

Providential Encounter at Parménie

Leo Burkhard, FSC¹

PREAMBLE

Mountains always seem to be enveloped in a certain mystery. As far as one delves into the history of mankind, one realizes that they have exerted a profound influence on us, either as instruments of frightening power, or as messengers of peace. Let us recall only Sinai, Fujiyama, Popocatepetl, and Vesuvius. There is probably no country in the world that does not boast of mountains steeped in history, with mystery and religion, adventures and intrigues, terrors and charm.

Personally, I recall having explored, still when very young, the area surrounding the famous Black Mesa in the United States, a level and black plateau, situated above some volcanic mines in the center of the state of New Mexico. There is a story told there that, every day, in a hidden cave, a terrible ogre devoured the bodies of six or eight young Indian warriors who had been captured in the neighboring pueblos. Much further to the south, in Mexico, I climbed the imposing pyramid of Teotihuacan, where, from the top in the past human beings had been sacrificed, and I took in, somewhat emotionally, the extraordinary beauty of Popocatepetl, the god of the natives.

But it is into France, in Dauphiné, that I wish to lead you, to have you discover a much more modest mountain, scarcely high enough to deserve the name, but rich in history and folklore – Parménie - a place which, over the years, has inspired so many and which, in our days, has not lost any of its splendor or charm.

It was in the spring of 1957 that I came upon it for the first time. As I was approaching the rough and green slope on the south side, I was thinking of the visit of John Baptist de La Salle on this mountain and it intrigued me considerably. In 1714, he had met the humble shepherdess called Sister Louise. I felt that it was necessary to probe the past and discover here, in this mysterious and attractive mountain place, the deep meaning of their encounter.

The rocky path zigzagged up the slope, past a small herd of deer, and then disappeared among shrubs that hid the mountain's summit. A little further on along the path, and sheltered from the sun, a crystal spring murmured its message to the quiet woods. All the while along this path,

Based on more than five decades of scholarly work, during his last year of life, Brother Leo Burkhard wrote an account of the encounter of John Baptist de La Salle and Sister Louise Hours at a hermitage called Parménie, on a high hill in Dauphiné, France. The present English text is a shortened and edited version of Brother Leo's final, as yet unpublished French text, *Rencontre Providentielle À Parménie*. It was prepared and edited in August 2012 by Brother Paul Walsh and Brother Donald Mouton in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

from the spring to the crest, I was overcome by the holy silence and the mystery of this high place, which I was approaching for the first time.

Below, just far enough away so as not to be heard, there exists another world, occupied and busy as usual, its various villages and towns spread out in the valley of the Isère and the plain of Bièvre. The giant Alps rise to the east but they are too far away to dwarf the little mountain of Parménie, which they seem to magnify, while the rocky cliffs of Vercors serve to shut off all contact with the troubling civilization of Grenoble.

At the summit, in the clearing, there are no Roman fortifications, no strong medieval castle. The ruins of a small rustic chapel speak of war and desolation. I reminisced about the young lieutenant Claude Dulac de Montisambert among these ruins, where he had sought refuge sometime in the past, far from the world and from war, and where he met De La Salle.

On the left, in front of the chapel, were the calcified remains of a large cross, which immediately reminded me of the crosses which, when I was scarcely seven years old, I had seen burned by the cruel Ku Klux Klan in the United States. Several incidents in the history of Parménie could provide the elements for stories more fantastic than those of the Klan, especially when, before an assembly of credulous peasants, the mountain became the scene of the blasphemous rituals celebrated by a self-proclaimed "Elias the prophet."

After I had climbed over the broken down walls of the old cloister, I entered the abandoned chapel. There, although very much alone, I felt an invisible and strange presence. Was it the very humble Carthusian, blessed Béatrice, whose tombstone lay at my feet, engraved with her initials? Was it, perhaps, that other Virgin who, from her empty niche above a demolished altar, cast a sad look over her profaned chapel? As it was, I had come across her, that lonesome Pieta, in the church of Beaucroissant. She had to keep an eye on her mountain, I mused, while the townspeople were enjoying themselves at the fair. Over the years, she had also witnessed the pilgrimages, which had attracted large crowds to these celebrated fairgrounds, even if only a very vague remembrance remains.

In the middle of the chapel, half hidden by the debris of a collapsed wall, there was a stone tablet very much larger than the others. What were the mysteries that it covered? Was it true that, according to a tradition among the peasants, the infamous grave robber Baunin died there after having amassed a fabulous treasure from pillaging the churches from Vienne to Grenoble? Be that as it may, people who search for treasures had certainly visited these places. The cloister, the gardens, even the cemetery, had been violated. There was one tomb in particular, that of Sister Rosalie, that caught my attention. Vandals had emptied it, leaving the poor bones unearthed and profaned.

I spent a long time wandering among these eloquent ruins and admiring the panorama, which the dying rays of the setting sun rendered even more appealing. With indescribable regret and, surely, nostalgia, I descended the mountain. How was I able to imagine then, with the night coming on, that this summit would one day become my home, and its history my passion? Yes, and, what is even more astounding and fascinating is the very history I discovered about this small mountain in Dauphiné.

The very evening of my first tour of the mountain of Parménie, I was so strongly moved that I buried a medal of St. John Baptist de La Salle, telling him that, really, this mountain belonged to him. In order to acquire this admirable site for the Institute to which I belong, I immediately resolved to research its history and, above all, that of the people who had played an important part there. What intrigued me more than the mystery surrounding Parménie was the identity of the owner of the property.

So, my research began in 1957. I spelled out my goal without delay: first, to put the astonishing history of this mountain in the hands of as large a number of persons as possible so as to interest them in the restoration of this site; secondly, to shed light on the mysterious situation of its ownership by Dom Henri de Malherbe and to acquire the property, if possible, for the purpose of bringing to a fitting end the research and efforts to discover the ancient history of this mountain. These two objectives were achieved thanks to the help of my professors in the faculty of Grenoble, of the Archivist of the Department of the Isère, and of a number of friends in the region, Brothers and former students of the Brothers, who stayed interested in and encouraged my efforts. A summary of my doctoral thesis "Parménie, a lofty Dauphiné Site" was published in 1976 under the title *Parménie, The Astonishing and Fascinating History of a Small Mountain in Dauphiné*.

So, three dreams have been realized: Parménie, resurrected from its ruins; a center for research, under the direction of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; an important study center, not only for the Region, but also for the eighty countries around the world where the followers of St. John Baptist de La Salle may be found.

I must admit, simply, that Parménie finally won me over. It is because of this that I allowed myself to wish to examine at much greater depth several matters in the two books that I mentioned previously, especially those which had reference to John Baptist de La Salle whose stay at Parménie has had an aura of mystery about it for a long time, as unbelievable as this may seem. I just had to write about it.

In order to bring a clearer perspective to the Lasallian drama that is wrapped up in Parménie, and to render my story more interesting, I will narrate the life of De La Salle in broad strokes. I am able to say that I have followed his steps across all of France. In doing this, I have realized that, in reality, the story is nothing but a human drama, in the true sense of the word, a drama nuanced by the circumstances of the times and places where it happened. As this seemed to be especially true for the subject matter with which I was concerned, my research touched, naturally, on the various persons who have played a role in this drama, who were present at its beginning, and who contributed to its happy resolution, especially Monsieur De La Salle and Sister Louise Hours. M. De La Salle was the central character of my book *Parménie, La Crise de St. John-Baptiste de La Salle et de son Institut, 1712-1714*, published in 1994.

I am attempting in this small book to focus my research on the humble shepherdess of Parménie. I sincerely wish to understand just how and why this unbelievable meeting with the founder of the Brothers occurred on this mountain in 1714. This was the reason that motivated all my research since my becoming a religious Christian Brother. I feel deeply that I must, regardless of the cost, solve this mystery.

So here you have it. This book *Rencontre Providentielle À Parménie* is the final result, the end so to speak, of many years of research, a study which always was for me most passionate. I cannot do better now, I believe, than to dedicate it to Notre-Dame de Parménie, just as was done by the first biographer of Sister Louise, Canon Gras de Villard. I cite below the beautiful dedication from his book as if I myself were the author, all the while giving my humble homage of admiration and appreciation for the very number of writings which he has left us, most of them still only manuscripts, regarding the history of Parménie.

TO THE MOST BLESSED VIRGIN MARY MOTHER OF GOD

When I decided to publish the Life of Sister Louise, I believed that it should only appear under your holy name. Therefore, would it have been proper to place under any other protection a work which has been written to reveal the merit of a daughter who has tried to portray your virtues in her entire life? What has she not done to have you honored and loved?

You know, most holy Virgin, of her great love for the Child Jesus, and her tender devotion to you, that led her to undertake the work that is consecrated to the glory of your dear Son, for your honor and for the conversion of so many sinners, on Mount Parménie. It is also through your intercession that she has received from God what has made this sanctuary successful and has raised her to such a high degree of piety that she has been admired by all who knew her.

