



The Messenger

A LASALLIAN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE

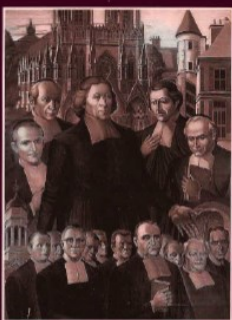
CHALLENGES AT EVERY CORNER

Dear friends, welcome to Issue Four of "The Messenger". As always, we begin by answering our discussion questions from the previous issue. The striking contrast that De La Salle saw in 1680 was between the nobility and the bourgeoisie on one hand, and the artisans and the poor on the other. Families often went through extreme hardship, and unemployment and starvation were a constant threat to survival. The "Little Schools" were schools set up by a single teacher in their own home, instruction was one to one with very strict discipline. They were open to all, but the poor usually did not attend and were not encouraged to so. De La Salle's real contribution to the creation of gratuitous schools was to build a stable community of religious laymen who could construct a network of schools throughout France. This group of men, who would come to call themselves "Brother" were central to the success of this Lasallian

enterprise, and from the beginning, they acted in a communal effort - "Together and by Association". De La Salle firmly believed that the success of his ventures was due to God's Providence. That his ears had been opened and that the Lords voice was being clearly echoed in the cries of the poor.

THE WORK IS YOURS

The Life of
Saint John Baptist de La Salle



Luke Salvo, FSC
Second Edition

Issue 4: A time of expansion.

Live Jesus in our hearts!

Mr. Kane Raukura

Chairperson - NZMAC

(NZ Mission Action Committee)



Q1. Where was the first school in Paris established? What difficulties were encountered?

Q2. What reforms were introduced into this first school to establish order?

Q3. What were the problems with the Habit and the Novitiate?

Q4. Why did the Brothers Community "begin to storm Heaven with prayer"?



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Beginnings in Paris (1688–1691)

In Reims in the year 1687, there was a small but highly motivated community of Brothers who had gathered around John Baptist de La Salle. They had already acquired a sense of identity and purpose, a distinctive habit, the essential elements of internal organization and a fair amount of teaching experience, as well as a developing and corporate expertise in the conduct of schools. The schools were flourishing, not only in Reims but also in the outlying towns of Guise, Rethel, and Laon. A junior novitiate of sorts was functioning at the center on the Rue Neuve, as was also the teacher-training program for lay teachers in the rural schools. Some of the Brothers including the Founder, had committed themselves by a vow of obedience which served to give a certain stability to the enterprise. The time had come to think of expanding the all-important mission of bringing the Gospel to the children of artisans and the poor.

There were already compelling reasons to think of Paris as a possible place to begin a new foundation. Father Barré had died in Paris in 1686. It was he who had guided De La Salle through the difficult choices involved in committing himself to the work of the schools. Perhaps now was the time to honor Barré's expectation that De La Salle would one day establish his Christian Schools for poor boys in the capital. The need there was even greater than in Reims. In addition, De La Salle had already promised Father De La Barmondière, one of his former teachers and now the pastor at Saint Sulpice in Paris, that he would come as soon as he could to take over the charity school in that sprawling parish.

It was while De La Salle was waiting for the right moment to make such a move that a rather different kind of proposal came from Charles-Maurice Le Tellier, the Archbishop of Reims. Delighted with the good reports that came to the chancery about the success of the schools, he offered to subsidize the work of the Brothers on condition that De La Salle would assign teachers exclusively to the charity schools in the Archdiocese of Reims. In turn, the Brothers would be given security and status as a diocesan congregation, with ultimate control in the hands of the archbishop.

De La Salle saw immediately the danger in this tempting offer. As Canon Blain remarks, Reims, which had been the cradle of the Institute, might now become its tomb. It became more urgent than ever to establish a foundation elsewhere. A foothold in the capital would provide many advantages and would serve as a more natural center from which the work could expand. Accordingly, De La Salle notified Father De La Barmondière that he was prepared to keep his promise to take over a school in Paris. The Founder's younger brother, Jean-Louis de La Salle, who happened to be a seminarian at Saint Sulpice during the early stages of the negotiations, could serve as an intermediary.

