




The Messenger

A LASALLIAN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE



TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION

Dear friends and colleagues around New Zealand, welcome to our new Lasallian professional development resource "The Messenger". Our focus for 2014 is to try to get to know our Founder a little better and to develop some understanding and appreciation for De La Salle - The Man. To accomplish this, I will be sharing with you excerpts from Br. Luke Salms book - The Work is Yours. After reading the material, relevant questions to encourage personal reflection and discussion will be included at the bottom of this covering page. It is hoped that this material might also be

utilised by Signum Fidei Groups, Lasallian Partners and as part of staff briefings etc. Our first foray into the Founders life will begin with his family and how he became destined for the Priesthood.

I hope you enjoy the material and make the time available to delve into one of histories most amazing stories of perseverance and resilience.

Live Jesus in our hearts!

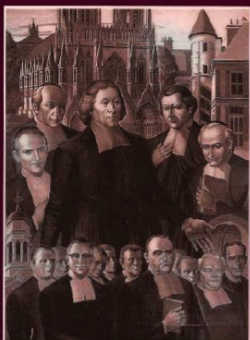
Mr. Kane Raukura

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THE WORK IS YOURS

The Life of
Saint John Baptist de La Salle



Luke Salms, FSC
Second Edition



Q1. So who were members of John's family? How many brothers and sisters did he have and who did he live with?

Q2. What was clerical tonsure?

Q3. What was schooling like? What was the norm of the day for a child's education?

Q4. Who was Charles-Maurice Le Tellier?



1

Family and Education (1651–1669)

John Baptist de La Salle was born in Reims on April 30, 1651. His parents were Louis de La Salle, a magistrate of the presidial court at Reims, and Nicole Moët, the daughter of the Seigneur de Brouillet. They had been married in August 1650; he was 25 years old at the time, she was 17. Altogether they had 11 children in 20 years of married life. Four of the De La Salle children died in infancy. In addition to John Baptist, the oldest, two girls survived, Marie and Rose-Marie, and four boys, Jacques-Joseph, Jean-Louis, Pierre, and Jean-Remy.

Ancestry

The legendary ancestor of the De La Salle family was Johan Sala, a Catalonian knight in the service of Alfonso the Chaste, King of Oviedo in Spain. Johan died in the year 818 in the war against the Moors, his legs broken in battle. There is a legend, originating only in the nineteenth century, that ascribes the origin of the three broken chevrons in the family coat of arms to this incident.

During the tenth century Armand Sala, a putative descendant of Johan, built a castle for his family, which thereafter was known by the name De La Sala. In the twelfth century the De La Sala knights were dispersed widely throughout France, serving in the armies of the various local princes. In this way the name assumed its French form of De La Salle. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the name became rather common throughout France. There is no genealogical evidence, however, to connect any of the various families named De La Salle to the original Sala family.

The name De La Salle surfaces again in the fourteenth century with Bernard de La Salle, a captain of Aquitaine, who had only one son, a bastard, who left no heirs. Bernard's brother, Hortingo de La Salle, fought on both sides of the struggle between the Italians and the Avignon papacy. He was rewarded in 1376 with a castle in Aougny in northern France. It is possible that the De La Salle family of Reims may be among his descendants, but there is no historical evidence to prove it.

The De La Salle family of Reims always traced its ancestry to Menault de La Salle, a cloth merchant who lived in Soissons in the late fifteenth century. His grandson, Lancelot de La Salle II, moved the family to Reims in 1561. Louis de La Salle, the father of John Baptist, was the youngest of the six surviving children of Lancelot de La Salle III and his wife, Barbara Coquebert.

Thus, despite the claims of the early and more recent biographers, the De La Salle family did not belong to the nobility. They were rather wealthy members of the upper bourgeoisie and some of them, including the father of John Baptist, married women of noble rank. These women, however, lost all claim to noble rank once they were married to a bourgeois.

During the nineteenth century, as the process leading to the canonization of John Baptist de La Salle was moving forward, there was an attempt on the part of two other families named De La Salle to claim relationship. The De La Salle family of Rochemaure in the Auvergne boasted a distinguished prelate named John Baptist de La Salle, who lived from 1723 until 1787. The son of Count Joseph de La Salle of Rochemaure, he had been vicar-general of the diocese of Vienne. When Pope Leo XIII conferred a noble title on Felix de La Salle of Rochemaure in 1899, the pope erroneously referred to the new papal duke as a member of the same "house of De La Salle" as the Founder of the Brothers who was about to be canonized the following year. There is no evidence, however, of any direct connection between the two families.

Then there was François de La Salle du Change, a priest who lived from 1775 until 1874. He was an historian and archivist as well, belonging to the De La Salle family of Périgueux. In 1859 he wrote to one of the Rochemaure family: "You ought to know that the Founder of this interesting Institute was Father De La Salle, one of our ancestors (sic!) . . . a fact verified by several letters from the superiors of that order." Whatever documents Father François had in his possession were later lost in a fire. In any case it seems certain that both the superiors of the Brothers and the various De La Salle families were finding connections to noble origins and to the Founder where there was no solid basis in historical fact.

Brother Clair Battersby, in his 1957 biography, claims that the family of the Founder belonged to the "nobility of the robe," as distinct from the hereditary nobility derived from knighthood, the "nobility of the sword." It is true that the judges in the courts of Paris were given noble titles on this basis. The magistrates in Reims, however, such as Louis de La Salle, were merely members of a provincial

court with limited jurisdiction and not thereby ranked among the nobility. Furthermore, the De La Salle name does not appear in the contemporary lists of those families entitled to be ranked with the "nobility of the robe."

