

JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE 1711 – 1714

or “THE TEMPTATION of PARMÉNIE”

This article revisits the critical times at our beginnings when John Baptist de La Salle, caught up in the turmoil of the “Clement” lawsuit, left for the South of France. For some years, he gave no (or very little) sign of life for the Brothers in Paris and its nearby area (Versailles and Saint-Denis); he was tempted by “retirement”, in the form of withdrawal from the concerns of his Institute.

We are faced with a time of crisis for the Institute as it was in its beginnings. Cognisance must be taken of its various aspects, the persons involved, the analyses made by the protagonists, the developments that took place, the responses given, in what ways these were (or were not) solutions to the crisis on hand, and, finally how the persons and institutions involved came out of it changed, and what that means for the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

We shall have to dwell again on the letter that “the principal Brothers” in Paris wrote to the Founder on 1st April 1714. It is one of the essential texts of our “foundation stories” as Lasallians¹.

The political, social and cultural context: an end of reign crisis

The story of the Institute, the history of its Foundation, our founding “myths” are not disembodied stories. It is true that in the writings of John Baptist de La Salle the contemporary, factual element is practically non-existent. You have to go back to the biographers to see certain aspects of them emphasised. Yet, the work of John Baptist de La Salle fits indisputably into a period of French history, into a particular and precise context which could not but have had an influence on the choices, decisions and attitudes of Monsieur de La Salle and the Brothers as well as on all those around them.

When abbé Clement first made contact with John Baptist de La Salle, in December 1707², **France was at war with the rest of Europe** (mainly Great Britain, Holland, Savoy and Austria), from May 1702, over the succession to the Spanish throne. Her ally was Spain, since it was over installing on the throne in Madrid one of the grandsons of Louis XIV. This war came to an end in 1713, with the Treaty of Utrecht that redrew the map of Europe and claimed to set up a “balanced Europe” to avoid domination by any single power (France).

It should be noted that it was those countries whose population exercised some control over their form of government (Great Britain, the Low Countries) that gained at the expense of the absolutist powers (France and Spain), a sign that something was changing at the beginning of the XVIIIth century in “higher politics” and the exercise of power. Another notable element affected the internal French policy.

The difficulties of this war, the defeats and reverses suffered, led Louis XIV to address his people by means of a declaration which was read in all the parishes in France, on 12th June 1709, during high Mass. He explained the proposals he had made to bring about peace, the draconian conditions the Allies wanted to impose on him³, and finally he asked for the support of his people to continue

¹ I am basing the core of my comments on the account of Blain (CL 8), Chapters 9 to 13 of the Third Book of his biography; as well as on the text of Brother Henri Bédel: ORIGINES. 1651 – 1726. An uncertain time (p.p. 142-151 of the French version)

² Blain II (CL 8), p.72. [Book I of Blain’s three volume biography has not been published in English. Books II and III have been translated by Br Richard Arnandez and appeared as Vol. 1, Bk.2 and Vol.2, Bk.3. Quotations from Blain are taken from this translation and are referred to simply as Eng. Vol. 1 or 2 plus the page number. Tr.]

³ Among others to declare war on his grandson king Philip V, to drive him from the Spanish throne.

the war. It was a quite unusual approach in the setting of the absolute and sacred monarchy of the Ancien Régime in which the king had neither to justify himself nor explain himself to his subjects. What's more, the declaration attained its purpose, for it was followed by a very significant and voluntary rush to the royal colours and the support of the civilian population in the prosecution of the war. Historians speak of the birth of a national patriotic sentiment, something new in the way people think and a significant evolution. This was another change at the start of the century.

Other happenings in this period had important repercussions on the life of John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers. In July 1702, **the revolt of the "Camisards"** began. From 1685, the public practice of the Protestant religion was forbidden in France (revocation of the Edict of Nantes) and all Frenchmen were supposedly Catholics. But on the South-East border of the Massif Central (the Cévennes) there existed a popular, rural Protestantism which continued to be practised, more or less secretly.

From 1707, in response to the requests of the Catholic Church and the political powers, John Baptist de La Salle sent Brothers to those areas to work at turning these "New Converts" into good Catholics⁴. When the Brothers opened those schools, the organised rebellion was over, but the insecurity remained, especially towards the ministers of Catholic worship. John Baptist de La Salle would be seen travelling about, several times, in that district, between 1711 and 1713, to the great anxiety of his Brothers and friends.

He reached Avignon towards the end of Lent, 1712. The Brothers there, delighted as were all the others over having their Superior with them, kept him with them as long as they could. He was preparing to make a visitation of all the establishments the Brothers had in the area. His plan caused the Brothers considerable alarm because it was dangerous to venture too far out in the country because of the Camisards who occupied the countryside and who waged a cruel war on all ecclesiastics. It was well known that their great delight was to sacrifice priests to their fury and to satisfy their hatred of Catholics by shedding the blood of the Lord's ministers.

Vainly did the Brothers point out to De La Salle that he should not endanger himself to be hunted down by the rabid fanatics whose external aspect alone showed them to be human, and who, under the semblance of men, bore the hearts of wild beasts. But nothing could discourage his zeal.⁵

During the night between 6th and 7th January 1709, there began **a catastrophic climatic event** which was to last several months. In Northern France and in the South-West, temperatures fell sharply. Temperatures of minus 20° C. were recorded in Paris in February 1709. The ground was deeply frozen for several weeks, autumn sowings died in the ground, it was impossible to plant winter wheat, trees were frozen to the core, cattle died in the fields, there were reports of birds dropping in full flight and being picked up frozen, infants died between their homes and the parish church while on their way to be baptised, so much so that priests celebrated baptisms in the homes and with warm water; the dead could not be buried, so hard was the earth. This severe winter was followed by a wet spring. Nevertheless the steps taken by the authorities enabled the damage to be limited⁶: requisitions of reserve stocks, massive imports of wheat, control of trading in grains, food distribution, taxing of the rich (those well-off), distribution of barley seed, a cereal that grows quickly. It has been calculated that there were 630,000 more deaths than normal, for the period 1709-1710, half as many, however, as in 1693-1694 when there were 1,300,000 extra deaths.

This catastrophe had repercussions on the lives of the Brothers. The novitiate came back from Saint Yon to Paris, for it was thought to be easier to feed the postulants and novices in the capital. This made the Paris community feel the pinch and created or reignited the tensions with the parish priest

⁴ See ORIGINES. 1651-1726. p.p.137 to 141: Schools for children of the "New Converts"

⁵ Blain II. (CL 8). p.p. 81&82. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p. 95&96.

⁶ The lessons of the 1693-1694 winter had been absorbed by the various authorities.

of Saint Sulpice, who was, in fact, financing a much more numerous community than the one necessary to run his parish schools. In addition, certain Brothers reproached de La Salle with welcoming too easily postulants who would come seeking food and shelter at the expense of the community and the schools, without having the vocation to be a Brother. De La Salle would respond that at least they made a good retreat before leaving!⁷

When the novices arrived in Paris, they increased the number of Brothers by over 50 per cent., The residence, which was reasonably spacious for the Brothers in Paris, became too small to accommodate them and the new arrivals. There were about 40 persons living there, which meant that they were in each other's way day and night. They slept on wretched straw mattresses with equally shabby coverlets and sheets of no better quality. Those mats were stretched out on the floor in an orderly manner, in the various rooms, behind doors, and wherever there was some space available. Yet, poor as this house of Providence was, it was open to anyone who wished to enter. The Superior's charity did not shut the door to anyone who showed good will and who was not evidently driven to enter by starvation. Those of his disciples gifted with a less robust faith or a less generous charity than he took it amiss that their father should share with newcomers the bread which was often insufficient for them. However, a good many of the latter did not stay long, preferring to leave after one or two months.

De La Salle consoled himself for the loss and consoled those who reproached him with his too great readiness to admit postulants, by saying wisely: "At least they made a good retreat, which will be advantageous for their salvation".⁸

The meagreness of successive harvests, right up to the death of the king in September 1715, joined with the general economic situation due to the long war of 11 years, would lead to a difficult recovery for France.

We are at the end of a reign, with all the uncertainties and tension of that situation. Louis XIV was born in 1638, he was king from 1643 (at the age of 5) and actually exercised power from 1661. That means he reigned for fifty years. The political personnel had already turned over two or three times. Those who worked with him were generally born about 1670-1680. From the time of his (morganatic) marriage to Madame de Maintenon (1684) the king showed an interest in piety, while settling once and for all into Versailles in 1682. But that was the end of the flamboyance of the Court over the years 60-70. The king took his behaviour in hand, and everyone fell into line with more or less good will; this implied not a little hypocrisy, even if the "conversion" of the king seemed sincere⁹.

In 1711, Louis XIV was 73 years of age and it was clear that his reign was coming to its end. In the short term, new men would have to come to the fore with new ideas and ways of doing things. His heir, the Grand Dauphin, died on 14th April 1711. The eldest son of the latter, the Duke of Burgundy, born in 1682, was recognised as the virtual sovereign. He had been educated by Fénelon and was keen on political ideas quite different from the practice of his grandfather, with a staff prepared to accept his orders. But he died in March 1712 from measles. The heir to the throne was then a young boy two years old (he would be Louis XV).

To the age of the king was now added great uncertainty as to the succession. Would the heir survive into adulthood? His health was fragile and, at that time three quarters of young people died before reaching twenty, furthermore death showed no respect for "status". If he died, who would reign in his place? His uncles? One (Anjou) had become king of Spain (Philip V) and renounced the French throne, the other (Berry) died in 1714 in a riding accident. Would it be Louis XIV's nephew, Philip

⁷ Blain II. (CL 8), p.p.59-60. Eng. Vol. 2, p.70.

⁸ Blain II. (CL 8). p.p.59-60. Eng. Vol. 2, p.70.

⁹ In passing, it is notable that the foundation of Christian Schools fitted almost entirely into this third part of the reign of Louis XIV.

of Orléans? He was not renowned for the odour of sanctity in the court of France, and there would be problems with his cousin the king of Spain, whose renunciation of the French throne was not admissible in French law. Then Louis XIV decided, in 1714, to declare his bastard sons (those he had had with Madame de Montespan) legitimate and “princes of the blood”, that is, fit to mount the throne of France. That was an act which flatly contradicted the traditional constitution of the Realm. In fact it was essential to be born of a legitimate marriage to accede to the throne.

This was another indication of the turmoil of minds and judgements, even at the highest levels, at the end of this reign. It may be noted, in passing, that the Founder and the original Brothers, like most Frenchmen of their time, would have known only one sovereign during the whole of their lives: Louis XIV. Their image of political power was mixed up with his person and the style he adopted in exercising it. In the end, Louis XV succeeded his great-grand-father, at the cost of a Regency led by his grand cousin, Philip of Orléans. And, with the difference from the other regencies experienced by France in previous days (Catherine de Medici, Marie de Medici, Anne of Austria: it was then the mother of the young king who ruled during his minority) this would be, politically, the calmest regency of them all, thus allowing a quiet transition to what would be called the age of *Enlightenment*.

