

Living in Community in Seventeenth-Century France

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1. Some introductory ideas about community living

The subject under consideration – living in community in seventeenth-century France – is purposely limited to France and to the seventeenth century, and the title “living in community” already indicates an intention to treat exclusively (or almost so) the forms of stable life, most of which are of a monastic or religious nature, or are very closely related to these institutions. At this time and in this milieu, the term “community” was frequently used to designate what we would today in the Roman Catholic Church call an “institute” or a “congregation,” i.e. the group of individuals who belong to a religious or similar house, or even the group of houses forming a centralized institute.

In these communities, the members lead the “common life.” This expression also can be given different meanings, such as a life regulated by a set of observances that are the same for everyone. But most frequently, in the monastic and religious writings of the previous centuries, the expression the “common life” implied essentially the idea of an evangelical sharing of goods (first of all, material ones) which led to a living together which was often understood in a strict sense: the same house, the same food, the same clothing.

A comprehensive glance: It deals with a milieu and an epoch rich in reforms and foundations, one or the other of which assume several convergent movements. First, a rediscovery of ancient texts and of the spirituality underlying them: the rules of primitive cenobitism (fourth to sixth centuries), but also the texts of the Desert Fathers (second to third centuries). Second, a desire to put into practice the reforming decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Third, a search into the effectiveness of and a greater attention to specific vocations (preaching, formation of the clergy, teaching, works of charity, etc.).

Cenobitical or hermitical life, living in community or living a solitary life?: This dilemma had previously presented itself to Pachomius,² newly converted to Christianity and initiated into a hermitical life. After several years of formation and asceticism, he deliberately opted for a cenobitical life, a cenobitism in its beginning stages whose heritage was passed on to all forms of “community life” in the Western Christian tradition.

After Pachomius, Basil³ opted still more radically for the cenobitical life, while coming very near to condemning the hermitical life. The gospel is active charity which supposes relations and charisms.

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Augustine⁴ and Benedict⁵ also recommended “community life.” After this and throughout the Christian ages, the model or prototype of the religious community was the “*cor unam et anima una*”⁶ of the first disciples in Jerusalem.⁷

Throughout the ages, at least in the West, the hermitical life was seen as something exceptional. But during periods of renewal, there were always new instances of the hermitical phenomenon, as was the case notably in France during the seventeenth century. But what was more common was the, at least temporary and more or less intense, solitude proposed or required by monastic or religious rules.

Living in community, the ideal of “all in common”: In the beginnings, the different forms of cenobitical, monastic, or religious life were always characterized by a willingness to share. At Tabennisi,⁸ to the brother who requested admission, the question was posed: “Are you determined to live without any goods of your own?” Already this was the “*sine proprio vivere*,”⁹ a more ancient formula and more clear than that popularized during the succeeding centuries by the “vow of poverty.” Upon the affirmative reply of the candidate, he removed his clothing in order to attire himself in the monastic tunic. Be he an agricultural worker or an artisan working with wood or metal, the cenobite gave the entire fruit of his labor into the hands of a designated brother. Within the cenobitical house, each received according to his needs, with particular attention being given to the more feeble or the sick.

In the episcopal monastery of Hippo,¹⁰ Augustine imposed the “all in common” on all the priests and clerics of his diocese. He explained his ideas on this subject in several sermons to the people of his diocese. The priest who refused to submit to this had to leave the diocese. To the monks of Hippo, in 423, he addressed a letter which became the famous *Rule of Saint Augustine* and which above all recalled the famous instruction regarding an evangelical sharing.¹¹

In Subiaco, Benedict first lived as a hermit. At Monte Casino, he organized a monastery based on the concept of the *Regula Magistri*,¹² which became the principal source of the *Rule* which he himself wrote for his monks. If the monastery had possessions, the monk had nothing of his own, though the monastery furnished him with what he needed.

In seventeenth-century France, reforms of religious communities or new foundations turned either to the *Rule of Saint Augustine* or to the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. They added to them declarations which made them more precise, but always they insisted on the “everything in common.” Other foundations gave themselves their own *Rules*, based on the life and the spiritual experiences of the time of their origins. But all stated, as did our *Common Rules*: “The Brothers shall not have anything of their own, but all things shall be for common use in each of the houses, even the Habits¹³ . . .”

Living in community, fraternal relations: The ideal of “all in common” found itself menaced, even from the beginning of monasticism. Hence, the frequent return of legislators (Chapter decisions, decrees coming from the Holy See) to the obligations of the common life. Also, we can say that all of the reforms of the monastic life had their beginnings in the return to a more strict common life. Two periods during which this was most characteristic were the thirteenth century, following Pope Innocent III¹⁴ and the Fourth Lateran Council,¹⁵ and the end of the

sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, following the reforming decrees of the Council of Trent¹⁶ and of Pope Pius V.¹⁷

Most of the texts strive, above all, to recall some elements of a juridical order: the renunciation of personal goods, a dependent use of the common goods, living together. They state “the law,” they ignore “the life.” This latter is quite diversified and fluctuating. Recall the innumerable ways of living according to the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, throughout the centuries, but also during any given epoch, in the different monasteries that claim to follow the same *Rule*.

