

An Educator and a Saint  
at Grips with the Society of His Time

# **John Baptist de La Salle**

## **1651-1719**



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Translated by  
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JOHN BAPTIST .DE LA SALLE  
(1651 - 1719)

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AUTHORS' PREFACE

The purpose of this booklet is to provide teachers and their students with as clear an outline as possible of

- what it was like to live in 17th century France
- how this society differed from our own
- the way in which John Baptist de La Salle was led to react when confronted by the people, the traditions, the institutions of the age.

Obviously, in such a short study, not everything has been said.

It is hoped that, enlightened by the way in which the Patron of Christian Educators set himself to live in his own environment, his own situation, each one of us, young or old, might reflect on our lives to-day and on what we might do, in different circumstances, with different means, to resolve some of the problems we encounter in the course of our own vocation in life.

Guided by the light of one man's successful experience - the experience of a saint - we might ask ourselves, as a postscript to this study, how we can give witness to Jesus Christ in the school world of to-day and how we can help young people to be better prepared for their adult lives through "schools which are well-run". (La Salle: letters)

The perspective of this booklet is meant to favour personal reflection. It comprises five sections:

1. A short lexicon of the 17th century in France.
2. The world that was challenged by de La Salle.
3. The options that presented themselves to de La Salle.
4. The conditions necessary for a school to be 'well-run'.
5. Some significant steps taken by de La Salle.

## I. A Short Lexicon of Seventeenth Century France

A number of seventeenth century French words no longer have the same meaning. Others refer to situations which no longer exist. Many of the contemporaries of de La Salle are unknown to us. Some information about these words and these persons will be helpful to understand a world very different from our own.

### (1) Some Contemporaries of J.B. de La Salle.

Nicolas Barré (1621 - 1686): A Religious of the Order of the Minims a talented preacher, a professor of theology at Paris and at Rouen, and the spiritual adviser of de La Salle. He drew up Rules for the Sisters of Providence of Rouen and the Ladies of Saint-Maur, both congregations devoted to the education of girls.

He was greatly esteemed by Madame de Maintenon and sent some of his Sisters to the Royal School of Saint-Cyr in order to give some pedagogical training to those in charge of that establishment.

Living as he did, a life of abnegation and of complete trust in God, he advised de La Salle to give all his goods to the poor and to rely solely on God for the support of his schools.

Charles Démiá (1637 - 1689): A priest of the Diocese of Lyons. He organised the seminary of St. Charles for the training of both priests and school teachers. He was a member of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament (q.v.) and worked with this society to set up schools for the poor and which would have a firm foundation of practical regulations.

He created the Bureau des Ecoles (the School Board) and was responsible for the foundation of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Charles for the education of girls. His 'Remonstrances to the Municipal Magistrates' (échevins) drew the attention of both religious and civil authorities to the problem of the education of the poor. They had a profound effect in Paris and Rheims. By presenting the school question as a matter of national concern, through its political, social and religious aspects, they aroused public opinion, promoted the vocation of many teachers and of founders of schools. In one of his manifestos, Démiá quoted the example of the early beginnings of de La Salle's work.

Charles Maurice Le Tellier (1642 - 1710): Archbishop of Rheims, the brother of the Minister, Louvois. His father, Michel Le Tellier, was both Minister and Chancellor of Louis XIV.



The Archbishop of Rheims was a hot tempered man and is known to the history of gossip through a delightful letter written by that loquacious seventeenth century letter writer, Mme de Sévigné. "Mgr de Tellier's coach was rolling on and on! It encountered a peasant's cart and sent it flying 'head over heels' into the ditch ..." Obviously an Archbishop could not be in the wrong, not when he was Le Tellier.

La Salle had considerable trouble trying to obtain from Mgr Le Tellier:-

1. the permission to renounce his office of Canon.
2. the permission to live in poverty with his Brothers: for the Archbishop this was an affront to the dignity of the priesthood.
3. the right to leave Rheims for Paris.

Nonetheless, de La Salle was able to convince the Archbishop of the validity of his reasons.

Louis-Antoine de Noailles (1651 - 1729): Archbishop of Paris who showed himself fickle in his reactions to Jansenism (q.v.) He was equally changeable in his relations with de La Salle.

At first, he accorded him the widest powers to confess within the diocese and acknowledged a semi-official existence for his novitiate. In company with James II, King of England, he visited the Brothers' school in the parish of Saint-Sulpice. It was he who advised the exiled English king to entrust de La Salle with the education of the sons of the Irish families that had accompanied him to France.

Later, the Archbishop gave ready credence to the criticism against the Founder of the Brothers. He appointed another superior in his place. He forbade him to train teachers for schools for the poor.

La Salle submitted to the Archbishop's orders, but finding that the situation in Paris was no longer suitable for him to exercise his apostolate in complete harmony with the diocesan authorities, he accepted the invitation of the Archbishop of Rouen to leave Paris for Rouen, the capital of Normandy. In this way, he was able to reconcile his perfect submission to the directives from Rome with his concern never to disobey his diocesan superiors, even when the latter were in disagreement with the Pope.

Adrien Nyel (1621 - 1687): A lay man from the Diocese of Laon, the general administrator of the Poor House (Hospital) of Rouen and responsible for the schools for the poor in that town.

After having established four schools in each of the four districts of Rouen under the care of the Board of Management for the Poor (Bureau des Pauvres), he attempted to train his teachers, who like Nyel himself, devoted their lives to working for the poor, accepting the minimum necessary for their own subsistence.

In 1679, he came to Rheims to establish schools on the model of those of Rouen. De La Salle invited him into his own home. Together they decided to organise the Rheims schools on a different model: instead of seeking the support of the General Poor House, they would put themselves at the disposition of the parishes and parish priests.

La Salle obtained the non-intervention of the Diocesan inspector of schools (écolâtre) and Nyel directed the school of Saint-Maurice. It was a success. Nyel recruited teachers, opened a school in the parish of St. James and began others in the neighbouring towns: Guise, Laon ...

La Salle found himself obliged to 'assume responsibility for the teachers at Rheims'. He was now involved in a vocation he had not foreseen.

In 1685, Nyel returned to Rouen, where he took up the position of superintendent of the schools for the poor. He never forgot the solemn commitment he had undertaken in 1657 to consecrate himself entirely, to the end of his days, to the service of the poor.

Nicolas Roland (1642 - 1678): A Canon of Rheims, the spiritual director of John-Baptist de La Salle and the founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, dedicated to the education of girls.

A man of an unusually precocious intelligence, Nicolas Roland helped to apply, in the diocese of Rheims, the reforms demanded by the Council of Trent. He was always available for retreats for the clergy, for seminaries, for country missions. Before undertaking any new work, he would always make a study of any experiments already attempted. His interest in schools for the poor was extraordinary. He was anxious that La Salle should do for boys what he himself had accomplished for the education of girls but he did not live to see it. However, by making the future founder of the Brothers the executor of his will, he was responsible for giving him an experience both with a religious congregation and with education that would prepare him for his mission.

(2) The vocabulary of the seventeenth century.

Almoner: An ecclesiastic whose function it was to distribute alms to the poor. Louis XIV entrusted the Great Almoner with the responsibility of discovering and applying appropriate solutions to the problem raised by the great number of poor people and by the shocking contrast between the different social classes. Begging was closely controlled. A central register of alms existed at the Royal Court and each parish had its own register.

The Poor Board: (Bureau des Pauvres). This was composed of the administrators of each town whose function was to collect and distribute goods bequeathed to the poor. The Poor Board sought assistance and organised collections. They were often the same people who administered the General Poor House or Infirmary, the social assistance of the period. Demia and other influential people used the same pattern to raise the funds necessary for their free schools.

La Salle was called to Grenoble by the School Board.

Camisards: Protestants of the Cevennes who rebelled against Louis XIV because of the excessive harshness with which they were treated. Several Bishops protested in defence of their freedom of conscience, objecting to the military force and the heavy fiscal penalties applied against the protestants, especially by Louvois.

But at that time, 'freedom of conscience' never included the 'right to error'. On the contrary, everybody believed that the truth of the Gospel would become self-evident to all provided only it was explained with the requisite clarity to those whose hearts would be disposed towards the words of the Gospel by prayer. It was for this reason that christian schools, by which was meant Catholic schools, appeared to the king and to the French clergy, not as means of oppression but as the ideal way to explain the Catholic doctrine to those who had never heard it. 'Royal schools', assisted from the public purse were established: they were both free and obligatory until the age of fourteen.

The Bishop of Alès brought the Brothers into his diocese to collaborate in this missionary work. La Salle's advice to his brothers was to eschew polemics, to explain simply what is of faith, to avoid what was a matter of controversy among Catholics. In his 'Duties of a Christian', he avoids speaking of protestants and prefers to speak in general terms of heresies, schisms, and of fidelity to the pope, the successor of St. Peter. He preserved a welcoming serenity towards 'our separated brethren'.

- 2 -

Chantre (Precentor): His official name was the 'Grand Chantre'. He was the Canon in charge of the singing in a cathedral. He recruited children for the choirs needed for the religious solemnities. This function presumed the children would have a minimum of instruction and the ability to read latin correctly. Consequently the precentor saw to their education, often in a school specially set up for that purpose. In addition to singing the Office, the children would also serve at Mass. The concern to find vocations to the priesthood among them often transformed this school into a sort of minor seminary. By extension, in the seventeenth century, the precentor had charge of all the schools for the poor in the diocese, from which office he received the name of 'écolâtre'.

In Paris, the parish priests wished to preserve their authority over the charitable schools; thus began a long dispute with the diocesan precentor. Peace was restored by a compromise: the parish priests would remain free to choose their own teachers but the precentor would have the right of inspection and would be the judge of disputed cases. When La Salle arrived in Paris, he too wished to retain his independence in the method and substance of his teaching. To succeed in this, he had to confront the parish priest of St. Sulpice as well as the diocesan precentor. The former wanted to interfere with the Brothers' life style, the latter with the school curriculum and with the admission of pupils. La Salle's patience and submission towards his ecclesiastical superiors were equalled only by his tenacity in explaining the motives of his conduct: more than anything else, what mattered was the welfare of the children and the glory of God.

Class structure: The seventeenth century was not a society of 'classes' as understood today but a society of 'orders'. There was the order of the clergy, the order of the nobility and the order of the Third Estate. Within each order, there were considerable social distinctions, as much as between one order and the other.

For instance, the minor nobility, ruined by wars, lived less comfortably than the rich merchants of the Third Estate. The country clergy were often less well-off than skilled workmen, or artisans. It would be preferable to speak of social categories rather than of social classes.

Cleric: Everyone who had studied was a cleric or clerk. Strictly speaking, a cleric was a person who had left the lay status and joined the clergy, an act that was signified by a particular ceremony, the tonsure. But neither the tonsure nor the conferring of minor

orders carried the obligation of perpetual celibacy. It was the sub-diaconate that constituted the definitive commitment to the ecclesiastical state.

The seventeenth century was in this matter very different from the present day. Despite the Council of Trent, a period in a seminary was not essential to become a priest. Quite a number of clerics stopped at minor orders, others did not go beyond sub-diaconate or diaconate. Parish curates were not necessarily priests.

As the administration of the goods of an abbey or other ecclesiastical property was reserved to clerics, men would receive the tonsure and minor orders without any thought of vocation to the Church, simply in order to benefit from rich ecclesiastical or monastic revenues. One of the results produced by the seventeenth century seminaries was precisely to do away gradually with this abuse of 'ecclesiastical benefices'.

Company of the Blessed Sacrament: An association of pious and apostolic men which brought together priests and influential laymen desirous of transforming the morals and structures of society in keeping with the spirit of the gospel. Demia was one of its most zealous members.

To reduce the opposition of other influential people to their reforming zeal, the members of the Company maintained a strict secrecy concerning their membership and their discussions. The Company was everywhere active in promoting the setting up of schools for the poor and School Boards. The Company existed from 1627 to some time after 1665.

Gallicanism: The doctrine of those French Catholics who, in the seventeenth century questioned the authority of the Pope. Under pretext of concern for the 'privileges of the Gallican Church', the king and the parliamentarians (q.v.) denied any validity in France to the decrees of the Pope and the Roman Congregations until they had been registered by parliament.

Not all Frenchmen were gallicans. The Jesuits and the Sulpicians were outstanding in their fidelity to Rome. Their adversaries called them 'ultramontane', admirers of what was done 'beyond the mountains' - the Alps - in Rome. For men of the period gallicanism consisted above all in considering the councils of the Church as superior to the pope, all of whose directives would be debateable so long as a council had not met to approve them.

Jansenism: Strictly speaking, this was a doctrine that was condemned by the Church, and which held that God did not give all men the grace necessary to be saved. The 'elect' would be only a small number of people. Holy Communion could be received only by perfect christians.

The doctrine had its origin in the writings of Jansenius, Bishop of Ypres in Belgium. (1585-1638). In the seventeenth century, its main propagators were the spiritual director of the Benedictine nuns of Port Royal, near Paris, and some holy men who withdrew from the world and were known as the hermits of Port Royal. These men devoted themselves to the education of children in small boarding schools known as Petites Ecoles (the Little Schools) of Port Royal which became famous for the excellence of their education.

In a broader sense, Jansenism meant any harsh, rigorous doctrine placing its emphasis on the ravages of sin and on divine punishment. This was a long way from the early jansenists who put love of God and trust in his divine will as the foundation of their thinking.

Jansenism was to trouble French society and not merely the Church for over a century. La Salle spoke of 'these troublesome times' (ces temps fâcheux) which were leading astray too many people of good will.

Letters Patent: Letters from the king which gave legal existence to an institution and publicised its purpose and aims as well as its mean of existence. Louis XIV required that every new community should have enough capital to provide an income or a pension for all its members. His purpose was to suppress begging and he wanted to prevent people from asking for assistance from a municipality or from the royal coffers under pretext of leading the religious life. Letters patent authorised the recipient to receive moneys from public bodies but only in return for services rendered. Thus free schools were often a charge on the budget of municipalities.

Master Scriveners or Writing Masters: They were a group of writing experts at the magistrates' courts. They had the privilege of teaching every kind of writing as well as grammar and arithmetic. They were independent school teachers, running small schools, usually for fee-paying pupils and were subject to the regulations of their guild.

Masters of the Little Schools: This group formed a guild of their own, conducting private schools, having nothing to do with the 'charity schools' that were dependent on the parish priests. Meticulous regulations guaranteed their privileges and forbade anyone to compete with them by opening schools close to theirs.

Nonetheless, faced with competition from the Writing Masters and the Charity Schools, they needed a powerful protector. They entrusted their interests to the care of the Precentor of the Cathedral who would adjudicate in cases of conflicts between schools and who also delivered authorisations to teach, after examining the competence of the masters. In return, they were expected to offer a free education to the poor who presented themselves. In fact, the children of the poor preferred to wander the streets with an eye to the odd penny rather than to attend the Little Schools. The masters did not complain - in meant fewer problems for them.

Parish: An ecclesiastical district with a parish priest (curé) in charge. These priests were usually appointed by the Bishop but a number of parishes were 'benefices' to which the incumbents could be appointed by other bodies or personages. The parish was also an administrative unit, particularly with regard to the distribution of taxes, to the holding of the census and the meetings of 'notables' or local delegates. The religious and civil functions of the parish were so closely joined that the statements of grievances (the Cahiers de Doléances) drawn up by the States General in 1789 were the statements from the parishes. The registers of birth, marriage and death, kept by the parish priests, were the official registers of the State. It is easy to see how this put a heavy burden on protestants.

In addition, the parishes maintained registers of almsgiving and were responsible for social welfare: charity schools, distribution of food in times of famine, care of the sick ...

Quietism: A mystical doctrine according to which passivity at prayer is preferable to effort. The Bishop of Chartres, a friend of de La Salle had to intervene in a famous quarrel between the great Bishop of Meaux, Bossuet and the equally learned Bishop Fénelon. La Salle prudently kept to the middle way, avoiding both extremes. In his 'Method of Mental Prayer', he explains that God ordinarily grants the special grace of experiencing his presence in prayer only to those who actively combat their evil passions and are not indifferent to the needs of their neighbour.

Translator's Notes: In addition to the above, the following notes which do not appear in the French edition, may be useful to English speaking readers.

