John Baptist de La Salle: The Educator and Visionary

Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the declaration that John Baptist de La Salle is the Patron of All Teachers of Youth

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May 15, 2000, was the 50th anniversary of the day on which the Catholic Church declared that John Baptist de La Salle is “principal patron before God of all teachers of children and adolescents.” The Church holds him up “in order that teachers and student-teachers might have a model whose example and virtues they could imitate…” What are those virtues? What is that example? Why is De La Salle not only a model for Christian educators but also recognized by secular historians of education for his innovative and effective contributions?

Education in De La Salle’s World

To appreciate him properly we need to know a little about the educational environment in which he worked. We might assume that a holy man who provides education for the poor would be welcome in any society. But in a class-conscious, and highly regulated society like that of 17th-century France such a man may step on many toes. De La Salle, as he went about creating a type of schooling for boys from the neglected poor and working class that had not been seen before, crossed social boundaries, upset established educational groups, and affronted certain conventions, both within the church and within society. He was neither a loud and vocal revolutionary nor a reformer with an abstract program of his own devising. He was an unassuming, quiet French upper-class gentleman, a cultivated priest and doctor of theology, who found God moving him to care in concrete ways for the education and salvation of the underclass, the working poor, and the ones whom Jesus had called “the least of these.” Gradually he became, step by step, and somewhat to his own surprise, an educational pioneer.

Educational opportunities in 17th-century France were not lacking – for the right people. Those who could pay and who were socially connected could find educational opportunities, beginning with tutors and moving on to apprenticeships or further schooling opportunities. And those who provided education carefully guarded their domains, often amid lawsuits that decided who could teach what to whom. Though the age of science and commerce was beginning to dawn, higher education still had a medieval shape and flavor to it: university instruction was wholly in Latin, and the curricula of the lower schools were largely literary and Latin-based – hardly appropriate for the needs of artisans and laborers and the working poor. The bureaucracies...
Cesare Mariani’s painting of the Founder teaching class. On the occasion of the beatification of St. John Baptist de La Salle in 1888, the Institute presented the painting to Pope Leo XIII. The painting has been on display from time to time in the Vatican Museum and in the Motherhouse in Rome.
overseeing all this were intricate and formidable, with crown, church, city, and guilds overlapping and sometimes competing with one another with regard to their rights, regulations and requirements.

The education of those who could afford to pay nothing was to be covered by individual parishes — with some private schoolmasters (in theory) taking on poor students out of a sense of social responsibility. Each parish had its Poor Register, and parishes were urged to maintain "charity schools" for the children of the families on that register. But the very name "charity school" shows that, for the poor, education was a matter of charity, not a matter of course, and certainly not a right. The necessity of being registered also meant that the poor were officially segregated in their schooling. The chronic poverty of this clientele was another major handicap, even with the best educational opportunity. The minor fees required for writing materials and the like were beyond the reach of many families, and if a child could work and bring the family any income at all, school attendance was likely to take second place, with a typical pupil being able to squeeze in a couple of years of attendance. Finally, by its nature, a parish charity school was only as effective as the zeal of the parish and the skill of the pastor could make it, as pastors came and went and charity waxed and waned.

But the most chronic problem was the lack of competent and stable teachers for these parish schools. A person who could read and write and do arithmetic well enough to be an effective teacher was also qualified to "do something better". In general, the profession of schoolmaster was seen neither as a profession nor as a vocation; it was neither well-paid nor well-respected. In the parishes, the schoolmaster was also likely to be either an assistant to the pastor who took care of the practical details of parish life and had a minimal amount of teaching, or a tradesman who could read and write, but who put the children to work making salable items to reduce the cost to the parish of the school and to increase his own income. There might be a little catechism, a little reading or counting, and a little manual labor, with discipline scant and truancy high.

None of this was De La Salle's concern. He was not a teacher, not a school administrator, and not a parish priest. He held a prestigious office as a canon of the cathedral at Reims, and was administrator of his family's wealth and guardian of his orphaned siblings. How did he get involved in education of the poor? In response to a request in a friend's will, he helped a new congregation of teaching Sisters to establish itself in Reims. Then, out of simple charity, he gave advice and help to a man from out of town who had come to Reims to establish a charity school for boys. Soon a second school for boys was started, and De La Salle, finding that the provided funds were not sufficient to maintain the teachers, contributed some of his own money to their upkeep. When the teachers grew too numerous for the parish house where they lived, De La Salle rented a house for them near his own.