Commenting today on the ancient texts, some authors willingly take pleasure in opposing Pachomius, Basil and Benedict to Eastern monasticism. It is necessary to guard against too facile judgments. Probably the military character of Pachomius’ monasticism is exaggerated so as to present Basil as the creator of the “monastic family.”

For Pachomius, however, the accent was placed on “charity, the fullness of life,” and it was a charitable purpose that presided over the organization of the first cenobitical house: “to gather the souls together in order to save them.” Without doubt, the increasing number of male (and of female) disciples of Pachomius gave their houses some features of small cities, which are seen as cooperative productive societies. But it was because they had and wanted to have only “one heart and one soul” that the disciples of Pachomius renounced their own possessions and put all things in common. And this charity did not turn back upon itself, for the first building they constructed was the guest house, where were lodged the poor, the sick, tired or destitute travelers, and so on; and it was by serving them that the “postulant” prepared himself to live among the monks.

The entire *Rule of Saint Augustine* and several chapters or articles of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* could be cited here: “Above all, since you are united in community, live with a perfect accord in the house; having only one heart and one soul in God.”¹⁸ “In this holy society, those individuals who had some standing in the world should not look down on those who come from a poor background; rather they should study to glory, not in the dignity of their rich parents, but in the society of poor sisters . . .”¹⁹

We know the importance Benedict attached to the figure of the abbot, but frequently we pass over in silence what he said regarding fraternal relations. To the “cellarer”²⁰ who is unable to give to a brother what he asks of him, he recommends giving him at least a few kind words.²¹ Among themselves, the monks were to be given what was necessary, “so that no one would be troubled or contrary in the house of God.”²² To the “hebdomadiers,”²³ prior to their service they were given something extra to eat “so that they could serve their brothers without murmuring.”²⁴ They are asked not to make any noise in the oratory for fear of disturbing the prayer of others.²⁵ In many places, the abbot is requested to care for the feeble.

In contrast, we can glance at the *Constitutions of the Friars Minor of the Observance*. Here we could believe it is the Middle Ages still, though what is dealt with are the sanctions decreed at the end of the sixteenth century, ratified by the General Chapters of 1639 and 1658, approved by the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, and promulgated in 1663. The offenses which they mention could not have been totally imaginary: to threaten a brother or to raise a hand against him; to strike him lightly; to strike him violently; to throw a stone at him or to use a stick

to hit him; to strike him with a sword; to strike or to kill the superior . . . without forgetting the excommunication promulgated against the monks who had possessions of their own.

2. Some examples of seventeenth-century communities

A community with a human face, the Visitation of Holy Mary: To the young ladies or the young widows who came to him, Francis de Sales²⁶ did not propose a “canonical religious life.” They were not to be tied down, neither by cloister, nor by the long recitation of the Office.²⁷ They were to be free to go out to visit and to help the sick and the needy, above all needy women.

Sustained in his ideas by some (Robert Bellarmine²⁸ among others) and contradicted by several (notably his metropolitan), Francis resigned himself to the fact that his spiritual daughters would become nuns. He proposed to them the *Rule of Saint Augustine*, adding to it some teachings and some examples related to those of the Bishop of Hippo, along with *Constitutions*, and then a *Directory* and a *Coutumier*²⁹ that specified the manner of living the *Rule*. The Founder, Jeanne de Chantal,³⁰ allowed herself to be questioned by the Sisters. Her “responses” that were collected by the Sisters, but under her control, permit us to form a more exact idea of the “real life” of the first Visitation Nuns.

Those who were “senior” had no right to any privilege. Each year the position that each sister had in the monastery was determined by lot; and even quite frequently, those things put at the disposal of the sisters were exchanged. All then was held in common, and the sisters shared among themselves their pains, their joys and consolations, without thinking of concealing their defects.

Each day, after the prayer of Prime,³¹ they exchanged greetings; and even during the times of silence, they greeted each other courteously, and not in just a few words or still less by signs. The meal was prolonged to permit the one who was slowest to eat at her ease. Recreations were long, and the nuns did not fear to laugh out loud, even over certain jests, provided this was done without wounding charity.

On certain occasions, relaxations were provided for, as on the Feast of the Kings. Plays were presented in which the sisters could wear costumes, but never those of men.

The essential rule, frequently recalled, was that of mutual charity.

A community of solitaires, La Trappe: The Abbot de Rancé,³² recently converted and named the commendatory abbot of the Abbey of Notre-Dame de la Trappe, began the reform with the intention of reintroducing the observance of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* in the rigorous spirit of Cîteaux.³³ He wanted to follow the exact text of the *Rule*, without any alleviation or easement, without any dispensation.

Curiously, Rancé read this same text, interpreted it, and commented upon it for his brothers in the light of much older texts, those of the anchorites and solitaires of the first ages. Not only did he want to introduce into seventeenth-century Normandy the customs and practices of sixth-

century Campania,³⁴ but he added to them privations, austerities, contempt of the world and of the body, and the harshest lessons of third and fourth century Thebaid.³⁵ Perpetual silence, blind obedience even at the expense of common sense, manual labor which excluded all forms of study, exercises of humiliation and of mortification carried to the total renunciation of one's own will, all were part of the desert heritage.

