

Reading Maillefer Today

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Of the three earliest biographers of M. de La Salle, only Blain was widely read throughout the Institute, and known by the Brothers during more than two centuries. Only in 1965 was Brother Bernard's manuscript published in *Cahiers lasalliens*.² The following year in the same collection, there appeared the "Life of M. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Priest, Doctor in Theology, former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools," by Dom François-Elie Maillefer.³

In this preface to the new edition⁴ of this work by Maillefer, we should like to stress the value of this biography for a better understanding of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. We shall also inquire how an attitude of critical awareness and of personal commitment can make this reading beneficial to us today.

I. Maillefer's Place Among the Three Earliest Biographers

François-Elie Maillefer was born in Rheims on August 6, 1684, the fourth son of Jean Maillefer and of Marie de La Salle, John-Baptist's sister. On June 30, 1702, he followed his brother into the Benedictine Congregation of Saint Maur. He made his profession on July 10, 1703, and was ordained a priest on April 4, 1711. After spending some years in various abbeys of the Order, he arrived at Saint Remigius' in Rheims in 1723, where he remained until his death in 1761. There he showed himself a moving spirit in the conventual liturgical life as well as a very competent librarian. He was an accomplished writer too, but in the fire which destroyed the rich library of Saint Remigius on January 15, 1774, all of his writings were lost with the sole exception of his "Life" of M. de La Salle.

Considering the dates, one is led to conclude that Maillefer hardly had a chance to know his uncle personally. The latter left Rheims when François-Elie was barely four years old. Later on, the Founder "made only very brief visits to Rheims, and during these he avoided calling on his family." On the other hand, Maillefer himself was away from Rheims most of the time between 1702 and 1723.⁵ One wonders, therefore, what induced him to write the "Life" of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and what material he used in composing his biography.

The author's Prologue, given below, furnishes us with a few clues that enable us to answer these two questions. But at the same time it suggests other questions which serious investigations have not yet succeeded in elucidating. Very briefly, we shall point out here the main conclusions which can be drawn with certainty from the Prologue itself, and from the investigations just alluded to.

(1) We possess two versions of the "Life of M. de La Salle" by Maillefer. These two texts were published side by side in *Cahiers lasalliens* #6. On the left of that text, we find the 1723 version which, for simplicity's sake, is called the "Carbon" manuscript, after the name of the 18th-

century copyist. On the right, we find the text consigned by the author to the library of the monastery of Saint Remigius in 1740, and which is called the “Rheims” manuscript because it is at present in the library of the city of Rheims.⁶ We have limited this new edition to a reproduction of this latter manuscript alone.

(2) Maillefer undertook to write the biography of his uncle because he has been requested to do so “by several pious persons,” who are also qualified as “intelligent persons.” This undoubtedly refers to members of John Baptist de La Salle’s own family, and in the first place to the Founder’s brother, Canon Louis de La Salle. Brother Bernard had given to the latter the first draft of the biography which he had composed in 1721. But this text could not satisfy the family and its Jansenistically inclined associates. So they turned to Dom Maillefer, who shared their Jansenistic convictions, and asked him to write a “counter biography,” and to assist him in this task they provided him with documents, among which, very probably was included Brother Bernard’s manuscript. The Benedictine’s work would have been printed “if death had not taken away the one who wished to defray the cost of the printing.” So, it remained in manuscript form.⁷

(3) The Brothers at Saint Yon got hold of this manuscript, as Maillefer himself explains. They loaned it to Blain, who had been asked by Brother Timothy to draw up a biography of the Founder. Blain made copious use of Maillefer, but never names him, whereas he expressly mentions the text written by Brother Bernard. This ostracism, which was to endure in the Institute, was no doubt due to the Jansenistic tendencies of Maillefer.

(4) When Blain’s “Life” was published in 1733, Maillefer considered himself to have been “duped and seriously wronged.” The Brothers had kept his manuscript, and had allowed someone else to utilize it without the author’s permission. In addition, Blain was offering the public a work which, at least to the Maurist’s fastidious taste, appeared clumsy and boring. Above all, it betrayed an anti-Jansenistic bias which offended the writer’s own entourage. So, going back to his notes, François-Elie began his work over again, and in 1740 consigned to the library where he labored a second version of the life of his uncle.

