

## **Uncovering a Pedagogy of Persuasion in the Letters of John Baptist de La Salle**

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### **Introduction**

As John L. Elias notes, "The conduct of Catholic education in the centuries after the Reformation was dominated by the work of new congregations and orders of men and women dedicated to teaching."<sup>2</sup> One such congregation that emerged in France during the seventeenth century was the Brothers of the Christian Schools founded by John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719). De La Salle was formally declared a Saint in the Catholic Church in 1900, and honored as a Patron of All Teachers in 1950. A unique feature of the De La Salle Christian Brothers was their decision to remain as lay persons in an apostolic community committed to educational service to the poor.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I examine the letters of De La Salle to his Brothers. These were letters addressed privately to the Brothers. In analyzing their style and content, I consider how the letters were a means by which De La Salle engaged the Brothers in a process of ongoing formation to sustain their educational mission in community. I further suggest that these letters reveal a pedagogy of persuasion.

My discussion will be in three parts. First, I outline the external world of seventeenth-century France with a focus on the educational landscape. This is to set the context to understand the significance and purpose of De La Salle's letters. Second, I provide an analysis of the letters to Brothers Hubert, Robert, and Gabriel Drolin, with an aim to uncover a pedagogy of persuasion that lies beneath De La Salle's method of spiritual formation. My analysis also interprets these letters in relation to De La Salle's spiritual meditations. Finally, I conclude by considering briefly the contemporary implications of this pedagogy of persuasion for the formation of educators.

### **External World of John Baptist de La Salle in Seventeenth-Century France**

It was never the intention of John Baptist de La Salle to start a lay religious teaching order for the Christian education of poor boys in seventeenth-century France. De La Salle was a priest and a theologian who first saw his involvement in education as temporary. He started off by offering support to help Adrien Nyel, a layperson, set up a charity school in 1679 for boys in Reims. Now, while Nyel went on to establish more schools with great enthusiasm, he was less effective in organizing and training the teachers, many of whom were "slovenly men of marginal intelligence."<sup>4</sup> Gradually but surely, De La Salle became personally involved in the formation of these schoolteachers when, at Easter in 1680, he invited them into his home for meals.<sup>5</sup> These meals were occasions for De La Salle to provide the teachers with spiritual counsel, as well as practical ideas to improve their pedagogy.<sup>6</sup> It can be said, then, that De La Salle's hospitality to these rough-hewn men as strangers/teachers had borne the seeds of what would germinate into the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He could not have known the impact of this act of hospitality at that time. As De La Salle would write much later upon retrospection:

I had imagined that the care which I assumed of the schools and the masters would amount to a marginal involvement committing me to no more than providing for the subsistence of the masters and assuring that they acquitted themselves of their tasks with piety and devotedness ... Indeed, if I had ever thought that the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project ... Indeed, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted two years. *It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, Who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, Whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.*<sup>7</sup>

For De La Salle, history is not a series of accidental encounters. Rather, through the lens of faith, it is the slow but sure unfolding of God's Providence that calls for human cooperation to announce the Gospel. Thus, in his First Meditation for the Time of Retreat, De La Salle declares, "That God in his Providence has established the Christian Schools."<sup>8</sup> This spiritual focus on Providence is a prominent theme in his letters to the Brothers, as I will discuss later on in this paper. Existentially, De La Salle was responding in the best way he could to particular circumstances in seventeenth-century France, which led him from one commitment to another in the Christian education of poor boys. I will now outline these circumstances with a focus on the educational landscape. The purpose is to set the external context to understand the significance of his letters to the Brothers.

Education in seventeenth-century France was situated in a period in which the Catholic Church and the State under the reign of Louis XIV were closely intertwined. As Van Grieken writes:

People looked to the parish as the country's basic religious and administrative center. Every village was, first of all, a parish, and the priest was second in rank behind the local noblemen. It was through the parish that most French people encountered the substance of their government.<sup>9</sup>

Education, then, was one of the more important social functions performed by the Church. In fact, the Church controlled the system of education in France. As historian Henry Phillips notes in *Church and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France*:

Through schooling, the Church managed to embed itself in society in a way that it would never again be able to repeat. Apart from academies attended by the nobility and a measure of private tuition, the Church, either in the shape of the religious orders or in the shape of Episcopal authority had the monopoly of education in the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of the Counter-Reformation, the Church regarded schools as instrumental in the teaching of Catholic doctrine, in addition to their task of forming a civil and responsible

citizenry.<sup>11</sup> While royal policy regulated teacher salaries and decreed that boys were to be taught by men and girls by women, the daily supervision of schools was an ecclesiastical function; that is, the bishop was the local superintendent of public instruction, and his authorization was required for anyone who wished to teach.<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the bureaucratic complexity of the education system was also highly clerical. This would be a challenge to De La Salle and his new community of laymen as teachers, especially when they had no legal and ecclesiastical standing in France.