Nobility, therefore, is not essential to understanding the privileged circumstances in which John Baptist de La Salle grew up. At the time of his birth, his father and mother shared the spacious mansion known as La Cloche with the paternal grandparents and the family of his only paternal uncle, Simon de La Salle d'Etang. Lancelot de La Salle, the grandfather, died the year John Baptist was born; the grandmother, Barbara Coquebert, died two years later. By a codicil in her will she provided that the rooms in the house would be shared by the families of her two sons, Simon and Louis, the father of John Baptist. As the family of Louis de La Salle grew, he was able to buy from his brother Simon the exclusive rights to the spacious mansion.

Childhood

The maternal grandparents, Jean Moët and Perrette Lespagnol, had a much greater influence on the young John Baptist. They were the godparents at his baptism. The baptism took place in the church of Saint Hilary, the parish where the Moët townhouse was located. For this reason it is possible that John Baptist may have been born in the Moët house. It was not uncommon for a young wife to go to the home of her own mother for the birth of her first child. Besides, three De La Salle families were sharing the facilities of La Cloche at the time Nicole was ready to give birth. If the boy had been born at La Cloche, he would more likely have been baptized in the old Saint Peter's, the parish where the De La Salle mansion was located.

Whatever the house in which he was born, it is certain that for the first 13 years of his life, John Baptist de La Salle grew up in the La Cloche mansion, nurtured by the loving care of his parents and by frequent visits from his maternal grandparents. Jean Moët had a great affection for his grandson, and no doubt brought him from time to time to visit the vineyards and play in the open fields of the Brouillet estate. As the local Seigneur, Jean Moët had a special bench in the chapel of the estate where he could show the boy off to the townsfolk of a Sunday morning. He himself loved to say the divine office of the Church, and is said to have taught John Baptist how to follow the complicated rubrics of the breviary. Perrette Lespagnol Moët, the grandmother, was likewise a source of guidance and support up until the time of her death in 1691.



Courtyard of the Hôtel de la Cloche, nineteenth-century engraving

During the 13 years the family lived in the La Cloche house, John Baptist learned to share his experiences and diversions with his sisters and his younger brother as they grew older: Marie, who was born in 1654, Rose-Marie in 1656, and Jacques-Joseph in 1659. To add to the variety, there were living in the neighborhood cousins galore, with the names of De La Salle, Moët, Lespagnol, and Coquebert, swelling the ranks of the extended family. There was sorrow to be

shared, too, with the deaths in infancy of Remy born in 1652, Marie-Anne born in 1658, and the first to be named Jean-Louis, who was born in 1663.

Only a few blocks away from La Cloche was the praesidium where Louis de La Salle functioned as a magistrate. It is likely that he took his oldest son to his office or to the court on occasion to try to interest him in the law. In the rather prosperous neighborhood there were other places that might arouse the curiosity of a young boy, such as the two busy marketplaces, one named for the cloth merchants and the other for the wheat dealers, or the sumptuous mansions, many of which belonged to the relatives of the De La Salles.

To this day one can stand in front of La Cloche and look down the street to see the flying buttresses supporting the apse of the Reims cathedral. The young John Baptist had only to look out the window to see the colorful processions pass along the Rue de l'Arbalète on the way to the cathedral. That was the customary route for the bridal processions in important weddings as well as for the processions of vested ecclesiastics on major feasts.

Since John Baptist was only three years old at the time, it is not likely that he would have remembered the occasion when Reims was the scene of the coronation of King Louis XIV, whose reign as the "Sun King" (1654 to 1715) would roughly parallel the life span of John Baptist himself (1651 to 1719). He certainly would have witnessed the processions in honor of Saint Remy after the pestilence of 1659 and the bonfires celebrating the treaty of the Pyrénées later that same year.

As respected members of the upper middle class, the De La Salle family and their relatives were active in the social life of Reims. Household routine was governed by the rules of correct and conventional social behavior. Music and the arts were held in esteem. There was a well-stocked library and the books were read. We can gather from problems in adjustment that John Baptist experienced later on, that the food at home was of high quality and that the family dressed in the latest fashion. There were servants, though not many full-time, to spare the children from having to do menial or disagreeable chores.

As a child, John Baptist seems to have been bored by the cultural soirees that were frequently held in the De La Salle mansion. It is told that on one occasion he ran to his grandmother to ask her to read to him stories from the lives of the saints as an alternate diversion. Musical performances in particular, a favorite form of entertainment that the father provided for his guests, were not to the liking of

his young son. The early biographers attribute this conduct to precocious sanctity; on the other hand, such attitudes are not uncommon in boys of that age.

There can be no doubt, however, that things religious had a special attraction for John Baptist from his earliest youth. The first biographers, who had the sources at their disposal, speak of the delight he took in attending church services, his fascination with the ceremonies, the games he devised to imitate them at home, the penetrating questions he asked about the meaning of all that he experienced or was taught about his religion.

Not all of this can be interpreted as a superficial religiosity. Surrounded by love and endowed with a trusting spirit, the young De La Salle developed a natural sensitivity to the needs of others. This emerged in later life in what the biographers could call "the natural goodness" of his "upright heart."

The elementary education of the De La Salle children began at home and was entrusted to private tutors. John Baptist would have learned to read and spell from Latin texts as was the custom. He was ten years old when, on October 10, 1661, after four years with the tutors, John Baptist de La Salle was enrolled in the sixth class of the Collège des Bons-Enfants in Reims.

The Collège des Bons-Enfants had been founded in the ninth century as an adjunct to the cathedral school, and so fell under the direction of the cathedral chapter of canons and the archbishop of Reims. It was originally intended for the education of poor students, the *bons enfants de la miséricorde*, as they were called, especially those who might be contemplating an ecclesiastical career. When the University of Reims was formally established by papal and royal decrees in 1545, the college was absorbed into the university as the school of liberal arts.