This end-of-reign crisis was also marked by a **resurgence of the Jansenist quarrel**. It would keep going right up to the French Revolution. On 26th October 1709, a decree of the King’s Council decided to scatter the last religious of Port-Royal-des-Champs (about twenty women, all very old) among various other convents, and to demolish the abbey. This dispersion “*manu militari*” caused scandal. The buildings were razed in 1711, as well as the cemetery of the nuns and Solitaries. More than anything, the argument started again: what are the rights of conscience when truth and innocence are persecuted?

The former Oratorian, Pasquier Quesnel, in 1692, brought out a work entitled: *The New Testament in French with moral Reflections on each verse*. This took up again and amplified works of Jansenistic inspiration begun in 1671. The bishop of Chalons, Mgr de Noailles, (later cardinal and archbishop of Paris) gave it his warm approval. Quesnel, having taken refuge in Mons (in Belgium, in the Spanish Low Countries) was suspected of Jansenism. The authorities had him arrested in 1703; he escaped, but his papers were seized and showed that he was implicated in a whole network which challenged the royal authority. Louis XIV then allowed him no respite and obtained the condemnation by Pope Clement XI in the Bull *Unigenitus* (8th September 1713) of 101 propositions extracted from the Moral Reflections.

In those days, within the framework of the Gallican Church and relations between Rome and France, a papal Bull, even one asked for by the king, could not be implemented in France without other legal process. The Bull had to be accepted by the bishops and registered by the Parlement for it to have the force of law. Now, the bishops were divided and they tried to produce an explanatory text, which was rejected by Rome because it seemed to be subordinating the authority of the Pope to the interpretation of the bishops. Cardinal de Noailles, having become archbishop of Paris, was caught in the toils of his contradictions and allegiances. After some hesitation, he ended up generating a formula which accepted the Bull *Unigenitus* with so many contortions that he was ranked among its opponents. He was followed, in his opposition, by a majority of priests in Paris, Oratorians, Benedictines and canons, people with strong connections with the parliamentary group (take a look at John Baptist de La Salle’s family). The Parlement¹⁰ especially the one in Paris,

¹⁰ The Parlement is a Court of Justice, entrusted among other things, with officially registering laws while verifying that they conform to the constitution and do not contradict previous laws. Magistrates purchased their office. It was not a chamber of elected representatives. A law, to have currency over the whole territory had to be “registered” by every

rejected a document which imposed, in a certain manner, pontifical infallibility and the supremacy of the Pope over the royal power in the course of a condemned article. The Parlement claimed to be defending the rights of the king, against the king himself.

At the time of his death, Louis XIV had not seen the last of all this opposition and bequeathed the problem to his successor, in this case to the Regent. Over and above the doctrinal question, it was the royal power that was being challenged. Whilst the Church in France was divided, a certain number of bishops, doctors of the Sorbonne and priests (3,000 or 4,000 in all) decided to appeal to a Council, that institution being considered superior to the Pope. In the last analysis, the focus was political and centred on the absolute power, that of the king like that of the Pope, over consciences. Was it an assembly (of bishops) which was to be the final arbiter, or the sovereign (king or Sovereign Pontiff)? Behind the reasoning of the clergy, there was also the weight of the resentment they had accumulated against the bishops – most of whom, because of the way in which they were chosen, were “in the pocket of the king” – and against the king, following the decision of 1695, approved by the Assembly of the French Clergy, which considerably strengthened¹¹ the disciplinary power of the bishops over the parish priests. Now, a whole movement claimed that if the bishops were the successors of the Twelve Apostles, the clergy were, in their turn, successors of the Seventy-two Disciples whom Jesus sent on their mission, and that they, necessarily, were entitled to their say on doctrinal questions and the organisation of the Church since their power was also of “divine right”, coming directly from God (like the Pope, like the bishops, like the king).

Amongst the “appelants” as well as the parliamentarians, the death of the king was awaited to revive the debate and the protest. And this did not fail to occur. To obtain the fullness of the Regency, Philip of Orleans restored some powers to the Parlement, whilst his entourage had strong sympathies for the fundamental Jansenist attitude: the autonomy of conscience, reserved, of course, to the *sanior pars*, to those “who were knowledgeable” and which was denied to ordinary people, “the base rabble”¹². Blain, with much exaggeration, attributed the difficulties that Monsieur de La Salle experienced in Marseilles to his opposition to the Jansenists. This was far from clear even if that dispute was not foreign to the annoyances meted out to him. It seems rather that the Founder, in the case of Marseilles, might have been the victim of power-plays and selfish influences, of priests and laymen, even within the circle of those faithful to Rome. Moreover, those events in Marseilles took place before the publication of the Bull *Unigenitus*. On the other hand, De La Salle’s reaction, in Grenoble, at the time of the publication of the Bull of Clement XI, and after the Pastoral Instruction of the Clergy¹³, was extremely clear and firm. It can be clearly seen that he did not distance himself from the doctrinal questions of his time.

John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers: two different generations

Another aspect of the difficulties experienced by John Baptist de La Salle is to be found, it seems to me, in the generational differences between De La Salle and the Brothers and among the Brothers themselves. John Baptist de La Salle was born in 1651 and all his formation occurred in the context of the triumphant Catholic Reformation and of the sacralised absolutism, of Louis XIV. Religion and power were considered to be hierarchical, of an order coming from above: the Trinity, the

Parlement in the kingdom (there were more than a dozen, but the one in Paris was the most important). Thus, for the Institute, the Letters Patent granted in 1724 by Louis XV, registered in the Normandy Parlement, would finally have the force of law throughout the whole country when this step had been taken by every Parlement in the kingdom.

¹¹ Such was the case with Jean-Louis de La Salle, canon of Rheims, brother of the Founder; and of Dom François-Élie Maillefer, his nephew and biographer.

¹² See the Memoires of the court of Louis XIV, by the duke of Saint-Simon.

¹³ See Blain II. (CL 8) p.p.106-107. Eng. Vol. 2 p.p. 125-126.

Church, the State, with the organisations of society functioning according to that principle. As for the Brothers, they had grown and developed within another context: a monarchy grown rigid and set in its principles; a Church rocked by ideological struggles while at the same time experiencing a disturbing weakening of doctrine.

Among the Brothers active in the Institute about 1711, the oldest in age by reason of entry, seems to have been Brother Gabriel Drolin, and present from the earliest beginnings in Rheims. He was a member of the Laon community in 1684. He had been assigned to Rome since 1702 and so was not directly involved with the events which are our present concern. Brother John Patois (Brother Antoine) was born in 1666 and joined the Brothers' community in 1686. There is a possibility that he might have been secretary to Brother Barthélémy in Paris, in the years 1711/1712 and 1713/1714. Brother John Jacquot or Jacot, born in 1672 was at rue Neuve in Rheims in 1686. He was recorded in the Grenoble community lists as the Brother Director from 1713 to 1715¹⁴. These two Brothers were numbered among the twelve who made perpetual vows with Monsieur de La Salle in 1694. Brother Paul Narra, born in 1677, was a member of the rue Princesse community from the age of 10/11 (according to the *Catalogue*¹⁵). He made his novitiate in 1695 and pronounced his perpetual vows in 1699. As to the years 1711 – 1713, no document exists to show where he was. All we know is that, in 1717, he was a member of the Rheims community. He died in 1751. For the period 1711 – 1713, these four Brothers were the oldest in the Institute. Three of them had been members of the Institute practically since the beginning in Rheims; the fourth was known from close to the beginning of the school in the rue Princesse. All four likewise participated in the foundational years 1691 – 1702 when “to live in society to conduct schools” became a reality which proved successful.

Quite a group of Brothers can be classified as belonging to a second generation. These joined the Institute in the closing years of the 17th century. Charles Frappet (Brother Thomas) joined the Brothers in 1690 and was most certainly the first of the Serving Brothers. John Boucqueton (Brother John Francis) who joined in 1691 made perpetual vows in 1696. In 1711 – 1713, he was probably the Director of the community of Saint-Denis. John Police (Brother Philip), after entering in 1692, made perpetual vows in 1699. We know for certain that he was Director of the Moulins community in 1716. Poncelet Thisieux (Brother Ponce) made perpetual vows in 1696. After a period as Director of the Mende community he became Visitor for the Brothers of the South of France, while, at the same time being Director of the Avignon community. He left the Institute, most probably in 1713, taking with him some of the community funds! François Blin (Brother Ambrose) joined in 1693 and made his perpetual profession in 1695. He was in Paris in 1704, then at St Yon in 1716, where he was principal in charge of Junior Boarders. John Le Roux joined the Institute in 1697 and made his vows “for life” in 1700. From 1711 to 1713 he was at Troyes, then in Rheims as Visitor of the Brothers in the North of France (with the exception of Paris). All the above Brothers were born after 1670 and were active in their work about 1711 – 1713.

About ten other Brothers born between 1672 and 1684 entered the Institute in 1700. The majority of them were in active ministry in 1711 – 1713. For the period 1701 to 1705, we find twenty-five Brothers and thirty for the years 1706 to 1709. Joseph Truffet (Brother Barthélémy), born in 1678, joined the Institute in 1703 after trying the monastic life at La Trappe. He made perpetual profession in 1705 and became the Director of the St Yon novitiate. He went with it to Paris when

¹⁴ See Br Felix-Paul FSC. THE LETTERS OF SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE. Critical edition. Procure Générale, Paris, 1954, p.218. Note 3.

¹⁵ Brother Maurice Auguste. Cahier Lasallien 3. *The vows of the Brothers of the Christian Schools before the Bull of Benedict XIII*, p. 33

the novitiate was relocated because of the 1709 famine. In 1711 – 1713 he was at rue Barouillère. He was not responsible for the communities of the South, since Monsieur de La Salle himself went to this region where, moreover, a Visitor (Brother Ponce) had that office; as for the North of France (excluding Paris), Brother Joseph was the Visitor. This latter was responsible for the Paris novitiate and for the community of Brothers in rue Barouillère at a difficult time – made so because of the parish priest of St Sulpice, and of church and civil authorities following the condemnation of his Superior. Furthermore, his authority over the Brothers was not upheld by positive action on the part of John Baptist de La Salle.

Guillaume Samson (Brother Timothy) as born in 1682, joined the Institute in 1700 and made perpetual profession in 1703. He was Director at Mende in 1711, then summoned to Marseilles in December 1712 by John Baptist de La Salle to take charge of the novitiate that had just been established in that city. When all the novices left, Brother Timothy met with Monsieur de LaSalle at Mende. In 1714, Brother Timothy was at Avignon, where, on behalf of the Founder he welcomed the former lieutenant of the Royal-Champagne regiment, Claude François du Lac de Montisambert, who became Brother Irénée. Brother Timothy was also the Visitor of the communities of the South replacing Brother Ponce who had fled the Institute¹⁶.