From his occasional visits and increasing involvement with them, he could see that this handful of hastily gathered men was far from satisfactory as a group of schoolmasters. In addition to
Whenever something unexpected occurred in De La Salle’s life, his response often began with the exclamation “God be blessed!” Whether he was in pain, had failed somewhere, or received a gift, this exclamation remained. On many occasions, the words “God be blessed!” were tied to events or situations that demonstrated to him that God’s provident care was clearly leading him on.

People of Influence in John Baptist de La Salle’s Life

Jean-Jacques Olier (1608 – 1657): Although De La Salle was only six years old when Olier died, he nevertheless had a powerful influence in De La Salle’s life through the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. Olier was a loyal and devoted religious and dedicated teacher in a very simple rented house at an undistinguished address in a decidedly poor part of town.

Within five years of this move, the community had adopted a title (Brothers of the Christian Schools) and distinctive clothing (neither “secular” nor “clerical” in style), and vowed obedience to the community. They staffed a number of charity schools, found more young people interested in joining them in this work, and ran a training center for lay teachers sent to them from rural parishes. They were also being asked to come to other cities, including Paris.

Nicolas Roland (1642 – 1678): A fellow canon of the Cathedral of Reims, Roland was De La Salle’s spiritual director after De La Salle’s parents died and he had to leave the seminary to care for his family. Roland guided De La Salle for six years until De La Salle’s ordination to the priesthood. He founded the Sisters of the Child Jesus for educating young girls and had a strong commitment to educating the poor, and hoped that De La Salle would become involved in the education of poor boys.

Adrian Nyel (1621 – 1687): A layman from the diocese of Laon, he was responsible for the schools for the poor in Rouen and trained teachers for that work. In 1679, he came to Reims to establish a similar work there. With the help of De La Salle, he established several such parish schools. Over time, he became less involved with the teachers and the schools while De La Salle became more involved. In 1685 Nyel returned to Rouen to resume his work for the poor of that city, a consecration for life that he had made in 1637.
John Baptist de La Salle maintained a deep appreciation for the restorative power of gardens. His father had rented a garden for the family to use, and De La Salle himself would find gardens for the Brothers to use for prayer and relaxation, if their house did not have a garden attached to it. In one letter De La Salle writes about a Bishop’s request, “He wants to install us in the house of Saint Vincent’s, which will be quite inconvenient, since it has neither courtyard nor garden.” He realized through his own experience that gardens were a privileged means of restoring one’s capacity for the difficult work that the Brothers did each day in the school.
"The teacher will take great care to see that all read quietly what the reader is reading aloud. From time to time, the teacher will make some of them read a few words in passing, surprising them and finding out if they are following attentively... If the teacher notices that some of them do not like to follow, or more easily or more frequently neglect to do so, the teacher will be careful to make them read last, and even several different times, a little each time, so that the others may also have the time to read."

— FROM DE LA SALLE'S BOOK THE CONDUCT OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

What Made These Schools so Unusual and Desirable?

ORDER AND FOCUS. The Brothers brought discipline, order, and focus where there was slackness or chaos. Many a charity school that the Brothers took over had no fixed class schedule, variable school hours, students coming and going at will, no regular prayer or uniform religious instruction, scanty discipline, and excessive attention to manual arts. The Brothers brought a fixed class schedule, daily catechism, regular prayer, fixed arrival and departure times, daily attendance at Mass, and effective instruction in reading and arithmetic.

APPROPRIATE CURRICULUM. They devised a curriculum appropriate to the needs of these particular students. De La Salle saw that what was needed was a curriculum that would provide the most benefit to the poor during the short time they were able to spend in school. They received effective training in basic academic skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic), social skills (politeness, leadership, and cooperation), and instruction and involvement in the Catholic faith (catechism, daily prayer schedule, and regular Mass attendance).

A COMMUNITY OF STABLE AND COMPETENT TEACHERS. Most importantly, the Brothers answered the crying need for stable and competent teachers who were trained to their task and dedicated to their students. The job of charity school teacher was not more prestigious or better paid than it had been some years earlier. However, in the Brothers’ schools the teaching was done by men who worked as a community and in association, neither for prestige nor for pay but for the glory of God, the salvation of the poor, and the fulfillment of their vocation as part of a community. The presence of such devoted teachers was just what had been lacking to make effective education for the poor and working class a genuine possibility.

GOSPEL VALUES. De La Salle advised the teachers: “Since you have been called to teach the poor, strive to find Christ in the faces of the poor children you teach. The more you love them, the more will Christ work for you.” The perennially surprising truth, which De La Salle and the Brothers embodied anew, is that Gospel values, when truly lived, reverse the accepted values of society. Thus, De La Salle’s directive to the Brothers: “Regard your students as the children of God himself. Have much more care for their education and for their instruction than you would have for the children of a king.”