Guilds: In de La Salle's day, anyone who earned his living by virtue of his profession or trade had to belong to a particular guild (known variously as a Compagnie, Corps et Communauté de Métier, or simply as a Métier). He would be sworn in as a member of the guild following a period spent in apprenticeship - hence the terms 'juré' and 'jurande' - of our word 'jury' - 'juryman'). Each guild rigorously controlled its membership, its privileges granted to it by its royal incorporation, standards of work and other social and religious activities. Within each trade, there might be many sub-divisions of workers, each group jealously watching over its own interests: thus in the shoe trade, there were different guilds to which workmen belonged depending on the type of leather used - new or old. This economic and social structure of France in the 17th. century explains the antagonism aroused by the Founder's intrusion into the 'closed-shop' of the writing masters and the masters of the Little Schools, themselves belonging to two different and mutually hostile groups of teachers.

The Poor: The Guilds embraced every type of gainful activity, from the most exalted, that of the King's legal officers - about ten of them in the average-sized town, through the 'compagnie' of the various legal officers, to which de La Salle's father would have belonged, down to the 'artisans', the manual workers. But below these well-off professional people, 'artistes' like the doctors or surgeons, and artisans, all of them organised in their guilds and protected by law, were the unorganised masses: domestics (nearly a tenth of the urban population), almost all the day labourers and the whole of a large, floating town population. (People in the country were not involved in the guild structure). These were the Poor who attracted the compassion of de La Salle. They were people without house, land or equipment other than a few hand tools. They were always tenants, crowded into one or two rooms and chronically in debt. In the course of a year, they would go through a whole series of jobs, interspersed with periods of unemployment. The family wages - of husband, wife and often children, barely covered the necessities of life, leaving nothing over to save. In Louis XIV's reign, a man might earn ten sols a day (a woman earned half of that sum and children, one quarter). Thus a family might earn



100 to 120 livres a year, in good times, the equivalent of about fifteen pounds of bread a day, double that amount if all the family worked. But the wars of Louis XIV, bad harvests and hard winters often changed that situation for the worse. Illiteracy, the low standard of living, ill health combined to maintain these people in the same position throughout their lives. De La Salle sought to better their condition in life by higher standards of literacy and by teaching useful trades.

Money: Money followed the 'pounds, shillings and pence' system still in use until fairly recently in some British countries. There were 12 deniers to the sol and 20 sols to the livre. In addition, there was the 'écu' which varied in value - we find de La Salle writing almost complainingly that he does not know the value of Gabriel Drolin's 'écus' - 'send me your accounts in French money so that I can understand them'.

The value of the livre varied until 1726 when it was stabilised for almost two centuries. In 1686, the stipend of a parish priest was fixed at 300 livres a year and that of a curate, at 200 livres. De La Salle accepted 150 - 200 livres per Brother when negotiating school foundations. When the parish priest of St. Maurice's, Rheims, Fr Dorigny, agreed to lodge some of Nyel's teachers the rate agreed was 200 livres a year, which La Salle paid out of his own pocket.

Parliaments: These must not be thought of as similar to the English parliaments of the period, still less like those of today. In France there were several parliaments, the largest being that of Paris whose territory included the city of Rheims, the Founder's birthplace. The French parliaments were judicial bodies, the highest courts in the land, dealing with both civil and criminal matters (cf the judicial functions of the House of Lords, in Britain). The political power of the parliaments rested on the need for royal decrees to be registered by parliament before they could pass into law. This allowed strong parliaments to bargain with weak kings before agreeing to register their edicts. But under Louis XIV no French parliaments dared to resist the 'sun-king'. The Founder would have dealings with the Parliament of Paris on a number of occasions, not least in his disputes with the writing masters.

II. The World that was Challenged by J.B. De La Salle  
(1651 - 1719)

(1) A very different Europe from that of to-day:

The European states were kingdoms sometimes grouped as empires. Instead of alliances based on economic interest there were family alliances between heads of states. The family of the Bourbons, through their intermarriages, reigned over Spain, France, the Italian kingdoms. The Hapsburgs of Austria were emperors of Germany, ie of the German states.

Bordering on Europe was the Musulman empire with a powerful Turkey extending as far as our present Rumania and Hungary. The United States did not exist and Canada was a French province or at least had small French settlements. Italy and Germany were divided into numerous small kingdoms and Russia was a far away country. England was split by Civil War and was, in any case only a small country of some seven million inhabitants, while France was the most populated country of Europe with twenty million people. The French language was the language of diplomatic and social intercourse.

Holland, the Low Countries, was the most powerful maritime commercial and financial country; its fleet constituted half the merchant tonnage of the world, whilst the goods of the whole world poured through its port of Amsterdam.

Customs barriers were to be found everywhere, even between provinces and towns of the same country, at least on the Continent. Economic crises were particularly dangerous, especially when the crops failed over most of Europe and many people would die of starvation or be killed by the epidemics that swept through Europe.

In most countries, the heads of state, wielding civil, economic and political power, were also the religious leaders. England was officially protestant and the catholic king James II was driven off the throne in 1688 in favour of the Dutch protestant William of Orange. The Irish who supported him, or at least, in whose land, his followers fought their battle of the Boyne and were defeated, were dispossessed both of their faith and of their own land. A number fled to France and their children would be among the Brothers' earliest pupils. The seven provinces of Holland, organised in a republic, were also protestant. Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the majority of the German States were governed by calvinist or lutheran princes.

Spain and France, on the other hand, were officially catholic. Bishops were often temporal princes at the head of vast domains. Mgr Le Tellier, archbishop of Rheims, was a member of the King's Council and spent a good deal of his time in Paris. This situation still survives in some quaint places such as Andorra where the Bishop of Urgel is the co-prince of the State, the other being the President of France.

The custom dating back to antiquity whereby the religion of the ruler was the religion of the people was accepted almost without discussion in the seventeenth century. Henry IV had breached it by his Edict of Nantes (1598) which had guaranteed religious liberty to the protestants of France and which granted them certain economic and military privileges, such as the right to maintain their own fortified towns. Louis XIV would take a retrograde step by revoking this edict, thus aligning himself with the general custom of his time. (1685)

(2) Frontiers and demography of France:

Under Louis XIV, the French frontiers were often in a state of flux and the main roads often disturbed by the passage of armies. The latter, formed largely of officers from the nobility and of mercenary troupes (Swiss, German, Italian or French) conquered Artois, Flanders, Alsace and Franche-Comté. Sailors also were important to the safety of the state. Seamen were obliged to do a certain number of years service in the French navy but received privileges in return: wages, exemption from taxation, exemption from prosecution for debt ...

Corsica, Savoy and Lorraine did not as yet belong to France. Avignon belonged to the pope and was ruled by his vice-legate.

The South of France was almost a world apart from Paris. One day, de La Salle, returning from Marseilles towards Paris, wrote to a correspondent in Rome, 'I am just returning to France ...' It was the same for most of the provincial capitals far from Paris. Paris, with half a million inhabitants, was by far the most populous town in France. Marseilles, Lyons, Rouen, Saint-Malo, Nantes, Bordeaux owed their prosperity and development to their geographical situation and to their ports. They were regional economic capitals.

Other towns were small. To instruct the whole of the child population of Rheims, the university college, the Jesuit college and four ("elementary") free schools, one in each district of the town, were quite sufficient. The few small fee-paying schools

scarcely affected the numbers.

As for the countryside, it must be remembered that two thirds of all French people lived away from the towns. Everywhere were small villages of two to three hundred inhabitants. It was difficult to group children from such scattered communities which is why the arrangements for teaching village children had to be different. It is noteworthy that De La Salle concerned himself only with town schools.

(3) Political and administrative structures:

Political power, absolute in theory, emanated from Versailles and spread across the provinces. The whole system of government was highly centralised.

To carry out his orders in the distant provinces, Louis XIV made use of a group of officials called Intendants. These were men appointed by the Royal Council, his envoys to the rest of France. They were responsible for the good order and welfare of the inhabitants of their region: they promoted economic progress, respect for the law, controlled the police and reported back to the King's Council on the affairs of their Province. Royal subsidies enabled them to assist local enterprises and various charities, organised for the help of the poor and needy.

It was the king too who selected the bishops by submitting to the pope a list of priests whom he desired to see elevated to the episcopacy. For a bishopric was a rich temporal prize that made its holder into the lord of large areas of the country and the representative of the king in the exercise of certain judicial functions. The archbishop of Rheims and the bishop of Laon were both dukes and peers of the realm. Other bishops bore the titles of counts or barons.

No organisation, no society, no religious community could have legal existence without securing letters patent from the king. But these letters patent required the approval of parliament to have force of law; papal bulls appointing a bishop or approving a new religious congregation were valueless in France until they had been registered by parliament.

When various civil authorities, bishops or priests challenged the pope's right to interfere in matters connected with religious or moral principles or claimed that they could legally oppose their religious doctrines to those of Rome, they did so on the theory of 'gallicanism', of the so-called privileges of the French church. In de La Salle's day, most of the parliamen-

tarians were gallicans. The Sorbonne, the theological faculty of the University of Paris, was composed in large measure of gallican professors. Jesuits and sulpicians (and de La Salle studied at Saint Sulpice) were staunchly loyal to Rome.

The religious and secular dimensions of life were closely intermingled. In each parliament, the supreme law courts of the land, ecclesiastical officials sat alongside lay magistrates. Every year, on the occasion of the meeting of the Clergy Assembly, the king would make known his intentions. This was done to urge the clergy to support his plans with large subsidies, known as the Free Gift of the Church, which the clergy gave instead of taxation. At the same time, he would not hesitate to make other suggestions, often trespassing on purely religious issues.

Thus at the very moment when the bishops met to discuss matters of a pastoral and spiritual nature, they would be asked to deal with questions relating to peace and war, to social and economic projects, to the financing of public works.

In towns and villages, the parish was the basic social unit both religiously and administratively. Each parish had its own council responsible both for the administration of the moneys needed for the maintenance of the church and the parish priests as well as for the implementation of the orders coming to it from the Royal Council via the provincial Intendant, especially with respect to the incidence of taxation.

In each town, 'notables', mainly drawn from the middle class and the higher 'guilds', the 'métiers', elected the town councillors whose function it was to assist the mayor in the administration of the town, to determine the subsidies to be allotted to schools and hospitals, the granting or withholding of authorisation to merchants to establish themselves in the town, the setting up of such public utilities as existed ...

It was the parish that was responsible for the census of population and the levying of taxes. The communal budget was controlled by the Intendant who could either make up deficits or forbid expenses considered contrary to central policy.

This interpenetration of the secular and the religious made a profound impression on de La Salle. He sought a solution that would respect both the rights of conscience and the legitimate autonomy of the secular world and at the same time conciliate them with his own conviction that the universe was the work of God, for whom

and with whom everything acts. This solution he found in the christian school. This was to be the means given us by God 'to know the truth', the truth which is God himself, the Creator, and all that comes from him, the secular as well as the sacred.

Since no educational reform would have been possible without the agreement, at least tacit, of the notables, the elected councillors, the parish priests, the church wardens, the bishop, the intendant, and in the great towns, the parliamentarians, it is easy to understand why De La Salle proceeded cautiously. It took more than thirty years for him to gain acceptance for the changes he introduced in school practices, in the recruitment and training of teachers.

(4) Economic life and the world of work.

a) The rural economy:

Huge country estates were not numerous. They belonged to the great nobles like the Duchess of Guise or the Duke of Mazarin. The law of primogeniture prevented the break up of these estates.

But these great estates were nonetheless exploited to the full and without mechanical means. The only agricultural instruments were made of wood covered with metal, sickles were used instead of scythes. Three out of four farmers had no plough as the French steel industry was scarcely in existence and steel had to come from Sweden.

Small properties were very numerous but accounted for only about one fifth of the land mass. Yet they had to support four-fifths of the population. Most of these lived at subsistence level, dropping below it whenever the harvest failed. Large numbers of people were landless or had insufficient land to feed their own family. Specialised farming was rare - and dangerous in case of a failure of the crop. Most farmers or peasants kept a few pigs and hens, the main source of meat, since only the minority could afford to keep the small cattle of the period, and cultivated a mixture of wheat, rye, barley in addition to linen and flax for clothes. Poaching was common, since hunting was reserved to the rich, and smuggling was a way of life on account of the high customs duties between towns and districts.

b. The urban economy:

In the towns, the guilds (corps de metiers) were powerful bodies. People were organised in groups called 'brotherhoods': butchers, barrel makers, mattress makers, carpenters, masons, etc.

Their regulations were both professional and religious. The

number of authorised shops, of journeymen, of apprentices, of salesmen, was specified. In Paris, for instance, the 'masters of schools and of boarding establishments' had statues protected by letters patent. No one could teach unless his place of teaching was at least 200 yards from the nearest other teacher.

Manufacturing industry was being developed thanks to the policy of Colbert, the king's minister. Banks as such did not exist in France as yet. Those who were called bankers were in fact merchants who changed and lent money at high rates of interest. Debts often had to be paid in species, gold, silver, bronze.

Between the small shopkeepers and the rich merchants, there was a great gap, with only the beginnings of intermediary bodies appearing. These found it easier to make headway among the educated middle class than among the cultured upper classes.

c) Transport and travel:

The transport of goods was paralysed by the high customs duties payable at the entrance to every town.

The most convenient method of transport was by boat along the streams and rivers of France but floods, ice or drought made this method impracticable for six months of the year.

Contrary to what one might imagine, people travelled a great deal in the seventeenth century. It was easy to pass from one country to another. Craftsmen sometimes did their own 'tour de France' to enrich their professional expertise. Merchants travelled to Holland or Italy to establish contacts. News travelled by word of mouth for newspapers were still in their infancy.

For passengers, there were the stage coach, the carrying service organised by the universities, the municipal services, the hirers of horses, cabs and coaches. Each system had its own privileges and rivalries. Prices varied and it is possible to mention only average costs.

From Rheims, the hiring of a horse came to 25 sols a day. The horse was changed at each relay post. Public vehicles covered about 100 kilometres a day (sixty miles) and cost about 15 louis a day for that distance, for each passenger. This was ten times dearer than hiring a horse.

To go from Paris to Rheims, the stage coach changed its team of horses eighteen times. From Paris to Rouen there were only fourteen relays, but from Paris to Marseilles, via Lyons, there were no less than ninety three relays. If one takes account of stops at hostels, a school master going from Rheims to Paris would sacrifice about three months of his salary if he travelled by coach, but only a week's if he went by horse.

It is easy to understand why De La Salle and the early Brothers nearly always travelled on foot.

.....

Of the way of conducting oneself when walking in the streets and on journeys by coach or by horseback. One must pay attention when walking in the streets not to walk either too rapidly or too slowly. Slowness in walking is a sign either of dullness or of nonchalance; however it is more unbecoming to walk too fast ....

When one gets into a coach, one must always take the less important seat, if one is of a lower rank than those with whom one enters.

In a coach, there are usually two seats at the back and two in front; the first place at the back is on the right hand side; the second on the left; and in the case when there are three places, the third is in the middle; if there are two doors, the first is on the right and the second on the left, and the seats on each side at the back are the principal ones.

If one gets into a coach with a person of higher rank, or to whom one ought to give honour, one should, because of the respect one owes him, allow him to go up first, and get in after him ....

When one is in a coach, it is most uncivil to stare at anyone among those who are there; or to lean against the back of the seat or to rest one's elbow on anything; one must keep one's body straight and rigid with one's feet joined as far as possible.

It is also most unbecoming and quite contrary to good manners, to spit inside a coach, and if one is obliged to spit, one should do so in one's handkerchief; if one spits out of the window, which is not really gentlemanly unless one is seated\* one should raise one's hand to one's cheek to shield it. \* understand "seated next to it,"

On getting out of a coach, it is good manners to be the first out, without waiting to be told, so as to offer one's hand to assist the person of quality, whether man or woman, to alight.

When one is mounting a horse, in company with a person one must honour, it is courteous to allow that person to mount first, to assist him and to hold his stirrup ....



d) Food and other resources:

Potatoes were almost unknown in France. The main staples of diet were bread and meat. White bread was too dear for most people and seemed more like cake. Most bread was brown wheaten or rye. In Paris, the usual ration was a pound of bread per person per day but manual workers often ate two or three pounds for lack of anything else. The only vegetables were salads accompanying meat dishes: pork, chicken, mutton, beef. Eggs, cheese, fruits completed the normal menu.