The generation gap existing between John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers of 1711 was very distinct. It was even more accentuated with regard to the Brothers living in France at the time. Among these latter, only John Patois and John Jacquot made their vows with John Baptist de La Salle in 1694 and chose him as their Superior on 7th June 1694¹⁷. A few Brothers, Paul Narra and about ten others had lived through the growth of the Institute from the days of the rue Princesse, through its struggles for autonomy from the demands of Saint Sulpice between 1694 and 1702, and from those of the corporation of Writing Masters and the Grand-Precentor of Paris, who was responsible for the Little Schools, until the days of the move to St Yon. How was the remembrance of all that experienced among the Brothers, for example by Br Barthelémy who was, in fact, responsible for the Paris community, but who had only recently joined the Institute? He had had quite a different human, ecclesiastical and spiritual training from that of the majority of the Brothers. How was this experience evaluated when important choices had to be made? The Brothers promised indeed “to live in society to keep together and by association gratuitous schools”, but what was their common memory of this? What consequences did they envisage from their reading of the history of events? Were they aware of the radical novelty they had introduced into the Church when they expressed their religious consecration by a new and distinctive vow formula? We shall see, later on, that the answer could not but be strongly nuanced.

The Clément affair and its consequences

Blain explains this affair starting, he says, from the memoir justifying his conduct penned by Monsieur de La Salle himself:

I have before me the memorandum which, before he took to flight, De La Salle wrote about this entire episode in order to justify his conduct. I need only to summarize it; we cannot have a more faithful witness to the truth.¹⁸

A young cleric¹⁹, 22 or 23 years of age, wanted to devote some of his income to good works

¹⁶ For information regarding the first Brothers see Augustine Loes: The First De La Salle Brothers. 1681 – 1719. 1999. Christian Brothers Conference. USA.

¹⁷ Brother Gabriel Drolin was in Rome.

¹⁸ Blain II (CL 8), p.72. Eng. Vol 2, p.85.

¹⁹ The cleric John Charles Clément was the son of Julien Clément, the ennobled surgeon of Louis XIV. He was not a priest, but had received the clerical tonsure in order to receive the revenue from an ecclesiastical benefice, in this

connected with education. His interest and his seriousness seemed to have impressed John Baptist de la Salle, who after a year of meetings and conversations with him²⁰, undertook to work at setting up a new Training College for Country Schoolmasters. It was to be set up at Saint-Denis where there was already a community of two Brothers. Saint-Denis was near Paris but outside the city. In those days it was a big village of a few hundred inhabitants grouped behind solid walls around the monastery of Saint Denis and the burial ground of the kings of France. John Baptist de La Salle, because the Institute had no legal existence, invested the funds with a third party: Monsieur Rogier, one of his friends. The Training College started in 1709. Three Brothers worked at training the schoolmasters and Clément devoted himself to a boarding house for boys, which was part of his project. The archbishop of Paris knew all about it, and even obtained from the duke of Maine (legitimised bastard son of Louis XIV) exemption for the house from billeting soldiers.

In February 1711, (even though it was still in the depths of winter), Monsieur de La Salle set out for the South of France, to visit the Brothers' communities in the South of the country. He entrusted responsibility for the local communities to Brother Barthélémy, the Director of the novitiate. But he was called back urgently to Paris. Abbé Clément's father, who had just been granted nobility, had brought an action against Monsieur de La Salle accusing him of suborning his son, a minor²¹, to extort money from him. The accusation was extremely serious, and either Monsieur de La Salle dealt with it in the wrong way in defending himself, or his opponent received hidden support, or maybe the enemies of the work of the Christian Schools were mixed up in it. The signs of a probable condemnation were obvious:

Still, so as not to be open to the reproach of having abandoned God's cause and of allowing it to be shamefully betrayed by the one who was the real author of the whole undertaking without opening his mouth to defend himself, he entrusted to several persons enjoying influence and authority a number of documents which established his own innocence – a memorandum and 13 letters from the young Clément. He asked them in their charity to see to it that justice was done him.

It has always been believed that what these persons did was to send these papers to be examined by some lawyers who were connected with the opponents of the Servant of God. For in the report they drew up and forwarded to those who had consulted them, they gave their opinions not like advocates but like declared enemies of De La Salle. The outcome of this consultation was entirely in conformity with the petition presented to the civil lieutenant. When this report was sent to De La Salle, he was indeed amazed at finding adversaries where he had hoped to find friends and defenders.²².

Further on, in the same chapter, Blain tried to analyse the causes of the malfunctionings in the manner of conducting the case:

The Servant of God, surprised at such a rapid judgment, was even more amazed that his case had been abandoned by the persons whose protection he had implored. It is certain that if they had wished to appear and take in hand the cause of the holy priest, they could have spared him this blow. Their influence would at least have shielded him from disgrace if it could not win for him a favorable judgment

Was it due to malice or to negligence that those whom he had chosen as his defenders abandoned him to such unjust treatment? It is not for us to judge. But it is a fact that their minds, too, were made up in advance, and that they were in contact with the one who wished to get the Servant of God out of Paris. Why, then, one may ask, did De La Salle place in their hands the documents which would

instance the revenue from the abbey of Saint Calais (in the department of la Sarthe, in the 17th century called le Maine). Subsequently Clément would come to a bad end being compromised in deals involving counterfeit money. He was stripped of his nobility and condemned to the galleys.

²⁰ Blain II. (CL 8), p.p. 72 to 76. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p. 85-89.

²¹ During the Ancien Régime, paternal authority was exercised up to the age of twenty-five for girls and thirty for boys. The age of majority was twenty-five. Only the king became an adult at 13.

²² Blain II, (CL 8), p.77. Eng. Vol. 2, p.91.

have established his innocence? Because, lacking all other help and support, he had no one else willing to speak for him.

He hoped that prejudice might yield to charity on this occasion, and that such worthy men (for the persons whose assistance he had requested were indeed such) would set aside all human views to uphold the cause of God.²³

He spoke also of “the malignancy of his lawyers” and “the laziness of his protectors”²⁴. He especially detected a tactic “of his hidden enemy” who, for a long time, had been wanting to banish him from the leadership of, at least, the Paris community in such a way that it would depend completely on the parish priest of Saint Sulpice and be separated from the other communities outside the capital. Blain is somewhat loathe to speak about that situation, partly because the plot was difficult to prove and unravel, but also because Saint Sulpice (the parish and the Company) was anything but Jansenist. Whence came all the circumlocutions in speaking of that “hidden enemy” who, although on the “right side” for Blain, did not hesitate to hatch dark plots against his hero, including pushing for a dishonourable and insulting condemnation. What is clear is that John Baptist de La Salle had enemies who, it seems, wanted to take control over a part of his work to make it serve their own plans.

One of the immediate results of those events was the ruin of the third attempt at creating a Training College for Country Schoolmasters. Now, very early on, John Baptist de La Salle thought of a country equivalent to his urban schools taking into account the characteristics of that environment: the link with the parish priest, the smaller number of pupils, the loneliness, the seasonal nature of school activity and the tasks to be done in the parish. An institution of this kind existed, first of all, in Rheims. It disappeared when Monsieur de La Salle was in Paris, at the latest in 1691-1692, since the Founder sent the Masters to replace the Brothers in the schools in order to give the latter a lengthy time of spiritual formation in the Novitiate at Vaugirard. Likewise, it could be an indication that this first Training College had fulfilled its purpose and had met the requests of all those parish priests of the Rheims archdiocese who desired a schoolmaster for their parish. In 1689, in the *Memoir on the Habit*, John Baptist de La Salle presents that Training College as one of the elements of his Community:

They also conduct a normal school for schoolmasters destined for the rural areas in a house distinct from the community residence and which is called a seminary. These candidates remain several years in residence until they are formed to piety and to the other necessary subjects of their apostolate; they are instructed thoroughly in chant and in reading and in penmanship; board, lodging and laundry are supplied gratis; following their training they are placed in some hamlet or village to perform the offices usually reserved to clerics. As soon as they are placed, they sever all connection with the society except those of goodwill and gratitude: they are permitted to return, however, to make retreats at the seminary. They wear clothes customarily worn by secular people, except that they are black or dark brown. Furthermore, they wear a rabat and keep their hair closely cropped.

(From *LA SALLE Patron of all teachers* by Edward A Fitzpatrick, Appendix 1, p.190.)

A second attempt was made in 1699, in the parish of Saint Hippolyte, in Paris, in the Saint-Marcel working class area. Brother Nicholas Vuyart was in charge. The difficulties with the parish priest of Saint Sulpice encountered by John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers in Paris beginning in 1702, then the sentence with heavy fines on Monsieur de La Salle and all the Brothers in the schools in Paris - so including Brother Nicholas Vuyart - in the conflict with the Writing Masters in 1704, led that Brother to dissociate himself from Monsieur de La Salle by declaring his independence from the community of the Christian Schools. He hoped that, thereby, he would escape the sentence. Certain persons who had been supporting the Training College for Country Schoolmasters then

²³ Blain II. (CL 8), p.78. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p.91 & 92.

²⁴ Blain II. (CL 8), p.79. Eng. Vol. 2, p.92.

withdrew and the work collapsed. Nevertheless, Nicholas Vuyart continued to run the gratuitous schools in the parish of Saint Hippolyte until his death. When the young abbé Clément began to call on John Baptist de La Salle in 1707, the latter presented him with a “memoir” in which the training of Country Schoolmasters was presented as one purpose of the Institute²⁵.

Another result of the condemnation in the Clément lawsuit, was the hasty departure of Monsieur de La Salle from Paris. He resumed the visit he had had to interrupt and left for the South during the first week of Lent 1712 (in February, so still in winter). This departure enabled him to escape the arrest which the conviction included. But a serious lack of tact by Brother Barthélémy created deep misunderstanding between Monsieur de La Salle and the Brothers, when he sent by post the text of the judgment of the court of the Châtelet condemning the Founder.

After the departure of the Servant of God, the Brothers received two summonses: one from Rogier, who had gone over to the other side although he had been John Baptist’s intimate friend, and the other from Clément’s father. In both of these documents De La Salle was treated with extreme discourtesy. In particular, they made it a point to call him “a priest of the diocese of Rheims”, and “superior of the Brothers of the said house”, not “superior of the Brothers of Paris and Saint-Denis”. All these expressions revealed the evident collusion between his legal adversaries and his great enemy²⁶.

As, apparently, Brother Barthélémy did not correct this title by an accompanying letter, John Baptist de La Salle thought, according to Blain’s interpretation, that he was playing his “enemy’s” game and that he was rejecting him:

What affected the Founder most keenly was that he imagined that all the Brothers in Paris were on his enemy’s side. It was a false impression because the Brothers in Paris, during his absence, remained in his regard what they had been when he was present among them: obedient, and inviolably attached to his person. What gave him this impression was the fact that Brother Barthélémy, thinking that it was the correct thing to do, had forwarded to him the two summonses in which the holy Founder was addressed as “superior of the Brothers in Rheims”, not Paris. Such terms, which could have been dictated only by his rival, made him wonder about the fidelity of his disciples in Paris and fear that they might have already given in to the intrigues of his enemy. For, as he said to himself, “Why send me these documents couched in such terms, if not to hint that they no longer consider me as their superior?” His suspicion was ill-founded. Brother Barthélémy had sent him the papers in all straightforwardness, thinking that he should let him know what was going on in his absence²⁷.