In his writings, Rancé often described his brothers as solitaires, living without any goods of their own, in an extreme frugality and poverty, and even in a certain confusion. To his own confusion, Rancé began by constructing cells in the monk's dormitory, but he made up for this by later on converting the room into a common dormitory.

These solitaires are presented as models of charity; and according to Rancé, absolute silence is the best guardian of fraternal charity since any use of words leads to failings against charity. Several accounts of the Trappists of the epoch praise their charity, but without going into any details.³⁶ But they did not lack those who praised their austerities.

A community of scholars, the Congregation of Saint-Maur: In seventeenth-century France, this monastic congregation attracted to itself almost all male Benedictines (non-Cistercians). It was not a simple federation of more or less independent monasteries, but a real powerful and centralized order.

The *Rule of Saint Benedict* was commented upon in a wise and critical spirit. Very soon, its monasteries and priories became the centers of a very intense intellectual life; and they were the sources of the best editions of the writing of the Fathers of the Church and the places where the best studies and publications on the first Christian ages had their origins. As for the *Rule*, they produced a more faithful text, without taking it "to the letter," and made it the basis of their daily life in these seventeenth-century French monasteries.

The Maurists, as they were called, provided themselves with "Declarations" to explain the manner of living the *Rule* in their day as also the "Constitutions" defined the institutions of their Congregation. Benedict had legislated for a single monastery, while the Maurists did so for a hierarchical and centralized Order. The Regime, or administrative leadership, of the Congregation was comprised a Superior General, two Assistants, and several Visitors. The vow of stability bound the Maurist to his Congregation, not to his monastery. Transfers of personnel were frequent, as also were journeys outside the monastery to visit the best libraries and to search for the best manuscripts.

The ideal of "all in common" was protected by detailed regulations concerning the transfers of monastic personnel and the equipping of centers for study and of publications.

Communities of secular priests: One of the problems of the age was that Rome had forbidden the founding of new religious orders (since Lateran Council IV in 1215). Pope Pius V renewed these prohibitions and extended them to all forms of life which were similar to the "Regular Life."³⁷ He showed himself tolerant only toward those priests living in common and wearing the habit of the secular clergy. Therefore, we see a rise of these "Societies of Priests," of whom the

best known in seventeenth-century France were the Oratorians,³⁸ the Lazarists,³⁹ the Sulpicians,⁴⁰ and the Eudists.⁴¹

The *Oratorians* of France, founded by Cardinal Bérulle,⁴² were similar to those of Italy,⁴³ at least as regard their rules. They lived in community, but each contributed a sum every month to cover common living expenses. They received only their lodging from the house and were bound by no vows so that they could freely withdraw from the institute.

Among the *Lazarists*, the vows were not those of religion.⁴⁴ A special vow obliged them to consecrate themselves, during the time for which it was made, to the apostolate of the missions in rural areas. A vow of poverty, which was more an act of disappropriation, left the missionary in possession of his goods while regulating the conditions under which he could dispose of them.

Among the *Sulpicians*, the associates made a simple promise from whose obligations a member could be released either by a decision of the subject or by that of the superiors. As with the Oratory and at Saint-Lazare, each kept his own possessions, but he could dispose of them only with the approval of a superior.

Due to their ministry, Oratorians, Lazarists, Sulpicians, and other similar groups could reside even on a regular basis outside of a “community residence.” But in such a house, the “exercises” brought together those present for some daily religious exercises.

Two communities of workers: Henry Buch (1598-1666), was a founder, a layman, a celibate, and a cobbler by profession; he became a master cobbler in 1643.

The date of the act of foundation of the Community of Brother Cobblers is February 2, 1645:

We, companion cobblers, to the number of seven . . . have made and are establishing a union among ourselves, and have begun in Paris the *Society and Community of the Christian Brother Cobblers of Saint Crispin and Saint Crispinian*; and we unite our persons and place in common our lives and our work, in order to serve God more perfectly . . .

Their aim was to live as perfect Christians and to assist and to help “our confreres in the same vocation.”⁴⁵

Among their exercises in common: every day at least one brother assisted at Mass “for all the community,” “work and meals in common,” and “we have decided not to go in any way to any place to work . . . if it is not or if it cannot be made into an institution like ours.” During their work, they discussed some holy stories. They recited the Rosary together; and if someone became too loud, the master said, “my brothers, remember Our Lord Jesus Christ.” And at the same time all kept silence and honored, through their silence, that of Our Lord, while resolving to speak more moderately.

Beginning in 1647, again in Paris, some *Tailors* formed a union among themselves in the same way as had the Brother Cobblers.

From Paris, the two communities migrated to several other cities in France.⁴⁶ They were suppressed during the French Revolution. On February 4, 1792, a communication to the Brother Procurator of our Institute⁴⁷ placed in the same category “the Hermits, the Brother Tailors, and the Brothers of the Christian Schools.”

The great community of the poor: During the seventeenth century, poverty was dreaded. The wars and scarcity had multiplied the number of vagabonds and beggars. Cities defended themselves as best they could. A policy was determined upon and then put into effect, the “grand gathering” or “putting away” of the poor.

