esteemed all who opposed him as instruments of divine justice employed to chastise a perfidious and recalcitrant slave. He accepted in the same way, as we

679. Ps. 51:3.

680. Ps. 43:16 (Vulgate).

have seen in the account of his life, all the spiritual trials that God sent him: apathy, desolation, the sense of being abandoned by God. He saw himself as deserving these punishments for having first abandoned God, and he deemed himself fortunate if they were not to be eternal. His earnest and persistent desire was to eliminate sin and to make it impossible to commit it, which would be happiness for him. Hence, he saw death only as something to be desired because it is the end of sin as well as its expiatory punishment. He faced the prospect with joy; it meant a happiness he could not help longing for. The only thing that consoled him for the prolongation of his life was that it meant he could also continue his penitential practices.

He hated sin to the point of fearing the least shadow and appearance of it. He lamented his own with tears ever renewed, and he made a perpetual sacrifice to God of a contrite and humble heart. His spiritual nourishment was a bitter regret for the years gone by. This holy abhorrence of himself was one of the most precious gifts God had bestowed on him. Because everything about himself served only to fill him with loathing, it cost him hardly anything to reject the sinful tendencies of the flesh, to oppose any ill-regulated inclination or desire, and to crucify his fallen nature with all its vices and concupiscences.<sup>681</sup>

De La Salle regarded this fallen nature as his greatest enemy; he mistrusted it and was always on guard against any of its propensities, always ready to thwart and combat its inclinations. It was a war without peace offering or truce. The thought of the deep-seated proneness to wrongdoing in human nature, ceaselessly prompting us to offend God, filled him with shame and sadness. He reacted to it with the rigor with which a master treats a slave who is always ready to rebel. He sided with God against the evil in his nature and made it a pleasure as well as a duty to punish and crucify it to ensure victory for the supreme majesty of God and to compensate this majesty for past rebellions. This hostility toward his body made it a joy for him to be badly housed, badly clothed, and badly fed, a prey to many ills and infirmities, frequently in need, lacking even what was essential. He was convinced that all these afflictions were his just desert and also less than what was merited by a sinful man fit to be execrated by every creature. This attitude made him reluctant to grant himself even what was necessary, refuse what he was most inclined to, and feel bound to rise above any likes and dislikes. It was a comfort to him to be overwhelmed by abuse, harassment, and other tribulations because he believed that there the justice of God was operating through men.

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681. Gal. 5:24.

He was also convinced that as the Apostle expresses it, the flesh resents subjection to God,<sup>682</sup> that it urges us unceasingly to take up arms against our lawful and sovereign Lord. He believed that as long as the body is satisfied, the salvation of the soul is of no concern to it. De La Salle chastised his body, therefore, like Paul,<sup>683</sup> with a zeal inspired by a sincere love of God, and he made it bear the full brunt of severe penances until the time would come for him to be separated from it, a moment he ardently desired. He accepted in the same spirit all the sufferings that God in his justice chose to visit upon him and his disciples. He took God's part against himself, zealously vindicating God's rights in his own person, accepting responsibility for all the sins committed in his communities. He earnestly wished to do penance for the offenses of others, especially for the failings of those entrusted to his care. He counted their faults as his own, pleaded guilty to them, and imposed fitting penalties on himself.<sup>684</sup> For such a man of penance as this, there was only consolation in the miseries of poverty, in the sharp wounds of insult and humiliation, in the distress of sickness, and in the most painful trials of all kinds. He saw all these as ways of supplementing the reparation he owed to God and as effective means of expiating his sins. He greatly preferred penances that were not of his own choosing and that ran most counter to his inclinations.

Another consideration that powerfully inspired in him a spirit of penance was that Jesus Christ is the great penitent of the church, the model of all other penitents. De La Salle's spirit of faith told him that he was a member of the body whose head was crowned with thorns, and he ardently desired to resemble him and, like the Apostle Paul, make up in his flesh what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ, his divine Savior.<sup>685</sup> All this explains his great love for the cross, a love shared only by those who are imbued with a spirit of penance. Far from blenching with fear at the approach of suffering, his countenance, which was always serene and calm, showed joy in double measure. Incidents of the most distressing kind, misfortunes most keenly felt, such as material privations, the death of his most fervent disciples,<sup>686</sup> the illnesses and physical discomforts from which he suffered,<sup>687</sup> the court judgments that tarnished his reputation, all the

682. Rom. 8:7.

683. 1 Cor. 9:27.

684. Blain had documentary evidence for these statements in the seventh of the personal rules he quotes earlier in the present work (chap. 22, note 215).

685. Col. 1:24.

686. See above, chap. 12, note 5.

687. Blain remarks in book 3, chap. 18, that John Baptist, although of delicate constitution in youth, "grew more robust with age" and that "no doubt he would have enjoyed good health, even to an advanced age, had he

calumnies, injustices, insults, and taunts, all the various ill-usage to which he was subjected—he was always ready to welcome them with joy, deeming it a happiness thus to share the cross of Jesus Christ and drink from the cup from which he drank.<sup>688</sup>

If it is possible to go to excess in the matter of penance, we must admit that this is a very rare failing, especially in the age in which we live. The idea now is to look for ease and comfort in our devotion. There are fanatics who in the name of mysticism teach systems of spirituality that favor our tendency to take things easy and make endless concessions to human nature. They say nothing about the instruments of penance that the saints in their fervor invented to discipline the flesh, the use of which is authorized in Holy Scripture and sanctified by the example of people such as David, Judith, Mordecai, and Saint John the Baptist.<sup>689</sup> Jesus Christ endorsed these practices by praising his holy precursor<sup>690</sup> and in his allusion to the Ninevites, who, he said, would have done penance if they had witnessed the miracles seen by the Jews.<sup>691</sup> Penitential practices have been hallowed by the universal and sustained custom of the saints of all times and places in the history of the church, as well as by all religious congregations.

I say it again: if we can go too far in the practices of austerities (and no one denies that this is possible), we must admit that it was a fault committed by the greatest saints and one that can be charged also against John Baptist de La Salle. Indeed, there was no lack of humiliating reproaches made against him on this score. But happy are

not undermined it by excessive penance.” References to the Founder’s illnesses recur throughout the biography. A fall into a ravine during a snow-storm “about 1681” left him with a rupture for the rest of his life (book 1, chap. 8); a serious illness in Reims threatened his life “toward the end of 1690” (book 2, chap. 9); his return journey to Paris before he had fully recovered caused a relapse, a symptom of his illness this time being “a retention of urine” (ibid.); his habit of sleeping on the floor gave him a chronic rheumatism for which the remedy “was more painful than the illness” (book 2, chap. 11); he fell ill during the period of the lawsuit relating to the school in rue Saint-Placide, but this time without complications (book 2, chap. 14); at Grenoble in 1714 there was another “violent attack of rheumatism,” necessitating a repetition of the gridiron treatment (book 3, chap. 11); severe asthma during the Lent of 1719 made it difficult for him to breathe, but he discontinued the Lenten fast only in obedience to his confessor (book 3, chap. 18). To illustrate the Founder’s spirit of penance in the present chapter and in chapter 39, Blain mentions other ailments: a tumor on the knee aggravated by a fall, a violent headache, a concussion resulting from a fall backward.

688. Matt. 20:22.

689 1. Chron. 21:16, Jth. 8:6, Esther 4:1, Mark 1:6.

690. Matt. 11:8.

691. Matt. 12:41.



reproaches of this kind! Happy the fault that provokes them! *Felix culpa*, we may truly say!<sup>692</sup> For it is a failing of which men of God accuse themselves only when they can no longer correct it, that is, at the moment of their death; doubtless their self-accusation is then made not so much with regret and a purpose to amend as with consolation and joy.

De La Salle was one of those who treated the body so harshly that they were sometimes obliged to justify themselves in this matter. But in the long run they did this only when they could no longer maltreat themselves, when the approach of death checked their holy wrath and forced them to call a truce to their avenging attacks. Only then did they grant pardon to their body and become reconciled to it in anticipation of the resurrection to come. We can consider here a comment of a brother-in-law of our saintly priest, who called one day at the Brothers' house in Reims to inquire about the health of their Superior.<sup>693</sup> He remarked, among other things, that they had a saint for their Father. He said that no one had been reared with more tender care than he had, and now there was no one who led a more mortified life. The visitor added that when John Baptist came to die, he would be obliged, as Saint Francis had been, to beg pardon of his body for the way he had mistreated it.<sup>694</sup> Yet, when his brother-in-law spoke thus, John Baptist was only at an early stage in his life of austerity, a mere apprentice, so to speak, in the practice of penance.<sup>695</sup>

692. Borrowing the theological oxymoron enshrined in the Easter hymn of praise, *Exsultet iam angelica turba*, attributed generally to Saint Ambrose.

693. This is a varied treatment of an anecdote already used in book 2, chap. 1, where the inquirer is simply "a member of his family." Bernard uses the reminiscence earlier, attributing the remark to "a person of good character who had known our saintly Father particularly well" (CL 4, 21). John Baptist's only brother-in-law was Jean Maillefer, born in the same year, 1651, who married John Baptist's sister Marie in 1679. Maillefer's disapproval of De La Salle's association with Nyel's first recruits is sketched by Aroz in CL 26, 277–78. Gallego suggests (158) that the person in the story was more probably John Baptist's uncle, Antoine Fremyn, who was thirty-seven when John Baptist was born and was a sufficiently intimate member of the De La Salle family circle to be named in the will of Louis de La Salle as one of the four persons who were to advise John Baptist in his role as guardian. Fremyn would doubtless be better qualified than Jean Maillefer to speak of his nephew's delicate upbringing, and the concern he showed in calling to inquire about the Founder would be in character with what we know of him.

694. The story of the deathbed apology of Saint Francis to his body derives from the second of two biographies of the saint written by his disciple, Thomas of Celano, paragraphs 210–11.

695. Blain, in a marginal note, gives 1689 as the year of the incident (therefore when John Baptist was thirty-eight).

What could the speaker have said if he had known the saintly priest when he had become a past master in this science of the cross?

The rigorous poverty of the Community and the penitential practices that De La Salle had successively introduced into it already ensured due suffering for human nature, but for himself he added still more fearful punishments, wanting to become, like his divine Master, a man of sorrows.<sup>696</sup> He was not satisfied to be well advanced on the road to Calvary; it was his desire to be among those who stood with Mary closest to the cross on which Jesus hung.<sup>697</sup> He would gaze upon the crucifix and contemplate his Savior there shedding his blood. This image was ever present to his mind, inviting him to copy what he saw and giving him no rest until its meaning was, so to speak, engraved in his flesh. By his choice of poverty, he had wished to resemble Jesus stripped of his garments; the humiliations and contempt he endured in the way of life he had embraced gave him a share in the opprobrium suffered by Jesus; now he sought to complete the resemblance to his suffering Lord by the practice of the most austere penance. John Baptist had made up his mind never to cease punishing his body until its life would come to an end. Mortification of the most daunting and bitterly painful kind could never satisfy his thirst for suffering. He never believed that his resemblance to his divine model was sufficient; each day he renewed the painful effort. As if he felt his veins too charged with blood, he sought to relieve them with cruel disciplines, the instruments he used covered with his blood. It was as if he wished to re-enact daily the scourging of his Savior. His body suffered the merciless strength of his arm and bore the marks. He was lacerated from head to foot; no part escaped the total onslaught. In this state he truly resembled Jesus at the pillar or when he was brought from it to stand before the people. Well might we have used again the words, "*Ecce homo!*—Behold this man!"<sup>698</sup> John Baptist de La Salle, so eager to resemble his Master and implant in his flesh all the Savior's wounds! Behold this innocent man, who treats himself as guilty and deals himself more punishment than he might have suffered at the hands of the executioners! Behold this priest of such purity of life, who yet seeks each day the cleansing baptism of his blood!

The hair shirt, often held close to his body with a spiked metal belt, was part of his normal clothing. He made journeys on foot, sometimes in the full heat of summer, sometimes in the rigorous conditions of winter. He took no special precautions against either, being

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696. Isa. 53:3.

697. John 19:25.

698. John 19:5 (Vulgate).

happy to let the seasons do their worst to his body, to treat it as harshly as he did. Often his body would be half frozen in the depth of winter, and only by the burning ardor of his charity and the fervor of his spirit did he sustain his physical weakness. When he was well, he hardly ever took means to keep warm, no matter how long and rigorous the winter. When in church, he protected neither his head nor his hands against the cold. It was the same during any of his frequent and lengthy periods of prayer, even when out in the open air. At these times he did not permit himself the use of gloves, muff,<sup>699</sup> or calotte.<sup>700</sup> Sometimes when he was writing and the cold made it impossible for him to hold a pen, he allowed the Brothers to bring a container of burning coals to his room so that he could continue his necessary task.

The remarkable thing is that he survived and remained fit and well through the long and severe winters of 1682 and 1709,<sup>701</sup> when many people died of the cold and others, having like him refused in a spirit of penance the use of a fire, became crippled or otherwise handicapped as a result and remained so for the rest of their life. Sometimes, retiring to sleep meant for John Baptist being frozen through and through before getting between sheets that were just as cold. He did not always walk up and down with the Brothers during the evening recreation, either through a spirit of penance or for a reason of charity, for he used to take this time as an opportunity to draw aside one or another of the Brothers, whom he had noticed upset about something, to console and encourage him.

During the early years of his intense fervor, he ate little, took little sleep, often fasted completely, and spent long periods in prayer. But this kind of life was only a preparation for one still more austere. The various intentions for which he fasted eventually became a daily affair. The successive years became so many Lenten periods, one following the other without intermission. Fasting for him meant bread and water with a few cheap and plainly cooked vegetables, never anything pleasing to the taste. He was always satisfied with food that

699. *Muff* is defined in Webster as “a warm tubular covering with open ends into which the hands may be thrust that is usually made of cloth or fur, usually lined and padded, and used by men in the eighteenth-century and now only by women and children.”

700. See above, chap. 33, note 499.

701. 1682 is a mistake or perhaps a misprint for 1684, the year of the famine during which, as Blain describe in book 1, chap. 15 (with the correct year), the Founder gave away his possessions to the poor. Blain describes the winter of 1709, with its effects on the struggling Institute, in book 3 chap. 7. Curiously (or characteristically), Blain omits mention here of the 1693–94 winter, the impact of which he describes at length in book 2, chap. 12.

was unappetizing, and he never allowed anything special to be prepared for him. The only distinction he permitted between the Brothers and him was to show a greater concern to mortify himself and to outdo them in austerity.

As for sleep, he treated his body as an enemy or as a slave who was not allowed any rest. Only when he came to the end of an exhausting day, weakened by his penances, did he fall asleep praying at his desk or kneeling on the floor. Sometimes when sleep got the better of him, he gave in, obviously with the greatest reluctance, stretching himself out on the bare floor only to wake up frozen stiff.

Another example of John Baptist's capacity for suffering and mortification developed from his assiduous application to prayer. I have mentioned his practice of spending parts of his days and nights in meditation and other devotional practices while kneeling on the bare ground or tiled floor. This caused a tumor to develop on one of his knees; he neglected it and was to have good reason to regret doing so. It is well known that swellings of this kind, if allowed to persist, become incurable. They can sometimes endanger life if treatment is unduly delayed. But De La Salle was the kind of man who, being pitilessly hard on himself, disregarded his feelings and took advantage of every occasion for suffering as something sent by Divine Providence. So he accepted the damage to his knee as yet another means of adding the merit of mortification to that of prayer.

De La Salle disregarded the tumor, and inevitably it grew progressively worse. It developed freely and became so large that he could no longer bend the afflicted knee. To make matters worse, when he was returning one evening from the parish church of Saint Roch and passing by the Tuileries, he stumbled and fell on an iron bar fixed in the ground as a doorstep. This fall on the ailing knee, or rather on the tumor, caused him such intense pain that he collapsed half-fainting in the mud, quite without strength to get up. Shame was now added to the agony; two street porters happened to be passing just then, and they took him for a drunk. But when they looked at him more closely, they saw that it was their pity he needed, and they gave him a hand to lift him up and lean him against the wall. They then saw the look on his face, and after waiting for him to gather his wits, they learned from him what had happened. They were humbly thanked by him for the help they had given him and went on their way, feeling embarrassed to think of how they had misjudged him.

Meanwhile, John Baptist had to wait a while in patience until he got sufficient strength back to continue on his way. Even then, all he could do was to summon the effort to drag himself along rather than walk, using the wall to support himself. His weakness and pain halted

him at every step and made him fear he would end up stretched out on the pavement. It took him more than an hour to cover what was a fairly short distance, but at last he reached rue Princesse.<sup>702</sup> He was so exhausted, however, that he could not manage to ring the doorbell and had to ask a passerby to do it for him. The moment the door was opened, he fell into the arms of the Brother who had answered the bell. He had to be carried straight to bed and was laid up for more than six weeks. Throughout this time he remained so resigned, tranquil, and edifying that those who came to visit him and express their sympathy went away cheered and encouraged by his patience.<sup>703</sup>

The ailment was well calculated to test the holy priest's virtue, but he would not have bothered about it if only he had been able to bend his knee. His spirit of mortification would have made him put up with it if the huge swelling had not made it impossible for him to kneel. Only this reason made him take the means to have the knee treated. My reason for thinking this is based on the testimony of one of the first and oldest Brothers, one of those who knew the Founder best.

De La Salle was now in Rouen, and there was a Capuchin friar there called Cosmas, a man widely known for his skill in surgery and general medicine.<sup>704</sup> John Baptist put himself in his hands. He endured

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702. The residence of the Saint Sulpice community since the arrival of the pioneers in 1688. It was in the same year of the accident, 1707 (see the following note) that according to the available evidence, the community moved to a newly leased property in rue de La Barouillère (now called, since 1951, the tercentenary year of the Founder's birth, "rue St. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle"). Blain records the move in book 3, chap. 5.

703. Referring to this incident (known only from the present account by Blain), Gallego (419) thinks it more likely that De La Salle made his way back to the Saint Roch community from the Tuileries rather than pressing on to rue Princesse, a distance at least twice as far (Blain's "fairly short distance" would have required half an hour's normal walking time). Gallego also suggests (following Félix-Paul) that the date may possibly be inferred from a remark made by the Founder to Gabriel Drolin in a letter from Paris dated 1 April 1707: "I have also been very unwell for six weeks and could not walk, but I am much better now" (*Letters*, 26.3).

704. An enquiry concerning this friar-surgeon, addressed to the archivist of the Capuchin Generalate in Rome, elicited the following obliging reply: "I have carried out all possible research about *le célèbre Frère Côme*, both here in the archives and in our central library, but I have found only the following mention of the name: 'On 17 December 1698, a decision of the King's Council forbade religious to exercise the profession of apothecary outside their monasteries, under penalty of a fine of fifty livres. . . . However, because there is no rule without its exception, on 25 March 1692, a Friar Côme had obtained authorization to continue his care for the sick, in spite of the recent creation of an association of qualified doctors and surgeons.' The extract is

the painful operation customary in such cases with so much patience and tranquility that he might have been thought not to have been suffering at all if an observer had not watched the scalpel make a vertical and horizontal incision into the inflamed flesh. John Baptist had wanted the cut to be made thus in the form of a cross to remind him of Jesus crucified, his exemplar, inspiration, and bestower of his patience. But however skillful Friar Cosmas was at this kind of operation, the treatment failed to remedy the trouble. God permitted this to nourish the new Job's patience with further agonizing sufferings, for it was necessary to take still more drastic measures. It is true that De La Salle, little concerned as usual about his physical condition, did not take all the needed precautions to ensure a speedy and complete cure. Hardly had the operation wound closed when he recommenced his usual activities. Only a short time later, he set off for Paris, where he had been called to discuss the opening of a school in the parish of Saint Roch.<sup>705</sup> While in Paris, he had to have recourse again to the surgeons; they first applied silver nitrate to the knee and then cut away all the infected flesh that had not been removed by the Capuchin friar. Throughout the torture John Baptist remained, as usual, with his thoughts on God; he read his breviary with the same absorbed recollection that people admired in him when he was saying Mass. He gave no sign of suffering, no indication that his was the body on which the surgeon was performing his ruthless task.

The patient was obliged to remain convalescent for some time and used the opportunity to revise several of the spiritual treatises he had composed while at the Vaugirard novitiate. These works and several others that he wrote later were intended solely for his disciples, so there is no need to speak of them here.<sup>706</sup> I make an exception,

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quoted in an unpublished thesis by Jean Mauzaire, OFMCap, who indicates its source as 'An enquiry addressed by M. de La Berchère, Intendant of Rouen, to the General Controller of Finances.' This is all I have been able to discover; there is no other mention of this friar-surgeon in sources relating to noted Capuchin practitioners of medicine and pharmacy. No doubt there was a Frère Côme at the Rouen friary. There exists a monograph of the Rouen community published in 1938 under the title *La Madone miraculeuse des Capucins à Rouen, Notre Dame de La Santé*. There is no mention of Friar Côme in it, but then it relates only to the first half of the seventeenth century."

705. A strange statement; the evidence of Blain's information in book 3, chaps. 2–3 is that the Saint Roch school in Paris opened about five months before the establishing of a community in Rouen (Gallego, 207, note 123).

706. In the concluding paragraph of book 2, chap. 12, Blain provides a (vaguely worded) list of the works "composed while at the Vaugirard novitiate" (a period of less than seven years), including the Rule, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, *Instructions on Mass and the Sacraments of*

however, in the case of the book entitled *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, which was so well received by the public that it has run into several editions. It has been claimed that of all the authors who have written on this subject, De La Salle was the most successful. He contrived to support his statements with examples drawn from Scripture and the Fathers,<sup>707</sup> and he mingled practices of Christian humility and of the Gospel maxims with the details he gave about polite and correct behavior. It must be said that of all the writings of the holy priest, this was the one on which he expended the most care.<sup>708</sup>

If the Brothers had made a note of all the mortification they witnessed their Superior practicing daily, there would be material for a whole book on this subject alone. But they became so used to seeing fresh forms of it that previous instances faded from memory. Nevertheless, I can mention a few that time did not allow them to forget.

Once, when he was confined to bed because of the tumor we have just mentioned, the Brother who was looking after him had to be absent from the house the whole day on urgent business. He so far forgot about his patient that he neither attended to his needs nor arranged for someone else to do so.<sup>709</sup> John Baptist's reaction was

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*Penance and Holy Eucharist*, "catechisms of all sorts" (including *The Duties of a Christian to God?*), and "meditations and prayer books for the personal use of his disciples". Campos thinks that Blain groups all these together to simplify things and that it is "improbable that De La Salle could have achieved such a quantity of writings at a time of such struggle" (CL 45, 247). Blain places the composition of "several works of piety for the instruction of youth and for the use of his disciples" during the stay at Grenoble, that is, from August 1713 to April 1714 (book 3, chap. 11) and that of "spiritual treatises for the benefit of his sons" at Paris following his return there from the South of France in August 1714 (book 3, chap. 13); a number of writings, including *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, are indicated for the period of retirement at Saint Yon (book 3, chaps. 14–17).

