



The Messenger

A LASALLIAN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE



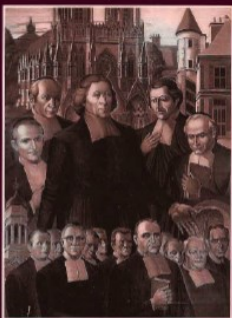
Beginnings in Rouen and Elsewhere

Dear friends, welcome to Issue Ten of "The Messenger". As always, we begin by answering our discussion questions from the previous issue - Beginnings in Rouen and Elsewhere. Darnétal, 1704, the immediate success was the opening of a new school under the Directorship of Brother Ponce. It was so well received by the parish and community, it was soon filled to capacity. It was 1705 and on the west bank of the Seine River JBDLS established the new novitiate of Saint Yon. This new establishment and training area for new Brothers was of critical importance at holding the institute together at this moment of history, as the Brothers were still struggling to gain a foothold in society and in the teaching of the poor. During the winter of 1706-1707, JBDLS was returning home from school visits and as he was cutting through the streets of Paris he tripped on entering the Tuileries Garden. He landed on a concealed

spike hidden in the gateway on an already injured knee. He fainted on the spot and was rescued by by-standers. The South of France saw a huge expansion of the Brothers Schools. New schools were opened in Dijon, Marseille, Mende, Ales and Grenoble.

THE WORK IS YOURS

The Life of
Saint John Baptist de La Salle



Luke Salm, FSC
Second Edition

Issue 10: Famine, Fame and Defamation

Live Jesus in our hearts!

Mr. Kane Raukura

Chairperson - NZMAC

(NZ Mission Action Committee)



Q1. 1709 saw the most severe winter anyone could remember. What was the result?

Q2. What happened at the Deer Park School in Versaille?

Q3. What was the last school in which JBDLS would be involved? Why?

Q4. What was the Clément Vendetta?



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Famine, Fame, and Defamation (1709–1711)

Nothing could have made John Baptist de La Salle happier as he approached his 60th year than to settle down in the peace and solitude of Saint Yon, contributing to the formation of the novices, corresponding by mail with his widely scattered Brothers, and making arrangements for an orderly transition of the superiorship to a worthy successor. But it was not to be. In 1709, De La Salle had ten more years to live; serenity and security were to elude him to the bitter end. A whole new series of problems drew him increasingly from his rural retreat outside Rouen to the center of the action in Paris.

The Famine of 1709

The winter of 1708–1709 was the most severe anyone could remember. One cold wave after another effectively ruined the winter crops; what provisions had been stored were soon exhausted by the armies of Louis XIV engaged in the War of the Spanish Succession. Famine was everywhere: there were food riots in the streets, plundering and pillage were commonplace, the hospitals were filled to overflowing with the sick and undernourished, bread was expensive and of poor quality, meat and vegetables were not available anywhere.

The Brothers suffered terribly, as did everyone else. Used as the disciples of De La Salle were to meager rations, periodic fasts and doing without comforts of any kind, they weathered the crisis better than most. But De La Salle had to make some emergency adjustments. To ease the plight of the teaching Brothers in Rouen, he moved the novices to the house on the Rue de Barouillère in Paris, where they were to remain for the next six years. Young men in desperate need of even a skimpy meal applied to enter the already overcrowded novitiate. No one who seemed in any way sincere was turned away, but not many could endure the austere regimen of the novitiate for very long. To those who complained that he was too lenient in accepting such candidates, De La Salle remonstrated that at least they had the benefit of a good spiritual retreat.

As always, De La Salle urged the Brothers to rely totally on divine Providence. And as always, Providence did not let them down. On more than one occasion, when the Brothers were reduced to their last few pennies, some unexpected benefactor would come to their aid. There were even some "miracle" stories. Brothers related how there were times when only a few crusts of bread would be served up at the main meal, not at all enough to go around. Thereupon the Founder would say the grace, pray over the meager rations, and somehow there would be enough for each to have his fill.