The Prologue contains a pitiless and rather bitter critique by Maillefer of Blain’s “Life.” However, “if the massive, prolix and rather disorderly work (i.e. Blain’s) deserved much criticism, it provided many details which Dom François himself found useful.” In other words, Maillefer’s second text which we are presenting here, draws both on Bernard and on Blain.

II. Interest Offered by Maillefer’s Biography

What we have stated thus far indicates the interest that the biography written by Maillefer has for us. It contains the essential facts of the history of M. de La Salle, such as his contemporaries knew it. Compared with Bernard, Maillefer is more complete⁸ and shows himself a clearer and more vigorous writer. Compared with Blain, he offers the invaluable advantage (for busy people like us today) of concision and brevity. We have often noticed this during the sessions of the International Lasallian Center (CIL)⁹; the reader is really caught up by the rapid, lively and yet complete story told by the Benedictine.

Whoever wishes to acquire a deeper understanding of John Baptist de La Salle's experience and of his spiritual teachings should, we think, read Maillefer very attentively. M. de La Salle's writings were composed with the Brothers in mind, and for their benefit.

He meets them in the concrete situations of their lives, in their daily concerns, in the humble duties of their task, in their limitations and their weaknesses. His teaching becomes precise in the course of a dialogue with them, as we can see by the frequent use of the second person in his writings.¹⁰

Reading Maillefer helps to put De La Salle's writings in their living context, to specify the circumstances which inspired them, to determine the things which changed and those which did not, to notice the modifications that intervened from one piece of writing to another. Above all, by reading Maillefer attentively, we can, much more easily than by reading Blain, follow the Founder on his spiritual pilgrimage: how he recognized God in events and answered the Lord's voice calling to him from the needs of neglected youth; how he came to share in Christ's mission and in His mystery of incarnation, in the service of the poor and in total self-sacrifice for their salvation. It shows us his fatherly action which brings into being through the Gospel a fraternal community by which he will let himself be evangelized.

At the end of his Prologue, Maillefer stresses that the only purpose he had in mind in writing the "Life" was to *edify*. Such a statement might tend to estrange today's reader, to arouse in one a certain feeling of distrust. The fact is that this purpose was one that Maillefer shared with Bernard and with Blain. Still, his account strikes us as much more in harmony with contemporary attitudes than those of the two other biographers.

Like Bernard, he seeks to discern the "guidance of God" in M. de La Salle's history. But he avoids the sometimes naïve "providentialism" of the first biographer; he leaves intact the entire human web of circumstances in the midst of which God acts, and where De La Salle finds God's will, adheres to it, and accomplishes it.

Like Blain, he tries to bring out the virtues of John-Baptist, and we must admit that his point of view seems to need readjusting at times. At least, we can be grateful for the sobriety and discretion with which he praises his hero. Above all, he spares us Blain's innumerable and interminable dissertations which end up by dissolving the authentic spiritual message taught by the facts themselves. The sharp criticism which Maillefer addressed to the Canon of Rouen shows that he, for this part, was quite clear about what he aimed at, and did not let his pen run away with him. "The majority of the facts set down in this work (i.e. Blain's) are, so to speak, drowned in a confused mass of badly-timed reflections." The Maurist avoided the "too frequent reflections which interfere with the thread of the story." He does not wish to substitute himself for his reader and knows that the latter "wishes as a rule to be allowed an opportunity of reflecting by himself."

However, while practicing this discretion and showing himself meticulous as regards sources and scientific precision,¹¹ Maillefer deliberately set himself to write a "pious history"; if one prefers, he wished to compose an additional chapter in the "history of salvation"; and in doing so he was

falling in with one of the central convictions that make up the spiritual experience of Saint de La Salle.

“God, who guides all things with wisdom and gentleness, and who is not in the habit of forcing men’s inclinations, wished to bring me to take full charge of the schools, but he did this in a very gradual manner . . . so that one obligation led to another which I had not foreseen at the beginning.”¹²

It is by being at once solidly historical and resolutely theological that Maillefer’s account is truly a spiritual document. It can be of help to us today as we try to discern in our own lives the signs of God’s active presence, moving towards the world’s salvation. In this way it attains its purpose of edifying, in the best sense of that word: of building up faith by showing how the latter transforms our view of the world and of history, and how it makes us enter upon an existence devoted to transforming the world and history according to God.