707. See above, chap. 27, note 362.

708. A facsimile reproduction of the only known first edition of *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, dated 1703 and preserved in the Rome archives, has been published in CL 19. The editor, Maurice Hermans, provides a list of the principal known editions and reprints but comments that it is not possible to offer a complete inventory. In 1956, Brother Albert-Valentin published a critical edition of the work, using a later edition than the princeps copy, which was discovered only in 1960 (as described in an article by Hermans in *Bulletin*, October 1960). Albert-Valentin's count of the known editions and reprints is 176. Rigault devotes five pages (556–61) to an appreciation of the work, describing it as "written by a gentleman and a saint, a representative document of our civilization." Regarding Blain's comment that when he was writing, the book had already "run into several editions," six such are known and are described by Hermans in his introduction to CL 19.



what it always was in circumstances like that. He was more forgetful of himself than the Brother was who was supposed to be looking after him. He left the care of his health in God's hands and awaited the moment of Divine Providence in peace and resignation. He made no complaint to the Brothers who came to see him. He maintained complete silence about the negligence of his infirmarian and made no mention of needing anything. Instead he offered some cheering words of advice to each of his visitors. Although he said nothing, his obvious weakness made one of the Brothers realize that he was in a bad state. The Brother, unaware of the reason, asked him what was the matter. The patient replied in his usual cheerful way, "There's nothing the matter, thank God." But the Brother asked him if he had eaten for some time and only then was told that he had nothing all day. Of course, everything was done to remedy this as soon as possible, but it meant that John Baptist was getting in the evening nourishment he should have received in the morning. The Brother responsible for the oversight told me about this incident, and his testimony also mentions another example of De La Salle's virtue, which illustrates his obedience as much as his spirit of self-denial.

The Brother concerned brought his Superior, who was still bedridden, a stewed apple for him to eat when he felt like it. The patient left it untouched because, says the Brother, "I had not told him to eat it. I know this because when I found the apple just as I had left and asked him why it was still there, he replied that I had not instructed him to eat it." The Brother's testimony continues:

I do not recall whether it was during this illness or another that one of the Brothers who had gone to see him to seek some advice asked him if he needed anything. Father asked for something to drink, and the Brother, when preparing it, was careless enough to take down the wrong container. The result was that he brought a cup of lamp oil instead of medicinal herb tea. The patient was aware of the mistake at the first sip, but being the mortified man he was, he refrained from showing the least sign of anything wrong. Delighted to have this occasion to win a difficult victory over nature, he drank the whole cupful just as it was. This remarkable act of mortification would have remained unknown if Father de La Salle had not felt bound to admit it when questioned. "I realized that the good Brother had simply made a mistake," he said to the one who was curious enough to ask him. In such circumstances he simply blessed God and held his peace.<sup>710</sup>

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709. A hardly credible lapse, but Gallego (507) accepts its historicity as a symptom of the absorbing work of the schools.



Thus it was that illnesses, lack of sleep, hard beds, hair shirts, wire armlets, fasting, and disciplines all served as instruments for punishing his body; all were means whereby the Spirit of God shaped in his servant the image of the Man of Sorrows. This was how he fulfilled his resolution to cease suffering only when his life would come to an end and to be a martyr to penance if he could not be martyred for the faith. He had been increasingly weak for a long time before giving in to the illness that finally led to his death. Throughout this period, his fervor did not let up at all in the matter of early rising,<sup>711</sup> but he had to drag himself rather than walk to be the first present for morning prayers and meditation. The same was true for the other spiritual exercises in common that his condition made very trying for him, such as the recitation of the rosary with the novices, who said it very slowly. Eventually the Brother Superior requested, or rather ordered, him to feel dispensed from the community exercises and indicated a time when he was to rise and say Mass.

As I have already mentioned, this great spirit of penance had passed from father to sons: the Brothers were like him in the harsh way they treated the body. Their self-denial became so excessive that the saintly man was obliged to check it because those above him ordered it and wise and holy people advised him to do so. It was necessary to accommodate the Brothers' lifestyle to their physical capacity for the work they had to do.<sup>712</sup> It was also necessary to calm his enemies' vociferous outrage at what they said was his fanaticism for penance, his intemperate harshness to himself and others, and his

710. Gallego (419) seems to think that the story had improved in the telling by the time it was written down in a reminiscence or else that Blain adds the embellishment that John Baptist "drank off the whole cupful just as it was." Is the reality of what happened implied in the statement that "the patient was aware of the mistake at the first sip"?

711. From the beginning of the Institute, the time for rising was 4:30 a.m. (CL 25, 95), which remained a prescription of the Rule up to the General Chapter of 1966–67. However, the General Chapter of 1901 allowed a modification of the timetable when deemed necessary, provided that the total time allocated to the spiritual exercises remained the same and that the modification was approved by the Superior General.

712. The 1705 manuscript of the Rule has the following article (repeated in 1718 and 1726): "There will be no corporal mortification of rule in this Institute" (CL 25, 25). Commenting on this article, Hermans writes: "The personal austerity of John Baptist de La Salle matched that of the greatest penitents of his time, but when he was legislating for others, he was guided by a supernatural discretion, paternally concerned for the weak. He had in mind, no doubt, the rule laid down by Saint Benedict for the abbot of a monastery: 'Let him temper all things in such a way that the strong will wish to do more and the weak will not shirk,' *Regula*, LXIV" (*Pour une meilleure lecture*, 72).

disregard for human nature and for the possible consequences of such exaggerated fervor. People who knew the way life was lived in De La Salle's Community used to say that anyone who wanted to condemn himself to the practice of the most frightful penance had only to apply for admission. Once there, he would have every opportunity to satisfy his desire and drink deeply of the cup of mortification.

[CHAPTER 38]

*Extracts on penance from his Collection of Various Short Treatises; examples of this teaching in his mortification of the senses; importance of interior abnegation*

The portrait I have already drawn of De La Salle as an illustrious penitent of our time is no more than a copy of an original he traced himself. For in the following passages, which were intended to show his disciples the meaning of a true spirit of penance, he was depicting himself:

Adore our Lord Jesus Christ in his state of penitence. Let your principal care be to be clothed by him with the penitential spirit. Often ask him to give you the heart and dispositions of a true penitent; enter into the strength and virtue of these practices.

In the first place, like Jesus Christ, who was made man, sinner, and penitent for us, we as penitents should always have our sins before us. This ought to be the foundation of all the duties we are obliged to render to God because of our sins. "My sin," said David, "is always before me."

Secondly, as sinner you should continually express the perpetual remorse you experience because of your sin, first, on your countenance and before God, like our Lord, who bore in the sight of his heavenly Father the disgrace of our iniquities. "His face," says the Prophet, "has been covered with shame." You should also feel ashamed before the whole world at finding yourself among the servants of God charged with these crimes and laden with the horrible and shameful burden of your sins, seeking for this reason solitude, as far as possible, and always remaining there in spirit. Finally, be ashamed of yourself, unable to bear or endure this shame and pain, just as the Son of God said, "I have become a burden to myself."

Try to maintain continually in your heart sentiments of remorse, sorrow, and detestation for your crimes, in union with our

Lord, who lived a life of perpetual sacrifice with a heart truly contrite for the sins of the world. In view of so many crimes, frequently submit yourself interiorly to the infinite, eternal, and all-powerful justice of God to suffer the effects of divine retribution and all the punishment to be inflicted on you for your sins. Occasionally make the following Profession of a Penitent, and every day take as a penitential practice the acceptance of what you find most painful in your state and employment.<sup>713</sup>

#### Profession of a Penitent

O my God, in honor of our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, and in union with him, a victim before you for my sins and those of the whole world, I declare that I will do penance every day of my life and look upon myself always and in all circumstances as a poor miserable sinner and a most unworthy penitent.

To fulfill this pledge, I first resolve always to carry with me an image of Jesus Christ, the sovereign victim for sin, to contemplate and embrace it frequently so that by his benign and interior glances he may remind me of the obligation under which I am of doing penance.

Second, I will offer most humble amends to the justice and holiness of God, whom I have offended by my sins.

Third, I wish to enter this day into all the interior dispositions of our Lord Jesus Christ the penitent, to do penance with him as one of his members and one of his children.

Fourth, I offer all my actions to you, O my God, and beseech you to accept them in satisfaction for my sins.

Fifth, I propose, with the assistance of your holy grace, to perform such and such an action today in a penitential spirit, to bear such and such a thing, and to mortify myself on this occasion so that you, who are just, should not lose any of your rights over me, your creature, or exact an entire vengeance and rigorous satisfaction of me in the next world.

Animate me with the holy spirit of penance, O my God. Renew within me that which I received in Baptism, and grant that I may give expression to these sentiments and dispositions by my entire conduct. This is what I promise you and the grace I beseech you to grant me through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.<sup>714</sup>

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713. These words are quoted from the article on penance in the *Collection* treatise, "The Principal Virtues That the Brothers Should Strive to Practice." Despite the length of the extract, Blain reproduces the text verbatim except for the substitution, at the end of the first sentence, of "*son état de pénitence*" for "*son état Pénitent*" (CL 15, 86–87; *Collection*, 71–72).

This is the compelling motive for the cruel war the saintly man waged on his senses, as he says in his instructions to his disciples:

The senses are the door through which sin usually enters the soul, and this is why the saints were most careful to curb them to fall less easily into sin. You should watch so carefully over your senses that you will refrain from using them in whatever has the least appearance of sinfulness, rejecting all that has a look of evil about it, as Saint Paul advises. Furthermore, it is important that you not allow your senses to dwell indiscriminately on every object that presents itself and that you accustom yourself not to use them without due reflection; otherwise, you will contract the habit of indulging your sensuality, and you will find it very difficult to correct this. You must of necessity use your senses, but as these may easily be misused and as this misuse leads to great disorders, it is most necessary to mortify them. What should induce you to mortify your senses is the fact that the more you do so, the more you will enjoy interior peace and the more you will know the presence of God. You may be encouraged to bear willingly with the trouble you experience in mortifying your senses by the thought that persons have been severely punished for having abandoned themselves to gratifications of the senses in cases which were apparently trivial. Such was the punishment of Lot's wife for having looked behind her at the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as they were consumed by fire. Offer God from time to time some act of mortification of one or another of the senses. This, by making you imperceptibly die to yourself, will be an almost continual sacrifice by which you carry out your duty to God, one which rises like an agreeable incense of sweet odor in the divine presence.<sup>715</sup>

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714. This prayer immediately follows the previous quotation in the *Collection*, as here; again, the biographer is careful in transcribing the original, his single variant being the correction of an obvious misprint “ses” to “ces” (CL 15, 87–89; CL 10, 87–88; *Collection*, 72–73). Rayez points out that the *Collection* article on penance is borrowed “à peu près intégralement” from *Introduction à la vie et aux vertus chrétiennes*, by Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Society of Saint Sulpice. Rayez notes, however, that De La Salle “did some shortening; he also clarified and softened certain expressions” (*Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 115, note 97).

715. Another quotation from the *Collection* treatise on “The Principal Virtues,” specifically this time on mortification of the senses (CL 15, 85–86; *Collection*, 70–71). Hermans notes only two variants in the transcription, neither of which affects the meaning (CL 10, 86–87).

Such teaching was acceptable and effective, coming as it did from one who exemplified it constantly in himself. There was not one of his senses that De La Salle did not make a special effort to mortify. I have noted, when speaking about his modesty, how he observed to the letter the stringent rules he had laid down about control of the eyes. He believed with utter conviction those words of the Holy Spirit that nothing does more harm to the soul than an uncontrolled use of the eyes. He not only avoided looking at forbidden objects or such as might be a source of moral danger; he showed the same restraint about things permitted and perfectly harmless. Fine buildings, splendid gardens, beautiful sculptures and paintings, and all those achievements of nature and art that appeal to the aesthetic sense and make people take delight in gazing at them either had no attraction for him or if they had, he made it a duty to sacrifice the desire to God.

To say that John Baptist was scrupulous about not looking at persons of the opposite sex, again in keeping with the warnings of the Holy Spirit, or that nothing out in public, in the streets or anywhere, could draw the gaze of a man who was ever attentive to the presence of God—all this is to credit him with no more than what is usual with people who live an interior, self-denying life. But in his case mortification of the sight went to the utmost limit. He turned his eyes from any object that he did not need to look at and that might have left useless impressions on his mind. He used his sight only for what might help him turn his thoughts to God or for what his duties required of him.

As for the sense of hearing, he was likewise attentive to those words of the Holy Spirit about not heeding every sort of discourse of things that are useless and vain.<sup>716</sup> Worldly conversation, the latest news, or local gossip could not reach the ears of one who made it his business to think only of God and to cherish silence and solitude as the guardians of his prayer life. If by chance someone wished to tell him something he had no desire to know, he would find that the saintly priest seemed not to hear him or listened unwillingly or with an indifferent or noticeably cool demeanor, and the useless talk would dry up as so much waste of words; the would-be speaker would feel embarrassed and disconcerted and would be obliged to remain silent, go away, or at least change the subject of conversation.

Mortification of the palate gave John Baptist unusual trouble at first, as I have recounted. He had any amount of repugnance to overcome when he wished to accustom himself to the cheap and insipid food served to his poor disciples. The natural delicacy of palate of someone who had been reared in the lap of luxury by parents who

<sup>716</sup> Titus 3:9.

cherished him so much meant that he had to fight battles that could be won only by strenuous effort, including going hungry for days on end. Finally, total victory was his, and from then on he became so used to rigorous fasting and abstinence and to cheap, tasteless, and scarcely edible food that he no longer seemed concerned about it. Tasty dishes, choice dainties, and tender meat he came to regard as so much noxious poison. He kept clear of festive celebrations with their well-laden tables as assiduously as gourmands look for them.

Never did De La Salle seem more put out than when he had to sit down to a well-prepared meal. He had to be trapped into doing so by someone watching for an opportunity and using some guile. We saw an example of this when the late bishop of Chartres, who had often invited him in vain to dine with him, finally forced him to do so by having all the doors of his residence locked and telling him that they would not be opened until after dinner.<sup>717</sup>

John Baptist constantly refused to accept the honor of such an invitation proffered him by many other bishops and important people. When it happened during his journeys that he had to put up at someone's house for some unforeseen reason and his host chose to have a good meal placed before him, it was an unpardonable fault. To compensate, he would go out of his way on subsequent occasions rather than be caught in the same place again.

When he was in Reims, some of the more charitable canons of the metropolitan chapter used to feel sorry for their former colleague, who, following an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, had exchanged a comfortable and pleasant way of life for one full of woes, one that left him a prey to hunger or to the many fasts with which he mortified himself. They made use of every imaginable pretext that their kindly ingenuity could suggest to coax him on some occasion into their home. When they finally prevailed, he had no option but to take a meal with them if he wanted to be able to leave. But these charitably minded hosts little knew that their efforts to bring some relief to one whom they believed to be starving because of his fasting and abstinence were only causing him to redouble them. For the holy man was annoyed, so to speak, at having been forced to treat his body better than usual, and he forthwith condemned it to the chastisement of a complete fast for the rest of that day and the one following. The Brothers noticed these protracted fasts, and one of them once asked him the reason. He replied that it was because he had indulged himself so much at the table of a canon who had detained him that he needed now to do some fasting. This happened frequently enough for

717. The story of this ruse employed by the Founder's friend, Bishop Godet Desmarets, is told in book 2, chap. 15.

the Brothers to feel obliged to notify the good canons that the meals they invited De La Salle to take with them were followed by these extended fasts and that his spirit of mortification led him to compensate for the food they had put before him.

It is hardly necessary to say that De La Salle contrived never to satisfy himself in this matter of food, that he always managed to find some way of diminishing the pleasure it afforded—by taking it when it was too hot or too cold, by having only a little of what he liked best, or by mixing something with it to make it unpalatable. Not that there was any need for this; all he had to do to mortify himself was to eat what was put before him. The dishes he was served were those his disciples had, and they were nothing but dishes of mortification. To be willing to eat them, a person had to be a very mortified man or else go very hungry. John Baptist, however, took them and ate them without giving a thought to what he was eating, however badly prepared it was. At the end of a meal, he had no idea of what he had eaten. This is how it happened that on one occasion his meal consisted of bitter herbs,<sup>718</sup> while on another when he was not feeling well, a young hare that the Brothers had caught in the fields was cooked for him. In neither case did he take any notice of what he was eating. It was all the same whether what he was given was prepared well or badly. By dint of mortifying his sense of taste, he had blunted its edge and made it indifferent to everything. The only use he made of it was to give it nauseating and sour things to savor, his pleasure being to swallow these things slowly to get the full effect of the disgusting and bitter taste. It was his way of honoring the experience of Jesus Christ, who was offered vinegar and gall when he thirsted on the cross.<sup>719</sup>

On another occasion, he was at Guise during the last days before the beginning of Lent. The king's representative there<sup>720</sup> sent a young hare as a present for De La Salle. The latter was quite upset when he was told about this by the Director, who then was sorry that he had

718. A seemingly well-attested incident related by Bernard (CL 4, 72) and Maillefer (CL 6, 74–75) before Blain used it twice (book 2, chaps. 1 and 11). The two earlier writers place it in the context of the beginnings of community life at rue Neuve; Blain relates it to the consequences of the poverty of the Vaugirard novitiate. Gallego suggests (256) that whoever supplied the reminiscence embellished the story by making the whole dish consist of absinthe and that what probably happened was that some stray leaves of the herb got mixed in with the vegetables and ruined the taste of the dish.

719. Matt. 27:34 and 48.

720. *Le Procureur du Roi*, an official directly appointed to a city by the king with the mandate “to safeguard always and in all things the rights of the monarch and the crown, to preserve the integrity of the royal domain, and to maintain public order” (*La Grande Encyclopédie*, vol. 27, 733.)

accepted the hare. He was given an order to have it cooked and shared among the pupils, an order that he obeyed.

With regard to the sense of touch, the most dangerous and redoubtable of all the senses, we have seen quite a few examples of the way John Baptist warred against it and how rigorously he mortified himself by the use of instruments of penance as well as by the remedies accepted for his ailments, real tortures in themselves. No clothing but what was cheap, coarse, and rough was allowed to cover his body. Because he dressed more or less the same in winter and summer, he was equally vulnerable to heat and to cold, taking no precautions against the changing climate of the seasons. He suffered all the extremes of weather and protected himself only when his life was endangered or his health might be compromised. The sufferings that Providence sent him did not satisfy him; he looked for others everywhere and was ingenious at finding them.

De La Salle did not, however, stop short at mortifying his bodily senses. He extended the process to everything about him: his moods, inclinations, dislikes, emotions, self-esteem, self-will, and personal way of understanding things—in a word, to all the faculties of his soul and their operation. He believed in the spiritual circumcision of fallen nature;<sup>721</sup> what Saint Paul calls the old man<sup>722</sup> was to be given no breathing space, no opportunity to gain the upper hand. His desire to share the feelings and wishes of his divine Master, as the Apostle urges us all to do,<sup>723</sup> prompted him strongly to renounce his own feelings and to eliminate everything that savored of personal whim. His earnest care to thwart his own tendencies made it impossible for them to appear at all, still less to escape his vigilance. It would have been a labor in vain to study his temperament and character to judge how he was thinking or feeling. It was quite impossible to know his likes or dislikes, for he never showed inclination or repugnance for anything. He was faithful never to do anything by merely natural impulse or because it suited his mood. He always showed the same tranquility, the same evenness of disposition, that is the rare and enviable product of a deeply mortified spirit. When he had to make a decision in which neither faith nor reason offered sufficient guidance, he consulted his personal feeling and inclination only to reject what they suggested.

Because this was his established procedure, whatever De La Salle did was always marked by mature wisdom and weighty consideration unlikely to cause regret. By allowing no place for mere mood and inclination, fruitful sources of wayward behavior, he stifled at their ori-

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721. Col. 2:11.

722. Col. 3:9 (Douai).

723. Phil. 2:5.



gin those sins that result from them and that for us are most frequent, serious, and dangerous. For it is difficult to condemn and abhor in all sincerity, and therefore to remedy, transgressions that stem from our inclinations because self-love prompts them and the heart gives them existence. Conversely, when fallen human nature no longer lives under such domination, to think in terms used by the Apostles,<sup>724</sup> the passions that are furtively strengthened by mood and inclination seem to be completely extinct, or so it was in De La Salle's case.

Even so, he continued to remain on the alert for these passions, thinking of them as wild beasts untamable by kindness and needing to be kept under firm control and made to do what they are told by blows of the rod; or else as so many vipers or other slumbering serpents, which gather their poison and their power to harm whenever they are awakened by someone's approach; or yet again, as irreconcilable foes with whom we must never declare peace or a truce under any pretext whatever, for if we fail to conquer them, they will not fail to destroy us; or, finally, as a tree of death that grows within us for as long as we are alive, the branches of which must be cut away as soon as they wither. Hence he waged a watchful combat against his passions as soon as they revealed their presence. He crushed them at birth against the rocks, even as the children of Babylon were crushed.<sup>725</sup> He never let up in this struggle, convinced that total victory is not possible on this earth and that however moribund our passions may seem to be, they always find new life and strength whenever we slacken in checking them.

De La Salle brought the same vigilance to the discipline of the spirit. His esteem for material austerity and the attraction he felt for any kind of corporal penance meant nothing to him if they were not accompanied by interior mortification. One of his sayings was, "I prefer an ounce of spiritual self-denial to a pound of exterior penance." When one or another of the Brothers showed more zest for bodily macerations than for spiritual self-denial and sought his permission to take the discipline, he would pleasantly say to him, "Yes, Brother, but let it be the discipline of your self-will; this is the kind of discipline you need and that will do you the most good."

He was personally so exacting that he refrained from even the most innocent ways of satisfying himself. The mind, left to itself, is inquisitive, vain, superficial, impulsive, and opinionated. It is no small task to heal it of all these flaws left by original sin. Few people apply the knife of spiritual circumcision deeply into their souls. Few have the constancy to bear the painful operation needed: refusal to satisfy

724. For example, Rom. 8:5.

725. Ps. 137:9.

their eagerness to hear new things or little-known and out-of-the-way scraps of information, to indulge in vainglorious and useless research. Few make no concession to the spirit of vanity that drives people to seek publicity, to achieve some distinction, to display their talents, and generally to make a better impression than they are entitled to. Few hold in check the superficial tendency of the mind to jump ceaselessly from one interest to another, to get involved in fanciful projects and undertakings, to entertain absurd flights of the imagination, and to be in a state of endless distraction. Few avoid the hyperactivity that results in excessive hurry, anxiety, stress, impatience, and useless rationalization or the stubborn self-assurance that causes us under the pretext of having a mind of our own never to surrender an opinion.

The holy priest had so far corrected these fivefold aberrations of the soul that he seemed to be guided only by the Holy Spirit dwelling within him. He was so lacking in curiosity that he was often the only one who was unaware of things everyone else knew about. He was not at all eager to be in the know. He wanted only to keep his mind free to think less about creatures than about their Creator. Because he offered no nourishment to the vain and trivial appetites of the mind, he was able to concentrate his thoughts on God and remain in interior adoration before him.

He was careful to check anything prompted by self-will, even when spiritual matters were concerned. This was apparent one day when he was discussing some such matter with a person whom he knew well. The conversation happened to turn on an excellent spiritual book that John Baptist did not know about but in which he showed an immediate interest, expressing a keen desire to read it. The other person went off immediately to get it for him, but John Baptist, having taken it, held it in his hands without opening it; he wanted to curb the excessive haste he had shown in expressing his wish to read it.

His enemies treated him as a stubborn man entrenched in his own opinions because they wanted to bring him into line with a style of government for his Institute that was quite contrary to its spirit and likely to bring about its ruin. To have merited from these people the reputation of being open-minded, he would have had to follow blindly all their fanciful ideas. Even so, his firm stance always had the backing of enlightened persons who for him held the place of God. The unquestioning obedience to which he was committed kept his personal judgment and self-will in constant subjection. He gave way to anyone who assumed a role of authority over him, without questioning their reasons or criticizing their procedures, views, or instructions. Far from challenging, arguing, or bickering to defend his own

point of view, he preferred always to go along with others. He had no use for wrangling about everything, making pronouncements, or handing down lordly rulings on sundry matters like those people who make no effort to discipline their own judgment and act sometimes with such an air of authority that people would think they had jurisdiction over anyone and everyone. On the contrary, he showed a submissive attitude even to those who took it upon themselves to act as his superiors, and he respected their self-assigned role.