The success of the schools, however, brought challenges and difficulties. Because the Brothers’ schools were well-run and effective, they quickly became popular outside the rolls of the “certified poor.” De La Salle established an innovative policy on admissions, no one would be denied admission and education in the “Christian Schools” would be free to all. This novel openness led the syndicates of schoolteachers and guilds of writing masters to see the Brothers as competitors depriving them of fee-paying clientele. There were lawsuits, complaints to ecclesiastical and civil authorities, harassment, even vandalism. A significant amount of De La Salle’s energy for twenty years was taken up defending the work of the Brothers — not always successfully — against well-connected opponents. He also had to defend the work against powerful and well-meaning “friends,” many of them in the Church: bishops who wished to make the Institute an agency of the diocese, pastors who wanted the Brothers under parochial control, various clerics who wished to meddle not only with the Brothers’ educational work but also with their governance, their rule, and even their way of dressing. Although ever reluctant to become involved in lawsuits and public controversies,
The students will be supplied with ink.

For this purpose, there will be as many inkwells as possible.
They will be made of lead, so that they cannot be overturned. One will be placed between each two students... There will be only ink and no cotton in these inkwells.
The ink will be supplied gratuitously.

- From De La Salle's book The Conduct of Christian Schools

De La Salle was untiring in defending the Brothers' autonomy as a community.

Love for Students. Perhaps De La Salle's most fundamental contribution to education is his conviction that at the root of true teaching must lie an authentic love for the students and for the vocation of teaching. He grasped that a truly effective teacher-student relationship must be based on practical affection and mutual respect. In his writings for the Brothers, he pointed out again and again how such a relationship is enacted day by day. Some examples: "Examine before God how you are acting in your ministry and whether you are failing in any of your responsibilities. Come to know yourself just as you are." "Do you have charity and tenderness toward the poor children whom you have to instruct? Do you avail yourself of the affection they have for you to attract them to God? If you show them the firmness of a father, you should also show the tenderness of a mother in gathering them together, and in doing them all the good in your power." "By love and patience, win over the hearts of those whom you teach."

Pedagogy. The method of teaching developed by De La Salle and the Brothers was based on both an abiding respect for the students and a realistic assessment of what they needed to become mature members of society and the church. Along with well-organized practical lessons taught in common, there was instruction in social manners and a host of classroom responsibilities, from ink-distributor to key-keeper to bell-ringer to prayer-leader. The teachers seldom spoke, except when asking a question or when, once a day, they shared a "reflection" on some religious theme in order to inspire the students and speak to them "from the heart to the heart." Each day, there was a catechism lesson and many opportunities for prayer, from the prayer said upon entering the classroom to the singing of a hymn (set to some popular tune) at the end of the day. Daily Mass attendance was expected, and at each hour of the day, the bell-ringer would stop all activity for the prayer "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.
Throughout the school, an atmosphere of respectful silence was maintained, as testified to by an account of a visit to one of the schools: "Their surprise increased when, on entering, they beheld the Brother amid this multitude of light-headed pupils, all as quiet as if they were an audience listening to the sermon of an eloquent preacher. Struck by such a novel spectacle, they stayed for hours, motionless and attentive, hearing the children read, watching the signs of the Brother correcting their mistakes, and admire the order and silence which reigned there."

The Brothers' schools became places where the young were able to develop intellectually, socially, and spiritually, where they were able to determine where and how to advance in their capacities, and where they experienced an affection and respect not commonly bestowed on the young by the general society of the time.

Conclusion. De La Salle's intervention in the French educational system was truly and quietly revolutionary, thanks to two fundamental contributions. First, he revealed that teaching has a religious as well as a human dimension and that divine love is at the heart of all teaching. Second, he guided into being a stable community of Brothers vowing to associate together for the purpose of keeping schools for the poor. For good reasons, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, with its essentially independent, non-clerical character and its mission-based, communal ministry of education, has been recognized by historians as a unique addition to the history of education. De La Salle's other contributions to education were many and varied, and have had enduring effects on all primary and secondary education.
De La Salle and the Brothers were devoted to the work of educating the poor and the working class, but they did not become attached to buildings or places or even specific schools. During the forty years that De La Salle was involved in this enterprise, some 60 schools were established or taken on. By the end of his life, 37 of these schools were still being run by the Brothers. Most of the schools the Brothers operated were schools they had taken over from others, not schools they had started from scratch. De La Salle’s genius lay in organizing the schools, training and supervising teachers, and adapting various educational methodologies, thereby generally doing well what was being done poorly by others.

