

The Lasallian Heritage Series

The Beginnings of our Lasallian Heritage

An Introduction and Purpose of the Series

As we approach the completion of our first month of school and settle into the rhythm of the school year, I would like to introduce you to *The Lasallian Heritage Series*, a monthly newsletter reflecting on our 325 year legacy of spirituality and pedagogy instituted by our patron saint, John Baptist de La Salle.

I invite the newly minted teachers, the well-seasoned veterans, and those in between to tap into this wealth of Lasallian pedagogy and spirituality. The Christian Brothers Conference has developed several programs tailored to fit the various needs of our faculty. The most comprehensive of these programs is a three year program called the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies. The Buttimer Institute gets its name from Brother Charles Henry Buttimer, a brother who was born in the early 20th century and lived until the early 1980s.

A holy man, very unassuming in personality, Brother Charles would become the first American Superior General for the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the 1960s. His leadership of the Institute through the turbulent '60s, would help to shape and continue the scholarship of the original mission and charism of the Brothers to meet the needs of a more sophisticated and educated populace for the late 20th and early 21st century.

The Buttimer Institute meets every summer for three consecutive summers. For three weeks beginning in June and ending in mid-July, teachers and administrators from all over the world gather to study the life, pedagogy, and spirituality of La Salle. The first summer of the Buttimer Institute takes you through three biographies of La Salle as well as his letters written to the Brothers in response to various school and community concerns.

The second summer of Buttimer focuses on La Salle's methods of classroom management. By studying *The Conduct of Schools*, *The Duties of a Christian to God*, and *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, you begin to appreciate that La Salle's holistic approach to education was meant to bring a child out of poverty and to help him find his rightful, dignified place in society. As you complete the third summer, the focus is on La Salle's spirituality by looking at his *Meditations* and *Method of Interior Prayer*.

In addition to the Buttimer Institute, the Christian Brothers Conference offers the Lasallian Leadership Insti-

tute, a somewhat abbreviated program designed for those in leadership positions in our schools. For three years, this group meets once a week in July and then one weekend during the school year.

As educators, from the sciences to the humanities, we can certainly incorporate much of La Salle's pedagogy into our classroom experiences. The very motivation of the Lasallian is to educate the whole student, helping him or her to find their rightful place in society. In Lasallian terms, we call this "the salvation of the student."

Some Suggested Readings

As mentioned earlier, several biographies of De La Salle have been written, but I have found these writings to be a bit tedious without the proper background and instruction. *The Work is Yours* was written by Luke Salm, FSC, in 1989. It is a great book for those who want a good background of the founder and his motivations for the establishment of the schools for the poor and artisan class. Some of his work is cited on page 3 of this publication.

Our school library has a comprehensive collection of Lasallian writings found in section 279.

How it All Began

"... God guides everything wisely and gently, and does not usually do violence to the inclinations of men. Therefore, when He

determined to urge me into devoting myself completely to the care of the schools, He did so in a manner that escaped my knowledge over a long period of time, with the result that one commitment led me to another that I had not foreseen at the beginning ..."

- La Salle's *Memoirs on the Beginning*

How true has this been in our lives? How did we end up here at Central Catholic? Was it an ad in the Help Wanted section of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*? Was it a friend of a friend who told us that a position was available? Somehow, as Christians, we believe we are called by God to share our talents with those who need help. Events such as these do not happen by chance; they are invitations to help others, to share in the Kingdom of God on earth.

October's theme: *The Need for Lasallian schools*



John Baptist de La Salle was born into the bourgeoisie of Reims, a city in north-western France on 30 April 1651. De La Salle's life would run concurrently with Louis XIV's reign as King. His father, Louis, was a local magistrate in the city who married a woman of wealth, Nicole Moët (of Moët & Chandon champagne fame). Because of such an arrangement, Nicole Moët lost all claim to noble rank once she married into the bourgeoisie.

La Salle was the oldest of seven children. Born into a typically religious family, his parents, especially his maternal grandparents, had a great influence on La Salle's life. Private tutoring, music, the arts, good food and fashion made up the typical bourgeois household of the 17th century.

It was rather unusual at the time for the eldest son to enter religious life. Following in the father's footsteps was *de rigueur*. This attraction to priesthood was solidified when a cousin

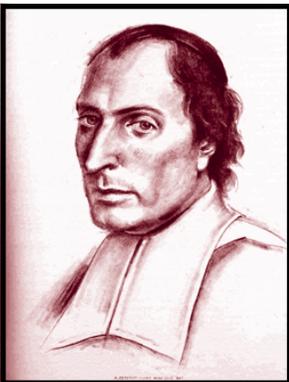


of De La Salle resigned his canonry at the cathedral in 1666. In accepting this position, La Salle assumed the duties of a canon of the cathedral and a member of the cathedral chapter. From all research, La Salle's parents supported this vocation that would see its culmination in the priesthood.