What De La Salle feared more than anything was to let his self-will assert itself. He never used such expressions as “I want this done;” “This is not what I wanted;” “Those are my orders,” and “I’m telling you to do it!” He could not bring himself to decide anything unilaterally or claim the right to follow his own preference in anything. His joy was to have everything regulated for him down to the least important actions, with time and manner specified. This is why he consulted spiritual advisers and sought their guidance on how he should proceed in unusual situations. He wanted to act in everything by obedience, the tomb of self-will, as the great Saint John Climacus called it.<sup>726</sup>

His self-esteem fared no better. He was firmly determined to make no concession to it, to mortify it at every turn, to punish it with severe penance whenever it caught him off guard. He had it so well under control that he was scarcely ever seen to yield to it over a period of several years. He was gentle and compassionate toward other people but hard and unfeeling for himself. He was always ready to do a service for the youngest of the Brothers, but he was reluctant to receive the smallest service himself, except when necessity obliged him to do so. Whatever was of profit or advantage to him, whatever served his convenience or even a real need, was of so little concern to him that people could have said that there was nothing about him in need of care, neither his body, his health, his life, nor his good name.

De La Salle was one of those heroic followers of Christ who no longer live according to the flesh but according to the spirit,<sup>727</sup> who are guided and moved by the Holy Spirit, to whom they have subjected themselves, who have crucified their flesh with all its vices and concupiscences,<sup>728</sup> who bear continually in their body the marks of Christ’s sufferings,<sup>729</sup> and who live by faith in him<sup>730</sup> and reflect his image in them.<sup>731</sup>

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726. Blain’s not quite accurate marginal reference, “deg. 5,” leads to the aphorism “*Obedientia est . . . sepultura voluntatis*” (*Scala Paradisi, Gradus IV*, PG, vol. 88, col. 679).

727. Rom. 8:5.

728. Gal. 5:24 (Douai).

729. Gal. 6:17.

He had such total control of his passions that he was able on occasion to put them to use in a way inspired by the Holy Spirit. At such times he would rouse himself and, according to need, show anger or tenderness, fire or coolness, activity or passivity, gentleness or severity. Even-tempered though he was, his countenance could assume a different kind of expression when he wanted in a charitable spirit to humble the Brothers or test their virtue. On one occasion, for example, he happened to answer the door one morning at a very early hour. The Director of the Rouen community had come for an urgent consultation with him. Before he could say a word, John Baptist gave him a sharp reprimand for having come away during the morning spiritual exercises, leaving the Brothers to themselves. What he said was quite mortifying to the Brother Director, who listened in humble and respectful silence with eyes lowered and head uncovered. Thereupon John Baptist changed his tone of voice and his demeanor, and his apparent harshness gave way to kind reassurance. On another occasion, he saw fit to use the opportunity of a slight fault committed by one of the Brothers to humiliate him as a test of his virtue. He raised his voice and gave the Brother an embarrassing rebuke out in the courtyard. The Brother humbly went on his knees and accepted this in a penitent and very edifying manner, causing his Superior instantly to become as gentle as a lamb.

[CHAPTER 39]

*His patience in suffering, a manifestation of his love of God;  
his life from the founding of his Institute as an exercise  
of this virtue; examples in addition to those already related;  
his advice to others about patience*

It is easy to believe that a man as mortified as John Baptist de La Salle was also very patient and that he possessed to an eminent degree the sweetness of temper that is the fruit of perfect self-abnegation and forbearance. As Saint Paul says, "Charity is patient; it bears all things, endures all things."<sup>732</sup> The more ardent a person's charity, the more heroic will be the patience resulting from it. Only disinterested charity can make a person love suffering and hardships, which are daunting to nature. When the spirit actually savors life's bitter experiences, when the heart rejoices in crucifying fallen nature, self-love becomes

730. Gal. 2:20.

731. Rom. 8:29.

732. 1 Cor. 13:4 and 7.

weak, and the love of God waxes strong. Patience takes captive all the passions; it holds man's reasoning power to its proper role and wards off the sadness that threatens the soul at the approach of suffering. John Baptist has some words about the virtue of patience:

This virtue disposes the heart to suffer all trials of mind and body for the love of God and in imitation of Jesus Christ. Have a high esteem for this virtue, and practice it frequently, abandoning yourself entirely to God to endure all things, no matter how trying they may be. When such things seem likely, accept them with submission to the will of God. When they occur, accept them patiently and humbly and without complaint in silence, not speaking to anyone about them but looking upon them as real blessings, desiring them and suffering with joy and thanksgiving.<sup>733</sup>

Our latter-day Job was unaware that in thus tracing the characteristics of a patient man, he was drawing his own portrait. There have been few men during the last century whose patience was so rudely tested and who yet exemplified patience more convincingly.

De La Salle made open profession of trusting Providence absolutely for everything. He practiced rigorously the poverty that he had freely adopted. He faced endless and fiercely violent persecutions, outrage, and contempt in every quarter and the most blatant acts of injustice. Slanders against his person and his actions were started wherever he went and whatever he did. Painful illnesses were his lot, and there were the various endless problems posed by the task of founding an Institute. All these things kept him at the task of advancing daily in perfection, of renewing the resolute effort to profit by so many repeated occasions for practicing patience.

The work of patience, as Saint James says, is perfect in itself and leads to perfection.<sup>734</sup> Calvary is the school and testing ground of all the virtues, and their epitome is patience. The passions soon die in a man who suffers with patience; when they are dead, the patient man suffers with joy. Patience is the virtue that discerns and corrects what is defective in others. It does honor to faith in vividly reviving the image of the Man of Sorrows. It is James again who says that sufferings are the surest test of faith and that patience in suffering is faith's most precious fruit.<sup>735</sup> True, the faith of the martyrs sustained them in their

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733. Blain provides an accurate reference for this passage in a marginal note, "Recueil p. 180" (CL 15, 93; *Collection*, 76). It is the entire article on patience in the treatise, "The Principal Virtues." The transcription is exact.

734. James 1:4.

735. James 1:2-3.

torments, but their victory was due to their patience. This virtue also placed the crown of glory on the heads of countless saints who, although they did not shed their blood, were true martyrs. De La Salle was one of these; he was seen to suffer in peace and tranquility all the adversities that the waves of a turbulent sea repeatedly dashed against the rock of his patience.

He was so well able to control these feelings of sadness and the rest, which naturally bestir themselves at the approach of affliction, that no external sign appeared of the slightest emotion within. Nothing in his words, gestures, or subsequent actions suggested that he was upset, bitter, or angry. It did not matter whether his sufferings came from outside the community or were physical or mental. He maintained perfect possession of himself and remained at peace in the midst of the greatest trials. The saying of Jesus Christ, "in your patience you will possess your soul,"<sup>736</sup> was his oracle. Not content to stay at the first degree of patience, which is to suffer without murmuring, resentment, or pique, he habitually preferred to suffer lovingly and with joy; patience can go no further. Heroic examples of it are scattered throughout his life story.

He firmly believed that it was God, the bestower of all good things, who also permitted sufferings to happen, especially to his chosen ones, and that it was God's saints and closest friends who had the largest share of them. This faith banished the somber hues that render sufferings hateful to us and made them agreeable to him.

The holy Founder found frequent opportunities for the exercise of heroic patience in the great poverty he had chosen for the love of God. Time and time again, he found himself and his Community with nothing to eat or drink and with no suitable clothing to protect them against the rigors of the seasons with their extremes of cold and heat. All the hardships that poverty entails were theirs. Not a word escaped his lips, I will not say of complaint, but even of anxiety; he felt no pang of sad regret at having given away all his possessions or any movement of mistrust in Providence, which seemed often to forget him. There is no need to repeat here the countless examples already given of this. Let it suffice to add that the occasions when his patience was most strikingly shown were when his tribulations brought the Institute to the brink of ruin, as they did a hundred times.

The Institute was the work God had entrusted to him; it was to this he had called him, granting him the necessary grace and even after many initial feelings of repugnance, an inclination and attraction. When perils threatened the Society, he could not avoid the feelings of anguish and alarm that are natural to a father for his children, how-

736. Luke 21:19 (Douai).

ever detached his generous virtue had made him. On such occasions of rigorous testing, John Baptist, like Job of old, had need of all his patience and his profound resignation to God's holy will. There was hardly a day when he was free of troubles of this kind. It might be illness ravaging his flock, death reducing its numbers, or inducements of the enemy scattering them. A cowardly infidelity caused some Brothers to abandon their vocation, some deserting because they had failed to check a hidden failing and others because an intractable temperament had let their pride incite them to rebel. There were occasions when John Baptist's enemies used artifice and guile to turn against him the weaker and more impressionable Brothers. Sometimes the authority held by his persecutors overawed and silenced the people who could have defended him. Persons who harbored a secret jealousy tried by clandestine means to lead astray even his most trusted disciples, or people pretending to be his friends visited the house where he was living, with the sole purpose of sowing discontent among the Brothers and causing discord and complaints. Sometimes his benefactors deemed themselves entitled to interfere and came to lay down the law to him and abolish established practices of the Community. Other intruders, more zealous than wise, aimed to gain control of the Institute, introduce a different spirit into it, and reshape it according to their own ideas.

Sometimes the saintly man found himself deserted by Brothers or friends on whom he counted most. It happened on occasion that his most senior disciples turned out to be his enemies, whether hidden or declared. People who had professed themselves his patrons became hostile toward him and his work. His own disciples, like modern Absaloms,<sup>737</sup> waged cruel campaigns against him, some even raising their hands to him or loading him with insults. There were times when the doors of a community were closed against him or when he was told to leave the one where he was staying.<sup>738</sup> Sometimes he had the shock of finding that some disciple or other had run away, actually climbing over the garden wall as if having to escape. It was not an infrequent experience for a school to fail because of someone's bad advice or because contracts that could have been advantageous for a foundation were canceled just when they were near the point of being signed, all because of the malice of secret enemies.<sup>739</sup> He often saw his disciples badly treated and even sometimes abruptly dismissed

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737. 2 Sam. 15–18.

738. Another allusion to the events at Mende described in book 3, chap. 6, and already referred to in the present work (see above, chap. 13, note 32).

739. For example, the thwarted foundation at Accoules in Marseille (see above, chap. 36, note 650).

from places to which they had been requested to come, simply because their practice of silence and modesty, of recollection and mortification, made them obnoxious to people who liked others to conform to their own standard of behavior. Without doubt he needed to possess his soul in patience in all these circumstances; this is just what he did to a nearly perfect degree, practicing to the letter his own teaching about suffering in silence, not becoming upset or annoyed, not allowing a single word of complaint to escape, not a tear of bitterness, not a sullen look.

But I can go further and say that his patience claimed a still greater triumph, for John Baptist never looked more content, more joyful, and more self-possessed than when he had just come through some tribulation. If what had happened made it impossible to rejoice, he at least made it an occasion for submitting to God's will and resigning himself to the divine good pleasure, a chance to practice total and loving trust in Providence. To cultivate patience of this heroic quality, which became more and more necessary with every passing day, he repeatedly recalled the words of Job, his great exemplar, "God be blessed!" This expression was so habitual with him that it came to be thought of as his motto. Whenever he learned of some particularly crushing blow to his work, he used to quote Job's full saying, "What the Lord gave he has now taken away; blessed be his holy name!"<sup>740</sup> He enshrined these words in the Rule to make them as familiar to the Brothers as they were to him.<sup>741</sup>

John Baptist showed this attitude, for example, when to his intense disappointment, the young boys who had wanted to join the Institute all left him. They had come to his Community to be trained by him, and they were the fair hope and future assurance of the Society. But at Saint Sulpice they were called away against John Baptist's wishes to be the parish altar servers, where they became careless and were led away from the Institute.<sup>742</sup> Other examples were the three

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740. Job 1:21.

741. The words appear in chapter 2, "The Spirit of This Institute," in the earliest texts of the Rule (CL 25, 18).

742. In book 2, chap. 6, Blain records that this group originated in Reims, probably in 1686, and that the Founder decided some three years later to bring the young aspirants to Paris, with the disappointing result referred to here. Gallego (236–37) questions the impression given here (also in book 2, chap. 10) that the whole group was lost for the Institute and points out that the biographer in his initial account says that there were some "who had preserved the spirit and grace of their calling." Gallego also doubts that the cause of the youngsters' deterioration was their service at the altar, a task that Blain earlier says they accomplished to the admiration and edification of all who saw them, including the biographer, who claims to have witnessed this when



occasions when his institution for training teachers for the country districts got off to a promising start but each time collapsed, keenly disappointing him after all the care and effort he had put into them.<sup>743</sup> Then there were the times when the Paris Writing Masters disrupted the schools with legal actions brought against his disciples, and heavy fines were imposed together with the order to close down the classes. Sometimes the Brothers' wages were withheld, resulting in extreme hardship.<sup>744</sup>

Repeatedly and for long periods, the Founder was without novices because outsiders invaded the sheepfold to drive him out and wreak destruction. Upstart replacement teachers with their manipulators came along with new ideas, seeking to introduce a different spirit into the Community, doing away with established practices, undermining discipline, making way for relaxation, criticizing De La Salle's way of running things, suggesting fresh rules more congenial to human nature, dismembering the Institute, breaking the links among the various communities, and setting them against one another to create anarchy. John Baptist found himself obliged—this was a bitter blow for him—to modify the practices of austerity and alleviate the ascetical spirit of the Society, suppressing numerous observances inspired by fervor that had served to enkindle the heaven-inspired ardor burning brightly in hearts prepared for it by great mortification.<sup>745</sup> All in all, it was De La Salle's sad experience for some forty years to see the Institute he had founded under divine inspiration fiercely persecuted and often brought to the brink of ruin. I have expressed it all in general terms to avoid

he was a student in Paris. Gallego attributes the diminished recollection and piety of the boys to their lack of guidance when Henri L'Heureux died and De La Salle was incapacitated by his two successive illnesses.

743. The first such venture, at Reims in 1685, is described in book 2, chap. 6; its failure, in book 2, chap. 10. The account of the second establishment, in 1699 in the parish of Saint Hippolyte in Paris, and of its collapse five years later forms the principal topic of book 2, chap. 15, and is referred to by Blain in the present work to illustrate De La Salle's detachment from material possessions (above, chap. 13, note 33). The third abortive attempt was made in the town of Saint-Denis in 1709 and was the occasion of the Clément imbroglio as described in book 3, chaps. 6 and 9 (see above, chap. 13, note 29).

744. Examples related by Blain are the withholding of all funds for six months in 1695 by Henri Baudrand, the pastor of Saint Sulpice (book 2, chap. 12) and a punitive reduction in payment by Baudrand's successor, De La Chétardie (book 2, chap. 21).

745. Specifically, in book 2, chap. 15, the Founder was urged by the bishop of Chartres and his vicar-general to modify the penances and mortifications practiced in the young Society. Later, in book 2, chap. 20, Blain tells us that the Founder yielded in this matter to "the ecclesiastical authorities," whose persuasive argument is quoted by the biographer at some length.

repeating instances that have filled the pages of his biography. But I am going to mention a few now that were not included.

One of the Brothers who observed him very closely and who more than anyone took him as his model assures us that the Founder never complained about anything. It was never possible to tell from anything he said, the look on his face, or any other sign that he was lacking something or that what he had been given was not suitable. He was always content. If he was ill and was asked whether what was done for him or given to him was all right, he would cheerfully reply, "Yes, Brother, it's all right; it's fine." No one ever saw him show the least sign of impatience. Often when he was in great discomfort and pain, no one knew anything about it until, in reply to the doctor or the Brother infirmarian, he mentioned it simply and without fuss. One day he came in from a walk with one of the Brothers with whom he had been chatting in his usual buoyant and self-possessed way. The infirmarian happened to meet him, and he asked him how he was. "I have this persistent violent headache," he replied. "It feels as if my head is splitting in two. The worst thing about it is that I can't settle down to read or write or do anything at all. O well, God be blessed!" But it was only God who was aware until then of what he was suffering; the Brothers would have needed a supernatural illumination to know about it! When he was on his deathbed and had just made his Confession, he was heard saying to the priest, "Father, I'm such a coward that I have asked God to let me die." Yet throughout his illness his countenance was always cheerful and smiling, and indeed it remained so after he had passed away, so that visitors were happy just to contemplate him. He seemed to be still living, for he looked just as he always did when making interior prayer or hearing a Brother's reddition.<sup>746</sup>

One summer morning in 1716, the Rouen Brothers were on their way to the six o'clock Mass at Saint Nicaise, which was then their parish church.<sup>747</sup> They were suddenly set upon by two thugs, each carry-

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746. A Rouen painter named Du Phly was commissioned to make a portrait of the Founder immediately after his death. The original was lost in 1904, and the two photographs of it, preserved in the Rome archives, are of poor quality, inadequate for a judgment of the validity of Blain's comments here. An excellent reproduction of the better of the two defective photographs appears in Rousset, *Iconographie*, plate 26, and in CL 49 with a detailed discussion by Joseph Cornet, who had already drawn attention to the significance of the Du Phly in an article in *Bulletin*, July 1954, "*Les Premiers Portraits de Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle.*"

747. Following the dispute with the pastor of Saint Nicolas (see above, chap. 32, note 482), John Baptist arranged for the community to transfer their residence to rue Caron in the parish of Saint Nicaise. The proprietor was

ing a sword in one hand and a cudgel in the other and looking as if they were going to kill them all. But the Brothers needn't have worried if they had chosen to defend themselves; their number and youth would have provided all the strength needed to dispose of the two roughnecks. But they had been schooled by De La Salle, and they were ready to be beaten rather than oppose violence with violence. However, because their assailants seemed to be the worse for drink, they thought it prudent to avoid a clash and take to flight. They were not all able to do so quickly enough; one of them was caught and given a severe beating. The Brothers, fearing that this kind of outrage would be followed by others if it went unpunished, believed it their duty to lodge a complaint at the nearby police station. When the incident had been reported, the two ruffians, realizing that they had more than enough reason to fear the rigors of the law, begged pardon of the Brother they had so badly treated; the latter, then and there, granted it in writing, an act of Christian charity that saved his attackers from being arrested.<sup>748</sup>

De La Salle, however, who was living at Saint Yon at the time, was upset when he heard what had happened. Never had he been seen so hurt or so obviously distressed as on this occasion. The reason? Was it because his disciples had been maltreated? Not at all. Occurrences of this kind could never upset him because he regarded them all as occasions of good fortune for people who professed discipleship of a crucified Lord. The reason for his grief was that the Brothers had lodged a complaint with the police; this was a fault he could not excuse. It was useless for the Brothers to try to justify themselves on the grounds that such outrageous behavior had to be stopped if they wanted to be free to run their Christian Schools without being insulted by godless people. He silenced them with a few words: "Brothers are supposed to suffer everything and not cause other persons to suffer." Because this language of the cross was difficult for them to accept, he reinforced his words by reminding them of the

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Claude Sevrey, who leased it to the community in the person of the bursar, Brother Thomas, whose signature appears on the original contract, dated 12 July 1712 and preserved in the Seine-Maritime archives. A Lasallian community was still residing there at the time of the Founder's death, according to a note on the subject in the Rome archives.

748. Lucard quotes (317) documentary evidence for this incident discovered in the archives of the Rouen Court of Appeal. His transcription of the *procès verbal*, preserved in the Rome archives, specifies that the incident occurred on 20 July 1717 (not Blain's 1716), that the two assailants were soldiers called Lebret and Thiénard, and that the Brother who lodged the complaint was Basile (Théophiste Chereau), who, according to the *Catalogue* published in CL 3, would have been forty years old at the time of the incident.

incident in the Scriptures when the Holy Spirit had filled the Apostles with his power and they had left the council chamber of the Jews rejoicing because they had been judged worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus.<sup>749</sup> He quoted this passage from the Acts of the Apostles with intense earnestness because he wanted his disciples to understand that they too, like the Apostles, should find all their joy in suffering for the name of Jesus because they also were honored with the glorious task of teaching Christian truth.<sup>750</sup> Contrary to his usual custom, he quoted the passage in Latin, something he did only when he felt very deeply about the matter concerned.<sup>751</sup> He avoided Latin altogether in his talks to the assembled Brothers because he had prescribed that those who knew Latin should show no sign of it and make no use of their knowledge. But when in his personal interviews with the Brothers he sought to inspire them with the spirit of Jesus Christ and to bind them, so to speak, to the foot of the cross, making them ever willing to share the divine Savior's cup of humiliations and sufferings, a holy enthusiasm would seize him, and he would speak as one no longer in possession of himself but moved and prompted only by the Spirit of God.

One of the Brothers who knew him best tells us that enough can never be said about the patience the saintly Founder showed with regard to the rough manners of some of the Brothers. One of these in particular was overbearing, hasty, and even insolent. But he did not realize this himself, and although he was not very intelligent, his heart was in the right place. However, he was a terrible trial for John Baptist's patience with his open indocility, repeated demands, and offen-

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749. Acts 5:41.

750. The equivalence of the Brothers' ministry with that of the Apostles is one of the great themes of *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, as Michel Sauvage, in *Catéchèse et Laïcité*, and Miguel Campos, in the second part of his doctoral thesis, published as CL 46, have made it possible to appreciate as never before.

751. What John Baptist said, if Blain's detail is correct, was "*Et illi quidem ibant gaudentes a conspectu concilii, quoniam digni habiti sunt pro nomine Jesu contumeliam pati.*" As the biographer implies, it is a surprise to learn that the Founder used Latin, however rarely, to the Brothers, whether in assembly or individually, considering the terms of the special chapter, "The Latin language," in the earliest texts of the Rule (CL 25, 93–94; see above, chap. 25, note 302). The statement that John Baptist quoted in Latin "only when he felt very deeply about the matter concerned" provides an insight into the prevailing understanding of the sacrosanct status of the Vulgate text, understood to express more surely than any translation the verbal inspiration of the passage concerned. There is the additional consideration, of course, that for the doctor of theology that De La Salle was, the Latin version would come more readily to memory than a vernacular form.

sive remarks. His Superior's patience always triumphed over these, but the fact that the Brother, despite his repeated outbursts and the bad example he was giving, never quite exhausted this patience or drove it beyond the uttermost limit of endurance did not mean that the saintly man's health did not suffer. He could easily have put things right with a show of authority. The troublesome Brother, in reality, offended more by thoughtlessness than by malice and was so obstreperous only because John Baptist was so patient; he would have soon come into line if the latter had chosen to show the iron hand. But this was not in the Founder's nature; he preferred to exercise patience rather than authority.

Finally, however, his health did give way to all the violence he was doing to himself, and he was obliged to take to his bed. A senior Brother who was unaware of the cause of the illness asked him about it and insisted on knowing the answer so that finally he drew from him this admission: "I will never be well as long as I am living with Brother (naming him)." But the said Brother, pest as he was to his Superior, was not easy to move. He was in good favor with the principal benefactor of the community, and no one dared think of having him transferred. He had all the time and opportunity he needed to keep on testing his Superior's virtue in the fire of tribulation. In fact, the Brother, just because he was so wayward, fitted in well with a man who found nourishment in mortification and who was eager to seize every opportunity of suffering.<sup>752</sup>

I have already mentioned that De La Salle often received letters full of insulting remarks and that he always read these with close attention and the utmost tranquility. One day he was getting ready to say Mass when a letter of this kind was brought to him. Normally he put off until after his Mass any business that cropped up while he was making his preparation, but on this occasion he chose to read the letter because he believed it would put him in the right disposition for saying Mass; he had a good idea of what it would contain. It was, in fact, very offensive and insulting. He read it and then handed it to a person who was there at the time and whom he trusted. The latter also read the missive and was amazed that John Baptist remained so undisturbed; all the latter said was that the writer of the letter meant well, and then he went off to say Mass for his benefit.<sup>753</sup>

Some devout friends of his asked him to change one of the Brothers to a different community because he was not observing the

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752. Lett identifies the troublesome Brother as the bursar, Brother Thomas, Charles Frappet (*Les Premiers Biographes*, 229).