At the same time, the poor had limited access to opportunities for schooling. The education system unfortunately reproduced structures of social inequalities. Salm describes four types of primary schooling.<sup>13</sup> First, children from wealthy families had the privilege of having private tutors for their primary education before entering colleges that offered classical and philosophical courses to prepare them for study in a university. This was the way that De La Salle himself was educated. Second, there were the “Little Schools” attended by children of the bourgeoisie who had no intention to enter the university. While these “Little Schools” were expected to provide free education for those certified poor, the teachers were not interested in reaching out to them. The poor also stayed away because of their felt-sense of shame. The writing masters, who were a guild of professional scribes protected by the civil authorities, provided the third type of schooling. They frequently fought with the teachers in the “Little Schools” for monopoly over the teaching of writing. The fourth and last group were the charity schools for the children of the poor, who had been “[e]xcluded by choice and necessity from both the university and the Little Schools.”<sup>14</sup> These charity schools were set up in response to the Council of Trent (1545-1563) that had mandated free parish schools for the poor. However, these schools were disorganized, and staffed by teachers who were uncommitted and poorly trained. An alternative for poor, abandoned children would be to attend school at the General Hospice or the poorhouses, where conditions were worse than the charity schools.

It was in such a social setting of class inequality that De La Salle discerned a very great need for education among the poor. He observed that the children of the poor and of the artisans were often abandoned, and excluded from the schooling system. As mentioned earlier, De La Salle’s involvement in education grew and deepened over time. So did his educational mission, which demonstrated a preferential option for the poor *and* for children through gratuitous schools.<sup>15</sup> As De La Salle would write in his Rule in 1717, when the Institute of the Brothers was well along in its formative stages:

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 the poor, that the Christian Schools were established.<sup>16</sup>

Noteworthy is the dynamic nature of De La Salle’s educational vision; that is, it emerged alongside his ability to discern and respond to the signs of his times through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is important to point out that by the time De La Salle became involved in primary education in 1680, the air was already charged with talk about educational reform for the poor in France. For example, Father Pierre Fourier (1565-1640), the founder of the Congregation of

Notre Dame at Nancy, had galvanized a group of Sisters to conduct gratuity schools for underprivileged girls. This happened in a period when women religious were strictly required to be cloistered. Additionally, in an era when rote memorization was privileged as *the* educational method, Father Fourier stressed the importance of good rapport between teacher and pupil.<sup>17</sup> This relational aspect of teaching was also emphasized in a book entitled *L'Escole Paroissiale* (1654). Its author was Jacques de Bethencourt, the pastor of the church of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet in Paris, and the book presented ideas that influenced the reform of parish schools. These ideas consisted of the regular need for schools to maintain contacts with the parents of pupils, the simultaneous method of teaching in large classes, as well as getting to know the pupils personally and showing them how to live the Christian faith in a concrete way.<sup>18</sup>

Then there was the dynamic preaching of Charles Démia who, in 1666, pleaded passionately for the need to educate the children of the poor in his “Remonstrances” to the “Provosts, the Merchants, the Magistrates, and the Leading Citizens of Lyon.”<sup>19</sup> His point was that the failure to educate the poorer classes had been the cause of much social evil. Démia’s ideas made a lasting impact on Nicholas Roland, who would later become De La Salle’s spiritual director. Roland attempted to engage De La Salle personally in the work of charity schools that he had been supporting in Rouen. However, it was only after Roland’s death that De La Salle became more aware of the various issues in schooling for the poor. As executor of Roland’s will, De La Salle had to contact the Sisters of the Child Jesus in Reims, which led to his meeting with Adrien Nyel.<sup>20</sup>

Underscored in these developments is the fact that De La Salle was drawn into a larger movement of educational reform that he had not started. Thus, as Salm insightfully highlights:

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.*<sup>21</sup>

The accent is on De La Salle’s creativity in sustaining an extended network of quality schools for the poor through the formation of a stable community of lay teachers as Christian Brothers. Establishing and maintaining this stability had its challenges. First, there was the challenge that came from without. Until 1725, the Brothers were not recognized as a formal religious community in the state and church. The Writing Masters and the Masters of the Little Schools also saw the expansion and success of gratuitous schools conducted by the Brothers as a threat, and frequently filed lawsuits against them. As De La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools had no legal and ecclesial backing, they often lost these lawsuits that resulted in closures.<sup>22</sup> The second challenge stemmed from within. The Brothers were mostly rough-hewn young men who hardly had any experience living in a community. Many also received limited education in religious practice and pedagogy. A crisis arose when De La Salle’s move to set up schools in Paris around 1690 led to a deterioration of the original community of Brothers at

Reims because “[t]hey were not ready to function without their Founder.”<sup>23</sup> The exchange of letters, then, between De La Salle and the Brothers was a significant means of regular communication to stabilize the community in view of these challenges.

### **The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle: Uncovering a Pedagogy of Persuasion<sup>24</sup>**

As the Superior, De La Salle required the Brothers to write to him monthly about their community relationships, work in schools, prayer life, and adherence to various community practices. Today, given the convenience of our electronic world of email, Twitter and Skype, it is easy to overlook and undervalue the importance of letter writing. In seventeenth-century France, it took a long time for letters to reach their addressees. Moreover, it was common for mail to be lost or intercepted in the postal delivery system. As such, the monthly correspondence between De La Salle and the Brothers demanded effort and commitment. One should also appreciate this exchange of letters as an intentional and creative initiative of De La Salle to systematically form and stabilize the community of Brothers spiritually and pedagogically.