France was reputed to be a rich nation and potentially it was, for despite the huge cost of war, of revolts, of crooked ministers and swindling officials, the sum total of taxes collected, despite protest, complaint and mutiny, more than doubled in a quarter century. It was a certain sign of the country's wealth.

(5) The world of the poor.

a) The Rich and the Poor:

Between 1680 and 1719 the social hierarchy began to change. Birth ceased to be the only criterion of worth. People of lower birth began, like Colbert, to rise to the highest offices. Their wealth allowed merchants to build sumptuous private mansions. Rival influences clashed within the ranks of bishops, municipal councils, parliaments.

The upstart is a theme of writers of the time, like La Bruyère who shows how, from a minor fiscal post, a man can rise, by threats and violence, to a high office over the ruins of many families.

But there are still many disinterested and generous middle-class people who were as concerned for the prosperity of the nation as for the well-being of the poor. They were the reading public who delighted in reading the satirists of the day, like La Fontaine and La Bruyère: in their pages they detected the foibles of many public figures.

Vauban, the great military engineer, took the defence of ordinary people and attempted to interest the king in reforms that would reduce the inequalities of society. He wrote:

'It seems to me that we have never had enough concern in France for the humbler classes ... they are the most oppressed section of the kingdom ... yet they are the most important both in numbers and by the real and effective services they render it ... it is indeed the lowest element of the nation that by its work and industry enriches it ... from whom come ... the tradesmen ... crafts and industry ... farmers, vinegrowers, labourers ... and by whom the enterprises, of whatever size, both in town and country, are brought to

completion ... Kings could not take too much trouble to preserve and to increase this people who ought to be so dear to them'.

(Projet de D<sup>me</sup> Royale, 1707)

Bossuet, the great preacher, spoke of the 'eminent dignity of the poor' who are the cherished members of Jesus Christ.

But despite this theoretical esteem for the poor, most of the nobility and the middle class despised them and treated them as inferior beings who did not deserve so much as a glance. In Paris, just opposite the Tuileries and only a few yards from the Brothers' school by the Pont Royal, ferrymen offered to ferry people across the Seine for only six deniers or pennies. Rather than have to associate with the common herd, the nobility and the gentry preferred to pay five times more and cross elsewhere.

De La Salle admits that, before he became involved with the work of schools, he considered school teachers as inferior to his man-servant. He experienced very great difficulty in overcoming his instinctive repugnance at welcoming them to share his table. It was only by dint of will-power, joined with fasting, that he succeeded in forcing himself to eat their food: the very smell of their popular cooking he found revolting.

b) The special condition of the Poor:

One must first decide at what level of income a person ceases to be considered as poor. According to present day standards, poverty begins when a person is unable to afford the basic amenities available to those living at the nationally recognised minimum wage level. The ordinary language of the 17th century did not consider things in this manner: it made a distinction between poverty and destitution.

Poverty was characterised, not by lack of comfort, but by lack of security. Richelet, in his dictionary of 1680, has this to say: 'There is great misery among craftsmen at the present time, because they have no work'. They lacked security because of the general state of unemployment. Without incomes, or capital to ride out a crisis, they were poor. But their poverty was only temporary. For other classes, or groups, in society, insecurity was a permanent state of life. Illness would result in the loss of a job and hence in destitution.

Here we are in presence of real poverty, the poverty of those who rarely ate their fill, who lacked the means to heat themselves in winter, who were unable to get married before the age of thirty, since they could not support a family. People as poor as this represented about one third of manual workers: street porters, road

sweepers, postmen, labourers, ferrymen, water-carriers, ragmen, knife grinders ... They were always at the mercy of the weather. For nearly all of them, periods of unemployment and of semi-starvation were inevitable and persistent.

c) The Organisation of Poor Relief.

Each parish kept its own register of the poor of the parish and accepted gifts of money for their intention. The royal treasury had its own budget for the poor, which was disbursed through a special office, the office of the Grand Almoner. It was also common, in well-to-do families, to set aside, at banquets and other festivities, 'the share of the poor'.

The monks, those great clearers of forest land, fulfilled a social function with regard to the poor. Their monasteries served as food stores in times of famine. They distributed bread and soup to those in want and gave shelter to 'poor travellers'.

The government imposed a special 'poor rate' or tax for the poor, levied on all non-indigent citizens. In Paris, this tax was fixed by the Poor Board. Every Monday, sixteen burgesses, three parish priests, two canons and several parliamentarians met for this purpose. The same was the case at Rouen, Marseille and a number of other important French towns.

Magistrates also busied themselves with the relief of poverty: instead of condemning rich people to prison, they would often impose heavy fines to be paid to the Poor Board of the Hospice or to the Grand Almoner.

A royal edict made it a strict duty for all school masters to accept poor children without charge. Jesuit colleges were free for all day pupils, so no poor child need be rejected.

But the ragged clothes, the coarse language, the lice that were characteristic of most really poor children drew down on them the contempt of the sons of the more fortunate. Consequently, the poor and the rich did not mingle in the colleges.

La Salle reversed this situation by making the most wretched ragamuffins clean, polite and eager to learn. Soon, the rich themselves would be attracted to his schools for the poor by the novelty of their organisation, the breadth of their curriculum, and their sheer success. Social barriers fell with the refining of the sensitivity of children previously badly brought-up.

(6) Social Life and Manners.

a) Customs:

In towns, as in the countryside, people followed the rhythm of the sun. They rose at dawn and went to bed at sunset. Each evening, at 8 or 9 o'clock, according to the season, the night watchman sounded the curfew. Following that, no one was allowed to wander about the streets. The constables arrested vagabonds and took them to the Hospice for the Poor which also served as a night refuge. The next day, the steward of this establishment would demand some work from them in exchange for food and shelter.

At breakfast, little was eaten, La Salle informs us in his 'Civility' that 'the ordinary practise of respectable people, when they breakfast, is to eat a piece of bread and drink one or two mouthfuls; beyond that, one must be content with dinner (the midday meal) and with supper, as is the custom among the well-behaved'.

However, the accepted practice recommended by La Salle is not that of the uneducated nor even that of the country folk, however estimable they may be. He is concerned to prepare town children to take their place without difficulty in a world of cultured and well-mannered people. So that the children of artisans and labourers might not feel despised, so that they might not feel out of place when they came into contact with well-to-do families, an education suitable to their position was required. Certain ways, customary among country people and manual labourers must be abandoned, for townspeople of any education regarded them as vulgar and coarse. It is in this sense that he remarks, in his 'Civility': 'It is contrary to good manners and somewhat rustic to offer a person a drink and urge him to take it, except when a person has just arrived from the country, hot and thirsty, and needs this little solace'. (p.79) The author is not writing for country schools; he is thinking of what one needs to know when one lives in a town. Education supposes a perfect adaptation of one's way of living to the environment in which one lives.

Among the nobility and the higher gentry, a life style unknown to the poor was created by the custom of primogeniture in inheritance, by the importance of family ties in the choice of a career, by the fact that marriage brought one into a whole new network of relationships, by the employment of wet-nurses and of tutors for the early education of children, by the large number of family servants in every household.

The comic dramatist, Moliere, has left us a fairly accurate portrait of life among the lower class. Elder sisters bring up the

younger children; from the age of 13 or 14, younger daughters enter service in a bourgeois household; people marry late. Whereas marriages from 16 years of age are not unknown among the nobility, the ordinary practise of the lower class would be to defer marriage until the age of 28 to 30.

Once married, the lower class housewife had no hesitation about standing up to her husband, regardless of French law, which developing from Roman law, made the husband the head of the family. She worked all day. Holidays were unknown to her. Her children were a source of endless worry; deaths in infancy; illnesses for which there were no remedies; vagabondage in the streets; squabbles with the neighbours. Unhealthy lodgings, problems of heating and danger of fire, absence of washing and toilet facilities ... all this was a heavy burden on family life.

.....  
Of Propriety and of Fashion in Clothes:

It is also necessary, if clothes are to be correct, to pay attention to the age of the person for whom they are intended ..

It would, for instance, be unbecoming for a boy of fifteen to be dressed in black, unless he were a cleric or were training to become one. It would seem absurd for a young man who was thinking of getting married to be clad as plainly and as simply as an old man of seventy.

It is of no less consequence that a person who is having a suit of clothes made should have regard to his position, since it would not be seemly for a poor man to be clad like a rich person, for a commoner to be dressed like a person of rank ...

A coat trimmed with gold braid, or made of some rare fabric, is proper only for a person of rank and a commoner who would want to wear a suit of this kind would make himself a laughing-stock; beside which, he would incur an expense that would undoubtedly be offensive to God, being above what is required by his state in life and what his means would allow. It would also be most improper for a tradesman to wear a feather in his hat or to carry a sword at his side.

... What provides the best rule concerning the rightness of clothing is fashion; one must without fail follow it. For as the mind of man is highly subject to change, and as what pleased him yesterday no longer pleases him today, men have invented, and invent daily, different ways of dressing so as to satisfy their fickle minds; and he who would dress today as one dressed thirty years ago, would

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be taken for a singular and ridiculous person. It is however a characteristic of the behaviour of a well-bred man never to be conspicuous in any way.

Men call Fashion the way in which clothes are made at the present time ... The surest and most sensible rule concerning fashions is never to be their innovator, nor to be the first to adopt them, and not to delay leaving a fashion until there is no one else following it.

Of Simplicity and Cleanliness of Clothes:

The way to set limits to fashion and to prevent those following it from going to excess, is to control it, and reduce it to moderation, which should be the rule of any Christian in everything that pertains to the exterior ... As women are, by their nature, less capable of great things than men, so they are also more subject to vanity and ostentation in their clothes. It is for this reason that St. Paul, after applying himself to exhort men to avoid the coarser vices into which they fall more easily than women, then goes on to advise women to dress simply ...

The Rules of Propriety and of Christian Civility.  
Chapter III, arts. I and II.  
J.B. de La Salle (1703 edn.)

.....

b) Instruction and Knowledge:

The 17th century peasant read little and wrote less. Working with his hands, receiving no printed matter, he rarely had any need for either reading or writing. But to make up for it, he could count both quickly and accurately. It was still a culture of verbal, not written, communication.

The country population was not dense enough to permit schools of more than one class in the tiny villages. Journeys of four to ten kilometres, that were necessary to reach the nearest school, were too much for eight year old legs. A cleric, training for the priesthood, a curate who might be a deacon or a sub-deacon, a sacristan would 'show' the children how to read and write during the slack periods in the countryman's year.

For colleges in the towns, holidays were limited to three weeks, or perhaps only a fortnight in September - not in August - but small villages found many an opportunity to close the school. Absenteeism from school was one of the problems of the age.

Among the working people, an apprenticeship in a guild, the rudiments of reading and writing, a better knowledge of arithmetic and calculating, an instruction which would enable them to move up

the hierarchy of their trade - these were the things that mattered.

Grammar, philosophy, history, literature appeared to them to be totally useless. More than knowledge, they needed ability. But genuine apprenticeship - of all that is necessary to go through life - takes place in the family, in the company of skilled workmen. It was through experience rather than by study that they knew their rights, ever ready to haggle over them, even though they might have forgotten the basics of their childhood handwriting and be unable to sign their marriage certificates. They knew their plants without having studied botany, the strength of materials without knowing the laws of physics. The homespun common sense of the characters of La Fontaine's Fables and of Molière's Comedies was the result of these lessons learnt in the book of life.

The upbringing of girls differed from that of boys; the aims were not the same. The main social role of boys among the common people was to become capable of supporting a family through hard, manual labour, whereas the role of girls, even when still quite young, was to begin helping the mother to look after her other children. Public opinion, even among the nobility and the upper middle class, treated with derision women who wished to learn. Fénelon wrote, of high society, that 'nothing was more neglected than the education of girls'. Father Barré, a priest of the Order of Minims, and Canon Roland, both directors of St. J.B. de La Salle sought to remedy this sorry state of affairs. They set themselves to improve the education of girls because they wanted to train good mothers - since the whole future of society depends on them more than on men. They maintained that school mistresses could teach religion like priests, because the primitive Church had instituted deaconesses to assist the clergy in the instruction of women.

A different perspective was opened up by the classical authors, more in keeping with Fénelon's comments on the education of boys and girls. Equality of the sexes was not accepted, the emphasis was rather on their differences and complementary qualities. Men are said to be less sensitive, less curious, less attentive to detail than women: the latter are more subtle, more gentle. Boys and girls therefore do not have the same motivation in their work.

The 17th century also had different objectives - the same educational system could not suit both boys and girls. Girls needed to learn sewing, knitting, weaving, spinning, how to manage a small shop; boys had to prepare themselves to earn their living, among the common people, by heavy manual work: the shaping of raw materials, the making of tools, building work of all kinds ... none of which can be taught to small children.

The 17th century was therefore convinced that both teachers and school curriculum had to adapt to the special needs of boys or the qualities of girls. Boys and girls frequented different establishments, especially from about 1680. Girls would leave school at an earlier age, despite the edicts of Louis XIV making schooling obligatory until the age of fourteen, because they were needed at home from the age of ten to help look after the house. There was no question of their needing to read latin, since no priest would ask a girl to serve Mass. For boys, on the other hand, great emphasis was placed by parish priests on the reading of latin: it was important to have altar servers and choristers who could sing at weddings and funerals and the children of the poor were nothing loth to raise a few pennies' pocket money by serving Mass, assisting at baptisms etc.

John-Baptist de La Salle took over what was already established. He did not concern himself with girls, already well provided with educationalists of talent; the vacuum existed in the training of masters for boys. It was on this area that he concentrated his efforts and in so doing responded to one of the most urgent needs of his time, and in this specialised field, he acquired an experience and a competence without parallel. Whilst most of the congregations of the 17th century offered their members a varied field of activity, such as the care of the sick, preaching, teaching, La Salle blazed a new trail: he raised to the dignity of a religious vocation the teaching of the children of the people, he invented a community whose members would work 'together and by association ... in free schools'.

c) Religious Life.

Everywhere, for the common people, distractions were rare, except for wakes and liturgical festivals, which drew people together. Such festivals were multiplied by the Church, not as La Fontaine suggested in order to reduce a workman's income, but to reduce his work load. For the working day could be as long as fourteen hours with no Saturday rest nor paid holidays nor summer break. Servants were not even free to dispose of their Sundays. On the holy days when Mass was of obligation, all work was forbidden. Religious life had an intensity that we find hard to visualise today. At Paris, in the church of Saint-Sulpice, the first Mass began, on week-days as on Sundays, at 4 a.m. The congregation was numerous and in Lent there would be a sermon. A clergy of more than forty priests ensured the fulfilment of wills and contracts providing for masses to be said. The 17th century was bathed in an atmosphere of christianity, of faith, love of God and the neighbour, which no longer surrounds us. But nonetheless, vice, lawsuits based on envy, and hatred were equally present.



(7) A World in crisis.

a) Changes in the way men thought:

In the 17th century, the proportion of people of culture and that of the illiterate was the opposite of that of today in advanced societies, and the world of the common people had ways of thinking that were very different from those of the nobility and the bourgeoisie.

It was the cultured circles alone that frequented the colleges and universities. Philosophy figured largely in the curriculum, based on Aristotle and Aquinas. It included cosmography, mathematics, notions of physics, as well as ethics and metaphysics. Writers like Montaigne were suspect because doubt was not desirable. Fierce opposition held in check, for a time, the theories of Copernicus concerning the movement of the earth around the sun. Descartes (1596-1650) attempted to renovate methods of reasoning but he came up against tradition. In medicine, the Englishman Harvey experienced the same difficulty confronting his discovery of the circulation of the blood. One must, however, in fairness, note that Copernicus, Descartes, Harvey mingled with their prescient observations, fanciful notions that laid them open to the attacks of their opponents.