753. Perhaps, suggests Gallego (446), it was the letter sent by the pastor of Saint Nicolas in Rouen, as related by Blain in chap. 32 of the present work.

Rule well enough where he was. John Baptist acceded to the request although he had little hope that the Brother would mend his ways as a result. It turned out that he was very far from doing so. The change of place seemed only to make him try to go farther in his waywardness, a development that provided more sorrow for his Superior. In the hope of remedying behavior that could only have disastrous effects, John Baptist took the opportunity of a visit to Provence to call and see this Brother.

The willful man received him politely enough, but when he saw that his Father wished to bring him around to a life more in keeping with his profession, he turned nasty and spared no harsh words, showing no regard at all for the character of the person he was speaking to and his status as Superior. He went so far in his insolence as finally to order him out of the house.<sup>754</sup> But John Baptist took no offense at this shocking treatment, although it gave him good reason to think of those words of the Prophet, "I have fed and raised up children, and they have turned against me."<sup>755</sup> He simply betook himself to the house of a devout person who gave him the same kind of welcome as Zacchaeus gave our Lord.<sup>756</sup> There the saintly man was still in touch with his Absalom-like son, and he kept trying all kinds of ways to bring him back to his duty, but it was all to no purpose.

The wretched man, far from responding, did everything his malice could suggest to find fault with his Superior and make him disliked by everyone else. But it was on him that the shame fell. All through the ordeal, the innocent object of his harassment took no notice of his wicked disciple's treatment and spoke of him only with kindly charity. He disregarded those who, feeling sorry for him, spoke their minds about the Brother, or he tried to calm them by finding every possible excuse for him. He finally left the place without

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754. Mende again (chap. 13, note 32, and note 738 of this chapter). Blain nowhere names the Brother who he says ordered the Founder out of the house, but the general surmise is that it was Brother Henri, Joachim Pelard, who, says Rigault (385), deserved better treatment at the hands of Blain.

755. Isa. 1:2.

756. Luke 19:5–6. Balin names the "devout person" in his earlier account of the episode (book 3, chap. 11). She was Anne Lescure de Saint Denis, an aristocrat who had devoted her wealth to the education of girls, especially of the daughters of non-Catholic parents. She had formed a community for this purpose, and according to Blain, De La Salle showed his appreciation of the hospitality he received from her, not only by providing spiritual direction but also by drawing up a Rule for the nascent congregation, the Dames de l'Union Chrétienne. In the Rome archives is a printed monograph of eighty-four pages on this congregation, by Ferdinand André, published by the Regional Archives of Mende, which takes note of De La Salle's collaboration.

having made any impression on the hardened heart of his disciple, but hoping that time would bring so unnatural a child to his senses.

But the holy Founder was not to have the consolation of witnessing this in his lifetime. The episode was by his own admission one of the most painful of all his trials, and he needed all his moral strength to control his grief and not burst into tears before everyone. His patience in the matter made a profound impression on all who witnessed it. His comfort was to read and reread these words of the Apostle: "Bear in mind how Jesus suffered the opposition of sinful men, and do not grow despondent or abandon the struggle."<sup>757</sup> They were words he often advised the Brothers to recall whenever those who were in their charge were proving recalcitrant.

Leaving aside further details of the great examples of patience the Founder gave in the many long and severe illnesses he suffered, I will only relate here one incident not previously mentioned. He was with the older boarding pupils at Saint Yon, giving them a talk as was a custom of his. A chair had been put in place for him, but the Brother who was with him presumed that he would not want to use it, and he removed it. John Baptist did not notice that he had done so, and when he sat down a moment later, he fell and struck his head so hard that he was picked up looking more dead than alive. The fall caused an abscess to develop on his head, so serious that there was doubt whether it would ever heal. But John Baptist's hour had not yet come, and God permitted the abscess to burst, releasing the pus through the ear, and this removed the danger. All the time he was afflicted with it, his patience drew tears from the eyes of people who were privileged to witness it. The Brother who had caused the accident expected a sharp reprimand, which only proved that he scarcely knew how his Superior's mind worked. John Baptist showed not the least sign of displeasure or annoyance. When the Brother went to him to beg his pardon, as he felt bound to do, the humble priest raised him from his knees with tender assurances, saying that they should both adore the Providence of God, who had allowed the incident to happen.

So patient a man could not help instilling the practice of the same virtue in those who were in his care, and this he did with great earnestness, for he was convinced that persons who teach the young have particular need to excel in patience. He often used to say to the Brothers, "You would spoil everything if you did not take special care to curb any movement of impatience. This would only upset those you are teaching."

A Brother who wrote to him one day about his spiritual progress mentioned that he was often driven to the point of losing his patience.

757. Heb. 12:3.

In his reply John Baptist pointed out the unfortunate results that this could lead to. Here is what he wrote:

Take great care not to give way to impatience in carrying out your ministry; otherwise, it will be quite unproductive. When you feel moved to impatience, control yourself and wait until the impulse has passed before you act. When you allow yourself to be carried away by impatience, as you say in your last letter you have done, ask your Director to reprimand you and give you a good penance. This will be an effective way of bringing you to correct yourself of this serious failing.<sup>758</sup>

De La Salle urged the Brothers to practice this virtue no less when out of school; he wanted them to be exemplars of it at all times. Hence he would administer a sharp reprimand even if he saw one of them giving way to impatience over matters of small importance; he would point out to them that if they could not control themselves in small matters, they would never be able to do so in greater ones. One such Brother mentioned in a letter that he had allowed himself to show impatience and annoyance with a confrere. John Baptist replied as follows:

Now, my very dear Brother, if you had patiently borne the pain that Brother had caused you, how many of God's graces you would have merited! Make sure, then, that in the future you bear your sufferings with patience. If you wish to be pleasing to God, offer him your sufferings in union with those of our Lord Jesus Christ. The anxiety you have concerning your faults cannot do you any good. The only thing to do is to consider before God what means you can use to overcome them. A little patience, and God will take care of everything.<sup>759</sup>

Another Brother, a Director, told him how much he resented having to put up with the moodiness of a few members of his community. The Founder replied, "A Director should be a man of such great patience and such proven virtue that he should look upon himself as a receptacle for all the rubbish of the community. By this I mean he must be ready to put up with everything without showing any annoyance or displeasure."<sup>760</sup>

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758. *Letters*, 99.1–2.

759. *Ibid.*, 75.4–7, a further extract from a letter already partially quoted (see above, chap. 27, note 370).

760. *Ibid.*, 95.



But if De La Salle required such great patience in exterior matters he was no less exacting in what concerned interior trials. He would have these borne in such a resigned spirit as to prevent any word of complaint to be uttered about them. Here is what he wrote on this matter to a Sister for whom he was a spiritual director over a long period and who had asked him for advice on how to accept with patience the various spiritual trials she was experiencing:

Throw yourself into the arms of God and of his Holy Mother, and you will be supported in your great weakness, not by means of sensible consolations but as God wills it and you yourself merit it. The violence that you have to do yourself will not always be so great nor will it last so long, for on his part God will bring you relief, and on your part you will not have so long to live. But even if it should go on and on, do not your sins deserve it, and does not the example of Jesus Christ demand it, and are not the love of God and the possession of eternal happiness worth it?

Confide all your failings to Jesus Christ, and trust in his goodness. He will not let you be overcome by your distress if you do not give him cause through your infidelity. So be patient and wait; consolation will come in good time. All the trouble and anxiety you experience afford you good opportunities for making satisfaction to God for your past life. Be faithful in this, and remember that you will give an exact account of the use you have made of these opportunities. Always cling, I beg you, to the cross of Jesus Christ, and never separate yourself from it. In the face of all the threats of the devil, boldly say that you will never leave it, nor will anything separate you from it. If you make this generous resolve, our Lord will at once come to your help and support you in his hands.

Let us accept our wretchedness joyfully, since our God is always in his eternal happiness. That should calm our anxieties. Let us live through our wretched life as long as it pleases God, without complaining to anyone, not even to him who can free us from it. Let us seek only his will. I admit that the continual violence you have to do to yourself is most disagreeable to human nature, but ought we not suffer to win back the paradise we have lost and to avoid the hell we deserve? Everything must be seen in relation to these two great eternal truths. Let God be your sole recourse in your struggles against human nature and your dejection, and let your visits to the Blessed Sacrament be your only remedy for your distress. If your present state of mind is a martyrdom, it is the best thing you could wish for, because it is

most profitable for your sanctification. Even if your submission to God's will in your sufferings is only minimal, it is enough. What you must avoid is revealing your feelings to others, except those who direct you. Be careful of that.

I realize, my dear Sister, that you are in great suffering, and I deeply share in your difficulties, but you should not, it seems to me, grieve so much. Your feelings of abandonment touch only the exterior. The profound darkness which you experience is the means that God gives to draw you more surely to himself. You know quite well that the more darkness and doubt you experience in your life, the more you will live by faith, and you know that it is faith alone which should motivate the lives and actions of those who belong to God. Often say to yourself from the depths of your desolation, "Even if I become a reprobate, I will do all that I can for God." And if out of twenty actions, there is only one that is good or even only partly good, still it will be so much done for love of God. Humble thoughts are sometimes good in your present state, but courage and confidence in God will serve you better. Once again I say, turn to God in prayer. Could doing this annoy him? Cast such a thought from your mind, dear Sister. I assure you that prayer always draws down some grace from God, even on the most hardened sinners. It is almost their only resort. And were you simply to remain in God's presence, that would still be a great help to you, supporting you in your troubles and helping you to bear them patiently. As often as possible, make your prayer in the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. This will help very much to bring peace of mind and tranquility to the depths of your soul.

Never let yourself be wrongly persuaded that God has abandoned you. On the contrary, be sure that God is more ready than ever to welcome you into his arms and that as your distress increases, so does his mercy toward you increase and abound. He knows just how weak you are and how needed his grace is to establish and strengthen in you what your weakness and laxity put you in danger of losing at every moment.<sup>761</sup>

How gracefully such teaching on patience came from one who practiced the virtue as John Baptist de La Salle did!

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761. *Letters*, 108.1–7

## [CHAPTER 40]

*His mildness; an acquired virtue, not a mere effect of temperament; the principles on which his mildness was based; how it influenced his dealings with others; his gentleness combined with firmness; examples of his practice of this virtue*

Such a man as John Baptist de La Salle, so patient and mortified, so dedicated to the interior life, and so humble, was also, like Moses, “*mitissimus super omnes homines*—the mildest of all people.”<sup>762</sup> Mildness is the end product of all the virtues in general, particularly of charity, humility, familiarity with God, abnegation, and patience. The degree of a person’s mildness can be measured by the degree to which he practices these other great virtues; we can say that mildness makes them acceptable in the sight of men and causes piety to be held in honor. De La Salle’s disinterested and generous love won him the heart of God; the tender gentleness of his love won him the hearts of persons who were not dominated by jealousy, prejudice, self-interest, and the hidden resentment that the spirit of the world inspires against virtue of a rare and heroic quality.

It is true that a meek and tender heart is not secure from danger; tenderness of feeling can easily degenerate into sentimental attachment, and mildness can become nothing more than weakness. But De La Salle was privileged to possess the virtues while keeping well clear of the failings. The special character of his charity toward others was that it was firm as well as gentle, pure as well as tender. He was a living image of his Savior in the practice of all the other virtues, and his mildness seemed to put the finishing touch to the portrait.

How then is this virtue to be described as exemplified in our servant of God? In what circumstances and toward whom did he practice it? What were his motives? These are questions that must be answered briefly if we are to know just how holy was his practice of this virtue. He had no time for the transient, benign feelings that depend on circumstances and our mood, that derive from a natural liking for someone and disappear with a feeling of antipathy. He would have nothing to do with the contrived and artificial meekness that is assumed when it suits our purpose and concocted out of all sorts of scheming motives. His gentleness was quite free of the self-centered feelings of kindness that nature inspires only in the hope of gaining something. All such forms of meekness are false and without merit in the sight of God. Their source is mere mood and temperament, or

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762. Num. 12:3 (Vulgate).

else a fawning and acquisitive disposition. It is well enough known that a worldly outlook can make people affable by studied effort, can make them artfully obliging, beneficent for motives of gain, courteous when it suits their interest, craftily compliant, well able to bestow favors at the right moment, even prepared to be servile to those they need but with the purpose of becoming their tyrannical masters.

The gentleness of Jesus Christ was firmly rooted in the soul of our saintly priest, and from it his own mildness had grown. Never was a heart more upright than De La Salle's; never did lips speak more sincerely. Candor was characteristic of him. The honesty of speech that our ancestors knew but that their descendants have banished found a refuge in John Baptist de La Salle. His natural temperament contributed nothing to his mildness; rather, it put serious obstacles in its way. He was not by nature composed and unemotional, a phlegmatic kind of person. He was warm blooded and hasty, with a tendency to be hot tempered. He would have easily given way to anger had he not learned to school himself early on. As is well known, great servants of God have this characteristic in common: they discipline their natural inclinations. Excuses such as "It's because I'm made this way," "It was because of the mood I was in," or "I can't make myself any different than what I am" belong to the children of this world. But they are words that shame them rather than justify their conduct. The saints speak a different language. Their guiding principle is to check their feelings, to oppose what their temperament inclines them to do. From this comes their success in combating their dominant passion.

A number of principles combined to make John Baptist de La Salle the mildest man of his time: careful watchfulness over the impulses of his heart, moral strength to stifle from the beginning any tendency to act according to his mood, and firm determination not to desist from this long and arduous combat until victory was complete.

His mildness was the saintly kind that is due to the action of grace. It was modeled on that of Jesus Christ and was a product of John Baptist's intimate communion with God. It was achieved by the practice of self-denial, inspired by the love of God, safeguarded by humility, manifested by his patience, and productive of peace and tranquility in his soul. His mildness was all embracing, admitting of no exceptions, present in his dealings with his great enemies, his calumniators, those jealous people who hounded him. Those of his disciples who showed resistance to him or otherwise caused him trouble were especially favored by it, as were those who seemed uncouth and graceless. The saintly priest humbled himself below them all and used his position as Superior only to be at their constant beck and call. He mixed easily with the most insignificant members of the Com-

munity and always combined a fatherly role with that of Superior. He cheered them up when they were disconsolate, listened patiently to their grievances, showed a concerned interest in the least of their problems, consoled them with great kindness, and seemed oblivious only of what concerned himself.

It was above all in the confessional when listening to persons most heavily burdened with sin that he strove to personify the gentleness of the Savior, who in the Gospels is called the friend of tax collectors and sinners.<sup>763</sup> Even for grave sins, he usually imposed light penances because he intended to make satisfaction for them himself with penitential practices in keeping with the seriousness of the offenses. He wanted to bring those who had sinned to repentance by the way of gentleness and love. In this way he avoided departing from the intention of the church and the ancient rules, which required penances to be appropriate to the gravity and number of the sins committed.<sup>764</sup> he made himself responsible to divine justice for the debts incurred by sinners, and so he balanced the leniency he had shown them by a saintly severity toward himself.

Not that he did not on some occasions impose a severe penance. But before taking the risk of doing so, he would study the character of the penitent concerned, measuring the grace that seemed to be theirs, the earnestness of their conversion, and the degree of their spiritual strength. Like a wise doctor prescribing remedies, he took into account the disposition of his patients even more than the nature of their illness.

The Brothers nearly always came away from their Confession to this saintly priest quite overwhelmed by his kindness, charmed by his gentleness, and edified by his patience. His mildness, full of unction and grace, won their hearts. It bound them to him, made them accept his authority with joy, and kept those to their duty who were inclined to shirk; it made them observe their Rule without constraint and lightened the yoke of the Lord so that it became pleasant to bear.

763. Luke 7:34.

764. The Council of Trent worded the requirement: "*Debent ergo sacerdotes Domini, quantum spiritus et prudentia suggererit, pro qualitate criminum et poenitentium facultate salutare et convenientes satisfactiones injungere, ne, si forte peccatis conniveant et indulgentius cum poenitentibus agant, levissima quaedam opera pro gravissimis delictis injungendo, alienorum peccatorum participes efficiantur*—Priests of the Lord must therefore impose salutary and appropriate penances as suggested by prudent judgment according to the nature of the offenses and the responsibility of the penitent. If they adopt a lenient attitude and deal too indulgently with the penitent by imposing very light penances for very serious offenses, they may become sharers in others' guilt."

The fact that his mildness was not a product of his mood or temperament made him more afraid of failing in it than of overdoing it. Too much rather than too little in this matter seemed to him more in keeping with the spirit of Jesus. John Baptist could not see excess of gentleness as a fault, not one anyway that he had any wish to correct. He was well aware that when a virtue is acquired by painful effort, it is rarely impaired by exaggeration and that it always retains its true character as long as natural feeling has nothing to do with it. Indeed, natural feeling in his case had often to swallow the bitter gall that he would not allow himself to discharge on someone else, something that has to happen frequently before the source of the gall dries up and leaves a person as free of it as a dove.<sup>765</sup> Victories of this kind make the heart bleed. Self-love has to suffer over and over again before meekness establishes its peaceful reign.

From this quality the servant of God derived serenity of countenance, calmness of soul, and evenness of temper rarely matched even by people of advanced virtue. He was always the same, more like God in this respect than like his fellowmen. Every day was marked by contradictions, rebuffs, insults, injustices, slanders, fatigue, illness—all the woes that life brings. But he never allowed himself to show the least sign of annoyance that would have given those who tested his patience the worthless satisfaction of seeing him complain, argue, or challenge what was said. He did not know what it was to bear a grudge, to show coldness, aversion, or resentment. He never gave a sharp or wounding retort, still less a threatening tongue-lashing, because he never considered that he had been offended. It was no trouble to him not only to pardon and be reconciled to those who did offend him but even to manifest additional marks of benevolence.

In brief, every day of John Baptist's life was signalized by some fresh aspect of his gentleness. No one can deny that meekness easily risks degenerating into softness, but De La Salle was far from falling into this extreme. He was as firm as he was gentle. It is true that life provides many a complex situation that causes people of even the greatest firmness of character to waver. Family considerations, public opinion, possible advantages to a Community, domestic misunderstandings, or troubles coming from outside can often make even the strongest resolves wilt. There are crafty and subtle temptations that take a person by surprise and cause him to succumb to family pressures, cupidity, or a false and opportunist kind of charity. But if we trace De La Salle's career step by step, we find that firmness was nev-

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765. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* corrects (for non-zoologists!) Blain's not quite accurate inference: "In animals without a gallbladder, such as horses, rats, and pigeons, bile comes directly from the liver" (Microp., IV, 390).

er lacking from his mildness. Family implications can so often shake the most resolute spirits and thwart the fulfillment of intentions that have been inspired by piety or the desire for perfection. But in John Baptist's case they came up against willpower that was firm as a rock and against which considerations of flesh and blood beat in vain. The protests of his relatives were strident when they saw him prepared, at the suggestion of his spiritual director, to exchange his canonry for a parish, an exchange that would have meant hard work with small financial return. His family set up all the obstacles they could think of to block the project but all in vain. John Baptist paid no heed to their words when the interest of God was in question. If the proposal did not, in fact, work out, it was only because the archbishop of Reims withheld his consent.<sup>766</sup>

On a later occasion, when De La Salle resolved to resign the canonry, it seemed only natural that he should bestow it on one of his two brothers, both of them destined for the service of God.<sup>767</sup> One was already a cleric and had shown himself greatly attached to John Baptist. Consideration for the family further seemed to make it a duty for him to give them the benefit of his patrimony when he had decided to dispose of it in order to follow Jesus Christ in his poverty. It would have been proper for him to do so, even though there was no compelling reason for it; his people were well off and not in need of anything. But the world around him would have applauded him, and his family would have appreciated a gesture that would have enriched them further; they would have been the first to approve and praise his decision.

But it was not in such ways that Jesus Christ counseled a man to become perfect, and the authority of the Gospel weighed more with John Baptist than family interests. He ignored the appeal of flesh and blood in acting as he did, and he thereby removed any additional reason for having to fear the flattering attentions of his relatives—one form of temptation against which he was now safe for the rest of his days! Firmness remained a sustaining force for his gentleness, making him as commendable in the sight of God as it won him the disapproval of the world. He remained ever wary of being too soft when

766. Blain earlier uses this episode to illustrate John Baptist's spirit of sacrifice (see above, chap. 9, note 143).

767. The mention here of "two brothers" as candidates for the resigned canonry is curious. In the protracted account of the matter in the biography (book 1, chaps. 13–14), only one brother is in question, Jean-Louis. The phrase "both of them destined for the service of God" identifies the other supposed candidate as Jacques-Joseph, who, however, had been a professed religious of the Canons Regular of Saint-Geneviève for five years at the time (1683) of his eldest brother's resignation of the canonry (CL 41, vol. 1, 324).

his own people were concerned. The claims of flesh and blood to be entitled to ask and expect everything from a clerical member of the family were for John Baptist a reason to pause and consider. His heart inclined him to grant the favors they sought, but his hand withheld them. He had not lost all natural feeling; on the contrary, he remained sensitively and tenderly disposed toward his own people. But he mistrusted these feelings and kept them in check, although from a motive of charity. Grace does not destroy human sentiment. Jesus wept for Lazarus, causing those who witnessed this to say, "See how much he loved him!"<sup>768</sup> The saints, being human and therefore impressionable, had to keep watch over their feelings. The bonds of flesh and blood often present subtle temptations even for the most nearly perfect of people.

Another source of temptation is the reaction of worldly-minded persons, and this can make even the strongest resolutions give way, and can frustrate plans for making progress in perfection. But we may ask how the world fared with its protests and criticisms, its mockeries and insulting harassment, against a man whom the Spirit of God placed in opposition to it as a challenge to its customs and maxims. I believe we must admit that the last century has seen no one more abused by the world than John Baptist de La Salle. The worldly minded, irreconcilably hostile to God's servants, hated De La Salle and waged war on him from all sides. We need only ask how they received his unprecedented examples of voluntary poverty, his refusal to be influenced by family interests, the strange lifestyle he adopted as a former canon of Reims reduced to penury by his own doing. We have seen the answer in the story of his life: malicious censure, biting slanders, stinging mockery, calculated disdain; he was spared nothing of such treatment. But none of it shook his resolution; he thought less of the world than the world thought of him. To manifest his own derision for an enemy whom Jesus Christ condemned, he appeared in public wearing the garb of the Brothers, which at the time seemed odd and even ridiculous. Nor did he make any secret, when there was need, of going to teach class in Reims, quite happy in the process to reap the harvest of jeers and contempt with which the common people choose to repay those who render them service.<sup>769</sup>

<sup>768</sup> John 11:36.

<sup>769</sup> All three early biographers say that the Founder's need to teach class arose from premature deaths among his disciples. Cosme Boiserins died on 24 March 1684, age 29; Jean Lozart succumbed on 26 June 1685, age 26 (CL 37, 39). Having no replacement for Lozart, De La Salle donned the strange-looking garb of the Brothers to teach his class. Bernard says that the experience lasted "for a fairly long time" (CL 4, 66), which Poutet (vol. 1, 743–44) surmises would be from 27 June to the end of the school year, 31 August.



This clamor of the world pursued the saintly man wherever he went, putting one obstacle after another in the way of his undertakings. Although it tested his patience, it made no difference to what he had set out to do for God, and never once did his moral strength succumb to misplaced meekness. Never did the opinions voiced by worldly people prevent him from doing what God asked of him.