In analyzing the style and content of his letters, I examine De La Salle’s formation of the Brothers not only as teachers, but also as leaders. In terms of style, his language is economical and precise. The letters, as Molloy describes them, “give the impression that De La Salle had his correspondent’s letter in front of him as he wrote his reply point by point with here a word of encouragement, there a reprimand, now a little irony, but mostly with advice for living in community and the management of classes.”<sup>25</sup> In terms of content, I focus my analysis on the letters written to three Brothers: Brother Hubert, Brother Robert, and Brother Gabriel Drolin. The letters to Brothers Hubert and Robert pertain to their formation as teacher, director and school leader in communities within France. His letters to Brother Gabriel Drolin will be discussed separately from the other two because of the unique nature of their relationship. A close analysis of all these letters, I suggest, reveals a *pedagogy of persuasion* that lies beneath De La Salle’s formation of the Brothers.

#### **a) Brothers Hubert and Robert<sup>26</sup>**

Brother Hubert joined the novitiate in Paris on April 20, 1700. In 1706, at the age of 23, he was already the Director of the school and community at Laon. He went on to be Director at Guise and at Chartes. Brother Robert had a more interesting history. He joined the Institute in 1700 at the age of 24, and was both a serving and a teaching Brother.<sup>27</sup> He was also listed in a court order in 1704 that prohibited the Brothers to teach in Paris, and was brought to trial again in 1706 by the Writing Masters. At around 1708, Brother Robert was Director of the school community at Darnétal under the supervision of Brother Joseph, Director of the Rouen community.

As with most of his letters to the Brothers, De La Salle advises them on practical topics concerning “school matters, school-parish relationships, relationships of the Brothers with their students, the personal, apostolic, and spiritual development of the Brothers, and relationships among the Brothers in community.”<sup>28</sup> He addresses these issues with a focus on forming the interior lives of the Brothers as teachers and leaders. The emphasis is on their identity as Christ’s witnesses, whose integrity is marked by a consistency in their moral character within the community and in school. I highlight three themes regarding spiritual formation in De La Salle’s letters to Brothers Hubert and Robert.

First, for De La Salle, the Christian educator is a disciple who walks the way of Christ's self-giving love. He exhorted the Brothers to reflect Christ's self-giving love by imitating His obedience to do God's will. His letters often remind and encourage them to grow in the virtue of obedience:

My very dear Brother, you must allow yourself to be led as a child of obedience who has no other aim than to obey and in doing so carry out God's will. (Letter 7 to Brother Hubert)<sup>29</sup>

Be faithful, moreover, in practicing obedience, for it is a virtue you should have very much at heart; it is the principal one you should practice in community. (Letter 40 to Brother Robert)<sup>30</sup>

This emphasis on obedience ought to be understood in the context of three interrelated frames of reference. The first is the French School of Spirituality in the seventeenth century.<sup>31</sup> A significant feature of this French School of Spirituality is "the necessity of one's personal *kenosis* (self-emptying) in order to be filled with Christ."<sup>32</sup> The accent is on adherence, which means "incarnating the very being of Jesus by adopting actions and interior attitudes similar to those Christ first brought to reality by His every deed, His every feeling, His every outlook."<sup>33</sup> Second, for the Brothers, obedience meant adherence to the Spirit of the Institute, which is that of faith and zeal. As De La Salle expressed it in the second chapter of his final form of the Rule in 1718:

The spirit of this Institute is, first, a spirit of faith, which ought to induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute everything to God [...] For this purpose they [the Brothers] will apply themselves to have great control over their senses and to use them only as needed, not wishing to use them except according to the order and will of God. [...] The spirit of this Institute consists, secondly, in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear of God, inducing them to preserve their innocence if they have not lost it, and inspiring them with a great aversion and a very great horror for sin and for all that could cause them to lose purity.<sup>34</sup>

Noteworthy is the sentiment of *kenosis* from French Spirituality in the language of the Rule, which frames obedience as a humble response in faith to a God who wills the salvation of abandoned and poor children through the provision of Christian schools. Third, De La Salle's notion of obedience is rooted in the tradition of Benedictine spirituality; that is, obedience is an important spiritual principle that undergirds stability within a community. In fact, when the Brothers made their first perpetual vows in 1694, the formula consisted of the vow of stability to their Society.<sup>35</sup> However, unlike the Benedictine monks, the *Opus Dei* for the Brothers was not the Divine Office but the Christian education of children in schools.<sup>36</sup> De La Salle's originality lies in his appropriation and adaptation of French spirituality as well as the Rules of other religious orders during the seventeenth century to shape a lay apostolate of teachers. His letters recognized that the conduct of the Brothers in community life shaped the authenticity of their witnessing as Christ's disciples in the classroom. Their obedience would serve as an example for the young to learn from.

