



The Messenger

A LASALLIAN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE



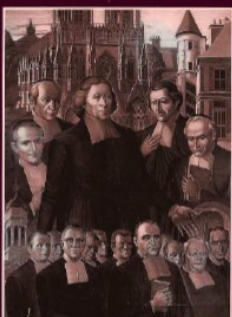
TENTATIVE STEPS TOWARDS A NEW DAWN

Dear friends, welcome to Issue Three of "The Messenger". As always, we begin by answering our discussion questions from the previous issue. Adrien Nyel was a zealous layman who helped convince De La Salle that the need for gratuitous schools for the poor was necessary. It was De La Salle's first meeting with Adrien that kindled the fires that would grow into the great institute that we have today. De La Salle's critical decision was to allow the teachers he had gathered to open the new schools to move into his own home. These teachers, of a status much lower than De La Salle's family, caused fierce arguments between De La Salle and his relatives. He did not budge in his decision however and focussed even more fully on forming the teachers into a community with a common spirit and purpose. Le Tellier (the Archbishop of Reims) who was initially supportive of De La Salle, was not always so forthcoming. His

opposition caused the failure of a planned teachers training centre in 1685. At the first general assembly, the Brothers and De La Salle pronounced a vow of obedience for the first time on Trinity Sunday 1686.

THE WORK IS YOURS

The Life of
Saint John Baptist de La Salle



Luke Salvo, FSC
Second Edition

Issue 3: A very great need!

Live Jesus in our hearts!

Mr. Kane Raukura

Chairperson - NZMAC

(NZ Mission Action Committee)



Q1. What was the striking contrast that De La Salle saw in the society of 1680?

Q2. What were the "Little School's?" How did they run? Who had access?

Q3. What was De La Salle's real contribution to the creation of gratuitous schools?

Q4. What did De La Salle contribute the success of his ventures to?

A Very Great Need

By the time the little community of Brothers in Reims had organized itself around John Baptist de La Salle to conduct "together and by association gratuitous schools," France was more than ready for some such educational enterprise. The need was great indeed. De La Salle himself only dimly realized it at first. Some years later, when the Institute of the Brothers was well along in its formative stages he could write in his Rule:

The necessity of this Institute is very great, because artisans and the poor, being usually little instructed, and being occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their family, cannot give their children the needed instruction, nor a suitable Christian education. It was to procure this advantage for the children of the artisans and of the poor, that the Christian Schools were established.

In the year 1680 the reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King, was in full flower. Having ascended the throne of France almost 30 years earlier, the fabled monarch had yet another 35 years to guide the destiny of France in the time of its greatest glory. It was an age that produced the great masterpieces of French literature, the classics of French pulpit oratory and treatises of spirituality, the palaces at Versailles and Fontainebleau, the brilliance of the royal court unmatched before or since.

It was an era, also, when the social hierarchy was beginning to change. Birth alone was no longer the criterion of worth. Some of the bourgeoisie were beginning to rise to high offices. The wealth of the merchants enabled them to build spacious mansions of their own in the towns. The rivalry for positions of influence was intense and engaged bishops, members of the town councils, and members of parliament alike.

As De La Salle himself came gradually to realize, the contrast between the nobility and the upper bourgeoisie on the one hand, and the artisans and the poor on the other, was striking. The lot of the artisans was characterized by insecurity. Unemployment was so general that craftsmen often had no steady income and no capital to help

them weather an economic crisis. Even worse off were the genuinely poor, those with no other source of revenue except the work of their hands. These were the manual workers, the porters, road sweepers, water carriers, ragmen, knife grinders, and unskilled workers generally.

For nearly all of them, illiteracy was a matter of course. Marriage had to be long delayed because few under 30 could afford to raise a family. Boys had to be sent off to work at an early age. Girls were usually kept at home to care for the younger children, but once the girls reached the age of 13 or 14, they were expected to enter service in a bourgeois household. Families suffered through periods of unemployment and semi-starvation that were inevitable and persistent.

Educational Policy

In matters of educational policy, as in all else, the power of the king was considered absolute. In view of the mutual support and interaction between the Catholic Church and the French Crown, with the king thought to be ruling by divine right, and the Church supported and often dominated by the power of the state, the religious and secular aspects of life were governed by a delicate balance between the two powers. Thus no organization, no religious community could enjoy legal status without securing letters patent from the king. Even papal documents defining doctrine, appointing a bishop, or approving a new religious congregation carried no weight in France if parliament and the king refused to recognize them.