III. A Critical Reading of Maillefer

For a long time, Blain played an almost exclusive role in forming and maintaining among the Brothers the dominant image of the Founder. In 1952, when Rayez analyzed the sources of biographical material about the Founder, he was led to conclude that in most of the text he had examined, “the chapters where the biographers seek to depict the personality of the Founder usually and exclusively go back to the texts, details and judgments found in Blains’ fourth book: *The Spirit and Virtues of M. de La Salle*.¹³

Putting Maillefer’s work before the Brothers will, it is hoped, bring this monopoly to an end – a monopoly which did a disservice to the Founder as well as to the Brothers and to the Institute. But it would be equally unfortunate if we went from one exclusive position to another. We must read Maillefer, but we must continue to read Bernard, and especially Blain – Blain so often irritating, yet more and more engaging as one comes back to him. He wears you out, yet is inexhaustible.

There is no doubt that the interest we take in Maillefer comes in part from the contrast between him and Blain. The Maurist’s clear, light, elegant style is a welcome respite following the canon’s ponderous repetitions. After reading certain pages where we find Blain cleaving in twain and even insulting his hero’s adversaries, Maillefer’s urbanity and serenity make us relax; and if we so enjoy the eloquent simplicity of the plain facts as given in the Benedictine’s account, it is no doubt because we have been submerged by the relentless homilies of the Rouen canon. Without indulging in paradox, one may observe that sometimes an overdose of Blain contributes a good deal to Maillefer’s success.

Reading Maillefer, however, should not dispense anyone from reading the other early biographers. Sound criticism demands that we compare the various accounts that different people give of a certain happening. Everyone knows the value of seriously using a good Gospel concordance, for instance. But the critical imperative must also come into play when reading each individual biographer. It is not our intention to undertake here a structural analysis or even a literary critique of Maillefer’s work as a whole. We should simply like to draw attention to a few

elements of interpretation which one should keep in mind while engaged in a critical reading of the text.

(1) In the first place, the *author*. The “Life” is not an autobiographical document. One must realize that the author’s personality is reflected in the biography he undertakes to write. He is already attuned to certain values; he has his own outlook on life, his own view of the religious world; naturally, he takes pleasure in stressing these values, sometimes insistently, in passage after passage, while leaving in the shade others towards which, because of his cultural background, he is less sensitive. One must therefore remain on guard against a too hasty reading which might make one accept the author’s personal observations as authentic Lasallian positions.

For instance, if no one can question that De La Salle was a great penitent, and if one can certainly find in his writings remarks that reveal a somewhat negative view of nature, of the world and of the human person, this sort of “pessimism” is often more balanced than one might suppose from reading – in Blain, evidently, but even in Maillefer – certain remarks about the penances and mortifications practiced by their hero, about his distrust of nature considered as corrupt, and which must be denied, bridled, annihilated. Possibly, this bias should be attributed to the Jansenistic atmosphere in which Maillefer grew up, was trained, and lived.

Here is another, more specific example that illustrates the author’s involvement in the story he is telling. We recall the episode that occurred during the serious illness John-Baptist experienced while on a journey he made to Rheims in 1690. He reached the Brothers’ house so ill that he had to take to his bed at once. Knowing that his family still resided in Rheims, the reader naturally wonders what his relatives did under the circumstances. Maillefer’s first account (1723) merely stated, as a matter of course, that “he was sure to find in his family all the relief he needed in his condition; in fact, they omitted nothing that their tender concern could suggest to contribute to his cure.”

And if John-Baptist did not profit by the family’s ministrations, it was entirely due to himself. “Since he considered himself a stranger in his own home town, all this attention was burdensome to him; and he had recourse to it with all possible restraint.”

Blain, unrestrained as he so often is, and eager to stress the complete break between John-Baptist and his family, gives us a completely different version of what happened:

True, he had at Rheims a wealthy family, quite capable of procuring for him the relief he needed; but he had forgotten them, and they had forgotten him even more completely. His relatives had broken with him ever since he had joined the schoolmasters, and especially since he had given away his patrimony to the poor, and his canonry to someone other than his own brother. One can even say that since he had donned the Brothers’ garb, he had become an embarrassment for his relatives, and they for him. Thus, on their part, there was no relief forthcoming for him.