Bestow then, Divine Mother, your holy blessings on the author and the book, which I have the honor of presenting to you. Beseech your very dear Son to give the grace that is capable of touching hearts, so that in imitating the virtues of Sister Louise, of which you are the model, we may be able to sing eternally the praises of him who has made you the Sovereign of the world and the Queen of Heaven.

On the feast of the Immaculate Conception
of the Most Blessed Virgin, December 8, 2005.

HISTORY OF PARMÉNIE

Over the Centuries

The following text of the history of this venerated place was sung to musical accompaniment by a troubadour before more than 2000 spectators as part of the celebration commemorating in 1980 the Tercentenary of the founding of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Brother Leo Burkhard directed the performance.

Parménie, a small mountain in the Alps of Dauphiné,
where the violence of men and the peace of God
are carved in the hearts of centuries past . . .
Mountain enveloped in the fantastic . . .

Burning sun of the past, without equal . . .
Land, which for thousands of years
harbored so many crowds consumed by passion . . .
Extraordinary place predestined
to foster legends and mysteries
and acts of faith as well as sacrilegious crimes . . .
Mountain buffeted by winds of every kind of hope . . .

Parménie is unassuming as a mountain but it is, nevertheless, very rich in history and folklore. Over the ages it has not lost its splendor and charm. But, let us go on . . . Let us delve further . . . into the darkness of times past . . . to discover the astonishing and fascinating history of this enchanted mountain.

The Druids

During the dark ages . . . several thousands of years before the arrival of the Romans to Gaul. Around a stone altar, Celtic priests, the Druids, celebrate a mysterious and symbolic ritual . . . to harp accompaniment. . . .

The Romans

Long after the Celts, the Romans occupy the southern part of Gaul and fortify this strategic Summit. They call it Para Moenia . . . around the ramparts. They build a temple to Mercury there and set up a nearby town to supervise the entire region. The Roman Emperor, Gratian, who gave his name to Grenoble, Gratianopolis, climbed it with his troops announcing his arrival with blasts of trumpet.

The Priory of the Holy Cross

After many centuries, the Roman Empire fell, leaving the area free for the Church. In this fortified site the bishops of Vienne and Grenoble sought refuge in the 8th century from the Saracens who had invaded Dauphiné. These prelates build a priory where the relics of the Holy Cross were honored.

The 14th of September became an important date for the entire region. Immense crowds climbed in procession to the small chapel. After the religious ceremony, a popular feast began. Thus originated the Fair of Beaucroissant, the oldest, and one of the most attractive, in all France.

The Relics – The Pieta

The feast was prolonged into the night and its joyous sounds were eventually lost in the forest at the mountain's summit. In the little church, hidden in shadows, the relics of the Holy Cross remained in their place of honor. After the people had left, there was only the lonely Pieta, the Sorrowful Virgin, surrounded by the dying candles left by the pilgrims.

The Carthusian Cloistered Nuns

The noise of the people at the fair dies out at the foot of the sacred walls . . . The Carthusian nuns, who had come to Parménie in the 13th century, sing perpetual praises to the Lord. One of them, Béatrice d'Ornacieux, will spend thirty years on this mountain. She died in 1303 and her tomb became a place of pilgrimage and miracles. She will be beatified by Pope Pius IX.

The Destruction – 1391

In the 14th century, armed soldiers under Raymond of Turenne occupied and vandalized Dauphiné. The nuns were terrified. They were able to escape and find safety in Vercors, quite near Parménie. Shortly thereafter they suffered greatly as they, from the top of the rocky cliff of Écouges, looked upon the terrible conflagration that destroyed their monastery.

The Hunt

Only ruins now cover the mountain. The nuns never return. Even springs have dried up. Weeds and shrubs and trees smother the vineyards and farmland. Wild beasts take possession of the land, at least until the time they hear, from the distance, the sound of horns . . . for the hunters also have the land of their dreams! Several nobles from the castle of Beaucroissant climb to the summit to enjoy hunting.

Sister Louise

Nevertheless, Parménie is not slated to be eternally forgotten. In 1660, a young shepherdess named Louise Hours arrived on the mountain.

John Baptist de La Salle

Around this time, quite distant from there, a pilgrim from Rheims undertook a difficult journey in the direction of the mountain of Parménie. He was John Baptist de La Salle, the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

The Prophet Elias

After the death of Sister Louise in 1727, her work quickly declined. Then . . . about the time of the Revolution, three extraordinary people arrived at Parménie. The first, the former priest Marion, bought the land at auction. He will become the “High Priest” and founder of a new religion. The second, a robust woman of Charnecles called “Nanon” Bonneton traveled the towns and villages of the countryside performing “miracles.” She will be the “Holy Mother.” The third, and the most astounding of all, is a wine merchant called Claude Dubia. He will be the “Prophet Elias” reincarnated, sent by God to announce the end of the world.

Surprisingly and quite inexplicably, the new religion attracted large crowds. Was it curiosity . . . or rather . . . fear? On this chosen hill more than a thousand heavenly sites were sold! Thirty years of extraordinary success . . . the sale of heavenly places! But, unfortunately, the situation turned bad in 1828. Brought before the courts the prophet was condemned as a fraud. The area remained corrupted for many long years.

The Olivetan Monks

In 1927, an Olivetan monk, Count Dom Henri de Malherbe, bought and restored the ancient priory. He succeeded in keeping it open for ten years, but finally he became discouraged, rented the land for farming and left the area shortly before the Second World War.

The Destruction 1943-1944

The Germans occupied Dauphiné. Parménie fell into their hands. They did not remain there very long. The nearby Vercors fort had to be taken at any price. Then Parménie becomes an ideal refuge for those who fight in the shadows. The resistance fighters came to take over, without much trouble, the place of their enemies. In January 1944, the Germans mounted a final effort to destroy everything. There was no blood lost, no dead on the hill, but from the villages all around people could see, fearfully, the terrible reddish glow in the sky! The hermitage remained in ruins for twenty years.

The Ruins

Strange things are happening there, say the villagers. Tombs have been opened, holes dug everywhere! They say that there is a hidden treasure there. One can hear shots fired. One can see strange lights! The mountain is haunted!

The Restoration

Despite all this, Parménie will rise from the ruins. In 1964, the year of the 250th anniversary of the visit of John Baptist de La Salle to this hill, the land was purchased in the name of the Brothers, thanks to the assistance of the Baron d'Aboville, a nephew of Dom de Malherbe, of Robert Mazin, a former pupil of the Brothers, and of Brother Leo Burkhard, who was appointed by his superiors to oversee the work of restoration.

The Construction Company arrived! The restoration begins! There is a new aura . . . fires . . . threats . . . vicious opposition. But the Friends of Parménie have well understood that the wind of the Spirit, which one can sense in the solitude of Parménie, is much stronger than the storms of whatever kind which have swept over this hill for centuries!

The restoration was completed in 1980, the year of the tercentenary of founding of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Paul Dreyfus wrote that Brother Burkhard had not only saved a few stones, he returned them to their original state, and in so doing has returned a part of its heart to Dauphiné.

Today the large gates to Parménie are open to the youth of the entire world, to members of the great Lasallian family, to pilgrims, and to groups of all kinds: meetings for senior citizens, industrial seminars, spiritual retreats, family reunions. People who come there are seeking calm, recollection, and inspiration.

THE LIFE OF SISTER LOUISE HOURS

The Humble Shepherdess of Parménie

Stories and legends of all sorts have been written about Parménie, and tradition, at least in this small, pleasant, rural countryside, can surely furnish many others. I do not believe that there is one any more charming and appealing than the story of the humble shepherdess, Louise Hours, who was known familiarly as “Sister Louise.” This is the story of her life, if not also the wonderful history of a small mountain in Dauphiné.

In feudal times, Béatrice of Ornacieu, having resigned her title as chatelaine, left her ancestral towers and entered the cloister at Parménie for a life of voluntary poverty, leaving an unforgettable souvenir until the total destruction of that monastery in 1391. Three years later, in the century of the Great King Louis XIV, it was Louise, a daughter of peasants, an indigent shepherdess, who brought life back to this sanctuary and made the ruins of Parménie speak in words so eloquent that they were heard in the royal court itself.

I will not try to justify the reputation for sanctity that she left in the surrounding countryside, much as Béatrice did, but simply to relate how this extraordinary peasant was able, almost miraculously, to restore the ancient chapel at Parménie which had been left desolate and totally abandoned for three centuries.

At that time, the French provinces were still suffering from the horrible epidemics and extraordinary wars, civil and religious, which had devastated France at the end of the preceding century. Entire villages had been destroyed and towns depopulated. The faith had been practically wiped out by this long series of misfortunes. Ignorance was such that Abellys, the bishop of Rodez, wrote in the 17th century, “Our people scarcely realize that God exists.” It was the same in Dauphiné. Bishop Le Camus, appointed to the Episcopal See of Grenoble, was so shocked to find so much ignorance of religious obligations in his diocese and so much scandalous moral depravity that he regretted having accepted such a heavy burden.