In mathematics, Pascal (1623-1662) invented the infinitesimal calculus and applied it to gambling, to study the probabilities of winning or losing, a practical problem for a people much given to games of chance. In physics, Pascal's experiments on weight and Mariotte's on the movement of liquids contradicted certain ancient popular principles and prepared the way for the reform of a number of techniques that were paralysing the progress of various professions: 'nature abhors a vacuum' was now to become an obsolete notion. Improvements in optical instruments allowed Louis' minister Colbert (1619-1683) to encourage the Academy of Science to build the Paris Observatory. A popular author, Cyrano de Bergerac, (1619-1655) was already making his readers dream of a fantastic 'Journey to the Moon'.

The traditional way of reasoning from first principles, or from Scripture, wrongly considered to contain scientific accuracy, was thus overthrown. The result was that consciences were hurt: the basis of their thinking was being attacked: so they rejected novelty. Cartesianism, as Descartes' philosophy became known, was condemned by the University of Paris, the Sorbonne. The ordinary people remained aside from these intellectual and scientific disputations but they were nonetheless disturbed at the sight of these doubts and contradictions of the learned.

b) Superstitions, religious ignorance, disbelief.

Religious ignorance was wide-spread, the result of the lack of any broadly-based culture and of the absence of effective means of communication. 'Free-thinkers' flaunted their incredulity. In his younger days, Nicholas Roland had encountered atheists who jeered at his piety and mocked him when he bowed before the Blessed Sacrament being carried to a sick person. A high ranking nobleman, the Prince de Condé, and a doctor, Bourdelot, undertook one day to burn a relic, a piece of the true cross.

On the other hand, others were credulous to a degree; palpable fakes were accepted as genuine relics. Old mediæval superstitions were far from dead, belief in alchemy had not disappeared but lay dormant, secret practices were spread by word of mouth. In 1676 an appalling criminal case burst on society. Among people of high society, among circles close to the king himself, magic philters and poisons had been distributed; there was evidence of deaths, orgies, black masses, witchcraft. A whole underworld of spall-binders, of fortune tellers, of 'magicians' was compromised. Finally the matter was hushed up on orders from on high but there was one outstanding victim, an adventuress, the Marchioness de Brinvilliers, who was beheaded and her body burnt and the ashes dispersed. The society gossip and letter writer Mme de Sévigné, was delighted at the result.

.....

St. John's Fires and Superstition in the 18th century:

- Q. Why does the Church express such joy at the birth of John the Baptist?
- A. She does so in order to perpetuate the joy forecast by the angel.
- Q. Is that the reason why bonfires are lit?
- A. Yes, that is the reason.
- Q. Does the Church take part in these fires?
- A. Yes, since in several dioceses and particularly in this one, a number of parishes light a fire that we call 'church fire'.
- Q. For what reason does the Church take part in the lighting of the fire?
- A. To banish the superstitions which people practise at St. John's Fire.
- Q. What are these superstitions?
- A. Dancing round the fire, gambling, feasting, singing lewd songs, throwing herbs across the fire, gathering them before midday or when fasting, carrying them on one's person, preserving the brands or embers from the fire,

or other such-like practices.

Bossuet: Catechism of the Diocese of Meaux.

- Q. What are the abuses that have crept into this ceremony in the course of time?
- A. Superstitious practices such as turning round in a certain way, or turning circles round the fire and making the animals do the same, carrying away fire-brands, embers, ashes, wearing girdles made from plants, throwing over or through the flames bundles of herbs ...
- Q. What is the order of this ceremony?
- A. While the fire is burning, one of the laymen in charge stokes the wood to make it blaze and burn up more rapidly; and one of the senior priests stands by the fire to remind the people of their duty and to prevent anyone from removing even the tiniest piece of wood or charcoal which could be used for superstitious practices, as also to prevent any other disorderly behaviour. Then, when all is over, buckets of water are poured on the embers to extinguish what remains of the fire, the ashes are immediately taken away, the place is tidied up, the carpet and the picture of St. John are put away, all of which is done under the supervision of the one in charge of the fire.

Instructions for the people concerning ...  
the manner in which the fire is to be  
made on the Nativity of St. John the  
Baptist, so as to rid it of its abuses  
and superstitious practices.

Texts quoted by Jean Delumeau, Catholicism between Luther  
and Voltaire, English translation, London 1977,

.....

c) Doctrinal disputes and tensions:

The Catholic world was shaken by jansenism, gallicanism, quietism. People of noble minds and generous natures were in open conflict with one another. Parishes and even families were often split by divergent views.

Jansenism, the doctrine emanating from the Belgian bishop, Jansenius, preached an extremely rigorous ethical code. The Jesuits became the defenders of Rome and the orthodox view but lay themselves open to attack by some of their writings concerning the conciliation of freedom of the will and the doctrines of grace and divine prescience. Pascal entered the fray and derided the Jesuits in a series of brilliant 'letters' 1656-7, which had an enormous success with the educated public. The Abbey of Port Royal, near Paris, became the

centre of Jansenism. In opposition to the jansenist views that salvation was reserved to the select few, some confessors distinguished an infinite number of cases of conscience and of circumstances, which pushed too far, suppressed all responsibility. The nature of grace, the good or evil nature of man, the rareness or frequency of communion became subjects hotly discussed by both laymen and priests. Parish priests who supported Jansenism would refuse to communicate to their parishioners the directives of the pope under the pretext that they had not been registered by the parliament of Paris, itself strongly jansenist, or that they themselves were independent of their bishop because they had received the benefice of their parish direct from Rome.

The bishops Bossuet and Fénelon engaged in a dispute over different ways of praying. Just as the techniques of Zen and Yoga are of interest today, methods of recollection and of meditation formed the subject of many conversations in the 17th century. The 'quietists' pretended that anyone can feel in some sensible manner the actual presence of God and enter into direct contact with him; no effort, no particular virtue seemed necessary to them; simple, 'quiet' passivity of the soul would automatically produce the effect.

Without entering into these disputes which were above their heads, the common people were still affected by them. La Salle does not hesitate to speak of 'these unhappy times'. Faced with the general confusion of ideas, he preferred to abide by the directives of the pope. He was suspicious of extremist theories. He provided his teachers and their pupils with books that were both reliable and doctrinally sound. Everything that was simply a matter for controversy, that was not universally accepted by the Church, was to be regarded as suspect, or at least, as inopportune for people who are not specialist theologians. He asked the Brothers of the Christian Schools to 'leave disputes of erudition to the erudite' and to confine themselves to 'what is of faith in the Church'. Scholarship and the practice of religion were each to be confined to its own rightful place. But he did not separate them radically, as though the secular and the sacred were two different and mutually incomprehensible worlds. For him, they were rather complementary aspects of the same divine creation. This indeed was one side of his own genius: to know how to remain within the area of his own competence; to know how to unite rather than to separate what is all 'God's work'.

d) Attempts at Reform:

A great movement of Catholic reform was launched by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Seminaries were opened for the training of priests.

Following Cardinal de Bérulle, the Oratorians preached on the worship and respect due to God; the Sulpicians exalted the dignity of the priesthood and the vital importance of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, confession, the anointing of the sick; St. Vincent de Paul radiated his own aura of charity over all human miseries. Everywhere, the thought of God was made actual and church bells reminded men that life is not limited by death or earthly horizons.

And yet, the common people remained almost untouched by this great revival. Not being able to read, they could not educate themselves, acquire information, base their ideas on serious grounds. They could learn about government decrees through the announcements made by the parish priest during the sunday mass. Sermons made some attempt to educate consciences but no one was ignorant of the fact that words easily vanish into thin air or that there can be as many interpreters of a speech as there are hearers. For this reason, preachers like St. Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716) or Father Barré recommended the creation of schools so that children could learn to read and so be in a position to acquire for themselves all they needed to know as adults and as christians. To the opening of a parish mission often corresponded the opening of a school. But once the mission was over, the school soon collapsed. It would all have to be done over again the following year.

La Salle found himself up against the same problem: how to give stability to the school and also to the teachers. This was impossible to accomplish with teachers who had no pride in their work. La Salle set out to rectify this - to teachers he would reveal the glory of their work. He spoke of the 'ministry' of the christian teacher, putting it on a par with the ministry of the bishop, not in the sense that the teacher commissioned by the Church is in any way superior to the priest, but because the teacher participates in the specific teaching function of the bishop, a mission in which the priest also, of course, shares. The teachers formed by La Salle were men who would become devoted to their chosen mission confining themselves to it, specialising in it, so as to increase their competence and efficiency in a work so essential to society and to the church.

.....

One of the principal duties of fathers and mothers is to bring up their children in a christian manner and to teach them their religion; but as most of them are not sufficiently

enlightened on this subject and some are busy with their daily concerns and the care of their families while others are continually occupied earning their living for themselves and their children, they are unable to find time to teach them the duties of a christian.

It is a mark of God's providence and of his watchful guidance of men's lives that he replaces fathers and mothers by other persons who are sufficiently enlightened and devoted to initiate children in the knowledge of God and his mysteries; who take good care of them and, like good architects, make every effort to lay the foundations of religion and of christian piety in the hearts of these children, many of whom are abandoned to their own devices, according to the grace of Jesus Christ which has been given them; you, then, whom God has called to this ministry, use the gift, according to the grace which has been given you, of instructing in your lessons and of inspiring in your exhortations, those who have been entrusted to your care, so as to fulfil in their regard the principal duties of fathers and mothers towards their children.

Meditations for the Time of Retreat,  
by J.B. de La Salle,  
1st meditation, 2nd point.

.....  
(8) Major Dates in the life of St. J.B. de La Salle. (1651-1719)

The period of the principal Lasallian 'options' was also the period of the zenith and decline of the reign of Louis XIV, the era of the 'crisis in the European Conscience' (1680-1715). The years 1651-1679 corresponded to the formative years of the Founder.

The France of Cardinal Mazarin: (1651-61)

This was the period of the 'Fronde': Civil War, desolation, chaos, famine, epidemics, insecurity on the highways, banditry, pillaging by opposing armies ...

1651: 30 April: birth at Rheims of John Baptist de La Salle.

1651: September: Proclamation of the majority of Louis XIV, now 13 years old.

1658: The Poor Board of Rouen chose Adrian Nyel to be the supervisor of the Hospice for the Poor and responsible for the Charity Schools of the town.

- 1659: Father Barré arrived at Rouen and promoted the creation of Charity Schools for Girls.
- 1661: 9 March: death of Mazarin. His heir, the Duc de Mazarin would later ask de La Salle to open a training school for country schoolmasters.
- 1661: October: La Salle became a pupil at the College of the town of Rheims.

The France of Louis XIV: (1661-1715)

- 1661: Louis XIV chose Colbert, a commoner from Rheims, to be his chief minister.
- 1662: A year of famine, epidemics. Bossuet strove to make 'high society' aware of their duties towards the poor.
- 1662: 3 November: La Salle received the tonsure in the chapel of the archbishopric at Rheims.
- 1666: Canon Dozet, the chancellor of the university of Rheims, presided at a prize-giving ceremony, admired the learning of de La Salle, his second cousin and made over to him his canonry, an ecclesiastical benefice guaranteeing an annual income of 4000 livres.
- 1668: At Lycns, Charles Demia, the director of the diocesan schools, drew the attention of the public authorities to the social, economic and religious significance of schools for the poor.
- 1668-9: At Rheims, Canon Roland, inspired by these 'Remonstrances' of Demia, began the work of training women teachers for schools for poor girls.  
 La Salle completed his first year of theology at the university of Rheims, then went to Paris, to the seminary of Saint Sulpice and to follow courses at the Sorbonne, so as to prepare himself for ordination to the priesthood.
- 1671: La Salle lost his mother.
- 1672: La Salle lost his father and was obliged to assume the guardianship of his younger brothers and sisters.  
 Until 1678, he continued his theological studies at Rheims.
- 1678: La Salle obtained his licentiate in theology and was ordained priest in the cathedral of Rheims.  
 Death of Canon Roland: La Salle was named as the executor of his will and so had to concern himself with obtaining letters patent for the school mistresses known as the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.
- 1679: Adrian Nyel came to Rheims to set up free schools for boys: La Salle offered him lodging in his own home.
- 1680: La Salle obtained his doctorate of theology.  
 He began to assemble Nyel's teachers into a community.

- 1683-4: In the course of a very severe winter, La Salle gave away his whole fortune to the poor.
- 1685: Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes.
- 1686: Some of the Brothers of the Christian Schools consecrated themselves to God by a vow of obedience.
- 1689: La Salle left Rheims for Paris to avoid limiting his work to one diocese.
- 1691: With Nicholas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, La Salle pronounced the heroic vow to labour until death at establishing the society of Brothers.
- 1693-4: A winter of exceptional hardship, famine and deaths; on some days, the Brothers had nothing to eat.
- 1698: James II, exiled king of England, entrusted de La Salle with the education of fifty young Irish boys whose parents had followed the king into exile and were now living in straitened circumstances.
- Mme de Maintenon interceded on behalf of the lasallian schools which the writing masters were seeking to destroy.
- 1700: The King of Spain's will, accepted by Louis XIV, provoked a War of Succession between France and the Empire with England as its ally, inaugurating a period of great distress.
- 1701: Despite the unsafe state of the highways and the need to obtain a passport merely to pass from one province to another, La Salle sent two Brothers to Rome to give evidence of his submission to the pope.
- The superior of the Sulpicians confided Antoine Forget to La Salle, to be trained in his teaching methods before being sent to take charge of the schools in Montreal, Canada.
- 1704: The Paris writing masters insisted on closing the Brothers' schools in Paris and were upheld by the courts. The Brothers were condemned also by the Precentor of Notre Dame - the diocesan inspector of schools - because they accepted in their free schools children who were not truly poor.
- 1705: The Bull of Pope Clement XI, Vineam Domini, warned against the jansenist heresy. La Salle was hurt to see his brother Louis, a canon of Rheims, oppose the decisions of Rome.



- 1709: Another rigorous winter and a time of starvation. Lack of food forced the closure of the seminary for country schoolmasters, recently opened at St. Denis, near Paris. In Rome, Gabriel Drolin obtained the direction of one of the papal schools.
- 1713: The War of the Spanish Succession ended with the Treaty of Utrecht.  
The Bull Unigenitus condemned jansenism. In Paris, Cardinal de Noailles, hostile to the stand taken by Rome, allowed his resentment to fall on La Salle and the Brothers who were unswervingly loyal to the Pope.
- 1714: Claude Francois du Lac de Montisambert, an officer in the royal army, wished after the Treaty of Utrecht, to enter a religious order. From the Trappists he went to Grenoble where he learnt of the existence of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. La Salle, on visit to his communities, admitted him to the society.
- 1715: 1 September: Death of Louis XIV.

France under the Regency: 1715 ...

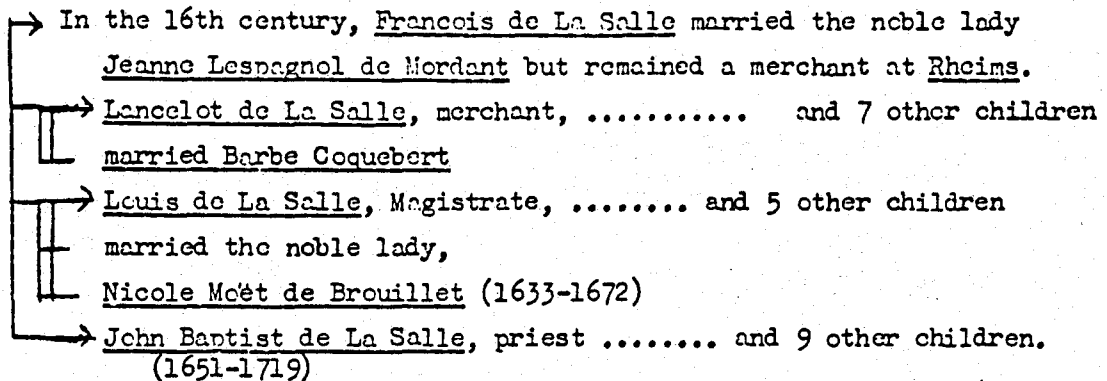
- 1715: The Parliament of Paris set aside the Will of Louis XIV; his brother, Philip of Orleans became Regent.
- 1716: At Calais, the military governor promised his assistance to secure the enlargement of La Salle's free school for sailors.
- 1717: In the name of Louis XV, the Regent granted letters-patent to the Brothers' community at Moulins.  
At St. Yon, near Rouen, Assembly of the First General Chapter of the Brothers and election of Brother Barthélemy, first Superior General of the congregation.
- 1718: Voltaire began to publish his works. Those whom the local people call the 'Yontins' by reference to St. Yon, he would derisively term the 'Ignorantins', since they did not teach latin, and also the Brothers with the wide hats.
- 1719: Friday, 7 April: Death at St. Yon of St. John Baptist de La Salle, at the age of 68 years. Even his bitterest enemies offered him homage.
- 1725: Approbation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by the Pope.
- 1900: Canonisation of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

### III. The Options that Presented Themselves to J.B. de La Salle

#### 1. Who was J.B. de La Salle?

##### a) His Family:

In the 15th century, Mennault de La Salle, draper at Soisson



John Baptist's father gave up the family business. At Rheims he had the reputation of being a worthy magistrate. He was a councillor of the King at the Presidial of Rheims, i.e. a judge.