As for advantages that might accrue to his Community,—a frequent source of redoubtable temptation for a religious superior, especially a founder—such considerations again failed to influence the kindhearted man we are studying. Never did such possibilities of gain make him adapt himself to the prevailing climate of opinion or make him unduly accommodating in his dealings with others. If he had been willing to be so influenced, say, while he was still in Reims, he could have profited from the magnificent offers made to him by his archbishop in favor of the Institute.<sup>770</sup> If he had been willing to be more pliant at Paris, he would not have lost the favor and financial help of the one who in the first place had professed to be his great benefactor.<sup>771</sup> If he had been ready to play politics when he was in Provence, he would have had free access to the funds of the sect that wanted to have the honor of his name for their cause and that would have gone to great expense to win his favor.<sup>772</sup>

On many other occasions, he could have spared himself much trouble and made fewer enemies if he had agreed to relax certain points of discipline and regular observance. There were times when he had only to go along with the conditions that were laid down or to accept a plan that was put before him and he would have increased his circle of friends and benefactors and multiplied the Christian Schools and his Brothers' communities. But he was incapable of opportunism when God's interests were at stake. He was never of two minds about preferring these interests to any potential advantages for his Institute. We have seen this demonstrated time and time again. He was always found inflexible in the face of the slightest threat to regular observance. His Institute's interests concerned him only insofar as the result was to give honor and glory to God. He wanted religious fervor to reign in it rather than that it be enriched with this world's goods. Opposition from within or outside the Community never caused him to relax his firmness in upholding God's interests or resisting wrongdoing, opposing sin, and reproving the sinner. But he did all this with kindness, with a gentleness that was firm and a firmness that was gentle.

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770. See above, chap. 20, note 159.

771. See above, chap. 13, note 31.

772. See above, chap. 5, note 44.

The general principle governing De La Salle's conduct was to give way to others everywhere and in all circumstances. He never was seen wrangling or arguing. He was always ready to defer to other people's opinions, and he never flatly contradicted them. If sometimes he was obliged to disagree, he did so with such a humble and pleasant manner that no one could take offense. Never did he speak sharply, not even when he was reproving someone, or if he felt bound to do so because the kindly approach was having no effect, he seasoned his words with enough consideration to make his reproof more that of a loving father than of a stern superior. Words such as courteous, affable, obliging, polite, and gracious describe him best. He directed any harshness or rigor only at himself. As a good servant of God, he felt bound by his duty as superior to be watchful and to reprove when needed, and this more than once drew a wounding reaction from certain easygoing disciples. They disregarded his habitual affectionate kindness and answered him back, often quite boldly. But he bore all this patiently and without complaint.

One such Brother, annoyed because John Baptist often had occasion to call him to order for his wayward behavior, reacted one day with such audacity that all his confreres were taken by surprise. Nor was he content just to use offensive language; when John Baptist tried to embrace him, he pushed him away. But his Superior's meekness stood the test of this bold conduct. John Baptist's humility came to his help, and he attempted to win over the haughty disciple by kneeling down and asking pardon. This act of virtue would have touched any heart less hardened, but it served only to inflame the insolent pride of this one. The holy priest, therefore, changed his tone and warned the impenitent one that God would abandon him. It was a prediction more than a warning, and it was only too truly fulfilled. The culprit left the Community and forthwith led a life without hope. He was what the Scriptures call "a man of uncircumcised heart,"<sup>773</sup> who had long resisted the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Founder showed the same indulgence to several others, who although less unruly were a great trial to him because of their bad manners and their lack of response to his advice. But he never rebuffed them, and he spoke to them only in kind terms that finally won almost all to Jesus Christ, exemplifying the truth of these words of the Book of Proverbs: "A soothing tongue is a tree of life."<sup>774</sup>

The humiliating experiences the Founder often suffered at the hands of various people, some in positions of authority, were also unable to draw bitter words from his lips or any sign of inner resent-

773. Rom. 2:29.

774. Prov. 15:4.

ment. He spoke of such persons only with respect although he felt keenly what he suffered from them. One day, someone upbraided him in callous and wounding terms, but his only defense was to remain silent. When pressed to say something, he replied in such a brief and conciliatory way that the other was quite won over and took leave of him with a warm handshake, assuring him of personal esteem.

A similar thing happened when he was traveling in the Cevennes region. A highly regarded bishop, who had hitherto honored him with his patronage, heard false reports about him and sent for him. He addressed him in a most severe way, which quite shocked the servant of God, who nonetheless remained perfectly calm as he listened. When he was allowed to reply, he showed in a few mild words that the reports were false, whereupon the bishop was so moved that he could not refrain from embracing him warmly and promising to be more guarded in the future about reports brought to him. He bade him good-bye with an assurance that he and the Institute could still count on his patronage.<sup>775</sup>

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land.”<sup>776</sup> John Baptist knew what it was to be thus enriched; he strove with zeal to share the benefits with those under his care. He took pains to urge them to speak to everyone, especially their confreres, with great kindness and to avoid words of ill humor or anger in their conversations. One day, he heard a Director speaking somewhat heatedly to another Brother; he called him aside immediately and asked him whether after all the time he had been in God’s service, he had not yet learned to control his feelings. He spoke firmly but in a friendly way:

My goodness, Brother, is this the way you imitate the gentleness of Jesus Christ, talking so sharply to your Brother? Don’t you know that if your responsibility gives you authority over him, it also means that you should be ahead of him in virtue? How can you presume to encourage him to practice mildness when you don’t practice it? When you advise him to behave with restraint and gentleness, won’t he be able to tell you that your advice is not very helpful because he does not see you acting according to it? So, Brother, begin here and now to practice what you will

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775. It is impossible (notes Gallego, 493) to locate this incident; a prelate “of the Cevennes region” could have been the bishop of Mende, Alais, Uzès. Later (520), Gallego suggests a possible connection with the unfriendly attitude shown to the Founder by Baglion de La Salle de Saillant, bishop of Mende, over the matter of changing the Brothers there, an incident related in book 3, chap. 6, and mentioned in the present work (see chap. 20, note 164).

776. Matt. 5:5.

then be able confidently and without fear of challenge to encourage others to practice. You will learn, if you are not already aware of it, that the Lord will guide you in what is right and show you all his ways, provided you try to acquire the virtue of meekness, which is so far lacking to you.

Having thus reproved the Director, he wanted him to repair the harm done. "Go now," he said; "make up for your fault by kneeling before the Brother, and when you have kissed his feet, ask his pardon in all humility for having spoken to him so sharply. Ask him to join his prayers to yours that God may grant you the spirit of meekness."

Such was the way John Baptist spoke to those who offended against this holy virtue that Jesus Christ bade us learn from him.<sup>777</sup> It was the same with those who in conversation with others wanted to insist that some idea they had put forward was right and who in the heat of the argument, let sharp and offensive words escape their lips, words that they did not mean. Mindful of Saint Paul's teaching that the conversations of the faithful should always be conducted with edifying mildness,<sup>778</sup> John Baptist would immediately check anyone he saw upsetting with their contentious talk the peace and tranquility that make community life pleasant. He would even impose a penance on such offenders to chasten their pride and would refer to them as troublemakers. His own conversations were so agreeable and friendly that people never grew weary of his company. Although he was so strict about anything that might upset the pleasant atmosphere, he would tactfully let small failings pass by to avoid spoiling things by untimely rebukes. He especially ignored and covered up faults of this kind committed against him, a fairly frequent occurrence, because among such a great number of people who were under his direction, there were always some who, as the Apostle Paul expresses it, departed from the right way<sup>779</sup> and took pleasure in contradicting him.

The same spirit of mildness that made the Brothers love him characterized De La Salle's behavior to people outside the Community. He had such a dislike for arguing that he preferred to suffer loss rather than harm this virtue. One day, a carpenter who had done some work for the Community and been paid had the effrontery to call a few days later with another demand for payment. The Brother to whom he first spoke was astonished and tried to show the man his mistake, but the latter, who knew how kind John Baptist was, would not admit to any error and persisted shamelessly with his demand.

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777. Matt. 11:29 (Douai)

778. Titus 3:2 (Douai).

779. Gal. 2:14.

The Brother was quite shocked at such boldness and told the man to be off, but he was answered with a torrent of abuse. The wretched fellow made such a row that John Baptist, who was some distance away, heard the noise and went downstairs to see what was the matter; it was unusual for such a clamor to be heard in the community. The humble Superior saw for himself the dishonest behavior of the enraged caller and tried to appeal to his conscience about the crooked claim he was making. But when he saw that he was making no impression, he gave instructions for the man to be paid what he was asking for, much to the annoyance of the community bursar, who did not think this was right at all! It was an example of peacemaking that taught the Brothers the meaning of the words of Jesus, "If someone asks for your tunic, give him your mantle also,"<sup>780</sup> and that there were some occasions when they had to put this lesson into practice.

We may conclude that the servant of God was anxious for a spirit of meekness to reign among his Brothers and used every means to inculcate it by word and by example. His disciples did not rate very high in his esteem if they neglected to practice a virtue that was the identifying characteristic of Jesus Christ,<sup>781</sup> and he often told such defaulters in quite categorical terms that they would not persevere in their vocation, a prediction that almost always proved correct. Those who offended only rarely in this matter he checked firmly when it happened and gave them a penance, but with a zeal always full of kindness. One such Brother mentioned in a letter to him that he had let some words escape him that were anything but meek. De La Salle replied to him as follows:

You should be most careful, my very dear Brother, not to speak so haughtily, as you tell me you sometimes do. The Spirit of God does not allow that sort of talk. So let humility and gentleness be always evident in what you say. "A soft answer," says the Wise Man, "breaks down the hardest nature." Nothing will make you more pleasing to God and men than these two virtues. But if you ought to speak to your Brothers with humility and gentleness, you ought to be no less careful to act in the same way toward people outside the community. Saint Paul requires this of all Christians. So never rebuff anyone: that gives very bad example. On the contrary, speak politely, which is altogether in keeping with the Spirit of God.<sup>782</sup>

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780. Matt. 5:40.

781. Matt. 11:29.

782. *Letters*, 49.1–4.

## [CHAPTER 41]

*His love for Jesus Christ; his looking to his Savior in all his needs, keeping him constantly present to his mind; his striving to imitate Jesus in all things; his particular devotion to the childhood of Jesus and to the mysteries of his passion and death; his practices and teaching about the Eucharist*

In the Office for the feast of Saint Martin, the church praises the saint with the words, “Blessed was this pontiff, for he loved Jesus Christ will all his heart.”<sup>783</sup> The same could be said of all the saints. Love of Jesus Christ was a distinguishing characteristic of them all, both the source of their merit and the cause of their happiness. All made it their study to resemble this divine model, to follow his lead, to live as he lived, thus renewing his earthly life in their own person; those who best succeeded in this are now the highest in glory in heaven.

John Baptist de La Salle followed their example in devoting himself entirely to the love of Jesus Christ, to resembling him, to being ever at one with him, and to living according to the pattern of his life. We could certainly say of De La Salle, “Blessed was this man, who loved Jesus Christ with all his strength!” His love for the divine Savior was tender and deeply felt, but it was also practical and productive of good. He seemed otherwise so emotionally detached as to be drawn only to this beloved friend of his soul. All his heart’s affection seemed to be for Jesus alone but not in a simply passive sense, stopping short at mere feelings. It was manifested in acts and heroic self-sacrifice. Everything we have seen in the story of his life entitles us to apply to De La Salle some words written by Saint Bonaventure about Saint Francis: “The love of Jesus burned within him, kindling a fire in his soul so powerful and ardent that all the waters of affliction and persecution could not quench it.”<sup>784</sup>

Jesus was John Baptist’s help in all his needs, the object of all his study, the exemplar he sought to copy, the joy and inspiration of his life. In every circumstance it was to Jesus that he turned for assistance. He was constantly aware of Jesus’ presence. In every situation

783. Accurately quoted; the passage is from the *Magnificat* antiphon according to a breviary published by Thierry, Paris, in 1688, and it has been retained as such in today’s revised liturgy.

784. Blain cites the passage as a quotation, but it is rather a free treatment of two statements from chap. 9 of Saint Bonaventure’s *Life of Saint Francis*: “He seemed utterly consumed, like unto a coal that is set on fire by the flame of love divine. . . . He emulated with an ardent flame of love the glorious victory of the holy martyrs, whose burning love could not be quenched nor their constancy broken down” (translated by Gurney Salter, 358, 360).

he tried to act as Jesus would, wanting only to be his inseparable companion and to spend his life only for him. In a word, his great preoccupation was to reproduce Christ's image in himself, to embody him in his own person.

There was, indeed, no one but Jesus Christ to whom De La Salle could turn for help. The world he knew had almost entirely turned against him and his disciples. His relatives had ceased to acknowledge him, and he in turn seemed hardly to know them because he had felt it a duty to forget about them and to keep his distance from them. He lost all his former friends and eventually came to have no dealings with people except for what concerned God's interests. Jesus became the only friend whose company he sought. For him he made a sacrifice of all his affections, putting into practice the words of *The Imitation of Christ*, "We must leave aside what otherwise is beloved for the sake of the Beloved, for Jesus will be loved alone and above all else."<sup>785</sup> His Savior was the only person to whom he was wholly attached; he looked upon him as the faithful one, the only friend he needed, the only one with whom a friendship is for eternity, to borrow terms again from the author of *The Imitation*.<sup>786</sup> He showed this very clearly by renouncing all he possessed for the sake of Jesus. The advantages this world offered him gave him no other pleasure than that of sacrificing them all for Jesus. He counted everything as loss that did not bring him closer to the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ, his Lord.<sup>787</sup> This knowledge told him that everything else was as nothing and made him regard the voluntary sacrifice he made as a great gain. The goods of this world, unless they served to gain him Jesus Christ, seemed to him so much mire, malodorous filth not to be approached without risk of defilement.<sup>788</sup>

It followed naturally that having left all for Jesus Christ, De La Salle sought in him his consolation, joy and satisfaction. He did this continuously, never growing weary or stale. In all his afflictions, anxieties, misfortunes, and harassment and in all his needs, he had recourse to his Savior as to his rescuer, protector, and great benefactor, always with the confidence that these reassuring titles inspired. At the feet of his divine Savior, everything was made easy, for he found there either a remedy for his ills or the strength to bear them. His problems were either resolved altogether or they became more manageable. Either he found his prayers answered or he came to understand that it was not to his advantage that they should be. In brief, his source of

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<sup>785</sup> *The Imitation of Christ*, book 2, chap. 7.1.

<sup>786</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>787</sup> Phil. 3:8.

<sup>788</sup> *Ibid.*

contentment was that in all circumstances and almost unceasingly, he could have recourse to Jesus Christ for light, strength, grace, and help, for he would thereby find fresh courage to suffer with renewed attachment to God's good pleasure and strengthened readiness to accept whatever Divine Providence willed for him.

Sometimes he would place himself in the presence of Jesus with the mind of a submissive slave before his sovereign lord, as a loyal subject before his king, or yet again as an alert and obedient servant eager to know the commands and wishes of his master so as to insure the fulfillment of all his intentions. It might be with the disposition of a humble and docile disciple ready to imbibe his divine teacher's instructions and become imbued with his sentiments, concerned to study his sayings, share his spirit, and meditate on the examples of his life. At other times he would draw near to Jesus as the Good Shepherd who would nourish him with his own flesh, a shepherd whose voice was to be listened for and whose footsteps were to be followed so as to arrive at the green pastures where they led.<sup>789</sup> Sometimes he thought of himself as a member of the Body from whose Head he wished to receive movement, inspiration, and life.<sup>790</sup> Occasionally, his attitude was that of a child wishing to show respect, love, and trust toward the best of fathers. Finally, Jesus was for him the spouse of his soul, the source of all his happiness in time and for eternity. Thus, whether bodily or in spirit, he was constantly at the feet of Jesus, like Mary Magdalene, the gaze of his soul fixed upon him, all his attention occupied in listening to him, speaking to him in prayer, or simply being absorbed in contemplation.<sup>791</sup>

John Baptist's great concern was never to lose sight of his Lord. He was careful to seek his presence in all situations, seeing him alone in other persons and finding joy in thinking about him. Jesus was the object of his greatest delight, and in this regard I could paraphrase Saint Bonaventure,<sup>792</sup> who wrote about Saint Francis that when he was alone and under no constraint—in fact, wherever he was, he was alone except for the company of Jesus Christ, whose company alone he wanted—he gave his heart freedom to express his love with sighs and aspirations directed to his beloved Friend or else with laments for his absence. Tears as well as words expressed his longing for Jesus' company. He would raise his hands to heaven to beg his Lord to

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789. John 12:14–16 and Ps. 23:2.

790. Eph. 4:15–16.

791. Luke 10:39.

792. Blain does not quote, but his minimal marginal reference, “c. 10,” shows that he has chapter 10 of the *Life* by Bonaventure in mind in this and the following paragraph.



come to him, or else he would strike his breast in token of grief for his absence. But once he had the joy of finding him again, he held him present within him to delight in his conversation and as if never more to be distracted from the colloquy.

Whenever the Brothers sought their Superior, they found him always occupied with Jesus, either in his humble room before the crucifix or in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament. They would hear him sighing deeply, as if with the pain of that blessed wound spoken of in the Song of Songs in the words, "You have wounded my heart."<sup>793</sup> A sentence to this effect was written about Saint Dominic, and we can well apply it to a man who resembled that great Founder in so many ways: "*Audiebant eum ingemiscientem ad Dominum, medullitusque suspiria trabentem*—They heard him yearning for his Lord and sighing deeply."<sup>794</sup>

But De La Salle's sustained contemplation of Jesus Christ was not just a self-indulgent expression of tender and affective love, taken up certainly with the object of that love but content simply to enjoy the beloved's presence. His contemplation resulted in action; it was productive and operative, like that of a painter who fixes his gaze on an original masterpiece to make a copy of the portrait there depicted. No, our saintly priest's continuous study of Jesus Christ was not limited to admiration or to merely speculative contemplation. His intention was to imitate him, and in this he succeeded. He often spoke to his disciples about the need to imitate Jesus, and in doing so, he could well have used these words of Saint Paul, "Be you imitators of me as I am of Christ."<sup>795</sup>

No effort was spared by this disciple of Jesus Christ to form himself after the model of so great a Master. His sole interest was to know the teaching of Jesus, to meditate upon the mysteries of his life, to emulate his deeds and his ways of acting, to think of things as Jesus did. To be at one with him in all his thoughts and judgments, John Baptist wanted to be imbued with the spirit of Jesus and to be totally

793. Song of Sol. 4:9 (Douai).

794. Blain gives a marginal reference, "L. 4 de sa Vie, n. 3." The Latin biography concerned has eluded research even at the Dominican archives in Rome and at the Vatican Library. However, the following relevant passage from the Process for the Cause of Canonization of Saint Dominic is quoted in a study by M. H. Vicaire, OP, *S. Dominique de Calaruega*, Paris: Cerf, 1955 (225–26): "Brother Dominic had the habit of spending the night in the church; there he prayed, shedding abundant tears with many sighs. When the witness was asked how he knew these details, he replied that he often followed the holy man to the church and saw him and heard him praying and weeping there."

795. 1 Cor. 11:1.

motivated by his sayings. Jesus was for him the great exemplar. He studied his actions to act like him, his words to speak like him, his ways of doing things to imitate them. Some words of Saint Bonaventure in an address to persons wishing to become perfect suit De La Salle very well: "Whether standing or seated, walking, speaking, keeping silence, taking a meal, alone or in company, he strove to be like Jesus Christ."<sup>796</sup>

What means, then, did our saintly priest adopt to achieve this ambition of resembling Jesus Christ and remaining ever in union with him, living according to the Savior's life to become transformed into another Christ? He was faithful always to carry with him a copy of the Gospels as a bequest of his heavenly Father and the written expression of the law and teaching of his Lord. He made this a point of rule for his Brothers.<sup>797</sup> He was always careful to have a crucifix to look upon; a crucifix, in fact, was the only personal possession he allowed himself and the Brothers.<sup>798</sup> He was faithful in celebrating Mass every day, nourishing himself daily with the Bread of Life and bearing within him the One who was all his delight. He loved others only as Jesus loved them, guarding his heart from all merely human attraction toward some while bearing with gentle patience the failings of others, those whom the eternal Father bears with for the sake of his Son. He constantly forgave injuries and found joy in doing so, even giving those who had hurt him a favored place in his heart. His efforts to be of service to others were unremitting because he was convinced that what he did for them was done for Jesus, as Jesus had said it was.<sup>799</sup>

In thus following the steps of his Savior, the servant of God showed how in the terms of Saint John's Gospel, he dwelt in Jesus, and Jesus dwelt and was at work in him.<sup>800</sup> By faith he gave his Lord a dwelling place in his heart so that, as Saint Paul says, he might grow within him "to maturity."<sup>801</sup> He labored to strip away the old self and put on the new (Saint Paul's language again),<sup>802</sup> to efface from his soul the image of the earthly man to depict there that of the heavenly Man and be transformed into another Christ by the strength of his own

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796. Blain's marginal reference accurately names his source for this as chapter 32 of part 1 of Saint Bonaventure's treatise, *De Institutione Novitiorum*. The passage concerned reads: "*Ut in omnibus factis et verbis tuis semper adhuc quasi exemplar respicias, incedens, stans, sedens, et comedens, tacens et loquens, solus et cum aliis.*"

797. See above, chap. 7, note 89.

798. Not quite the *only* personal possession; see chap. 23, note 250.

799. Matt. 25:40.

800. John 15:5.

801. Eph. 4:13.

802. Eph. 4:22–24.

love and by the power of the Holy Spirit. He sought to bear within him the ineffaceable stamp of his divine Master, to put on Christ as a garment of salvation<sup>803</sup>—in a word, to live by his life and to enable Christ to live in him. Hence he could say with the great Apostle, “For me to live is Christ; the desire to be at one with him makes death seem a great gain.”<sup>804</sup> “As long as my soul gives life to my body,” he could have said, “Jesus Christ gives life to my soul; what my soul is to my body, he is to my soul. I live only by him and in him, or rather, it is Jesus Christ who lives in me.”<sup>805</sup>

John Baptist always tried to hide his feelings, to let no sign of his extraordinary fervor appear outwardly, yet he was often quite unable to restrain himself when the time for his celebration of the Eucharist drew near. Then divine love so took possession of his heart that he was seized with involuntary agitations that persons at some distance from him could hear. It grieved him deeply to see Christians indifferent and ungrateful to him whose name they went by and to whom they were infinitely indebted. This cut him to the heart, and he could not always restrain himself from sobbing audibly when he saw it.

All the mysteries of Christ's life were objects of devotion for him, but the divine childhood, the passion, and the Eucharist had a special attraction for him. His way of honoring the childhood of Jesus was to recite unfaillingly every day in company with the Brothers the litany of the Holy Name and that of the Divine Infancy, the first at the morning prayer and the second at about eight o'clock.<sup>806</sup> He kept up this practice all the years he was associated with the Brothers. He imbued them with the same devotion and had them pray that the spirit of the Divine Child be granted to them and to the children entrusted to their care.<sup>807</sup> On the feast days commemorating these mysteries of the Divine Infancy, he was seen to be quite absorbed in the delectable contemplation of God's presence. On these days especially the attractions of this world seemed insipid to him, for he was able to imbibe deep drafts of the bliss and contentment that the Prophet Isaiah says are to

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803. Gal. 3:27.

804. Phil. 1:21.

805. Gal. 2:20.

806. The Litany of the Holy Name was included in the vocal prayers that preceded the period of interior prayer and that began at 5:00 a.m. The Litany of the Divine Infancy was recited after breakfast, timed to begin at 7:15 (CL 25, 96–98). Both litanies are found in a beautifully scripted *Exercices de Piété*, dated 1738, preserved in the Rome archives.

