



The Messenger

A LASALLIAN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE

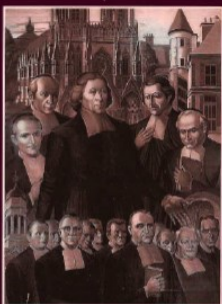


Return and Retirement

Dear friends, welcome to Issue Two of "The Messenger" for 2015. We continue with our Lasallian Professional Reading and "The Work is Yours". We have only 2 chapters remaining and then we will be taking another direction. As always, we begin by answering our discussion questions from the previous issue - Return and Retirement. When DLS returns to Paris he does not resume his role as Superior and makes it clear that he has no intention of running the daily affairs of the Brothers. DLS has complete faith that Brother Barthelemy can accomplish what needs to be done and that he himself will remain an advisor and spiritual guide. The important event of 1717 occurred on Pentecost Sunday May 16th - the event was "The first General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools". At this chapter, Brother Barthelemy is elected as Brother Superior and becomes De La Salle's successor. At the appointment of his successor, DLS is happy to retire and by example gives Barthelemy all the submission and deference he deserves as the Superior. DLS though continues to give advice when asked although hesitantly and not wishing to undermine Barthelemy in anyway. This allows Barthelemy and the Senior Brothers to find their own answers and path forward for the Institute. The Brothers finally gain for themselves the title and ownership of Saint Yon and secure it as a place of peace and isolation for future Brothers.

THE WORK IS YOURS

The Life of
Saint John Baptist de La Salle



Luke Salm, FSC
Second Edition

Issue 3: Faithful till the End

Live Jesus in our hearts

Mr. Kane Raukura (Chairperson - NZMAC)

(NZ Mission Action Committee)



Q1. Were DLS's remaining years alive quieter or just as busy as his life journey had been?

Q2. August and Sept 1718 saw what future securing event occur?

Q3. What was the one final humiliation De La Salle faced?

Q4. What were the Founders last words?



Faithful to the End (1718-1719)

It is easy to understand De La Salle's reluctance to return to Saint Yon and to the Brothers. He thought of his life's work as finished and wanted only time to prepare himself for death in peace, solitude and union with God. Despite his claim that he could no longer be of any use to the Brothers, the last months of his life were as full of activity, service, controversy, and opposition every bit as much as any other period in his life.

The activity that gave him the most satisfaction was training the novices in the practice of meditation. Each day before the noon meal he would give them instruction on the various methods of prayer. Each novice in turn would then express his prayer aloud. The Founder would point out mistakes in the use of the method, suggest a better approach, and gradually lead the novice to be able to pray for long periods of time on his own. Out of these lessons De La Salle developed his treatise on prayer, entitled *Explication de la méthode d'oraison*. Over the years, he had been composing meditations for the Brothers which he now gathered into his collections of meditations for Sundays, feasts, and the time of retreat.

During this period the Founder was also kept busy in the exercise of his sacramental ministry for the Brothers at Saint Yon, as well as for the boarding students and the inmates of the house of detention. He celebrated Mass regularly and gave extended homilies on Sundays and feasts. He heard the confessions of all the Brothers once and sometimes twice a week. He took a particular interest in the hardened adults in the house of detention, winning many of them over by his kindly manner with them, and in some cases effecting permanent conversions to a better way of life.

Not all the Brothers appreciated what it meant to have the Founder in their midst. Blain tells of one insolent serving Brother who chided De La Salle for having dinner in a rectory in Rouen after celebrating High Mass in the parish church. The same Brother, on another occasion, told him that he was being lodged and fed at Saint Yon out of charity, that he was a penniless priest who was no longer good

for anything. At this, Blain tells us, the Founder could not help laughing. Occasions such as this show that De La Salle had a sense of humor.

Of somewhat greater importance during this period were the legal matters that had to be attended to. Since the Institute had no corporate legal status, all the property had to be in the name either of De La Salle himself or one of the Brothers. It was time now to put all the assets of the Brothers under the control of Brother Barthélemy. Accordingly, on August 11, 1718, De La Salle had his personal library brought from Paris to Saint Yon and the title transferred to the new Superior. On September 18, he did the same for all the legal documents pertaining to the houses of the Society. On November 14, he handed over to Brother Barthélemy title to the furnishings at Saint Yon. In this way the financial stability of the Institute was assured until such time as letters patent, giving legal corporate status, could be obtained.