There seems to have been some breakdown between Monsieur de La Salle and the Brothers. We are in the affective realm with such words as: “affected... imagined... impression... wonder...”. Regarding him, without reacting, as “the Superior of the Brothers in Rheims” and not of the others, but especially of those in Paris, was to deny all that had happened since 1688, and their coming to rue Princesse; all that had taken place in 1694 with the vows and the election of the Superior by the twelve Brothers, the choices made in 1702 and then in 1706 to defend the autonomy of the Institute against the parish priest of Saint Sulpice. It was to send John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers back to the proposal, in 1687, made by the archbishop of Rheims, His Grace Archbishop Le Tellier, to fund the young community, on condition that it limited itself to his diocese, and which they had rejected.

It was really the “to live in Society” of the vow formula that was under attack. The mutual misunderstanding was undoubtedly increased by generational differences, and thus of mentality,

²⁵ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 73. Eng. Vol. 2 p.85. See also on the subject of Training Colleges for Country Schoolmasters: Henri BÉDEL. *ORIGINES, 1651-1726*, p.p. 68, 98-99 and 117.

²⁶ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 79. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 93.

²⁷ Blain II (CL 8), p. 79. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 93.

between John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers, which we have recalled above. There was a whole “real-life experience” of Monsieur de La Salle that eluded Brother Barthélémy. The latter could not imagine what the apparent wiping out of 25 years of the life of the Founder meant, when, he agreed, without protest, to let him be referred to as “Superior of the Brothers in Rheims”.

John Baptist de La Salle “no longer wished to correspond with Brother Barthélémy who, he thought, had gone over to his adversary’s party, and wished to receive his letters only to betray him under this appearance of confidence”²⁸. In other words, there was no longer any intuitive understanding between the Founder and the one “responsible”, in fact, for the Paris communities. It was a very upsetting situation for Brother Barthélémy, but one which said much about the embarrassment filling John Baptist de La Salle in his relations with the Brothers.

Travels in the South of France

Leaving Paris during the first week of Lent 1712, John Baptist de La Salle reached Avignon at the end of Lent. He continued on his way visiting the communities of Alès and les Vans in the heart of Camisard territory. He made his way to Mende, then went back to les Vans from thence to Uzès – the community of les Vans depended on the bishop of that town. He called again at Alès and finally reached Marseilles²⁹. Blain emphasises the dangerous nature of that trek, not only because of the Protestant rebellion, but also because of the mountainous nature of the region and its severe climate. Thus, Blain speaking of the route from les Vans to Mende wrote (we are referring to the month of May or June 1712):

That part of the journey was dangerous and difficult for him; more than once he risked his life on the way through the rugged mountains of Gévaudan with their treacherous precipices. He endured stinging and bitter cold with the result that when he arrived in Mende his health had suffered.³⁰

John Baptist de La Salle realised that it was a question of a region somewhat different from the one he knew to the north of the Loire: in landscapes and climate but also in social customs, mental attitudes and language. Was it not rather Blain’s feelings that were being expressed (from some distance in time and space) or was Monsieur de La Salle giving his impressions after the events?

The local dialects were different: those of Mende, of the Cévennes, were forms of the langue d’oc [of the south], the language of Marseilles was Provençal, which was somewhat related to Italian or Piedmontese. In Paris, Rheims and Rouen, the people generally spoke a language similar to the langue d’oïl [language of the north]. The Brothers even when they were in regions where the langue d’oc was prevalent would always teach in the medium of the langue d’oïl. Nowhere is there any trace of a manual, syllabary, catechism or reader printed in the southern French medieval dialects. Furthermore, the rules of pronunciation and examples given in the *Management of Christian Schools* or in the *Rules of Politeness and Christian Civility* were given in the language of educated town dwellers, namely the langue d’oïl. This northern French was, moreover, spoken more or less by the important people in the towns of the South (frequently bi-lingual), and in proportion as you went down the social ladder, you would encounter all gradations in the practice of both languages to the sole langue d’oc. John Baptist de La Salle was nonetheless aware that there could be problems in this matter of language, since he proposed the setting up of a novitiate especially for this region:

... to establish a novitiate to train local candidates, who would be better able to labour in their home territory than others who did not know the spirit and customs of the area, and whose inclinations and

²⁸ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 80. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 93.

²⁹ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 80. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 98.

³⁰ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 80. Awe at mountain landscapes appeared in France only at the very end of the XVIIIth century and for a long time remained merely a matter of considerable literary interest.

even language were quite different³¹.

Thanks to the financial assistance and interest of certain ecclesiastics and important citizens of Marseilles, a novitiate was opened in that city while a new impetus was given to a plan for the opening of several Christian Schools³².

Up to this point, John Baptist's travels proved rather fruitful. Blain, in his account of de La Salle's journeying in the South and in Marseilles, emphasised the Founder's meetings with the Brothers, their communities and his desire to acquaint himself with their mission and to encourage them therein, especially where it proved particularly difficult, as for example in the Cévennes where the Brothers were educating the children of Protestants. He also met with those responsible for local Churches: bishops and parish priests. He was happy to hear them speak so positively of the Brothers' mission. The welcome he received at Marseilles, if it seemed, without a doubt, too effusive, gave him the opportunity to implant the Institute in a different France. Blain's account would suggest that de La Salle's approach was nevertheless cautious. Was it the cultural reserve of a northerner in contrast to a southerner's outgoing nature, or, more profoundly, the spiritual clear-headedness of a person who knows the cost of doing God's work and building for the future?

Monsieur de La Salle alone felt some reservations over such rapid success and feared to see everything buried underneath the ruins of such fine beginnings. The reason was that he did not see the work as founded on the rock of Calvary and hence he wondered whether it would last. Enlightened as he was in the ways of God, he had learned from his own experience and from that of the Saints that undertakings which are not founded on the Cross and which are launched without difficulties either do not disturb the devil very much or do not last very long.

Thus he did not venture to let full joy occupy his heart, fearing that the present success would dissolve in the misfortunes that a near future might bring. He feared lest some secret motive, hidden under a mask of apparent devotion, might have taken the place of genuine charity and might have inspired the notable zeal which seemed to animate some of his backers. As he saw it, that would have been enough to cause the project to fail. God does not bless what is not done for His sake³³.

Blain used expressions such as 'have reservations', 'feared' (three times), 'did not venture', and 'hidden under a mask'. Above all, John Baptist's relationships with the Brothers in Paris had not been reconciled. He corresponded with the Director of St. Yon Novitiate³⁴, but is silent in relation to the other Brothers:

...he revealed his presence as little as possible, and left unanswered all the letters from the Brothers which reached him from all sides.

He did so because he believed that the Institute's best interests required that he give up all such contacts, so that the enemies might not turn against the Brothers the resentment that they could no longer vent on him personally. Moreover, under the mistaken impression that the Brothers in Paris had not been faithful to him, he did not know whom to trust³⁵.

To explain this attitude, Blain speaks not only of prudence in order not to have his enemies rage against the Brothers, but also of suspicion towards the Paris Brothers who "had failed in loyalty to him". There was, therefore, a personal bond between himself and some Brothers (Brothers who were important to him) that remained broken. "He no longer knew whom he could trust", concluded the biographer. Finally, then, if the course of events seemed splendid, the situation was the same as when he left Paris at the end of the first week of Lent 1712. The rift between himself and the Brothers remained, John Baptist de La Salle had not recovered confidence in his "associates". I

³¹ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 84. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 98.

³² Blain II. (CL 8), p. 85. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 98.

³³ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 84. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 99.

³⁴ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 85. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 101.

³⁵ Blain II. (CL 8), p.85. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 100.

even believe that, for better (or for worse), he did not want to recover it. This is what explained his silence and his refusal to correspond with the Brothers in the North.

The crisis in Marseilles³⁶: “*he had come to Provence only to destroy...*”

Without actually being able to establish the order of events, nor how long the developments took, one of the first difficulties was the relations that existed between the Brothers who ran the Marseilles school and the novitiate. Indeed, once the novitiate began, John Baptist de La Salle demanded that the two Brothers “attend the exercises of the novitiate every day”³⁷. Perhaps the “every day” is an exaggeration on the part of the two teachers to bring the School’s founders to their side, for previously Blain had written: “he had them come to him from time to time”³⁸. Whatever was the case, the two Brothers coped badly with that pressure. However, that is what used to happen in Vaugirard and in the Grand’Maison, for the Brothers in Paris, as well as at Saint Yon, for the Brothers in Rouen.

Blain might go on about the malice, the lukewarmness, the laxity, etc., of those two Brothers (referred to as two children of Belial³⁹) but, we are, it seems, faced with a conflict between generations. John Baptist de La Salle, without any doubt, was not aware of the changes in the way of thinking of his Brothers, and that what was acceptable for the men of his generation or for the Brothers at the start of the Institute in Rheims or in Paris, was no longer so for those people who belonged to the new century. Those Brothers could no longer recognise themselves in what was practised in former days.

It was a surprising thing for someone who was used to exercising strong authority that the two Brothers could gain what they wanted thanks to the support of the founders of their school. They remained in their school, in opposition to the will of their Superior, who had had to give in. A particular view of obedience and authority was called into question. It was also the first obvious sign of the discrepancy existing between the practice of the Rule in the novitiate and what was practised in the school communities, revealing a sort of schizophrenia between life in the Houses of Formation and the real life of the Brothers. That was a constant phenomenon, repeated throughout the history of the Institute.

Blain’s reading of the religious and intellectual situation in Marseilles in terms of the conflict between the Jansenists and those who were “orthodox” might offer a radical justification for the departure of John Baptist de La Salle, but it does not do justice to the complexity of the Marseilles situation. There was a contest for influence and power in which Monsieur de La Salle was sidelined.

³⁶ It will be noticed that, in his account, Blain never used the name “Marseilles”. He called it “the City”. That did not add to the clarity of his account! Likewise, he did not mention the name of any person, ecclesiastical or civil, in the City. It could be thought that chapter 10 of Book 3 of his biography is, for the most part, the author’s intellectual and ‘literary’ reconstruction, from a distance of 20 years, and without having direct knowledge of the places, the persons or the facts. His chronology for 1712 is very difficult to follow: John Baptist de La Salle, leaving Paris during the first week of Lent 1712, reached Avignon at the end of Lent. Then, he passed to and fro between Alès, les Vans and Mende and ended up in Marseilles. There he sparked off the enthusiastic welcome of which we spoke, a novitiate was planned, set up and opened; a Jesuit priest who was the Lenten preacher in one of the large parishes in Marseilles launched the project of a second Christian School in Marseilles and things were being organised. At the same time (but which time?) the two Brothers who were running the Marseilles school grew tired of having to go normally to the novitiate – this indicates that it had already been operating for some time. But the intrigues to withdraw from the hands of the Brothers the school that was planned, but not yet set up, began “as soon as the Jesuit had finished his sermon” (Blain II, p.88. Eng. Vol.2 p. 103). Moreover, a few lines previously, Blain pointed out that “everything was ready”, and “the holy Founder had been advised to call in the Brothers who would take charge of the school” (Blain II, p. 87. Eng. Vol. 2, p.103)

³⁷ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 87. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 101.