When it was all over, the Brothers had managed to survive. Some of the wealthier congregations went bankrupt, and most of them lost a large percentage of their membership to sickness and to death. Such was not the case with the Brothers. Blain quotes one of the priest friends of the Brothers:

If you suffered hunger, at least it did not destroy you. Your community is the poorest in the realm, yet it survived the cruel years which, it would seem, should have put an end to it. You have neither property, capital, nor endowments, yet you survived a time when famine made itself felt, or at least was feared, in the wealthiest families. Many rich, well-endowed communities were ruined during those times or emerged from them laden with debts. But you, you are just as you were before. If you have nothing, at least you owe no one anything, and your numbers even increased during those doleful days.

The fact is that some half-dozen Brothers did develop serious cases of scurvy. The always dependable Doctor Helvétius came to the rescue. He put the sick Brothers in the charge of a skilled colleague, and paid out of his own pocket for all the medicines and treatments until they recovered.

The most serious case was that of the Director of Novices, Brother Barthélemy, whose scrofulous tumors seemed to resist all medication. The Brothers were all for dismissing him from the Institute and sending him home, on the pretext that the pastor at Douai was anxious to have him back as a lay teacher to replace his recently deceased father. The Founder was on the verge of agreeing, but after a whole night spent in prayer, he decided to allow the sick Brother to remain. In time, the tumors healed. It was this Brother Barthélemy who would one day succeed De La Salle as the Superior of the Institute.

Problems in Chartres

Famine or no famine, the year 1709 provided little respite from the problems De La Salle had to face in administering his relatively far-flung Institute. The Bishop of Chartres, Paul Godet des Marais, as we have seen, had a high personal regard for De La Salle, whom he knew from seminary days, and was more solicitous than most ecclesiastics of the time for the temporal needs of the Brothers. At the same time, Bishop Godet was the sort of man who wanted to get his money's worth in terms of control. He had already made an attempt to mitigate the austerity of the Brothers' Rule and to have them begin the elementary lessons with Latin rather than French. De La Salle had been successful in dissuading him on both counts.

Now, in the spring of 1709, the Brothers in Chartres were told that they would have to move from the house where they had been living for ten years and which had proven adaptable in every way to their needs and lifestyle. Bishop Godet planned to install them in a vacant priory he had recently acquired that was adjacent to the junior seminary. When De La Salle heard of it, he was totally opposed. As he wrote to Brother Hubert, the Director, on July 20, 1709, "It has neither courtyard nor garden," and there, he said, the Brothers would be "very uncomfortable." The need for a courtyard and a garden was a recurrent concern of the Founder in choosing a house for the Brothers. Much as he encouraged mortification and bodily austerity of all kinds, De La Salle always insisted on the therapeutic value of fresh air, especially since the Brothers were confined all day long in the fetid atmosphere of overcrowded classrooms.

Faced with this new intervention on the part of his friend, the bishop, De La Salle instructed Brother Hubert to begin a campaign of prayer involving the students and the Brothers. Special attention was to be given to devotions at the Lady Chapel in the great Chartres Cathedral. The rest was to be left to Providence. For his part, De La Salle planned to speak once more to Godet when next the bishop would come to Paris, sometime before the opening of the school year in October. As it happened, Godet des Marais died in September that year, 1709, and the proposed move never took place.

The new bishop was Charles-François de Méroville, the nephew and auxiliary bishop to his predecessor, Paul Godet. Although the new bishop shared his uncle's appreciation for the Brothers, he saw no reason to continue to support them out of his personal funds. This new situation put the Brothers in desperate financial straits for a time,

and at one point the numbers had to be reduced from seven to four. It was only because of the concern of a canon of the cathedral, Father Charles de Truchis, that they were able to survive at all.

There were other problems as well. Once the personal support of Bishop Godet was gone, the writing masters in Chartres raised the usual difficulties, claiming unfair competition because the Brothers were teaching writing gratuitously to those who could afford to pay. Eventually the guild won at least the passive compliance of the new bishop for a policy that would limit the schools of the Brothers only to the certified poor.