The First School in Paris: Saint Sulpice

The charity school in the parish of Saint Sulpice, with an enrollment of more than 200 pupils, had recently been placed under the direction of a diocesan priest, Father Compagnon, who had only a young layman to assist him. Aware of De La Salle's promise to the pastor and desperate for help with the large number of pupils in his care, Compagnon wrote as early as July 1685 asking for a Brother to come to teach in the school. Since by that time De La Salle, in consultation with the Brothers, had made it a rule never to send a Brother alone on a mission, his reply was evasive. Compagnon then journeyed to Reims to present his petition in person, but he found that De La Salle was out of town. When De La Salle learned of the visit, he wrote to Father De La Barmondière to say that he was interested in the project. The condition was that the pastor be willing to accept two Brothers and De La Salle along with them.

There was a series of delays over a period of almost two years before all the arrangements were complete. At first Compagnon wondered why the Brothers did not come sooner. Jean-Louis de La Salle told him that his brother was waiting in Reims for more explicit instructions. Compagnon then hesitated for a time, realizing that the presence in the school of two Brothers and the Founder himself might prove to be more than he had bargained for. De La Salle, for his part, was reluctant to come to an agreement with anyone other than the pastor himself. When Father De La Barmondière finally realized the reason for the delay, he had Father Baudrand, who was soon to succeed him as pastor, write in his name to inform De La Salle that he and the two Brothers should come to help with the school.

De La Salle arrived in Paris with the two Brothers on the eve of Saint Matthias' day, February 24, 1688. They were taken to the school building on the Rue Princesse, which also housed a hosiery factory where the school children could be taught a useful trade. The Brothers were to be lodged in the upper floors above the school, but they had to share their living quarters with Compagnon's teenage assistant and M. Rafrond, the layman in charge of the factory. Meals were sent to the Rue Princesse from the Sulpician community where Compagnon had his residence. The building on the Rue Princesse still stands to this day, now a combination of apartments and small shops, the only building in Paris associated with the Founder and the early Brothers to have survived the ravages of time.

It did not take the new arrivals long to realize that the school was in a state of utter chaos. The pupils came and went as they pleased. There was no fixed schedule of classes, and school hours varied from one day to the next. There was no provision for organized religious instruction or for class prayers to begin and end the school day. Card playing and gambling seemed to be the favorite pastime during recess in the narrow courtyard behind the school. The factory was a constant distraction, but it did provide a motivation of sorts in terms of financial profit for both the manager and the pupils. No one seemed to care: the pastor rarely visited the school, Rafrond was content to run the factory, Compagnon, who was nominally responsible, was often absent and no great disciplinarian in any case.

In face of all this disorder, De La Salle urged his Brothers to be patient, to trust Providence, and to concern themselves only with their teaching duties. Since the role of the Brothers was limited to classroom instruction, they used the little autonomy they had to divide the pupils according to their age and ability. This first small step toward organization was so effective that it soon attracted even more new students. When one of the Brothers collapsed from overwork, De La Salle had to take his place in the classroom until he recovered.

As the weeks went by Compagnon began to realize that it would be better all around if De La Salle were to take over the direction of the school. At one point, he even made a suggestion to that effect, but De La Salle, sensing a certain reluctance and insincerity in the offer, politely declined. He was conscious, too, that such a change in administration would have to come from the pastor.

It was not until sometime in April, two months after the arrival of the Brothers, that Father De La Barmondière, the pastor came on one of his rare visits to inspect the school. Quite distressed by the lack of

discipline and order, he inquired as to the cause. In the face of the embarrassed and evasive replies of Compagnon, he thereupon pleaded with De La Salle to take over the direction of the school. The Founder replied that he would need more Brothers if anything effective were to be done. De La Barmondière agreed to accept as many as needed, and he offered to pay them well. This new arrangement only served to create resentment in Father Compagnon, who continued to have supervisory responsibilities for all the schools of the parish.