³⁸ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 86. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 101.

³⁹ Blain II (CL 8), p. 87. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 102.

Bishop Belsunce⁴⁰, recently appointed (1709), was very well disposed towards Monsieur de La Salle and the Christian Schools, but “he had not yet had time to discern the spirits”⁴¹. Finally, the founders chose to entrust the new school to clerics who would also render services in the parish.

John Baptist de La Salle was then accused of being too strict on the novices, his pious practices met with disapproval as did the penances he imposed. Little by little, donors shut their purses, certain novices were urged to leave by people close to them and they complained about the severity of the Superior, which they found excessive. A scurrilous attack was made on him. The Founder attempted to answer it, but without success. The Brothers in the South of France were unsettled by those attacks. The novitiate collapsed through lack of subjects. Brother Ponce, Visitor of the communities in the South, left the Institute taking a tidy sum of money with him. The two Brothers in Marseilles told Monsieur de La Salle that “he had come to Provence only to destroy everything” instead of building things up⁴².

This is the context of his attempt to leave for Rome⁴³, and the well-known response of John Baptist de La Salle to the Brothers on seeing him come back to the house when they thought he was on the high seas, “God be blessed! Here I am back from Rome. It is not his will that I should go there. He wants me to busy myself with something else”. Beneath his religious and spiritual motives of visiting the centre of Christianity and expressing his fidelity to the Pope, it is possible to detect in this voyage a desire to flee from what was happening in Marseilles which was slipping away from him.

The accumulation of rebuffs, difficult relationships with several Brothers and the failure of projects made him “begin to ask himself whether his mission really was from God and whether a work that everyone opposed was not in fact the creation of his own spirit”⁴⁴. So, there was a man who was nearing the twilight of his life (he was 62 years of age, considered old at that time) who had done great things, led dozens of young men to follow him, saw several die on the job, struggled with the ecclesiastical, civil and corporatist powers to further what he thought was the work of God for the salvation of the children of artisans and the poor and was asking himself if he had missed the point of his life! Those reflections were painful and very unsettling. They cropped up after almost two difficult years which ended in failure. Moreover, harmonious relations with numerous Brothers who mattered for John Baptist de La Salle seemed shattered. With whom did he now live in Society? What was the impact of the vow of 1691? Of that of 1694?

He was also well aware that wanting to make a new start, “beginning his life again”, did not make sense. Belief in himself, belief in others, in the Brothers, belief in the Other, was affected. In other words spirituality, that which gives meaning and consistency to life was affected.

God spoke to him no more

In this existential distress, “God spoke to him no more”⁴⁵. The expression could be interpreted in two ways: God no longer spoke to him, or he no longer experienced the sweetness of God’s presence. John Baptist de La Salle was driven to seek pure faith, absolute trust. But was it possible to seek this state when God was silent? He chose to withdraw from society believing that his physical presence was basically the cause of the difficulties met with in Marseilles. He went to the

⁴⁰ In 1720, that bishop would be one of the heroes in the last plague epidemic known in France, an epidemic which started in Marseilles.

⁴¹ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 88. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 104.

⁴² Blain II. (CL 8), p. 93. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 109.

⁴³ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 93-94. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 110-111.

⁴⁴ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 96. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 113.

⁴⁵ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 96. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 114

convent of Saint Maximin (a Dominican convent) close to Saint Baume, a famous place of pilgrimage and of the hermitage where Mary Magdalen would have taken refuge.

So he withdrew to a hermitage some ten or 12 leagues from the city. There, elevated above himself and all the world, he found himself like a traveller on some lofty peak where winds and storms no longer swirl; and there he discovered a deep repose and sweet tranquillity. Occupied with God alone he forgot everything else. If his thoughts sometimes turned to his Brothers or his persecutors, it was to pray to God for them and to implore His Majesty to uphold the former and convert the latter. The injuries and outrages offered him had left in his soul no other traces but those that perfect charity inspires for enemies whom he loved in God and for God's sake. The saintly Founder had already begun to find his Mount Thabor in this desert; and like Peter he exclaimed: "Lord, it is good to be here!" He enjoyed such peace and calm that he would have wished to end his days in that spot, unknown to men; but he had not reached the end of his labours. God had others in store for him which would last to the end of his life."⁴⁶

On three or four more occasions, the Founder would experience that search for retreat, far from the world and life's vicissitudes, far from the cares of guiding an Institute, from Brothers and from having to confront those who opposed him. After that period at Saint Baume, at Mende where some worthy Sisters conducted an institution for the daughters of members of the Reformed sect, they suggested he stay with them as their chaplain. Blain says that it was here that "Brother Timothy found the holy Founder in a dwelling which Mademoiselle de Saint Denis had made ready for him and where he was living as if in a veritable desert"⁴⁷. When he was at Grenoble, he made a three-day visit to the Grande Chartreuse⁴⁸

Edified by the silence and recollection which reigned among these solitaries, his attraction for a retired life grew stronger than ever, and he would have wished to end his days among them. Among all the devotional places in the holy monastery that de La Salle visited, his heart was most charmed by the hermitage of Saint Bruno. His own associations with the saint touched him; and if he had followed his inclination, he would have been the second canon of Rheims who hid in a cleft of those rocks. He had to do violence to his piety in order to leave the place; but if he went away in body, his spirit remained behind.

What might also be mentioned, but the key was quite different, was the refuge he found "in the most retired room on the top floor of the house" where he devoted himself to mental prayer "that had no other measure than that of the day itself"⁴⁹. But the context at this stage was that of community life.

Finally, after submitting himself to a radical and painful treatment for the rheumatism that afflicted him, he went to convalesce in the home of a priest friend. This was Father Yse de Saléon living in the small village of Tullins, where, some distance away, on the hill of Parménie (Permeigne) the hermitage of Sister Louise was established⁵⁰. She was to be the one who would turn de La Salle away from the temptation to end his days as a hermit.

The holy priest admitted to her that he ardently longed to spend the rest of his days in solitude, which attracted him strongly so as not to have to think of anything except God and himself. *Such is not God's will,*" replied Louise. *"You must not abandon the family God has made you the father of. Labour is your lot; you must persevere in it to the end of your days, combining as you have done heretofore, the life of Magdalen with that of Martha.*

John Baptist de La Salle seemed to be seeking out his vocation, far removed from the Brothers, in

⁴⁶ Blain II. (CL 8). p. 97. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p. 114-115.

⁴⁷ Blain II. (CL 8), p.p. 98-99. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p. 116-117.

⁴⁸ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 100. Eng. Vol. 2, p.118.

⁴⁹ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 99. Eng. Vol. 2, p.117.

⁵⁰ Blain II. (CL 8), p.p. 103-105. Eng. Vol.2, p.p. 122-123.

solitude or rather in devoting himself “to the conversion of sinners”⁵¹. Sister Louise made him become aware that he had already found it: his place was in the midst of his Brothers.

Community and Mission, or finding God again

It was in the community at Grenoble that John Baptist de La Salle again found meaning in his life. It seems to have been a community where it was good to live:

From Mende, he went to Grenoble where he thought he had discovered a new heaven and a new earth in the oasis of profound peace he found there. The Brothers in Grenoble realised what a treasure they possessed and took advantage of his presence. Delighted at having with them the Father who had suffered so much persecution in Provence on account of more than one of his sons, not to mention outsiders, they tried by their kindness and attention to make him forget the sorrows he had suffered on account of the ingrates.

To show his appreciation the Founder resolved to remain with the Brothers at Grenoble as long as he could. Everything concurred in making him decide thus: the Brothers’ good dispositions, the peace which reigned among them, the solitude that enveloped their residence, and the hidden and retired life he led there.⁵²

The Brother Director of that community was, possibly, Brother John Jacquot, one of the signatories to the vows of 1694 and the act of election of June 1694, one of the loyal supporters from the beginnings in Rheims and Paris. That is the explanation. It seems that John Baptist de La Salle replaced in his class one of the Brother he sent on a mission to the communities in the North of France. That replacement was an opportunity for direct contact with the children of artisans and the poor and the specific mission of the Institute:

Thus one might have beheld this doctor, this ex-canon of Rheims, this founder of a Congregation showing himself honoured, taking pleasure, and considering it a duty to teach the children, to help the little ones learn the alphabet, to encourage the older ones to read and write, and to impart to all the rudiments of Christian doctrine. The way in which he fulfilled his duty showed clearly enough the joy he felt in fulfilling it and his assiduity in practising the different virtues which at every moment are called for in a classroom.

If he showed favouritism for any students, it was towards the poorest ones. His concern for them was manifested by the trouble he took to help them make progress in reading and writing; for, as he said, those were skills they badly needed. That was how his humility succeeded in masking his charity. His zeal in their regard made them his favourites again during the catechism lessons which he taught them every day. Again the students he singled out for special care were the most ignorant ones. Such children, usually abandoned to their natural stupidity or light-headedness by teachers lacking in zeal or charity, became the objects of his predilection and occasions for displaying his patience.

God blessed his efforts, showing that kind and paternal zeal finally succeeds and can work miracles even on the most limited intelligences. For he finally managed to teach them the truths of religion and to cause them to advance in reading and writing. This is an outstanding example which should be imitated by all those in charge of youth.⁵³

A certain number of the comments of the biographer on the attitudes of the teacher come straight from the pages of the *Conduct of Schools*: zeal, patience, the teacher’s gentleness, his attention to the poorest, the most ignorant, the most stupid, care brought to the Christian upbringing of children, the importance of basic learning – reading and writing, “these were skills they badly needed”. As for Blain’s conclusion, concerning the specific characteristics of a truly Christian school (or Lasallian – but that adjective was not used at that time!): “Unless one is on his guard, self-love can seek its satisfaction in a classroom as well as anywhere else, and then natural inclinations take over. One neglects the poorest, the most stupid and ignorant pupils, and those who are not naturally

⁵¹ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 97. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 115.

⁵² Blain II (CL 8), p. 99. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 117.

⁵³ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 101. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p. 119-120.

attractive, reserving his zeal for those who are agreeable to deal with” [Eng. Vol. 2, p. 120.]; it remains valid for all our educational centres these days!

The Founder’s continual prayer issued in work in the service of the Brothers and the schools, through the composition and revision of texts:

The only distraction he allowed himself was the composition of several works of piety for the instruction of youth and for the use of his disciples. He also revised the work, *Christian Duties*, and brought out a third, more accurate edition.⁵⁴

Blain concluded that passage by pointing out that calm had returned in the communities in Provence; that Monsieur de La Salle resumed relations with the Brothers by means of letters and the journeys of the Brothers Visitors.