It was in these circumstances that Louise Hours was born, in 1616 in the parish of Touvet, in the valley of Graisivaudan, eighteen miles from Grenoble. Her father, Benoit Hours, was a native of Hauterives, and her mother, Elizabeth Pelu, came from Voiron. While not blessed with wealth, they worked for the Count of Ferrières. Louise’s father had a job as game and forest ranger and her mother was in charge of the castle.

Little Louise was barely two years old when her parents went to live at the foot of Parménie in the parish of Beaucroissant as they continued to work for the Count of Ferrières, whose Alivet castle was nearby. They received a small salary from him on which they were able to live, in the parish of Renage, in a small house, which they referred to later as Parménie.

Alivet is both the name of a hamlet as well as of a castle in the district of Renage. This hamlet is remarkable as a picturesque site and more so for its favorable location near a river which has been used by industry for a long time. Since the 17th century it has had thriving forges and steel mills whose steel has been sought for making swords, spears, and other armaments for the soldiers of Dauphiné. The village owes its existence to these factories. There is a large castle near the village with a park designed, it is said, by Le Notre. Near the village, there is also an ancient castle, perhaps that of the Counts of Ferrières, built in the first half of the 17th century.

Louise grew up close by, in the very shadow of Parménie, or the neighboring hills, where she was caring for her sheep or knitting their wool in the mountain's forest of beeches and oaks. At fourteen years of age, she began to work for a person in Rives, in whose home there was a priest whom she requested to teach her about her religion.

Two years later, the death of her father forced her to return to Beaucroissant to be near her aged mother and she returned to shepherding on the slopes of Parménie, her favorite spot. She loved to wander among the ruins of the ancient monastery of the Carthusian nuns, and pray at the altar of Mary, which was still standing in part. She began at that time to have a great desire to see God worshiped again in that place, a wish which as yet she did not act upon but which became stronger every time she visited this mountain.

In order to be of greater help to her poor mother, Louise began to work in Grenoble for a pious lady. But after a few months, her filial duties called her back home. Her mother died shortly thereafter. This death forced her to consider her own vocation.

Louise was able from then on to spend more time on the mountain. One day, on the Feast of the Holy Cross in September, when she went to visit the ruins, having left the care of her sheep to some other shepherdesses, she imagined that she heard an inner voice which said to her several times, *"This is the place where I have chosen to be honored. I want you to build me a sanctuary here."*

Louise was quite perplexed, for, on the one hand, she considered the great difficulties that seemed to be in the way of accomplishing what she believed she was ordered to do, and, on the other hand, she dreaded disobeying. She did all she could to convince herself that the voice was nothing more than a hallucination.

Louise was not one to have visions, apparitions, or dreams of childish imagination. This voice, which spoke to her, was one of those powerful influences which fascinated her and led her on. She was not an ecstatic, nor illusional, nor eccentric. Nevertheless, her behavior seemed to be bizarre and insincere, and her own friends did not believe her and made fun of her. They even spread the word around that she was imagining everything.

Most appropriately, Louise turned to her confessor, revealing to him her most intimate feelings, her thoughts and the inspirations that were driving her so persistently to rebuild the old chapel of Parménie in honor of Mary. At that time, her confessor was M. Duran, the parish priest of Voreppe. This intelligent and prudent priest advised her to be humble and made her apprehensive that this could be a delusion. Louise told her plans to other trustworthy people, among them Mother Bon, an Ursuline nun at Saint Marcelin, who had a reputation for holiness. Mother Bon sent her to M. de Gorges, a Dominican from Grenoble, well known for virtue and insight. In his turn, M. Gorges, after wisely considering everything, sent her to the diocesan dean, M. Canel, a theological canon of Saint Andre and counselor to the Parliament. This was only one step from there to the bishop.

All this happened in 1673 in the second year of the episcopacy of M. Le Camus. This bishop, who had experienced life at the court of Louis XIV, was considered to be the glory of the French

clergy because of his zeal, his knowledge, and his penitence. He well deserved, later, to become the pride of the Sacred College, Cardinal of Grenoble. For a poor young shepherdess, who did not know how to read or write and who spoke only the patois of her village, to appear alone before a bishop was a foolhardy endeavor. Nevertheless, Louise tried it, but this first attempt was not successful.

After asking M. Lyon, the assistant and secretary to the bishop, to set up an appointment for her, she let him know, quite candidly, what she had in mind. When M. Lyon heard about her extraordinary inspiration to build a church, he considered this young lady to be a visionary, and taking her by the arm, he led her out of the room.

Humiliated and resigned, Louise went again to M. Canel, who, taking up her case, went to intercede with the bishop. Louise was granted an audience. The bishop listened to her with kindness. "What means do you have to accomplish such a project?" he asked her. "Unfortunately, your Excellency," responded Louise, in patois, "I have nothing, but what appears to oblige me to heed the command that I believe has been given me is not the lack of means, if it is His will. I am here to learn this from you."

"It would be better for you to return to your parish which has a genuine need," was the bishop's response.

"Excuse me, Your Excellency, it appears to me that God is not asking me to do that. There are other people in charge who have the means."

"Please leave, I beg you," said the bishop, "Come back a year from now about this."

Louise accepted the delay as providential and, on leaving the residence of the bishop, she spent a moment in prayer to ask God to rid her of this idea if it was not in conformity with his will, or to use some other person who would have the resources and the talent necessary for this project. "You know very well that I am poor," she told him, "and that I have nothing at all that would be needed for this work." This prayer had the benefit of keeping her from discouragement. As for the project with which she seemed to feel so totally attracted, the conviction that it would be accomplished in its own time became even stronger for her.

The delay that the bishop had determined expired and when the bishop came to Tullins on a pastoral visit, Louise went to ask him a second time the permission she was seeking. Trembling with emotion, she said to him, "Your Excellency, I beg you to allow me to build a chapel at Parménie. It is the will of God."

"How do you know that it is God's will?"

"It is because of the strong and continual inspirations that I have been receiving for five or six years, and because I do not have the strength to give it up, regardless of whatever I do to stop thinking about it anymore. Ask God to make me know his will and to be at peace while awaiting it. As soon as I will know God's will, I will write to my parish priest at Beaucroissant to let him know."

Finally, in order to get rid once and for all of the incessant requests of the shepherdess, he told her, "When you have money you can begin."

Finding herself very much at peace and free from the responsibility that she had felt about doing something at Parménie, Louise went back to the mountain to pray at the ruins of the ancient altar of the Virgin. There, she made a promise that as soon as she had the permission of the bishop, she would devote herself entirely to the work of restoring the chapel. Much to her surprise, she found there in the dust, a few coins worth a few sous, which she picked up. "Now, I have some money." Then, she remembered what the bishop had told her, "When you have money, you can begin."

"Thank you, good God." she said enthusiastically, "It is also easy for you to give me all that will be necessary to continue, just as you have given me this first amount. I am accepting it from your hand as a guarantee that I can hope for the rest."

She walked back on the road to the bishop to tell him that she now had money and that he had to keep his word. Touched by the simplicity of Louise's faith, he said to her, "Go, daughter, build it with your money. Since you are courageous enough to build a chapel at Parménie, you have my permission, but do not count for a moment on any of my money. I want to see by the results if it is really the work of God."

Her wish fulfilled, Louise did not waste any time. On the 19th of February 1673, she started to try to raise money in the town of Tullins, as it had the largest parish in the vicinity. This first attempt was disappointing. She was turned down and sent away as a fool. Nevertheless, encouraged by Mme. La Coste, a woman of Tullins who had a lot of respect for Louise, she approached the Count of Tonnerre, a nobleman of Tullins. This man ordered his dogs to chase her away, but only after he had scolded her most arrogantly, as a quarrelsome person and a dissolute hypocrite who, under the pretext of building a church, was trying to beg money to improve her situation and build a place where she would be able to freely gratify her passions.

Providence then came to her aid by arranging for a poor young lady who offered to accompany her in begging for financial help. In Tullins, they collected less than a hundred sous from a population of three or four thousand. Rather than allowing themselves to be discouraged with this paltry effort, they continued to solicit in Cote-de Saint André and in Saint Marcelin. Although the total did not amount to much, Louise decided to start work on the project on the 4th of April. Several peasants from the village agreed to show up on the mountain with her and she had them clean up the site and try to locate the foundations of the ancient church which had been nothing but ruins for the last two hundred years. Her first attempt at fund-raising had allowed her to feed and pay the workers, and she set about preparing the materials that she would need.

Sister Louise's project was criticized as presumptuous and foolish by most of those who knew anything about it, but heaven appeared to have quite visibly blessed it. Here are a few instances, among several, that seem quite remarkable and may be miraculous.

Louise's sister, wishing to show her support, had joined the villagers who had come to work at clearing the site where the chapel was located. As a young mother, she had brought her child

with her and had placed the child at the foot of a small tree while she was working with Louise in removing rocks from the site. While everyone was busy working, one of the peasants thoughtlessly flung a large root onto the small tree that was protecting the child, and this seriously injured her. Louise, who was overseeing all, rushed there immediately and saw that the little girl had been smothered and was motionless, her mouth bleeding. The strength of the blow had not given the child time to cry out. Without saying a word to anyone, and without complaining, Louise took up the child in her arms and carried it into the forest.