Through his mother, John Baptist descended from the lords of Brouillet and was thus connected with the country gentry.

He was the eldest of a large family and shared the sorrow of his parents when four of his brothers and sisters died young.

The others were as follows:

- Jean Remy, a judge at the court for the royal Mint at Rheims.
- Jacques-Joseph, a canonist and professor of theology in the congregation of the Canons Regular of St. Genevieve.
- Jean-Louis, a canon of the cathedral of Rheims.
- Pierre, who inherited his father's office of judge at the Rheims Presidial.
- Rose-Marie, a Canoness of St. Augustine.
- Marie, married Jean Maillefer, merchant draper.

##### b) His Education:

Middle-class merchants, minor landed nobility, clergy, magistrates - intermingled in the family gatherings at the home of John Baptist. It was a social group whose dominant characteristics were knowledge of the law, administrative ability, desire for order, loyalty to the king, concern for the prosperity of their town, devotion to the church and to the maintenance of high principles in life.

As a youngster, John Baptist felt their influence. Until the age of nine, the customary age for starting school, parents and grand-parents were the principal educators. Reading was learnt from grandfather's breviary. The lives of the saints that grand-

mother loved to read engraved in the child's memory a host of examples of heroic generosity. While still very young, John Baptist wanted to consecrate himself to God. His parents allowed him to receive the tonsure and consequently to direct his future towards the priesthood.

At School, in the town of Rheims, he followed the normal curriculum of studies and passed the final examination, known in those days as Master of Arts. At the age of 16, he was noticed for his intelligence at a prize-giving ceremony and the Chancellor of the University chose him to be his successor as a canon of the cathedral of Rheims. John Baptist's vocation to the Church was made all the stronger. He studied theology at Rheims, then in Paris, and defended his theses for the degrees of bachelor and licentiate. Formed for 18 months at the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris, he was acquainted with the best spiritual teachers of his time. In 1678, he was ordained priest. In 1680, he received the robes of a doctor of theology. He could now become a professor at a seminary, the theological adviser to a bishop, a vicar-general ... His relations, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, all placed great hopes in him.

.....

Q. Is the tonsure an order?

R. No, because it confers no function in church, it merely gives the right to assist at the divine offices in surplice and to wear clerical dress.

Q. What then is the tonsure?

R. It is a ceremony of the Church, in which a christian is consecrated to God to be at his service in the clerical state.

Q. What intention must one have to receive the tonsure worthily?

R. One must have a genuine desire to become a cleric and to live worthily in this state.

Q. What dispositions must one have to receive the tonsure?

R. One must have the following three dispositions:

1. One must know at least how to read and write;
2. be confirmed;
3. be called to the clerical state.

Q. What are the obligations of one who has received the tonsure?

R. He has three special obligations:

1. He must have his hair short and wear the

clerical dress; he must, on Sundays and Holy Days, assist in surplice at the divine office in his parish church; he must frequent the sacraments and give example.

- Q. May parents oblige their children, or even urge them to receive the tonsure, merely in the hope of receiving some ecclesiastical benefice?
- R. No, they have no right to do so.
- Q. What wrong would fathers and mothers do who would oblige or urge their children to receive the tonsure merely in the hope of getting a benefice?
- R. They would do three grave wrongs to themselves:
1. They offend God;
  2. They are the cause of their children's damnation and of the scandal they give the Church;
  3. They damn themselves
- Q. What must be the attitude of mothers and fathers when they want their children to be tonsured?
- R. They must do six things:
1. Examine whether their children have the disposition for the clerical state and whether they appear to be called to it by God;
  2. Pray fervently to God to declare his holy will;
  3. Take the advice of their confessor or of some pious and learned churchman;
  4. Avoid having them enter the clerical state on the occasion or in the hope of some benefice.
  5. ....

## 2. The Option in favour of Schools.

Canon Roland, La Salle's spiritual director, had just died, after having established a community of teaching religious, the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. But they had so far obtained neither the approval of the bishop nor letters-patent from the king. La Salle found himself named as the executor of Roland's will and within a short space of time he had secured all the requisite authorisations for the Sisters. Despite the promptings of several of Roland's friends, he resolutely declined to undertake for boys a work similar to the one he had successfully completed for girls. 'This idea had never entered my mind' he later wrote (Blain I, 169). Schools were of no direct interest to him.

### a) The invitation to Nyel:

In 1679, the superintendent for the hospice for the poor at Rouen arrived in Rheims accompanied by a fourteen year old boy. Their purpose was to set up schools for the poor at Rheims on the model of those at Rouen. The administrators of the hospice were responsible for poor relief and could be expected to help. La Salle met Nyel at the house of the Sisters of the Holy Child and offered him the hospitality of his own home. He warned Nyel of the difficulties Roland had had with the hospice over the school for girls, and advised him to approach instead the parish priests, who were free to establish charity schools in their own parishes.

Nyel acted on this advice with the result that the parish priest of St. Maurice's church handed over to him his own charity school. This immediately broadened Nyel's work beyond the narrow confines of the hospice, concerned as it was only with abandoned children. Poor, but not necessarily destitute, families began to take advantage of Nyel's expertise. The school prospered and its numbers increased.

### b) The invitation to the Masters:

La Salle believed his share in the work was over. But another parish asked for his help. A generous benefactress offered an annual sum to help support a teacher but, as the sum was modest, it was necessary to find someone who, like Nyel would be satisfied with the essentials of lodging, food and clothing.

Nyel enthusiastically set about finding the teachers needed but, by now, the money available was proving insufficient: La Salle took over the management of the finances, adding to them from his own pocket. Finally, he rented a house for the teachers and invited them to share the meals with his own family.

c) Community life with the teachers:

As the guardian of his brothers and sisters, La Salle had been, since the death of his parents, accountable to a family council. Uncles and aunts were shocked to see their nephews and nieces sharing their meals with people 'of no class'.

These newcomers, whose teaching was limited to reading and writing had little conversation, less polish. Even La Salle himself esteemed them 'less than his man-servant'. The protests of his family were loud and many. But La Salle persisted with his idea: he wanted to associate with these masters to become familiar with a milieu he had never before frequented.

Unable to placate his relatives, he left the family mansion and set up in a rented house with the teachers, where he would no longer have cooks, servants, domestic comforts. The meals were cooked in typical peasant fashion and were unappetising: greasy soup, indigestible meat ... La Salle now had the experience of eating the food of the poor - and his stomach rebelled. It required long weeks during which he would either fast or force himself to overcome his repugnance and eat, before his stomach ceased to heave at every mealtime.

From then on, separated from his family, cut off from those of his own social circle, La Salle lived transplanted into the world of the teachers. Every day, he would hear, at first hand, the problems of educating the very poor, he would observe and reflect: gradually, he was to arrive at a solution. Two conclusions formed in his mind: one was an option in favour of a religious solution; the second, needed to maintain religious life intact, was an option in favour of the towns.

.....  
Of the things one uses when at table:

At table, one should use a napkin, a plate, a knife, a spoon and a fork; and it would be quite unbecoming to do without any one of these articles when eating. It is for the person of highest rank to unfold his napkin first, and the others should wait until he has done so before unfolding theirs.

It is impolite to use the napkin to wipe one's face; it is even worse to clean one's teeth with it; and it would be the height of rudeness to blow one's nose on it. It is also indecent to clean the plates and dishes with it. When one is at table, one may and one should make use of the napkin to

wipe one's mouth, lips, fingers, when they are greasy, to wipe the knife clean before cutting bread and to clean the spoon and fork after using them.

... When the spoon, fork or knife are dirty, it is most impolite to lick them, and it is not at all proper to wipe them or indeed anything else, on the table cloth.

When the plate is dirty, one must avoid scraping it with the spoon and still more must one avoid using one's fingers to clean one's plate or the bottom of a dish; that would be quite uncouth.

Of the way to cut and serve meat and how to help oneself:

... So that one does not take for oneself the best pieces, which could sometimes happen by error when one does not know better, and so that one can serve them correctly to the right persons, it seems that it would be useful at this point to explain what they are, in order to avoid any possibility of making mistakes. With boiled meat, the breast of capon or chicken is considered the best part and the legs are esteemed better than the wings; in a joint of beef, the part which is a mixture of fat and lean is always the best. Roast pigeons are served whole or cut in half. In birds that scratch the ground with their legs, the wings are the more tasty parts, but the legs are to be preferred in birds that fly ...

The Rules of Propriety and of Christian Civility  
Chapter IV, parts II and IV  
by J.B. de La Salle, 1703 edition.

.....  
3. The option for religious life:

In the early stages of the work, La Salle concerned himself with the teachers 'from the outside'. He was a secular priest; as yet, he had no intention whatever of becoming a religious. But circumstances, in which he saw the hand of God, shaped the future differently. Nyel left Rheims for the town of Laon where he was invited to found still more schools. La Salle found himself left with the teachers on his hands and the teachers were weak, unstable, ignorant of their religion.

a) Detachment and Community Life.

So a second stage began. La Salle received the teachers at his own family table. He gave them no wages for the simple reason

that money was lacking. Naturally, some of the teachers left as soon as they could find themselves a normal salaried post. Others set themselves up as writing masters or in charge of boarding houses. Jobless people, with no special qualifications, were accepted to fill the gaps but the rate of turn-over was even more rapid. La Salle found himself having to sift out these would-be teachers and reject the unsuitable. For the others, he devised a pattern of set prayer times and spiritual reading. But his relatives found this style of life too austere and complained of the association with the humble school teachers.

Another solution had to be found. La Salle left his family and began a genuine community life in a separate house. A suitable rule of life was drawn up with a detailed time-table: mass, prayers, religious studies, class preparation, recreation, walks ... La Salle presided the prayers and initiated the teachers in meditation. This type of community living, set up by mutual agreement without specific commitments, was not uncommon in the 17th century. But La Salle could not leave matters at that point. He was wealthy, whereas his teachers were poor. Fear of the future constantly preoccupied them; there were desertions; those who remained worried about their poverty. It was then that La Salle took the decision to give away all his wealth to the poor and so to become like every other member of his community, sharing with gladness their feeling of insecurity which is the constant lot of the poor.

b) Vows and a Distinctive Habit:

From sheer necessity, the clothes worn by the teachers were simple and rapidly tended to uniformity. As they were typical of the clothes generally worn at the time, the jobless imagined that the tiny Lasallian community took in anyone wishing to learn the art of school teaching. Nothing stood in the way of leaving as soon as the life became too demanding. Instability persisted.

La Salle talked it over with his teachers. Two decisions were reached: the community voted in favour of a distinctive habit rather like the clothes worn by peasants in the Champagne countryside and they chose the name of Brothers of the Christian Schools by which they would henceforth be known. From this moment, it would be apparent to all that this fellowship of school teachers was singularly like a religious order. Henceforth no one would think lightly of joining it; to do so would require a special 'vocation'.

The beneficial results were not slow in appearing: students thinking of entering the seminary to train for the priesthood



joined instead the Brothers of the Christian Schools. La Salle was now able to suggest to those who seemed most suited that they should bind themselves by a vow of obedience. This commitment, at first temporary, for one or three years, was later made perpetual. In 1694, the Founder and twelve Brothers consecrated themselves to the Holy Trinity, promising obedience 'to the body of this society' as well as to its superiors. To this basic vow, they added the specific vow of conducting free schools together and by association even though to do so they might have 'to beg and to subsist on bread alone'.

Twenty years later, the sound organisation and the development of the Society made it unlikely that they would be reduced to begging in order to subsist. The heroic phrase disappeared from the formula of vows but its spirit was not rejected. If he was to keep his free schools open to all and well adapted to the needs of the common people, the Brother owed it to himself to be ever ready for all renunciations.

Together with obedience to his superiors, the Brothers practised poverty, that is to say, detachment from wealth and common possession of all goods. Consecrated celibacy, or perfect chastity, was seen in a positive manner as a total offering to God of all one's physical and affective powers. La Salle insisted on the virtue of purity as an exclusive loyalty to God, a union with Christ which does not prevent the Brothers from 'loving tenderly' his pupils or from being 'affable' to the mothers of his schoolboys. If the teachers of the Lasallian community did not take genuine 'vows of religion' as early as 1694, it was because the Church required before permitting such commitments, episcopal or pontifical approbation of the society. La Salle desired that this approbation should be pontifical, because his society already stretched across the boundaries of several dioceses.

c) Consecrated laymen in a teaching ministry:

La Salle was in no hurry to ask the Pope to give approbation to the society. The latter's structures had not as yet reached the definitive form he desired, under the direction of a Brother. Despite his own efforts, until 1712, he was repeatedly re-elected superior at each general assembly of the Brothers. But he was a priest, a doctor of theology, a former canon of the cathedral of Rheims, and he did not wish to see priests in the society. The idea of a lay superior was close to his heart ever since the death of a Brother whom he had been preparing for ordination to

the priesthood and which he had taken as a clear sign of God's will. Since then, his own reflections had confirmed him in this conclusion. As for the teachers for the countryside, since they were not organised in a community but were prepared for their work in his training college, he saw no inconvenience in having ecclesiastics among their number.

But he was equally determined that the Brothers whose vocation was to community life and who worked in town schools, should remain lay men. In the highly structured society of the 17th century, the priesthood conferred social superiority and privilege, it raised the recipient above the level of the poor. La Salle wished his Brothers to be on the same level as their pupils so that the educational role of the Brothers might be enhanced by the effect of their example. In his Meditations for the Time of Retreat, he recalls the fact that baptism and confirmation make all christians share in the 'ministries' that are the responsibility of the bishops. The teacher has no need of any additional sacrament in order to pursue his 'ministry'. La Salle goes even further. Since it is the bishops in the church, not the priests, who are directly responsible for the 'ministry of teaching', christian teachers share in ministry of the bishops rather than in that of the priests and other ecclesiastics. This thought is, of course, based on the premise that every Brother is a teacher of religion and works for the christian formation of his pupils. It simply does not admit the possibility that a Brother might not be interested in the religious dimension of education or withdraw into an exclusively secular teaching.

There is another reason why de La Salle takes this stance: the Brother should not be tempted to abandon his humble vocation with poor children, lured by the prospect of more exalted functions, nor diverted from the care of his pupils by duties foreign to the 'ministry of the school' which he might find entrusted to him by the Church. For in the 18th century, any man of culture taking up teaching in poor schools would lose social standing whilst anyone receiving the priesthood would rise socially.

The elements of the problem have since changed, yet the broad outline of Lasallian principles still remain valid: equality among the Brothers; revaluation of the 'ministry' of the lay teacher; specialisation in one specific mission of the church.

.....

God is so good that, having created men, he wishes them all to come to the knowledge of truth, that truth which

is God himself and what he has had the goodness to reveal to us, through Jesus Christ, or through the apostles, or through the church; of this, God wishes all men to be instructed so that the light of faith might shine in their minds. And one can only be taught the Mysteries of our holy religion if one has had the happiness of hearing them, an advantage one will have only by the preaching of the word of God (For how will men believe, says the Apostle, in Him of whom they have not heard?). It is for this reason that God, who through the ministry of men, spreads through the world the perfume of his teaching and who commanded light to issue from darkness, has himself enlightened the hearts of those whom he has destined to announce his word to children so that by their teaching these children may be enlightened with the glory of God.