The able-bodied poor, above all, were gathered together in order to teach them to work. Later, the concern was more to make them live as Christians, and a general hospital⁴⁸ was built and regulated somewhat in the manner of a monastery. Toward the middle of the seventeenth century, the cities of Rouen, Paris, and Rheims had their general hospitals where the poor were obliged to gather. To take care of the children, each had its school master. The school always included one or several workshops in which artisans trained some apprentices, but the general hospital took the aspect more of a prison than of a voluntary community.

Outside of the general hospital, begging was strictly prohibited and almsgiving almost as much so, for to give alms to a vagabond was to unjustly deprive the poor in the hospital.

In connection with one or another of these hospitals, some devoted persons, either individually or at times in groups, took charge of certain services; and here we might recall the case of Madame Maillefer and of Adrien Nyel.⁴⁹ Also, we might recall the fear of De La Salle to associate the first schools in Rheims with the general hospital of the city, or finally we can recall the experience De La Salle and several Brothers had when working inside or in association with the general hospital in Rouen (1705-1707).⁵⁰

3. Formation of the community of the Brothers

From the small group of “recruits” of Adrien Nyel to the first Brothers of the Christian Schools: It is important to recall a few facts:

- Adrien Nyel, the intendant of the Rouen schools incorporated into the general hospital.
- De La Salle and his recent experience with the Community of “secular Daughters” of Nicolas Roland.
- The “Maillefer foundation” (one teacher and his aide) for a charity school in Rheims; the difficulties foreseen by De La Salle; the advice of several prudent persons; the curé of the parish of Saint Maurice as a “figurehead.”
- A second “Des Croyères foundation” (two masters) for the school in the parish of Saint Jacques, which forced Nyel to hastily recruit some teaching masters.

A group of teaching masters “without any idea of community”: This was the experience in the presbytery of the parish of Saint Maurice for all of the first masters, as well as the experience of those who lived in the house nearby Hotel De La Salle when the number of masters exceeded the capacity of the presbytery. If they lodged under the same roof and even if they ate at the same table, Nyel and his companions kept their independence.⁵¹

The interventions of De La Salle: He used his wealth in order to make up for the insufficiency of the stipend of those masters who resided with the curé of the parish of Saint Maurice and to provide the house needed in the parish of Saint Symphorien and the stipend of the two masters “who taught school in the house.” He gave his advice to assist the masters in performing their work, in the drawing up of their first “rule” and time schedule, to initiate them into the spiritual life (a first retreat), and to the requirements of their position as Christian educators. By the offer of his hospitality, he, at first, welcomed them to his house during the time of meals and, later on, during their free time each day. Finally, on June 24, 1681, he shared with them his family dwelling.

The exodus to rue Neuve: While he moves out of his family house into a house with them on the rue Neuve⁵² in order to reclaim his liberty as regards his own family, he does it, above all, not to be among the masters as a proprietor who had all the rights. De La Salle rented a building in order to live there with the group (then very reduced in numbers) of the masters, not including Nyel. If he saw himself abandoned by most of the first masters, De La Salle saw coming to him some young men “who were not married and who felt an attraction for school work and for a secluded life.” It was with these young men that he could begin life in community by introducing among them certain “exercises,” a certain cloister, and various regular practices. De La Salle perceived this style of life as necessary in order to assure the good Christian and professional formation of the masters and to maintain the schools (their survival and their smooth functioning as places of Christian education).

From the first house to a “small congregation”: This same year, 1682, De La Salle “offered to provide the necessary funds to be used to purchase a house (in Rethel) which could serve to lodge the school masters who would instruct without any recompense the poor children of the city.” The same year still (June 20), he wrote to the Mayor and Aldermen of Chateau-Porcien, promising to send them “two school masters of our community.”

In the meantime, Adrien Nyel took the initiative in regard to two other schools, one in Guise and the other in Laon. Desirous, maybe even obliged to return to Rouen, he asked De La Salle to take charge of these two schools; but for a long time, De La Salle refused. But in 1685, Nyel left Laon; and at the request of the local curés and to avoid the ruin of the schools, De La Salle sent “some of his masters” to Guise and Laon.

After this, as his biographers emphasize, De La Salle found himself at the head of a small congregation established in five cities and in two dioceses: Rheims and Laon.

From the first vows to the first “Rules”: Desiring to establish or to maintain a certain uniformity in the different houses, De La Salle held a first “assembly”⁵³ in Rheims. Representatives of the houses outside of Rheims joined with the Brothers (perhaps all the Brothers) at the rue Neuve.

The agenda of this first assembly is not completely known. Certainly it dealt with the question of their diet and that of the vows, as well as the choice of a name and of a common style of dress. It is suggested that the first *Rule* was composed at this time, but it might have been done at this time or at a later time.

The name: Earlier, probably at the rue Neuve, the masters began, among themselves, calling each other “Brother.” The complete and definitive title of “Brothers of the Christian Schools” was undoubtedly adopted and assumed only at a later date.

The habit: Several years later (1690), the *Memoire on the Habit*⁵⁴ recalled that, at first, the Brothers wore “tight fitting coats without pockets, of a very simple style,” then they adopted the cloak or “capote,” and finally the short soutane. Based on this same text, the habit was definitely finalized during the winter of 1684-1685. After this, the Brothers were conscious of forming a Christian community unlike any other Regular or Secular community then existing in the Church in France.