Reform and Resentment

Once De La Salle and the Brothers were in charge, the good order already customary in the Christian Schools in Reims was gradually introduced. The doors were not opened until the Brothers were in their place and prepared to supervise. Once classes began the doors were locked. Students who came late could not get in; those who were accustomed to run off during the day had no way to get out. Regular attendance was insisted upon, a fixed schedule of classes was instituted, and the time devoted to the manual training program in the factory was considerably curtailed. The daily catechism and the regular classroom prayers became a focal point of the school day. To fill in the long period between the end of the morning session and the return in the afternoon, the Brothers brought their pupils, lined up two by two, to the parish church for Mass. This was something new: an example of piety and decorum for the spectators on the streets of Paris, an advertisement for the school, and a feature of the schedule in the Christian Schools ever after.

These reforms only provoked jealousy and resentment on the part of Compagnon and Rafrond. Both tried to play up to the pastor. Aware that the manual training program was the pastor's pride and joy, Rafrond thought that he would force the issue by threatening to resign. When he did so, the shop closed down for a time, but the pastor did nothing to call him back. De La Salle, who had come to see some value in this type of training, engaged Rafrond, now unemployed and anxious for the money, to teach one of the Brothers the necessary skills. The Brother mastered the techniques within three weeks. Another Brother with skill in knitting was brought from Reims, and soon the factory was operating better than ever. Rafrond had only succeeded in maneuvering his way out of a job.

Compagnon was rather more insidious. He began by trying to undermine the late morning Mass favored by the Brothers by urging

the pupils to attend the early parish Mass, which he knew the pastor preferred. When this ploy did not succeed, he tried to use his influence with a group of charitable ladies in the parish who were fond of him personally and generous in their support of the works of the parish. Compagnon began raising doubts in their minds about the innovations introduced by De La Salle. Included were some insinuations of mismanagement, probably on the basis of complaints from delinquent students who had been disciplined by the Brothers. In this way Compagnon was certain that the negative reactions would reach the ears of the pastor.

For some unknown reason, De La Barmondière seemed to give credence to the complaints. De La Salle was surprised to find, on his return from a trip to Reims to secure more Brothers for the school, that the pastor's attitude had noticeably cooled. Not wanting a direct confrontation, De La Barmondière let it be known to De La Salle, through Father Baudrand, who was his confessor, that it might be better if he were to resign. As soon as the summer vacation period arrived in September 1688, De La Salle visited the pastor to bid a formal farewell. By this time, De La Barmondière was no longer quite so sure, declaring that he needed more time to think about the matter, that the Brothers meanwhile were to remain as they were. It was only after a thorough investigation of the whole matter by an outside priest that the source of the trouble became known. Within a year, Compagnon was removed from any responsibility for the schools and put in charge of the choir boys of the parish.

A New Pastor, a New School, and New Difficulties

Meanwhile, in January 1689, Father Baudrand had succeeded De La Barmondière as the pastor of the parish. The new pastor was so delighted with the conduct of the school and the progress of the pupils that he resolved to open more schools in his very extensive parish. Early in the next year, 1690, a new school was opened on the Rue du Bac. Still in the parish of Saint Sulpice, the school was near the Pont Royal connecting the Rive Gauche with the Louvre on the other side of the Seine. Two Brothers were summoned from Reims to take over the two classes in the school, and it was an immediate success.

At this point, De La Salle might well have thought that the schools in Paris were sufficiently established. They had the support of the pastor, and the lines of authority were rather clearly drawn. It seemed that he and the Brothers might now go on with their work in

relative peace. But it was not to be so. This time the trouble came from the outside, from the Corporation of the Masters of the Little Schools to be exact. It was the opening of the school on the Rue du Bac that precipitated the crisis.

The basis of the complaint was that the school had been opened without authorization from the school supervisor (*chantre*) of the Notre Dame Cathedral. No protest had been raised in connection with the school on the Rue Princesse because that had always been considered a charity school and, as such, was legally under the control of the pastor. But the school on the Rue du Bac was something else. It was a new school, for one thing, and so great had the reputation of the Brothers grown that they were not only attracting the certified poor, but they were beginning to draw away from the Little Schools those who could afford to pay. The masters of the Little Schools, certainly with some reason, feared that their livelihood was being threatened by this new and highly competitive approach to elementary education.