A well-balanced community, carrying out well its mission to the children in Grenoble, a Brother Director who had been sharing the initiatives of John Baptist de La Salle for a long time, a very specific (and limited) mission among the children in the school in the parish of Saint Laurence, one which enabled him to make direct contact again with the reality of the Brothers’ employment, service for the benefit of the whole Institute and its mission through writing spiritual or practical works: that was how Monsieur de la Salle was again able to converse with the God who, some time before, was no longer saying anything to him

I promise and vow to unite myself and live in Society with... in order to...

So far we have examined the crisis experienced by John Baptist de La Salle in his dealing with a certain number of ecclesiastical or civil authorities, in his relationships with the Brothers, in his questioning of his role and position in what had become the Institute of the Brothers. It remains now to look at the other crisis which is still more essential for us Brothers and our associates at the present time: the crisis which the communities in Paris and its nearby region lived through, with the new approach to “living in community” that we are trying to set up.

“I promise and vow to unite myself and live in Society with... in order to...” We still pronounce this sentence from the 1694 formula⁵⁵. I would like to emphasise three aspects of this expression:

- it is an “I” who is speaking, a single person who is committing himself;
- this person wills “to unite himself and live”, these are verbs, actions, not a statute to be ratified after participation in a constituent assembly;
- it is a question of “living in Society”, which implies, at one and the same time, a permanent state and a kind of life lived in common or shared in this Society which again is not defined by statutes but by persons: “with”; and for a purpose: “to keep...”.

It was on this foundation set up in 1694 that the Institute, that is, John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers, would develop the future for “associates to keep together gratuitous schools”. “Association” is an abstract word with legal connotations, “associates” refers to living persons.

The beginnings of the crisis experienced by John Baptist de La Salle and the Institute from 1712, occurred in Paris. Blain devoted an entire chapter to “what took place in France during the absence of M. de La Salle”⁵⁶. In fact, he emphasised, in addition to the Clément affair, the problems of that period of the Institute’s history and pointed out how the Institute evolved to display a well-defined

⁵⁴ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 102. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 120. That corrected edition was rejected by the censors, and has not come down to us.

⁵⁵ Except that we no longer say, “and vow”.

⁵⁶ Blain II. (CL 8) Chapter XII. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 126...

image of itself.

The sudden departure of John Baptist de La Salle for the south of France in the course of the first week of Lent in 1712 left the Brothers in Paris without direction or guidance. Blain highlighted that situation, while admitting his own perplexity in the face of that attitude at the beginning of Chapter XII of Book 3 of his biography:

If we were permitted to judge the actions of the saints, who conform to principles so markedly different from those of other men and who often enough act outside the ordinary rules of human prudence because they are following the motions of the Holy Spirit, we might be tempted to blame the precipitate and hidden flight of de La Salle to Provence. It occasioned great turmoil in his Institute and came near bringing about its ruin.

It would seem, in fact, that before taking this resolution, or before leaving Paris, or at least after his arrival in Provence, the holy Founder should have informed the Brothers, let them know where they could write to him, have answered them, directed them by letters from his place of retirement, and, finally, appointed the one whom he felt best qualified to take his place in Paris, one whom the others would then have honoured as their superior in his absence.

John Baptist did none of these things. He went into hiding in the most distant provinces and did not want to let anyone know where he was going. He remained there unknown and did not reply to the letters he received from the Brothers. He did not even designate anyone to replace him during his absence. Finally, as far as the Brothers in France [i.e. the northern region, especially around Paris] were concerned, he showed no sign of life or movement, as though he were actually dead.⁵⁷

It is also known that the misunderstandings between himself and Brother Barthélémy led to a (temporary) loss of confidence by Monsieur de La Salle towards this Brother. Blain indicates four unfortunate results from Monsieur de La Salle's action:

The first of these was that, even though there did not arise among the Brothers any dispute, as had arisen among the Apostles, as to which of them was the greatest, there was uncertainty as to whom the Brothers should obey. De La Salle not having made this clear, there was no certain rule to follow on this point.

The second disorder which followed on the first was that in the absence of any clear authority a good many faults remained uncorrected, and thus the indocile remained unpunished. A third inconvenience was that a few Brothers, weak in virtue and wavering in their vocation, considered their state as uncertain and unstable and left it. Others suspecting that the holy Founder himself had abandoned the Institute, felt that they had a right to imitate his example. A fourth source of trouble was even more dangerous, for it gave rise to another form of government which de La Salle's rival, of whom we have so often spoken, finally managed to introduce into the Society.

The Institute seemed mortally stricken; undermined to its foundations, it threatened collapse. Its ruin had indeed begun, and it is a sort of miracle that it eventually managed to rise again with brighter prospects and greater success than ever.⁵⁸

The first three of these disorders concerned the internal life of the community and the relationships of its members towards one another. But the fourth disorder had a bearing on the very basis of its existence. It was question of a new society which jeopardised the choices made in 1694 (regarding the vows and election of the Superior). Later, Blain gave more precise detail as to "the rival's" outline of his proposed organisation:

The main points of his new organisation were these: (1) the Brothers should have superiors from outside the Community, men capable of directing them something like the external superior who directs nuns; (2) the house in Paris would form a separate entity and should depend entirely on the ecclesiastical superior; (3) the novitiate should be suppressed as a useless burden: it cost too much to educate and feed all the novices; moreover, there was no need for so many in Paris, since the Brothers should remain fixed in the schools where they taught, as will be explained below; (4) the

⁵⁷ Blain II. (CL 8), p.p. 107-108. Eng. Vol. 2 p.p. 126-127.

⁵⁸ Blain II. (CL 80), p. 108. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p.127-128.

Brothers should remain in one place and not be changed from house to house; (5) to fill the gaps of those who died or left or who had been dismissed for misconduct, it was proposed to have one, two, or three novices, more or less, in each house according to its revenue and personnel needs.⁵⁹

This system led to the withdrawal of each community from the overall united work to which it was committed and made such a community an agent for the exclusive service of the parish (or town) which gave it employment. This tended to make of the Society of the Christian Schools a series of as many small and separate entities as there were communities. The Institute, as a social body, was no longer at the service of “the Church” but rather at the service of the “local Churches” or parishes. Blain’s analysis explains the matter clearly:

In a word, the scheme tended to make of the Brothers’ Society a series of little splinter groups, lacking subjection to a common chief and depending on the local superiors, something like the many communities of schoolmistresses which are being multiplied in France today, and which each bishop establishes or allows to be established for his particular diocese.⁶⁰

It was true that that manner of functioning was, indeed, one of a number of possible ways that could be followed in the ecclesial and social system of that time. On several occasions, the Brothers had been tempted to follow that pattern (Rheims, in the 1702 crisis). But that was not the pattern they had chosen in 1694. In 1699, when bishop Godet des Marets asked Monsieur de La Salle to send Brothers to Chartres, hence outside the radius of action of the early community, (Rheims, Paris) it was decidedly “in association” that they planned to take that decisive step which was to lay down the rules for the future functioning of the Society:

Before promising to send any of his subjects to Chartres, the humble Superior wished to obtain the Brothers’ consent. So, he called them together and informed them of the illustrious prelate’s proposal; and after praising the latter’s eminent piety and ardent zeal for religion, he let them come to their own decision as they pleased.

The Brothers, conscious of the honour paid to them by a bishop whom the partisans of sound traditional doctrine honoured as the shield of the faith in France, vied with one another in offering themselves to their Superior for this mission.⁶¹

That process of an assembly of the community to decide the opening of a new community was exceptional. There was no further description of it in later accounts of biographers. John Baptist de La Salle was certainly cognisant of the novelty which the departure from well-known apostolic practices meant for a certain number of Brothers. From all that, they learned to consider themselves as Brothers for a universal mission rather than as Brothers restricted to the schools of a given parish.

Furthermore, the choice of an ecclesiastical superior for each community was contrary to the decision made by the twelve Brothers on 7th June 1694:

We also declare that it is our understanding that the present election will not have the force of a precedent for the future. Our intention is that after the said John Baptist de La Salle, and forever in the future, no one shall be received among us or chosen as Superior who is a priest, or has received Sacred Orders; and that we will not have or accept any Superior who has not associated himself with us and has not made vows like us and like all those who will be associated with us in the future. [Eng. Vol.1, p. 140.]

Blain commented quite accurately with regard to the changes introduced by Monsieur de La Salle’s “rival”:

Foreseeing that some such circumstance might arise, De La Salle had bound the Brothers, as we related above, to decide that after his death they would elect no one but one of themselves as superior. In doing so, what he had in mind when he wished to give up his position as superior, was to

⁵⁹ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 111. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 131.

⁶⁰ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 112. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 132.

⁶¹ Blain I. (CL 7), p. 370. Eng. Vol. 1, p. 165.

oblige the Brothers to choose someone from among their ranks to succeed him.

The point seemed so essential to De La Salle that he wished to see it put into effect while he lived, so that once he was dead there might not be any difficulty about it.⁶²

The oldest Brothers tried to counter those ongoing measures of the “rival”. They were quite happy at first with the status quo, as long as the so-called “Superior” did not act authoritatively. But this latter succeeded in having recorded in the community register the reality of his power as “Superior”. He was able to do that because of Brother Barthélémy’s timidity or of his lack of understanding or simply because he could not act otherwise:

“You call me your superior,” he told them one day, “but you should show concretely that I am really such.” And for fear that the Brothers might seem to misunderstand his words, he added that *he wanted a formal statement drawn up which, after being signed by the Brothers, would be included in the house register.* This was an important point, one which would affect the very essence of the Institute....

It was, therefore, very important that the Brothers not yield to the proposal made by their protector. We must blame the weakness of Brother Barthélémy in agreeing to it.⁶³

It must be remembered that Brother Barthélémy joined the Institute in 1703 when he was aged 25. He did secondary studies with the Jesuits in Douai, received the tonsure and studied theology. He tried religious life at the monastery of La Trappe under abbot de Rancé, then with the Canons Regular before entering the Brothers’ novitiate at the Grand’Maison. His formation and his perspectives were, as a result, somewhat different from those of the other Brothers. Furthermore, he had not lived through the decisive and valuable years 1691-1702 when the community had developed for itself a form both original and fruitful by means of a consecration to God and a search for sanctity through and for a mission viz. “to keep schools gratuitously”

As the “ecclesiastical Superior” argued that he was making important changes in the Institute’s organisation (in order to ensure his dominance in the Paris region since other communities in other dioceses were outside his jurisdiction) the Senior Brothers reacted by requesting that all Brothers be consulted⁶⁴. These Brothers likewise protested about the very basis of these arrangements, pointing out that they were contrary to what they had chosen to live:

A number of the principal Brothers, more enlightened than the others, more familiar with the nature of their Institute and with the right way of governing it, complained aloud about the new system, asserting that the service some people claimed to be doing the Society was really a mortal blow for it.