People of Influence in John Baptist de La Salle’s Life

Nicholas Barré (1621 – 1686): A religious priest of the Order of Minims, a talented preacher, and a professor of theology in Paris and Rouen, Barré was one of De La Salle’s spiritual guides after the death of Nicholas Rolan. He was the founder of several religious orders of women for the education of girls. Barré advised De La Salle to have the teachers live with him in his house and, later, advised him to distribute his wealth to the poor, and to rely solely on God’s Providence – as De La Salle had so often advised his teachers to do.

Charles-Maurice Le Tellier (1641 – 1710): Archbishop of Reims from 1671, he ordained John Baptist de La Salle to the priesthood (April 9, 1678). Well-connected (his father was chancellor to King Louis XIV) and hot-tempered, the archbishop had several encounters with the Founder. De La Salle sought out, and eventually received, permission from him to renounce his office of canons, live in poverty with his Brothers, and finally to leave the Diocese of Reims and extend the work of the Brothers into Paris.

Charles Demia (1637 – 1698): A priest of the Diocese of Lyons, he organized the Seminary of Saint Charles for the training of both priests and school-teachers. Very interested in schools for the poor, Demia founded an order of Sisters for the education of girls, was responsible for creating a school board in Lyons, and wrote a public treatise called Remonstrances in which he drew attention to the problem of education for the poor. His writings roused public opinion and encouraged many people to become involved in education.

Louis Tronson (1622 – 1700): The senior spiritual director at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, Louis Tronson had a great influence on De La Salle with his regular conferences, his extensive writings on seminary life, and his series of published meditations. He was a leading figure at the seminary and later became its superior. Tronson continued to provide guidance to De La Salle after he left the seminary, especially when De La Salle came to establish the Brothers in Paris and found himself in confrontation with the views and ideas of the Parisian clergy.

John Baptist de La Salle’s Written Works

For the schools:
The Conduct of Christian Schools (in manuscript form until 1720)
Exercises of Piety for the Use of the Christian Schools (1686)
Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass (1698)
Teaching French Syllables (1696)
How to Go to Confession (1698)
Prayers for Confession and Communion (ca. 1698)
The Rules of Christian Politeness and Civility (1702)
Spiritual Exercises for the Use of the Christian Schools (1703)
The Duties of a Christian (1703)
Christian Public Worship (Volume III of The Duties, 1703)
David’s Psalter and the Office of Our Lady (1706)

For the Brothers’ Community:
The Common Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1705 and 1718)
The Collection of Short Treatises for the Use of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1705, printed in 1711)
The Rule of the Brother Director of a House of the Institute
Meditations for All the Sundays of the Year and for the Principal Feasts of the Year
Meditations for the Time of the Retreat
Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer

© Signs of Faith - De La Salle Christian Brothers - Diocesan of San Francisco
"When the students begin to write, it will be useful and appropriate to give them a stick of the thickness of a pen to hold. On the sticks, there will be three grooves, two on the right and one on the left. These grooves indicate the places where the three fingers should be placed. This teaches the students to hold the pen properly in their fingers and makes them hold these three fingers in a good position."

- From De La Salle's book The Conduct of Christian Schools

De La Salle
the Educational Pioneer

Practical curriculum. The curriculum addressed the practical needs and realistic options of the poor. The charity school students were not university-bound or headed for the seminary. The average student in a charity school could not stay more than two or three years, since by age fourteen many of them would have to be at work. Each subject area sought to be as practical as possible. Catechism lessons came from texts that De La Salle wrote, including Duties of a Christian, How to Go to Confession, and the like. The major reading text on politeness was written in a formal cursive script that the students would encounter in society. Writing was practiced with agreements, contracts, and the like. Simple mathematics focused on the French monetary system. Students were grouped by ability, and teachers made sure that a student had mastered one level before moving to the next.

French not Latin. It was customary to teach spelling and reading with Latin words rather than with French ones. But De La Salle saw that the charity school students needed facility in reading and writing the everyday language of business, commerce, and catechism, not a language that they would little use. De La Salle had to explain and defend the Brothers' policy of instruction in the vernacular. He also wrote Teaching French Syllables to teach reading in the native tongue. This syllabary still was widely used in French primary schools for 150 years after his death and is credited by French historians as one contributing reason for the eventual standardization of French pronunciation throughout the country.