She immediately began to pray, calling on the Child Jesus with faith and confidence and begging him to heal and bring back to life this child who had been hurt because of those who were attempting to restore his chapel. In the earnestness of her request and with holy familiarity she even said to the Lord, "If you do not cure her, I will no longer work at this job. So, do it so that I may see she has been healed." At that moment the child came to, and the signs of the accident disappeared, except for a small scar on her lip, a reminder of this extraordinary cure. Louise brought the child back to her place without saying anything about what had happened. Much later, in her old age, Louise related this incident to M. Soland and M. Bottu, managers at Parménie.

A second incident, just as marvelous, of the heavenly protection of the Parménie enterprise, concerned the care of the oxen and the wagons which were the first vehicles used for transporting the necessary materials for the construction of the chapel. One day, these were in danger of falling off a cliff. Six or seven wagons, in tandem, were ascending the mountain. The ascent was not only long and steep, but it was over a road that was in very poor shape. So, it became necessary stop them and give the animals a rest to catch their breath.

That day, it happened that the object placed to restrain the first wagon was so weak that the four oxen that were hauling it were pulled back by the weight of the load. The animals had already backed up some thirty or forty feet and the peasants were powerless to hold them. Fearfully, they realized that the wagons were about to be lost over the precipice when, suddenly, the lead team stopped. Because of the concern that Louise had for every aspect of the job, her vigilance had to be over all that was being done. At this time, she noticed the pile-up of the wagons. Realizing the danger, she immediately started to pray and God allowed that, at that very moment, the wagon that threatened to drag the others, hit a tree trunk and stopped suddenly. According to M. Soland, who learned of this from Louise and other eye witnesses, divine protection showed itself very clearly to all present for it seemed to them absolutely impossible that a loaded wagon could be held back from such a rapid descent by so weak an obstacle as that which it encountered.

These first indications of the blessings of God were followed by a third instance. This latter was the happy and persevering attitude of the peasants of the area who almost all came to assist Louise. Some provided the lumber; others, despite the difficulties in reaching the site, provided the needed wagons voluntarily, and still others, what was needed to feed the workers. Among these last, a certain number did not ask for any pay other than nourishment and, yet, worked as enthusiastically as if they were working for themselves.

The amount of money from the first solicitation did not last long and Louise found herself obliged to resume fund-raising anew. She returned to Grenoble and collected about thirty livres.

On the 25th of August 1673, work began on the walls over the foundation of the ancient church. When, again, funds were running out, she went on another begging trip, this time to Valence. Circumstances were very favorable for she collected not only one hundred twenty livres, in cash, but also a donkey loaded with several different items, a foretaste of the furniture and ornaments that were needed for the chapel.

Upon arriving at Parménie on her return from Valence, Louis found a pleasant surprise. All the tiles needed to cover the roof of the chapel had shown up in her absence. They were a gift from a charitable lady from the vicinity. Louise hurried to have the roof of the chapel completed and covered with the tiles. Arrangements for the interior came next. A large wooden railing was put in place across the entrance, setting apart the sanctuary, as a nave was to be built later on. Actually, it had to be this way because Louise had not given any thought to future plans for enlarging the chapel.

All the while, as this work was going on, she tried to find the tomb of Béatrice of Ornacieu. She was convinced, following a tradition in the area, that there were remains of saints beneath the ruins at Parménie. The Life of Béatrice of Ornacieu, which a Dominican friar from Prémol had loaned her, confirmed this and she decided to dig in the cemetery of the ancient monastery that was next to the church. She was not mistaken for she found an extension of about three feet at the foot of one of the pillars. This disclosed a well-polished square stone that had been used to cover a small hollow about a foot and a half in diameter and built with plain rocks. When this stone was raised, it revealed three skulls set in triangular fashion on top of some whitened bones carefully arranged one above the other. Louise did not doubt for an instance that these were the remains of the three Carthusian nuns whom she was seeking. With approval of the curator, of his supervisor, and of the bishop, who believed much as Louise that they were the remains of Béatrice of Ornacieu, Louise cut a small opening in the thick wall and placed a black marble plaque on which were carved, in gold letters, the year 1694. This epitaph, approved beforehand by the bishop, read: *Here lie the remains of Béatrice of Ornacieu, a Carthusian nun from Parménie, and two of her companions, deceased in 1303.*

Due to the diligence that Louise brought to her work, in less than a year everything had been completed, furnished, and provided with what was necessary for celebrating Mass properly. Finally, with everything in readiness, Louise had the happiness of seeing her chapel blessed on the 3rd of May 1674. M. Canel was the celebrant with permission from Bishop Le Camus. Four other priests from Grenoble came with him and concelebrated.

Mme. Canel, Father Canel's mother, had arrived two days earlier. She was in Tullins just to be able to set up a portrait that she had commissioned for the chapel. She also gave gifts: a chalice and four chasubles. The portrait in question, as explained by a Father Bellanger has Béatrice of Ornacieu kneeling before the Mother of God and receiving the cross from the Savior's hands. This public showing of the portrait of Beatrice at Parménie demonstrated that devotion to her was already very popular. The recent and miraculous discovery of her relics, after three centuries, had reawakened this devotion in several parishes in the area, and even some more distant, as pilgrims to Parménie spread the story. This discovery was looked upon as an historical event by many contemporaries. The crowds of the faithful, who came to this tomb to

strengthen their faith and for healing, increased noticeably. Many outstanding blessings were granted the faithful through the intercession of their glorious patron.

The ancient chapel of Parménie had been raised from the ruins. Will it become the goal of an important pilgrimage, or even, would this restoration only pass on to future generations the memory of what this peaceful place had been in the past? Louise did not know yet how God would be glorified by a project which he seemed to have inspired, and which he had visibly supported. While waiting for his will to be more manifest, she resolved to make this place one where, far from the world, she would try to become holy. She decided to be the guardian of the chapel and spend her time in prayer and manual work.

So, without worrying about the inconveniences that might occur and, even giving them no thought, she built a small hut near the chapel for protection from the wolves that roamed the area and to shield herself from the winds that swept the mountaintop. She decorated it with flowery plants and thick grasses and covered the roof with straw. According to Mr. Soland, this hut was still there twenty years later. It was to this that she retired, along with a friend, once the pilgrims had departed after the blessing of the chapel. Both of them lived there for seven years, usually on bread and water. Often this food was no more than what the shepherdesses of the area had discarded while having pastured their flocks. They were obliged to get water from the foot of the mountain. It was not rare that they had to do without. They did not have any stew, even salt, or other seasoning at their very frugal meal. As for warmth, not having a chimney in their hut, it was not possible to burn anything, even on the coldest days, without suffering a lot from the smoke and thus threatening to set fire to their dwelling. Now and then some priests would come to celebrate Mass, but this was very rare, and the two recluses descended the mountain every day, regardless of the weather, in order to attend the holy sacrifice. Thus, situated in this peaceful remote place, Louise's humble chapel was a promise of things to come.

She soon discovered that she had other important things to do. The walls of the ancient cloister were still in ruins. There was not even one cell standing. At the request of Canon Canel who showed up from Grenoble now and then to visit Parménie, Louise resumed her fund-raising. It became necessary to build some rooms for those who might visit. She made a trip to Lyon, by way of Salettes, where the dauphin, Humbert 1st in 1299, had built a monastery on the banks of the Rhone for the Chartreuse nuns. Those sisters wished to associate themselves with her work, in remembrance of Béatrice d'Ornacieu and her companions.

After leaving Salettes, Louise boarded a boat on the Rhone and almost perished, along with the other passengers. Thanks to an act of providence, all escaped safe and sound in what had been a dangerous voyage. At Lyon, Louise made the acquaintance of M. Chambaud, a very wealthy and holy priest who became one of the most outstanding benefactors of Parménie.

According to Gras du Villard, Louise was imprisoned by order of the archbishop of Lyon as a consequence of certain accusations that had been made against her. This humbling experience, far from quenching her zeal to bring about the completion of her project, only made it stronger. She even comforted the people who were pained by this detention, assuring them that the person who had put her in prison would soon personally release her. This happened just as she had predicted and, moreover, the archbishop gave her a substantial amount of money for rebuilding

her chapel. After having remained a little more than a week in Lyon, Louise had obtained a hundred livres and purchased several different things for the chapel, included among them a wax statue of the Child Jesus. This article, because of its composition, was subject to customs duty. She was not aware of this and neglected to declare it. She was charged with violating the law and her Child Jesus was seized and kept by the customs agents who found it very pretty and worth keeping. It was only with assistance from archbishop Henri de Villars, thanks to a request made by his sister, the abbess of Saint André on High, that Louise regained possession of her Child Jesus.

On a journey towards Parménie at the end of January, she lost her way in the forest of Bonnevaux and suffered from the cold such that she almost died. Finally on her return, once restored to health, Louise began immediately to see that work continued and even participated in enlarging the chapel, with the same enthusiasm and happiness as before.