The second theme is the importance that De La Salle placed on the spiritual exercises of prayer. He considered the interior life of prayer as inseparable from the work of the Brothers as educators. As De La Salle wrote to Hubert:

One of your main preoccupations, my very dear Brother, should be to apply yourself to prayer and to your class work, for these are your two principal occupations and the ones for which you will have to give an account to God. (Letter 7 to Brother Hubert)<sup>37</sup>

There was a letter in which Hubert was taken to task for not being disciplined at prayer. Of interest is De La Salle's firm but gentle approach in which he expressed a determination to accompany Hubert in his struggle with prayer while reminding him of the duty to be exemplary in his conduct as a Director:

I will have to work with you and you must try to live differently; in particular be more assiduous at prayer and in following the spiritual exercises. This is what you must work hardest at and what you have not given enough care to.

If it is necessary for someone to go out, send another Brother and you stay at your place at the spiritual exercises. Give me an account of the number of times you have been absent [at the spiritual exercises] and for what reasons. Please do not fail to do this in your monthly letter, for the chief care that a Director should have is to be the first at all the exercises. (Letter 9 to Brother Hubert)<sup>38</sup>

De La Salle, however, was also careful not to have the importance of spiritual exercises override classwork. This is reflected in his advice to Robert:

Be faithful to be present at the spiritual exercises and to go nowhere without permission. It is better to omit some part of the spiritual exercises than to take time from class to carry out what is necessary, for you must not lose a minute from class.<sup>39</sup>

At first glance, this advice seems to contradict that given to Hubert. Yet, such an apparent contradiction ought to be understood in relation to De La Salle's pastoral sensitivity to the specific situation that each Brother was in. As Molloy comments, "He gives advice to this effect because Robert seems to have needed encouragement to overcome his natural weakness in the face of his school work."<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, underscored in both cases is the necessity for a practical balance between prayer and work in which "classroom duties [are] as important for the sanctification of the Brothers as spiritual exercises."<sup>41</sup>

This centrality of prayer in the life of a Christian educator is also emphasized in De La Salle's Fourth Meditation for the Time of Retreat:

You must, then, devote yourself very much to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry. You must constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you have experienced in guiding them.

Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him as the one who can do everything in your work and yourself as an instrument that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him.<sup>42</sup>

Christ is the source of grace that animates teaching. Christ is also the inner teacher whom one consults in and through prayer, and this is a notion that goes back to St. Augustine who writes:

Regarding, however, all those things which we understand, it is not a speaker who utters sounds exteriorly whom we consult, but it is truth that presides within over the mind itself; though it may have been words that prompted us to make such a consultation. *And He who is consulted, He who is said to dwell in the inner man, He it is who teaches – Christ – that is, the unchangeable Power of God and everlasting Wisdom.*<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly, De La Salle's insistence that the Brothers pray for their students also finds an echo in Augustine's comments on the importance of prayer in preaching:

And he [the ecclesiastical orator or preacher] should not doubt that he is able to do these things [i.e. speak to be understood and obediently heard] ... more through the piety of his prayers than through the skill of his oratory, so that, *praying for himself and for those whom he is to address, he is a petitioner before he is a speaker.*<sup>44</sup>

The Christian educator, then, is also a practical mystic and an intercessor. Now, it is not surprising to trace the influence of Augustine in De La Salle's writings. The Augustinian Rule was one of the four Rules recognized within the Church then, according to the Lateran Decree of 1215.<sup>45</sup> De La Salle actually drew on the Rule of St. Augustine to frame the Institute's Rule of 1718 so as to stabilize the Brothers of the Christian Schools as a new congregation that was not only responding to an unmet need within the Church in France, but was also continuous with the traditional principles of the religious life.<sup>46</sup> It is thus probable for his spiritual writings to express the traces of Augustine's pedagogical ideals, albeit in more direct language and reinforced in practice through his correspondence with the Brothers.

The third significant theme in these letters is poverty. As De La Salle wrote to Robert:

You must love poverty, my very dear Brother. Although he could have been rich, Our Lord was very poor. So you must imitate this divine model. [...] Please remember that you did not join the Institute to enjoy every comfort and satisfaction, but to embrace poverty and its consequences. I say its consequences because there is no point in loving virtue unless you love all that comes with it and gives you the means of practicing it. (Letter 38 to Brother Robert)<sup>47</sup>

Such is an expression of evangelical poverty that demonstrates a radical living of the Gospel. However, through the contemporary development of liberation theology, one must be careful not to construe De La Salle's words as an endorsement or romanticization of material poverty. As discussed in the previous section, De La Salle is said to demonstrate a preferential option for the



poor and for children in his insistence on the gratuity of instruction by the Christian Schools. He constantly reminded the Brothers never to accept payment of any kind from the parents of students or from the students themselves.<sup>48</sup> As such, the love for poverty in De La Salle's letters ought to be understood as an incarnate expression of Christ's solidarity with the poor. The Brothers and by extension, Christian educators, are to instruct for the common good by keeping their focus on the marginalized. It is striking that De La Salle's language about poverty in Letter 38 to Robert echoes his meditation for the Feast of Epiphany, where the Magi are led by the light of faith to encounter and behold the truth of Christ in his poverty:

Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them. Love poverty and honor the poor after the example of the Magi, for poverty should be dear to you who are responsible for the instruction of the poor. May faith lead you to do this with affection and zeal, because these children are the members of Jesus Christ. In this way this divine Savior will be pleased with you, and you will find him, because he always loved the poor and poverty.<sup>49</sup>

The letters, then, functioned to infuse the Brothers with an apostolic spirituality that was (and still is) socially sensitive and mission-oriented toward educating the poor.