The first vows or the first vow: It was at the end of the first assembly (very probably Trinity Sunday 1686) that some Brothers professed a first temporary vow of obedience to the superior of the community, a vow for three years, but renewable each year for a new period of three years.

A practice was introduced which became practically definitive. Some Brothers made vows, and others did not make vows. These vows were not received in the name of the Church, and the superior himself was present more in the role of a witness than in that of one actively involved.

It can be noted that annual vows were introduced only after the General Chapter⁵⁵ of 1858 and that a rescript⁵⁶ was obtained for this the following year. The first annual vows in the Institute, then, date from the year 1860.

The first Rule: Pressed to write the *Rules*, De La Salle preferred to wait and to live with the Brothers before legislating with and for them. The *Practice of the Daily Regulation*,⁵⁷ a 1713 manuscript, probably contains in most of its sections what was decided much earlier, things probably dating back to the first years of the community.

It was during the period at Vaugirard (1692-1698),⁵⁸ and most likely in 1693-1694, that the *Common Rules* were drawn up for the first time. It was already practically a complete text, at once doctrinal and practical, which clearly stated the finality and the spirit of the Institute, and set down the obligations special to the Brothers but common to all of them.

A decisive step: the vow of association and the election of the Superior (6 and 7 June 1694):
The preparations for the assembly of 1694: Some Brothers had insisted for a long time on binding themselves by perpetual vows, and De La Salle responded favorably to the request of twelve of them. To these (and perhaps even to all the Brothers), he communicated the project of the *Common Rules* and received from them evaluations and suggestions.

During the assembly, the *Rules* were read again and adopted by the assembled Brothers.

At the end of the assembly (Trinity Sunday, June 6), De La Salle and twelve Brothers made perpetual vows of obedience to the Superior of the Society, of stability, and of association to keep together gratuitous schools. These were vows with a social finality, for the Brothers vowed themselves to God, but also obliged themselves, one with regard to the other.

On the day after this making of the first perpetual vows, the twelve professed Brothers proceeded to the election of the Superior of the Society. De La Salle was elected in spite of his protestations. The act of the election brought out the exceptional character of the election. Henceforth, no priest would be admitted into the Society; and no one could be chosen as Superior who had not made the vows which the Brothers make.

The structure of the society: Prior already to the vows of 1694, on November 21, 1691, De La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart, and Gabriel Drolin had vowed to devote themselves, until death, to the establishment of the “society” of the Christian Schools.

In 1694, in the formula of vows, as in that of the election of the Superior, there is insistence on the word “society,” though generally De La Salle had written and would still very often use the word “community.”

The appearance of the word “society” indicates the importance which the vow of association took in the eyes of De La Salle, for it gave the community a greater cohesion and stability. After this, it was a matter of defining a “state” and not only a “way” of life.

The novitiate: The Vaugirard period was also that of the establishment of an essential structure, the novitiate. In Rheims, all during the first years, there was not a novitiate, wrote Bernard,⁵⁹ who added: “fifteen days were sufficient!” Perhaps, but we should not forget that De La Salle lived among the Brothers at rue Neuve, and that they had a “continuing formation” through contact with him.

At rue Neuve, again, and later in 1687, there was a real novitiate. Young men were formed there to the exercises of the community and of the school. At Vaugirard, from October 8, 1691 to the end of the year, there was a period of renewal for some Brothers who had not had the benefit of the novitiate in Rheims. At Vaugirard, again, beginning on November 1, 1692, there was a novitiate for school Brothers and for serving Brothers.⁶⁰

According to the old texts, the novitiate was a period of formation. One was a novice for two years, and these two years were not spent entirely in the house of formation. The novice was obliged to initiate himself into his work.⁶¹ The reception of the habit took place after a first period of initiation, and in all instances prior to the period in community. Taking of first vows presupposed, then, at least the presence of two years of living in community; but the initiate was a member of the community since his entrance and his admission as a postulant.

Admissions to vows: The authentic Lasallian texts are very discreet as to what concerns the vows. There are hardly any allusions⁶² in the spiritual writings destined for the Brothers. As regards the “formalities of admission,” we have only some words of De La Salle.⁶³

The Common Rules of 1718: The *Common Rules* were presented to the General Chapter of 1717, discussed during the absence of De La Salle, and returned to De La Salle for the final revision.⁶⁴ It was during these revisions that De La Salle made several significant additions or changes: article 1 of chapter 2; all of chapter 16; the development of the only chapter regarding

the schools, which became chapters 7 to 11 of the new text; the new development of the chapters on “the sick,” “letters,” and “the Latin language.”

De La Salle opted for a “single book.” The coutumier was introduced into the *Rules*, which also contained the directives given the Brothers for community living as well as for the classroom. Whatever was the part taken by the Brothers in the deliberations, the composition of the *Common Rules* was very much the personal work of De La Salle.

After the death of De La Salle, and as early as the General Chapter of 1720, the Brothers modified several points of the *Rules*. They would make a new general revision in 1725, after obtaining the *Bull of Approbation*,⁶⁵ introducing among others things two chapters dealing with the vows and making several more minor additions.