Blain then goes on, using Maillefer’s very words concerning De La Salle’s attitude, who “considered himself a stranger,” and who made use “with great restraint” of the relief offered him which he found “burdensome”; but according to the Rouen biographer, these latter

expressions refer to the attentions of the Brothers and which the Founder sought to set aside; as for his family, it ignored him.

On rewriting his text after Blain's work was published, Maillefer accentuated and detailed the active and positive role played by John-Baptist's relatives during this illness. This time he brings out not only that John-Baptist could count on the "relief" afforded him by his family, but that the latter actually provided him with it. He uses the same words, but changes the order of his sentences.

He was sure of finding in his family all the relief he needed in his condition; but as he considered himself a stranger in his own home town, he had recourse with all possible restraint to the help that their tender concern led them to provide him with for his cure. Their over-concern for him, as he considered it, was burdensome to him. He complained of it and sought as far as he could to keep them unaware of the danger he was in.

Faced with these three versions of the event, it must be admitted that it is not easy for us to determine what, precisely, was the attitude of the De La Salle family¹⁴ and even his own. On the other hand, it is easy to see how the author's personality influenced his treatment of the episode. It seems clear that in 1723, Maillefer was writing a straightforward, factual account. In 1740, he was reacting vigorously, as a member of this family of John-Baptist's, so lightly disparaged by a Blain who no doubt was not personally acquainted with them.

(2) This example leads us to mention a second element we must bear in mind when reading Maillefer: what was the author's *intention* in writing? Here, a careful reading of the Prologue sheds much light on three points: the origin of Maillefer's project, the motives which induced him to write, and the people for whom he wrote. Or, to put it in another way, the objective he had in view in presenting his hero, and the central concept he formed of him. Let us review each of these points quickly.

(a) We mentioned before the idea which led to the writing of Maillefer's biography. At the request of the De La Salle family, he undertook to compose a "counter-biography," to "forestall or definitively undercut the Brothers" and especially Brother Bernard. This same idea of a "counter-biography," this time directed against Blain's work, is plainly stated in the Prologue of the 1740 work. Thus, writing at the express request of a definite group of people, Maillefer did not intend his work directly for the Brothers,¹⁵ and it was only with considerable reluctance that he let them have his first manuscript. He was writing rather for people in a given milieu, to whom he wished "to give a *life* of M. de La Salle, brief yet sufficiently detailed to provide them with an idea of his holiness."

His purpose thus explains certain omissions, certain reticences, which one needs to pay attention to, for they are just as significant as Blain's verbose polemics.¹⁶

Blain, on his part, was writing first of all for the Brothers, at the request of the Superiors of the Institute. One of his concerns was that his work might "contribute to preserving the Institute in the spirit of its Founder, and those who have entered it in fervor, regularity, humility, obedience, mortification . . . in a word, in the practice of the virtues which their Father gave them such

heroic examples of.”¹⁷ When dealing with historical facts, he is, therefore, inclined to make them opportunities for throwing into the limelight these examples of heroic virtue, and also to take advantage of his story to give the Brothers lessons in regularity.

A fine example of this difference between Blain and Maillefer stemming from the influence of each author’s audience occurs in the story of the visit that John-Baptist’s grandmother paid him when he lay in bed during the illness mentioned above.

Very soberly, Maillefer limits himself to recounting the episode that happened in the parlor, and explains it as being due to “not wanting to infringe on the rules of the house.” Blain dramatizes the event and relates it as if he has been an eye-witness to the scene, as if he had helped John-Baptist get up and dress so as to come down and meet his grandmother, as if he had recorded the latter’s expostulations. But the end of the discourse, which he puts in John-Baptist’s mouth, gives us the key to all this insistence: “Henceforth, no Brother can complain if the door of his room remains shut to women, and if even his close relatives are not permitted to enter, once he knows that my own grandmother did not have the privilege of coming to visit me when I was ill, except in the parlor.”