Since God then, by his mercy, has given you so great a ministry, do not falsify his word, but acquire from him the glory of revealing the truth to those whom it is your duty to instruct and may this be your whole concern in the lessons you give them considering yourselves as the Ministers of God and the dispensers of his mysteries. ... That is why you must honour your ministry, working for their salvation: for since God (following the expression of St. Paul) has made of you his ministers to reconcile them with him, and has entrusted to you the word of reconciliation on their behalf, exhort them as if God were exhorting them through you, God who has destined you to announce to these youngsters the truths of the Gospel and to procure for them the means of salvation adapted to their age; tell them of this, but not with studied phrases, lest the cross of Jesus Christ, the source of our sanctification, be annihilated by them and lest all your studied words be fruitless in their hearts and minds: for these children are simple and for the most part, badly brought-up, so that those who would help them to save themselves must do so in so simple a manner that all their words are clear and easily understood. Be faithful then to this practice, so that you may contribute so far as God desires of you, to the salvation of those he has entrusted to you.

Meditations for the Time of the Retreat, that the Brothers of the Christian Schools will have during the holidays, by J.B. de La Salle.  
1st meditation: 1st and 2nd points

d) Official recognition of the novitiate and of the religious life:

From 1694, even from some years earlier, the Brothers of the Christian Schools lived an authentic religious life. They have an annual retreat; they follow a Rule structured on the rules of other religious orders; young men wishing to join the community must begin by a period in the novitiate. Here, their time is spent in the study of christian doctrine, they live their life in the presence of God, performing acts of charity and detachment, giving practical application to their zeal in classrooms with children, learning how to improve their techniques of instruction and how also to perfect themselves as educators.

At the general assembly of the Brothers in 1717, La Salle was at last successful in having his resignation as superior accepted. To forestall the possibility of any precedent being established, he insisted that his successor, Brother Barthelemy, should be known as the 'first' superior general of the congregation. La Salle, the priest, wished for no other distinction than that of being a Brother and a teacher in the congregation he had founded.

Without further delay, steps were taken to obtain papal approval. Since, for this, royal letters patent were essential, a property was bought at St. Yon, near Rouen. This property, where the novitiate was already situated, would become the official centre of the congregation. La Salle died in 1719, but the events he had set in motion pursued their course; six years later, Pope Benedict XIII gave official recognition to the Brothers of the Christian Schools as a religious institute, in which the members bound themselves by vows of 'chastity, poverty, obedience, stability and teaching the poor gratuitously'.

(4) The Option in favour of towns.

a) Offers refused:

The duc de Mazarin, baron of Château-Porcien, asked for Brothers to staff his country schools which he was anxious to set up across his estates. In the country surrounding Rheims, several parish priests also made a request for teachers, in the period 1683-1685. La Salle was only at the beginning of his venture but already he could foresee serious difficulties in dealing with the countryside in the same way as with the towns. He therefore refused. The Brothers were destined to work in towns, not to be dispersed throughout the country villages. But the latter would not be neglected. For them, La Salle decided to create training colleges, which he called 'seminaries for country school teachers'. These teachers could live alone; they could be ecclesiastics - tonsured clerics, sub-deacons, deacons. The hope that, once ordained priests, they would continue to teach in elementary

schools seemed an illusion; at Lyons, D mia was already setting up schools staffed by teachers who were clerics, but as soon as these teachers became priests, they thought themselves 'fit to go higher', in other words to exercise their pastoral ministry with young people and with adults in the much wider apostolate of the parish.

La Salle accepted that the masters he had trained in his colleges for country teachers might later become priests and give up their work in elementary schools; other, younger men were there to replace them. Following the parish priests of the countryside near Rheims, it was the turn of the parish priest at Crosne near Paris, who approached La Salle to ask for teachers trained by him. We have the substance of La Salle's reply: it was impossible to accede to the wishes of the parish priest of Crosne because the duties of secretary in a presbytery were incompatible with the assiduous nature of the work in any well-run school.

Other refusals were given on two occasions to requests from the hospice for the poor in Montreal: this hospice was not for the Brothers and they could not accept to be dispersed throughout the countryside without running the risk of destroying their own institute.

b) Hopes and expansion:

La Salle showed himself to be as favourable to requests from towns as he was reluctant to entertain those from the country.

When the archbishop of Rheims made him a very tempting offer if he would remain in the diocese, La Salle preferred to eschew security in favour of sending Brothers to the capital, Paris. From that vantage point, so he had been told, he could radiate over the whole of France. Not once did he refuse Brothers to any sizeable town once the conditions for normal religious life were guaranteed. At the most, he might request a delay when he lacked the necessary personnel.

In Marseilles, he hoped to assume very rapidly the responsibility for four schools of the town; in Rome, he wanted all the 'papal schools' to be run by the Brothers; in Lyons, he himself took the initiative. At the request of persons of influence, he sent off Brothers to negotiate the conditions for their stay in the town. In the end, it was not he but the diocesan authorities who did not follow up the project: the masters formed by D mia were not to be replaced by others. At Mende, Grenoble, Rouen, he replied every time with a 'yes'.

His work did not shun any region, any diocese. So long as a town was large enough to require a minimum of four teachers for the education of all the poorer population, La Salle was prepared to send in Brothers, even if, at the outset, only one or two classes were envisaged. His confidence in the success of his Institute was such that he expected

rapid results. Within a short space of time, four classes would be opened and he would send in a team of five Brothers to ensure that the school was well run.

c) Motives:

In the 17th century, town and country did not have the same educational needs. Reading and writing were not so useful in a rural area as in an urban setting. Contrasted with the concentration of people in a town, the country could offer only a low density of population and a very wide dispersion. Its tiny villages did not permit a large enough number of boys to be assembled so as to give work to a teacher for a whole year; if he was to survive, the teacher had to take up other jobs - sacristan, secretary or scrivener.

Again, in the towns a more or less correct form of French was spoken, but in the country the local dialect varied from province to province. A master wishing to adapt to his pupils would need to know the local customs and become acquainted with rural ways and expressions. The rhythm of the seasons, the interruption of school by the harvest or grape-gathering, the impossibility for children to cross flooded land on the way to school or to make their way along snow-covered lanes gave rise to very special conditions of teaching. Schools could only be opened periodically and the teachers might find themselves free for a great part of the year. Time-tables and programmes were considerably lighter than in the towns.

But La Salle wanted 'specialists'. He maintained that the christian education of children through schooling involved the whole man. He prepared his Brothers for a specific mission: he gave them the spirit of acting in common. All pedagogical, educational, even religious questions would be discussed in the community so as to evolve a mode of action to be adopted by all. In this way, the Brothers of the Christian Schools became a 'corporate body' in which the Brothers undertook to maintain 'together and by association free schools'. At any moment, and according to whatever need (illness, departure ...) each can be replaced by another: the educational aims remained the same, the teaching methods did not vary, the local teaching team suffered no disturbance, the children were not put under stress by divergent regulations.

Time-tables, curriculum, methods, text-books, everything was adapted to the needs of town children. The Rules of Propriety and of Christian Civility which served as a reader was not suitable in many respects for country children - the Lasallian experience was essentially urban and the Founder deliberately circumscribed his efforts within the sphere of his own competence. Faithful to one of his dearest principles,

he did not try to do everything, but to do very well only what he was capable of achieving. We are in presence of a marvellous concern for efficiency. Personal efficiency was assisted by a specialised training for the individual Brother, a training that was possible because it was the result of a community's reflections on a clearly defined and limited objective: the education of the urban poor.

#### IV The Conditions for a School to be "Well-run"

In his correspondence, La Salle frequently shows his concern to know 'whether the schools are doing well'. For him this expression could only be applied to lessons that were interesting, that nurtured the emotions as well as the mind, fostering the will, sound moral attitudes and the faith. To attain these objectives, several conditions were essential: they relate to the teachers, the pupils, their relationships within the framework of the christian school, the christian life, the teaching methods.

##### (1) The Teachers:

To the traditional 'school master' performing alone in front of his pupils, La Salle substituted the notion of a 'teaching community'. It is together and by association that the Brothers of the Christian Schools reflect upon their mission, draw up their programmes, exchange their pedagogical insights.

The director of the community watches over the proper co-ordination of efforts. Because faith is the foundation of the whole Lasallian set-up, the director is also the animator of the christian life of the teachers and of their pupils. An inspector assists him in visiting the classes so that he can the better advise the teachers and see to their continued formation. Exchanges between the teachers, from one school to another, are easy, thanks to the Brother Visitor who makes the best use of each one according to his professional expertise and the circumstances. More than the personal interests of the educator, it was the good of the children that was constantly in mind.

The austerity of such demands upon the teachers was eased by the religious consecration of the Brothers whose vows of poverty, chastity, obedience guaranteed a minimum at least of self-denial 'for the greater glory of God and the salvation of sould'. Pedagogical competence, a

perfect grasp of the subjects to be taught, were indispensable. Every day, the time-table drawn up by La Salle allowed for periods of personal study and lesson preparation.

Before launching his Sunday Schools, whose purpose was to enable young men to perfect their knowledge of technical drawing and book-keeping, La Salle had private tuition given to several Brothers to prepare them thoroughly for this new undertaking. In his 'Management of Schools', he asks each one to become perfectly familiar with the 'Treatise on the pronunciation of French' because merely to teach how to read was not enough: they had to teach how to read well.

But it was the human and supernatural qualities of the teacher that counted most with children who behave according to their impressions. The child is more likely to imitate what he sees than to practise what he is taught. On this point La Salle was adamant: no teacher should remain in a school if he was a cause of scandal. On this he insisted, time and again.

'The first thing you owe your pupils is edification and good example. Do you teach your disciples nothing that you do not practise yourself? It is of consequence that your example should speak louder than your words'.

Love of the poor, detachment from worldly wealth, devotedness to those least endowed, energy, constancy, loyalty to the given word, obedience to the Church, there was no end to the qualities and virtues La Salle expected of the christian teacher. He stressed twelve for their pedagogical value:

- Gravity: A manner that was serious, refined but also cheerful.
- Silence: A calmness that is conducive to attentiveness.
- Humility: A simplicity that does not overwhelm the child with excessive authoritarianism.
- Prudence: The art of getting down to the child's level.
- Wisdom: Common sense, the intelligence of what is practical and not merely of theory.
- Patience: The toleration of imperfection in others.
- Restraint: Self-control.
- Mildness: Goodness that attracts affection.
- Zeal: Devotedness in action.
- Vigilance: Continual attention to anything that could be a cause of physical or moral danger to children.
- Piety: Having recourse to God for oneself and for others.
- Generosity: The disinterestedness that does not count the difficulties.



(2) The Pupils:

The 17th century was not short of colleges or free schools, but the children of the poor rarely set foot in them. The school programmes were not suited to their needs, the teachers did not welcome them. In Paris, when La Salle arrived in the parish of St. Sulpice to take over its charity school, he found it provided with a hosiery work-room. But the children arrived at all times, they passed the day gambling, they were there to occupy their time rather than to learn anything useful. The articles they made in the work-shop were sold to help maintain the school.

La Salle transformed this scene of truck and chaos. He established a daily routine which allowed time for instruction as well as for manual work. There was now to be time for an education that was truly human, civic and christian. Prayer ceased to be a soul-less formality. People in the neighbourhood noticed the change: no more fighting children in the streets, no more pilfering, less loudness, more cleanliness, more regard for the elderly and the sick. In a short space of time, the school doubled its roll, the children were happy and showed their appreciation for the help that was being given them.

It was nothing short of a social revolution that had begun and one that extended its horizon, by the opening of 'poor schools', to all children without distinction. It was a revolution that was to promote genuine progress for the poor by bringing them into a new relationship with more favoured circles.

.....

Of the head and the ears:

To scratch one's head when talking, or when in company and not talking, is indeed most indecent and unworthy of a well-born person; it is also the result of great negligence and dirtiness, for this ordinarily comes from not having taken care to comb one's hair thoroughly or to keep one's head clean. This is something to which those who do not wear a wig must give their attention, not to leave dust or scurf on the head ....

Propriety and good manners require one not to allow dirt to build up in the ears, thus, one must from time to time, clean them with an instrument made for this purpose and called accordingly an ear-swab. It is most indecent to use one's fingers or a pin for this purpose: and it is contrary to the respect one should have for the persons with whom one finds oneself, to do it in their presence;

one must also have the same respect for the holy places ... The finest ornament for the ears of a christian is that they should be well-disposed and ever ready to hear attentively, and receive with submission, instructions concerning religion and the maxims of the holy gospel. It is for this reason that holy canon law has ordered all ecclesiastics to leave their ears completely uncovered, to remind them that they must always be attentive to the law of God, to the teachings of truth, to the knowledge of salvation, of which they are the trustees and distributors.

Of the hair:

There is no one who should not take for rule and for practice to comb his hair daily and one must never appear before anyone with tangled and untidy hair; above all, one must be careful not to have any lice or nits. This concern and care are of importance for children.

Although one must not too readily use powder on one's hair, which reminds one of an effeminate man, one must nevertheless take care not to have greasy hair; that is why, when one's hair is naturally greasy, one can remove the grease with bran or put powder on the comb so as to dry the hair ...

It is even more improper to wear a badly combed wig than to have uncombed hair ... Although one must not be over-negligent with this sort of head-dress when it is customary, it is nevertheless contrary to good breeding and to common sense for a man to spend a long time, and to go to great trouble, to adjust and arrange it.

Les Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne  
by J. B. de La Salle (1703 edn.)  
1st part, ch. II and III

.....

a) Availability to all:

In the Lasallian school, complete gratuity was a fundamental principle. Even well-to-do families found themselves forced to receive freely what they would willingly have paid for - and thus secure for themselves a position of influence and control in the school. This was a rich man's privilege that La Salle rejected. At the outset, poor children alone came because the school was still called a 'charity school', an unflattering name. But La Salle soon removed this notice board and replaced it by one bearing the inscription 'Christian School'. Better-off craftsmen began to send their children because the teachers

no longer tolerated vermin on the poor: fleas, ring worm, lice became rare.

The Writing Masters and the Masters of the Little Schools protested because they were losing fee-paying pupils. La Salle insisted on keeping his schools free even for those who could afford to pay: poverty was not to be the criterion for the admission of children to the 'Christian Schools'. Children of the people had the right to associate in class and at play with children from bourgeois families; they should not be excluded from genuine and worthwhile relationships with more favoured social circles.

Social discrimination gradually disappeared. Following the lead of the craftsmen, bourgeois children arrived to learn reading and writing on the same benches as the children of the poor. The equalising of opportunity gained ground all the more easily as the Brothers concerned themselves more with the poor than with the rich, with the dull-witted than with the clever, with the awkward characters than with the docile, with the uncouth than with the nicely-mannered ... This openness was extended to rich as well as poor, to non-christians as well as the christians. Only one condition was imposed: attendance at the lessons of religious instruction. It was not a matter of 'making them live like christians', but of informing them about the contents of christian doctrine. Just as foreigners attending school in France are expected to study French history if they wish to pass French exams, so non-christians coming to a christian school were expected to become informed as to the nature of christianity.

Confronted with those whose attitude to work and whose behaviour remained unsatisfactory, a certain reserve was required: they should not be allowed to harm their companions. For education is as much a matter of relationships between friends as the work of the teacher. Three unheeded warnings were to be sufficient motive for dismissal. But in that case, the Brother should consider himself as responsible, at least in part, for the failure. He must see to it that such a result is not repeated. He must also allow a child who has been dismissed to return to school 'if there is any hope of improvement'. Nothing was to be final until after a second dismissal.

.....

You are under an obligation to instruct the children of the poor, you must therefore have a very special concern for them and procure their spiritual goods as far as you can, looking upon them as members of Jesus

Christ, and as his loved ones; the faith with which you should be animated should make you honour Jesus Christ in their persons and should make you prefer them to the rich of this world, because they are the living images of Jesus Christ, our divine master.

Show, by the care you take of them that they are truly dear to you and ask St. Nicholas, their patron, to obtain for you from God, some share of the love he had for the poor, above all a great zeal to obtain purity for them, a virtue which it is difficult to preserve in a century as corrupt as ours.

Meditation for the feast of St. Nicholas.