Studies and preparation for the priesthood took La Salle to the Seminary at Saint Sulpice as well as the Sorbonne in Paris. While he was studying in Paris, De La Salle's parents died within nine months of each other during 1671.

La Salle was just 21 years of age when

he was made executor of his father's estate. Not only did La Salle have the responsibility of taking care of his father's affairs, he also had his siblings to raise. At this



time La Salle sought spiritual direction from a fellow canon of Reims, Nicolas Roland, ten years La Salle's senior. The Lasallian legacy began with a combination of two key elements while he was in his late twenties. First, with the death of his priest friend, Nicolas Roland, La Salle became the executor of his estate. With Roland's estate came the responsibility to see that a local community of Sisters (Sisters of the Child Jesus) be legally recognized so they could establish a school for poor girls.

As a priest, De La Salle not only saw to their incorporation as a religious order with legal standing in the Church and state, but also saw to their spiritual needs by offering them the sacraments, especially Eucharist and Reconciliation on a daily basis. The second encounter that would shape De La Salle's future as an Insituteur of the Brothers came almost a year later when De La Salle had a chance meeting with Adrien Nyel outside the entrance to the Sister's convent. Nyel, a layman from De La Salle's town of Reims, was concerned with the escalating poverty in Rouen where he was working for a priest, Father Nicolas Barré. Nyel was sent to Reims by Madame Maillefer, (no relation to the biographer mentioned earlier, but she had marriage connections to La Salle's family) who was underwriting Barré's mission to educate the poor youth of Rouen.



Nyel came to De La Salle with a proposal for helping to establish a school for poor boys in Reims. If a school for young poor girls could be setup with success, how about a school for poor boys? This was the proposal - to set up a school for poor boys in Reims.

From this day, 15 April 1679, the work of the Institute officially began in the parish of Saint Maurice.

The "Start of Something Good"

La Salle thought once he helped Nyel establish this school, he would get back to running the family affairs and continue his duties as canon. If you were to compare Nyel to La Salle, the image of the

Odd Couple comes to mind. De La Salle was the pragmatic and organized one while Nyel, with a heart of gold, could not see any project to completion.

Word soon got around about the success of this gratuitous school. Nyel would travel other cities to open schools like the one in Reims. However, that meant no one to supervise the teachers, who themselves were from all walks of life with no formal education courses. The existing schools began to fall apart. La Salle stepped in and began working with the teachers to reestablish stability and discipline for both teacher and pupil.

La Salle wrote in his memoirs, "I had thought that the care which I took of the schools and the teachers would only be external, something which would not involve me any further than to provide for their subsistence and to see to it that they carried out their duties in a religious and conscientious manner."

Because Nyel was the idea person who had little time for follow-up and training of the teachers, La Salle took it upon himself to create some structure for these men. Seeking advice on what to do with these teachers with whom he was becoming more and more involved, La Salle turned to his friend and spiritual director, Father Barré, for advice. Barré challenged La Salle that in order for these schools to survive, the teachers would need to be trained.

Experience had taught Barré that if there was no direction or genuine interest from someone, the endeavor would deteriorate.

This training would have to be done by La Salle since there was no college or seminary that addressed teacher training at this time for this type of endeavor.

De La Salle eventually moved the teachers into his house to begin their training. This movement created a stir within the social circle of Reims. That a man of La Salle's social and religious status would bring a bunch of "braggards, charlatans, etc." into his household was seen as weird. But in order to guarantee success of this new work, La Salle saw no



"If I had ever thought that the care, motivated by pure charity, which I gave the schoolmasters would ever impose on me the duty of residing with them, I would have stopped it. For since quite naturally, I considered the men whom I was obliged to employ in the schools, especially at the beginning, lower than my own valet, the very thought of living with them would have been quite intolerable to me. And, as a matter of fact, I felt great distress in the early period when I had them come and live in my house, a period that lasted two years ..."

- Lasalle's *Memoir on the Beginnings*

Soon La Salle's patience began paying off. While many in this newly established community came and went, the need for good, caring and qualified teachers increased with each new school that Nyel founded.

Central to the success of the Lasallian enterprise was the community of teachers now who called themselves Brothers. Being a pragmatist, De La Salle insisted that his band of brothers adopt a lifestyle that was disciplined and even austere, prayerful and highly motivated. Great importance was attached to competence and confidence in the classroom, the religious spirit overflowing into a sense of mission and an ardent zeal to accomplish it. From the beginning, the Brothers conducted their schools as a communal effort: "together and by association" was the phrase they chose to express their essential characteristic. (Salm 56)

Word continued to be spread among the local towns of La Salle's success with his gratuitous schools.