Family Problems

Ever since the publication of the Bull *Unigenitus* there had been a falling out between John Baptist and his blood brother, Jean-Louis, now a doctor of theology and canon of the cathedral at Reims. It distressed the Founder terribly that Jean-Louis had aligned himself with the Jansenist party appealing the Bull. After all entreaties to side with the Roman view had failed, John Baptist cut off all further relationships with his brother and, if Blain's account can be trusted, he neither spoke of him any further nor would allow him to be spoken of.

A reconciliation of sorts was effected when their youngest brother, Jean-Remy, became seriously ill. After a career in the army, Jean-Remy had become an official in the royal monetary exchange at Reims. In 1711 he married Madeleine Bertin du Rocheret, but the marriage seems never to have been a happy one. Three of the children born to the union survived. By 1715 Jean-Remy began to show signs of a mental breakdown and, consequently, had to resign his position at the exchange. In 1717, as his condition grew worse, he was deprived of all civil rights and confined to a mental institution in Paris, where he died in 1732.

This tragic situation was compounded by the reluctance of the Du Rocheret family to provide adequately for the three children. The concern of the De La Salle family for their nephews is manifest in an exchange of letters between John Baptist and Jean-Louis. In a letter

addressed to Jean-Louis in March 1718, the Founder agreed to make over to the children of Jean-Remy the income from some properties to which he had personal title.

For many years, in fact, Jean-Louis had been at the head of a group of trustees that had founded at Reims a civic association to acquire property for the Institute and otherwise deal with financial matters in the name of John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers. As news of the precarious condition of the Founder's health reached Reims, Jean-Louis wrote to his brother on January 3, 1719, to remind him that there was urgent business involving both the family and the Institute that needed attention. The letter begins as follows:

Reims, January 3

My very dear brother,

Although it would appear that you are determined to forget this part of the country completely and that you have decided to cut off all communication with us for a year or even several years—so that I have only with great difficulty been able to get a reply from you in matters of great importance—I do not consider myself free from my obligations. So I take it upon myself to write to you once more, not only to pay my respects to you at the beginning of this new year and to wish you a very happy one, insofar as there can be a happy one in this life, but mainly to remind you once more of some matters of importance to your Institute, which I have already had the honor to speak and write to you about on several occasions.

The letter goes on to speak of the need to replace some members of the group of trustees, and the importance of making a will so that the in-laws of Jean-Remy will not be in a position to claim title to properties destined for the use of the Institute. De La Salle did get around to making such a will, but only on his deathbed.

Jansenism Again

Just about this time, De La Salle learned from the Brothers in Calais that his name was on a list, published by the Dean of Calais, of those who were appealing the Bull *Unigenitus* in which the pope had condemned a series of Jansenist propositions. In a letter to the Brother Director at Calais, dated January 28, 1719, De La Salle stated in no uncertain terms:

I do not think, my very dear Brother, that I have given the Very Reverend Dean of Calais any reason for saying that I am one of the appellants. It has never been my intention to appeal any more than it has been to embrace the doctrines of those who appeal to a future council. I have too much respect for our Holy Father the Pope and too great a submission to the decisions of the Holy See not to give my assent to any of them.

The letter goes on to support his position by arguments from Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine. De La Salle concludes with the words: "Such are my sentiments and such are my dispositions, which have never been different and which I will never change."

It is quite obvious that De La Salle's name appeared on the list by being confused with that of his brother, Jean-Louis, who indeed was among the appellants. It is also possible that the Dean of Calais used this ploy to try to win the Brothers over to the Jansenist party. In the year following, the Brothers would have much to suffer at the hands of the Dean and his partisans at Calais for their resistance to this kind of pressure.

The Final Illness

As the season of Lent approached in 1719, it became increasingly difficult for De La Salle to conceal the fact that he was seriously ill. The rheumatism which had plagued him for many years became chronic and would not yield to even the most potent remedies. To this were added attacks of asthma, which were aggravated as he began to observe the penitential season of Lent with his usual rigor. As breathing became more and more difficult for him, the Brothers urged him to mitigate his penances, but to no avail. He only replied that the victim was ready to be immolated and needed to be purified. Even Brother Barthélemy, returning from a trip to Paris, was unable to convince him to go easy on himself. Finally the Brothers persuaded his confessor to forbid the Founder to continue a fast that was putting his life in danger.

A series of mishaps only aggravated his condition. One Brother, trying to be helpful, pulled back a chair as De La Salle was about to sit down. The Founder lost his balance and fell on his face. This opened a gash in his head and later caused pain in his ear. Although he tried to conceal the extent of the injury, he admitted to the infirmarian one day that he had such a headache that he felt as if his head

were split in two. What bothered him most was that he found it increasingly difficult to concentrate so as to be able to read or write.