We are poor Brothers, unknown and of little consideration to people of the world. It is only the poor who seek us out; they have nothing to offer us but their hearts disposed to receive our teaching. Let us love all that is most humiliating in our work so as to share, in some way, in the abasement of Jesus Christ at his birth. Rest assured that, so long as you remain committed at heart to poverty and to all that may humble you, you will bear fruit in souls and the angels of God will cause you to be known and will inspire fathers and mothers to send you their children to be taught; that, by your instructions, you will touch the hearts of these poor children and that most of them will become true christians. But if you do not resemble Jesus at his birth by these two eminent qualities, you will be little known and little used, you will be neither loved nor appreciated by the poor and you will never be able to possess, for them, that character of 'Saviour' which befits you in your work; for you will attract them to God only in the measure of the likeness that you bear to them and to Jesus at his birth.

Meditation for the Feast of the Nativity.

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b) Individual and group work:

Too much was made, in the 19th century, of the 'simultaneous' method of Lasallian teaching. In fact, our 17th century Brothers knew how to individualise their teaching: they aimed at the progress of the individual as well as at that of the group.

### Group Centred Work:

In the 17th century, manners, customs, language, clothes, personal hygiene varied considerably between poor and rich. They were altered in two stages in La Salle's schools.

In the first period, his schools attracted only the very poor, the most wretched children. Their language was unremittently vulgar, their clothes in rags, their personal cleanliness deplorable. By inspections of cleanliness, by constant vigilance over their vocabulary, by lessons of 'civility', that is of good manners and politeness, by exerting to the full their educational expertise, the teachers finally managed to clear their classes of lice and fleas and to make their pupils look clean and 'presentable'.

Then began the second stage: craftsmen and small traders noticed the change. They no longer hesitated to let their children mix with those who, only yesterday, were regarded as little 'hooligans'. They now wanted their children to attend La Salle's schools. There was only one condition: La Salle insisted on absolute gratuity for all. The craftsmen and small traders, later the lower middle class, were not allowed to create for themselves a social privilege, that of paying which marked them off from the very poor. Every element of discrimination based on money was eliminated. From that moment, the friendly relations that could develop between 'rich' and poor helped the less fortunate to improve their vocabulary and their manners and to make useful contacts that would assist their entry into the world of adult work.

### Child Centred Work

Each pupil was followed up individually. Under the seal of professional secrecy, the teacher studied the character of each child and drew up a statement of his 'good and bad qualities'. These observations were to be accomplished not in the manner of a judge, but with 'affection', for La Salle desired his teachers to 'love tenderly all their pupils'. They were to get to know the child, his family, the company he kept, his difficulties, so as to give him the benefit of the teacher's experience and to encourage him in his efforts.

The school curriculum was drawn up with carefully graded syllabuses in each subject. A child who was gifted in one subject could advance more rapidly in this one than in the others. Changes from one set to another of a more advanced level were carried out at monthly intervals so that it was not necessary to wait until the end of the school year before beginning a new programme and joining a group of new companions.

Quickness of intellect was not to be the only criterion in deciding this individual promotion. A sound psychology must also guide the decision. Bright children were to be encouraged to deepen their knowledge in preference to rushing through the different grades. There were good reasons for this. What is learnt too quickly can soon be forgotten; a sound mind is better than one filled with the appearance of knowledge; it was better for young children not to complete too quickly the whole course of studies for they would then be deprived, at too early an age, of the educative relationships of the school and would find themselves thrust too young into the adult working world. On the other hand, boys who were already thirteen or fourteen years old when they came to the school could change grades as soon as they had acquired the necessary knowledge to follow classes at a higher level. In a short time, they could complete the whole course of studies.

This system was possible because the tests and examinations were not designed simply to provide marks: they were intended to verify that a particular programme had been assimilated. The director and the inspector watched over this with the greatest care. They encouraged and rewarded, but it was not overall marks or totals that determined their decisions, it was a shrewd analysis of the quality and quantity of the knowledge of each pupil.

Individual progress was also assisted by the way children shared in the various responsibilities of the teacher.

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Of the qualities and abilities that children must have  
to be changed grades:

It is of the greatest importance never to place a child in a grade of which he is not capable because he would then be put in a situation of never learning anything and of remaining ignorant for the rest of his life.

That is why one must not be concerned about a pupil's age or size or the time he has spent in one grade when one wishes to move him into a higher one, but only with his aptitude; thus, for instance, before making a child read words in groups, it is necessary that he should know perfectly how to read letters and syllables.

With regard to young children with quick minds and ready memories, one must not move them up continually, when they are capable of it, because otherwise they would not attend school for a long enough time. This is, nonetheless, what would be desirable and what one must try to obtain as far as possible, without upsetting

the parents. One must however avoid the two extremes: for it is not good to keep a child a long time on one lesson lest he, and his parents, become disgusted with it just as it is not fitting to promote too quickly those who are too young and too immature, or who are not capable of it, for the reasons which have already been given. The ability and the qualities a child must have to be changed from one grade to another, are the following:-

Those who have shown a lack of self-control or piety or who have been careless and lazy in studying and in following lessons will be changed only with great reluctance and will be examined more rigorously and severely than the others; if they fall into the same ways, the following month, they will not be changed the next time, however clever they may be.

Those who have been absent for five full days, that is ten times, will not change grades at the end of the month even though they would otherwise be capable of so doing.

Those who read in the 'Civility' will not be changed from the first to the second grade until they have been reading by syllables for at least two months, and they will remain in the second grade for as long as they continue to attend the school.

Those of the seventh grade who are writing letters of account, will not be changed, to do small and cursive writing, until they have written in this seventh grade for at least six months.

Those of the first and second grades for arithmetic, who are learning addition and subtraction, will not be changed until they have spent at least two months in each grade.

The Management of Christian Schools,  
ch.4, article 3. (mss of 1706?)

.....  
(3) Participation and educative relationships:

If the 17th century colleges were highly organised, but primary schools preserved a freedom of action that is poles apart from the administrative control customary in European countries to-day. There were no laws dealing with the relative roles of teachers and pupils, of educators and parents, of schools and professional bodies.

La Salle's point of view was crystal clear: children are not schoolboys but 'disciples'; the master is not an official, he takes the place of the parents, he is the 'minister' of God and the Church, he represents Jesus Christ. Creation is not a completed activity: the teacher shares in the progress of each child, for the improvement of society, for the temporal and eternal happiness of each.

The ethos of the popular school was radically changed by this attitude. The teacher was not the supreme authority. It was towards God that all looked; it was from God alone that orders came; it was from the discovery of his will that lives were to be shaped. Vigilance and affection were to replace supervision and a frigid authority.

... show great affection for all their children...

... watch over children ... have adequate care and vigilance for them ...

... be careful in all that concerns them ...

.... devote oneself wholeheartedly to their instruction...

These words and phrases are to be found at every moment coming from the Founder's pen.

Firmness however is not lacking. It is seen in the consistency of the teacher's expectations. It does not abdicate when confronted with the fickleness or carelessness of turbulent or lazy children. Punishment also existed. Its purpose was improvement, to reform. Its conditions and application were strictly defined. It must be:-

disinterested, carried out for the love of God and for the child just, dealing with genuine fault

proportionate, to the responsibility of the guilty one moderate, 'rather less than more'

calm, and, preferably, delayed in its application reasonable enough to be acceptable to the child.

The relationships developed through the school were quickly seen to be natural and genuine because they developed from a real understanding of the child, through a knowledge of his family background.

Personal contact was made with the father or mother at the time he joined the school. The director would inquire about the parents' work, the behaviour of the child in his previous schools, the future they foresaw for him, his good and bad points, his special strengths, his physical weaknesses, how he showed himself a christian ...

The part taken by the children in the running of the school was shown in several ways.

When a child missed a class, a 'visitor of the absent' would go to his home to enquire after him. If he was ill, he would try to



cheer him up and would call regularly to see him. If the teacher was unexpectedly called away from class or before he arrived in school, a pupil known as the 'inspector' would replace him. He was not to speak or threaten; he was simply to observe attentively; his role was that of a monitor who must give an account to the teacher. Lest the inspector himself should colour the facts, other children were to watch over the conduct of the inspector. Thus, justice could be seen to be done. The 'reciter of prayers', the distributor of papers and books, those appointed for the cleaning of the school, the opening and closing of doors fulfilled a function that was of service to the community of the school. The number of posts to be filled permitted, at one time or another, a large number of children to assume responsibilities that could only be useful for their education.

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List of pupils in the fourth grade in 1706, with an account of their qualities and weaknesses.

Francis Delevieux, aged  $8\frac{1}{2}$  years, has been coming to school for two years. He has been in the third grade for writing since 1st July.

He is a restless boy; he shows little piety or self-control in church and at prayers, unless one watches him. Because he is so light-headed, his main defect is lack of self-control. He is fairly well-behaved; he needs to be won over and encouraged to do well. Correction has little effect on him because he is light-headed.

He rarely misses school, except occasionally without permission through meeting dissolute companions and because he is light-headed; but he has often failed to arrive on time.

His application to work is poor; he will often gaze around and take a rest, unless one is watching him. He learns easily, but he has twice failed to be moved up a grade, from the second to the third, on account of his lack of application.

He is obedient if one has authority; if not, he is stubborn. However, he is not of a difficult nature; once he has been won over, he will do anything one requires. He is loved by his parents who are not pleased if he is punished.

He has not held any office because he is not really capable of any. But he is alert and would acquit himself well of his duties but for his coming often late.

Lambert Dulong, aged 12½ years, has been coming to school for four years. He has been in the fourth grade for writing for six months, in the fifth grade for accounts, and in the fourth for arithmetic since 4th May. He is a scatter-brained, light-headed boy but he learns and retains easily. He has very little piety in church and at prayers, he rarely goes to the sacraments. His particular defect is pride and he is very upset when he is humiliated. Punishment is sometimes useful for him.

He is normally hard-working, is very attentive at catechism, at writing and arithmetic. He has always changed grades on time.

He is submissive when he meets his master; otherwise he is disobedient. His parents are not displeased when he is corrected.

He has been the reciter of prayers and the first in the bench; he performs these duties well.

N.B. The 'first in the bench' had the duty of keeping the attendance register: pupils arriving late, or absent with or without permission ....

.....

(4) The Principal Pedagogical Methods:

The Management of Schools written by the Founder cannot be summarised - it must be read. Shrewd observations, wise suggestions, advice suited to the different subjects of elementary schooling are to be found on every page: we can mention here only a few of these ideas. Not that we consider these to be the most important, merely that they are important in their own right.

The good order insisted on by de La Salle was in direct contrast to the general disorder frequent in the schools of his day. It was to be obtained by a detailed time-table rigorously respected by the teachers. An atmosphere of calm would come from the habitual silence of the staff: it was for the pupil designated to speak - the school is 'active'. A small instrument, the 'signal' allowed teachers to give their instructions to the pupils without having to raise their voice. The aim, in these elementary classes, was to show the children how to read and write rather than to explain complex notions.

Repetition and graded progress was the complement of the teacher's silence and that of the rest of the class. The children who knew the answers to the questions which the teacher put quietly would be questioned first; then those with rather less intelligence would be asked next and would repeat before they had time to forget: finally those with little

memory or application would be asked to reply. During this time, the more advanced would already be foreseeing the rest of the lesson and what they would next be asked. No one was left behind.

Uniformity and consistency of method appeared essential. La Salle often insists on this. He wanted it to be possible for teachers to move from one town to another without obliging their new pupils to adapt to new methods with each change of teacher: it was for the teachers to adapt to their pupils. The Management of Schools was there to promote this uniformity and this continuity in the application of well-tested methods. Experimentation was not, however, precluded. The more experienced teachers were authorised to experiment prudently, provided this did not impede the work of others or damage the general harmony of the school. Periodically the Management of Schools was revised. The results of the best experiments were written into it when the 'principal Brothers' met in general assembly.

The 'supernumerary' was an extra teacher placed by de La Salle in every school of at least four Brothers. In ordinary times, he busied himself with the affairs of the house, maintenance, purchases, meals. But when occasion arose, he would step in to replace some ill or overworked teacher. This typically Lasallian solution solved the problem, so frequent in the 17th century, of absentee teachers, a problem caused by the prevalence at that time of tuberculosis, influenza, 'fevers', early death. It differentiated the Brothers' Free Schools from other schools of the period that were quite unable to guarantee permanency of teaching throughout the year. Absenteeism among the pupils would diminish, in the 18th century, only to the extent that a remedy could be found for absenteeism among the teaching staff.

The School Curriculum: This emerged from the needs of the local group, not from edicts of authority, and was adapted to the situation of children of the common people.

- Latin was of no practical use for manual and commercial work. The time they would spend in school was too short for the poor and artisans to acquire even a smattering of latin culture. So the reading of latin passed into second place in the school curriculum.

- French, and the reading of French, was given pride of place - a revolutionary decision.

- The practical and the useful were La Salle's objectives: the ability to read manuscripts, accounts, legal contracts ... On this point, he achieved results that can only be considered as superior to those of to-day.

- To these programmes of practical value was added an education in the social graces. His 'Rules of Propriety and of Christian Civility' was

not just a study of good manners and polite forms but rather a serious reflection upon the bonds that link people together in society, a reflection that is gradually developed at every page of this masterly book. Instead of teaching about civilisation, La Salle preferred to train children to live as civilised people.

Through the ability to read, the door was thrown wide open to genuine culture. Here, the curriculum left room for personal choice and endless enrichment. With the progress of time, children's knowledge would become deeper and more extensive, following the development of society.

.....

Memoir addressed to M<sup>r</sup>. Godet des Marais, Bishop of Chartres,  
by J.B. de La Salle, to justify the reasons for teaching  
reading by beginning with French.

1. The reading of French has a usefulness which is greater and more universal than the reading of latin.
2. French, being their mother tongue, is comparably easier to learn than latin by children who understand the former but not the latter.
3. Consequently it requires far less time to learn to read in French than it does to learn to read in latin.
4. The reading of French prepares for reading in latin, but on the contrary, the reading of latin does not prepare for reading in French, as experience shows. The reason is that, to read latin well, it is sufficient to stress each syllable and pronounce the words carefully, a thing that is easy to do when one has first learnt to spell and to read in French.

.....

8. Experience shows that boys and girls who attend the Christian Schools do not persevere long enough in their attendance and do not come long enough to learn to be good readers of latin and French. As soon as they are of an age to go out to work, they are withdrawn; or they are unable to attend any longer because they need to earn their livelihood. That being the case, if one begins by teaching them to read in latin, the following disadvantages ensue: They withdraw before they learn to read in French or to read well. When they withdraw they can only read latin imperfectly and they soon forget what they knew, with the result that they are never able to read either latin or French. Finally the most harmful disadvantage is that they almost never learn their christian doctrine.

9. In fact, when one begins by teaching children to read French, they at least are able to read it competently by the time they leave school. Being able to read, they can continue to educate themselves in christian doctrine, they can learn from printed catechisms, they can sanctify the Sundays and Holy Days by reading good books and by saying their prayers well in French ....
10. Finally, experience shows that nearly all those boys and girls who do not understand latin, who have no acquaintance with letters or the latin language, especially the common people and most of all the poor who frequent the Christian Schools, never learn to read latin properly and, when they do read it, are simply pitiable to those who understand that language; it is therefore quite useless to spend a long time teaching a language to people who will never use it.

Quoted by Blain, La Vie de Monsieur de La Salle,  
Vol. 1, PP 375-376, 1733 edn.

.....

Teaching Aids: These too were changed. The traditional 'dunce's cap' was abolished. If the stick and the strap still subsisted, they could only be used with the greatest discretion. Other sanctions, requiring no instruments, were preferred because they called for more thought and personal effort: the study of a lesson not learnt, the re-writing of a previously botched piece of work ...

Large wall charts helped the reading of writing. A blackboard was used for the teaching of arithmetic. Desks and benches were given precise dimensions and the most meticulous care was taken so that every child should be properly seated according to his size instead of on benches that were uniform for the whole class. Tastefully drawn maxims and sentences decorated the walls of the class and recalled important ideas to the children. To the 'signal' already mentioned was added a long pointer which allowed the teacher to show the pupils the sentences on the wall charts or the places where they had gone wrong in their calculations.

(5) Christian Life.