On one occasion, the financial problems of the community in Chartres came close to solution when the Brothers were left a legacy intended to support the Christian Schools. The will was contested and the Brothers lost the case. Without corporate legal status they had no right to inherit anything. It was suggested that it might be possible for the Brothers to apply for letters patent that would give them legal incorporation. But De La Salle was opposed. "I prefer that you yourselves be guided by Providence," he wrote. "You can get letters patent after my death if that is what you want." Eventually, that is what the Brothers did, but out of Saint Yon rather than Chartres.

Versailles and the Vincentians

The year following the great famine of 1709 saw a new wave of expansion as the fame of the Institute spread. One such venture was the school at Versailles in a town dominated by the newly built palace and the legendary court of Louis XIV. A Vincentian priest, Father Claude Huchon, had earlier opened two charity schools, one in the king's Deer Park, and the other in the local parish. Well aware of the Brothers' reputation, Father Huchon persuaded De La Salle to send two Brothers to take over the Deer Park school.

The older of the two served as the Director and was, in the words of Blain, "an excellent Brother and a first-rate teacher." Father Huchon had a high regard for him. Unfortunately, this Brother soon acquired a taste for the heady life of the town, made extensive contacts with the notables of the court, and gradually lost the spirit of his vocation.

On his first visit to the community, De La Salle saw what was happening. Recognizing the early stages of disenchantment with community life, the Founder decided that an immediate transfer was in

order. The pastor, however, had become so taken in by the Brother's talent, and so dependent on him, that he would not hear of any change. De La Salle had to yield, and the Brother remained at his post.

Before long, De La Salle's intuition proved to be correct. Unable any longer to endure the constraints of the school and the community, the Brother one day put aside his religious habit and took off without saying a word to anyone. When the Brother failed to show up in the school, the pastor sent a saintly old Vincentian after him. The priest caught up with the fugitive at the gates of the town, but all his spiritual insights and powers of persuasion were in vain. The pastor learned his lesson. From then on he never interfered again in the affairs of the Brothers.

Huchon's successor as pastor in Versailles was equally supportive of the Brothers. Soon two more Brothers were invited to take over the school in the town, and another was added to provide for the temporal needs of the community. From then on the schools at Versailles prospered, animated by the prototypical Lasallian community of at least five Brothers, one of whom was charged with temporal affairs and available as a replacement in the schools in case of emergency.

De La Salle always had a high regard for Saint Vincent De Paul and the Congregation of the Mission, commonly known as the Vincentians or the Lazarists. He often proposed them to his Brothers as models of religious observance and of devotion to the poor. In addition, it was through Father Divers, the Procurator of the Vincentians with the Holy See, that De La Salle often addressed his letters to Brother Gabriel Drolin in Rome.

It was just about the time of the Versailles incident, however, that the Vincentians in Rome were beginning to persuade Gabriel Drolin to replace the Brothers' habit with the clerical soutane and to accept the tonsure. In his letters to Drolin from 1709 to 1711, the Founder is adamant on both points, insisting that these priests no longer interfere with the internal affairs of the Brothers. He wrote to Drolin on August 24, 1711: "Do not heed what the Lazarist [Vincentian] Fathers may say. Those in Paris are acting in a way that could well result in the destruction of our Institute."

Les Vans

Les Vans is a small town in the diocese of Uzès, nestled in the cavernous Cévennes and deep in the heart of the Huguenot country. In

the year 1708, Father Vincent du Roure, a priest zealous for orthodoxy, whose family had once owned property in Les Vans, was passing through Avignon. Impressed by what he saw of the Brothers' work there, he determined to disinherit his relatives and leave his modest fortune of 7,000 livres to endow a Brothers' school at Les Vans. He thought this would be the best way to help to counteract the Protestant influence. When Du Roure died in 1710, De La Salle accepted the inheritance and delegated Brother Ponce to make the final arrangements from the center at Avignon.