Shortly thereafter he was struck again on the head by a falling door. Then pains in his side became so unbearable that he finally had to take to his bed. The doctor who attended him made no secret of the fact that the illness was terminal. De La Salle received the news with equanimity, and even joy. Since the remedies prescribed proved to be quite useless, the Founder asked the Brothers not to waste any more money on him, but to leave all in the hands of the divine Physician.

After the medication was discontinued, De La Salle was able to say Mass daily and to hear confessions regularly for another week or two. But even this proved to be beyond his strength, and he was obliged to remain in bed. He expressed the hope that he would soon "be delivered from Egypt and brought into the true promised land."

As March 19, the feast of Saint Joseph, was drawing near, De La Salle expressed a great desire to celebrate Mass in honor of this special patron and protector of the Institute. So weak was his condition and so intense the pain, that any such idea seemed to be out of the question. However, on the eve of the feast, he felt all of a sudden that the pain was subsiding and that his strength had returned. At first he thought he was dreaming, but in the morning he was well enough to get up and celebrate Mass for the Brothers. They were overjoyed at the prospect that a miraculous cure had returned their Father to them. But almost immediately thereafter he relapsed into his former condition. It became clearer than ever that the end was near and that it was in honor of Saint Joseph that he had celebrated Mass for the last time.

One Final Humiliation

While De La Salle was thus hovering between life and death, a vicious campaign was being waged behind his back in the chancery office of the archdiocese of Rouen. The vicar-general, Father Bernard Couët, was engaged in the last stages of a long-standing vendetta against the Founder and the Brothers.

The trouble had its origins in the arrangements made under Archbishop Colbert in 1706, shortly after the Brothers had moved into Saint Yon. Although Archbishop Colbert was a supporter of the Brothers in many ways, and had given extensive faculties to De La Salle to exercise his priestly ministry in the archdiocese of Rouen, he also had supported the vicar-general in affirming the rights of the pastor of the

church of Saint Sever, in whose parish Saint Yon was located. The pastor had insisted that the Brothers and the boarding students at Saint Yon attend Sunday Mass in the parish church. The chaplain at Saint Yon had to be approved by the pastor and was allowed to say Mass in the chapel there only for the Brothers and their students, but not for outsiders.

When Colbert died in 1708 and Claude-Maur d'Aubigné succeeded as Archbishop of Rouen, the claims of the Brothers at Saint Yon for autonomy in their internal affairs became a continual source of annoyance to the ecclesiastical authorities. When De La Salle first came to pay his respects to D'Aubigné, he was rudely rebuffed. On another occasion, D'Aubigné berated him unmercifully. The Founder simply fell to his knees and uttered not a word in his own defense.

The sticking point seemed to be the requirement that the boarders attend the Sunday Mass in the parish. Once the house of detention was opened, this proved to be impossible. The prisoners confined under the *lettres de cachet* would only take advantage of this opportunity to escape. Accordingly, De La Salle had Sunday Mass said for the Brothers and the boarders in the Saint Yon chapel.

The vicar-general interpreted this as defiance and a violation of the rights of the pastor of Saint Sever. When called in to answer this charge, De La Salle had explained that he and the Brothers were not violating any of the articles of the agreement except those that had proven from experience to be impossible to keep. The vicar-general was unconvinced. In the spring of 1719 he reported the affair to the archbishop, and in the process declared that De La Salle was a liar. Canon Blain happened to be present at the time and tried to speak up in the Founder's defense, but he was not listened to. As a result, the archbishop suspended De La Salle's faculties to exercise his priestly functions. Canon Blain was commissioned to communicate the decision to the Founder, who by then was on his deathbed.

Blain said nothing at first and could not bring himself to communicate the decision to the Founder. Conscious that if he himself did not soon do so someone else would be sent, Blain warned the Founder that serious trouble was brewing at the chancery and that he had been unable to do anything to avert it. When Blain went to visit De La Salle on April 5 he learned from the Founder's lips that someone indeed had come to inform him that his faculties had been revoked. "They had asked me to bring you the news myself," Blain told him, "but I was in no hurry to carry out such an unpleasant task." "I suspected as much," the Founder replied, "after what you told me the

last time you were here." He accepted the decision, this final and ignominious blow, with the same serenity and equanimity with which he had received so many others. "God be blessed!" was all he would say.

