

The Journey of the Lasallian Community

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All Lasallian educational works throughout the world today trace their origin to Saint John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) and the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools of which he was the founder. His work comes at the beginning of what we call Modernity as the France he knew saw the movement of so many people away from the countryside into the rapidly developing cities. De La Salle and his Brothers' concern for the education of the urban poor develops against the background of the highest point of French civilization at the Court of Louis XIV.

What was the dynamic force of this foundation that enabled it to survive its suppression in the country of its origin in 1792, its reinstatement in 1803 and its eventual spread into all the continents so that 96% of those associated in this movement today are not members of the Brotherhood as such but see themselves in different ways as sharers in the same Lasallian heritage?

The following text traces the continuity between the founding vision and the vitality of the Lasallian movement today.

1. De La Salle's Own Journey to the Priesthood

The journey of the first community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools begins with the personal journey of John Baptist de La Salle and only later becomes that of the schoolmasters. The young Canon, whose administrative competence and self-assurance had been proven between 1672 and 1678 became, unwittingly as his own words indicate, associated by vow with a group of men whom he initially ranked below the social level of his own personal servant. Before concentrating on the events following his meeting with Adrien Nyel in 1679, it is important to take into account the journey which the young De La Salle had made especially through personal suffering and the taking on of family responsibilities between 1672 and 1678.

The biographers tell us of the death of his mother on July 19, 1671, and of the death of his father on April 9, 1672. The young John Baptist was not present for either of these funerals. His mother

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Brother Gerard holds a doctorate from Lancaster University, where he studied world religions. Fluent in French, Spanish, Italian and German, he served two periods on the staff of the International Lasallian Center in Rome and was twice elected to the General Council of the De La Salle Christian Brothers (1986-1993 and 1993-2000). In the United States, he is a foundation presenter of the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies and of the Lasallian Leadership Institute. Since 2000, he works mainly with educators as a presenter for Lasallian Education Services in Australia and as an Adjunct-Professor at the Australian Catholic University.

had been buried for almost two weeks before he arrived in Reims to meet his sorrowing father and his sisters and brothers. Only nine months later there followed his father's death. We know that John Baptist made the Holy Week retreat at Saint-Sulpice before terminating his studies and his residence in Paris so that it was only two weeks later that he returned to Reims to take up his duties as administrator of his father's estate. Thanks to the detailed research of Léon Aroz in *Cahiers lasalliens* Nos. 26 – 32 we now know much about how he lived these years between 1672 and 1678 but we can only guess at his personal grief and sense of loss. With the advantage of hindsight, however, we can easily see just how much his personal faith grew and was strengthened through these years of his family administration.

2. A Tension to be Solved

First, there must have been the tension between his personal path towards the priesthood and his new duties as administrator. De La Salle initially resumed his theological studies in May only some weeks after returning to Reims and received the sub-diaconate in early June at Cambrai; by October he had to postpone his studies because of his administrative obligations. This sense of fidelity to his overriding duty as administrator, however, never allowed him to lose sight of the goal of priesthood to which he felt himself called.

Second, we can only guess at the enduring influence of Saint-Sulpice throughout his lifetime, shown especially in the importance he accorded to the presence of God in his later writings and meditations on interior prayer (oraison) and, at a moment of crisis in 1691, to an obvious imitation of Jean-Jacques Olier and his two companions in the content and manner of the “heroic vow” of that year. Was it, perhaps, through submission to his spiritual director at Saint-Sulpice in discerning the will of God that he was later to forge so special a relationship with Nicolas Roland, his spiritual director? Even though Roland's urging that he resign his canonry came to nothing because of the change of mind of the parish priest, it may have been an important lesson in understanding the force of hierarchical pressure to maintain the status quo, something John Baptist would experience many more times in his lifetime. Named executor of Roland's will, De La Salle succeeded in obtaining recognition for the Sisters of the Child Jesus. Thus it was that in following out his new path in relationship to these Sisters he first came to know Adrien Nyel, to consult Nicolas Barré and, in following Barré's advice, to become the leader of Nyel's group of schoolmasters.