#### **b) Brother Gabriel Drolin**

Brother Gabriel Drolin shared a unique relationship with De La Salle. On November 21, 1691, together with Nicolas Vuyart, he joined De La Salle to pronounce the heroic vow "never to leave ... the Society ... even if we are obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone."<sup>50</sup> In 1702, De La Salle sent Drolin to start a school in Rome. Drolin remained in Rome on his own for 26 years without the companionship of another Brother. Arguably, it was the correspondence between him and De La Salle that sustained his fidelity to the Institute.

Compared to the correspondence with Hubert and Robert, De La Salle's letters to Drolin are distinctive in at least two ways. First, they reflect the difficulties that Drolin faced in trying to set up a school in Rome, where education was provided by a "highly organized, clerically dominated, and closely guarded system of schools."<sup>51</sup> As a layperson in a community yet to be recognized by the Church, Drolin struggled to find a teaching position. It was not until 1709 that he obtained a provisional license to teach in a papal school.<sup>52</sup> Second, these letters also reveal De La Salle's vulnerability, given his close association with Drolin. Given his "disciplined equanimity [and] absolute calm in the face of either success or disaster,"<sup>53</sup> De La Salle significantly confided in Drolin matters pertaining to financial difficulties, the death of good Brothers, and his own illnesses.<sup>54</sup> Whilst encouraging, these letters at times also showed his impatience with Drolin for not making any inroads to start a school in Rome. This is ironic given De La Salle's constant instruction to his Brothers to be patient with one another in community, and with their pupils in schools. Now, under these uncertainties in Rome, two further themes are especially significant in the Founder's letters to Drolin.

The first is an exhortation to trust in God's Providence:

As for myself, I do not like to make the first move in any endeavor, and I will not do it in Rome any more than elsewhere. I leave it to Divine Providence to make the first move and then I am satisfied. When it is clear that I am acting only under the direction of Providence, I have nothing to reproach myself with.<sup>55</sup>

These words attest to De La Salle's conviction that it is ultimately God who saves, and that Christian schools are initiated by God's providential love for the salvation of the young. "It is characteristic of the providence of God and of its vigilance over human conduct to substitute for fathers and mothers persons [i.e. the Brothers / teachers] who have enough knowledge and zeal to bring children to the knowledge of God and of his mysteries."<sup>56</sup> As such, the work of Christian education is God's, and teachers as cooperators with Christ through the grace of the Spirit. It is precisely this radical abandonment to Divine Providence that De La Salle hoped to encourage in Drolin as this had enabled him "to enter practically and creatively into the world of the poor, even when it necessitated burning of clerical culture, social class, security and even family."<sup>57</sup>

The second theme is concerned with preserving the identity of the Brothers as lay teachers. After the sudden death of Henri L'Heureux whom De La Salle had been preparing for priestly ordination and succession as superior, he decided that the community would remain non-clerical, with all as Brothers. In order to prevent the Brothers from being tempted to opt for a cushier life as a parish priest, De La Salle forbade them from learning Latin. This strict rule is reinforced in one of the letters that instructed Drolin not to buy a Latin New Testament or claim to know Latin.<sup>58</sup> De La Salle also revealed an anxiety over the possibility of Drolin assuming holy orders, given the difficulties in establishing a school on his own within a highly clerical setting in distant Rome. The letters not only made subtle references to this possibility, but also encouraged Drolin to remain faithful to his vocation as a Brother:

It is good to know that you have been on retreat in order to try to regain fully the spirit of your vocation and that of prayer. I pray that God will grant you this grace. [...] Make every effort, also, to dissociate yourself from those candidates for ordination. You may be assured that I will not fail to pray to God for you.<sup>59</sup>  
(Letter 27)

Commentators have pointed out an ironic ambiguity that this retreat could have been Drolin's preparation for the tonsure,<sup>60</sup> which gets mentioned in a later letter: "I am told that you intend to take the tonsure. Tell me how the matter stands. You know, of course, that it is contrary to Institute practice."<sup>61</sup> Yet, even if De La Salle had known that the retreat was for the tonsure, it is significant that he spoke of it as helping Drolin "regain fully the spirit of [his] vocation." In doing so, De La Salle demonstrated trust in Drolin by assuming his fidelity.

It is important, however, not to interpret De La Salle's insistence on the lay character of the Brothers as a simple opposition to the ordained priesthood. Rather, one ought to situate his view historically within a wider effort to sustain and stabilize an emerging lay movement of teachers to meet the educational needs of the poor within a strong, clerical-centered ecclesiology, after the Council of Trent, and in seventeenth-century France. De La Salle was certainly innovative during that period to employ the language of ministry to speak about the work of lay educators, and eclectic in developing an apostolic spirituality to support it.