What, they asked is the purpose of this new type of arrangement that is being introduced? Do they want to deprive the Founder of the right to govern his Institute, so that when he returns he will find the doors of all the houses closed to him – houses that he himself founded! Is the idea merely to sustain the Brothers during his absence and keep them true to his spirit? To keep watch over the Institute, as it were, so that on his return he might find it just as he had left it? Do they want to give his creation a more appropriate form, correct its defects and consolidate its foundations? Or do they want to create a new Institute on the ruins of the old? No matter how these changes are presented, they still amount to pernicious novelties, born of malice or at least dreamed up by mistaken zeal.⁶⁵

The majority of local “Superiors” named in a circular letter that Brother Barthélémy sent to various houses (Blain was chosen for Rouen) worked to leave things as they were originally and contributed towards avoiding a fragmentation of the Institute. However, the risk remained, persons change, deaths can occur, which would upset the fragile balance. Some Brothers also no longer recognised that as their Institute and became troublesome. Some had to be expelled from the Society by an

⁶² Blain II. (CL 8), p. 113. Eng. Vol. 2, p.134.

⁶³ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 113. Eng. Vol. 2, p.134.

⁶⁴ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 114. Eng. Vol. 2, p.134.

⁶⁵ Blain II. (CL 8), p.p. 115-116. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p. 135-136.

assembly of “principal Brothers:

The principal Brothers resolved to make an example of them so that the scandal might not go any further. They had a meeting, therefore, and dismissed those proud religious who later on might have spread to others the mortal poison of their independent spirit and thus occasioned greater disorders⁶⁶

But matters had gone much further than Blain’s account in, Vol. 2, chapter 12 (of English translation) allowed us to see. An assembly of Brothers had even organised a revision of the Rule which had taken into account the changes described above. The Grand-Vicar of Paris given the responsibility of examining the draft, after studying the text for seven or eight months, returned it on 7th April, 1714, asking the Brothers (and the ecclesiastical Superior) to make no changes:

He kept the documents for seven or eight months. It was during this time that the troubles arose in Paris over the Constitution Unigenitus and cardinal de Noaille’s refusal to agree to it.

After all this, Vivant sent the documents back to de Brou with a letter, in which he stated: “His Eminence does not think that anything should be decided about this matter, or signed in his name, either with regard to the regulations themselves or the changes it has been proposed to make in them. He has full confidence in your wisdom for the good of the schools which you have charge of, and he feels sure that under such wise direction piety and peace will flourish in them⁶⁷

The form the Institute took after Monsieur de La Salle’s return and the subsequent election of Brother Barthélémy as the first Superior General of the Society was not therefore all that clear for many Brothers. The hesitation regarding the way in which the Institute should or could exist in the Church of that period remained. In the end, “the principal Brothers” of Paris, Versailles and Saint-Denis, the same, no doubt, who had taken part in the assembly where the propositions for the changes in the Rules and the government of the Institute had been put forward, spoke up and decided to send a letter drawn up by all of them to Monsieur de La Salle.

Thirty years on: the word of a community of consecrated men

Our very dear Father,

We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in view the greater glory of God, the greater good of the Church and our Society, recognise that it is of the utmost importance that you should again take up the care and general management of the holy work of God, which is also yours, since it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and to direct it for such a long time.

Everyone is convinced that God gave you and still gives you the graces and talents needed to govern properly this new Society which is so useful to the Church; and it is only proper for us to acknowledge that you have always governed it with much success and edification.

This is why we very humbly beseech you and command you in the name and on behalf of the Body of this Society to which you have promised obedience, to resume without delay the general management of our Society.

In testimony of which we have signed.

Done at Paris this first day of April, 1714. We are with most profound respect, our dear Father, your humble and obedient inferiors. [From Arnandez. Vol. 2, p.p. 139-140]

At the start and at the end of the story of the founding of the Brothers, there is found a ‘word’ of the Brothers (the Masters) which challenged Monsieur de La Salle. In 1683 or 1684, it was the Masters who challenged the young canon: it is easy to talk of abandonment to Providence when you are well off... and John Baptist responded by standing with them in their poverty without any possibility of turning back. Thirty years on the Brothers again provoked the Founder to be one with them, to the very end, in the name of the road they had covered together.

According to Blain, the text we are reading is the second version of the Brothers’ letter. He explained himself like this in the *Short life of Brother Barthélémy, First Superior General of the*

⁶⁶ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 111. Eng. Vol. 2, p.p. 130-131.

⁶⁷ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 149. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 176.

Monsieur de La Salle whom the letter of the Brothers in Paris, Saint-Denis and Versailles had recalled to Paris, kept on declining to take up again the government of the Society saying that to compel him to do so the Brothers in Provence would have to give proof in writing that they gave their consent. Brother Barthélémy wrote to those Brothers to inform them of the matter and enclosed in his letter a copy of the one from the Brothers in Paris which had caused Monsieur de La Salle to return, so that all the Brothers of those cantons might sign it. There were only a few changes in the wording. In place of *we beseech you to come back* there were the words *we beseech you to resume the management of our Society*. The Brothers in Provence having received the letter signed it and sent it back to Paris straight away.

So, the original letter simply said “we beseech you to come back” instead of “we beseech you to resume the management of our Society”. This wording enables us to understand the reaction of John Baptist de La Salle, reported by Blain, when the Founder arrived at the community in rue Barouillière on 10th August, 1714: “Here I am; what do you want of me?”⁶⁹

Letter, 1st of April 1714: a rhetoric reading

- A. Sir, our very dear Father. We, the principal brothers of the Christian Schools
- B. having in view the greater glory of God,
- C. the greater good of the Church and of our Society, believe that it is of the utmost importance that you take up again the care and overall direction of the holy work of God which is also yours,
- D. since it pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and conduct it for such a long time.

We are all convinced

- D'. that God has given you and continues to give you the grace and qualities necessary to govern
- C'. this new company well, which is of such great use to the Church, and that it is just that we should state that you have always directed it with much success and edification.
- B'. This is why, Sir, we beg you very humbly, and we order you in the name and on the behalf of the body of the Society to which you have promised obedience, to take up responsibility again immediately for the overall government of our Society.
- A'. In virtue of which we have signed. Done at Paris, this first of April 1714, and, with the deepest respect, we are, Sir and our very dear Father, your very humble and obedient inferiors, etc.

Our very dear Father, we, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools,.../... In testimony of which we have signed. Done in Paris, this first day of April, 1714. We are, with the most profound respect, our dear Father, your humble and obedient inferiors.

At the beginning and the end of the letter are found: “**Our dear Father**”. The context is that of human relationships and is within them. Those who are contacting John Baptist de La Salle are **the principal Brothers**... This is a category that has no formal existence, but which nevertheless all the Brothers can identify. They are likewise the **obedient inferiors**, in virtue of the vow of 1694. **We**, recalls the vow of 1691, which uses **we** in addressing God. However, none of these “principal Brothers” made that vow. Brother Nicholas Vuyart has withdrawn, Brother Gabriel Drolin is in Rome and Monsieur de La Salle is the recipient of the letter. Throughout the letter, the community

⁶⁸ Blain ‘Short Life’. (CL 8), p.19. [The English version is my translation. J.W.]

⁶⁹ Blain II, (CL 8), p. 120. Eng. Vol. 2, p. 142.

aspect is recalled by the systematic use of the first person plural. “We” or “our” occurs nine times. It is also recalled by **Society**, twice, as well as **company**, and **body of the Society**. The word Community is not used.

This is a summary of the relationships between the Brothers and John Baptist de La Salle. It was an affectionate relationship, an awareness of being a body, of being committed, co-responsible for the future of this community; an hierarchical relationship, founded on faith and confidence in the one who is the **Father**. This is because they are associated for a Mission. It should be remembered that the 1694 formula of vows listed the names of those associated.

Having in view the greater glory of God.../... This is why we very humbly beseech you and command you in the name and on behalf of the Body of this Society to which you have promised obedience, to resume without delay the general management of our Society.

Mentioning **the greater glory** of God takes us back to the Mission: **the glory of God** is not our glory or our educational triumphs or our successes, but the victories of God in the lives of the young people entrusted to us. The **glory of God** is ahead of us and makes us look to the future.

Expressions such as “**the greater glory of God, in the name and on behalf of the Body of the Society to which you have promised obedience**” constitute an internalised reading of the vow formula pronounced together in 1694. They took Monsieur de La Salle back to it. The vow constituted the Community, the “associates”, as a body of consecrated men in social terms. Behind it there is a whole history experienced together, what they have discerned, then shared over the years, in Rheims first of all and above all in Paris and Rouen. Their ‘word’ sparkles with the story of their community consecration and the shared experience of the ministry of salvation lived out by the Institute. For **Society** is an obvious reminder of “associated for...” That is how they live, that is how they are consecrated, to run schools, to do the work of God, to collaborate in his plan for salvation, for the young people and consequently for themselves.

We also know to what extent **the glory of God** has numerous harmonics in the spirituality and the expression of the Lasallian project. The glory of God is that all men be saved, that they be holy, that they be completely for God, that they achieve knowledge of the truth about God, knowledge of his mysteries, in particular of the gift that God has given us in Jesus Christ.

* You must...have the love and the glory of God as your single aim in teaching these children. (MR 201.2)

* Let your zeal give tangible proof that you love those whom God has entrusted to you as Jesus Christ has loved his church. Help them to enter truly into the structure of this building and be able one day to come before Jesus Christ full of glory, without stain or wrinkle or blemish. In this way God will be able to display to the ages that are to come the great wealth of his favour to them, which he accomplished by procuring them the help of education. It is for you to give them this education and training, so that they may become heirs of the kingdom of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord. (MR 201.2)

* ...to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next. (MR 201.3)

The glory of God finds the means to see and act (“procure” it) in the lives of human beings. These are the sites of the History of Salvation today. Especially does it find the means to see and act in the Christian Schools, through the ministry of those whom God has chosen to do his work:

God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God. (MR 194.1)

The glory of God is tied to gratuity, for the gift of faith (in which teaching is offered free of charge)

is also gratuitous. The Brothers have integrated into their vision of their vocation the words and spirit of the formula of vows: they are its words which come to them when they wish to express their relationship with John Baptist de La Salle and give a context to their connection with him.

That is why: still the formula of vows. The glory of God leads to a concrete commitment. They make their own this profound Lasallian perspective. It is the link between the thrust towards God which comes from God, with its realisation in the web of daily life, in the story of the Christian Schools, in their community experience.

...the greater good of the Church and our Society, [we] recognise that it is of the utmost importance that you should again take up the care and general management of the holy work of God, which is also yours.../...which is so useful to the Church; and it is only proper for us to acknowledge that you have always governed it with much success and edification.

The Brothers emphasise the place of their Community in the ministry of the Church: **“...the greater good of the Church and our Society”** (this new company) **“which is so useful to the Church”**. The Brothers’ Community is not independent of the Church. It has its place in the collaborative work of salvation. The Church is the place and the means by which God wished to remain present to men. The Church is another essential Lasallian theme:

- * The Task of Teaching Youth is one of the Most Necessary in the Church. (MR 199, Title).
- * How to Make your Ministry Useful to the Church. (MR 200, Title).