When she ran out of funds, she resumed begging, especially in Lyon, and each time more successfully. Thus, in less than six years the work was brought to a happy conclusion, not just by enlarging the church but, even erecting a building large enough to serve as the residence for a priest and several retreatants. There was a special room for herself and her companion. The new chapel was much larger than the first, which from then on served as a sacristy. Together, they were more than thirty feet in length by sixteen in height.

It was evident that, during this time, Providence was helping Louise in a special way, whether by inspiring several wealthy people to give a good deal of money, sometimes even before she would ask, or by encouraging her and sympathizing with her during the many difficulties related to the project which she was then pursuing. According to an unsigned manuscript it is related that one day, while she was at prayer, she told Our Lord her troubles, and felt that she heard the divine Master saying, "Just as the great nobles built for themselves country estates so they would be able to go there to relax and enjoy with their friends, so I have seen to building this here so that I may enjoy it with the souls that I love."

Since 1673, when she had obtained permission to begin to work on the chapel, Sister Louise had not only been busy with fundraising and erecting the buildings which she considered necessary to complete her project, she was also looking for a good priest who would be able to minister in this place of prayer. But she had neither money to provide for his living expenses nor a room comfortable enough for him. What she had in mind was a space on the first floor and another above, both with bare walls, and unfurnished. Is it possible, to expect that bishop Le Camus, so strict and intelligent, would ever agree for a priest to live in this way, alone on the mountain, as director of the two pious peasants?

Louise dared to speak to him about it, saying with her usual candor, "Monsignor, since you have allowed me to build and have blessed my chapel, you must, permit me to say, provide me with a good priest." "How are you going to support him?" answered the clergyman, realizing immediately all that was implied in this request. "Where will he live? What duties will he have?"

"For the time being," Louise said, "Our Lord will provide. It is he who gave me the means to begin. He will give me what is necessary to make it go. It is his work. As for the duties of the

priest, the work will be there. Already many people come to pray in the chapel and I have hopes that all will be for the glory of God. All you need to do is to give your permission for a good priest to celebrate Mass and hear confessions.”

“As there will be many visitors to the place, you will certainly need a tavern to be able to provide for their needs.”

“A tavern!” cried Louise, “My God . . . uh . . . Monsignor, God would not like that!”

“Well, how are you going to be able to care for everybody who will be coming?” said the bishop.

“Monsignor,” Louise replied, “I trust in the word of Our Lord who has said: *‘Look for the kingdom of God and his justice and all the rest will be given you in addition.’* He multiplied the loaves and fed five thousand in the desert. He is just as powerful today as he was then.”

While Louise did not win that argument, the bishop listened kindly to her request. Because of this, she was not disheartened by the delay.

When, in 1681, the bishop was in Tullins, accompanied by M. Chanel, she brought up the matter again, with even more insistence. “Monsignor, the only thing that is missing for the chapel is a good priest. The Lord did not see to its being built just for the birds of the forest. Those who come to pray have no one to whom to go to confession. Many would even like to have Mass. I have done all that I can do. You are responsible for the rest, Monsignor, and for all the good, yet to be done now and in the future, if there is a good priest to reside there.”

The bishop, far from being offended by her courage, was impressed by her faith and zeal. “Where can I find the kind of priest you are asking for?” He responded. “Find one who would like to go there, and if I approve, I will appoint him.”

With this answer, the bishop was hoping to get rid for a long time of Louise’s persistence. He did not believe that she would be able to find a priest who would want to live as a hermit in the desert deprived of everything. He was pleasantly surprised two days later, when she came with a holy priest from the diocese of Vienne whom she had persuaded to assume this good work.

He was the well-known M. Roux. Louise had lost no time earlier on leaving the bishop, and she walked to La Frette, to find M. Roux. Despite the many objections that he raised, she was successful in winning him over. It was not, however, without some anxiety, that she had sought him out. She had been praying very much all along the way. When she told the bishop of her success, he considered it a sign from heaven, as a reward for all the begging and good works which Louise had been doing for the past seven or eight years.

Bishop Le Camus was already acquainted with M. Roux as Father Canel had referred to him as a person who was well suited for the proposed ministry. It is because of this that, after having discussed the matter with him, he gave him authority to preach and administer the sacraments at Parménie, under the authority of his local bishop. M. Roux came to Parménie in October of 1681 and, for thirty years, worked with extraordinary heavenly blessings.

Father Roux had been born around the year 1653 in La Frette, in the diocese of Vienne, about six miles from Parménie. His parents were good middle-class citizens. After his initial studies, the young man chose to enter religious life as a Capuchin but he encountered some difficulties and settled by joining the local clergy, pending a more specific life calling. He loved being with people who had a very great reputation for holiness. Among this number were a Mother Bon who had talked to him about the piety and the grand project of the shepherdess of Parménie. He went to Parménie to see for himself just what was there and to speak with Sister Louise. After this first visit, he developed a fascination for that peaceful place.

After his ordination, he would go there occasionally to celebrate Mass, and even, in that year 1681, he spent the entire month of September there, having been allowed during his stay there to keep the Blessed Sacrament. He decided to visit every year and make a retreat at Parménie but without thinking about anything more than preparing himself for whatever ministry Providence had in store for him.

Such was his state of mind when Louise came to visit him at La Frette. She told him all that Bishop Le Camus had said to her in Tullins, and after having pointed out to him the great good that he would be able to do at Parménie, she urged him to go with her to present himself to his Excellency.

The word got around very quickly throughout the area that Parménie had its first Director, one whose life was as simple and as austere as that of Sister Louise. The great good that was being accomplished for the pilgrims who came to Parménie prompted a great many people to go there for retreats and, even, for some, the notion of staying and spending the rest of their lives there.

However, it was not possible at that time to accept them as residents. So, M. Roux and Louise were urged to erect a new building for women as the first had been reserved for men. That is what was done, in almost the same miraculous way as before. When the new building had been completed, about the year 1686, Parménie now had two residences each able to care for at least eight retreatants. But, that was yet too small. And so, to respond to the desires of the pilgrims, a few additional rooms were added in due time.

Bishop Le Camus, hearing of all the success, wanted to honor Parménie with his presence. He climbed the mountain and, after visiting the church and the retreat residence, he exclaimed in admiration, “This is too much for only a shepherdess to have done. It is an extraordinary act of Providence.”

Without hesitating, he gave permission for the Blessed Sacrament to be reserved in the tabernacle of the chapel. He also authorized, very specifically, the retreat exercises which had already begun for those attending and suggested a daily schedule to be followed there. Finally, he himself wished to assume the title of superior of the establishment, making M. Roux his vicar, fully in charge. He issued this decree:

Etienne Le Camus, by the grace of God and the authority of the Holy See, bishop of Grenoble . . . We came to Parménie to inter the remains of Béatrice of Ornacieu. We have been edified, more than we are able to express, by the work that has been done here by the

devotedness of a poor shepherdess who, from the beginning, has built a chapel dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary, under the title, Our Lady of the Crosses. We have assigned there, by these presents, for as long as it will please you, M. Jean Roux, as our vicar, with the title of rector of the Chapel of Our Lady of the Crosses, thus giving him jurisdiction over this establishment while reserving to Ourselves, direct control.

Given at our holy house of Parménie, September 2, 1687

The record shows that Bishop Le Camus had arrived at Parménie on the 31st of August, accompanied by M. Canel, and that he departed at 2:00 p.m. on September 2nd. Louise, radiant with joy and very grateful, had knelt at the feet of the bishop as he was about to leave, to receive his blessing.

“Good-bye, good sister,” he said to her, “pray to God for me. I have great faith in your prayers.”

“The title of sister that you give me, your Excellency,” Louise said in patois, “makes me so happy, that I plan to visit you to congratulate you next year for something that will happen to you on this day next year.” In fact, on that day, the following year, the Pope awarded the cardinal’s hat to Bishop Le Camus. This prelate retained during his entire life a very strong regard for the foundation at Parménie. He claimed, on one occasion, that it was among the establishments in his entire diocese that he loved and admired most. On being informed one day of a miracle for a young lady who had been mute but who recovered the use of speech, his Eminence, quite touched and joyful, said, “What a great miracle for a young lady to be able to speak again. It would rather be a miracle to have her shut up!” It’s at Parménie where there are truly miraculous conversions. Women keep quiet there and souls are converted.

The successes of the retreats at Parménie have been so great that it is not at all possible to recount them all. There would be, without a doubt, as many stories as there have been retreatants.

“If God touches souls in a particular manner,” wrote an old missionary from the diocese, “it is at Parménie. I have been in many places, but I have not felt God’s presence more than in this blessed place. I will not be able to forget this holy house. The great number of conversions happening there and the perseverance of the converts makes Parménie outstanding.”

Another witness, on being told of the seven wonders of Dauphiné, stated, “Add an eighth one, one worth more than the other seven. The foundation at Parménie.”

The historian Theodore Ogier wrote, “Parménie of Sister Louise, on returning to its original spirit, surpasses what had been the Parménie that was episcopal, canonical, and even Carthusian.”

I myself would like to add that the very providential arrival on this mountain of John Baptist de La Salle, the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and of Claude Dulac de Montisambert, formerly a lieutenant with the Royal-Champagne, was the high point among the extraordinary meetings which have taken place in this holy place during the life of Sister Louise.