Lasallian pedagogy aims at forming men who conform to God's creative purpose. The secular is not neglected, it retains its autonomy, but it is not shut off from the religious dimension. The life of any baptised pupil attending a christian school is a life that by its origin and through its development owes it to itself to be christian. The education of the child's faith has, on the horizon

of its perspective, the communitarian ideal of the Acts of the Apostles:

They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching  
and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and  
to prayer ... All the believers were together and  
had everything in common. Acts 2, 42-44

They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching: For La Salle, catechism should be taught daily, even on Sundays. Meditation No. 201 (for the Retreat) insists on it. The Founder was no doubt concerned to base this custom on apostolic practice and on that of Christ himself: according to the gospels and the Acts, Jesus and the apostles taught the word of God daily.

'You must perform your duties in the same way that the apostles fulfilled their ministry, about which it is said in the Acts of the Apostles that 'they never ceased to teach daily and to proclaim Jesus Christ in the Temple and in houses'; so that by their action 'the Lord increased daily the number of the faithful and the fellowship of those who were being saved ...' If the holy apostles acted in this manner, it is because Jesus Christ gave them the example'. (cf M. Sauvage, Catéchèse et Laïcité, pp 594-595)

Every day, a half hour of religious instruction contributed to enlighten minds on the truths of faith. Learning by rote was considered important, as it still is to-day in non-literary cultures, as was the sub-culture of the poor in 17th century France. But the Brothers were urged to explain, to inspire, to make religion attractive. La Salle never ceases to remind them that they have not merely to teach truths but to teach children how to live.

... and the fellowship: A training in christian living was more important in Lasallian schools than theoretical knowledge. Practice was therefore essential: acts of charity towards class companions, acts of respect towards teachers and parents, acts of reparation for wrong done, exercise of will, of self-control, called 'sacrifices' at that time - and so on ...

... to the breaking of bread: Daily attendance at Mass, a common feature at that period, was considered normal for christian children since no pressing work prevented them. This life of fellowship, of communion with God, was accompanied by education of the conscience. Preparation for the examination of conscience fitted naturally in to the prayer that marked the end of afternoon class. A brief glance over the day, a thought given to one's main actions of the day, a few guiding questions from the teacher to direct the pupils towards a better understanding of their own characters, constituted an exercise of great psychological and

spiritual value when performed in the presence of God and with the intention of pleasing him.

... and to prayer: The words of the gospel, 'pray ceaselessly' were not forgotten. At every hour and every half-hour, a child recalled the presence of God. For a few moments work ceased, they thought of God, they quickly said their love, followed by a prayer of adoration or request said aloud. It was a moment to think of the absent, of the wretched, the unbelievers, perhaps to pray that one might also possess those other qualities they had in higher degree.

they ... had in common: Since the poor rarely ate before going to school, La Salle decided that all the children would eat their breakfast at school before the start of the school day. To prevent one from showing off and another from feeling humiliated, it was forbidden to bring expensive foods. So that those without food should have their need filled, the teacher gathered in a basket and distributed the excess of food brought by those best provided. This sharing of bread was done in an evangelical spirit. It began and ended by grace. Once more, La Salle refused to compartmentalise the secular and the sacred, the religious and the educational. While the children were eating their breakfast, they busied themselves revising their lessons. Thus education in charity, training in good manners, through the vigilance of the teachers, the practical example of christian living in a particular instance of daily life, everything here helped the child to rise above himself.

For John Baptist de La Salle, christian education was not merely instruction, it was an apprenticeship for life.

.....  
Of the things to which the Teacher must attend during breakfast and afternoon collation:

The teacher must see to it that the pupils bring something every day for their breakfast and afternoon collation; a small basket will be put in a special place in the classroom so that, without being obliged to do so, the children may put in it the bread they have left over, when they feel so inclined, and this bread will be distributed to those who are poor.

The teacher will take care that they do not give up so much of their bread that they do not have enough left for themselves; those who have bread to give will raise their hands and show the piece of bread they are giving, and a pupil whose duty it is to receive the alms will go and collect them and, at the end of the meal, the teachers will distribute the bread to the poorest, and will exhort them to pray for their benefactors.

They will also take care that they do not throw any kernels or shells on the floor, but they will oblige them to put them in their pockets or in their bags. They must also tell them that if they are requested to eat in school, it is to teach them to eat correctly, with moderation and politely and to say grace before and after eating .... They will not allow their pupils to give anything to one another, even from their breakfast or to exchange their food.

Management of Christian Schools (1720)  
Chapter II, art. 1.

Of the Almoner:

There will be in each class a boy whose duty it is to collect alms, that is to say, the bread to be given for the poor during breakfast and the afternoon collation.

Towards the end of breakfast and afternoon collation, he will take the basket placed in the classroom for this purpose. He will go along the benches from one side of the class to the other, in silence, and taking care never to ask anyone for anything.

When he is going through the class in the performance of this function, he will walk slowly and quietly, and will take care never to look fixedly at any other pupil.

When the offerings have all, or nearly all, been collected, he will first bow to the teacher and then present the basket to him, for distribution.

Each teacher will take care that the one in charge of this office will be reverent and kind towards the poor, above all that he is not greedy and that he does not give anything to anyone, much less take for himself anything that is in the basket.

idem. Ch. II, art. 3. (ms 1706?)

.....



V Some of the significant steps taken by John Baptist de La Salle.

The whole life of the Founder of the Christian Schools was guided by one unfailing resolution: in all things, to do God's will.

To accomplish this endeavour, he sought to discern the divine will in all the happenings of life, in the counsels given by his spiritual directors; without neglecting personal reflection on the conclusions he had drawn from his studies and his experience of life.

(1) Integration with the world of the poor:

Canon de La Salle's first heroic decision was taken when his teachers at the very outset of their enterprise, spoke to him of their worries about the future. In case of failure, La Salle would still have his family wealth and his canonry. They, on the other hand, would have neither work nor resources.

Two solutions occurred to the Founder. He could either use his personal capital to create an income for his teachers or else he could become as poor as they were and encourage them, by his own example, to endure the considerable risk of destitution.

It had already appeared to him that his duties as a canon no longer corresponded to what God desired of him: if he was to fulfill them conscientiously, they would occupy too much of his time and leave him too little for the schools. Accordingly, in 1683, he renounced his canonry.

The following year, a harsh winter gave him the opportunity to distribute his wealth to the poor. Seeing in this a sign from providence, he no longer hesitated: he made the plunge into the world of the poor.

From now on, he resembled the Brothers with whom he was living: he had nothing more than they did. He also resembled the poor children whom it was his mission to instruct. Psychologically, this identification seemed to him to be essential, a matter he often explained to the Brothers, writing for instance:

So long as you have in your hearts a yearning for poverty ... you will touch the hearts of these poor children ... But if you do not resemble Jesus at his birth ... you will be neither loved nor appreciated by the poor. (86th meditation)

It was because Christ became man and became poor among the poor that La Salle acquired the certainty that he too had to be poor if he was to educate the children of the poor. Such was the plan of God.

(2) Unfailing loyalty to the Church of Christ:

In the 17th century, Jansenists, Quietists, Gallicans were all unsettling the minds of Christians. Jansenism was favoured by the

Archbishop of Paris, by the Bishop of Boulogne, by the main personalities of Marseilles who were involved with the town schools.

La Salle was urged to take sides in these doctrinal squabbles. At the risk of losing valued support, he refused. He was unwilling to see his Brothers diverted from their humble apostolate by the infighting of public opinion. His advice to them was to remain aloof, to 'leave disputes of erudition to the erudite'. What is 'of faith' was quite complex enough without trying to explain theological subtleties to children.

Rather than give his approval to the conduct of Cardinal de Noailles, the Archbishop of Paris, who favoured the jansenists, La Salle preferred to lose his protection and, eventually, to establish his novitiate far from Paris, in Rouen, in the diocese of a bishop who was loyal to the Pope's directives.

Rather than take part in ecclesiastical conferences organised at Marseilles by the jansenists, he did not hesitate to state publicly his opposition to the theological positions which attacked the Sovereign Pontiff. His benefactors who were supporting his schools and had just obtained a house for the novitiate promptly took the opportunity to express their disagreement with him and to stop his maintenance. La Salle held firm to his doctrinal position. He preferred to lose all rather than to equivocate about the official teaching of the Church.

When a parish priest in Boulogne spread the rumour that La Salle was an appellant to a Council against the teachings of the Pope, he lost no time in putting an end to this false charge. He wrote:

From Rouen, this 28 January 1719. I do not believe that I have given any cause ... for it to be said that I am of the number of the appellants ... I have too much respect for our Holy Father the Pope ... It is enough for me that the one who today occupies the Chair of St. Peter should have spoken through a Bull which has been accepted by nearly all the bishops of the world ... After such an authentic decision of the Church, I say with St.

Augustine that the cause is finished .... (Blain II, 224)

In his Collection of Short Treatises, he insists: 'Remain attached to what is of faith; follow the tradition of the Church; receive only what it receives, condemn what it condemns, approve what it approves, whether by the Councils or by the Sovereign Pontiffs; render it in all things a prompt and perfect obedience. Let your faith be active and animated by charity'.

In his last will and testament, he insists on this indefectible loyalty to the Church which characterised him. He recommended his Brothers:

'to have a complete submission to the Church, above all in these troubled times ... never to separate themselves in any way from our Holy Father the Pope and from the Church of Rome, remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to ask God for the grace that their society should always be entirely submissive to Rome'.

.....

To Brother Gabriel Drolin.

From St. Yon, suburb of Rouen, this 5th December, 1716.

It is very much against my own wishes, my very dear Brother, that I have not written to you for so long. I wrote to you several times without receiving any answer from you. I think this is because my letters have been intercepted, as I know yours to me have been.

I have had many trying problems since then, and I am at present in a house in a suburb of Rouen where the novitiate is situated. I assure you that I have much tenderness and affection for you and that I often pray for you.

You can write to me whenever you wish. I trust that the Brother who is now at Avignon will be faithful to send on your letters for he is very reliable and I shall answer you in the same way.

For nearly ten months now, I have been ill in this house where I have been living for the past year.

The business of His Grace, the Archbishop of Paris is causing concern among the Bishops. I do not know what they think of it in Rome ...

Let me know, I pray you, how your affairs are prospering.

I was hoping to be able to send you, during these holidays, a Brother who has been to Rome and who knows a little Italian and who is very reliable and a good teacher, but we have appointed him elsewhere, thinking that his usefulness in this post would be of great importance.

The Brothers are preparing for a general assembly from Ascension to Pentecost to settle a number of matters concerning the rules and the government of the Institute.

I pray you, give your consent to all that will be decided in this assembly by the principal Brothers of the Society.

I believe you are still working in your schools. Let me know, I pray you, how many pupils there are.

Your nephew came to see me, saying he wanted to become a Brother and that he had been to see you and that you were going to become a priest. As he is light-headed, I sent him away to think it over and I have not heard from him since.

I am, in Our Lord,

My very dear Brother,

Devotedly yours,

De La Salle.

.....  
(3) The total gift to God of his whole life:

In 1690, a gust of discouragement blew over the society of the Brothers of the Christian schools. Teaching was a laborious occupation. Some of the best teachers died. The traditional teaching organisations, the Writing Masters, the Masters of the Little Schools were openly hostile. The young society found itself afflicted with desertions and discouragement. Then La Salle fell ill. The Brother he had been grooming to replace him died. The future looked black.

In prayer, during a long retreat in 1691, La Salle became convinced that it was not fitting for the Brothers to have a priest at their head. He looked around for a way to resign. With two Brothers, Gabriel Drolin and Nicholas Vuyart, he formed a team to govern the society. All important decisions would henceforth be taken by 'common consent'. The criterion for the taking of decisions was the will of God and the good of the society of Christian Schools.

The pact of association was sealed by a vow pronounced on the feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 21st November, 1691. It declared an irrevocable will to abandon themselves to God to the end of their days. Here is the essential part of this admirable statement:

'Most Holy Trinity, ... we consecrate ourselves to you, to procure, with our every power and our every care, the establishment of the society of the Christian Schools in the manner which will be most agreeable to you and most advantageous to the said society.

And, to this effect, I John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I Nicholas Vuyart, and I Gabriel Drolin ... from now and for ever, until the last one living, or until the complete establishment of the said society, do vow to remain in association and in union to secure and to uphold the said establishment ... even though ... we would be obliged to beg and to live on bread alone'.

Because the structures of the new congregation were not yet settled, because the Brothers refused to have any other superior than

La Salle, because the bishops would hardly allow a priest to share his authority with two laymen like Drolin and Vuyart, this vow remained a secret. But La Salle never forgot it. Twenty six year later, in 1717, when he was preparing the general assembly of the Brothers, he recalled it to Brother Gabriel, then far away in Rome. He asked him to ~~give his assent~~ to the decisions which would be taken by the Brothers at this assembly.

This same attitude is to be found in the personal Rule of Life left us by La Salle. In it he sets out in detail the means to be taken to discover what could be 'most agreeable to God'. He writes:

.....

A good rule of conduct is not to make any distinction between the affairs proper to one's state in life and the affair of one's salvation and perfection, and to be assured that there is no better way to seek salvation, and that one will never acquire more perfection, than by fulfilling one's occupational duties provided that they are accomplished with a view to the Will of God. One must always try to have that in view. ... I shall always look upon the work of my salvation and the establishment and management of our community as the work of God; that is why I shall abandon the establishment and the care of it to him, so that whatever I do for it shall be done only by his orders; and I shall consult him frequently on every matter I have to do, either for the one or for the other.

It is a good rule not so much to worry about knowing what should be done as to do perfectly what one knows.

Every morning I shall set aside a quarter of an hour to foresee the things I have to do and dispose myself accordingly; the occasions of fall I may have in order to preserve myself from them; and I shall take the necessary measures for the conduct of my day ...

I shall be careful to raise my heart to God whenever I begin an action; and whatever I undertake, I shall be careful not to act until after this prayer.

The Rule of the Community is that one should not enter the house or any room without praying and renewing one's attention to God; I shall take care not to fail in this point.

(Rules I have taken on myself, quoted by Balin, II, pp 318-9)

.....

(4) A life-long commitment to the Brothers:

In 1694, La Salle committed himself publicly with twelve Brothers to keep 'together and by association free schools' or 'to do in the said society anything at which he would be employed by the body of the society or by its superiors'.

As superior, he once more showed that he would not avoid any of the obligations imposed on the Brothers. Like them, he took the vow of obedience and bound himself for his whole life.

The Brothers would remind him of this when the occasion arose, in 1714. La Salle had left Paris because he was being harassed by several particularly unfair lawsuits. There was even the danger of his being arrested. Above all, he felt that he had become a hindrance to the development of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the city of Paris: the Archbishop had forbidden him to train any more teachers, the Precentor of the diocese was siding with the Writing Masters; the parish priest of St. Sulpice was trying to claim full authority over the Brothers teaching in his schools. For all - except for the Brothers - La Salle appeared a nuisance.

So the Founder withdrew, hoping by this means to take the edge off the worst resentments. There was another reason: he wanted a Brother to get used to governing the society in his absence and so to be ready to succeed him. But, once he was gone, everything began to fall apart. No one knew what to do next. Outsiders began to meddle with reforming the rules and organisation of the Society. The novices left.

Faced with disaster, the directors of the principal communities met. Together they drew up a kind of summons reminding their Founder of the terms of his vow of 1694. He must return. He must direct the congregation. It was to him that God was giving the enlightenment that was needed. For the moment, no one could replace him. Here are the terms of this letter:

Our very dear Father,

We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in mind the greater glory of God, the greater good of the Church and of our society, recognise that it is of the utmost importance that you should resume ... the overall direction of this holy work of God which is also yours ... We are all convinced that God ... gives you the necessary grace and the talents to give good government to this new company ...

That is why, Sir, we beg you humbly and we order you in the name and on behalf of the body of the society to which you have promised obedience, to take charge immediately of the overall government of our society ...'

La Salle received the letter at Grenoble. He hesitated, for he had sound reasons for his departure. He took advice. But his irrevocable commitment obliged him to agree to his Brothers' request. He returned to Paris, faithful to the vow he had taken with them to remain united with them for 'the whole of his life'.

We find this spirit of abandonment to God and of humble consensus with his Brothers in La Salle's last words. On his death bed, he still found strength to say:

'I adore in all things God's handling of my life'.

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