3. Fidelity to the Will of God

The autobiographical *Memoir on the Beginnings* leaves us in no doubt that the unexpected meeting with Adrien Nyel early in 1679 had consequences which became an important test of De La Salle's fidelity. It is difficult not to feel that on numerous occasions up to June 6, 1694, De La Salle seemed to see his task as bringing some stability to this new community which he found himself creating almost in spite of himself but which he did not envisage as his life's work. His various attempts to allow the members to decide their own future as a community of laymen with their own autonomy under a lay superior can certainly give the impression that it was only in 1694 that he saw that God was calling him to make perpetual vows as one of them. Indeed, the very dating of the *Memoir* (“some fourteen years after”) suggests that by June 1694 De La Salle had come to see that his task of helping to stabilize this community from the outside was no

longer sufficient. The same spirit of faith which had brought him to this moment, now led him to vow the rest of his life to this task.

Fidelity for De La Salle, then, was not following out some predetermined path trodden beforehand by others. It was rather the recognition that the Spirit of God was actively calling him through the events and challenges of his present situation to a fidelity to a future which was in no way certain or secure except by complete openness to this “God who is so good...”

4. Journeying with the Spirit of Faith

In his 18 months at Saint-Sulpice, the young De La Salle seems to have understood and accepted one of the characteristics of the spirituality of seventeenth-century France with regard to Christian discipleship. This was not so much the “following” or even the “imitation” of Christ and the following of Christ’s example but in a more profound sense the way in which Christ was to live in us. The very invocation which later became the watchword and signal of the community - “Live Jesus in our hearts!” “Forever!” - was a constant prayer of the community members for one another. It is striking to note how often in his *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, De La Salle invokes the text from Galatians 2:20, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me,” as the interior disposition to which faith should lead us.

“Seeing everything with the eyes of faith”, as he was later to write in the *Collection of Short Treatises*, enabled him to be faithful in spite of many severe disappointments. There was the intense disappointment he must have felt when many of the original teachers left him. There was the dramatic reversal of roles when, after he had recalled Scripture to show the importance of reliance on God’s providence to the new teachers, they were able to show him the contrast between his own security in life and the Gospel counsel he was offering! His administrator’s experience of how money could be used to endow the schools was rejected by Barré who asked him, instead of endowing the schools himself, to give away his personal fortune and to rely on God’s providence. Barré’s greatest gift to De La Salle may have been to help him see that the salvation of the young people would not come about from the hierarchical structure of the Church and society of the time but from the way that the mission of Christ would be carried out through this new lay community that ensured the continuity of the gratuitous schools.

It is not surprising, then, that De La Salle gave the spirit of faith as the foundation spirit for those who were to live in this community. His approach was not a vague abstraction but involved “seeing and judging” events in the light of faith and even, daringly, trying to see as God sees. He saw also that this faith was authentic to the extent that it found expression through what he was to call “an ardent zeal.” Was it, perhaps, through his own closeness as confessor and guide to his first followers that the untimely deaths of Brothers Jean-François, Nicolas Bourlette, Jean Morice and Henri L’Heureux in the first years of the community deepened his conviction of the importance of faith and its expression through zeal as fundamental to the work of the schools and strengthened his growing perception that the work of the Christian schools was indeed “God’s work”? A spirit of faith expressed through zeal was essential but it is significant that De La Salle’s achievement, as Michel Sauvage notes in *Catéchèse et Laiçat*, was his insistence that the journey of faith was not to be made alone but was to be sustained through membership of a community.

5. Membership of a Community

If we assume that the first Assembly at Reims was indeed from Ascension to Trinity Sunday 1686, then it is here that we can trace some of the essential elements which consolidated membership in the community by decisions about various external signs of belonging. After requesting that De La Salle take over the schools in Laon and Guise, Nyel had returned to Rouen in the summer of 1685. Whereas Blain's reporting of this Assembly stresses De La Salle's humility in allowing the members to express their own opinions about the matters to be discussed, modern commentators on the same facts emphasize how important it was for De La Salle to allow each person to speak for himself since they were the ones choosing to make the transition from being an ad hoc group to becoming a new kind of community with its own special mission.