The classes in the college were numbered in descending order, beginning with the tenth grade for the untutored beginners. The sixth grade, where De La Salle entered the system, and the fifth, were devoted to mastering the rules of Latin grammar with readings from the easier Latin authors: the plays of Terence, Cicero's letters, and Virgil's Eclogues. Greek grammar would be introduced in grades four and three, along with readings in the more difficult Latin authors. In the second and first grades the emphasis was on rhetoric with readings from the orators and rhetoricians in both Latin and Greek. This program prepared the students for the two years of philosophy that followed, meriting for those who succeeded the degree of Master of Arts.

As may be inferred from this outline of the curriculum of the Collège des Bons-Enfants, there was little room for the study of contemporary authors. In fact, the statutes explicitly forbade the introduction of any recent works or any that might be considered suspect. The theory was that the student "ought to drink at the font of knowledge that is fed from only the purest springs."

Likewise, the prescribed curriculum made no provision for the study of either geography or history. Whatever the students learned about these subjects would have come indirectly through the study of the ancient historians or, perhaps, through the historical passages of the Bible. The contemporary world was avoided as a fit subject for serious study. As far as the masterpieces of French literature were concerned, there was no place for them either. On this basis, none of the great writers of the time would have penetrated the Bons-Enfants: not the Pléiade, not Montaigne, Malherbe, Corneille, Racine, La Fontaine, or Molière, and certainly not Rabelais.

This does not necessarily mean that John Baptist de La Salle grew up totally ignorant of the subjects that did not form part of the curriculum of the college. His father, Louis de La Salle, was an accomplished humanist; most of his bourgeois friends and relations were involved in politics, and some of them had travelled widely. It might be supposed that the men of the family would have discussed the literary and political movements of the time in the presence of the younger generation of De La Salles.

Among his contemporaries enrolled in the Collège des Bons-Enfants, John Baptist would have found many of his young relatives. There were others related to the De La Salle family whose parents preferred the rival college of the Jesuits, which had been opened in Reims some 50 years earlier. The Jesuit college had a reputation for being rather more innovative in its educational methods and a challenge to the staid and traditional Bons-Enfants. All through the seventeenth century, the precise relationship of the Jesuit college to the University of Reims and its privileges was the subject of a bitter dispute. It is tempting, nonetheless, to speculate on what influence a Jesuit undergraduate education might have had on John Baptist de La Salle.

In any case, the student body was exclusively male, as was also the teaching and administrative staff. According to the statutes of the university, women were not to be admitted, even in the role of servants. Although there was little or no tuition to be paid, with only minimal gratuities required from time to time, the children of the artisans and the poor were for all practical purposes excluded. They

could not even afford the examination fees or the cost of books and school supplies.

In the social climate of the time, such students would have been out of place and totally unwelcome by reason of their dress, their manner of speech, and their patterns of behavior. Furthermore, the duration of the course of study and the subject matter of the curriculum were far removed from the situation of the poor families who were forced to send their children out to work at an early age. From his earliest years, John Baptist de La Salle learned from experience to take this sort of social segregation for granted.

Clerical Tonsure

Toward the end of his first year at the college, on March 11, 1662, John Baptist de La Salle received the clerical tonsure. This ceremony, which consisted in a ritual clipping of hair from the crown of the head in the style of the ancient monks, marked the formal entrance of a candidate for the priesthood into the clerical state. The tonsure was conferred at the invitation of Father Pierre Dozet, a first cousin of De La Salle's paternal grandfather. Dozet was vicar-general of the Reims archdiocese at the time, and chancellor of the university as well. It is likely that he wanted to direct his talented young cousin toward the priesthood at an early age.

John Baptist was not quite 11 years old when he was tonsured. It was not uncommon at the time to give the tonsure to boys that young. For one thing it made them eligible for ecclesiastical benefices without committing them irrevocably to the obligations associated with Holy Orders. The early biographers insist, however, that for John Baptist, young as he was, this was a conscious choice that signaled his determination to follow in the vocation to which he felt God was calling him. The parents, too, in approving this step, consciously sacrificed any hopes they may have had that their eldest son would follow his father in a career at law.

After the ceremony, John Baptist de La Salle, now tonsured and in some sense set apart from his companions, returned to complete his first full school year at the Bons-Enfants. He continued as before to live at home with his parents, but now he would come to school wearing the black ecclesiastical cassock. There were of course other young ecclesiastics in his classes dressed in the same style. Although clerics were allowed to let their hair grow back normally, the regulations forbade flamboyant hairstyles. This might have been a problem

for John Baptist, if indeed the regulation was enforced, since his chestnut brown hair tended to fall loosely in abundant curls.

Meanwhile, De La Salle continued in the prescribed course of classical studies at the college. His early biographers are at pains to point out that he was a good student, that he was respected by his teachers and his fellow students, that he made remarkable progress in a short time. Whether this is based on hard evidence or whether it comes from hindsight and admiration for their subject, is not always clear.

A printed program from April 1663 indicates that John Baptist had a secondary role in a school play dealing with the martyrdom of Saint Timothy. From the year 1665 a document has survived listing the winners at the annual distribution of prizes in April of that year. On that occasion John Baptist de La Salle was awarded a second prize in elocution and an honorable mention in extempore declamation.

Between these two documented events, another change occurred in the life of the De La Salle family. By that time the La Cloche mansion was becoming inadequate to accommodate comfortably the growing numbers. In May 1665, Louis de La Salle moved the family from La Cloche to a mansion he had recently purchased on the Rue Sainte Marguerite. The house was diagonally across from the apse of the cathedral, but located in the parish of Saint Symphorien a block away in the opposite direction. At the time, Nicole Moët de La Salle had just given birth to her eighth child, Jean-Louis; there were now five of her children still living.

During the years in the house on the Rue Sainte Marguerite, three more children were born to Louis and Nicole de La Salle, two of whom would live to maturity. Already in December of 1664, Jean-Louis had been born and given the name of his brother who had died as an infant the year before. There followed Pierre, born in 1666; Simon, born in 1667, who died two years later; and finally Jean-Remy, born in 1670. Jean-Louis would eventually become a priest, Pierre a lawyer, and Jean-Remy, after a varied career and a succession of marital troubles, was to die in a mental institution.