(b) If we pay attention to the biographers’ purpose, we shall be all the better able to realize the image he had in mind in presenting his hero to us. Here again, Maillefer’s Prologue enlightens us. He wishes to write the life “of a saintly priest whom God guided by paths that were simple but hard for nature.” The writer has no other purpose than that of “edifying.” On this point, Maillefer, too, obeys the rules of a hagiographical genre which has its own laws.

No doubt, as we already mentioned, Maillefer’s account is much more spare than Blain’s. Still, although succinct and direct, his story does at times turn to a panegyric; it also includes some apologetic passages. This he explicitly acknowledges in his Prologue. Moreover, on several occasions, he points out how the facts he has just related refute the opinions of De La Salle’s adversaries. But he goes even farther; he intends to show the Saint’s “firmness,” his “ardent zeal,” his “tender and insinuating charity,” his “affable manners and above all his unlimited love for penance,” his “detachment from all things,” his “patience in contradictions.”

In short, he wishes to present us with the portrait of a man stripped of everything, humiliated, abandoned by all, opposed on all fronts, persecuted and broken in the end. Naturally, this aim of his which flowed from the idea that Maillefer had about holiness, influences his account and leads him to insist on one episode while failing perhaps to perceive the importance of that other one. Thus, it would seem that Maillefer is less aware than Blain of the slow maturation of the radical decision taken by John-Baptist to give up his fortune and his canonry. Blain observes that “as M. de La Salle did not do anything hastily, and would not act without the order of his usual Director, he allowed these early projects of evangelical perfection to mature slowly.” On the contrary, Maillefer pretends that “he then and there took the firm and lasting resolution to give up everything to follow Jesus Christ in His poverty”; he “informed” his Director of his decision, and seemed to await only the latter’s ratification of his plan, rather than any help in bringing it to maturity.

(c) Finally, to be attentive to the intention of the biographer is to try to perceive the central image he has of his hero. For, in his perception of M. de La Salle, Maillefer interprets the events he wishes to present in terms of this central image which he defines in the Prologue: "It is in this light that I will show him establishing a Christian society that would not exist were it not for his great confidence in God."

He chooses a particular perspective in writing the life of the saintly priest: the hand of God directing him "by simple paths, but difficult for human nature. In forming him in virtue, He makes him know the value of doing good and gives him the necessary talents to lead others to good."

In these words, we find the richness and the limitations of Maillefer's study.

First of all, the *richness*. The intuition in the title of Bernard is retained: The Guidance of God. But for Maillefer, there is more. The birth of the Institute has its foundation in God's action. De La Salle receives "gifts" only to be strengthened in his mission. He is a man of God, chosen, tried, sent to others. His limitless confidence becomes the central axis in the sequence of events.

But we must also be aware of the limitations of this central image used by Maillefer while underscoring the total faith, gifts, talents, and efforts of De La Salle to strengthen the community.

Maillefer dwells more on the private, and often enough, negative virtues with only minor, if any at all, communitarian and social implications. The "passivities" are accented. The positive action, response to persons, use of talents and creativity to effectively and affectively meet the needs of the Brothers and the poor, his understanding of social situations, the positive oppositions, existing structures, and in all of this, his determination to create a new pastoral structure capable of touching the lives of the poor in their concrete situations, preparing them for life, proclaiming the Gospel to them, are all aspects of the Founder that become less central in Maillefer's study.

We must be aware, then, of the framework of the study. Maillefer unambiguously states: "There will be gaps and the neglect of certain facts that could be found in a more complete biography." He is thus aware of the limits dictated by the length of the study. He seems less aware of the limits resulting from his point of view. The reader must take note of this. Not to do so is to run the risk of being caught by the didactic and edifying purpose of the author, and by his personal ideas, and of losing sight of the personal mystery and growth, of his choices and commitments, of his interaction with other people and institutions, and of his action in the world.

(3) A third element to be kept in mind are the *sources* he used. Let us note here a complaint of Maillefer: "The memories furnished to me and upon which I depended for this study were not always as detailed as a scrupulous exactitude would expect."

What were these sources? The biography of Bernard? That of Blain? Or sources from De La Salle himself? Documents describing the beginnings of the Congregation?