The decision to wear a distinctive habit was a visible sign of community membership. More important and fundamental to the whole process was the decision to put aside the name of "schoolmaster" and to adopt the title of Brother, especially the double sense of definition given to the expression by defining themselves as "brothers to one another" in the community and "older brothers" to the young people confided to their care. De La Salle allowed some members to take a vow of obedience for three years, renewable each year, but it is important to see that this was a personal option and in no way constitutive of the community. It may well be that the habit and the name both came from De La Salle's seeking advice from Barré, whose "brothers" never succeeded as did the "sisters" he founded, possibly because Barré, himself a Minim, never lived in community with his Brothers. Indeed, this "new" community of men who were neither clerics nor formally "religious" in the then contemporary sense, were soon viewed askance from a clerical point of view, especially when it became known that De La Salle, former Canon of Reims, was practicing obedience to the lay superior of the community, Henri L'Heureux!

This transformation of the individual schoolmasters into a community did not happen at one moment but could be thought of as the crossroads where De La Salle's own journey intersected with the hesitant steps of the former "schoolmasters". What bound the members of the community together were not the traditional bonds of a religious community i.e. habit, vows and an officially approved rule of life, but rather the willingness of a group of laymen to associate themselves, to put everything in common and to live together under agreed regulations in order to assure the continuity of the gratuitous schools founded for the Christian education of poor boys in Reims and its environs. Commitment was expressed through the willingness and availability of all the members to continue the work that had been begun. If De La Salle allowed some to make vows it was to accommodate their own preference and devotion. The common mission would be served by all, with or without vows.

6. The Journey from Reims to Paris

The physical displacement from Reims to Paris in 1688 was another milestone in the life of the community. First of all, De La Salle, who had successfully obtained ecclesiastical and civil approval and an assured future for Roland's Sisters of the Child Jesus, was not prepared to accept the same offer of approval and patronage from the archbishop of Reims. In the absence of any stated reasons for this refusal, we can surmise at least that De La Salle did not feel that the

little group had yet found its own identity or stability as events in Paris were soon to prove. The “Memorandum on the Habit” was another important step in insisting on this sense of a “community” noted by the first biographers as early as 1681-1682, and referred to by De La Salle himself in the same year in his letter to the authorities of Château-Porcien. The members may have lived in a number of separate houses but saw themselves as forming one community.

The importance of the “heroic vow” of November 21, 1691, was that it had a precise objective not previously formulated so explicitly: the foundation of the society. The objective of the heroic vow had been achieved when on June 6, 1694, De La Salle and twelve Brothers pronounced vows of association, obedience and stability for life. The importance of their vow of association was that it bound the members together in view of a common mission, the continuation of the Christian and gratuitous schools. If the community had the external appearance of a “religious” community its novelty was that it differed in very significant ways. Instead of being like existing communities in which the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience were fundamental in creating the basis on which some external mission could be carried out, the members of this new community first associated themselves to live under regulations in this community in order to continue the Christian and gratuitous schools. Some would confirm this choice by making vows, but others would serve the community without anyone being obliged to do so.

7. The Social Function of that First Association

Eleven years before the “heroic vow” of association of November 21, 1691, De La Salle had already shown himself ready to “associate” himself closely with persons from a lower social status. His biographers are at one in telling how natural it was for De La Salle to invite Nyel and his pupil-teachers to his own home while the initial arrangements for the first school were made. When the school at Saint-Maurice was opened in April 1679, Nyel and the first teachers lodged with the parish priest. This arrangement having proved to be unsatisfactory, at Christmas 1679 De La Salle lodged them behind Saint-Symphorien. This situation also proving unsatisfactory, in June 1681 De La Salle took them into his own home in Rue Sainte-Marguerite. The clash with his close and extended family shows how far he was prepared to go to ensure the success of the schools which he had come to see was inseparable from the formation of the schoolmasters themselves. This clash of persons from two widely separated levels of society could not have been unforeseen but De La Salle’s attempt to make it work is perhaps a measure of his growing conviction of the importance of the journey he was willing to undertake to have these schools succeed.

The reaction in both family and ecclesiastical circles in Reims to De La Salle’s living as a simple member of a lay community with a lay superior showed the strength of the prevailing social system. Léon Aroz in *Cahiers lasalliens* No. 52 has helped our understanding of the family conflict culminating in the lawsuit brought by his brother-in-law, Jean Maillefer, husband of Marie de La Salle, which eventually led to De La Salle and the schoolmasters moving to Rue Neuve in 1682.

