



# The Messenger

A LASALLIAN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE



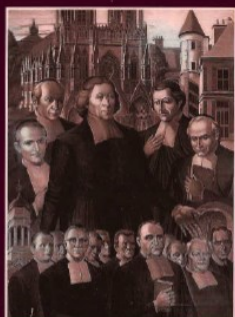
## Experimentation and Expansion

Dear friends, welcome to Issue Seven of "The Messenger". As always, we begin by answering our discussion questions from the previous issue - Experimentation and Expansion. The Grande Maison was a sizable property in the Parish of St. Sulpice, it was to replace the Novitiate at Vaugirard which had outgrown its usefulness. The connection it had to King James II of England, was that no sooner had De La Salle and the Brothers settled into the Grand Maison, a request came for De La Salle to provide lodging and instruction to a group of 50 or so Irish Boys that had followed the King into exile. The Bishop of Chartres tried convincing De La Salle that he should make changes to the Brothers Rule and also tried insisting on other changes that were against the spirit of the institute. De La Salle would not budge and held his ground. Alone in Rome, but loyal to De La Salle for over 26 years, Brother Gabriel Drolin was

the isolated Brother who battled to be accepted as a teacher by the Rome authorities. In 1703, De La Salle established a school in Avignon, a papal state. This was a crucial step as it provided a direct connection between France and Rome. Any good works accomplished in Avignon were sure to be recognised in Rome. Probably more than any of the lone work that poor Br. Gabriel had tried to achieve.

### THE WORK IS YOURS

The Life of  
Saint John Baptist de La Salle



Luke Salvo, FSC  
Second Edition

#### Issue 7: Paris: The Ecclesiastical Establishment

Live Jesus in our hearts!

Mr. Kane Raukura

Chairperson - NZMAC

(NZ Mission Action Committee)



**Q1. Who was the secret enemy from Saint Sulpice?**

**Q2. What was the investigation that lasted most of November in 1702?**

**Q3. Why did the Brothers decide to leave the Grande Maison?**

**Q4. Where was the new house to be and how did God's Providence work for the betterment of the Brothers?**



## Paris: The Ecclesiastical Establishment (1702–1705)

One of the characteristic traits of John Baptist de La Salle, attested to in all the sources and highlighted by all the biographers, was his disciplined equanimity, his absolute calm in the face of either success or disaster. His typical response in either case was: "God be blessed!" This expression, deeply rooted in his own implicit trust in divine Providence, concretizes the spirit of faith that he wanted to communicate to his disciples. In the Rule he wrote:

The spirit of this Institute is first, a spirit of faith, which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute all to God, always entering into these sentiments of Job: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; as it has pleased the Lord, so it is done."

Never was this spirit more tested than in the face of the persecution he had to endure in Paris that began during the years that his Institute was meeting with such marked success in so many other cities outside the capital.

### The "Secret Enemy"

Unlike many of the obstacles that the Founder had to surmount during the earlier period, those that had their origin in the early 1700's were neither fortuitous nor easy to identify. It seems beyond doubt that De La Salle was the victim of a calculated plot to take the Institute out of his hands. The means used were devious: manipulation, misrepresentation, and subterfuge were all employed in an attempt to discredit the Founder and alter the nature and purpose of the foundation.

In relating the story, the biographer Blain attributes the plot to the machinations of a "secret enemy." Internal evidence makes it clear that Blain is referring to the pastor of Saint Sulpice, Father De La Chétardie. Although Blain does not name the "enemy," and indeed speaks

glowingly of the pastor as a living saint and disparagingly of "the enemy" as an agent of Satan, he leaves enough clues to enable the reader to judge that the "enemy" and the pastor are one and the same person. There is also an independent source, a letter written by Father Charles de La Grange to a priest friend in Laon in response to a request from the Brothers there for detailed information about the problems De La Salle was having with the cardinal in Paris. The letter is quoted by the biographers without mentioning the name of the Founder's adversary; in a copy of the original that has been preserved, he is identified as the pastor of Saint Sulpice.

This is somewhat surprising in view of what is known of the character of De La Chétardie. He was evidently quite saintly and a wise shepherd that cared for his flock, enterprising and tireless, generous and sensitive to the needs of the poor. He does not seem to have been ambitious: when he was offered the post of Bishop of Poitiers in 1702, he cited 66 reasons (that was his age) for remaining as he was. He was deeply concerned to foster the work of the Brothers, supervising and supporting not only the schools in his parish, but also the novitiate and the innovative projects at the Grande Maison, of which he was especially proud. For all of that, he seems to have developed a growing resentment against De La Salle for his intransigence in matters of policy and his consistent refusal to allow any interference in the affairs of the community or the schools of the Brothers.