807. The recitation of the Litany of the Divine Infancy was prescribed specifically “to dispose the Brothers for going to their classes and to beg the Infant Lord to grant them his Spirit so that they might communicate it to the children in their care” (CL 25, 98).

be found in the springs of divine life.<sup>808</sup> On these days above all, he carefully avoided anything that might distract him.<sup>809</sup>

The holy priest's devotion to the Savior in his humiliations and sufferings was also admirable. Experience had made this devotion attractive to him; it was his refuge in the midst of his own trials. The remembrance of what Jesus had endured made him welcome the disdain and rebuffs that the unsparing world inflicted upon him. It was a cause of total and endless joy for him to know that such treatment made him resemble the one who brought salvation to mankind. He was convinced that to be like Jesus in his life meant resembling him also in his death and that the hope of sharing his glory presupposed sharing his sufferings. His usual way of encouraging the Brothers to bear their trials was to have them think about what the Savior of mankind had endured. The passion of Jesus was the great book he invited his disciples to study, following the example of Saint Francis,<sup>810</sup> and it was the principal subject he proposed for their meditation. In keeping with this, he established among them the devout practice of reciting the Litany of the Passion, in which all humiliations, contempt, insults, and sufferings endured by Jesus are detailed, one after the other. He always recited this litany with such earnest and deep devotion as to stimulate the fervor of others less moved by it.<sup>811</sup>

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808. Isa. 12:3.

809. For a useful discussion of the Founder's devotion to the Child Jesus, see Battersby, *De La Salle, Saint and Spiritual Writer*, 153–58. Rayez (in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 125–26) includes an extensive note on the sources of this devotion. Three of the Institute's *Circulaires Instructives et Administratives* have been devoted to the subject: 25 October 1901, by Brother Gabriel-Marie, *Renouvellement de la Dévotion à la divine Enfance*, the second, from the same Superior, 15 August 1910, *Archiconfrérie du Très Saint Enfant Jésus*, the third, a substantial monograph of 242 pages, composed by Frère Irlide-Lucien and published 11 October 1955 by Brother Denis, *Dévotion au T. S. Enfant Jésus et Archiconfrérie de Bethléem*. A notable contribution to the development of this devotion in the Institute was that of Br. Lawrence O'Toole, Assistant Superior General, 1946–66, who propagated the Archconfraternity as a spiritual force for the Brothers' apostolate.

810. Thomas of Celano, disciple and first biographer of Saint Francis, relates that in the midst of the saint's sufferings, his brethren one day begged him to tell them what book they could read to him to ease his anguish. His reply was, "There is no book I desire more than the passion of Jesus Christ. I meditate on it continually, and if I were to live to the end of time, I would need no other reading matter" (quoted in *Saint François d'Assise*, by Léopold de Chérancé, Paris, 1886, 326).

811. The chapter on the daily timetable in the earliest texts of the Rule prescribes the recitation of the Litany of the Passion of Our Lord after the midday meal and before recreation, which the litany would dispose the

John Baptist's devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament, that most striking manifestation of Christ's goodness to humanity, the sacrament that in a manner of speaking holds him a prisoner in bonds of divine love, was always ardent and ever renewed. One of his established practices was never to pass by a church without entering to pay homage to the Savior residing there, and if circumstances made it impossible for him to do so, he made his act of adoration interiorly. He made no exception to this rule, even when he was traveling.<sup>812</sup> His faith in this divine mystery was so strong that an observer had only to watch him for his own faith to be rekindled.

If people who doubt the real presence of Jesus in this sacrament were to see only priests who resembled John Baptist de La Salle, they would feel compelled to accept the teaching of the church on this point. His devotion shone forth especially during his celebration of the Mass. Often he seemed like a man in ecstasy, his countenance all aglow and his appearance angelic. His heart, inundated with joy to be so near his Lord, seemed to throb with such emotion that its beating could be heard in every part of the chapel. He celebrated Mass every day unless it was quite impossible for him to do so. His fervor in this matter yielded neither to illness nor to the inconvenience of having to travel. If he was not confined to bed, he forced himself to say Mass no matter how unwell he was feeling, and on a journey it was a keen mortification for him not to be able to find a church where he could celebrate. On days when he was to have medical treatment, including perhaps bloodletting, he said Mass very early so as to nourish himself with the Bread of Life, for which he always hungered and without which he could not live.

He approached the altar with dignity and piety combined. People who were present could see how holy this priest was who was going to celebrate, and they felt an increase of faith as well as a feeling of self-reproach that their own devotion was so feeble. He always took a considerable time to prepare for the august sacrifice and did not like to be interrupted in this for any reason whatever. If someone

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Brothers to spend the with greater discretion and reserve (CL 25, 99). This litany, according to Rigault (468) and Rayez (in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 127) was directly borrowed from a popular spiritual work of the period, *Le Chrétien Intérieur*, by Jean de Bernières, who in his turn (suggests Poutet, vol. 2, 444–45) borrowed and adapted the invocations from *L'Office des principales fêtes de l'ordre de Saint François*, itself well known to De La Salle. *Rivista Lasalliana* (vol. 6, 378–79) has a brief historical study of this litany.

812. A statement attested by number 17 of the "Rules I Have Imposed on Myself" (see above, chap. 22, note 215), or perhaps Blain had this rule in mind when making the claim.

wished to speak to him at this time on however urgent a matter, he would quietly tell the person that he would hear what he or she had to say after Mass. During this time of preparation, he was so taken up with the thought of the august and awesome thing he was about to do that he became oblivious to everything else.

No less fervent than his preparation was his thanksgiving. The ardor enkindled within him by the presence of Jesus could not be hidden but was evident to everyone. The heavenly wine he had received inebriated his soul with joyful love. In this connection a devout Sister of the Congregation of Our Lady has testified as follows: "I have often seen Father de La Salle leave the altar after celebrating Mass and enter our sacristy quite beside himself, as if he were in a transport of God's love. He had to rest for a quarter of an hour before taking off his vestments, and I never dared to speak to him during that time; to do so would have been an intrusion on his utter enjoyment of God's presence."

All the Brothers and other people who assisted at his Mass have testified in similar terms. His zeal led him to compose an excellent method of hearing Mass well, and the Brothers used it to great advantage.<sup>813</sup> He made it a rule for his disciples not only to teach their pupils how to hear Mass well but also to take them every day to assist at Mass and thus show them more by example than by words what supreme reverence and intimate piety so holy an action requires.<sup>814</sup>

The practice of frequent and fervent Communion was something he earnestly recommended to persons he found well disposed for it, especially the Brothers. He gave reassurance about this to any who were hesitant and encouraged the pusillanimous. He would chide any who were halfhearted about communicating and tell them that it was their lukewarmness that kept them from relishing the Bread of Life. If one or another of his disciples asked to be dispensed from going to Communion because of his imperfections, John Baptist's reply was, "No, Brother, go to Communion. Go to your soul's Physician; tell him

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813. The title of the published work is *Instructions et Prières pour la Sainte Messe*, of which at least two editions appeared during the lifetime of De La Salle. CL 17 reproduces in facsimile a posthumous edition dated 1734, published at Rouen by J. B. Machuel (publisher of Blain's work). The 1711 edition of the *Collection* also contains "A Method of Hearing Holy Mass Well," a kind of synopsis of the longer work (CL 15, 70–74; *Collection*, 57–61). In his correspondence the Founder more than once recommends the use of the method (*Letters*, 19.18, 43.17, 76.3).

814. The rule appears in the 1705 manuscript: "On school days, the Brothers will take the pupils, at the most convenient hour, to the nearest church for Holy Mass, unless in some place it has been judged entirely impossible by the Superior of the Institute" (CL 25, 35).

about your weaknesses, and ask him to heal you.” If any of them said he was not fit to receive because he was not fervent, the reply was, “Well, then, go to Communion, and you will become fervent!”

Generally speaking, the Founder wanted the Brothers never to omit receiving Communion without a necessary and valid reason, and never without permission. But at the same time, his zeal in this matter was always prudent and enlightened. He could not approve of people approaching the altar too often if they showed what he thought a rash kind of eagerness to do so. He knew that it was possible to become so impulsive about this as to lose sight of what the person was doing and to begin to take Holy Communion so much for granted as to fail in reverence for it. He would urge such persons with a saintly vehemence to diminish their Communions, saying that if they wanted to approach often, they must grow in holiness. If their desire for the Bread of Life was so great, he would say, they must be prepared to purchase it by sweat and hard work, meaning by living an interior life, a life of recollection and self-denial. They would never appreciate the value of such a great boon as Holy Communion, he would add, if they did not earn it by the practice of virtue.

This good priest had no patience with the arguments of those who had goodwill but were timid about frequenting the sacrament. He told them that it was the devil who sought to keep them away from so great a benefit and that they should take care not to heed him. If they persisted in abstaining in spite of these remonstrances, he warned them that God would be angry with them. “If you go on like this,” he would say, “God will leave you to yourself, and you will come to a bad end.” Fear that his disciples might by too much familiarity with their eucharistic Lord become negligent in making their preparation made him often urge them to redouble their fervor in proportion to the number of their Communions. He told them in one instance:

It would be a great abuse and a sad disorder of your soul if the frequency of Holy Communion were to diminish your fervor. On the contrary, nothing disposes us so well for the next Holy Communion as the previous one. If we do not resist the grace given in this sacrament, our hunger will be sated without our losing the desire of receiving Holy Communion. In this same way, heavenly bliss satisfies the blessed but does not diminish their desire of seeing God, so that after beholding God a million years, they long as much to see him as if they had only just entered heaven. Do you feel such a desire for Holy Communion?

At the moment of Holy Communion and during thanksgiving, it is a good suggestion to call to mind what we find most difficult

in the service of God and to say to ourselves, "See, your God gives himself entirely to you; will you not give yourself entirely to him? Because this difficulty is the only one, will you not overcome it through his love? Will you not make him this sacrifice through the respect you have for him?" Doubtless you would not dare refuse him. In this way you should urge yourself to overcome yourself.

Rest assured that there is no better time in all of life than the moment of Holy Communion and the time immediately following, when you have the happiness of speaking mouth to mouth and heart to heart with Jesus. But if you are careful, you will find that you have not derived all the benefit you should from these holy communications. Examine the cause. Is it not because you wish to speak all the time and do not listen to our Lord, who also wishes to converse with you? Is it not because you are indolent during this time? Do you give yourself unreservedly to our Lord to enter into his designs in your regard and to realize them? To receive Holy Communion worthily, there is no need to worry about having new thoughts every day. The simplest and most ordinary are the best, for there is nothing more touching and more powerful in uniting you to God than to consider the most common teaching of faith with regard to this divine sacrament.<sup>815</sup>

In such earnest terms as these the saintly man encouraged his disciples to communicate often, teaching them not to separate fervent Communion from frequent Communion.

John Baptist's love and devotion to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament were evident in everything to do with the liturgy. He wanted the objects used in the celebration of the sacred mysteries to be clean as well as of excellent quality and appearance. However short of money he might be and despite his concern for poverty, he did not question expense in the matter of the Mass vestments and linen and the sacred vessels, as is evident from those he left for the chapel at Saint Yon.<sup>816</sup> On feast days, especially those commemorating our Lord's mysteries,

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815. From the article "Regarding Holy Communion" in the *Collection* treatise, "Reflections on Their State and Employment That the Brothers Should Make from Time to Time, Especially During Retreat" (CL 15, 116–17). Hermans notes eight variants, none of which falsifies the Founder's meaning (CL 10, 90). All of this particular treatise is indebted to a series of *Considérations* by a French Jesuit, Père Julien Hayneufve, in an edition of 1685. In CL 16, José Arturo Gareis shows the extent of the dependence of the *Collection's* considerations on those of Hayneufve by placing the two texts in parallel columns. For the particular passage quoted here by Blain, see CL 16, 82–83.

816. See above, chap. 8, note 112.



he made himself responsible for the decoration of the altars, always with much enthusiasm and joy. He made sure that everything was in its proper place and appropriate down to the last detail.

But he was still more concerned that his soul should have the purity and fervor that the divine Spouse requires for the spiritual marriage that takes place in Holy Communion. Those who served his Masses were to have a genuinely religious spirit and give token of their piety by their attention to the smallest rubrics.<sup>817</sup> If they fell short in this or if in the responses they went too quickly or pronounced badly, he would not omit to tell them so in the sacristy afterward. On the eve of solemn feast days, he would sometimes go to the chapel to see if everything—altar, vestments, and the rest—was in order and well prepared. He would notice even such a thing as a badly inserted pin. He was sometimes found in the chapel after the retiring bell had rung, putting the last touches to the arrangements. It is said that one day he noticed that a Brother had left in the infirmary a vestment he was repairing. John Baptist did not think this becoming, and he told the Brother about it in no uncertain terms.<sup>818</sup>

#### [CHAPTER 42]

*His other great devotions; the Most Blessed Virgin; Saint Michael the Archangel; Guardian Angels; Saint Joseph; all the other saints, with particular devotion for certain ones*

There is such a close link between the love of Jesus and the love of Mary that the human heart cannot possess the one without the other.

817. The sentence recalls Blain's encomium of the fervent Brother Maurice (book 2, chap. 4), who, he says, was the Founder's favorite Mass server.

818. Blain's discussion of De La Salle's devotion to and understanding of the Eucharist is substantiated by the considerable quantity of the Founder's writings on the topic. An overall study of the subject remains to be made, as Sauvage and Campos point out (*Annoncer l'Évangile*, 203), although a few theses they mention have treated the pedagogical aspects of the subject. De La Salle's independent stance with regard to the pervading Jansenistic ideas concerning Communion was studied as long ago as 1888 by Père Albert Tesnière, Superior General of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, in a series of lectures published at Paris (*Un Antagoniste du Jansénisme ou La Mission Eucharistique du Bienheureux J.-B. de La Salle*). According to this authority, De La Salle's series of meditations relating to the feast of Corpus Christi places him "at the level of Francis de Sales and Alphonsus de Liguori" (30). Battersby devotes five pages to the Founder's writings on the Eucharist, which he signalizes as "perhaps the most remarkable part of his spiritual works" (viewed in relation to the Jansenistic tendencies of the time).

It is only natural to love this Mother if we love her Son; it would be astonishing and strange to refuse our tribute of tender affection for the Mother so fondly loved by her Son if we profess to be wholeheartedly devoted to him. Love for him results in love for her; the more ardent the former love, the more sincerely tender the latter.

Who, after God the Father and Jesus Christ, more deserves a place in our heart than she who is the well-beloved of the Blessed Trinity? Mary is more closely associated with the three Divine Persons than any other creature can possibly be. No one is nearer to the throne of God than she who is full of grace, virtue, and merit. She has more power with her Son than all other saints together; they are only his servants, but she is his Mother. No one could be more concerned for the salvation of mankind, purchased as it was at the cost of blood that flowed from her veins into those of the Savior. She saw him shed this blood on the cross for the salvation of humanity, and she offered it in union with her adorable Son by the very fact of consenting to his sacrifice.

As a creature, Mary owes all to the Creator; as a child of Adam, she owes all to her Redeemer. But she possesses an advantage over every other creature: she has the inalienable privilege and dignity of being the Mother of God. From her, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus, her Son, received his human nature. From her womb he received the body that he sacrificed on the cross and that he gives us for our nourishment in the Holy Eucharist. It was thence his heart drew the pure blood that became the ransom whereby we were saved. It was in this womb that he dwelt like any other child for nine months, living and growing there as in the heaven he had left, the most pure and most worthy habitation for him after the bosom of his Father. From Mary he came to birth, and under her guidance he spent his holy childhood, entrusting himself to her care. It was to her, in large part, that he confided the knowledge of his mysteries, and it was she whom he made the treasurer of his graces. So often he was carried at her virginal breast; from her holy lips he was happy to receive so many pure and tender kisses. She was the chosen one whose caresses it was his joy to receive and to return in kind. In a manner most wonderful, he had the familiarity with her of a child with its mother, and he remained close to her for his whole life, so that she was by his side when he died.<sup>819</sup> We can say that he gave himself to her in a greater degree than to the world as a whole.

In singling her out in this way, Jesus not only wanted to honor her divine motherhood but also to reward her for what she did for him. He accepted being dependent on her, as any other child of

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819. John 19:25.

Adam would be, receiving from her all the attentions such a state calls for. She nursed him, brought him up, cared for him with surpassing tenderness. But the services she rendered our Savior place us correspondingly under an obligation to her; they entitle her to our gratitude and love. The love we have for Jesus makes it incumbent upon us to love his holy Mother. We cannot doubt this because he made us her children in the person of Saint John and gave her a mother's heart for us.<sup>820</sup>

If, then, John Baptist de La Salle had made a distinction between love for Mary and that for Jesus, if he had been less than remarkable in his devotion to the Mother of God, he would have been the first and only person to act thus among all true Christians. Indifference with regard to the Queen of heaven is something more appropriate to the followers of the new doctrinal ideas, especially those of recent times, who find devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin unbearable, criticize it, and make mockery of it.

But this devotion was very near to the heart of John Baptist de La Salle, who was convinced that a love for the Son must inspire a love for his Mother. It was a devotion that he loved to defend and propagate. He rejoiced to see the honor of Mary grow ever greater in Christ's kingdom. No one was more convinced than he of the obligation of all the faithful to profess their support for devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin. He was quite sure that such devotion not only was beneficial to him and everyone else but also served the interests of God, who counts as rendered to him the marks of honor shown toward Mary, for it is she who bears, *par excellence*, a relationship to God of Daughter, Mother, and Spouse.

De La Salle became eloquent when urging on others a devotion so reasonable, just, and attractive. He would point out that by giving her to us to be our Mother, God has made it an obligation for us to love her. Or he would say that by making her Queen of heaven and of the church on earth, Queen of angels and human creatures, God has made it incumbent upon us to serve her. He would argue that God had honored her with graces exclusively hers and that his intention was that we should make a distinction between the homage we render to her and the honor we pay to the saints in general. Sometimes he would stress her sublime role as Mother of God, with the fullness of grace, virtues, and merits it implied as well as the eminence of holiness. Her authority, powers, and all her attributes, he would say, were a compelling reason for us to render her all the homage that can possibly be bestowed on a creature; to refuse this would be a failure in simple justice. She is the Mother of Mercy, a title

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820. John 19:26.

given to her by the church,<sup>821</sup> and is so concerned for our salvation, so full of tender love for all humanity, that she regards us as her children. There is nothing she holds more dear than that the precious blood of her Son should accomplish its redeeming work to the full and that there be an ever-growing number of souls destined to praise and glorify him forever. Mary, the Founder would continue, feels only compassion and kindness for sinners, whom Jesus himself loves. It is her happiness to favor with her protection all who have recourse to her. Because those truly devoted to her receive more graces, for graces are given through her, it would be a sign of indifference about our salvation not to be willing to enroll in her service.

Finally, this holy priest would point out that everywhere in the church this devotion, universally felt from ancient times, was well founded and approved. The teaching of the Fathers and councils was there to endorse it, as well as the example of the greatest saints and scholars, together with the constant and immemorial practice of the church. To treat it as some new devotion was to adopt a Protestant stance. Moreover, God had been pleased to authenticate devotion to Mary by countless miracles, manifested in all ages, in all parts of the church, and still daily accorded to those who practiced it. To object, therefore, would be very rash, and to neglect it, a great mistake. In fact, the Founder would conclude, to reject devotion to Mary would amount to resisting God's will, for he had shown in so many ways his desire that she whom he bids all the angelic spirits honor in heaven should likewise be honored by the church here on earth.<sup>822</sup>

From its very beginning, our saintly priest made sure to place his great undertaking under the protection of the Holy Mother of God. To underline the fact that he was giving it this sure foundation, he conducted the pioneer Brothers of his Society on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Liesse to seek her patronage for them and him and to ask her

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821. An allusion to the anthem, *Salve Regina, Mater misericordia*, the recitation of which at the conclusion of the liturgical hours is attested from the eleventh century.

822. Hermans is critical of the preceding paragraph as purporting to represent the Founder's teaching: "De La Salle," he says, "does celebrate the divine maternity, the universal motherhood of Mary, and her role as mediatrix; he does profess belief in her Immaculate Conception and in the power of her intercession for sinners. But he expresses all this in a way that is not such as Blain attributes to him." Examples of the non-Lasallian vocabulary noted by Hermans include *immémoriale, protestante, témérité, se refuser, véritables dévots, distinguer dans la culte, s'enrôler à son service, faire valoir le sang précieux*; and others; even the term "Mother of mercy," the use of which Blain implicitly attributes to the Founder, does not appear in *Vocabulaire Lasallien* (CL 10, 202–03).

to be the Superioress of his Institute.<sup>823</sup> This same journey of devotion became a fairly regular practice for him; whenever he had occasion to visit the communities at Laon or Guise, he made sure not to pass by Liesse, which is in that area, without calling to pay his respects to the bountiful Madonna so much venerated there. Once he was on his knees before her, he found it difficult to tear himself away; the proof of his delight in being there is that whenever possible, he would remain as much as three hours before the shrine, and he would do this after he had celebrated an extraordinarily fervent Mass in her honor.

Throughout his life it was John Baptist's glory to be a servant of Mary and to exert every effort to have her honored. He would sometimes say that he could not find words strong enough to express what he felt about people who, with a rashness bordering on impiety, criticize devotion to her. In his teaching on prayer he wrote:

If it is advantageous for us to pray to any of the saints, how much more it is to address our prayers to the Most Blessed Virgin, for she is perfect among all created beings, the one most elevated in glory, and therefore has very great power with God. She can help much toward our salvation and in all our needs by her intercession, which she never refuses to those who ask sincerely and with hearts detached from any tendency to sin.<sup>824</sup>

There was nothing the Founder recommended to the Brothers so much as to have recourse to the Most Blessed Virgin, who is the treasurer of God's graces. It mattered so much to him that she be spoken of with respect that he would not allow her to be named except as "the Most Blessed Virgin," a term he always used himself and that he preferred to all others in his writings about her.<sup>825</sup> Often he would check a person who heedlessly referred to her simply as "the Virgin"

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823. Blain is the only source biographer to record this pilgrimage, and he does so only here. Although he does not specify the occasion, the Institute tradition (accredited by such subsequent biographers as Lucard, Guibert, Rigault, Battersby, and Gallego) is that the pilgrimage took place during the assembly of 1686, when vows were pronounced for the first time (book 2, chap. 2). The history of this shrine dedicated to Mary under the title "Cause of Our Joy" (*Causa nostrae laetitiae*—whence the name Liesse) is the subject of two articles in *Bulletin* (1921, 349–54, and 1922, 60–69). The shrine remains today a very popular center of Marian devotion. A stained-glass window and a stone tablet there commemorate this first Lasallian pilgrimage. The Italian artist Gagliardi has portrayed the event in a painting displayed in the Generalate, Rome (Rousset, *Iconographie*, plate 42).

824. The quotation is taken almost verbatim (two insignificant variants) from *The Duties of a Christian to God* (CL 10, 76).

or even as “the Blessed Virgin.” “Oh, please say ‘Most Blessed,’” he would remark a little vehemently. “She deserves it well!” He celebrated all her feasts with singular devotion, even those that are not holy days of obligation, such as the Visitation and the Presentation; he also made it a point of rule for the Brothers to do so.<sup>826</sup> On such days he appeared so recollected and so absorbed in God that he stirred the devotion of those who saw him, even the most easygoing.