Blain has a similar complaint. However, he often explicitly quotes documents, autobiographical sources, and letters. In any case, he does so more often than Maillefer. As Brother Maurice-Auguste¹⁸ says of Blain: “We can regret that he did not always acknowledge his sources. We can even, here and there, criticize him for having shortened quotations that would be much more valuable than his own verbiage . . . But we cannot off-handedly accuse him of lacking rigor; nor do we have the right to rework his text.”

Work on the sources is just beginning, but there is no doubt that on the origins and first years of the Congregation and on the struggles of the Founder to consolidate his work, Blain provides a massive amount of information that could not be found elsewhere. Maillefer, then, should be controlled by Blain, and both, as well as Bernard, should be controlled by documents of the times recently studied by historians.

IV. A Positive and Committed Reading of Maillefer

Actually, questions about the context and the personality of the biographers, the purpose and final structure of their work, and their sources raise a more fundamental problem: that of interpretation – the interpretation of the biographer and then that of the reader who interprets by means of an interpretation already found in the text.¹⁹ How then should one read a biography? How does one personally interpret the text?

(1) A critical biography, yet to be written, as well as a comparative study of existing biographies, will be indispensable tools. A study of the cultural milieu of the biographers is also necessary. Especially autobiographical documents relative to the life of the Founder will give a better picture of who he was in his daily milieu, as can be seen already from the studies of Brother Léon de Marie Aroz.²⁰

However, these tools are not meant to destroy. They can assist us in better understanding the central image that the biographers – in our case, Maillefer – present of the Founder. These images, better focused, will then be seen in perspective, a perspective which is not a-temporal and valid for all times. A comparison of the four biographies written between 1721 (when Bernard wrote) and 1740 (when the second edition of Maillefer appeared) shows that they do not present a monolithic picture of the Founder.

(2) The world of the present-day reader is not the same as that of the Founder and his biographers. When then, and how, should we read a work that at times is irritating and offensive to readers today? The reader must enter into dialogue with the Founder, which implies a priority for Lasallian autobiography, an encounter between the outlook of the reader and that of the Founder, an acceptance of the plurality of images of the Founder and of the interaction of these images among themselves.

(a) A respect for the world, the views, and the language of the biographer is certainly needed. Superficial adjustments will never do justice to the limitations and richness of the texts. It is also necessary to enter into the intention of the work by means of critical studies. All the same, we wish to emphasize the importance of autobiographical sources and documents of the Founder since these are always linked to crucial events in his life.²¹

The way De La Salle interprets the events of his life and his own way of finding a language to understand what is happening are more important than the reflections of his biographers. The value of these latter writers lies in the fact that they were committed witnesses, at least at times, of the action they narrate; and they are culturally closer to the Founder than is the modern reader. However, their interpretations are never normative. They are guides in leading the reader to the Founder. Without denying the value of the biographies, and precisely by reading them, it is necessary to reinstate the autobiographical sources.

(b) Secondly, we must not absolutize the critical studies. This amounts to an archeological reproduction of the time and space of the Founder. It is digging up bones.

But biographies are not written to display bones. In praising the lives of their heroes, biographers want to propose a model. With their limitations, they have tried to give meaning to the life of the Brother, to that which they are and do in the Church. There is a relation between the proposing of a model and one's self-understanding. The study of the forces involved in the process by which a group tries to understand itself is related to the larger studies of myth and ritual. We cannot address this topic in a few pages. We wish, however, to make a few observations about the model that emerges from the central image chosen by the biographers. They wish to "edify." Does this mean that they want to elicit a passing emotion from the reader?

The word "edification" should be linked to the question of the understanding of a group. We are edified when we find correlations between the life of a saint and our own lives because then we are involved, and not merely emotionally and intellectually.

A critical reading remains dead if it does not touch, at least partially, something of the personal life of the reader. In this sense, the texts and interpretations they present directly concern the life of the reader, his way of understanding his existence, his choices and commitments in terms of his own cultural milieu, his times, his language, and everything that gives meaning to his life. Otherwise, the reading would not be significant. The drama presented by the biographer should thus relate to the drama of the reader.

(c) Finally, the life, writings, and spirituality of the Founder are not alive except in the measure that they can be found again in the life, the ideas and the spirituality of the "living members" of the Congregation. It may be that "my central idea," "the angle" from which I understand my life and actions are quite different from that of the biographer of the Founder. It would be anachronistic to want to adopt at all cost the ideas and language of a world separated from ours by staggering psychological, sociological, political, and religious change. It could even be that the personal interpretation of my life that gives it meaning and direction is in conflict with the interpretations of the biographers or that of the Founder himself. It could be that I find them irreconcilable. Finally, it is inevitable that different readers form different images.