Canon of the Cathedral Chapter

Toward the end of 1666, Pierre Dozet decided to resign his benefice as a canon of the cathedral of Reims in favor of his young cousin, John Baptist de La Salle. The formal ceremony of investiture took place on January 7, 1667. For John Baptist, not yet 16 years old, it was a distinct honor to enter the company of the cathedral chapter of Reims, which

numbered among its alumni three popes, 23 cardinals, more than 30 bishops and, most distinguished of all perhaps, Saint Bruno, who had resigned the office in the year 1084 to found his order of hermits in the Chartreuse mountains near Grenoble.

In accepting this office, John Baptist assumed both the privileges and the duties of a canon of the cathedral and a member of the cathedral chapter. The duties were related principally to public prayer, especially the daily chanting in the cathedral choir of the liturgy of the hours and the capitular celebration of the Eucharist. The canons always had a place of honor in the solemn liturgies and processions that marked the great feasts of the church year. In addition to these liturgical offices there were regular meetings of the chapter to attend to its internal affairs and to serve, when asked, as an advisory group to the archbishop.

The position of canon was not without its rewards. Each canon was assigned a house adjacent to the cathedral. If he did not occupy it himself, as in the case of De La Salle, he could rent the lodgings to some suitable client. There was a fixed stipend for participation in each of the liturgical services that added up in the course of a year to a considerable sum. Above all, there were the dignity and prestige attached to the office, prelatial robes trimmed in ermine, and privileged seating at all the ecclesiastical and civic ceremonies.

It could not have been easy in the stratified society of the time for a young canon to accept without some sense of self-importance the honors that came from his new dignity. On the other hand, the regulations of the chapter imposed a rather rigid discipline on the younger canons who were not priests. They were expected to pay special deference to the priest-canons, to be zealous in their studies and modest in their behavior. Although the canons attending the university were exempt from attendance at choir and meetings on school days, they were strictly bound to the long liturgical offices that occupied the greater part of the day on Sundays and feasts.

Master of Arts

It was in these circumstances that John Baptist completed the standard program in classical studies in the summer of 1667. Day in and day out, week after week for the six years between 1661 and 1667, he had recited the rules of grammar, prepared the required exercises in composition and elocution, mastered the Greek and Latin authors, and engaged in public demonstrations of rhetorical skill.

His written style would always bear the stamp of these mental gymnastics: not much lyricism, but always the correct phrase, accurately expressed, logical and precise, yet often marked by austerity and a certain heaviness. Although his extensive study of the Greek and Latin classics must have helped to form his intelligence, there is little explicit reference to them in his later writings. While these were always laced with extensive quotations from Scripture and the Fathers of the Church, scholars have been unable to trace more than a handful of allusions to classical authors.

With all of these advantages and disadvantages, the 16-year-old Canon De La Salle began the traditional two-year course in philosophy in October 1667. The first year was devoted to the study of logic in the morning and ethics in the afternoon. The principal source for the logic course was Aristotle's *Organon*, dealing with logical categories, hermeneutics, prior and posterior analytics, exercises in dialectics, and refutation of sophisms. The ethics course was devoted to the study of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, with an examination of the meaning of the human life as human, the intellectual and moral virtues, and contemplation by participation in the divine intelligence as the greatest human happiness.

The routine of the first year of philosophy was interrupted briefly when, on March 17, 1668, John Baptist de La Salle took the four minor ecclesiastical orders of porter, lector, exorcist, and acolyte. This important step was significant for his status as canon and a sign of his determination to move forward in his vocation to the priesthood. Then, just before the new school year was to begin, his grandfather's cousin, Pierre Dozet, who only two years earlier had resigned his canonry in favor of John Baptist, died in Reims on October 3, 1668.

The second year of the philosophy course was particularly heavy. The morning was devoted to the study of Aristotle's *Physics*, the afternoon to the same philosopher's *Metaphysics*. At the end of the school year, on July 9, 1669, John Baptist de La Salle presented himself for the final examination. The examination was oral and conducted entirely in Latin over two sessions. The first was devoted to logic and ethics, the second covered the entire field of philosophy. De La Salle passed with the highest honors. The diploma, dated July 10, 1669, conferring the degree of Master of Arts, *summa cum laude*, is preserved in the archives of the Brothers' generalate in Rome.

In this way the career of John Baptist de La Salle at the Collège des Bons-Enfants came to an end. At the age of 18, a canon of the cathedral of Reims in minor orders with a Master of Arts degree, he

was considered equipped to pursue advanced studies and a distinguished career based on the solid foundation that had been laid during his eight years at the college. It was time now to turn his attention to the specialized studies required to respond to his vocation to the priesthood.

2

Theology and the Priesthood (1669–1680)

First Year Theology at Reims

With the degree of Master of Arts, John Baptist de La Salle was eligible at the age of 18 to enter any of the advanced programs in the university leading to the doctorate, whether in letters, theology, medicine, or law. Long since committed to his vocation to the priesthood, De La Salle, not surprisingly, enrolled in the school (or “faculty”) of theology.

Contrary to the impression given by the early biographers that De La Salle began his theological study in Paris, documents survive to show that he was enrolled in the first-year theology courses at the University of Reims during the academic year beginning on October 10, the feast of Saint Denis, in 1669.

The theology courses at Reims were offered in two centers by two professors: Michel de Blanzky lectured at Saint Patrick’s Hall in the morning; Daniel Egan taught his course in the Abbey of Saint Denis in the afternoon. De Blanzky, a native of Soissons, was a distinguished priest, canon, and scholar with a taste for the comfortable lifestyle which his extensive income made possible. Egan, a fugitive from persecution in his native Ireland, was also a priest, canon, and scholar, but known rather to prefer the simple life, the solitude of his study, and his professional contacts with his students. Much of Egan’s income was devoted to providing the means for young Irishmen interested in the priesthood to come to Reims to study.