We will follow their journeys at the same time as they converge at Parménie - the former obliged to flee from Paris, and the latter obliged to flee from Rome - and all this at the same time that Sister Louise and the pious director of retreats at Parménie, M. Roux, were suffering a terrible trial that was capable of totally destroying the work which they had founded on this mountain site.

Dear readers, I would love to believe that you have been able to agree with me that what Sister Louise and M. Roux looked upon as their labor is the work of God - *Opus tuum* - and that they had left it all entirely to the divine will, much as De La Salle had done. They counted upon the action of Providence before undertaking anything. The following incident demonstrates in an outstanding way, their resignation to the will of God.

If the retreats and pilgrimages at Parménie were graced with marvelous incidents, the success on this mountain also provided opportunities for greed, mainly on the part of the prior of Saint Vallier of Rives, Flodoard de Champrond, who wanted control over what he referred to as the tithes due the priory. The loss of Cardinal Le Camus, the protector of the undertaking at Parménie, who died on September 12, 1707, was a boon for the prior. Bishop de Montmartin, the Cardinal's successor, had selected as his chancellor and vicar Moret de Bourchenu, nephew and successor of the Prior of Saint Vallier, and a friend of the count of Ferrières, Lord de Beaucroissant. This uncle and his nephew wasted no time in putting their plans in operation.

In the meantime, the pastor of Rives, who had been planning for a long time to resign his honorarium, had spoken with M. Roux and Sister Louise seeking advice. The latter suggested that the priest whom he had in mind to replace him had a fine reputation in the area and seemed to her to be a perfect choice and the will of God. The said pastor did not take long in doing what Sister Louise had suggested, but without consulting bishop De Montmartin, who had written to him in favor of another priest.

It so happened that some wicked people who took exception to what they learned had been Sister Louise's advice, succeeded in turning the bishop against her and M. Roux. The new bishop of Grenoble, unaware that Parménie belonged to his jurisdiction, and was part of his see, issued a decree in which he revoked the privileges that had been granted by Cardinal Le Camus, and placed Parménie entirely under the jurisdiction of the nearest parish priest and had in mind to remove M. Roux.

This very unjust decision was like a lightning bolt for Sister Louise and M. Roux who both, nevertheless, humbly accepted this as the will of God and of the bishop without doing anything to defend themselves. However, M. Canel, their strong protector, having been informed of all this, immediately took up their defense to justify them and prevent this attack on the new establishment of which he himself had been the author, as much by his donations and his actions and the advice which he continued to give.

This priest, whom the entire diocese held in great esteem, wrote a letter dated the 14th of October 1711, to bishop de Montmartin who was residing at that time in his castle of Herbeys. In this letter M. Canel pointed out to him in precise terms, and in very strong language, just how wrong he had been in issuing the ordinance before being completely informed of what was in the

interest both of God and of his own position as bishop. Written with an audacity that would have gone beyond the respect due the bishop, if it had come from a person less commendable by his merits than M. Canel, it caught the bishop's attention. Following the example of his eminent predecessor the bishop desired to look into this matter himself. He went to Parménie and was so strongly impressed by all that he observed and was so convinced of the innocence of Sister Louise and M. Roux that he destroyed the ordinance he had issued against Parménie and ripped the original out of the diocesan records.

Since that time, Bishop de Monmartin became its new protector and demonstrated his affection for Parménie. Thus, the schemings of those who had slandered Sister Louise and M. Roux were thwarted at the very moment when they thought they had won.

M. Roux was the retreat director at Parménie for more than thirty years. During that time, people of all states and conditions were made to feel welcome. The mountain regained its former reputation as an important place very quickly, so much so that at the end of the 17th century it was considered one of the wonders of Dauphiné.

M. Roux left Parménie only once during all this time. That was because, for health reasons, his doctor sent him to the hospital in Voreppe. He returned to the mountain very soon after. He died on the 8th of June in 1712. His body was placed in a tomb in the middle of the chapel, the first one interred there.

After his death, the retreat work continued under the direction of a M. Jean Yse de Saléon. It was he who introduced John Baptist de La Salle to Parménie, as we are about to learn.

SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE And the Brothers of the Christian Schools

Before we follow John Baptist de La Salle's journey across France, from Rheims to Grenoble, I am going to share with you the secret of my strong attachment to this remarkable and humble shepherdess, Louise Hours, as well as the inspiring mountain of Parménie, the place of their providential meeting in 1714.

It occurred to me, as a young Brother of the Christian Schools in the United States, to wish to live in the France of the 17th century so as to be able to meet M. de La Salle personally and to get to know him by living with him during his entire life. I would like to do this before becoming one of his disciples for life. To do this, I chose to become a poor, young boy, actually a ragamuffin, much as so many others in the Paris of 1672.

I actually went to France in 1956. I was asked by the Superior General of the Christian Brothers to assume a position as teacher of modern languages at the missionary establishment of the Brothers at Saint Maurice-l'Exil, near Vienne in Dauphiné. I was right on French soil, less than an hour's trip to Parménie, the mountain of my dreams! I cannot but credit this move to an act of providence. Before reaching my new destination, I was able to replicate the journey of M. de La Salle, which I am going to relate now.

When Louise was busy on her mountain in Dauphiné, under the inspiration of Providence, restoring that very ancient foundation, also in the remote province of Champagne, a young canon of the cathedral of Rheims was busy with another enterprise that was such as to have him decide one day to make a journey to Parménie. This canon was John Baptist de La Salle and his undertaking, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Louise was five years old when John Baptist de La Salle was born in Rheims on the 30th of November 1651. Louise's family was most humble, scarcely blessed with the goods of fortune or of society. The De La Salles, on the contrary, enjoyed the very highest reputation among the people of Rheims. They did not lack anything. Besides, John Baptist was provided, at the age of 16, with a rich stipend as a canon in the cathedral of Rheims.

After he had completed his preliminary studies in his native city, he went to Paris to continue his education in the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. It is due to his time at Saint-Sulpice that he was able, later on, to become acquainted with M. Claude Canel, who was the spiritual director of Soeur Louise. M. Canel had also studied at Saint-Sulpice, but five years before De La Salle. Later on, John Baptist was to meet a M. Jean Yse de Saléon, five years his junior. As a seminarian, John Baptist participated in the catechism programs and the care of the little schools of the parish. There he met, perhaps for the first time, children who were poor. In rounding up these children for his catechism class, De La Salle walked the streets of Paris of the Grand Century. And what streets! Most were badly paved if at all, narrow and winding, often strewn with malodorous garbage, where misery was accompanied by slovenliness. This experience moved the young seminarian deeply.

But it was at Rheims that Providence waited to introduce him to his future work. As Sister Louise was called to the area around Parménie by the death of her parents, it was also the deaths of his own parents that required the young seminarian to return to Rheims in 1672. He had been ordained a priest on Holy Saturday, the 9th of April in 1678. Events soon pointed out to him the job to which he was destined. His spiritual director, M. Nicholas Roland, who had begun the religious congregation the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, to conduct free schools for young ladies, died that very same year. This meant De La Salle was in charge of the yet fragile work. Before dying, Roland had predicted that De La Salle would start a similar school for boys.

Sometime in the spring of 1679, a M. Adrian Nyel arrived in Rheims at the orphanage, which was under the direction of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, on the very day when De La Salle had come to celebrate Mass. M. Nyel had been sent there by a Mme. Maillefer precisely to meet De La Salle. M. Nyel had indicated that he would like to open a school in Rheims. Mme. Maillefer felt that De La Salle, a relative of hers, might be of assistance to M. Nyel in finding a place for a school for poor boys. Canon de La Salle received M. Nyel very graciously and was able, after discussing the matter with the pastor of Saint-Maurice, to provide a house for M. Nyel to open his school. This was on April 15, 1679. Thus began a relationship that eventually would lead to the creation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

As M. Nyel seemed to be more concerned with opening schools than with their proper functioning, De La Salle, little by little, became more involved with the school. Upon observing that the teachers seemed lacking in social graces and were somewhat disorganized and

overworked, De La Salle realized that some type of supervision would be necessary if the work in the school was to be successful. So, on June 24, 1680, he found a house for the teachers and arranged for them to come to his residence for the noon meal. A year later, he invited the teachers to live with him in his own residence. This brought on criticism and complaints from his relatives and friends and obliged him to leave his ancestral home.

On June 24, 1682, he took up residence with the teachers in an old house in the rue Neuve. By this time there were now several schools, and a regular routine was set up governing their life together; it included preparation of lessons and discussion of teaching practices, meals, and prayer. These changes to an organized lifestyle and the labors of the classroom discouraged some of the teachers who decided to leave the group. However, others soon came to fill the empty places, and De La Salle set about training these new teachers. De La Salle even decided to welcome some younger candidates for whom he arranged a special training program.