## Uncovering a Pedagogy of Persuasion

These letters do not only demonstrate De La Salle's interior response in faith to the exterior world of France. I suggest that they also reveal a *pedagogy of persuasion* that constructs this response to form and transform a community of Brothers. As Augustine writes on the manner of speaking to teach the good in *On Christian Doctrine*:

He who seeks to teach in speech what is good, spurning none of these three things, that is, to teach, to delight, and to *persuade*, should pray and strive that he be heard intelligently, willingly, and obediently.<sup>62</sup>

It appears that persuasion effects one's reception of the message in obedience; that is, it moves people to give consent and act on the truth that has been instructed. It is to this effect that "persuasion is victory."<sup>63</sup> Noteworthy is how De La Salle's letters also reflect the three movements of teaching, delighting, and persuading, though they blend into one another more fluidly in his correspondence with the Brothers. I would further suggest that for De La Salle, to teach *is* to persuade, given how his letters sought to form the Brothers to be in a loving relationship with God, and with one another at school. He utilizes, then, a pedagogy of persuasion that holds firmly to his educational vision of quality Christian schools for the poor but with a pastoral sensitivity that is attentive to his Brothers as individual persons. I distill from his letters three dimensions of this pedagogy of persuasion.

First, De La Salle's pedagogy of persuasion involves *conversation*, which is unlike the persuasive monologue of the orator in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. His monthly correspondence with the Brothers was an ongoing conversation in writing, and the letters reveal De La Salle's genuine interest in their lives not only in community, but also as persons. A clear illustration is found in the manner he delicately dealt with Drolin who may have thought about holy orders in Rome:

I do not know what you mean by saying that you are not completely faithful to the Rule. Have you made some change in your robe or your lifestyle? Let me know in what way. (Letter 28 to Brother Gabriel Drolin)<sup>64</sup>

Beneath such direct and brisk language is a spirit of openness to continue what must have been a difficult and sensitive issue for the Founder. De La Salle does not only seek clarification, but also presumes the best in Drolin's character. In the same letter, he writes: "I am told that you intend to take the tonsure. Tell me how the matter stands. You know, of course, that it is contrary to Institute practice." As discussed earlier, De La Salle places his trust in Drolin's fidelity and judgment.

The pedagogy of persuasion that underlies the dynamics of conversation in these letters utilizes the modes of affirmation, encouragement, advice, reminding, challenge, and correction. These various modes work together to nurture relationships founded on truth and love. Language lies at the heart of persuasion through conversation. In this regard, De La Salle is particularly mindful of the power of words to build or destroy communities. As he writes to Hubert:

Take great care never to use terms as “I want” or “I won’t” or “I must.” These are expressions and ways of speaking that are to be held in abhorrence. They cannot but keep back the graces that God offers to those who have no other will but his, for as Saint Bernard says, it is self-will alone that leads to hell. (Letter 7 to Brother Hubert)<sup>65</sup>

Certainly, these are strong and challenging words for many of us today who live in a self-promoting and individualistic culture that has permeated the world of education. Yet, they also hold wisdom for us to realize that conversations that persuade to gather persons into communities begin with a consideration for the other in a spirit of trust that frees. Hence, De La Salle speaks about the regulation of conversations in his Meditation for Easter Monday:

One of the first things to be done by those who have risen with Christ and who wish to lead a new life is to regulate their conversations properly, making them holy and pleasing to God. Ordinarily and especially in communities, it is in our talk that we commit most of our faults and the most serious ones. It follows that conversations is one of the things we need to watch over the most, so that it may not become harmful.<sup>66</sup>

Such proper regulation of talk, especially during the Brothers’ community recreation, features frequently in the letters. The Brothers ought to be watchful about what they say because “[t]hose who teach are only God’s voice.”<sup>67</sup>

The second dimension is *accompaniment* through the art of letters as conversation. The letters demonstrate De La Salle’s commitment to walk in faith with his Brothers. This is evident in my earlier discussion on how he expressed a determination to “work with” Hubert on his prayer life. De La Salle continually assures his Brothers of his prayers for them, and offers guidance that reflects his knowledge of them personally and goes to the heart of their issues. As he writes to Robert to advise him against his brashness:

You must make it your concern to overcome your thoughtless behavior, my very dear Brother. It is a failing you need to be especially on guard against because it is harmful to you. (Letter 43 to Brother Robert)<sup>68</sup>

The letters also indicate that the Brothers responded to De La Salle’s genuine care as they confided in him their personal issues:

Don’t be upset by temptations to impurity or by natural movements. Try to think of something else. [...] You must not let the temptations against purity that you experience upset you. They should not keep you away from Communion. (Letter 8 to Brother Hubert)<sup>69</sup>

The fruitfulness of this accompaniment is best seen in the case of Drolin, who successfully kept his vow as a Brother from a distance without the support of a community in Rome. For Drolin, De La Salle was community. It has been suggested that Drolin carried the final letter from De La

Salle with him in his pocket, and it was probably this letter that had helped him persevere in his vocation for years after the Founder's death in 1719:

I assure you that I have a great tenderness and affection for you and often pray to God for you...I have been greatly encouraged by your last letter, and the assurance of your wholehearted affection gives me much joy. Please let me know how you are getting along. (Letter 32 to Brother Gabriel Drolin)<sup>70</sup>

The third dimension of this pedagogy of persuasion is *role modeling*. As Augustine points out, "the life of the speaker has greater weight in determining whether he is obediently heard than any grandness of eloquence."<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the persuasive appeal in the letters of De La Salle resides in the integrity of the Founder's life. De La Salle practiced what he preached. He could instruct about poverty and Divine Providence because he lived it. He resigned from the canonry, gave away his wealth, and moved out of his world of comfort to be in association with poor teachers in their educational work. De La Salle taught and led by the example of his life, and this constitutes a key principle in his pedagogy. In his Meditation for the Second Sunday after Easter, De La Salle reflects on how teachers ought to care for their pupils in the same way that Jesus the Good Shepherd tends to his sheep:

It is also necessary, says Jesus Christ, that the sheep know their shepherd in order to be able to follow them. Two qualities are needed by those who lead others, and should be particularly evident in them.

The first is a high level of virtue in order to be models for others who would not fail to go astray following their guides, if the guides themselves did not walk in the right way.

The second is a great tenderness must be shown by them for those entrusted to their care. They must be very alert to whatever can harm or wound their sheep. This is what leads the sheep to love their shepherds and to delight in their company, for there they find their rest and comfort.<sup>72</sup>

De La Salle could only expect his teaching Brothers to be shepherds if he were a shepherd to teachers. Indeed he was. Like a shepherd, he was vigilant in reminding his Brothers who were Directors to be exemplary in their conduct:

So, you are ready to let the Brothers lose their vocations because you are not courageous [...] You expect patience from your Brothers; then you must show patience yourself, and let them see that you are not acting through whim or following your inclinations at such times as these. (Letter 12 to Brother Hubert)<sup>73</sup>

Like a shepherd, he was also tenderhearted in his affectionate affirmation shown to his Brothers:

You say you are poor; how much pleasure it gives me to hear you say that! For to say that you are poor is to say that you are happy. "Happy are you who are poor,"

our Lord said to his apostles. I say the same to you. (Letter 38 to Brother Robert)<sup>74</sup>

Thus, it is De La Salle's authentic witness to Christ through his life of faith and zeal in education that carries the weight of persuasion in his letters.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have historically situated the correspondence between De La Salle and his Brothers as a means of stabilizing a fledgling lay community to educate poor children, a need that was inadequately met in a highly cleric-centered Church in France during the seventeenth century. It is striking that De La Salle never thought that he would be involved in the work of Christian education; he stumbled into it in faith. Salm describes this journey aptly:

In his [De La Salle's] 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.*<sup>75</sup>

The driving force for educational reform was De La Salle's zeal to advance the Reign of God through proclamation of the Gospel with the poor as the privileged hearers, just as the joy of Christ's birth was first announced to the poor shepherds who were watching their flock by night. Indeed, to educate poor children is to welcome God's reign for "it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matthew 19:13).

It is this clarity of mission to advance God's reign that motivates De La Salle's pedagogy of persuasion as uncovered in his letters to the Brothers. De La Salle formed them by winning and touching their hearts through this pedagogy of persuasion, which expanded their imagination of teaching as an act of faith in cooperation with Christ for the salvation of souls.

Three lessons can be drawn from De La Salle's pedagogy of persuasion for the contemporary formation of teachers in Catholic educational institutions. First, formation has to attend to the personhood of the teacher *in* and *for* a community of relationships that are human and divine. De La Salle formed the Brothers as unique individuals, and this echoes Parker Palmer's insight that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher."<sup>76</sup> That is, I teach from who I am and where I am at in community. Second, teacher formation involves the process of creating a dialogical space for educators to articulate and clarify their vision and mission for Christian education. The exchange of letters between De La Salle and his Brothers was a continual conversation to find a language to vocalize and commit to that educational vision and mission. Finally, formation should also empower teachers to see themselves and one another as leaders who serve in the way Christ serves. Such formation ought to encourage and challenge teacher-leaders to reflect on how they can be witnesses of Christ's love within a community that must educate for the common good, with a focus on the poor and marginalized.

## Notes

1. Mr. Pang is a Ph.D. student in Theology and Ministry at the School of Theology and Ministry, Boston College.
2. John L. Elias, *A History of Christian Education: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Perspectives* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 2002), 104.
3. Ibid., 106.
4. George Van Grieken, FSC., *Touching the Hearts of Students: Characteristics of Lasallian Schools* (Landover, Md: Christian Brothers Publications, 1999), 23.
5. Luke Salm, FSC, *The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), 34.
6. John Mark Crawford, FSC., *Extending Lasallian Charism: Its Texts and Lived Contexts for the Spirituality of Teachers* (Boston College: unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2008), 28.
7. Jean-Baptiste Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, cited in Van Grieken, FSC, *Touching the Hearts of Students*, 23-24. Emphasis mine.
8. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations*, trans. Richard Arnandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC, ed. Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC. (Landover, Md: Lasallian Publications, 1994), 432.
9. Van Grieken, *Touching the Hearts of Students*, 29.
10. Cited in Crawford, *Extending Lasallian Charism*, 31-32.
11. Ibid., 32.
12. Salm, *The Work is Yours*, 48.
13. Ibid., 49-51.
14. Ibid., 50.
15. Ibid., 57. "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."
16. Cited in Salm, *The Work is Yours*, 47.
17. Salm, *The Work is Yours*, 51.
18. Ibid., 52.