In the morning sessions, De Blanzky taught the traditional scholastic tract on God and creation. The *Book of Sentences* of Peter Lombard served as a text. In the afternoon, Egan presided over a series of practical exercises in theological disputation. There was also a basic course in Sacred Scripture “as interpreted by the Fathers of the Church,” but it is not clear which of the two professors taught this course.

The students were expected to master this material in all of its complicated detail. The emphasis was on memory and technique rather than on personal conviction, and not at all on critical or creative independent thought. There is no doubt that this training left its mark on John Baptist de La Salle. All his life he displayed a prodigious

memory for the texts of Sacred Scripture and the Fathers, but this was coupled with a firm resistance to theological innovation. There are documents attesting to the fact that De La Salle followed and successfully completed these first-year theology courses at Reims.

In the normal course of events, De La Salle would have continued to follow at Reims the remainder of the course leading to the degree of Bachelor of Theology. During the academic year 1669–1670, however, his first in the school of theology, a dispute arose between the professors of the faculty and the administration of the University of Reims.

The trouble had its origin in 1668 with the retirement of Pierre Dozet as Chancellor of the University, a position he had held for fifty years along with all his other titles. Appointed to succeed him was a priest named Louis-Eléonor Tristan who, unfortunately, had only a bachelor's degree in theology. This did not sit well with the professors, all of whom had doctorates or licentiates. How, they asked, could a chancellor with only a bachelor's degree preside over examinations for the higher degrees which he himself did not have?

The professors brought suit before the presidial court of Reims, which was able to calm things down during the fall term. In the spring of 1670, when the chancellor insisted on holding the examinations as usual, the professors immediately declared them null. The case again was brought to court, and the judgment went against the professors. A later appeal to the parliament in Paris failed and Tristan was eventually confirmed in the office of chancellor.

Although it is not known exactly how the students were affected in the day-to-day classes by all of this controversy, it is easy to imagine the confusion that must have resulted once the procedures for the examinations, as well as their validity, were called into question. The situation must have been especially painful for De La Salle, since at the time both his father and his grandfather were members of the Reims court that was charged by law to protect the privileges of the administration of the university.

The dispute was in its initial stages when John Baptist de La Salle was first enrolled in the faculty of theology at Reims in the fall of 1669. The option for Reims rather than Paris on the part of the son of Louis de La Salle might have been intended as support for Chancellor Tristan and a gesture of reconciliation. By the end of that academic year, however, the situation had worsened considerably. This may have been the reason why, after one year of theological study at Reims, John Baptist de La Salle left Reims for Paris in October 1670, where he enrolled in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice.

The Seminary of Saint Sulpice

The seminary in Paris as De La Salle knew it was under the direction of the priests of the Society of Saint Sulpice, which had been founded a generation earlier by Jean-Jacques Olier. In the course of a long spiritual odyssey, Father Olier had come under the influence of Charles de Condren, who trained him in the principles of the French school of spirituality that had originated with Cardinal Bérulle earlier in the seventeenth century.

The spirituality of this school was dominantly Christocentric, focusing on the total self-abnegation of the divine Word in the mystery of the Incarnation and manifest in the successive events in the life of Christ. Meditation on the "mystery" element of these events was considered an important means to cultivate this internal attitude of personal nothingness which, at the same time, was the promise and the condition of deep personal union with God.

Convinced of the need for a well-trained clergy, Olier founded his first small seminary at Vaugirard in 1641. His appointment as pastor of Saint Sulpice in 1646 was the occasion for establishing the seminary and founding the Society in the parish from which it took its name. The goal was to produce priests committed to a life of self-sacrifice and self-discipline, zeal for the salvation of souls, especially the poor, and exactitude in living up to the demands of the clerical state.

With this in view, seminary discipline was exceptionally strict. It was early to bed (night prayer at 8:00 P.M.) and early to rise (5:00 A.M.). There were the customary spiritual exercises: vocal prayer and meditation, daily Mass, the divine office for those obliged to it (the rosary in common for the others), and spiritual reading. Silence was imposed and strictly observed, even during meals, when the seminarians took turns reading aloud. All were expected to be serious and modest in their external behavior, and nothing was to be done without permission.

The fees at the seminary were relatively high, so much so that only wealthy clerics could afford to go there. A successful sojourn at Saint Sulpice set the young cleric apart and was practically a guarantee of high ecclesiastical preference afterwards. Despite the elite quality of the clientele, professors and students alike were required to maintain a simple lifestyle in common and to observe exactly every last detail of the seminary regulations.

As part of their preparation for pastoral work the seminarians were given the opportunity to teach catechism in the various centers located throughout the large parish that embraced some of the poor-

est neighborhoods in the Paris of that time. The seminarians were prepared carefully for this ministry by one of the priests of the faculty who supervised both the content and the method of instruction. The seminarians usually worked in pairs: one would explain the lesson of the day while the other tried to keep the children quiet and orderly. The records show that these sessions were popular among the young people of the parish and were well attended.

Although it may be presumed that De La Salle took part in this program, there is no evidence that in his seminary years he ever thought of the catechetical ministry as a vocation in itself. More than likely, at that time, to him it was just one more aspect of seminary life, challenging and agreeable, perhaps, but only a passing phase in his formation for the priesthood. It may have also provided some more direct contact with the poor than he had been used to, arousing his sympathy and charitable feelings, but certainly no thought that he might some day become one of them.

Of all the Sulpicians on the faculty of the seminary at the time, the one who had the greatest influence on John Baptist de La Salle was Father Louis Tronson. He was the senior spiritual director of the seminary, and quite possibly De La Salle was assigned to his charge. He would eventually become Superior General of the Sulpicians, the second after Father Olier to hold that office.