Although educational policy was established by royal decree, the day-to-day supervision of the schools was considered to be not a civil but an ecclesiastical function. The royal policy fixed the minimum salary for the teachers and decreed that boys were to be taught by men and girls by women. On the other hand, teachers needed authorization to teach from the bishop or his delegate, unless exempted by royal letters patent. The police had no jurisdiction over school matters: this was reserved to the diocesan school supervisor, known as the *écolâtre* or *chantre* of the cathedral, a title derived from the time when the cathedral school doubled as a seminary for candidates for the priesthood who functioned meanwhile as choir boys. The local pastor might control the schools in his parish, but always as dependent upon the bishop.

Such a system, with its bureaucratic complexity, was bound to prevent any significant efforts at educational reform, as De La Salle soon found out once he became seriously involved with a new type

of school. It required the greatest tact and diplomacy to win over the officials, the city council, the parish priest, the bishop, and the royal supervisor, in order to effect any change in the prevailing system. Eventually, it was only by bold and independent initiatives that De La Salle was able to bring the advantages of a good education in a new way to a new clientele, the artisans and the poor.

Educational Opportunities

Nowhere was the inequality built into the social structures of seventeenth-century France more evident than in the opportunities for schooling. As we have seen in the case of De La Salle's own education, the children of the well-to-do were usually provided with private tutors in the earliest stages of their education. By the time they were nine or ten years old they were then ready to enter one of the "colleges" which provided the classical and philosophical courses required for entrance to the university.

As an alternative to the private tutors, or for children of the bourgeoisie who did not intend to enter the university, there were the "Little Schools" (*Petites écoles*). These schools were usually presided over by a single teacher who would set up shop, often in his own home. The diocesan supervisor (the *chantre* of the cathedral) was responsible for maintaining standards, protecting the rights of the teachers, and designating the precise territorial boundaries assigned to each. Although the Little Schools were required to accept the children of the certified poor free of charge, a sense of shame on the part of the poor and lack of motivation on the part of the teachers kept them away.

Instruction in the Little Schools was on an individual basis. The language used was Latin, and the emphasis was on rote memory. The pupils were expected to prepare themselves to come before the teacher to recite their lessons. There might be an assistant hired to keep the children quiet as they waited their turn. The stout leather strap known as the *ferule* was ever ready in the teacher's hand to make memory lapses the more memorable and less frequent.

A more specialized type of training was provided by the writing masters. These constituted a powerful guild of professional scribes under the protection of the king and parliament. Their principal function was to verify signatures and to maintain the quality of penmanship in official documents. A formal oath to preserve high standards of writing was taken by those who were admitted to the guild. Those who

failed to qualify would often become public scribes, earning a modest living by writing personal letters for a fee.

The writing masters were continually feuding with the teachers in the Little Schools in an attempt to preserve their monopoly on the teaching of writing. In their view, the schoolteachers should restrict themselves to teaching reading only. Professional jealousy often resulted in complicated legal battles, and sometimes physical attacks as well.

Excluded by choice and necessity from both the university and the Little Schools, the children of the poor were relegated to the charity schools sponsored by the parish with the approval of the local bishop. Each parish was required to keep a list of the certified poor whose children alone were eligible to attend the charity schools, a policy intended to force those who could afford to pay to patronize the Little Schools.

There were no special qualifications for the teachers in the charity schools. At best, they might be retired or part-time teachers from the Little Schools, bringing with them all their inefficient methods, even less effective in an uncontrolled environment. At worst, teachers were recruited from among seminary or university dropouts who might not have progressed much beyond the elementary stages of an education. There was little by way of supervision or organization, and sessions were often interrupted for any excuse: budgetary problems, policy feuds in the parish council, lack of a teacher, needs of the harvest, or just plain lack of interest. Discipline was notoriously bad, and truancy was more the rule than the exception.

The only alternative to the parish charity school for poor children was the school usually associated with the General Hospice (the poorhouse) in the larger cities. These centers housed not only the sick and the incurably ill, but the aged and homeless, the mildly insane, migrant workers, and vagabonds. Among them would be sick or abandoned children, street waifs, or even children placed there for longer or shorter periods by their working parents. If anything, the schools in these poorhouses were even worse than the charity schools in the parishes.

It was within this framework that John Baptist de La Salle had to address the educational needs of the poor, as he began to see with ever-increasing clarity how urgent the situation was. It is worth noting that De La Salle rarely "opened" a school; he was usually invited to take over a school situation that already existed but was in desperate need of a new approach.

Movements for Reform of the Schools

In addressing the need for the reform of popular education in France, John Baptist de La Salle was not alone, nor was he operating in a vacuum. In one sense, he was not even a pioneer. All of the innovative methods he introduced into the Christian Schools had been thought of and tried elsewhere. It was his role and his genius to make them practical and effective in a network of schools animated and energized by a community of qualified and dedicated religious men.

Among the predecessors of De La Salle in this field was Saint Pierre Fourier (1565–1640), the founder of the Congregation of Notre Dame at Nancy. In an age when religious women were expected to be strictly cloistered, it was his view that they could better procure the glory of God through a teaching ministry, thus integrating the religious and the apostolic life. Fourier was particularly sensitive to the need to give underprivileged young girls a solid Christian education, and for this reason he considered gratuity to be essential to the schools conducted by the Sisters.