The General Chapter of 1734 would decide that, henceforth, the decrees modifying the *Rules* would not be introduced into the body of the text. In this way began the long history of periodic hesitation: to preserve without change some prescriptions that were difficult to observe, or to change the text, which as a result became substantially less faithful to the *Common Rules* of 1718?

The first Brothers:⁶⁶ Beginning in 1682, De La Salle saw come to him some young men, several of whom were from families that were well off, one or another even coming from rich families. More than one had abandoned his (classical) studies. During the Vaugirard period, above all during the famine of 1693-1694, the number of postulants and novices was considerable; and of those who persevered, Blain⁶⁷ tells us that only two of them were poor.

The oldest register of admissions dates from 1714, and it does not mention those Brothers who died in the Institute or withdrew from the Institute before 1714. Of the 154 Brothers listed for the period of the Founder’s lifetime, 14 were under the age of 17 when they were admitted and 112 were between 17 and 29 years of age.

Of these 154 Brothers, 33 came from localities in which the Brothers taught school: Paris (11), Rouen (7), Rheims (4), others (11). And 119 of the 154 Brothers came from less significant centers, or from small villages.

For eight among them, we know the father’s profession: “artisans” (3), “sergeant royal” (1), “inn keeper” (1), “working man” (1) and “professional men” (2).

According to Blain, six Brothers who were not 30 years old died before De La Salle left for Paris in February 1688. After that, and prior to the death of the Founder, 45 Brothers died in the Institute.⁶⁸ Basing himself on the letters of the Founder, Brother Félix-Paul gives a brief survey of the “beginnings of the Institute.”⁶⁹

4. Juridical status of the community of the Brothers

In 1690, the community was neither established, nor founded . . . except on providence:⁷⁰ By the expression “to found,” we mean to gather capital, create revenue, or obtain real estate for the

purpose of assuring the future of a work. In order to finalize such a foundation, the act was certified by a notary; and in seventeenth-century France, the act was valid in the civil forum and in the ecclesiastical forum.

By the expression “to establish,” we mean to recognize the existence of an entity and to assure it of the protection of the civil laws. The establishment of a community supposed the obtaining of royal letters or *letters patent*.

In 1690, De La Salle recognized and even declared that his community had no legal existence, either in the civil forum or in the ecclesiastical forum. It could not claim any protection for itself.

Always, though, it could have been said that several school masters of the community were endowed since benefactors had committed themselves to support one or several masters. In the seminary for country school masters, benefactors⁷¹ took responsibility for the stipends of one or several candidates or clerics. It was possible to speak of students on scholarships and even of funded scholarships since Mazarin had committed himself to such by contract before a notary.⁷²

But the community, as such, existed only in virtue of toleration. The bishops did not intervene to forbid it. Most often the civil authorities ignored it as a “community,” not distinguishing the “Christian schools” from the “charity schools” run by pastors, or in their name.⁷³

How to explain this choice made by De La Salle?: De La Salle had worked to obtain the establishment of the Community of the Infant Jesus,⁷⁴ created by Nicolas Roland; and he was completely aware of the pertinent civil and ecclesiastical laws.

For his community, he refused to be the “acquisitive-accountant” that he had been for the Sisters, the one who solicited a “recognition” from the town councillors of Rheims; and he even refused to devote his own wealth in order “to found” his community. Having stated his position, he maintained it during his entire lifetime, making no effort to obtain *letters patent* just as he had initiated no request for approbation on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities, either in France or in Rome.

The attitude of De La Salle regarding the letters patent: A decree of the Court of the Parlement of Paris on February 5, 1706, forbade him, as well as the Brothers, to act as a community prior to having obtained *letters patent*. In spite of this judgment, De La Salle and the Brothers continued. Bishop Paul Godet des Marais, his friend and bishop of Chartres, well known to King Louis XIV, vainly offered his services to De La Salle to obtain these *letters patent*.

During the absence of De La Salle in the south of France, Brother Joseph, director of the house in Rheims, wrote to Archbishop De Mailly⁷⁵ asking him to intervene in order to obtain *letters patent* for the house in Rheims. He called attention to the wealth that the house possessed and the fact that it was in this house that the Institute had its beginning.

When De La Salle returned in 1714, the Brothers who had experienced some difficulties during his absence (1712-1714) urged him to request the *letters patent*. “You can request them after my death,” replied De La Salle.

The attitude of De La Salle in regard to the ecclesiastical authorities: He refused the offer of Archbishop Le Tellier,⁷⁶ who would have assured the future of De La Salle's community if it had remained in the single diocese of Rheims. He would not allow bishops and pastors the right to interfere in matters internal to the community, the rules which some found too austere, the creation of a central novitiate, or the reassignment of the Brothers from one location to another.

If he sent Gabriel Drolin⁷⁷ to Rome, it was to give evidence of his fidelity and that of the Brothers to the Holy See, not to request approbation.⁷⁸ If he thought of going to Rome himself, it was to visit Gabriel and to satisfy his own devotional inclinations; but it was not to request approbation, which would have supposed some advance work in France among several of the bishops and with those officials responsible for handling French affairs at the Court of Rome.