In treating of this period, the biographer Maillefer, always quite discreet in such matters, may be closer to the mark when he speaks in the plural of "his enemies" and "those who started the trouble." In view of the attitude of Father Baudrand earlier and Father De Brou in a later period, there seems to have formed within the Sulpician community a conviction that the idea of a community of Brothers to teach gratuitous schools was a good one, but that it could be better controlled and its future assured if it were under the direction of the Sulpician pastors, rather than left to the unreasonable demands and obstinate attitude of the troublemaker from Reims.

### Complaints

The occasion for the move to oust De La Salle had its origin when, shortly before the move from Vaugirard in the winter of 1693-1694, the Founder thought it best, in view of the multiple and complicated negotiations that were then underway for schools in distant places, to

give over the direction of the novices to Brother Jean-Henri. When Brother Jean died soon after, he was succeeded by Brother Michel, an uncompromising sort of person with little understanding of human nature and more zeal than discretion. He treated the novices with such severity that two of them went to De La Salle to complain. He, deeming it wise not to interfere, encouraged the aggrieved young men to find peace in patience, obedience, and mortification.



Cardinal Noailles

This approach was satisfactory only as long as the Founder was available to give encouragement and solace. As soon as De La Salle was called away on business, the Director intensified the penances he imposed on the novices, including physical beatings which left their scars. Having no other ready recourse, the two novices went to De La Chétardie who listened sympathetically to their tale of woe. He then asked them to put their complaints in writing, which they were happy to do. This gave the pastor a good excuse to take action, but he decided to wait for more evidence.

It was not long in coming. The Director of Novices had his counterpart in Brother Ponce, the Director of the community on the Rue Princesse. One day, dissatisfied with the performance of a novice who had been assigned to his school for practice teaching, he subjected the terrified young man to a cruel scourging. Unable to bear such treatment, the Brother fled and went straight to the pastor to display the welts left by the blows. Without waiting for the return of De La Salle, Father De La Chétardie drew up a memorandum which he sent to Cardinal Noailles, describing these incidents. He added some observations of his own, alleging that there was dissension among the Brothers and that many were disillusioned with their vocation. He concluded by stating that De La Salle was no longer fit to be Superior and that he should be deposed.

### Investigation and Condemnation

Cardinal Noailles, who all along had held De La Salle in high esteem for his ability, his honesty, and his saintliness, found the accusations hard to believe. At the same time, he respected De La Chétardie as a zealous and effective pastor, and one not easily given to intrigue or self-seeking. Not wishing to act without a better knowledge of the facts, the cardinal assigned his 70-year-old vicar-general, Edme Pirot, to conduct an on-the-spot investigation.

The investigation lasted throughout most of the month of November 1702. Pirot came to the community once each week to observe what was going on. Each Brother was brought in and interrogated privately under oath. Secrecy was insisted upon with strict instructions not to discuss with the others what had transpired during the interview. De La Salle, who had returned by this time, could not help but notice that something was going on. Yet he remained detached from the proceedings and made no attempt to find out what the investigation was all about. No one had the heart to tell him or the temerity to violate the secrecy that had been imposed.



Pirot's report, which was never made known to De La Salle or anyone else except the cardinal, must have been negative, in view of subsequent events. It is difficult, all the same, to imagine what evidence he could have gathered against De La Salle. Granted that the complaints of the abused novices were justified, it was the Directors who inflicted the punishment and not De La Salle, who was away at the time it happened. The biographers suggest that Pirot probably based his report, not on what he heard and saw in the Brothers' community, but rather on the repeated insistence by the pastor that De La Salle be replaced.

Some idea of the contents of the report can be gathered from the letter of Father La Grange, referred to earlier, in which he reports the results of a visit he himself made to the cardinal to discover the facts. Speaking of De La Salle, he wrote to his correspondent in Laon:

He is accused only of being too severe toward his Brothers, of practicing and encouraging penances that are too severe. He has been described to the cardinal as being a person not suited to direct others, and above all as a person extraordinarily committed to his own sense of purpose, directing himself and his Brothers solely according to his own manner of thinking.

His great crime, as far as I can find out, is that he does not act according to the views of the pastor of Saint Sulpice. He would like to meddle with the administration and even the personal affairs of the Brothers, but up to this moment De La Salle has refused. I do not know how these things will turn out, for you know as well as I the mentality of the pastor. He is the key to the difficulty; if De La Salle could agree with him, there would be no trouble with the archbishop.