19. Ibid., 53.

20. Ibid., 54.

21. Ibid., 54. Emphasis mine.

22. Crawford, *Extending Lasallian Charism*, 32-33.

23. Colman Molloy, FSC, "Introduction," in *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, trans. Colman Molloy, FSC, and ed. Augustine Loes, FSC (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1988), 3.

24. Letters cited in this paper are found in an anthology *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, trans. Colman Molloy, FSC, and ed. Augustine Loes, FSC (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1988). Henceforth, this anthology will be referenced to as De La Salle, *The Letters*.

25. Molloy, "Introduction," in *The Letters*, 9.

26. For a detailed description of the profiles of both Brothers and the sequence of letters sent to them, see De La Salle, *The Letters*, 34-35 and 136.

27. See commentary on Letter 12 in De La Salle, *The Letters*, 54. Around 1692, De La Salle admitted young men into the Society who did not demonstrate an aptitude for teaching. These Brothers were known as serving Brothers, responsible for providing the community's temporal needs. They were distinguished from the teaching Brothers by their clothing in brown robes. Although the 12th General Chapter in 1810 officially allowed the serving Brothers to wear the same garb as the other Brothers and to make the fifth vow of teaching the poor, it was only in the Rule published in 1947 that reference to serving Brothers was dropped.

28. De La Salle, *The Letters*, 34.

29. Ibid., 35.

30. Ibid., 139.

31. For a discussion on the various figures in the French School of Spirituality who influenced De La Salle, see Crawford, *Extending Lasallian Charism*, 35-40.

32. Van Grieken, *Touching the Hearts of Students*, 30.

33. Ibid., 30.

34. De La Salle, "Chapter 2 of 1718 Rule – The Spirit of This Institute," in *John Baptist de La Salle: The Spirituality of Christian Education*, ed. Carl Koch, Jeffrey Calligan, FSC, and Jeffrey Gros, FSC (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 107-108.

35. Molloy, "Introduction," in *The Letters*, 7.



36. Ibid., 6.

37. De La Salle, *The Letters*, 35. Emphasis mine.

38. Ibid., 41.

39. Ibid., 142.

40. Ibid., 143.

41. Ibid., 143.

42. De La Salle, *Meditations*, 439.

43. Augustine, "The Teacher," in *Saint Augustine: The Greatness of the Soul*, trans. Joseph M. Colleran. *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (New York: Newman Press, 1978), 177.

44. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril Educational Publishing, 1958), 140.

45. Molloy, "Introduction," in *The Letters*, 5. The four Rules were Saint Basil's, Saint Augustine's, Saint Benedict's and Saint Francis'.

46. Ibid., 6. As stated in Chapter 16 in the Rule of 1718: "It is necessary for the Brothers to apply to themselves and to take as the basis and support of their fidelity to the Rule what Saint Augustine says at the beginning of his Rule, that those who live in a Community ought before all else love God and after him their neighbor, because these two commandments are the most important that God has given us and because any form of fidelity which is not based on the observance of these commandments is useless for salvation."

47. De La Salle, *The Letters*, 137.

48. For examples, see Letter 8 to Brother Hubert and Letter 42 to Brother Robert in De La Salle, *The Letters*, 37 and 143.

49. De La Salle, *Meditations*, 179.

50. Commentary on Letters 13 to 32 in De La Salle, *The Letters*, 56.

51. Commentary on Letters to Brother Gabriel Drolin in De La Salle, *The Letters*, 57.

52. Ibid., 57.

53. Salm, *The Work is Yours*, 99.

54. Appendix B: Studies Contained in Circular No. 335 in De La Salle, *The Letters*, 281.

55. De La Salle, *The Letters*, 75.

56. De La Salle, *Meditations*, 433.

57. Carl Koch et al., "Introduction," in *John Baptist de La Salle: The Spirituality of Christian Education*, 23.

58. De La Salle, *The Letters*, 60.

59. Ibid., 99.

60. Ibid., 100.

61. Ibid., 103.

62. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 142.

63. Ibid., 137.

64. De La Salle, *The Letters*, 102.

65. Ibid., 35.

66. De La Salle, *Meditations*, 86.

67. Ibid., 38.

68. De La Salle, *The Letters*, 143.

69. Ibid., 36-37.

70. Ibid., 114-115. See also commentary on p. 286.

71. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 164.

72. De La Salle, *Meditations*, 91-92.

73. De La Salle, *The Letters*, 50-51.

74. Ibid., 137.

75. Salm, *The Work is Yours*, 57. Emphasis mine.

76. Parker J. Palmer, "The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching," *Change Magazine* 29, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 1997):15.

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