Perhaps it is only in taking a long view from the first meeting with Adrien Nyel in early 1679 to his death at Saint-Yon in 1719 that we can appreciate the importance of the social distance De La Salle himself travelled in moving from a position of patronage to one of service and in the

process becoming God's chosen instrument in bringing into being a lay community which was to outlast him and continue the mission of Christian and gratuitous education which he launched. But it is important not to so emphasize De La Salle's journey that we underestimate the journey made by the community of which he was the founder. The men who accepted De La Salle's leadership and guidance did so without the solid theological background and spiritual formation which had enriched him but were willing to undertake this journey with him as leader. They, too, were led by faith along a new path in the Church.

8. The Crisis of 1707-1714

After the loss of the court case brought against him by the writing masters and the formal condemnation by name on August 29, 1704, not only of De La Salle but also of some eighteen Brothers, the journey of De La Salle and the novices continued to Rouen while the named Brothers, who could no longer teach in Paris, were dispersed to Chartres, Dijon and Rouen. Success in overcoming difficulties in Rouen gradually brought some stability to the community, but the unfavorable judgment against De La Salle in the prolonged Clément affair which had dragged on from 1707 to 1712, eventually led De La Salle to visit the communities in the south of France so as to distance himself from bringing further difficulties on his community.

The story of De La Salle's thirty-month absence from Paris appears only through some isolated details. It seems the original plan was simply to remove himself from Paris so as not to bring further difficulties on his community; a series of disappointments seemed to have convinced him that his very association with the Brothers was itself the source of their difficulties. Whatever consolations De La Salle may have received at Grenoble, it is the image of the doctor of theology seeking counsel from the unlettered shepherdess Sister Louise that is most striking. The letter of the "principal Brothers" at Easter 1714 marks a new stage of the community's journey because of its clarity in appealing to De La Salle's act of association with them on June 6, 1694, as the basis by which his community could insist on his return: the authors of the letter had indeed absorbed his teaching!

9. The Importance of the *Common Rules* of 1717-18

The clear understanding of the importance of association is shown as well in that for the decision to hold a General Chapter in 1717 to be approved, Brother Barthélemy visited most of the communities in order to obtain the signature of each Brother as a sign of agreement. The Lasallian community had some twenty-five years of experience when De La Salle first formulated a set of *Common Rules* in 1705, even though the biographers speak of Rules written in the early part of 1694 and the "Memorandum on the Habit" speaks of the members living according to Rules. Now, at the end of his life, when the Brothers were at last ready to name as his successor one of their own, De La Salle put the finishing touches to the *Common Rules*, based on the lived experience of the community since its origins. It is most significant, therefore, that this "final" version approved by the delegates at the General Chapter at Rouen was then sent to each community by Brother Barthélemy to replace the Rule previously in force.

10. Brother Agathon's Fidelity to the Journey

The one hundred Brothers of 1719 had become almost nine hundred by 1789. Increasingly after the mid-century, the Brothers came into conflict with the philosophes, the proponents of the Enlightenment. Since 1725 the Institute had been officially approved by the Church through being granted its own *Bull of Approbation*. While this official approval of both Church and State had helped the Institute to develop, it now did so as a religious congregation and, in the theology of religious life of the time, lived with the ambiguity of the two aims of their semi-monastic style of life, namely the Brothers' search for perfection in seeking their own salvation and the at times apparently contrary demand of being "from morning to night with their pupils." It is easier for the historian to see better than Brother Agathon and his Council that the Brothers were in danger of losing the essential link between their consecration, their community and their mission.

Nevertheless, Brother Agathon's leadership through his writings from 1777-1792 witnesses to his fidelity to the founding vision as he struggled to maintain the foundation principles of gratuity, the "principal duty" of the Brother as catechist, the development of the list of *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher* left by De La Salle into an important book, the updating of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* to meet new needs and his spirited defense against the suppression of the Institute by the National Assembly. Even though the Institute formally ceased to exist after 1792 in the land of its foundation, the fact that there was already an established community in Lyon in 1803 which was soon followed by the arrival of Brother Frumence as Vicar-General in 1805 is its own tribute to its solid foundations. Hampered in many ways by its controlled status under the university throughout the nineteenth century, the Institute nevertheless showed great creativity and became missionary in a way which its founder could never have envisaged.