After the investigation was over, De La Salle went to see the cardinal to thank him for the official display of interest in his community. The cardinal received him graciously, as always, with the usual signs of friendship. Then came the blow. Gently but emphatically, the cardinal told him that he could no longer be the Superior, that another was being appointed in his place. Difficult as it must have been, De La Salle accepted this judgment in silence and with equanimity. He did not ask the reasons why, and none were offered. When he got back to the community, he said nothing about what had happened. He went about his business as usual, confided in no one, and sought

no other comfort than the peace that he always found in bowing to the inscrutable designs of God in his regard.

### **Confrontation and Resistance**

A day or two after the interview with the cardinal, Pirot sent word to De La Salle that a date had been set to install the new Superior and to have him acknowledged by the Brothers. Once more, secrecy was imposed. Without giving any hint as to the reason, De La Salle sent word to all the Brothers in Paris that they were to assemble at the Grande Maison after Vespers on the first Sunday of Advent.

Not expecting anything unusual, the Brothers gathered in the community room at the appointed hour. Soon a carriage drove up to the door, and Pirot emerged accompanied by a priest they had never seen before. Once they all were settled in their places, the vicar-general launched upon a lengthy discourse praising De La Salle for having instituted a work so useful to the Church and for having guided it so well up until then. Finally, he had to come to the point. He told them that the cardinal had decided to name a new Superior, and introduced Father Bricot as a man worthy of esteem and confidence, one they should be prepared to obey in all things.

At the mention of the word "Superior," one of the Brothers respectfully whispered to Pirot that they already had a Superior, and it would be better not to mention another. Pushing aside the Brother who had interrupted him, Pirot was forced to be more explicit: the Brothers had no choice but to obey the cardinal's orders. The Brother then repeated out loud what he had whispered the first time. Pirot tried to continue, but by now it dawned on all the Brothers what was happening. They drowned out his final words, shouting that De La Salle was the only Superior they needed, that he and the cardinal were the only superiors they would recognize, that the cardinal must be somehow mistaken, that they would appeal.

De La Salle, appalled at the response of the Brothers, called for silence. He did all he could to try to persuade them to be reasonable, imploring them on his knees and with tears in his eyes to be quiet and submit. He was no more successful than Pirot had been. The Brothers replied that they would gladly obey him in all other things, but in this they could not and would not. At this point Brother Michel, the Director of Novices, intervened to speak on behalf of the Founder. In exasperation, Pirot shouted at him: "What? You? You dare to speak? You, who are responsible for all this trouble in the first place!"

Father Bricot, tall, young, and dignified, was more embarrassed than anyone at the situation in which he had been placed. All he wanted to do was to get out of there. To put an end to a scene that had already lasted too long, he suggested quietly to Pirot that they withdraw and leave well enough alone. De La Salle accompanied them to the door, apologizing profusely for the stubbornness of the Brothers and their refusal to obey.

### Compromise

The sequel is best described in the letter of Father La Grange to his priest friend in Laon, and through him to the Brothers:

On his return, the vicar-general was emphatic in his praise of the zeal and affection of the Brothers for De La Salle, and he told the archbishop that "if all the members of communities of men and women were as united with and as fond of their Superior as were the Brothers to De La Salle, there would not be so many disorders in Paris." He then described all that had taken place, making it clear that the Brothers would not listen to any reasons given for accepting a new Superior.

The cardinal was so annoyed that he there and then sent to the royal palace to find out how the situation might be remedied and how the Brothers might be punished for their failure to submit to his orders. Some time later, the vicar-general returned to inform De La Salle that, unless he made his Brothers obey the orders of the cardinal, he would be exiled from the country. De La Salle replied that the vicar-general well knew the efforts he had already made, but to no purpose. As for being exiled, he was prepared to go wherever His Eminence might care to send him and that this would afford him much consolation since he could find God everywhere. As for food and clothing, he could hardly be worse off than he already was.

The vicar returned without carrying out his threat, full of admiration for De La Salle's lack of concern for his own fate. When the Brothers heard the news, they decided to spend the whole day and night in prayer, without food or drink, imploring the help of heaven in their anxiety and affliction. The following day, they decided to leave their schools in Paris and abandon the house. As they started to



make arrangements to depart, the news was brought to the pastor of Saint Sulpice. He immediately went to De La Salle and begged him to stop them. At the same time, the cardinal sent word to parliament to suspend the decree of banishment and to leave things as they were.

It was a sort of armistice. Truth to tell, the Brothers won out. But it was still necessary to find a peaceful settlement that would save face and leave the last word to the archdiocese.