The existence of the Community, then, remained precarious, and De La Salle was fully aware of this: Already in the *Memoire on the Habit*, De La Salle showed that he understood that ecclesiastical authorities could intervene and disapprove of certain things, notably the wearing of a distinctive habit. When La Chétardie⁷⁹ stopped supporting him and sought to change the structures of the Community, De La Salle found himself deprived of the means to resist him.

Steps to obtain the Bull of Approbation: When De La Salle was alive, the Brothers could feel themselves protected, even while lacking legal recognition. With the Founder absent, and above all when he was dead, they could fear some arbitrary interference. In 1721, the first steps were initiated; and they came to an end in September 1724⁸⁰ and in January 1725.⁸¹

At the court of Rome, two difficulties were raised: The abridgement of the *Rules*⁸² submitted for the approbation of the Holy See had not received the approval of the French bishops. Rapidly, the Brothers obtained numerous approbations, even from certain bishops who had neither called the Brothers to nor received the Brothers in their dioceses. And the "chargé des affaires" of France opposed granting the *Bull* because the Brothers had not obtained *letters patent*, and the pontifical authorities must not try to force the hand of the civilian authorities of the Kingdom of France in the matter. This difficulty was overcome only in September 1724, and this explains the length of the delay in Rome.

At the court of Rome, there was an unclear perception of the character of the Institute: The 18 articles, which were submitted for approbation, insisted on the finality of the Institute and on the structures it had given itself.⁸³ These articles did not present the Institute as a society as similar as possible to the canonical religious state, for that would have been enough to stop the process. The chairman of the process, Cardinal Corsini, spoke of the Institute as being a Confraternity, similar to that of the Christian Doctrine⁸⁴ which was already approved by Pope Pius V, but a Confraternity whose members made vows. This was not a novelty since these were simple vows, hence without canonical effects of the vows of religion.

In virtue of the approbation of Rome: The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was authorized to exist in the Church and, henceforth, it was of Pontifical Right, though under the authority of the bishops as regards the conducting of its schools.

Neither the bishops, nor the Brothers themselves, could modify the statutes approved by the *Bull* without the consent of the apostolic authority. In addition, only the Holy See had the right to give an authentic interpretation of the texts which it had explicitly approved.⁸⁵

Dispensation from the vows was reserved to the Holy See, and no one could transfer from it to any other Religious Order whatever, without the consent of the Superior of the Institute.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: The *Bull* left the Institute outside of the canonical category of “Regulars.” But most of the Congregations approved at this time, and since then,⁸⁶ also remain outside of the “Regular State.”

During the eighteenth century, in several cities, the Brothers were recognized as belonging to the body of the “Regulars,” but evidently this changed nothing of the value of the *Bull*. More than once, the superiors of the Brothers consulted the Sorbonne to find out if the Institute had not been approved as “Religious,” but evidently the replies were negative.

During the nineteenth century, the Congregations with simple vows, but also some Congregations and Societies without public vows, were progressively taken under control by the Holy See which tried to unify “the Religious Life.” At the same time, in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, as in a large number of others, among those in charge at least, a certain uneasiness developed. Why remain, thus, on the fringe of the canonical categories?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, on the eve of the promulgation of the *Code of Canon Law* in 1917, those Congregations with simple and public vows were defined as belonging to the canonical religious state. It was the end of a long and slow evolution, or even of two converging evolutions: that of the common law of the Church and that of the thinking or consciousness of the members of those “quasi religious” Congregations and Institutes.

Very probably, then, our superiors had decided that we had no other choice and that, henceforth, we were too far from being a “Society living the common life without public vows,” as were and as have remained the Daughters of Charity, the Lasarists, and many others.

Notes

1. Maurice-Auguste Hermans, FSC (1911-1987) was a Doctor of Canon Law, former Assistant Superior General and Procurator General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He served as the first international director of the office of Lasallian Studies in the Generalate in Rome (1956-1987), and is recognized as the architect of the monumental series *Cahiers lasalliens*, through which has been disseminated the writings of John Baptist de La Salle and much of the twentieth century scholarship about his life, spirituality, and pedagogy. For a presentation of Brother Maurice-Auguste’s important role in the evolution of Lasallian studies, see “50 Years, and More, of Lasallian Studies: Chronicle and Perspectives” by Brother Alain Houry in *Digital Review of Lasallian Research* 1 (2010): 2-25.

2. Saint Pachomius (292-348) is widely recognized as the founder of Christian cenobitic monasticism.

3. Saint Basil the Great (329-379).

4. Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430).

5. Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-547) founded communities for monks at Subiaco, Italy, before moving to Monte Casino.

6. Of one mind and one heart, of one mind and one soul.

7. Acts of the Apostles 2:42, 44-46; 4:32, 34-35; 5:12-14.

8. This monastery on an island of the Nile in Upper Egypt was founded by Saint Pachomius.

9. Living without anything of one's own.

10. In Northern Africa, it was located in what is now known as Algeria.

11. Cf. the fourth and fifth chapters, Acts of the Apostles.

12. Or *Rule of the Master*, an anonymous sixth-century collection of monastic precepts.

13. Religious garb.

14. He was Pope of the Roman Catholic Church from 1198 to 1216.

15. The Fourth Lateran Council was the twelfth ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, held in 1215.

16. The Council of Trent was an ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, held 1543-1565.

17. Pius V was Pope of the Roman Catholic Church from 1566 to 1572.

18. *Rule of Saint Augustine*, 1.2.