All his life John Baptist never failed to say the rosary every day.<sup>827</sup> He was convinced that no prayer is more acceptable to God because it is made of *Paters* and *Aves*, which have the highest authorization of the church and cannot be surpassed in holiness. He had such esteem for the rosary that it was a point of honor with him to recite it everywhere. When walking through the streets, he had the beads in his hand under his cloak, or else he used a metal ring rosary on his finger;<sup>828</sup> he said this prayer with great devotion. It was the same when he was traveling, and he made this a rule also for the Brothers.<sup>829</sup> This practice has had much to do with the modesty and recollection of which they have been an example down to this day. De La Salle further made it a duty for the Brothers to teach the children how to say the rosary with devotion and piety, and he established the laudable

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825. Gallego (293) points out that in *The Duties of a Christian to God* (293–304), for example, De La Salle uses “the Most Blessed Virgin” forty-two times, where the source he was following, a work by Claude Joly, uses “the Blessed Virgin.” On the other hand (adds Gallego), there are also instances of the latter term in the Founder’s writings, for example, in *Meditations*, 88.3.

826. Chapter 10 of the 1718 Rule, “The Days and Times When the Brothers Will Teach School and the Days on Which They Will Give a Holiday to Their Pupils,” has the following article (no. 8): “On the feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Most Blessed Virgin, and on other feasts that are not public holidays but are celebrated in the Community, such as the Transfiguration of our Lord, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, and the feast of the Presentation and of the Visitation of the Most Blessed Virgin, as well as the feast of Saint Joseph, Patron and Protector of the Community, they will give a holiday all day instead of on Thursday” (CL 25, 46). The school week was Monday to Saturday, with Thursday the regular day off (*ibid.*, 45).

827. But see no. 16 of “Rules I Have Imposed on Myself,” quoted by the biographer in chapter 22, page 242.

828. The use of such rings dates from the fifteenth century. Early examples are preserved in the British Museum (Dalton, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities*, London, 1901).

829. The prescription is not included in chapter 24, “Travel,” in the earliest texts (CL 25, 88–89), but the one detailing the daily timetable has the article, “After the Litany of the Holy Infant Jesus . . . those who teach in schools outside the house will leave to go there and say the rosary both in the morning and in the afternoon while going and returning” (CL 25, 98).

custom whereby two pupils were appointed to alternate in leading the recitation of the rosary in school.<sup>830</sup>

But what of the way the saintly man recited a prayer so holy, valuable, and sanctifying as this, a prayer, however, that is usually said badly, with little attention, and in a routine, perfunctory manner? He did so every day with fresh devotion, never allowing himself to become bored, apathetic or distracted, as is so often the case with less fervent souls when they are saying the same prayer over and over again. Nor had he any false shame about reciting it in public. On the contrary, it was a point of honor with him to do this and also to let people know his esteem for the rosary when the occasion offered. He liked to expatiate on its advantages with the idea of prompting everyone else to say it. Briefly, he spoke of the devotion of the rosary as one that has been in use in the church for centuries, that has the authority of the popes to support its use, a devotion that has been favored with great indulgences and endorsed by notable miracles, that is found in every part of Christendom and in regular use by all the faithful, who see it as a very easy way of praying through reverent meditation on the mysteries of Jesus and Mary. He carried the beads with him always as a mark of his loving fidelity to the Most Blessed Virgin, a devout custom that has become established among the faithful since Calvin and Luther publicized their heretical ideas. Catholics adopted the practice as a way of distinguishing themselves from Protestants.

Such great piety for the Queen of heaven did not go without its reward. John Baptist obtained abundant and special graces from God, all by favor of the Most Blessed Virgin. As a faithful devotee of the divine Mother, he turned to her in the midst of all trials and persecutions; she was his refuge, and he ran to her arms as a child to its mother. If he was faced with some important business matter, he never dealt with it until he had recommended it to her with great earnestness; then he was confident it would turn out well.

Our holy Founder concluded each day's activities with prayer to the Most Blessed Virgin, thereby placing all he had done under her protection. Usually the prayer was *Sub tuum praesidium*,<sup>831</sup> but after each period of meditative prayer, he renewed his consecration to her

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830. A practice described in two articles of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* drawn from the chapter, "School Officers"—article 1, "The Reciters of Prayers," and article 5, "The Rosary Carrier and Assistants."

831. This is the earliest known prayer to Our Lady. The John Rylands Library, Manchester, preserves a papyrus fragment of the Greek text dating from the third century. The prayer has been the subject of many learned studies, as the bibliography listed in *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (vol. 11, 1471) shows.

with the beautiful formula, *O Domina mea, sancta Maria*.<sup>832</sup> This was the prayer he also used for the conclusion of the recitation of the rosary. The closing prayer of each day was *Maria, Mater gratiae*, and this was also the last prayer he uttered on his deathbed.<sup>833</sup>

Finally, in his zeal to have due honor paid to the holy Mother of God, he was inspired to introduce into his Society, especially as a novitiate exercise, the recitation of the so-called Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin,<sup>834</sup> a custom already well established in many other congregations. He was almost always present for this with such recollection and devout attention to its proper recitation that even those novices who were most inclined to be distracted felt obliged to gather all their devotion to perform this duty to the Most Blessed Virgin well. He has something to say about this in his treatise on prayer:

Those who recite this Office should carry out the exercise with a very special piety and devotion. To draw from it all the fruit that the Church desires, three things should be borne in mind: first, the surpassing dignity of the Most Blessed Virgin, in whose honor the Office is recited; second, her love for those who place themselves under her protection; third, the great need we have of her intercession with God.<sup>835</sup>

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832. This use of the prayer and its recitation at the conclusion of the period of morning interior prayer are prescribed in *Pratique du Règlement Journalier* (CL 25, 96 and 98). The origin of the prayer has eluded research. In Lasallian literature there is a solitary mention of it as “attributed to Saint Aloysius Gonzaga” in a circular letter, dated 26 April 1901, of Brother Superior Gabriel-Marie. I am indebted to Gilles Beaudet for the information that the same prayer already existed, before its incorporation into the Lasallian prayer book, in a work by Mathieu Beuvelet, a prominent member of the faculty of the Paris seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, *Conduite pour les exercices principaux qui se font dans les séminaires*. Beuvelet’s work would have been known to De La Salle (another book by the same author formed, in three different editions, part of the library that John Baptist inherited from his father in 1672 (CL 51, 183). Beaudet was good enough to transcribe the Beuvelet version of *O Domina Mea* alongside that familiar to generations of Lasallians of almost three centuries; the two texts are identical save for a couple of phrases in Beuvelet specifically appropriate to seminarians.

833. As already related by Blain (book 3, chap. 18) and, before him, by Maillefer (CL 6, 256). Blain says that it was at someone’s suggestion that the Founder uttered the prayer. It was an appropriate suggestion because the rhyming verse concludes, “*et mortis hora suscipe*—and welcome us at the hour of death.” The prayer is found in the 1738 manuscript, *Exercices de Piété* (see note 10, chap. 41), where it is prescribed for recitation “*à la fin de l’étude à 8 1/2,*” therefore immediately before evening prayer.

834. See above, chap. 8, note 109.



On her feast days, John Baptist had Matins recited with the full three lessons together with Lauds, taking an hour and a quarter in all. He made it a rule for this Office always to be recited standing. The other Hours were chanted, likewise slowly. This meant that from 4:30 in the morning until midday, the novices were in the chapel without having had anything to eat<sup>836</sup> and almost continually kneeling, apart from the Psalms, dividing the time between meditative prayer, holy Mass, and the Little Office. Because De La Salle was there with them, no one seemed to grow weary of it at all; still less did anyone think of complaining. Wanting to emulate their saintly Founder, all were full of fervent zeal for the honor of the Most Blessed Virgin. Finally, for a half hour before supper, he would give a talk full of devotion on the nature of the feast day being celebrated.<sup>837</sup>

De La Salle's devotion for the other saints was also very great. He believed that because he was obliged to direct a great number of undertakings, he could not have too many friends and intercessors with God because they were able to obtain for him the plentiful help of grace. Here is one of his exhortations:

We will never find it unprofitable to ask the saints to pray for us and to look kindly on us, for when they were alive, they had compassion on sinners and prayed to God for them. How much more now must they have a feeling of pity for us fellow humans because they have continually before their eyes him who is the

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835. A verbatim quotation from the Founder's catechetical work, *The Duties of a Christian to God*, which has a special chapter on the Little Office.

836. The custom of omitting breakfast on Sundays and feast days is deducible from the absence of any mention of the meal in the timetable for those days in the 1705 and 1718 texts (CL 25, 103) and also from a remark in a letter of the founder to Brother Mathias, who seems to have complained about what seems a hardly festal practice (*Letters*, 61). Beaudet points out as relevant to the question that a clause of the 1705 manuscript prescribes that the Brothers were to omit breakfast on days when they were to receive Communion; another says that on Sundays and Feasts all were to communicate.

837. Battersby allocates ten pages (158–68) of *De La Salle, Saint and Spiritual Writer* to a discussion of the Founder's devotion to Mary. Before him, a Belgian Lasallian, Jules Herment, had published a monograph on the subject, *La Dévotion à la Très Sainte Vierge selon Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, Namur, 1940, a study, however, faulted by Rayez (*Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, 88–89). The third volume of the five-volume series of learned studies entitled *Maria*, Paris, 1949–1958, includes a twenty-five page essay by Georges Rigault, “*La Dévotion Mariale dans l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes*.” *Rivista Lasalliana* has featured two studies of the Founder's Marian doctrine, one by Brother Remo (1947, vol. 21, 92–111), the second by Br. Enrico Mattoccia (1970, vol. 37, 24–38).

source of all mercy. Because the saints are now much more aware of our weaknesses than they were in their lifetime, their charity toward us, far from diminishing, must be greatly increased.<sup>838</sup>

John Baptist had a special devotion for the holy angels, particularly their leader, Saint Michael, to whom he looked as the protector of the church, the first champion of God's glory, and the first antagonist of Satan. He celebrated his two feast days with singular piety.<sup>839</sup> He frequently had recourse to him for help in warding off the repeated assaults he suffered at the hands of the demons of the world. To prompt others to do the same, he used to say that he had always felt the benefit of addressing himself to this prince of God's armies.

He honored the guardian angels no less. The day on which the church celebrates their feast was one of great solemnity for the Founder and the Brothers; he wished them to receive Holy Communion on the occasion, to nourish themselves with the Bread of Life in the presence of those blessed spirits. He advised the Brothers to have frequent recourse to their own guardian angel, especially for the problems they experienced in teaching their pupils. He assured them that they would experience tangible help from these charitable friends of theirs in accomplishing the ministry they shared in saving souls. The Founder would further say, both to give the Brothers an elevated idea of their employment and to inspire in them an esteem and deeply felt affection for it, that they were the visible guardian angels for their pupils.<sup>840</sup> He used this exalted notion to urge them always to cling close to these noble spirits and to turn to them with confidence, always with a respect worthy of their excellence and always faithfully heeding their counsels because they speak in the Lord's name, as the Scriptures assure us. John Baptist wished that the Brothers undertake nothing without having first sought their help and placed themselves under the protection of their guardian angel.<sup>841</sup>

838. This paragraph is quoted from *The Duties of a Christian to God* (CL 20, 462–63); Hermans notes five variants (CL 10, 75), among them the omission of the Founder's attribution of the teaching to Saint Bernard.

839. Prior to the revision of the liturgical calendar called for by Vatican Council II, the church celebrated the Apparition of Saint Michael on 8 May and the Dedication of Saint Michael on 29 September.

840. A teaching enshrined in the fifth and sixth *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, entitled "That those chosen by Providence for the education of children must fulfill the functions of Guardian Angels for them" and "How in the education of youth the function of the Guardian Angels is fulfilled" (*Meditations*, 197 and 198).

841. Hermans (CL 10, 80) sees in these lines an allusion to De La Salle's meditation for the feast of the guardian angels, especially the third section,

This was something De La Salle never failed to do, and we must admit that the angels saved him from many dangers. His recognition of this increased his confidence in them. He used to say that there were several occasions when he owed his life to them. He would mention one incident in particular that happened in Paris, when he miraculously escaped from some robbers, who had attacked him with swords. He told of another occasion when he was waylaid by some brigands, who took what he had and fastened him to a tree, intending to kill him; he was saved only because God warded off the blow by the ministry of his guardian angel.

This holy Founder had an equally strong devotion to Saint Joseph. He had placed his Institute from the beginning under the protection of this great saint, and from then on he had taken every means to venerate him and to have him venerated.<sup>842</sup> For example, he recited every day a litany composed in Saint Joseph's honor, and he recommended that the Brothers follow his example so that they might obtain through Saint Joseph's intercession his spirit as guardian of the Child Jesus.<sup>843</sup>

The saint's feast day became one of the most solemn in the Institute.<sup>844</sup> However ill the Founder might be, he would get up to offer holy Mass in honor of the beloved spouse of the purest and holiest of virgins. During John Baptist's last illness, it became evident how pleased our Lord was with his devotion for the great saint; as I have related, he seemed to intervene miraculously to enable him to satisfy it.<sup>845</sup> The Founder made Saint Joseph the patron and protector of his Institute, and on his deathbed, as so often throughout his life, he recommended that the Brothers become noted for their devotion to him.<sup>846</sup> What impressed John Baptist most in the admirable life of this

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but he notes also that the terms used by Blain here are very close to the reply in *The Duties of a Christian to God* to the question, "In what consists the devotion we should have for our holy guardian angels?"

842. *Pratique du Règlement Journalier* refers to "the great Saint Joseph" as "the patron and protector of the Community" (CL 25, 119). A wax seal used by the Founder represents Saint Joseph with the Child Jesus (Loes, *The First De La Salle Brothers*, 133).

843. *Pratique du Règlement Journalier* prescribes daily recitation of the Litany of Saint Joseph, "Patron and Protector of the Community, to ask for his spirit and his assistance in the Christian education of the children" (CL 25, 100).

844. A detailed program for the day, attested by *Pratique*, confirms this statement (CL 25, 119–21).

845. The story is told by Blain (who could well have been a witness of the incident) in book 3, chap. 18.

846. The recommendation "to have a special devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin and also to Saint Joseph, patron and protector of their Institute"

holy spouse of the Mother of God was his great docility to the guidance of Divine Providence and his willingness to do whatever Providence required, however painful it might be. In addition to this prompt responsiveness to the Lord's voice, he admired Saint Joseph's love for the hidden life, his angelic chastity, and his tender love for Jesus and Mary. These were virtues of the great saint that De La Salle sought to emulate. He succeeded in doing so because we can say in his praise that he was a living portrait of Saint Joseph. Out of devotion to him, he composed in his honor a litany based on passages drawn from Holy Scripture that touchingly express his own feelings of tender and devout affection for the saint who was, *par excellence*, a just man.<sup>847</sup>

In fact, John Baptist's devotion extended to all of heaven's saints; all were for him persons to be honored in a special way. A few years before his death, he added to the Brothers' prayers the invocation, *Omnes sancti et sanctae Dei, intercedite pro nobis*.<sup>848</sup> He included the stories of the saints' lives in the list of subjects of conversation he drew up for the Brothers in the *Collection*, where he wrote:

They will speak of the lives of the saints, especially of those in whom the spirit of the Institute was most conspicuous; likewise, those who have been remarkable for the spirit of mortification and of zeal for the salvation of their neighbor.<sup>849</sup>

He then names the saints to whom he was personally most attracted. He manifests a particular wish that the martyr Saint Cassian was made in the Founder's will, a transcription of which, accredited by Brother Superior Barthélemy, is preserved in the Rome archives. The text has been published in full, with commentary, by Aroz (CL 36, 286–305). The recommendation has been well heeded in the tradition of the Institute; for example, the number of educational establishments under the patronage and title of Saint Joseph was 171 in 1962 (according to the Institute directory that year).

847. Matt. 1:19. The text of this litany, attributed to De La Salle, appears in the reproduction of *Exercices de Piété qui se font pendant le jour dans les Écoles Chrésiennes* (CL 16, 41–43). Poutet discusses it in a monograph covering the whole subject, *Saint Joseph dans la Vie et Œuvre de Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle* (Centre de Recherche et de Documentation, Montréal, 1986).

848. Borrowed from the Litany of the Saints, the invocation is found in the 1738 manuscript (see above, chap. 41, note 806) at the conclusion of morning prayer.

849. A quotation, verbally correct but incomplete, from the seventh of the thirty topics of conversation recommended in the first edition of the *Collection* (CL 15, 34; *Collection*, 26). The omission is a mention of Saint Joseph and Saint Cassian, no doubt because the biographer has just written about the former at length and is going to refer to the latter in the next few lines.

be honored because of his great zeal for the instruction of youth, zeal that won him the crown of martyrdom. John Baptist chose this saint as one of the patrons of his Institute because of the similarity between his calling and that of the Brothers.<sup>850</sup>

The Founder had an even greater devotion for Saint John the Baptist, whose name he had the honor to bear and whose innocence of life and spirit of penance, recollection, and prayer he had learned so well to imitate.<sup>851</sup> His devotion to all the Apostles, especially to their leader, Saint Peter, to Saint Paul, and to Saint John the Evangelist, was no less intense. He was faithful in practicing their virtues, and he was concerned that they be held in honor, as may be seen by the edifying instructions he composed on their life and death and the meditations he wrote for their feast day.<sup>852</sup> His great love for Jesus Christ gave him a special attachment also to Saint Ignatius Martyr, that great devotee of Jesus, whose love for him seemed to rival that of the Apostles. De La Salle was quite taken out of himself when he spoke about this great saint; it was partly as a way of imitating him that he established in the Institute the custom of concluding every community activity with the words, "Live Jesus in our hearts! Forever!"—a holy expression that has become a kind of salutation among the Brothers.<sup>853</sup>

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850. In addition to the meditation on the feast of Saint Cassian on 13 August (a feast discontinued in Vatican Council II's reform of the liturgical calendar), De La Salle composed a life of this saint, basing his information, as he says, on two biographies (one in verse, the other in prose) by the fourth-century writer, Prudentius Clemens (CL 12, "Fêtes," 127–29 and 273–74). Surprisingly, Blain does not recall here the fact (book 2, chap. 14) that when the Vaugirard novitiate was transferred to the Grand'Maison, De La Salle placed the new residence under the patronage of Saint Cassian. The remembrance of this saint for posterity in general is ensured by his named presence in the procession of twenty-six white-robed martyrs depicted in the breathtaking mosaic of the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna.

851. The source biographers, relating the transfer of Nyel's group to the De La Salle family residence in 1681 and then the move to rue Neuve the following year, leave an impression that the date of both momentous events, 24 June, was chosen by John Baptist because it was the feast of his patron saint. In an article in *Bulletin* (1959, 27–35), Hermans shows that the date was dictated by the Reims laws concerning the leasing of property.

852. Three for Saint Peter, two each for Saint Paul and Saint John, and one for each of the other Apostles, corresponding to the feast days celebrated in their honor in the liturgical calendar of the time (CL 12).

853. *Pratique du Règlement Journalier* prescribes that the Brother responsible for waking the community at 4:30 should first ring a bell and then knock at the doors of the dormitories, calling out, "*Vive Jésus dans nos cœurs!*" to which the Brothers were to respond, "*A jamais!*" "This," adds the text, "is the signal of the Community" (CL 25, 95). The seven known Letters

De La Salle also greatly venerated the founders of religious congregations, particularly those who were outstanding for their zeal in procuring the glory of God, such as Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Dominic, Saint Ignatius Loyola, Saint Philip Neri, and Saint Teresa, that seraphic woman for whom his affection was beyond words. Included also among the saints whom he made it his duty to imitate were the incomparable men, Francis Xavier and Vincent Ferrer, of whom he used to say that he could not find words eloquent enough to praise their untiring zeal to attract souls to Jesus Christ. To close the list, he spoke with no less veneration of Saint Charles Borromeo and Saint Francis de Sales, through whose intercession he asked God unceasingly for the spirit that had animated them, the zeal and abnegation of the one and the pre-eminent gentleness of the other.<sup>854</sup>

There, then, in a few words I have described the devotion of John Baptist de La Salle for the Most Blessed Virgin, the angels, and those saints whom he imitated at the same time as he honored them.

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of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, which gave him his place among the “Apostolic Fathers,” reveal a man, says *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (677) “passionately devoted to Christ.” De La Salle’s meditation on the saint stresses this aspect, especially in the particularly eloquent second section (CL 12, “Fêtes,” 20–21). The custom of concluding community spiritual exercises and other assemblies with the invocation “Live Jesus in our hearts!” “Forever!” remains in honor to the present day. A recent work by Père Raymond Deville, Superior General of the Society of Saint Sulpice, devotes a chapter to De La Salle, which includes a discussion of the significance of the invocation in the spirituality of the Founder (*L’École française de spiritualité*, Paris: Desclée, 1987, 125–37). No commentator seems to have suggested the possibility that the community salutation may have derived from a sentence in *Introduction to the Devout Life*, by Saint Francis de Sales, for whom, as Blain is going to tell us in the next paragraph, John Baptist had a special veneration. The dedicatory prayer prefacing this spiritual classic (several editions of which existed in De La Salle’s time) concludes, “Live Jesus! Live Jesus! Yea, Lord Jesus, live and reign in our hearts for ever and ever! Amen” (Eng. tr. by J. K. Ryan, New York: Image Books, 1950, 27).

854. The Founder provided a meditation on each of the saints named here, with the exception of Saint Vincent Ferrer (CL 12).

## EPILOGUE

*Interior portrait of De La Salle*

We have said it more than once: no one looked more like a saint than John Baptist de La Salle. Grace was enthroned, so to speak, on his countenance, apparently to make the onlooker know what this man was in God's sight; it seemed to wish to reflect the beauty of his soul. Just to look at him was to feel drawn to God. Everything about him exhaled the perfume of virtue: humility, modesty, gentleness, calmness, evenness of temper, abnegation, charity, and rare piety.

Amid the many occasions of frustration and pain that were his, all the harrowing and dispiriting events, so many reasons for worry and stress, John Baptist was always the same. He was seen as a man whose body indeed belonged to this world but whose heart was elevated heavenward, a man who seemed uninterested in what happened here below, a man who directed to God and the divine good pleasure all his desires, so holy; all his purposes, so glorious.

His life story is the Gospel reduced to practice: a catalogue of penance, renunciation, mortification, humiliation, abnegation, prayer, dialogue with God, and withdrawal from the sight of men to work for their salvation or else to suffer their scorn. He made the poor and most abandoned the object of his zeal, suffering everything, yielding to everyone, never complaining, never thinking himself offended, always putting himself in the wrong, the first to condemn himself, content with whatever happened, blessing God in everything and taking his will as the sole guide of his own, loving his friends in God and his enemies for God's sake, wanting only God in all things, interested only in his glory and oblivious of all else, with aversion only for the world and hatred only for sin. He feared nothing except to displease the divine Majesty, desiring only to imitate Jesus Christ, attracted only to the cross, and loving only God. Have we not here, in fact, a summary of the Gospel as well as of the life of John Baptist de La Salle?

What examples he gave of self-forgetfulness, of severity for his body, of disdain for worldliness, of thirst for justice, of purity of heart, of a holy passion for humiliations and sufferings, of detachment from all the things of this world, of love for prayer and union with God, of self-sacrifice! That last day, when hearts will be revealed, will show what graces he had hidden in his heart, what merits he had accumulated in his life of suffering.

John Baptist de La Salle was a man meek and humble of heart, a person who seemed dead to everything and in whom nature no longer dared to show itself or ask for anything. His life was entirely

supernaturalized, wholly filled with God. He thought, spoke, and acted like someone of a different world, someone with a different nature than ours. Virtue had become his natural element; God, his life; Jesus Christ, its soul and center. At prayer he was like an angel; at the altar, a seraph. In all he did, he was like one of the Apostles; in his patience, a Job; in poverty, a Tobias. His abandonment of himself to the care of Providence was like that of Francis of Assisi, and his rigorous penances made people think of Abbot de Rancé. His obedience reproduced perfectly that of Saint Dositheus. In the way he practiced all the virtues, he was a perfect disciple of Jesus Christ.