What made these schools unique?

- They were open to all young men, regardless of income.
- They were gratuitous.
- Subject matter was basic, reading, writing, and arithmetic.
 - Later these courses would be expanded to "trade" courses. i.e., Schools in Normandy and Marseilles for example, would have courses in sailing, navigating, etc. since they were port cities.
- Class instruction was taught in their native language - French.
- Students would receive catechism class everyday.
- Simultaneous, not individual instruction

While these characteristics were not new, De La Salle was able to combine many

aspects of religion and pedagogy. De La Salle would continue to establish his schools with local parishes in the city.

His invitation to Paris would begin several years of difficulty with the Guild of Writing Masters and the Masters of the Little Schools. In today's terms, they were the "unionized" teachers who had legal status to teach and collect a fee in the local cities.

With De La Salle's community of men establishing gratuitous schools for students in all walks of life, this would become a financial burden for some of these Writing Masters and the Masters of the Little Schools. For the rest of De La Salle's life, he would be in and out of court trying to win peace and gain their respect.

Given the precariousness of this situation, the Brothers were becoming more and more unsure of the future. Given the meagerness of their salaries, which they shared in common, as well as austere living conditions, they challenged La Salle to give up his wealth. This event came to a head in the winter of 1683-1684 with an unexpected, severe famine. This situation provided an answer. De La Salle would give away his wealth and his canonry, but keep just enough for a typical salary of a schoolmaster. The tone was set for the Institute - to rely on Providence!

In this time of great expansion in France, De La Salle and his Brothers would eventually open several teacher training centers, novitiates (house of formation for the Brothers entering the community), and schools for adjudicated youth. De La Salle died on Good Friday, 7 April 1719, several weeks shy of his 68th birthday.

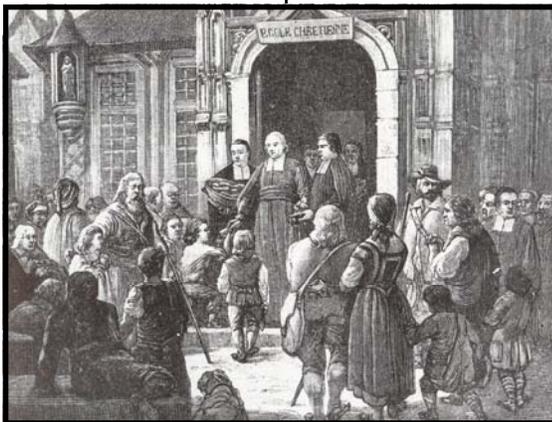
When he died, it was ironic that De La Salle's Brothers did not have government and church status. In the years after his death the Superiors General would seek the Letters of Patent from the government to grant legitimacy to the work of the Brothers - the very letters which he sought for the Sisters of the Child Jesus in 1671-72. Simultaneously, the Institute was also seeking approval for its existence by papal authority. The Institute was granted its Bull of Approbation on 26 January 1725.

The Lasallian Legacy Continues

Saint John Baptist de La Salle was a pioneer, but not in the sense that he founded gratuitous schools, teacher training centers, or even the use of the vernacular as a vehicle of instruction. The genius of the Lasallian legacy is in the creation of a stable community of religiously motivated lay men to construct a network of Christian schools throughout France that would make practicable and permanent the best elements from the pioneers who had gone before him. (Salm 54)

The title "Christian" not only stressed the religious character and purpose of the school, but also served to differentiate this new type of school from the charity schools on the one hand and the Little Schools on the other. (Salm 56)

For De La Salle and the Brothers, gratuity of instruction was a fundamental principle which guaranteed that no distinction would be made in the school between those who could afford to pay and those who could not. The expenses of running the school and



the living expenses were met through contracts arranged with the pastor and/or those who endowed the school. This policy left the Brothers free from any kind of external financial pressure in the running of the school. It would also lead to a great deal of legal trouble, as is seen by the various lawsuits filed against La Salle by the Writing Masters.

In retrospect, De La Salle regarded these developments as the outcome neither of his own organizational genius nor of the initiative taken by the pioneers who had preceded him. In his view of faith the entire enterprise was due to the working of God's Providence that enabled him to hear God's voice in the cry of the poor. He was deeply conscious that in his lifetime, and in his schools, at least one sign of the Kingdom of God was being realized: the poor had the Gospel preached to them. (Salm 57)