Whether it be a conflict of interpretation with the time of the Founder and his biographers, or among contemporaries, this diversity can elicit a fruitful dialogue that can assist us not only in better understanding the Founder but also in better understanding ourselves.

It is thus in the living context of an association, where the Brothers are in touch with their own personal history and that of others and of those whom they serve, and in contact with the evangelical origins of which the biographies are witnesses, that they can continually create central images and angles from which they can better understand the evangelical dimensions of the ecclesial ministry in a world that is always changing.

The reader may object at this point: if Maillefer did not write especially for the Brothers, and if his purpose was not to give meaning to their lives, if he was in less contact with the Founder and the Institute than Bernard or Blain, why now reinstate his biography? Is it only for secondary reasons, such as the brevity or fluidity of his style?

There is more. His detachment permits him to avoid a certain narrowness found in the two other original biographers. Through comparing their works we get a better picture of John Baptist de La Salle and the beginnings of the Institute. But this demands on our part an active commitment, for the central ideas of the biographers, as good as they may be, are only guides. It is up to us, Brothers of today, serious about our lives and about our origins, to create “changing images” for the world of today.²²

In our recent study, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, we tried to present three viewpoints that aid in better understanding the spirituality and writings of De La Salle within the context of his Gospel ministry. Reading alone, however, will not result automatically in a critical picture of the Founder. Our study is simply the beginning of a dialogue. It is only in the exchange between Brothers or between different critical interpretations that a certain vision can emerge. To facilitate this dialogue, we suggest three major perspectives:

(1) First, the gift of faith to proclaim it to others. De La Salle, through faith, was able to identify the needs of abandoned youth, the presence of God leading him to participate in the mission of His Son, and to bring to them His saving love. His faith response was modified, deepened, and changed by persons, situations, and pressing needs.

How has my faith, understanding of God and the world been challenged by situations, persons, needs?

(2) Sent to proclaim the Good News to others. De La Salle used his talents to create a pastoral structure capable of effectively reaching the poor in their particular situations in life and of assisting them in liberating themselves. To this end, he not only proclaimed the Gospel in words but became in his own life Good News for others.

In what situations, with which people, for what present needs, have I devised programs and ministries relevant to the needs of today?

(3) Proclaiming, through association, the Good News to the poor. De La Salle lived out his faith and mission in union with the Brothers. Together they discovered the meaning and demands of their ministry.

With whom am I closely associated? How do I help my community to become more aware of and more effective in its role, namely, that of constant renewal in the spirit of the Gospel that called it into being by the living Spirit of the Lord?

Notes

1. Born near Lille, France, Brother Michel Sauvage (1923 – 2001) became a Brother at the age of 16. He made his theological studies at the Angelicum (Rome) and did his doctoral thesis in Lille ('Catéchèse et Laïcat' LIGEL, Paris, 1963, a text still used today). He was a professor at the Lateran Pontifical University in Rome ("Jesus Magister") and was theologian for his brother, Bishop John Sauvage, at Vatican II. He also worked on the commentary for *Perfectae Caritatis* in the Unam Sanctam collection. He was an expert at the General Chapter of renewal of the Brothers in 1966 where he was elected Assistant Superior General for Formation. Subsequently, he was named Regional Superior of the Brothers of France. In the late 1980s, he was appointed Director of Lasallian Studies in Rome. His thought, strongly Trinitarian, remains very relevant to the problems of today.

Brother Miguel Campos was born in Guantanamo, Cuba in 1938 and entered into young adulthood at a time of revolution and the beginning of the Castro Regime. A Christian Brother since (1959 or 1961?), Brother Miguel completed undergraduate and graduate programs in religious studies, then a doctorate in Theology, at the Lateran Pontifical University in Rome, Italy. During more than fifty remarkable years of religious life, Brother Miguel has distinguished himself as an excellent teacher, an outstanding retreat master, and an international scholar without peer. Brother Miguel is currently a distinguished professor of Lasallian Mission at La Salle University in Philadelphia, PA, a position he assumed after serving in Rome for seven years as a member of the General Council.