Because Fourier wanted the education of the girls to be of high quality, he insisted that only the best qualified among the Sisters be chosen for this work, that they be well trained, that they be supervised by one of their own members, and that they work together to improve their teaching methods. Since the girls in the schools came from poor families, the accent was to be on practical subjects. The pupils were grouped in classes according to ability and rate of progress (hence an early experience with the simultaneous method, without using the word). In Fourier's view, education consisted in more than rote memory; as a result, much importance was given to developing a good rapport between teacher and pupil.

Fourier died in 1640, well before De La Salle came on the scene, but his experiment remained as an example of what might be achieved. His success was due to his clarity of purpose and creative vision, which he communicated to an able and dedicated community of religious women.

Another impetus for the movement to reform the parish schools came with the publication in 1654 of a book entitled *L'Escole Paroissiale*. The author was only later identified as Jacques de Bethencourt, for 18 years the pastor of the church of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet in Paris. The book was a description of the policies and practices that made this parish school a model and a center of educational reform throughout the rest of the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century.

In this highly influential little book, great stress was put on getting to know the pupils personally, especially by establishing regular contacts between the parents and the school. In order to give the students a sense of personal responsibility, certain supervisory duties were assigned to them. The simultaneous method of teaching was employed in the relatively large classes. The catechetical instruction was to go beyond mere rote memorization of formulas: the pupils were to be shown by concrete example how to live in a Christian manner. Absences were not tolerated, and truants were to be reported to the parents.

There were two interesting practices advocated in this book that were to be considerably altered in the Christian Schools of De La Salle. In the parish of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, the first language to be learned was Latin as more fundamental for educational purposes than French. Secondly, although the school was organized to accept both the rich and the poor, the two groups were strictly segregated. The reason given for this was practical: the dirty and unsanitary condition of the children of the poor might prove either offensive or a source of infection to their better-groomed classmates.

Another center of educational innovation was the Abbey of Port Royal. The Little Schools established there lasted only from 1637 to 1660, being suppressed in the face of the anti-Jansenist stance of the king and the parliament. But they did establish a precedent for practices that would eventually become widespread. Not only did these schools pioneer in beginning the educational process in French rather than Latin, but they introduced instruction in contemporary foreign languages as well. They devised a system for taking notes while reading, a method intended to imitate the dissection process in the study of anatomy. Credited with the invention of metal pens for writing, the schools at Port Royal were famous for the fine penmanship of their students.

With the preaching of Charles D  mia, the city of Lyon became identified with the movement to provide a decent and Christian education for the poor. Encouraged by what he had seen at Saint Sulpice and at Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet in Paris, in 1666 D  mia addressed his famous "Remonstrances" to the "Provosts, the Merchants, the Magistrates, and the Leading Citizens Of Lyon." The subject of this impassioned plea was the urgent need for schools for the children of the poor. D  mia argued that all the evils plaguing the city—moral, social, and economic—could be attributed directly to the fact that the poorer classes lacked an education. Word of this bold initiative, when it reached Paris, made a lasting impression on the young Nicolas

Roland, who was studying there at the time. It played a part in his determination to bring the same message back to his native Reims.

Démia had to repeat his "Remonstrances" in 1668, and eventually he began to be heard. Appointed by the Archbishop of Lyon to take general control of the schools, he developed a program for the reform of the schools and established a school board composed of priests and laymen to supervise them. He also scheduled regular assemblies of the teachers in order to maintain quality instruction and a high level of motivation.

In an effort to recruit good teachers, both men and women, Démia founded the Seminary of Saint Charles for young men who wanted to study for the priesthood, but who were willing during the years prior to ordination to exercise an apostolate teaching children in the schools. To this group, there was later joined the community of the Sisters of Saint Charles devoted to the same purpose. The seminary did not survive the death of its Founder, but the Sisters' community developed into a religious congregation that exists to this day.

Meanwhile, in the opposite corner of France at Rouen, Father Nicolas Barré, a member of the Clerics Regular Congregation of Minims, had been busy since 1660 training women teachers for all sorts of schools, especially those devoted to the religious instruction of the children of the poor. Together with two pious ladies, Françoise Duval and Marguerite Lestocq, he had helped to found a small community known as the Teaching Women (*Maitresses*) for the Christian and Charitable Schools. In time this group evolved into the congregation known as the Sisters of the Child Jesus of Rouen.