When he learned that the teachers were becoming apprehensive about their future because they had no visible means of subsistence, while De La Salle had the stipend from his canonry and his family wealth to rely on, he decided to renounce his position and its income as canon in 1683. Furthermore, in 1684, he used his family wealth to feed the poor when northern France was suffering from famine. In fact, there were even occasions when he, himself, resorted to begging for nourishment for his community of teachers.

By this time, schools had been opened in Rethel, Guise, Laon, and Paris, in addition to the one in Rheims. De La Salle chose to call together twelve of the teachers in what is now termed their first General Assembly. On May 9, 1684, in Paris, M. de La Salle and these twelve agreed upon a rule of life and to live in community as the Brothers of the Christian Schools. They brought this 17-day meeting to a close by making a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Notre Dame de Liesse where all committed themselves to this work by a vow of obedience.

In 1688, De La Salle was able to secure the assistance of M. de La Chétardye in opening two schools in Paris, one on the Rue Princesse and the other on the Rue du Bac. They were being financed by M. de La Chétardye, the parish priest. He felt that he was in charge and asked the archbishop to appoint a priest to be in charge of the schools. Fortunately, the priest so appointed realized the situation and limited his appearances at the schools to once a month, giving no direction to the teachers. Within a year there was a normal school for the training of teachers for the rural countryside.

It was in Paris that De La Salle and his group of teachers encountered their very first difficulties. Paris had a number of schools conducted by writing masters who were paid by the parents of their pupils. As the schools, which De La Salle and his teachers opened in Paris, were totally free, it was not long before the parents of some of the students in the school of the writing masters transferred their sons to those of De La Salle. The writing masters took exception to this by complaining to the authorities. Their complaints naturally ended in lawsuits, which interfered with the work in the schools. In addition, the writing masters vented their frustration by vandalizing the schools. The Brothers, in some instances, found their classroom furniture and books thrown out into the streets.

De La Salle felt the work with the poor to be so deserving that to assure its continuance he persuaded two of his most dedicated Brothers to join with him and commit themselves firmly to this work. So, on November 21, 1691, Gabriel Drolin, Nicholas Vuyart, and De La Salle vowed to do this in the following words:

Most Holy Trinity, Father Son, and Holy Spirit, prostrate with profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you, in order to further with all our strength and our care the establishment of this Society of the Christian Schools, in the manner which appears to us most agreeable to you and the most beneficial to the said Society and to accomplish this, I, John Baptist de La Salle, a priest, and I, Nicholas Vuyart, and I, Gabriel Drolin, from the present moment and forever until the last one of us is still living, or until the entire termination of the establishment of the said Society, vow to associate together to promote and maintain this establishment, and not to separate even if we three only remain in the said Society, and we find that we are obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread only. For this, we promise together and vow to do all that we believe necessary and conscientiously, without any human consideration to be for the greater good of the said Society.

Two years later, on the feast of the Holy Trinity in 1693, De La Salle permitted a dozen Brothers to pronounce perpetual vows of association, of stability in the Society, and of obedience. The formula used was similar to that with his two companions in 1691, with the phrase “to beg for alms and to live on bread only” omitted.

Following this important ceremony and commitment, he called upon them to elect a Brother to be their superior. They could have none of this, for they felt, unanimously, that he should continue to be their leader. This decision, when brought to the attention of the archdiocesan authorities, as it happened a number of times over the next two decades, created further internal problems for De La Salle and his Brothers. All the while the difficulties with the writing masters in Paris still continued.

The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools now had a definite organizational structure. Given the very strong commitment vowed by De La Salle and his two principal Brothers, as well as the decision to vow obedience by the twelve Brothers two years later, it would seem *a propos* at this time to learn from De La Salle just how, precisely, all this came about. He composed a memoire towards the end of his life in which he wrote:

After many reflections in the presence of God, and after much prayer and, of course, opportunities to seek advice, it appeared to me near the end of the year 1692 that God was calling me to take over the care of the schools. This was also the recommendation of M. Nyel and Mme. de Croyère. I had not been thinking of this, but not because no one had suggested it to me. Several of M. Roland’s friends had tried to urge this, but it had not even occurred to me, and I never had thought of doing this. If I had believed that the care that I had been showing the teachers from pure charity would even oblige me to live with them, I would have abandoned it. For, naturally, I looked upon those who were at work in the schools, especially at the very beginning, as less worthy than my valet. The very idea that I would be required to live with them would have been unsupportable. I felt, really, a great pain in the beginning when I had them live in my house. Apparently,

this was the reason that God, who handles everything with wisdom and gentleness and who does not usually force the inclinations of anyone, wanted me to take over the care of the schools. God brought this about in an imperceptible manner and over a long period of time, such that one step led me to take another without having foreseen it at the beginning.

A particular lawsuit was brought against De La Salle in 1712 in connection with the normal school at St. Denis, near Paris. A certain M. Clément, a 25-year-old priest from a well to do family, had furnished money to assist De La Salle with the opening of this normal school. The young cleric had promised to subsidize the training school for country teachers. He had signed a note to repay De La Salle the start-up money, 5,200 livres, but reneged on his promise once he came into the money he had promised. The legal charge was that he had been induced by De La Salle to sign a note to that effect. De La Salle put together the documents in his defense and left them with a lawyer to handle the case for him while he left to visit the schools in the south.

Before leaving, he appointed Brother Barthelemy to be in charge of the schools in northern France. He made it a point to visit the seven schools in Avignon, Mende, Alès, Moulins, Grenoble, Les Vans and Marseilles.

His brief visit to Marseilles was the occasion for a new problem. The Jansensits there, on account of De La Salle's staunch fidelity to the Holy See, decided to use all in their power to hinder the work of the Brothers in that city. They succeeded, at last, in closing the school and even the novitiate for the training of young men who were asking to become Brothers.

Upon leaving Marseilles, De La Salle spent forty days in a retreat in the monastery of Saint Baume on the plain of Saint Marcellin, and then joined his brothers in the community of Grenoble. While in this city he sent the Brother Director, Jacques, to Paris as his delegate to find out what was happening in that city. In Brother Jacques' absence, De La Salle replaced him in his classes.

It was while De La Salle was at Grenoble that he had occasion to visit with Soeur Louise at Parménie.

PROVIDENTIAL ENCOUNTER²

During his stay in Grenoble De La Salle suffered from attacks of rheumatism and underwent extraordinary remedies that had been used for him twenty years before when he was in Paris. He could not walk and had to stay in bed, unable to celebrate Mass or pray the office. When he regained his physical strength he thought about making another retreat to recover the spiritual strength he lost while unable to perform many spiritual exercises during his illness. He also wanted to discern in prayer and recollection whether the time had come for him to remove himself permanently from the direction of the Society. He had left an impressive body of writings to the Brothers that would serve as an adequate legacy to guide them in their religious and professional life. Canon Yse de Saléon, one of the founders of the Brothers' school in Grenoble and a friend and admirer of De La Salle, suggested he go to Parménie, a hermitage on a high hill not far from Grenoble. A devout visionary known as Soeur Louise lived there and De Saléon served as part-time chaplain and spiritual director.

De La Salle went to Parménie and after some time in solitude went up to the hermitage to meet Soeur Louise. De La Salle shared with Soeur Louise his perplexities about the troubles and opposition he experienced since founding the Society. She told him about the struggles she had in her life and how God had given her the strength to overcome them. From the first they felt like kindred spirits in their abandonment to Providence during their trials and difficulties. De La Salle confided to Soeur Louise his desire to spend the remainder of his days in solitude and his belief that this came from God as he had always felt an inclination for the private life. Soeur Louise assured De La Salle that this was not God's will for him and that he should not abandon the family God had made him the father of and that he was called by God to the work and government of the Brothers. He should persevere in this till the end of his days, combining as he had until now the life of Mary and Martha. De La Salle recognized in this answer that Soeur Louise was interpreting for him the will of God.

After a fortnight at Parménie De La Salle returned to Grenoble and celebrated the feast of Saint Joseph with the Brothers on March 19, 1714. He kept up a pious correspondence with Soeur Louise and sent her some of the works of devotion he had composed. Because she was unable to read she received the help of a third party to remain in contact with De La Salle.

When Yse de Saléon was to be absent from Parménie for a short while because of other duties in Provence, he asked De La Salle to replace him there in the spring of 1714. During this time the growing concern of the Brothers of the Paris region about the future of their Society led to a decision to have the Directors and principal Brothers of the Paris region draw up a letter ordering De La Salle to return to Paris in obedience to the body of the Society, assuring him that they were convinced he had from God the gifts to lead the Society.

This letter probably arrived at the Brothers' residence in Grenoble in De La Salle's absence and it would have been taken up to him at Parménie. De La Salle at first was surprised when he saw this letter. He had to convince himself it was a genuine letter and that the Brothers in the Paris region had the right to command in the name of the Society, which included the Brothers in the south.

Monsieur, our very dear Father: We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in view the greater glory of God as well as the good of the Church and of our Society, consider that it is of the greatest importance that you return to the care and general direction of God's holy work, which is also your own, because it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and to guide it for so many years.