Simultaneous method of instruction. It had been customary for teachers to engage one student at a time in a classroom of dozens of students. While the rustily occupied themselves, or worked at some minor trade to supplant the teacher's income, one student would be called up to the teacher for one-on-one recitation. De La Salle did away with this inefficient method. The Brothers' new method was to divide a large class into small groups according to their level of learning and to involve whole groups in the lesson. De La Salle wrote instructions on how to involve the whole class by posing questions and subquestions and by having one student repeat or correct another's answer. The goal was to engage every student every day in as many ways as possible.

Teacher Training. "To teach," wrote De La Salle, "you must first know." He not only established pedagogical training for the Brothers but also created...
"At each hour of the day, some short prayers will be said. These will help the teachers to recollect themselves and recall the presence of God; it will serve to accustom the students to think of God from time to time and to offer God all their actions, and so to draw upon themselves God's blessing."

— FROM DE LA SALLE’S BOOK THE CONDUCT OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

centers for the training of lay teachers who would serve in rural parish schools. Country priests begged De La Salle to send just one Brother to each charity schools, but De La Salle would never send fewer than two, since two is a minimal community and Brothers lived and labored in community. Instead, he took in young men sent by the parish as soon as they showed them as teachers, for free, before sending them back to their parishes. He founded three separate training institutes for rural school-teachers over a thirty-year period. Each closed after a short time either because of lawsuits by superiors in the educational establishment or because local needs had been fulfilled. But they were quite diverse, and historians credit De La Salle with pioneering teacher-training schools in France.

**Psychological Observation.** De La Salle wrote, "All minds are not attracted in the same way and it is necessary to know how to deal with each in order to lead it to give itself over to the task." De La Salle and the Brothers studied each child's capability, character, and needs, and passed their notes on to the next teacher when the student moved on. This sort of psychological observation became widespread in the 18th and 19th centuries and is now habitual. Thanks in part to such observations, the modern concept of "childhood" as a distinct phase of growth has gradually come to be common wisdom. An example of one such note: "Francis Delevieux: 8 1/2, two years at school, in 3rd section of Writing since July 1st. Somewhat turbulent; little piety at church or prayers unless supervised. Lacks reserve. Conduct satisfactory; needs encouragement to effort; punishment of no avail; light-headed. Rarely absent except when with bad companions; often late. Application moderate but he learns with ease. Twice nearly sent down for negligence. Submissive to a strong hand. Not a difficult character. Must be won over. Spoilt at home. Parents resent his being punished."

**Bending Social Barriers.** In their charity schools the Brothers charged nothing, accepted no gifts, and allowed no distinctions between those who could afford to pay and those who could not. De La Salle instructed the school inspectors: "Have books for every lesson, with as many as necessary for the poor who have none of their own. There should also be enough writing paper for the impoverished writers who have none of their own." He repeatedly told the Brothers: "Be conscious of the poor, and try to overcome the tendency to give more attention to those better off than to those who have less." As more children of families who were better off came into the schools, boys from bourgeois families studied, played, and prayed with poor boys, and vice versa.

**Civility and Manners.** The first reading book assigned to students of sufficient skill was a book that De La Salle wrote, titled The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility. De La Salle wanted his pupils to learn how to act in the larger world. As the Brothers taught the boys reading and religion and math, so they taught them social and civil virtues, virtues very much De La Salle's own — politeness, fairness, self-control, graciousness, prudence, and self-discipline. This book, like his French speller, was republished many times in the succeeding two centuries and was widely used even outside the Brothers' schools.
New Types of Schools

**Technical Secondary School:** The traditional Latin school, with its conventional literary curriculum, did not offer the technical and scientific courses that the energetic and growing class of lower bourgeoisie (shopkeepers, merchants, artisans, draftsmen) wanted for their children. At the request of such parents, De La Salle started a boarding school at Saint Yon that offered courses in geography, bookkeeping, accounting, architecture, mechanics, music, and more. This has been identified by historians as a forerunner of the modern secondary school.

**Homes for Troubled Youth:** At Saint Yon, De La Salle started a school specifically for difficult and refractory boys who in modern terms would be called juvenile delinquents and wards of the court. As their behavior and skills improved, they were able to join the normal curriculum. So good were the results with juveniles that De La Salle, at the request of the President of the regional Parliament, or judicial court, opened a similar facility for certain adults who for various reasons were ordered confined by the courts. These effective programs of rehabilitation through education were, as one historian puts it, "two centuries ahead of their time." Notably, De La Salle was known throughout his life as an effective confessor for "hardened sinners" and in his retirement at Saint Yon he spent much of his time both with the novices, teaching them about prayer, and with these hard cases, teaching them about God through his presence and conversation.

Statue of De La Salle by Lejeune, placed in Reims in 1951 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of his birth.