2. *Cahiers lasalliens* (CL) are a set of texts, generally published in the French language since 1959 at the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Rome, about the life of John Baptist de La Salle, his writings, and the origins of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

3. CL 4.

4. On the occasion of the tercentenary celebrations of the foundation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1980, a new edition of Maillefer's life of De La Salle was published in Rome.

5. Except for a brief stay at Saint-Nicaise de Reims in 1716. Because of his connections with Jansenism, Maillefer was expelled by the Archbishop and was unable to return until after the death of the latter.

6. On these manuscripts, see CL 6, pp. 4-12.

7. The manuscript given by Maillefer to Brother Thomas in 1724 was never returned to him (Prologue). It is not extant, but there are two 18th-century copies in the Archives of the Institute (CL 6, p. 6).

8. Bernard speaks of a work in four parts, but the manuscript we possess has only the first part and an incomplete second part. The narrative ends before the departure of John-Baptist for Paris. See CL 4.

9. CIL is an international renewal program conducted, more or less, annually in Rome at the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

10. Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor: The Spiritual Experience and the Spiritual Teaching of St. John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Matthew O'Connell (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers National Office, 1981), p. xviii.

11. With, however, one reservation: the suppressions due to his Jansenism. "It is regrettable that he sacrificed to his doctrinal perspective the literal exactness of certain texts he transcribed," CL 27, p. 21. See, also, Emile Lett, *Les premiers biographes de Saint-Jean-Baptist de La Salle* (Paris: Ligel, 1955), p. 207.

12. Maillefer and Blain both quote these texts. Their quotations are identical except for one word. Where Maillefer writes: "in a manner hardly perceptible and in a little time" (Ms Carbon, p. 10; Ms Rheims, p. 14), Blain writes: "in a manner hardly perceptible and in much time" (CL 7, p. 169).

13. Cf. Andre Rayez, "Lasallian Studies in the Mid-Twentieth Century" in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert Berger (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), pp. 81-131.

14. What is certain, at least, is that De La Salle's grandmother was interested in him. Blain, who just stated that the Founder could no longer count on his family, continues by pointing out the "special tenderness" of this "good lady," who "learned of the news of his illness and went immediately to the Brothers' house."

15. "Two biographies, one preferred and received by the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the other projected by those who were attacked in their religious and political opinions – Augustinian and Gallican – by the condemnations of Jansenius and Quesnel" (Lett, p. 207).

16. For example, Maillefer does not speak of the submission of John-Baptist to the Roman Pontiff. He proscribes "any conduct of the holy Founder contrary to the opinions of the Gallican Jansenism touching the constitution of 1713" (Lett, p. 207). See, also, Lett, p. 249, for examples of this "notching of history" committed by Maillefer: the meaning behind sending two Brothers to Rome, the projected trip to Rome of M. de La Salle, etc.

17. See the "Letter" of Blain to Brother Timothy, at the end of the second volume of Blain (CL 8): "A Book made for them (the Brothers)."

18. Brother Maurice-Auguste Hermans was Director of Lasallian Studies at the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Rome from 1956 until his death in 1987.

19. Georges Rigault, *History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, Volume 1, VI.

20. Brother Léon de Marie Aroz was a very important Spanish researcher on the life and times of De La Salle. A great deal of his research is published in *Cahiers lasalliens*. A wonderful collection of his unpublished materials can, thanks to the strong friendship that Brother Léon Aroz had with Brother Luke Salm, now be accessed in the Archives of Manhattan College in New York City.

21. Cf. CL 45; also, Edwin Bannon, *De La Salle: A Founder as Pilgrim* (London: De La Salle Provincialate, 1984).

22. “Fidelity to the present and fidelity to the Founder, far from opposing and excluding each other are mutually conditioned, provided we do not expect St. John Baptist de La Salle to have known in advance our problems and to have answered our questions. To affirm this principle is to pose the problem of the interpretations of the writings and work of the Founder” (*Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today*, 6.1). “Fidelity to the specific intentions of the Founder and to the history of the Institute is confided to the Institute, that is, to the community of men that constitute it. The living community in dialogue is the privileged place of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit” (id. 7.2).