Whether or not Tronson was actually the spiritual director of De La Salle, his influence would have been considerable. He regularly addressed the assembled seminarians in conferences that were reputed to evoke a positive response from his hearers. His contemporaries described him as a lovable priest who gave wise advice, whose demeanor was calm, and whose conversation was charming. His portrait shows that he was rather chubby with a fatherly look in his eye.

Tronson wrote extensive treatises on various aspects of seminary life, including a manual for seminarians and a series of meditations. These were considered classics in their own time and were later published. In the tradition of Olier, the emphasis was on meditation, spiritual reading, daily examination of conscience on a particular subject, and openness to the spiritual director. The need for serious study, especially of theology and Scripture, found a place in Tronson's exhortations. One of his favorite maxims was: "Learning without piety produces a proud cleric; piety without learning produces a useless one."

Some aspects of the spiritual doctrine of Tronson might strike the modern reader as rather severe. In his treatise on obedience he devotes 17 chapters to the importance of submitting to even the smallest

details of the seminary regulations. In the manual he prepared for the seminarians, there is a notable mistrust of the body and its functions: eating, drinking, and sleeping are considered animal actions that ought to be minimized as much as possible.

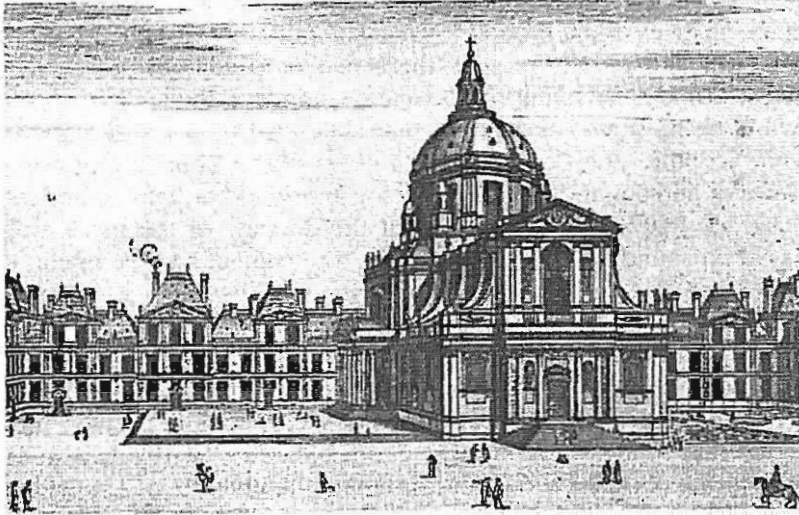
Among the other priests on the staff of the seminary who would play a part in the subsequent history of De La Salle, there were two who would later become pastors of the parish of Saint Sulpice, Father Claude de La Barmondière and Father Henri Baudrand. Then there was Jean-Jacques Baüyn, a convert from Calvinism and not yet a Sulpician when De La Salle was at the seminary. Once converted, Baüyn became noted for his extraordinary spiritual gifts, his austerity of life, and his deep humility and charity. He would one day serve as De La Salle's spiritual director during a difficult period when the two of them were neighbors in the suburb of Paris known as Vaugirard.

Two of the students living at Saint Sulpice while De La Salle was there would eventually play a part in the foundation of the Institute of the Brothers. Paul Godet des Marais, upon becoming Bishop of Chartres in 1692, would be the first bishop to invite the Brothers into his diocese. It was to him that De La Salle would address his policy statement on the teaching of Latin. Later still, Guillaume de Mérez, a fellow seminarian, would invite the Brothers to Alès in 1707 in his capacity as vicar-general of the diocese.

Theological Studies at the Sorbonne

While the training in spirituality for candidates aspiring to the priesthood was provided at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, the courses in academic theology leading to advanced degrees were given at the Sorbonne, which originated in the thirteenth century and eventually became the School of Theology in the University of Paris. The professors and graduates, known as the "Doctors of the Sorbonne," were a powerful influence in French political and ecclesiastical life.

De La Salle's association with the Sorbonne was simply in his capacity as a student of theology. He was not part of the "college" of the Sorbonne since he did not reside there, but at Saint Sulpice, a 15-minute walk away. The theology classes were held in buildings which had been renovated in 1627 by Cardinal Richelieu, whose tomb can still be seen in what was once the sanctuary of the college chapel. Whether De La Salle might have eventually joined the prestigious "Company of the Sorbonne" remains problematic since he had to leave Paris before obtaining any academic degrees from that university.



The Sorbonne

De La Salle came to the Sorbonne from Reims armed with the prerequisite Master of Arts degree plus a full year of theology. He needed two more years of theology, with only two courses required in each year in either dogma, moral theology, or Sacred Scripture. De La Salle opted for the dogma cycle. Then there would be two more years of advanced philosophy in order to meet the five-year requirement for the Bachelor of Theology degree.

The theology courses at the Sorbonne were then being taught by two distinguished scholars and doctors of theology with the title (and the revenue) of “royal professors,” Father Jacques Despériers and Father Guillaume de Lestocq. They were much involved in the theological controversies at the time. Both were staunch defenders of the Roman, and the royal, opposition to the subtleties of Jansenism; both shunned what were considered the dangerous novelties in the philosophy of Descartes; both opposed the Gallican claims of the French church against the papacy, but there is some suspicion that De Lestocq at least was not so strongly Roman on this issue as his public stance would indicate.

During his first year in Paris, his second year of theology, John Baptist de La Salle followed the course of Despériers on the Incarnation and the course of De Lestocq on the Triune God. During the following year he took the course of Despériers on the Sacraments in

General and Baptism, and that of De Lestocq on Grace. The certificates attesting to his attendance at these courses have been preserved in the archives of the Brothers' generalate in Rome.