Such a man was John Baptist de La Salle. Such is his true portrait! Death, which spells the end of most men's glory, marked only the beginning of his. His memory is held in benediction. He is ranked among the princes of the people, among those who in the last century have been the honor of the church and the exemplars of perfection.

Oh triumph of holiness! The tombs that conceal the ashes of princes and kings, those sad remains of bodies that in their lifetime were so honored, hold buried also their memories. But the tombs of God's servants reawake the remembrance of them and recall examples for our imitation. Oh holiness, so worthy of honor but so little esteemed by mortal beings, holiness that renders imperishable the memory of the just while that of others fades away to nothing!

Where now are those who were thought happy by this world's standards, who made idols of what they possessed and were swollen with self-importance; people who were feared, esteemed, sought after, and flattered here on earth? At great cost they amassed a brittle glory in the sight of men but have nothing to show before God. They played their glittering part on the stage of this world and then, one after the other, left the scene. Death, in taking them from our sight, effaced them also from our memory. Their wealth is scattered; their grandeur has vanished, and their name has sunk into oblivion, dying away with the last echoes of the clamor they had raised.

What do those mausoleums tell us that have been built to their glory? Only that those within them have passed on, that they have had their brief existence and are no more. Those edifices, unwilling perpetuators of the vanity of those they house, impress with their splendor and hold our gaze with their trappings. But in thus evoking our admiration for the artistic skill they display, they only distract our attention from the sad and mournful mysteries they enclose. What is the use of all the impressive talent that thus gloriously elevates some people above others and seems to signify that God has endowed them with natural qualities of a superior order? Of what use is it if holiness has not consecrated these qualities? Wealth, honors, nobility of



birth, and everything that the world esteems most counts for nothing in heaven, nothing in the sight of God, who knew poverty, humiliation, and death on a cross; God, who acknowledges no greatness outside himself, who endorses only the virtues that give a resemblance to himself, and who honors only those who practice them!

If at present the world disdains such people, it will one day have to render them justice and withdraw its adverse judgment. On that day all that now shines brightly in our eyes will be recognized for the vanity it is. Earth and sky will disappear before him who created them, and all grandeur will hide itself before the grandeur that is his, unable to withstand his scrutiny. A holy life alone will be a ground of reassurance. God will speak its praise, and all creation will applaud. The condemned will be forced to acknowledge that God is just in the rewards with which he will crown such a life.

What honor it will be for those who will have achieved that crown! At present, they have only their faith to sustain them, only their hope to console them, only prayer to be their help. The practice of mortification sustains their effort, along with the prospect of the destination, which is heaven. Their life hidden in God,<sup>855</sup> as the Apostle expresses it, gains only disdain here below; they are thought of as the world's off scouring.<sup>856</sup> But God, in his own good time, will free them from opprobrium and set them before the world as its judges. He will make their name known, will reveal their merits to all, will glorify their virtues, and give them a share in his own felicity.

The saints are the work of God's mercy, the reflections of his holiness, the masterpieces of his grace, images of his well-beloved Son. In them he is well pleased;<sup>857</sup> they are vessels of election for whom heaven has been prepared. They alone have acquired the right to enter therein, and they alone are admitted. Let us share their virtuous life if we wish to share their happiness. Let us resolve to follow their example if we desire to win the rewards that they have won!

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855. Col. 3:3.

856. 1 Cor. 4:13.

857. Matt. 3:17.

## APPENDIX

*Certain incidents that seem to have contained an element  
of the miraculous, which occurred some before  
and some after the death of De La Salle*

Although miracles have greatly served to cause the saints to be honored in the history of the church, it is not working miracles that constituted their holiness. Saint Paul assures us that holiness consists in charity, not in miracles. "If I could move mountains," he says, "but am without charity, it would be nothing."<sup>1</sup> Charity is indispensable if we wish to be holy and pleasing to God. Miracles are only gifts freely bestowed by God to those whom he chooses and for his own glory. Those who receive these gifts can gain no merit from them unless they also have this divine virtue of charity.

Judas received the gift of miracles from Jesus Christ at the same time as did the other Apostles, and he seems to have exercised it with them and like them. But does this make his memory in the church any less abhorrent? The case is the same with many other persons who have been damned. Jesus Christ said expressly that many will say to him on the last day, "Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not work miracles?" He will reply, "I know you not—*Nescio vos*. You are workers of iniquity."<sup>2</sup>

John the Baptist was pronounced a saint by Jesus Christ, who called him "the greatest of the sons of men."<sup>3</sup> Yet, according to the Gospels, he performed no miracles, but his life was one prolonged miracle, and that sufficed to bear witness to his holiness. Many others are honored in the church as great saints about whom we read of no miracles they performed.

Holiness, then, has no essential link with this gift that is so highly regarded in the eyes of the world. It is simply something that God bestows and makes use of through his servants for the purpose of his own glory. But more often the only prodigy God offers the faithful for their meditation is the example of the saint's life, because this alone can edify them; this alone they must imitate.

In the world in which we live, the life of John Baptist de La Salle may well be counted a prodigy. If no other marvel were attached to his name, we would still be able to say that he was great in the sight of God. Nevertheless, both during his life and after his death, God used him to manifest his glory by extraordinary happenings, which,

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1. 1 Cor. 13:2.

2. Matt. 7:22–23.

3. Luke 7:28.

however, we cannot count as miraculous before the church pronounces on them. It is for bishops, not private individuals, to study such occurrences and then decide. Being conscious of this, I limit myself here to reporting simply a few facts that appear to have contained an element of the extraordinary, even though particular claim is made for them.

I will begin with some favors that were obtained while the holy priest was still alive. These will be set forth succinctly without going back on matters already reported in the biography, where, for example an account was given of a Brother who was critically ill and who recovered immediately when John Baptist embraced him.<sup>4</sup> Several Brothers have testified that when they were troubled or tempted, they had only to go to him and tell about their difficulties to be relieved of them. "What we admired most in our esteemed Father," they write, "was that when we were strongly tempted, and no matter what problem we had, it sufficed to speak to him to be freed of the temptation or whatever the trouble was." Many similar things have been attested in the lives of numerous saints, both men and women.

A person of great piety, whom I will not name for fear of offending her modesty, testifies that she was seriously troubled with temptations of the flesh. She had tried as much as possible to overcome these rebellious tendencies of her nature but without success. She finally bethought herself of making her temptations known to De La Salle by letter, asking his advice and begging him to pray earnestly for her. The servant of God in his charity sent her a very consoling reply and promised her his prayers. It was not long before these prayers proved fully effective; the temptations disappeared, together with other wayward tendencies that caused them. "It seemed to me," says our witness, "that I was another kind of being altogether and that God had given me the nature of an angel. The experience caused me to have a high idea of the holy man's virtue as well as a greater attachment to the service of God."

A Brother of the Society was reduced to the last extremity by an abscess in his throat. He was awaiting the moment of death when he was visited by his Superior, who urged him earnestly to resign himself to God's will and encouraged him to be patient in his suffering, always in the hope that he would soon be delivered. Consoled by the presence of his Father, the disciple summoned his remaining strength to beg him not to forget him in his prayers. John Baptist gently promised not to do so and went away with the intention of offering a Mass for him. The sick Brother was greatly comforted and full of hope that

4. The Brother was the Director of the community at Guise; Blain relates the story in book 2, chap. 6.

he would soon feel the effects of the saintly man's prayers, nor was he disappointed. Hardly had John Baptist reached in his Mass the moment of the consecration, when the patient's abscess burst and discharged a great quantity of pus, resulting in the amelioration of the ailment. In a matter of a few days, the Brother was back to a state of perfect health.

Brother Gilles,<sup>5</sup> whose life reflected all the virtues and whose memory continues to be held in great veneration by the Brothers of his Society, was one day making a journey on foot. Suddenly his head began to ache so violently that he was unable to continue his journey; he was obliged to lie down by the side of the road, quite overcome by the pain. He then remembered that he was carrying a letter of his saintly Superior, which he regarded as a relic. He had enough confidence in it as such to apply the letter to his head by placing it inside his hat. Then, full of trust in God and in the merits of God's servant, he got to his feet even though the pain was still intense. But he had hardly taken a few steps when he found himself completely free of the headache. He finished his journey feeling perfectly well, and he blessed God a thousand times for having given such power to an object just because it had a connection with his servant.

Another Brother assures us that he too was cured of a violent headache the moment he applied a piece of the saintly priest's hair shirt and recited the *Pater Noster* and the *Ave Maria* five times.

Brother Timothée, the present Superior General of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, tells us that he developed a tumor on his left knee; his account, incidentally, is endorsed by a number of Brothers who witnessed what happened. Brother Timothée neglected the growth at first, thinking it was not serious, but it became so swollen and livid that it was unbearable to look at. A surgeon was called in, and when he made an incision, a great deal of ugly matter came out. The surgeon made no promises about the quick recovery but instead expressed fear for the Brother's life if the latter did not take more care. This put Brother Timothée in a dilemma: he had intended to go as soon as possible to take charge of a school in a provincial town. De La Salle had personally made this known to him when he came to visit him; finding him bedridden, he expressed regret that the Brother's disability would prevent the implementation of the plan. Thereupon the sick man got up, saying that no illness would stop him from carrying out his Superior's wish. He

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5. Blain names him because he was not alive when the biographer was writing. *Livret des Premiers Vœux*, preserved in the Rome archives, gives the date of the perpetual profession of Gilles (Pierre Cluse) as 8 September 1700; an added note says that he died at Reims, 1 January 1709 (CL 3, 17).

took measures accordingly, despite the protests of the surgeon, who warned him that if he did not take great care, the result could cost him his life; the wound was in a very dangerous condition and likely to prove mortal if the slightest accident occurred to it.

The only precaution Brother Timothée took was to carry a good supply of ointment for the journey. Actually, John Baptist's blessing rendered this unnecessary. Timothée had total confidence in obedience and in the merits of his Superior; before setting off, he asked the latter to bless the affected part. The servant of God was taken aback by the request; his face became flushed, and he refused categorically to do what he had been asked. Finally, because Timothée insisted and because he was touched at the latter's generous spirit of obedience, he placed his hand on the sore part and made a sign of the cross with his thumb, saying that he would go now and say some prayers for him.

Brother Timothée, beside himself with joy, set off immediately, refusing the carriage that had been arranged for him. He was convinced he had no need of it because he no longer felt any pain! In fact, he made the whole journey on foot, something that should have been an exhausting ordeal for him because he had never before made such a long journey without using a carriage. But he forgot all about his bad knee and his ointment, and he was agreeably surprised on his arrival at Chartres, his destination, to discover when he started to attend to his wound that it had disappeared; the bad knee was as sound as the other, and there was not even a scar remaining. "It was then," says Brother Timothée, in an authentic statement he has given us on the incident, "that I was convinced that God had healed me by the touch, the blessing, and the prayers of my meritorious Superior."<sup>6</sup>

As for cases occurring after the Founder's death, there was one concerning a Brother of the Christian Schools who suffered a violent attack of asthma at the beginning of Lent. The thought that this would prevent him from observing the holy forty-day fast upset him very much. He felt inspired to make a novena "in honor of Father de La Salle" to obtain from God the grace to observe the fast, intending on each of the nine days to receive Communion and recite the *Pater noster* and the *Ave Maria* five times. In fact, he was cured as soon as he began the novena, and he had no difficulty in observing the fast throughout Lent, which he spent in perfect health. He has testified to this in a document written and signed by him.

Brother [\* \*] of the same Society tells us that he suffered a series of attacks of fever and that he sought God's help by the intercession of De La Salle. He promised, he tells us, that if the fever left him, he

6. Timothée's handwritten attestation is in the Rome archives. Blain's account corresponds, but his quotation is approximate (CL 40, vol. 1, 113–14).

would say three *Paters* for the souls in purgatory every day for nine days and would testify to the fact in writing so that God might be glorified and the people edified. He placed inside his nightcap a letter his Superior had written to him and also a small packet of his hair, and forthwith settled himself to sleep. When he awoke, he found himself completely well and was glad to have the obligation of fulfilling his promise.

Toward the end of December 1719, one Brother caught such a bad cold that he found it impossible to sleep at night. He was concerned about keeping others awake with his violent coughing, and it occurred to him to place a few of De La Salle's hairs on his lips and on his throat and to ask God through the Founder's intercession to prevent him from inconveniencing the other Brothers. His prayer was hardly finished when he felt himself cleared of the cold and the cough.

The Brother who is now the senior member of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and whose testimony is extremely reliable tells us that on one night last year, 1732, he had such a violent attack of headache that he did not know what to do with himself. He then recalled that he had a letter written by De La Salle in his pocket. He placed this against his forehead, and almost immediately the pain ceased, and he was completely cured.<sup>7</sup>

Another Brother, still living, had a prolonged attack of quartan fever for which various remedies proved useless. He then thought of using another remedy, and this proved immediately effective. He removed a little of the encrusted perspiration from the inside of De La Salle's biretta, which he had found in the sacristy at Saint Yon. Not without qualms but also not without benefit, he swallowed this and was immediately relieved of his persistent fever. His cure was so complete that he has never felt the least attack of the fever since. But the joy he felt about this was not so much to have had his health restored as to have perceived how God in his goodness had endorsed De La Salle's holiness by such extraordinary healing; this was something very consoling for him and for his confreres.

The following incident, of another kind, is from Brother Barthélemy, who was careful to note what happened. Here is what he says:

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7. This was either Gabriel Drolin (Gallego, 587) or (because Drolin had died on 11 January 1733, the year in which, apparently, Blain was adding this appendix, and *maintenant* seems to suggest that the rank of senior member had been assumed recently) Antoine (Jean Partois), who had entered the Society in 1686, two years after Gabriel, and survived the latter by ten years (CL 3, 32). What we know of Antoine makes the qualification "extremely reliable" no less applicable to him than to Gabriel. The letter referred to in the story has not come down to us; twenty of those received by Gabriel have done so.

During the night of 19–20 June in the year 1719<sup>8</sup> a Brother who has been in the Society several years and teaches school had a strong temptation to leave his vocation. As a result, he came to me to request his secular clothes. I gave them to him, saying that if I had previously declined to do so, it was only for his own good. He seemed to have no doubt that this was indeed the case, and he also said that the charity he had always been shown since entering the Society was the one thing that now made it difficult for him to leave. My reply was that he should not be concerned in this regard but should think about what he was doing. He was yielding, I told him, to a temptation of the devil, for it was certainly his vocation to be a member of our Society. I saw that this caused him to waver, and I was able to persuade him to make a retreat to know more surely what God's will was for him. He made the retreat at the novitiate house, and he there felt strongly inspired to resolve to be very faithful to the Rule for as long as he remained in the Society, to have much recourse to God in prayer, and to appeal for help to the Most Blessed Virgin, Saint Joseph, and Father de La Salle.

His fidelity in following these inspirations of the Holy Spirit seems to have obtained for him the result I now describe. He retired one night, as usual, to the common dormitory to take his rest, but he woke up during the night and thereupon asked God to grant him the grace of perseverance, at the same time invoking the assistance of the Most Blessed Virgin, Saint Joseph, and our revered and very dear Father. He opened his eyes and was astonished to find the room all alight. His first thought was that it was daytime and that no doubt everyone else was up. He was so sure of this that he too started to get up, but he suddenly saw the figure of Father de La Salle before him. He was frightened at this and tried to call out but was unable to do so; all he could do was stare. He seemed to see our dear Father with a warm glow on his countenance and wearing his priestly vestments, a chasuble of shining white satin embroidered with red roses and with hyacinths forming a cross. Father's right hand was raised as if he was giving an instruction or about to begin a sermon. He seemed to call for the Brother's attention, a first and a second time. The Brother now felt more reassured, and listening carefully, he heard the following words: "My son, I know what is in your heart. I say to you in the name of God, persevere in the state to which you have been called by Divine Providence, and observe your rules

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8. Some ten weeks, therefore, after the death of the Founder.

to the letter. If you do so, you will possess eternal life; if you do not persevere but return to the world, you will be lost.”

Hearing these words, the Brother made as if to get out of bed and kneel down, but the vision then disappeared as though in a flash of lightning, and he was once again enveloped in the darkness of the night, amazed but also consoled and strengthened. He even wanted to tell the Director of Novices<sup>9</sup> there and then what had happened, thinking that he was in the same dormitory, but not finding him, he returned to bed. One feature of the incident suggests that the vision was not an effect of his imagination: throughout the following day, his eyes had a feeling of discomfort from the flash of light they had experienced.

Having been thus well and truly advised, the Brother resolved to persevere in his vocation, and he did do so for some time further, observing the Rule with great fidelity. But his passions were strong, and he did not sufficiently dominate them, with the result that his temptation returned, and this time he yielded, undeterred even by Father de La Salle's terrible prediction that he would be lost if he returned to the world.

It has recently come to light that a certain lady in Rouen, who was suffering from a serious complaint for which there was no hope of a cure, was advised by a clergyman to make a novena at De La Salle's tomb and that she was completely cured after doing so. The lady felt it her duty to make this known to the Brothers, and she has done so with a detailed account.

Brother Superior has received a letter from Avignon saying that one of the pupils of the Brothers there had an injury to his hand that became so infected that the doctors had given up hope of healing it and had decided to amputate. But pending the arrangements for this cruel operation, the Brothers placed on the poor child's hand a piece of a mantle that De La Salle had used when he was in this area. They did so with great confidence in the merits of their saintly Father, and their faith was rewarded. With this single remedy, the boy's hand, which was due to be amputated, healed up in a few days without further need of medical attention.

In the year 1703, there was at the Brothers' school situated near the Paris mental asylum a poor lad who had suffered from epileptic fits for several years. De La Salle felt sorry for him and took steps to try to cure him, including a drink that he prepared for him. What the

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9. Brother Irénée (Claude François du Lac de Montisambert), for whose remarkable career, see Rigault, vol. 1, 421–24; vol. 2, 111–13, 115–16, 167–69, and 189–92.



drink consisted of is not known, but in any case its real purpose was no doubt to disguise any good effect that might result from John Baptist's prayers and mortifications for the boy. What could not be disguised, however, was the fact that from this time on, there was no doubt that the child was completely healed. Brother Jean, from whom we have this account, says that he saw the lad more than ten years later, and he was in perfect health, something for which, adds the Brother, "he said he was surely indebted to Father de La Salle."<sup>10</sup>

The saintly Founder was nearing his final agony when he uttered these words, "Saint Yon will become a flourishing establishment. Brother \* \* \* will see it come to pass." Brother Superior was standing near him when the Founder said this, but he did not say that he, the Superior, would witness it. In fact, he did not, for his death followed thirteen months after that of the Founder.<sup>11</sup> But the Brother named by the latter is still living.<sup>12</sup> Those Brothers who have been able to witness what progress the Saint Yon establishment continues to make, progress that has surprised even outsiders, recognize that it was a true prediction their Father made at a time when everything pointed the other way.

Another Brother, in written testimony, dwells at length on this prediction of De La Salle. Here is what he says: "Our saintly Father, a little before his death, said that in a few years a great change would be seen at Saint Yon. He said that this community would become well known and would do great good in the province and even throughout the realm. He even named one of the Brothers present, saying that he would witness it all."<sup>13</sup>

10. The mention of "situated near the Paris mental asylum" (*les petites maisons*) identifies the school concerned as the third to be established in the parish of Saint Sulpice, the one founded in rue Saint-Placide five years previously to the present incident. The testifier was Br. Jean Jacquot, a member of the Institute since 1686, one of twelve who made perpetual vows with the Founder on Trinity Sunday, 1694. He was still alive, aged 61, when Blain's biography was published (and was to live another twenty-six years). Elected Assistant, first to Brother Barthélemy, then to Brother Timothée, he resided at Saint Yon and so was an invaluable consultant for the biographer. See above, Blain's "A Word of Explanation," page 24, note 2, and chap. 26, note 340.

11. According to *Catalogue des Frères* and to Blain's biography of Brother Barthélemy, it was almost exactly fourteen months after—8 June 1720 (CL 3, 38).

12. Gallego suggests (584) that the Brother concerned was Irénée, Director of Novices at Saint Yon since 1717 and in continuous residence there from 1725, as Assistant to the Superior General, until his death in 1747.

13. Blain provides in the closing lines of the biography (book 3, chap. 19) a summary of the developments he witnessed at Saint Yon. An illustrated 270-page history of the establishment, *Le Manoir de Saint-Yon au Faubourg*

One day, a long time before that, De La Salle was returning from a journey with a postulant and another gentleman, both of whom expressed a desire to call at Saint Yon and see the property. The Founder duly took them there. The gentleman was surprised at the extent of the terrain and at the purity of the air breathed there, and he remarked that he wished that this was where he lived. De La Salle took up his remark with the words, "All this will belong to the Brothers." He said this at a time when there was no likelihood that his prediction could ever be fulfilled. At the time, the Brothers had no means whatever to acquire the property; they could not have been poorer than they were just then. In addition, there were several other obstacles in the way, all of them seemingly insurmountable. But it was at such a time that De La Salle confidently told the Brothers not to worry: the property of Saint Yon would one day be theirs. To convince them of this, he took a significant step at the moment when the Brothers were about to vacate Saint Yon, having received notice to do so, and when they were refusing admission to postulants and boarding pupils with the intention of transferring the novitiate elsewhere. It was then that the Founder sent for all the chapel furnishings and his well-stocked library to be brought from Paris to Saint Yon.<sup>14</sup>

This decision astonished his disciples, especially Brother Barthélemy, but John Baptist simply repeated his assurance that the property would fall to them. He characteristically added that the only real obstacle in the way was his own presence in the community. As long as he remained there, he said everything would keep going wrong for the Brothers, but all would be well once he was out of the way. In fact, it was while he was residing at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet that the sale of Saint Yon to the Brothers was successfully concluded, as has been described in its proper place.<sup>15</sup>

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*Saint-Sever de Rouen*, by Chanoine Farcy, pastor of the parish of Saint-Sever, was published at Rouen in 1936. See also, Rigault, vol. 2.

14. The sentence recalls Bernard's assurance that the Founder used the annual income of 200 livres retained from the distribution of his possessions for his long journeys, for furnishing the chapel, and for the purchase of books (chap. 10, note 161). In the Rome archives is the original document, dated 11 August 1718, by which the Founder bequeathed the library to Brother Barthélemy; a transcription of it appears in CL 26, 306.

15. Book 3, chap. 16; the statement that the property was acquired while the Founder was at the Paris seminary is not strictly accurate. According to Blain (and to Maillefer in both versions), De La Salle was at Saint Nicolas until 7 March 1718 (5 March is a more likely date, according to Aroz, CL 41, vol. 1, 46, and Gallego, 566), but the deed of purchase of Saint Yon, signed by Joseph Truffet (Brother Barthélemy) and Charles Frappet (Brother Thomas) is dated 8 March; the original document is in the National Archives, Paris.

To conclude: during De La Salle's life and since his death, no house or individual Brother of the Society has not felt the effect of the continual blessings bestowed on them by the Lord because of the prayers of their gracious Founder. But if any of my readers are skeptical and inclined to smile whenever there is any mention of visions or miracles and question what I have just been reporting, let them forget it all. Let them retain only the memory of the heroic acts of virtue that make up the story of John Baptist de La Salle's life. If such readers are prepared to think about the matter, they must admit that a man so holy might well have been capable of achieving the miraculous. They will agree that if miracles are rare occurrences at the present time, it is because people as saintly as John Baptist de La Salle are not commonly found just now!<sup>16</sup>

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16. There is extensive documentation in the FSC Rome archives (102 dossiers) relating to extraordinary cures attributed to the intercession of John Baptist de La Salle, all in the nineteenth century. The three that were accepted for the beatification in 1888 and the two for the canonization in 1900 are described in outline by Battersby, 312–14.

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