11. Fidelity in the Crisis of 1904

By the end of the nineteenth century, the growth of the Institute outside of France presented particular difficulties. One was that, as the founding charism became institutionalized through its centralized forms of government, there was a tendency towards uniformity as a value in itself with the failure to recognize the very different cultural circumstances under which the Brothers were working. This was particularly so in the difficulties encountered in trying to maintain the principle of gratuity when the Brothers had to operate boarding schools to have some financial security. Responding in this way seemed to question the identity of the Brothers as entrusted with "the children of artisans and the poor." This insistence on uniformity and a literal fidelity to the Rule (notably in the rigid interpretation of the prohibition against the teaching of Latin) threatened the development of new ways of responding to the needs of the poor. The changing circumstances required as well that there was need for better formation of the Brothers themselves.

The secularization laws in France in 1904 presented the French Brothers of the time with a dilemma: was it possible to be faithful to the founding vision if a Brother could no longer continue to live in the Institute with the traditional "separation from the world", religious name and habit, support of community life and all the other aspects which had always been present, or was it better to go into exile to maintain the life of the Institute in a foreign country? From our

vantage point a century later, it is possible to see that the “secularized” Brothers and those who went into exile were both faithful as, on one hand, the unjust laws became the providential instrument for the further international dispersion of the Institute, already launched through its missionary outreach in the second half of the nineteenth century, and, on the other, the “secularized” Brothers maintained their presence in a creative way and were largely responsible for preserving what they could until the laws were repealed.

12. The Meaning of Re-foundation

There is a profound sense in which every new opening since the first school in Saint-Maurice in 1679 has been a re-foundation because the same underlying principles of the Lasallian heritage have led to its creation. Among these principles there would have to be included the following four:

- the foundation is a response in the spirit of the Gospel to the particular needs of those to be served
- those responsible for the work are associated together in what they see as a common enterprise and are prepared to work together to achieve its ends;
- the basis of relationships, among those who serve as well as among those being served, is that of being “brothers/sisters to one another and older brothers/sisters to those served”;
- a profound sense of gratuity, material and spiritual, characterizes the policies of the foundation.

The above principles are considered indispensable for the foundation itself; it is no less important that periodic evaluation ensure that they are maintained and upheld especially if the original foundation is required to change because of outside circumstances. If such an evaluation were to show that some or all of the original principles were no longer operative, fidelity to the heritage would make it imperative to try to implement the same foundational principles in the new situation.

From an historical viewpoint, each District has had local responsibility for monitoring the Lasallian character of its foundations while the General Chapters of the Institute have had periodic evaluations of policy from an international perspective. The recognition by the General Chapters of 1976, 1986 and 1993 that the mission is now “shared” with lay persons as the majority of participants has brought a certain urgency to the propositions of the General Chapter of 2000 in its call for more widespread participation of representative lay persons in policy-making as regards the Lasallian mission. In whatever ways this may be implemented, fidelity to the heritage requires that all persons called on to help make and implement such policy decisions need formation in understanding the foundation principles and in being prepared to support them.

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Appendix A: Facilitator Guide

- 1) Distribute “The Journey of the Lasallian Community” several days before scheduled discussion. Include questions for readers’ consideration, to encourage participation of persons more inclined to deliberation.
- 2) Provide additional copies of the discussion questions on-site, and consider using writing easels to capture responses to questions c, d, and e, below.
- 3) Schedule discussion with ample time for sharing and reflecting on others’ contributions. Consider structuring the group’s movement through the discussion by offering reminders at benchmarks halfway and shortly before the end of the discussion period.
- 4) These questions are offered as suggestions. Add or adapt as participants’ situations may require.
 - a. How has your particular life-journey intersected with that of the Lasallian Community?
 - b. What strikes you most about this overview of the journey of the Lasallian Community?
 - c. What, in your opinion, are the important “values” which have enabled the Lasallian educational mission to grow, survive, and remain relevant in so many different parts of the world today? Which do you see as absolutely necessary to ensure continuity and progression in development of Lasallian identity in a community?
 - d. How might the four principles of “re-foundation” (at point 12 in the reading) apply to the Lasallian ministry or work to which you contribute? What more do you feel needs to be done?