The initial step was for the Corporation to file suit with the school supervisor for the archdiocese of Paris, Father Claude Joly. They put a seizure on all the furniture in the school on the Rue du Bac, an action they were legally entitled to take, and the school had to be closed for the time being. The first court decision went against the Brothers. Despite his reluctance, De La Salle was persuaded by Father Baudrand, his pastor and confessor, that he should appeal the decision as the only way to safeguard his educational mission to the poor.

De La Salle submitted his brief in writing. So cogent were his arguments, and so solid the support from the parents of the pupils, that the decision was reversed. The legal basis for the reversal was the judgment that the school was indeed a charity school under the control of the pastor, not the archdiocesan supervisor. The matter rested there for the time being, but it would erupt again in various forms as long as De La Salle remained in Paris.

Trouble in the Community

While all of this was going on, De La Salle was sorely tried by a crisis that arose within the community of Brothers. When the two additional Brothers were brought from Reims to supplement the two that had originally come to Paris, De La Salle appointed one of the new arrivals as Director of the community. This did not sit well with the two pioneers,

who had endured so much in getting the school started in the first place. One of them abruptly left the community. This was a great loss to the small community and to the school as well: the man was tall and impressive looking, had many skills, was an excellent teacher, and was well liked by the boys. The second of the two pioneers con-



The habit of the Brothers in the seventeenth century

tinued in the community, but he was a constant source of trouble and dissension, insolent and disrespectful to De La Salle, going so far on one occasion as to raise a hand to strike him. After three years, this second of the Paris pioneers followed the first and left the Institute.

Trouble with the Pastor: The Habit and the Novitiate

Another issue that caused pain and controversy during this period concerned the habit that the Brothers had adopted earlier in Reims. The opposition this time came from Father Baudrand. Not only was he now the pastor of the parish, but the recent lawsuit had established the principle that the very existence of the schools depended on him. For this reason he felt justified in making representations about the Brothers' habit. He thought this strange and rather countrified sort of get-up that the Brothers wore did not reflect favorably on his parish schools. He would have much preferred that the Brothers wear a plain black cassock with the ecclesiastical mantle.

Although De La Salle had jealously guarded the autonomy of the community on internal matters, here was an issue that concerned the external relationships as well. Nevertheless he was unwilling to yield in such a matter, lest the autonomy he sought for his Society in the departure from Reims might now be compromised. There was not much point in avoiding the trap of becoming a diocesan congregation, only to wind up as the adjunct of a parish. Furthermore, for De La Salle and the Brothers, their distinctive habit was the embodiment of their special identity as consecrated laymen, neither clerical nor secular. Caught on the horns of this dilemma, De La Salle had recourse as usual both to prayer and to spiritual direction. Fortunately, Father Tronson, his old spiritual director from his seminary days at Saint Sulpice, was available in Paris at the time. He advised the Founder to stand his ground.

The result was the *Memoir on the Habit*, the earliest and most precious of the autograph writings of De La Salle that has survived. In it, the Founder had an opportunity to explain publicly and in detail the special nature and mission of the young Society, all of which was symbolized by the distinctive garb they wore. Unusual as it was, people had gotten used to the Brothers' habit. It became in time a remarkable way to identify, not only the Brothers as a community, but the special type of school they conducted wherever they went.

The habit of the Brothers was not the only matter that caused tension between De La Salle and Father Baudrand, between the

broader vision of the one and the narrow parochialism (in the literal sense) of the other. Once the two schools in Paris seemed to be running well, De La Salle determined to bring the junior candidates from Reims to Paris so that he could personally supervise their formation. He took the precaution of obtaining beforehand the necessary permission of François de Harlay de Champvallon, the Archbishop of Paris. To those candidates who were old enough, De La Salle gave the Brothers' habit and employed them in the schools. At the request of the pastor, several of the others were assigned to spend the entire morning in the parish church to serve the many priests who came there to say Mass.

It soon became apparent that Baudrand looked upon these candidates for the Institute as somehow subject to his control. As a result, the young teenagers were caught up in an ecclesiastical environment that was not suited to their vocation to be teaching Brothers. Many of them, in fact, began to drift away from their original fervor and dedication to the ideals of De La Salle. Once again, the Founder was in a delicate position. He was entirely dependent on the pastor for whatever authority he had over the schools, yet he wanted complete independence when it came to matters concerning the internal structure of his young Society. Eventually, he was able to withdraw the juniors from their role as acolytes. He sent home those whose fervor had faded, and admitted the others to the regular life of the community.