For quite a while, De La Salle and the Brothers were left in peace. In the meantime, however, there were several meetings. De La Salle and some of the principal Brothers visited the vicar-general, and several priests were sent either by the vicar-general or the pastor of Saint Sulpice to the Brothers' house to speak and confer with each Brother in private.

Some eight or ten days later, the ninth of this month [probably January 1703], the vicar-general and Father Bricot returned to the Brothers' house and asked that the Brothers be assembled. They made a thousand promises, among them that nothing would be changed, that they would still keep the same Rule, that De La Salle would not be taken from them. Although it was necessary for them to accept and obey Father Bricot as their Superior, they would have the consolation of having De La Salle still with them, and the new Superior would visit them only once a month.

They agreed to these conditions, or at least they did not resist as they did the first time; if the proverb is true that silence means consent, they did consent to the choice of this priest, since not one of the Brothers said a word in objection.

This compromise seems to have satisfied the archdiocesan authorities. From then on they refused to get involved in the affairs of the Brothers, especially in anything that concerned the pastor of Saint Sulpice.

### **The Persistent Pastor**

Father De La Chétardie did not give up so easily. Once he understood that he could not dislodge De La Salle by invoking church authority, he had recourse to more indirect means. Father Bricot was soon re-

placed as ecclesiastical superior of the Brothers by a priest more in sympathy with the pastor's attitude. Whenever this new superior came to visit the Brothers, which was rather more often than Bricot had been used to doing, he subtly suggested alternatives to the austerity of their lifestyle, their extreme poverty, the harsh conditions under which they lived, if only they would accept himself as their superior in fact as well as in name. He even suggested that they might well be opposing the will of God in preferring De La Salle to an appointee of the cardinal.

Although most of the Brothers treated the man as an intruder and avoided him as much as possible, some of them fell victim to his blandishments. Religious fervor suffered to some degree, and as many as eight or nine Brothers left the community. De La Salle himself reluctantly agreed to mitigate some of the rigor and penitential practices, especially the public use of the discipline, which he eliminated altogether.

One Brother who favored more rather than less in the way of penitential rigor was Brother Michel, the Director of Novices, a typically rigid sort of person, harsh on others and as harsh on himself. One night he and a companion climbed over the wall at the Grande Maison and headed for the Trappist monastery, where they presented themselves for admission. The Trappist superior, an admirer of De La Salle, refused to accept them, and sent them back to their community. A year or so later, Brother Michel was transferred to Chartres. He died there in the plague of 1705 that carried off four of the Brothers, including the infirmarian who had been sent from Paris to take care of the plague victims.

It was at this time, also, that the two Brothers teaching in the Sunday Academy became dissatisfied with their vocation and decided to leave the Institute. This project was particularly dear to De La Chétardie, and he did all he could to persuade De La Salle to continue it. The Founder was willing, but he was having difficulty finding Brothers willing to be trained in drawing, mathematics, and the other advanced studies offered in the Academy. The Brothers felt that to acquire such skills might put their own vocation in the same danger. One of them even drew up a lengthy memorandum explaining this point of view.

When De La Chétardie saw the text of the memorandum, he was furious. He accused De La Salle of writing it, or at least inspiring its tone and content. The Founder protested that he had nothing to do with it, whereupon De La Chétardie called him a liar. Taken back by such an insult, De La Salle replied quietly: "If that is true, Reverend

Father, then it is with that lie on my lips that I am going now to celebrate Mass."

The departure of the two Brothers forced the Sunday Academy to close for the time being. To show his annoyance, the pastor immediately reduced the salaries of the Brothers teaching in the parish. Then one of the Brothers, concerned for the survival of all the rest, volunteered to study drawing. He was ready in a fairly short time to reopen the Academy on a modified basis. As soon as he did so, the pastor restored the salary cuts.

### Loss of the Grande Maison

This continued interference in the affairs of the community led some of the Brothers to urge the Founder to move the novitiate and his headquarters to some other location outside the parish of Saint Sulpice. But De La Salle loved the Grande Maison for its convenient location, its extensive rooms, and its spacious grounds well protected from the noisy city outside its thick walls. Soon he had no choice. In the early summer of 1703, the property was put up for sale and, modest as was the price, De La Salle had no means to purchase it. Things looked bright for a moment when one of the wealthy parishioners left a legacy of 5,000 livres precisely to endow the novitiate. Since, however, the Brothers had no legal identity, the pastor was able to deprive them of the entire sum and turn it to other purposes.