19. *Rule of Saint Augustine* and *Rule of Saint Benedict*.

20. The procurator or econome.

21. *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 31.18-19.

22. *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 31.31.

23. Those who serve at table for the week.

24. *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 35.13.

25. *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 52.1-5.

26. Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622), with Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, founded in 1610 the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary.

27. The Divine Office, or Liturgy of the Hours, is the official set of daily prayers prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church to be recited by clergy, religious institutes, and laity. It forms the basis of the common prayer within Christian monasteries.

28. Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) was an Italian Jesuit and Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church.

29. The habitual or customary schedule of the community.

30. 1572-1641.

31. Prime, or first hour, is one of the fixed times of the Divine Office; this prayer is said at the first hour of daylight.

32. Abbot de Rancé (1626-1700).

33. A Benedictine abbey founded in 1098. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux was a member of this abbey.

34. A region in southern Italy in which is located the great Abbey of Monte Cassino.

35. This region of ancient Egypt served as a place of retreat for hermits, and it was the birthplace of Saint Pachomius.

36. Except for one infirmarian.

37. In the Roman Catholic Church, a form of religious living under *Rule*.

38. Founded in 1611 on the model of the one founded earlier by Saint Phillip Neri in Rome.

39. Lazarists, or the Company of the Mission, was founded by Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660).

40. Sulpicians, or the Society of Saint Sulpice, was founded by Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657).

41. Eudists, or the Company of Jesus and Mary, was founded by Saint Jean Eudes (1601-1680).

42. Cardinal Bérulle (1575-1629).

43. The Oratory of Saint Philip Neri.

44. The vows of religion are those of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

45. By “vocation” is meant here “trade.”

46. Toulouse, Soissons, Grenoble, Lyon . . .

47. Brothers of the Christian Schools.

48. The “general hospital,” as it is referred to here, was not a medical center. It was a network of “hospices” to enclose the poor. It is sometimes called the “general hospice.” See Luke Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, 50.

49. Ibid., 31-33.

50. Ibid., 131-132.

51. Some details in CL 4, pp. 34, 35, 36, 39.

52. Since De La Salle moved into this house with the first Brothers in 1682, it is sometimes called “the cradle of the institute” by the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

53. Very probably Trinity Sunday 1686.

54. Cf. La Salle, “Memorandum on the Habit” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, trans. and ed. by Augustine Loes and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1995), 147-191.

55. The General Chapter here referred to is a general assembly of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. It is a regularly scheduled time of prayer and planning, with representatives of all of the sectors of the Institute.

56. According to the *Code of Canon Law*, a rescript is an administrative act issued in writing granting a privilege or dispensation at someone’s request.

57. Cf. Gutierrez Alonso and Houry, “Community, Society, Institute” in *Lasallian Themes 3* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1998), 40.

58. De La Salle had realized for some time that the Brother teachers needed time and a place for retreat and renewal. Eventually, he found a house in Vaugirard, a suburb of Paris.

59. Cf. Brother Bernard, “John Baptist de La Salle” in *John Baptist de La Salle: Two Early Biographies (Maillefer and Bernard)*, ed. Paul Grass (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996).

60. The serving Brothers did manual work, helped the teachers at school, and wore a capuchin-brown habit.

61. He was the novice-employed.

62. And at times suspect.

63. Cf. CL 2, pp. 92-93.

64. Cf. La Salle, *Rule and Foundational Documents*.

65. The official ecclesiastical recognition by the Vatican of the establishment in the Church of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

66. Cf. Loes, *The First De La Salle Brothers (1681-1719)*, (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999).

67. Cf. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle: A Biography in Three Books* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000).

68. Cf. CL 37, pp. 35-43, where Brother Léon Aroz gives several death certificates.

69. Cf. *Circular 335*, p. 226 and after.

70. Cf. "Memorandum on the Habit".

71. The Duke of Mazarin, the curés of Champagne.

72. A commitment which was valid only due to the agreement of the ecclesiastical authority, as regards the projected seminary in Rethel.

73. Cf. Everett, "The Education of Teachers for Primary Schools in Seventeenth-Century France" by Dominic Everett in *So Favored by Grace: Education in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle* (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1991), pp. 1-34.

74. Cf. Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

75. François de Mailly was Archbishop of Rheims from 1710 to 1721.

76. Charles-Maurice Le Tellier was Archbishop of Rheims from 1671 to 1710.

77. Cf. Calcutt, *Gabriel Drolin: De La Salle Brother (1664-1733)* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1993).

78. Cf. De La Salle's letters to Gabriel Drolin and De La Salle's final Testament.

79. The pastor of the parish of Saint-Sulpice.

80. *Letters patent* for the house of Saint-Yon.

81. *Bull of Approbation* of the Institute.

82. The 18 articles.

83. Certain of which appear not to have been thought of until the time when the request was being drawn up.

84. The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, whose purpose was giving religious education, was an association established at Rome in 1562.

85. The 18 articles and some particular clauses as approved by the Vatican.

86. Recall that these notes are from a conference given in 1982, that they concern events in the eighteenth century, and that church law evolved with the promulgation of the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* and its revision in 1981.

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