The school opened in the following October with Brother René as Director assisted by Brother Maximin. Since the annual revenue of 350 livres from the legacy was not enough to support the two Brothers, the municipal authorities agreed to provide an additional 130 livres to make up the difference. In addition they ordered new furniture for the school and lodged the Brothers in a house facing the square in front of the church. The house, which still stands, proved to be comfortable for the Brothers, but there was little privacy in the heart of a small town accustomed to neighborly relationships where whatever went on was the subject of continual gossip.

As in Alès, there was in Les Vans considerable resistance to the repressive policies of Louis XIV against the Huguenot Protestants. Inevitably, the Brothers became one of the targets of the resistance. On at least one occasion, the townspeople blockaded the house and hurled rocks at the windows in an attempt to drive the Brothers away. The police intervened and dispersed the mob.

Some of the biographers estimate the size of the crowd in the thousands. Since, however, there is no mention of the incident in the minutes of the town council, it seems that a legend of sorts may have grown up around it. It is true that the Bishop of Uzès threatened strong penalties against the leaders, but De La Salle, when he heard of it, urged the Brothers to trust only in Providence to vindicate their rights.

Moulins

In 1710 De La Salle sent two Brothers to take over the school at Moulins in the Bourbon country. The request came from Father Louis Aubrey, who for years had been devoting his considerable energy to the education of the poor. The older of the two Brothers, and the Director, was a man named Brother Philippe. He made such an impression that the vicar-general of the diocese, Father Languet de Gergy,

brother of the assistant pastor of Saint Sulpice, asked him to give model lessons in the parish church for the benefit of the younger clergy and the catechists of the town. Although this was a departure from Institute policy, it did serve to enhance the reputation of the Brothers, which endured through the years as the school prospered and expanded. More than a century later, Brother Benilde Romançon, the first Brother after the Founder to be canonized, would teach in this school.

Boulogne-sur-Mer

The foundation in Boulogne, a seaport on the English Channel, was the last in which De La Salle would be personally involved. The Bishop of Boulogne, Pierre de Langle, was already familiar with the work of the Brothers in Calais, which was in his diocese. The suggestion to open a Christian School in Boulogne came once again from a Vincentian priest, the rector of the diocesan seminary, Father Bernard. He proposed the idea to a devout and celibate layman, Jacques Abot de La Cocherie, who had already devoted a considerable amount of his time and money to charitable works for the Church. De La Cocherie was able to obtain contributions from his influential friends and from the bishop himself. As soon as the necessary funds were raised, De La Salle was contacted. In 1710 he sent four Brothers to open the school.

The Brothers were well received by the bishop, who lodged them in the seminary until a house could be provided for them. At first the school was located in what was known as the lower town, the commercial center near the port. After a few years, the bishop was so pleased with the results that he decided to open a second school in the upper town near the cathedral. For this purpose he obtained two more Brothers from De La Salle.

The house that had been rented for the Brothers proved to be too small for such a number and the distance between the two schools too great. Such was the enthusiasm of the townspeople for the Brothers and their work that the original founders decided to build for them a new residence between the two schools on a plot of land obtained by a grant from the king. The governor of the town himself drew up the plans.

Construction was started, but soon the money began to run out and the work slowed down. To move things along, the governor, the Marquis de Colbert, with connections in high places, managed to

obtain the needed building materials and to have them transported to the site. He recruited volunteers to lend a hand with the work and soon the building was completed. De La Salle would one day be received with great honor and enthusiasm when he would have the occasion, some years later, to visit Boulogne en route to Calais.

The Teacher-training School at Saint Denis

The origins of this enterprise, which was to turn out so tragically for De La Salle, go back to December 1707 when the Founder was recuperating at Saint Honoré from the wound sustained when he fell near the Tuileries and his knee was pierced by a spike. The details of the history of the foundation at Saint Denis are narrated by the biographer Blain, who had before him an account, which has since been lost, written by De La Salle himself in order to clear his good name.

It all began innocently. De La Salle was visited in the house on the Rue Saint Honoré by a young layman named Jean-Charles Clément. Impressed by what he saw of the work of the Brothers at the Rue Princesse, Clément asked for some Brothers to help inaugurate a program that he had in mind to give training in useful trades to teenage boys. Money, he said, would be no problem: he had in fact, already begun to gather some of the necessary materials. Besides, his father was a well-known surgeon, and negotiations were then underway whereby he himself would receive as a benefice the revenues of the well-endowed Abbey of Saint Calais.