Last Will and Testament

Meanwhile, aware that death was imminent, on April 3 De La Salle revised his handwritten will to provide for the concerns that had been expressed by his brother. The text begins as follows:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I, the undersigned John Baptist de La Salle, priest, being sick in a room near the chapel of the house of Saint Yon, in the faubourg of Saint Sever in the city of Rouen, wishing to make a testament to conclude all the matters which still remain to my charge, I recommend to God first of all my own soul, and then all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools with whom he has united me.

I urge them above all else always to have entire submission to the Church, especially in these evil times and, in order to give proof of this, never to separate themselves from the Church of Rome, always remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to ask God for the grace that their Society be always entirely submissive to it.

I also recommend to them to have a great devotion to Our Lord, to have a great love for Holy Communion and the practice of meditation, to have a special devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin and to Saint Joseph, the patron and protector of their Society, and to fulfill their assignments with great zeal and without self-interest, to have a close union among themselves and blind obedience toward their superiors, which is the foundation and support of all perfection in a community.

There then follow several clauses in which the Founder confirms the transfer of his library and other properties to Brother Barthélemy made the previous year. Finally, as requested by Jean-Louis, he clarifies the status of the properties occupied by the Brothers in Reims and Rethel, and the provisions he made earlier for the welfare of the children of his younger brother, Jean-Remy.



Engraving of a portrait painted during the wake prior to burial of the Founder's body.

The Death of a Saint

Early in Holy Week, the pastor of Saint Sever, having heard that De La Salle was near death, came to visit him and to reconcile their differences over the role of the Brothers in the parish. De La Salle then asked to receive the Holy Viaticum, which was arranged for the next day. The Brothers were asked to prepare the house and the sick room so as to make it a suitable place to receive the Blessed Sacrament. De La Salle, weak as he was, insisted on getting out of bed and vesting in his surplice and stole. In this way, seated in a chair, he awaited the coming of his Lord. When he heard the bell announcing the arrival of the priest, he fell on his knees to adore Christ in the sacrament. He received the sacred host with what Blain called “seraphic devotion,” and so transformed did his face become that some wondered why Viaticum was being given to such a healthy looking person.

The following day was Holy Thursday, and it was arranged to have him receive the sacrament of the sick, at that time called the “last anointing.” He received it in the full possession of his faculties, responding to all the prayers. When the ceremony was over, he remained in repose for many hours, giving thanks for the final graces that the last sacraments had bestowed upon him.

Later that day, as the Brothers gathered around him, he began to have difficulty speaking. Brother Barthélemy asked him for a final blessing for those present and for all the Brothers of the Institute. Reluctantly, and with great effort, he lifted his eyes to heaven and said simply, “May the Lord bless all of you.”

Toward evening, as his speech became erratic and he began to lose consciousness, the Brothers began to recite the prayers for the dying. Blain tells us that he regained consciousness long enough to give the Brothers his last bit of advice:

If you wish to persevere in your state and to die in it, never have familiar dealings with people of the world. Little by little you will acquire a liking for their way of acting, and you will be drawn into conversation with them so that out of politeness you will not be able to avoid their way of speaking, no matter how objectionable it may be. This will cause you to become unfaithful, and once you are no longer faithful to the observance of your Rule, you will become disenchanted with your state, and finally you will abandon it.

At about midnight, De La Salle broke into a cold sweat and entered into an agony which lasted until half past two the next morning. He then recovered slightly and, at the suggestion of one of the Brothers, invoked the Virgin Mary in the concluding verse of the night prayer: *Maria, Mater gratiae . . . in mortis hora suscipe.* (Mary, Mother of grace . . . receive us at the hour of our death.) When asked by Brother Barthélemy whether he accepted his sufferings, the Founder replied, "Yes, I adore in all things the guidance of God in my regard." These were his last words.

At three o'clock in the morning, he fell into agony again and, although much agitated in body, his face appeared tranquil and reassured. At about four o'clock, he made an effort to rise from bed as though to greet someone. He then joined his hands, raised his eyes to heaven, and breathed his last. It was Good Friday, April 7, 1719. He was just a few weeks short of being 68 years old.

He was buried the next day in a side chapel of the church of Saint Sever. Because of the celebrations of Easter week, the solemn obsequies were not held until a week later. Throughout all Rouen, and soon throughout the Institute, the word spread: "The Saint is dead!" But saints do not die. They live on in eternity in the blessed vision and experience of God. John Baptist de La Salle, in particular, lives on in time and history in the Institute he founded, the Lord's work as he liked to call it, that he left as his legacy to the Church and the world.