The employment, the ministry useful to the Church, the greater good; such is the concern for the instruction of youth in the way this Society, this new company, set it up under the guidance of John Baptist de La Salle. For the **“holy work of God”**, more important than looking after the company, is the instruction of youth. Again take note that **“to take care, to be careful to, to be entrusted, to conduct, the work of God, his work”**, are characteristic expressions in the Lasallian vocabulary. **“So useful for the Church, the greater good of the Church”**, are described at length in MR 199 & 200:

- * You lay the foundation of the building of the Church when you instruct children in the mystery of the most Holy Trinity and the mysteries accomplished by Jesus Christ when he was on earth... to be chosen by her (the Church) for such a holy and exalted work, to procure for children the knowledge of our religion and the Christian spirit. (MR 199.1)
- * That is why Jesus Christ has sent you and why the Church, whose ministers you are, commissions you (to announce the Gospel of the Kingdom of God). (MR 199.2)
- * That is why you must have an altogether special esteem for the Christian education and teaching of children, since it is the means of helping them become true children of God and citizens of heaven. Such teaching is the very foundation and support of their religion and of all the other good that takes place in the church. (MR 199.3)
- * Consider that you are working in your ministry for the building up of the Church through your teaching of the children whom God has entrusted to your care. These children are becoming part of the structure whose foundation was laid by the Apostles. For this reason you must fulfil your ministry as the Apostles fulfilled theirs...
You are the successors to the Apostles in their task of catechising and teaching the poor. If you want to make your ministry as useful to the Church as it can be, you must teach catechism every day, helping your disciples to learn the basic truths of our religion. (MR 200.1)

The Founder’s ministry

The specific ministry of John Baptist de La Salle was not quite the same as that of the Brothers. His ministry was directed towards the animation and life of the Community or Society; for them, as for

us in our day, the ministry is directed towards the Christian School (Christian education), a salvific ministry integrated with the Church's ministry.

In situating God's work, John Baptist de La Salle's ministry, within the Church, the Brothers understand the place of their ministry and their existence as a Society. It is within the Church which is the instrument in time and place of God's Salvation History, and which is on-going. The Brothers would say to Monsieur de La Salle that for him as well as for them the existence of their Community can not be separated from the Church's mission. They regard themselves as part of the Church where in the faith, God speaks, acts, takes up his people's cause and constitutes them as a redeemed People.

This is the work that is "**the holy work of God**". The charism and ministry of John Baptist de La Salle for the Community and the charisms and ministries in which the Brothers engage when they attend to the needs of youth, of the Church and of their Community, are all one. The Brothers looking at their development together see and proclaim the place as well as the determining role of John Baptist de La Salle as the executor of God's plan: this "**holy work of God which is also yours, you have always carried out with much success and edification**". They were fully aware of the vocation of the Founder and Mentor of the Brothers and of the way in which he had lived this vocation with and for them

Since it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and direct it for such a long time.../... and since God gave you and still gives you the graces and talents needed to govern properly this new Society.

What John Baptist de La Salle had lived through was understood as the **holy work of God**. God was present in this life. He was the beginning and end of it: **the greater glory of God, the holy work of God, it has pleased God to make use of you, God has given and still gives you...** God is present in this work, in this History, in this society.

To establish it and to direct it for such a long time, the talents needed to govern properly: these are the gifts that God granted to John Baptist de La Salle so that he should carry out his work in the Church **for this new Society**, for the benefit and good of the Church. The Brothers emphasise the length and permanent nature of this gift of God: **over such a long period God has given you and still gives you the graces**. Again we must turn to the Meditations for the Time of Retreat in order to find out how and why God acts:

- * God desires all to be taught this knowledge, that their minds may be enlightened by the light of faith. (MR 193.1)
- * In his Providential care... God has called you to this ministry... (MR 193.2)
- * God has made you his ministers... (MR 193.3)
- * He has had the goodness to call upon you to procure such an important advantage for children. (MR 194.1)
- * You are the ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself. (MR 195.2)
- * Jesus Christ has chosen you among so many others to be his co-operators in the salvation of souls. (MR 196.2)
- * It is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the gospel to them and to bring them up in the spirit of religion...this is the work of God. (MR 201.1).

The link, established by John Baptist de La Salle in his Meditations between the active ministry of

the Brothers and the active presence of God in his work, is seen by the Brothers in the work of their Founder. The establishment of the Society of the Brothers is understood as a salvific act in which God speaks and allows himself to be seen.

Everyone is convinced

At the very heart of this letter was the Community restating its fundamental confidence in the presence of God in the work accomplished by Monsieur de La Salle over such a long period. The confidence came from what had been lived together, for what was yet to be lived, in the view that the community was part of the Church, that it was useful in building up the Kingdom.

The Brothers were convinced that God had been present and was still present in this enterprise; that John Baptist de La Salle had responded faithfully to what God asked of him. He had known how to listen to him, to recognise his appeals in the situation of the poor, to hear his voice in that of the children of artisans and the poor; how to find suitable and coherent responses for this plan. It was in a spirit of faith that he responded, discerning God's hand in this story of the community of the Christian Schools, with the men who were united with him.

Throughout the letter, the Brothers showed they had profoundly understood the spiritual teaching and vision of their Father, as well as the adventure they had lived with him for more than thirty years. Frequently, their manner of writing was very much akin to that of the Meditations for Retreat and of different vow formulas. If the Brothers used this form of expression, it was because they were in close union of mind and heart with John Baptist de La Salle; it was the same language that they had used throughout their journeying together and their community sharing. And thus Monsieur de La Salle would continue to find his way again in their manner of living, speaking, praying, thinking, understanding and re-reading the action of God in the Christian Schools and in their Society.

God led John Baptist de La Salle into the desert and Monsieur de La Salle discovered him again in the Promised Land of the Community, in Grenoble, and in the letter of the Brothers in Paris. The word of the Community shed light on his life. As a result of this, roles were somewhat reversed. Those who were enlightened by him in their lives now did the same in the life of the Founder. So well had they assimilated the plan of salvation they had lived with him that their word could become a sign.

John Baptist de La Salle had doubted his own efforts when he saw that all his attempts throughout his life to establish the Institute seemed to have come to nothing. Those efforts of his had been directed towards bringing into existence the Society, which seemed to have broken apart. The Brothers had made a vow of association and the Society was breaking up into independent community groups. Even more seriously, the rapport between John Baptist de La Salle and several Brothers appeared to have disintegrated, as well as the overall work they had, up to that time, accomplished by their united efforts. He had tried to be a true Father to his Brothers, and had reached a stage where he was led to believe he was incapable of governing, being rejected by them. But, lo and behold, the Institute came to exist in its own right: the members assembled on their own initiative, the Society was alive, it willed to confront the problems facing it. This was evidenced by their taking up the 'word'. The association stood firm; it was in its own name that the Brothers came together; they relied on association to recall their Founder. The Community was capable of re-reading its History, with him, and to tell it back to him. It was capable of understanding its own commitment, and the unique commitment of the Founder as a ministry given by God.

He was not alone. He was still one of their number. The Brothers following in the footsteps of John Baptist de La Salle, read their History from a mystical point of view: God, his plan, his action, his will. They understood how the Founder had corresponded therewith. It was his plan, his action, his way of seeing God's will and being disposed to obey it. They said that, in reality, God's work was being done in this Society, by John Baptist de La Salle and by what they had accomplished and still wanted to accomplish in union with him. God was present in their individual histories as in the common history of their Society. This history was also a history of salvation within the Church.

Bringing to its conclusion the *holy work of God* confided to me

The crisis which swept through the Institute during this period affected the very person Monsieur de La Salle was, in his relations with himself, with the Brothers and with God, as well as the relations of the Brothers amongst themselves. Likewise, it had implications for the pastoral landscape of the Church of the time as well as for contemporary society.

In the course of those three years John Baptist learnt to "let go". He became aware of the discrepancy in ways of thinking, between himself and several Brothers. He had to learn that the Institute was not "his thing", to learn to live without it and in peace. He came through the trial having learned the place and style of relationships with himself, with others and with the Other, which would enable him to bring to its conclusion the work of God that had been entrusted to him.

It is certain that the internal wounds he felt and which might have been revealed in his silence with regard to several Brothers, were not healed. When Blain wrote his biography, more than twenty years after the events and when he questioned the Brothers he had an inkling of what the latter felt during that time. And it was recorded that their questions remained:

No doubt a man as wise and enlightened as he must have had very serious reasons for acting in this manner, but it is not possible for us to guess what these reasons were.

Did he want to accustom the Brothers to get along without him, and thus to oblige them finally to choose one of their number for their superior, a thing they had never wanted to do while he was among them? Perhaps he carried humility and the low esteem he entertained of himself to the point of considering himself as a source of malediction and the cause of the troubles which constantly beset the Congregation. Perhaps he thought that some of his own disciples had gone over to his enemies and that he could no longer trust anyone. Perhaps, finally, he wished to persuade his adversaries that he no longer intervened in the government of his Institute, hoping thereby to disarm their ill-will.

Whatever may be the truth about this matter, for we are reduced to mere conjectures, **de La Salle never having wished to give any explanations on this score**, although he was frequently asked to do so, his precipitate and hidden flight gave rise to several difficulties which followed.⁷⁰

He "never wished to give any explanation on this score". So, he departed with his wound and his mystery.

With the Brothers, including those he suspected of going over to "his enemy", relationships had again become trusting. It has been seen to what extent the letter of 1st April 1714 was a veritable mirror of his experience of God. He now knew that that experience had passed to his Brothers.

The role of the Community (the one in Grenoble, but also the one in Paris together with the letter of the "principal Brothers") must be emphasised in the revival of equilibrium experienced by John Baptist de La Salle. The dimension of ministry in his involvement with the young people in Grenoble, and on behalf of the Brothers through quite a labour of writing with them in mind (the revision of the *Duties of a Christian*), is also essential.

⁷⁰ Blain II. (CL 8), p. 108. Eng. Vol 2, p. 127.

The Brothers, from different generations and with different experiences, somewhat from the nature of things, learned to work together, to imagine their future, and, obviously, made some mistakes in their efforts. It is striking to note how often in Blain's biography, he tells us that the Brothers in Paris met to make a decision, to evaluate, to discuss and to write... In a certain manner, they ratified and, as it were 'owned', the commitments of 1691 and 1694.

The person of Brother Barthélémy stands out firmer and more clear-sighted about what was at stake in the decisions to be taken to give the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools its full scope. Undoubtedly, he also absorbed into his experience of God the complete newness of "uniting myself and living in Society, with... in order to...".

The "body of the Society" realised that "to unite and live in Society" was the key to its future. It was by deepening and living this feature of its commitments that it had found salvation. The Institute was now ready to put into practice the decision of 7th June 1694: to choose a Superior from among its members, someone who "would have been associated with and would have made vows with them". It was also ready to take on the particular spirituality which animated John Baptist de La Salle, and which he had transmitted to them and continued to transmit, throughout his life. That experience of God had become their own; it has become ours.

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