De La Salle replied that he could do nothing unless the project being proposed conformed to the nature and purpose of the Institute. He thereupon drafted a written statement for the young man's benefit, outlining the specific apostolic works to which the Institute was committed, and suggesting that he study it carefully.

Clément returned three days later, admitting that he was not really interested in the work of the Christian Schools as such. But he was much taken with the Founder's long-range plan to open once more a center to train schoolmasters for the country parishes. Such a project might even be expanded eventually to include his own plan for training teenage boys in manual skills. Clément was eager to start at once, expressing his willingness to use for the purpose a good part of the allowance he had from his father until such time as he would have an independent income of his own.

Although De La Salle was himself eager to reopen the training school for teachers, he decided that it would be wiser to proceed cautiously with this enthusiastic young man. The more Clément urged immediate action, the more De La Salle insisted on reflection and delay. In addition, there was the problem of a suitable site, since De La Salle was formally forbidden by the court order of February 5, 1706, from opening anything like a training school for teachers within the jurisdiction of the Châtelet of Paris.

As time went by, Clément became impatient with the delay. He decided to use his considerable influence to involve the archdiocesan authorities in the project and, in this way, to put pressure on De La Salle. In contacts initiated by Father Vivant, the archdiocesan *officialis*, De La Salle was assured that Cardinal Noailles would approve of the project provided that the training school would be located outside the city limits of Paris.

The first offer of a site came from the pastor at Villiers, a small village about ten miles from Paris, but Clément was not at all pleased with such a remote location. Then another and seemingly providential opportunity presented itself in Saint Denis, where the Brothers had just opened a school. The sister of Mlle Poignant, who had founded the school, had a house in Saint Denis that she was ready to sell for 13,000 livres. The contract was signed on October 23, 1708.

Since Clément was not yet 25 years old, and still legally a minor, the house was purchased for him by the lawyer, Monsieur Louis Rogier. The down payment of 5,200 livres was supplied by De La Salle from a fund that he had set aside precisely for this purpose. Clément signed a receipt, which he entrusted to Rogier. In it he affirmed his intention to reimburse De La Salle and to pay the balance due so as to become the sole proprietor of the house.

The training school opened in 1709 with three candidates. Except for a brief period when it had to close because of the famine, it soon began to prosper. Cardinal Noailles took a positive interest in the program. Through the good offices of Madame de Maintenon, the Cardinal was able to obtain a royal decree of exemption from the obligation to quarter soldiers. The program itself followed that of the earlier centers in Reims and Saint Hippolyte. There is reference in the sources to instruction in plainchant and to the presence of the student teachers at church services dressed in cassock and surplice, as would be expected of them when they assumed their duties in the country parishes.

In 1710 Jean-Charles Clément came into possession of the revenues of the rich abbey of Saint Calais, probably when the previous holder of the benefice, Charles-François de Mérinville, succeeded his uncle, Paul Godet, as Bishop of Chartres. The sudden access to independent wealth and the title of Abbé, even though he was not in Holy Orders, seem to have turned the head of the ambitious young man. He made no attempt either to reimburse De La Salle for the money he had advanced, or to pay the balance due to Mlle Poignant. She, in turn, was trying to get the house back from Rogier, the titular owner, who had plans of his own to resell it to a prospective new buyer. Although he made no further effort to assume any of the debt, Clément insisted that he wanted the house for himself.

In the midst of these negotiations, Doctor Julien Clément, the young man's father, learned of the business. Accusing his son of being a light-headed simpleton, he declared that the entire arrangement should be judged invalid by reason of his son's legal incompetence as a minor.

De La Salle visits the South

Such was the state of affairs in 1711 when De La Salle decided to undertake a project he had long envisioned of visiting the schools and communities that had been established over the previous eight years in the South of France. Little is known of the precise itinerary. Blain gives no details about the journey, except to say that De La Salle was received with joy by the Brothers wherever he went, and with great respect by the bishops in whose dioceses the Brothers were conducting schools.