Baudrand, for his part, continued in his opposition to an independent novitiate outside his control. He attributed De La Salle's intransigence on these matters to stubbornness, a charge that would be repeated many times and in many different circumstances in the future. It became the customary response every time the Founder tried to preserve the originality of his creation, the independence of his young Society, and its internal cohesion and identity.

Another Brush with Death

Toward the end of 1690 De La Salle fell ill and almost died. Although he was only 39 years old, it is not surprising that his physical frame, which had always been somewhat delicate, should become exhausted from the excessive burden of the work, the stress and anxiety in facing almost constant opposition, the long hours devoted to prayer, and the austerity of a lifestyle that included rather severe penitential practices.

The first attack came after De La Salle had undertaken to go by foot on the long journey from Paris to Reims in order to attend to some urgent business. Although he wished to return quickly to Paris, he was unable to ignore or to conceal his weakened condition, and was forced to take to his bed. The Brothers at Reims, who had not seen him in two years, were horrified at first when they saw how emaciated he had become. But they lavished on him all the care that the love of devoted sons could devise and all the remedies that their meager resources could provide. In a short time the needed rest and nourishment began to have their effect in restoring him to health.

It was during this illness that his maternal grandmother, Perrette Lespagnol, now the widow of Jean Moët, came to visit him at the Rue Neuve. She asked to be shown to his sick room. De La Salle sent word that she was not to be admitted to the upper floors of the house. She, who of all the family had always sided with John Baptist, insisted that it was her right to visit a sick man who was her very own grandchild and godchild. Instead, De La Salle made the effort to get dressed and to receive her in the parlor. He calmed her remonstrances by pointing out that it was a strict rule—as it was in most religious communities of men—that women not be allowed in the living quarters of the house. He did not want to make an exception in his own case, but he assured her that he loved her all the same and that he was recovering nicely.

As soon as he was able, De La Salle set off again for Paris, much against the doctor's advice. When he arrived back at the Rue Princesse he was so exhausted and so ill that he again had to be put to bed. This time, despite the attentive care of the Brothers, he did not rally and his condition grew worse. Within six weeks he was suffering intensely from a retention of urine and it seemed that death was imminent.

Filled with consternation the Brothers began to storm heaven, praying that their Father not be taken from them so prematurely. They contacted the famous physician Adrien Helvétius, well known to the Sulpician community for his effectiveness in treating Father Tronson three years earlier. The doctor proposed a remedy, warning De La Salle that it would either cure him or kill him. In an attitude of submission to the will of God, John Baptist agreed to go through with the remedy. The doctor recommended that Holy Communion in the form of Viaticum be administered beforehand to support the patient.

The procession with the Blessed Sacrament to the bed of the sick man was a solemn affair. Father Baudrand himself headed the group of several priests from the Sulpician community and the seminary, all dressed in surplices and carrying lighted candles. In the sick room, the Brothers were all in tears, begging their Father's blessing. Baudrand assured them that if the worst were to happen, he himself would be a father to them. De La Salle, dressed in surplice and stole to receive his Lord, could barely speak, but Blain tells us that he finally whispered, "I recommend that you remain closely united and in complete obedience." Someone had to hold his hand to give his blessing. He then received the sacrament with his customary fervor and faith.

After the priests had left, Helvétius administered his remedy. He stayed with the patient for a considerable time until he was sure that the remedy was producing the desired effect. De La Salle soon began to show signs of recovery. Within a few days he was able to take some nourishment, and his strength began to return.

During his long convalescence, the holy priest protested all the special care that was being taken of him, saying that he ought to be sent to the General Hospice with the rest of the sick poor. Through it all, he remained utterly calm and resigned to the will of God. Once his recovery was sufficiently advanced, he resumed his work and his austere life, confident that the success of the Christian Schools depended not on his health or even his life but on the will of God. As long as possible he would continue to exert himself to the utmost to procure God's glory as far as he was able and as God would require of him.