The courses followed the "thesis method" traditional in scholastic theology. A statement of doctrine dealing with the subject matter would be presented as a thesis, then defended by *a priori* citations from Scripture, the Councils, and Fathers of the Church. Opposing views of heretics and dissident theologians would be refuted and, finally, an analysis would prove that the doctrine of the thesis was based on sound theological reasoning. The content and the methodology were not much different from what was customary before and since in Catholic seminary courses, at least until Vatican II.

By the very fact of having attended the Sorbonne, De La Salle became associated with a distinguished group of prelates and ecclesiastics who had shared the same experience. Among those who preceded him at the Sorbonne was Charles-Maurice Le Tellier who as Archbishop of Reims, would ordain him to the priesthood. Among the doctoral candidates during De La Salle's student days were François de Harlay de Champvallon and Louis-Antoine de Noailles, who would be successively Archbishops of Paris during the difficult years when the Institute of the Brothers had to struggle to survive.

Interruption

John Baptist de La Salle was in the final weeks of his first year at the seminary in Paris when he learned of the death of his mother in July 1671. Less than nine months later, during the Holy Week retreat at the seminary, word came that his father had died on April 9. After only 18 months at Saint Sulpice De La Salle had to leave the seminary for good in order to attend to family affairs back in Reims. He arrived home just before his twenty-first birthday in April 1672.

A complex set of responsibilities awaited the young canon. As executor of his father's will he had to provide for the equitable distribution of the family inheritance, collect and manage the revenue from his father's property holdings and investments, and assume his own role as head of the household. Although himself legally a minor—the age of majority at the time was 25—he became the legal guardian of his four brothers and two sisters.

It might easily be presumed that under these circumstances De La Salle would have struggled through a crisis in his vocation to the priesthood. Man of faith that he was, he might well have been in-

clined to interpret these events as a sign that God was directing him along another path. But he had also learned in the months at Saint Sulpice not to trust his own judgment in such matters. Accordingly he looked about for a spiritual director to guide him through this difficult time.

He found such a one in the person of Father Nicolas Roland, a man ten years older than himself and a fellow canon in the cathedral chapter of Reims. In order to keep open the option of the priesthood, Roland suggested that he enroll at once in the University of Reims to complete the theology courses that he had begun the previous autumn in Paris. Then, as Pentecost approached, and supported in overcoming his hesitation by Roland's advice, De La Salle decided to present himself for ordination to the subdiaconate. The ceremony took place at Cambrai in the chapel of the archbishop on the eve of Trinity Sunday, June 11, 1672.

At the same time there were problems at home to be taken care of. Shortly after the ordination of John Baptist as subdeacon Marie, the older of his two sisters, went to live with the maternal grandmother, Perrette Lespagnol Moët. She took with her their youngest brother, Jean-Remy, who was not quite two years old. The younger sister, Rose-Marie, had already entered the convent of the Canonesses of Saint Augustine in Reims shortly before the father's death. This left John Baptist with only three of his younger brothers to care for in the house on the Rue Sainte Marguerite: Jacques-Joseph, who was 13 years old; Jean-Louis, who was eight, and Pierre, who was six.

Theological Degrees and Ordinations

During the academic year 1672–1673, De La Salle put aside his theological studies to take care of his brothers and to manage his father's estate. By the fall of 1673 family affairs seemed to be well enough in hand for him to resume his university studies while continuing to live at home. In addition to the three years of theology already completed, there yet remained two more years of advanced philosophy required for the degree of Bachelor of Theology, which De La Salle was awarded by the University of Reims in August 1675.

De La Salle might have terminated his theological studies at this point since he had already completed more than was required for ordination to the priesthood. There was, however, much prestige attached to the advanced degrees in theology since they considerably enhanced the prospects for promotion to high ecclesiastical rank. It is

reasonable to suppose that at this time De La Salle might have envisioned such a career for himself. In any case, in January 1676, he began the two-year course that would lead to the conferral of the licentiate in theology in 1678.

The year 1676 also saw De La Salle involved in some non-academic affairs that would be significant for his future life as a priest. Early in that year it became known that Father André Clocquet wanted to resign as pastor of the old Saint Peter's church in Reims to devote himself to prayer and study. Nicolas Roland, De La Salle's spiritual director, sensed that here was an opportunity to point his young protegee toward a more apostolic ministry. The fact that De La Salle was only a subdeacon at the time was no obstacle. There was precedent for clerics in minor orders to be appointed pastors. They would then engage an ordained priest to supply the required sacramental ministry.

For De La Salle even to consider such an offer involved a real sacrifice since it meant that he would have to resign his office as canon and, of course, the revenue attached thereto. But consider it he did, and he even went so far as to sign an agreement to that effect, convinced that in following the advice of his director he was doing the will of God.

When word of the proposed plan leaked out, the reaction of the De La Salle family was negative and intense. John Baptist, still anxious to discern the will of God in such crises, decided to consult with his archbishop, Charles-Maurice Le Tellier, who was in Paris at the court, where he was accustomed to spend a good part of his time. De La Salle probably expected that the archbishop would approve, especially since he was following the advice of his spiritual director and acting from the loftiest motives in his willingness to renounce his canonry.

Influenced perhaps by the family, the archbishop commanded the zealous young subdeacon to abandon the project at once and not even to think about it any further. As it turned out, Father Clocquet himself had second thoughts about the whole affair and took steps to have the signed agreement nullified. De La Salle later on admitted that all along he felt that an inner voice was telling him that God did not want him to be a parish priest.

While in Paris, either on the occasion of his visit to Le Tellier or shortly thereafter, John Baptist de La Salle was ordained a deacon on the eve of Passion Sunday, March 21, 1676. The ceremony was performed by a Capuchin bishop in the chapel of the Archbishop of Paris, François de Harlay de Champvallon.