It seems likely that De La Salle would have set out from Paris in February 1711, probably stopping at Dijon and Macon en route to the South. There is documentary evidence that he was at Avignon in July; in Grenoble, the account books for that year make reference to his visit to the community there, but no precise date is given. Blain's generalizations would suggest that De La Salle also visited the remote communities at Mende and Alès, either before or after the Avignon visit.

It is certain that he traveled as far south as Marseille. A letter dated August 24, 1711, that De La Salle sent from Marseille to Gabriel Drolin in Rome, has survived. In it the Founder says that he is about to "return to France," that is to Paris, as if he had been in a foreign land. No doubt, the deepening crisis of the Clément affair demanded a hasty return to the capital.

The Clément Vendetta

In 1711 the Clément family was granted noble status by King Louis XIV. This, together with the recent accession of the young abbé to the benefice of Saint Calais, may have prompted the family to want to sever any connection with a priest as socially and legally out of favor as was De La Salle. Their ploy was to depict their young son as the dupe and victim of the wily innovator from Reims. This time, as Blain points out, it was not De La Salle's possessions or even his schools, but his very honor that was at stake.

On his return from the South, De La Salle found the cards stacked against him. All attempts to make a reasonable settlement with the Clément family were in vain. De La Salle offered to withdraw from the entire enterprise without compensation for his investment in it. He was willing to swear on his honor that he had not acted in any malicious way in his dealings with the young zealot. But the elder Clément would have none of it. He would be satisfied with nothing less than the vindication of his son through a public and juridical condemnation of De La Salle.

On January 23, 1712, De La Salle was cited to appear in court to answer to charges of suborning a minor for the purpose of extorting money from him. To defend his honor, De La Salle prepared a dossier containing 13 letters that Clément had written to him, the signed receipt for the 5,200 livres, and a long memoir detailing the history of the foundation at Saint Denis. When Rogier came to tell him that the case was lost, the house was to be confiscated, and that a warrant was out for his arrest, De La Salle, unwilling to appear personally in court, put the dossier in the hands of his lawyers and left Paris to resume his tour of the schools in the South.

According to Blain, De La Salle's lawyers allowed the dossier to fall into the hands of those who were prosecuting the case. Even so, the judge in the case considered any defense irrelevant in the face of the undeniable fact that Clément was a minor. The Clément family had powerful friends in high places. De La Salle, by contrast, had none. In view of his long history of conflicts with Cardinal Noailles and Father De La Chétardie, he could hardly expect help from that quarter. He was on shaky legal grounds, besides, for trying to circumvent the court order forbidding him to engage in the training of teachers.

The condemnation came on May 31, 1712. In it the Châtelet formally annulled all the documents signed by the Abbé Clément. De La Salle was obliged to cancel the debt of 5,200 livres and to reimburse

Clément for the 3,200 livres he had spent for the maintenance of the student teachers. By way of a criminal judgment, De La Salle was warned never again to enter into business negotiations with minors and to refrain for the future from trying to extort promises of money from such persons.

As soon as he realized that the case was hopeless, the lawyer Rogier dissociated himself from De La Salle to salvage what he could for himself. He put forth his claim as the titular owner of the house in Saint Denis. On June 15, the court assigned to him the 5,200 livres and title to the house on condition that the balance due to Mlle Poignant be paid or the house be sold. The Brothers had to vacate the house, and in this way the teacher-training program came to an end.

It may be that Rogier acted with the intention of repaying the 5,200 livres to De La Salle, but he never did so in his lifetime. It was only after Rogier's death that De La Salle learned that an equivalent sum had been left to him as legacy. In his will, Rogier specified that this bequest was intended as a matter of conscience.

Meanwhile, De La Salle was far away in the South and unaware of the distressing final scenes in this dismal drama. Betrayed by those whom he had every right to trust, in this matter as in all else he was willing to leave the outcome and the final judgment in the hands of Providence.