We are all convinced that God himself has called you to this work and that he has given you the grace and talents necessary for the good government of this new Society so beneficial to the Church. We acknowledge in all justice that you have always guided us with considerable success and edification. That is why, Monsieur, we very humbly beseech you, and we command you in the name and on the part of the body of the Society to which you have vowed obedience, to return to Paris.³

In faith of which we have signed. Done at Paris this first day of April 1714. And we are, with the most profound respect, Monsieur and very dear Father, your very humble and obedient inferiors.

When he spoke to Soeur Louise about the letter she pointed out that it was clearly God's will that he should return to Paris, not abandon the family God had given him, and give an example of the obedience he had preached to his Brothers. She told him he could be free to return to Paris as soon as Canon Yse de Saléon would return to take up again his functions at the hermitage.

Before he left Parménie a young aristocratic soldier of fortune, Claude Dulac de Montisambert, was sent there by Yse de Saléon to consult with De La Salle about his desire to join the Society of Brothers. Convinced the young man was sincere, De La Salle accepted him into the Society, invested him with the habit on June 6, 1714 and gave him the name Brother Irénee. This new disciple of De La Salle was to become one of the most influential and best-known members of the Society as Director of Novices, Director of the motherhouse at St. Yon, and Assistant to the Superior General.

De La Salle returned to Paris arriving there on August 10, 1714 after making a last tour of the communities in the South, and greeted the Brothers with the words, "Well, here I am. What do you want of me?"

It was the return to Paris that saved the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from almost certain ruin. The providential encounter of De La Salle with Soeur Louise at Parménie was decisive in helping him listen to the voice of God calling him to return to Paris. It can be said, without hesitation: *Sur cette colline de Parménie le sort de son jeune Institut a été décidé à tout jamais.*

It is paradoxical that the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is one of the most important in the Church devoted to the apostolate of education, and this is due, in a significant way, to a poor shepherdess at Parménie who herself had no formal education.

EPILOGUE⁴

There are, in the entire world, very special places that will never die. Parménie is one of these. The most brilliant civilizations end up in ruins, but some, such as the Roman Forum, as well as the Acropolis at Athens, have always drawn the attention of those who know or who are true seekers.

Parménie is just a small mountain among all the well-known Alps and lofty mountains of France, but it possesses, as such, for whatever reason, a rare mystery. Since the dawn of historical times, it has known the worship of gods, genuine religious worship, and a discrete and shining holiness. It has also been associated with crime, with death, with fires, and the exploitation of the weakest by the most unscrupulous. It is just like the lives of us all, whose saddest times are matched with the most admirable values. People have the ability within themselves to start over, to be reborn again, to emerge anew in a better way. This, in itself and among other things, is proof that spiritual values are always able to change our world.

Parménie with its silence, its grandeur, its strange secret, calls us all to ponder for a moment, such that we feel called mysteriously to another destiny, where we may feel, rather confusedly, that there is something which might be referred to as . . . calmness confronting life . . . peace of soul . . . the joy of living . . . a personal encounter with a God immediately near.

Notes

1. The author of *Rencontre Providentielle À Parménie*, a yet unpublished work in French, Brother Leo Burkhard, FSC, is a well-known researcher and writer on the life of Saint John Baptist de Salle, founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. During his last year of life on this earth (2007) he wrote an account of the encounter of John Baptist de La Salle and Sister Louise at a hermitage called Parménie, on a high hill in Dauphiné, France, and of the significance of this place for the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The present English text is a shortened and edited version of the French text.

As a young Brother in Louisiana, USA, Brother Leo read biographies of De La Salle and was especially intrigued by the role of Parménie in the history of the Brothers' Institute. Based on his readings he wrote a fictional history of De La Salle entitled *Master of Mischief Makers* in 1952, which was subsequently translated into many languages (French title: *Un Gamin de Paris*). This served as the inspiration many years later for a film on De La Salle.

He was sent to France in 1956 to a formation house at Saint-Maurice-l'Exile (Isère) near Parménie as a language professor for young men studying to be Brothers in various mission countries. In the spring of 1957, he decided to find the place of the earlier "Parménie of his dreams." He found it in ruins and decided that his vocation in life now was to have it restored. He spent the next thirty years working on the acquisition of the site for the Institute and having it restored into an international center for retreats, conferences, and other gatherings.

Brother Leo also wrote several books about De La Salle as well as a doctoral thesis on Parménie presented to the University of Grenoble in 1964. This served as the basis for his book *Parménie, l'étonnante et fascinante histoire d'une petite colline dauphinoise* published in 1976.

Brother Leo died in Denver, Colorado on November 1, 2007. His hope that he would be laid to rest at his beloved Parménie and placed next to Soeur Louise in the crypt of the chapel there was realized on January 10, 2009 at a moving ceremony attended by many Brothers and friends of Brother Leo. Brother Don Mouton had the honor of bringing the urn from Denver to Parménie and placing it next to Soeur Louise. Soeur Louise, with unbelievable courage and faith, in the 17th century, rebuilt the ruins of Parménie; so too Brother Leo Burkhard, with unbelievable courage and faith, rebuilt Parménie in the 20th century.

This English version based on Brother Leo's yet unpublished French text was prepared and edited in August 2012 by Brother Paul Walsh and Brother Donald Mouton in Santa Fe, New

Mexico. Brother Don is the author of this note which provides a bit of biographical material and a context for the essay here presented.

2. Brother Leo Burkhard died on November 1, 2007, before finishing this last part of his book. Brother Donald Mouton, FSC, who had frequently seen the manuscript as Brother Leo was writing it and who often visited Brother Leo at Parménie when they both lived in France, completed this last chapter using notes of Brother Leo.

3. In Jean-Baptiste Blain's biography of M. de La Salle (1733), and in almost all other biographies, the expression "*we very humbly beseech you, and we command you in the name and on the part of the body of the Society to which you have vowed obedience, to take up at once the general government of the Society*" appears in the letter (*Cahiers lasalliens* 8, p. 118). It seems, according to Brother Leo Burkhard, that this would be in the letter which the Brothers of the south signed and sent back to Paris after having seen the letter from the principal Brothers of the north that De La Salle received at Parménie which simply had the expression "*we very humbly beseech you, and we command you in the name and on the part of the body of the Society to which you have vowed obedience, to return to Paris*" (*Cahiers lasalliens* 8, *Abrégé de la Vie du Frère Barthelemi*, p. 19).

4. Some remarks are in order concerning the views of two writers who have, it seems, adopted an interpretation of remarks by Blain. Namely, that the Founder thought that several of his own disciples were in agreement with his great enemy. Brother Miguel Campos, in *Cahiers lasalliens* 45 (January 1975) *Itinéraire évangélique de Saint John Baptist de La Salle*, dedicates one section to the "crisis in Paris" under the title "Effacement pour le bien de la Société"; Brother Jean-Louis Schneider in *The Lasallian Charism* (February 2006) uses the same text from Blain that Campos uses as the basis of his view that the greatest affliction suffered by De La Salle was the thought that all the Brothers of Paris shared the position of his enemy.

[The French text of Burkhard has a lengthy critique of the position of Campos and Schneider.] It would be useful to examine a second less known text of Blain entitled "Petit Recueil des Vies de quelques Disciples de M. de La Salle," an appendix to the life of De La Salle in which Blain seems to correct certain speculations and exaggerations of his first text. Blain wrote his biography in 1733 and lived near Brother Barthelemy at St. Yon during the last five years of Brother Barthelemy's life, 1715-1720. To honor him Blain fills a half-page just for the title of his account: ABREGE DE LA VIE DU FRERE BARTHEMEMI PREMIER SUPERIEUR GENERAL DE LA SOCIÉTÉ DES FRERES DES ECOLES CHRETIENNES APRES MONSIEUR DE LA SALLE.

"The holy Founder, seeing himself resembling his divine Master confronted with contradictions, persecuted from all sides in Paris, and the object of jealousy of certain people in whose opinion he did not belong to the new community which they wanted to govern in their own way, decided to yield to them and disappear from their eyes in order to divert from the heads of his disciples the new blows he was suffering. But before leaving he carefully examined before God which of the Brothers he wanted to take his place to govern the Society.

He chose Brother Barthelemy because he had the qualities needed to govern, namely, regularity, vigilance, kindness, firmness, piety, and discretion. The more the Founder pondered this before God, the more convinced this was the right choice. However, before declaring his choice, he wanted to test Brother Barthelemy by new trials, to see if indeed his virtue was solid. Convinced that this was the case, he told him of his decision and gave him the necessary instructions to maintain order and regularity and on how he should conduct himself during his absence. That being done, the man of God, persuaded that he had nothing to fear for his young Society under the guidance of such a good Pilot, disappeared and left everyone in ignorance of the place of his voluntary exile from Paris.”

I see in this text the confirmation of the text of Blain about the departure of De La Salle from Paris after the Clément lawsuit, a text not used by the two writers mentioned above: *The Brothers of Paris continued in the absence of M. de La Salle what they manifested in his presence, their inviolable submission and attachment to him.*

There was no schism. The majority of the Brothers did not abandon him and did not side with those who wanted to impose another form of governance for the Society. Blain would later state that the project for a new form of governance was aborted at its birth.