On April 30 of that same year, 1676, John Baptist de La Salle arrived at his legal majority. At the same time he decided to relinquish the guardianship of his younger brothers to Nicolas Lespagnol, a cousin of his maternal grandmother. Before doing so, he was required to render to the bailliff of Reims a detailed account of how he had managed the family finances during the previous four years. The discovery of this document in the municipal archives of Reims in 1964 by Brother Léon Aroz has given new insights into the character of De La Salle, the meticulous care and administrative acumen that he brought to this responsibility he had inherited from his father.

The reason for De La Salle's decision to cede to his older cousin the care of his younger brothers was, no doubt, the pressure of academic work in preparation for the licentiate degree in theology.

So far as can be ascertained from the sources, this program did not involve extensive course work, but rather preparation through personal study to defend in a series of oral examinations a number of theses covering the whole field of theology. The final public examination took place on January 26, 1678. De La Salle, along with four other candidates, succeeded in convincing the jury composed of several doctors of theology as to his mastery of the field. The degree of License in Sacred Theology (STL) was formally conferred on the Monday before Ash Wednesday in 1678.

Thus John Baptist de La Salle began the season of Lent in 1678 as a canon and a deacon with the licentiate in theology. On the last day of Lent in that year, Holy Saturday, April 9, 1678, he was ordained to the priesthood. The ceremony took place in the palace of the Archbishop of Reims, with Charles-Maurice Le Tellier himself as the ordaining prelate. The next day, Easter Sunday, Father De La Salle celebrated his first Mass before a small gathering of relatives and friends in the Lady Chapel of the Reims cathedral.

After his ordination to the priesthood, there remained the question of whether or not De La Salle would pursue the degree of Doctor of Theology. At the time, it was customary to take the examinations for the doctorate soon after the licentiate; ability to pay the high fees was more at issue than any additional study or research. There was no requirement of a written or published thesis such as is the almost universal practice today. It was simply a question of another series of oral examinations covering much the same theological ground as for the licentiate.

In this matter, as in so many others, De La Salle did not follow the usual pattern. In the beginning he hesitated. Whether through humility and modesty, lack of funds, his initial involvement with the

schoolteachers, or simply in obedience to his spiritual directors, De La Salle did not present himself for the doctoral examinations for another two years. Finally in 1680 he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Theology in a formal ceremony in Saint Patrick's Hall at the University of Reims.

Early Years in the Priesthood

The human joy and spiritual elation that De La Salle must have experienced at his ordination and first Mass at Easter of 1678 was soon tempered by the untimely death of Nicolas Roland, his spiritual director, on April 27 of that year. Just before he died Roland had appointed De La Salle, not quite 27 years old, and Nicolas Rogier, fellow canons, to be the executors of his will. In this capacity De La Salle was suddenly faced with the complicated negotiations that Roland had begun, to secure legal recognition for a community of Sisters he had established for the education of poor girls.

Helped in large measure by the support and influence of Archbishop Le Tellier, De La Salle was able to convince the civic and religious leaders in Reims to endorse the petition to the king for letters patent, equivalent to legal incorporation, for the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, as they were called. Less than a year later, in February 1679, the document arrived bearing the signature of Louis XIV and the royal seal, thus assuring permanence to the community of Sisters and their apostolic work. To this day the Sisters consider De La Salle, together with Roland, as a co-founder of their Institute.

De La Salle's contact with the Sisters did not end with the granting of the letters patent. He frequently said Mass for them and otherwise provided for their spiritual needs. In addition, although the Sisters now had legal control over their own finances, De La Salle continued to advise them in this and other temporal matters which had been his responsibility as executor of Roland's will.

It would be in connection with some such matters of business usually conducted in the convent parlor, that the Sister Superior, Françoise Duval, would have the opportunity to introduce De La Salle to Adrien Nyel, just arrived from Rouen. That was an encounter destined to change the entire course of De La Salle's life.

Along with his service to the Sisters of the Child Jesus, De La Salle fell into the routine of priestly ministry, such as any newly ordained priest might do today. Central to this ministry would be the daily celebration of the Eucharist. The special devotion and serious-

ness with which he said the Mass attracted people, and many of them waited afterwards to speak to him of their spiritual needs and problems.

No small part of De La Salle's daily routine would be occupied with his duties as a canon, which could require as much as five or six hours a day in attendance at the cathedral. He had the required authorization of the archbishop to hear confessions. It seems that in this regard he had a special gift for dealing with hardened sinners who had for a long time abandoned the practice of their religion. On at least one occasion he was formally designated to receive a non-Catholic woman from another diocese into the Catholic Church.

During the summer of 1679 De La Salle became involved in an incident that created something of a sensation and a scandal in the close-knit ecclesiastical circles of Reims. One of the canons of the cathedral, César Thuret by name, had apparently been living in concubinage with a servant girl for some time when De La Salle formally denounced him before the chapter. Thuret vehemently denied the charge, and a committee was appointed to investigate.

Meanwhile De La Salle himself became the target of gossip and abuse. Who was this young priest, daring to bring into the open a scandal that could only harm the reputation of the cathedral and its chapter? Popular or not, the investigation was thorough and lasted several months.

The delinquent canon was eventually found guilty on the basis of the testimony of several witnesses, including the girl herself, who was persuaded to testify against him. Assigned to a year of penance and deprived of his privileges as a canon, Thuret left Reims and accepted title to the chapel of Saint Gervais in the village of Guise. One author remarked that, rather than change his life, he changed only his residence.

Another aspect of De La Salle's daily routine ought to be mentioned in connection with this period in his life. Little by little he managed to turn the family residence on the Rue Sainte Marguerite into a religious center where some of his fellow priests could gather for longer or shorter periods to discuss common problems, to pray together, and to share a community experience. This provided not only some continuity with De La Salle's formative years in the priesthood, but also a setting for the radical change that was soon to come.