The house was soon sold to an outsider. The new proprietor was good enough to allow the Brothers to remain for a while, rent free, while they sought another site for the novitiate. The only condition was that they should not gather fruit from the orchard and that they should allow the gardener and his family to continue to live on the property. The gardener, ostensibly to guard the owner's fruit, decided to move to a room overlooking the orchard. Much to the annoyance of the Brothers, he would now have an unobstructed view of all their activities, depriving them of the privacy they had hitherto enjoyed. The gardener did not keep his lookout for long.

For years, the house had an unenviable reputation for being haunted, based no doubt on the fact that the deceased nuns who had built the place were buried in the crypt beneath the chapel. Two of the Brothers claimed that one of the dead nuns, Sister Saint Fiacre, appeared to them regularly. She revealed to them her name and the fact that she was spending her Purgatory there. To humor the impressionable Brothers, De La Salle celebrated a Requiem Mass for her soul and

had the Brothers receive Communion. But she still did not rest in peace.

During the first night the gardener moved into his new quarters Sister Fiacre became active again. Her ghost waited until the gardener and his family were asleep and then woke them up by turning everything in the room upside down. Dishes, chairs, and furnishings were flying all over the place. Even the little baby was taken from its crib and placed in the center of the room. After two successive nights of such visitations, the gardener had enough. He packed up and moved his family to some rooms above the stables, far away from the Brothers. The ghost seemed satisfied and bothered them no more.

The dear dead nun was apparently unhappy to have the Brothers leave. She let her displeasure be known once again in a last attempt to keep them from going. Just as the last wagon carrying their furniture was about to depart, she shook it so violently for several minutes that it almost toppled over. At least that was the interpretation given by some Brothers who saw it happen while the wagon was standing at the door with no one around it.

Even Blain relates these incidents with a skeptical tone. The Brothers may have been less naive and more resourceful in having their way than we are inclined to think. Or perhaps one of them was a poltergeist. Or, despite the skeptics, it may have been a true ghost after all. In any case, ghost or no ghost, the Brothers left the Grande Maison for good in August 1703. They had been only five years in a house that might otherwise have become the center of a prosperous educational enterprise. But Providence had other plans.

### The Rue de Charonne

The new house was located on the Rue de Charonne in the distant faubourg Saint Antoine not far from the infamous Bastille. Since the house was within the confines of Saint Paul's parish, the pastor's permission was necessary to relocate the novitiate there. The pastor had a long-standing policy of not admitting any new communities and had, in fact, already turned down several similar requests from other congregations. Yet he was aware of the reputation of De La Salle and the good that a school might procure for the children of the parish, and for that reason he made an exception in this case, assuring the Brothers of his protection and patronage.

Wary of further involvements with the archdiocesan authorities, De La Salle did not renew his request to celebrate Mass in the novitiate

chapel. There was no real need. Just across the street there was a chapel in the convent of the Dominican Sisters of the Cross. They were more than willing to allow the Brothers to use it, especially when they saw the fervor with which the Founder celebrated Mass. Very early on they asked that he serve as their confessor, a favor which he granted but with considerable reluctance.

For the next several years, this community of Sisters was the principal source of support for the Brothers whenever they needed help, even after the school on the Rue de Charonne had to be closed. The Sisters could afford to be generous because the convent was well endowed and well known—it features in *Cyrano de Bergerac*—and many of the Sisters were from noble families with influential connections. Often in later years, when De La Salle would be at the end of his resources, he would say to the Brothers, “Let us go to the Cross.” The Sisters of the Cross never let him down.

Once the novices were settled in their new home, it was already September 1703, and time for the school year to begin. There was first of all a new Christian School for the children of the parish. Then the Sunday Academy for working teenagers was reopened in this new location on the Rue de Charonne. Both met with the usual success and were soon filled to capacity. The faubourg Saint Antoine to the north-east of the central city was a long walk away from the faubourg Saint Germain on the left, or south, bank of the Seine, where the house on the Rue Princesse was located. Nevertheless, the school Brothers continued to come to the novitiate on Sundays and feasts for growth and renewal as an apostolic community under the personal guidance of their spiritual father.

As a sign—in more ways than one—of the new beginning in a new center, a huge placard was hung over the door with the legend *Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes*. This was a way of proclaiming to the world that the Society had found its identity, that it had achieved a modicum of independence, at least from the pastor of Saint Sulpice, and that it was prepared to move ahead with the business of providing Christian teachers and a quality Christian education for the poor and anyone else who cared to profit by it. But the sign, to use the Gospel expression, would soon be contradicted.