At the same time, Adrien Nyel, who was then the procurator general of the General Hospice at Rouen, was organizing a group of volunteer laymen to assist in attending to the many needs of the sick, elderly, and homeless poor who were housed there. Among the inmates were many poor and abandoned children. Eventually Father Barré joined with Nyel in trying to organize a community of men to be known as the Teachers (*Maitres*) for the Christian and Charitable Schools. Although these lay volunteers considered themselves as followers of Father Barré, it does not seem they ever formed a permanent community.

It was no doubt through his spiritual director, Nicolas Roland, that John Baptist de La Salle would have become aware of the movements in Rouen to provide religious instruction for the children of the poor. Roland had been a frequent visitor to Rouen where he was much in demand as a preacher. Father Barré and the Sisters provided both the motivation and the support for his own foundation of the

Sisters of the Child Jesus in Reims. There seems to be some evidence that Roland had even tried to interest De La Salle personally in the work of the charity schools, without success.

It was his role as executor of Roland's will that first sensitized De La Salle to the urgency and complexity of the problems in popular education. His contacts with the Sisters of the Child Jesus in Reims after Roland's death led directly to that fateful meeting with Nyel in 1679. From then on John Baptist de La Salle was being drawn, one step at a time, into the mainstream of a movement in which so many others had been the pioneers.

The Christian Schools of De La Salle

The originality of John Baptist de La Salle is not so much that he was a pioneer, for example, in gratuitous schools for the poor, the simultaneous method, the use of French as a vehicle of instruction, centers for training teachers, or any of the other educational innovations with which he is sometimes credited. Rather, his contribution was to create, resolutely and against great odds, a stable community of religiously motivated laymen to construct a network of schools throughout France that would make practicable and permanent the best elements from the pioneers who had gone before him.

By the time that De La Salle gathered the principal Brothers together in 1686 for their first solemn assembly, the essential elements that were to characterize the Christian Schools of De La Salle were already in place. The name itself is significant. The title "Christian" not only stressed the religious character and purpose of the school, but also served to differentiate this new type of school from the charity schools on the one hand and the Little Schools on the other.

Central to the success of the Lasallian enterprise was the community of teachers who called themselves by the name Brother. The community provided an element of stability and continuity, as well as a process of growth that came from shared experience and experimentation with new educational methods. Under the guidance of De La Salle these men adopted a lifestyle that was disciplined and even austere, prayerful and highly motivated. Great importance was attached to competence and confidence in the classroom, the religious spirit overflowing into a sense of mission and an ardent zeal to accomplish it. From the beginning the Brothers conducted their schools as a communal effort: "together and by association" was the phrase they chose to express this essential characteristic.



Father Nicolas Barré

The method of instruction in the Christian Schools was entirely practical. Religious formation aimed at developing good Christians, that is to say, in the context of the time and place, practicing Roman Catholics. Instruction was given in French rather than Latin, a policy that De La Salle defended by advancing the most practical reasons. The emphasis was on useful subjects—reading, writing, mathematics, and other skills that would be helpful in gaining a livelihood. The

simultaneous method was employed, although modified to provide for individual differences by dividing the large classes into homogeneous sections presided over by student monitors.

Discipline and good order soon became one of the outstanding characteristics of the Christian Schools. Silence reigned to the point where even the teachers spoke as little as possible. Detailed instruction was given on habits of cleanliness and the rules of politeness so that even the poorest pupils could associate with their peers without fear of offending them.

Regular attendance was insisted upon, and truancy was dealt with severely. The pupils themselves were often given the opportunity to assist in maintaining good order. Punishments were kept to a minimum, graded to meet the offense, and always administered with dignity, calm, and without any show of anger or resentment.

The original motive for the development of the Christian schools was the urgent and evident need to provide for the education of poor boys. This primary purpose was never lost sight of. However, as the schools began to prosper, more and more of the children of families who were somewhat better off began to seek admission to the Lasalian schools. The parents whose children were not destined for the university were attracted by the practical curriculum and the good order. Boys from bourgeois families learned that they could mingle easily with poor boys who were well behaved and well groomed; the children of the poor began to see new opportunities in life through the contacts they made with their better-situated classmates.

For De La Salle and the Brothers, gratuity of instruction was a fundamental principle. This not only provided a quality education for the poor, but also guaranteed that no distinction would be made in the school between those who could afford to pay and those who could not. The expenses of running the school and the living expenses of the Brothers were met through contracts arranged with either the pastor or those who endowed the school. This policy left the Brothers free from any kind of external financial pressure in the running of the school. It also led to a great deal of legal trouble, as will be seen in the narrative to follow.

In retrospect, De La Salle regarded these developments as the outcome neither of his own organizational genius nor of the initiative taken by the educational pioneers who had preceded him. In his view of faith the entire enterprise was due to the working of God's Providence that enabled him to hear God's voice in the cry of the poor. He was deeply conscious that in his lifetime, and in his schools, at least one sign of the Kingdom of God was being realized: the poor had the Gospel preached to them.