

John Baptist de La Salle: His Life and Times

CELEBRATION OF THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE IN REIMS, FRANCE

It is April 1679. A young priest waits on the doorstep of a convent in Reims, France. He has come to call upon the Sisters of the Child Jesus, a new order whose work is the care and education of poor girls. The young priest has helped them in becoming established, and now he serves as their chaplain and confessor. His name is John Baptist de La Salle. The eldest son of a wealthy professional family in the city of Reims, not quite 28 years old, he has been ordained for two years and is about to receive his



doctorate in theology. He is a canon of the prestigious Cathedral Chapter at Reims, which is a traditional breeding ground of bishops and cardinals. A man so gifted and so positioned might well become an important member of the Church hierarchy or a distinguished professor. This young canon, thoughtful, cultivated, and kind-hearted, will certainly become notable in church circles and a pious influence at the comfortable and powerful level of society that is his natural world in 17th Century France.

Now it is April of 1719. That young priest, now old, racked by asthma and chronic rheumatism, is at the end of his earthly journey. In the early morning hours of Good Friday, he lies in his bed, attended by the men whom he calls "Brothers". His wealth has long ago been given

away and the privileges that were his by birth are long since surrendered. His church connections are mixed at best; some church leaders admire him, but many powerful pastors and bishops have treated him and his work with contempt or hostility. His journey has been down paths he could not have

imagined forty years earlier. And what are the final results of his life's work? A small community of some hundred men that calls itself the Brothers of the Christian Schools but is not yet recognized officially by either church or state, and a set




of mostly parish-based schools for poor boys, schools fully appreciated only by those who attend them. Early on that Friday morning, as De La Salle begins to breathe his last, Brother Barthélemy, his successor as Superior of the Brothers, asks

him if he accepts his sufferings. De La Salle responds: "Oui, j'adore en toutes choses la conduite de Dieu à mon égard." ("Yes, I adore God guiding me in all the events of my life.")



Painting from Gerlier's engraving of Gaveau's 1886 Life of the Founder – from Rousset's Iconographie.

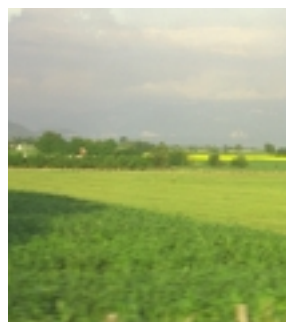
Timeline of Events

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	1651:	<i>John Baptist de La Salle is born at Reims.</i>	
	1651:	<i>King Louis XIV attains his majority (age 14). Riccioli (in Italy) publishes a map of the surface of the moon.</i>	
1	6	6	0
	1662:	<i>Louis XIV begins building the palace at Versailles.</i>	
	1666:	<i>Following the resignation of Pierre Dozet, John Baptist de La Salle is named Canon of the Cathedral Church of Reims.</i>	
	1669:	<i>John Baptist de La Salle earns his Master's degree, with highest honors.</i>	
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	1670:	<i>John Baptist de La Salle enters the seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris.</i>	
	1670:	<i>Pascal's Pensées is published.</i>	
	1672:	<i>John Baptist de La Salle's parents die. He leaves the seminary and returns to Reims to be head of the family and guardian of his six brothers and sisters.</i>	
	1673:	<i>French explorers Marquette and Joliet reach the headwaters of the Mississippi River.</i>	
	1678:	<i>John Baptist de La Salle receives a licentiate in theology and is ordained a priest, having continued his studies in Reims.</i>	
	1679:	<i>A chance encounter at the convent of the Sisters of the Child Jesus on the Rue du Barbâtre with schoolmaster Adrian Nyel, who had just arrived from Rouen, involves John Baptist de La Salle in starting free schools for poor boys in Reims. John Baptist de La Salle invites into his home on the Rue Sainte Marguerite both Adrien Nyel and his fourteen-year-old apprentice.</i>	

And so John Baptist de La Salle dies. He has not become a distinguished professor or an important churchman. He has only

rigorous life style and intended to produce priests capable of self-sacrifice and self-discipline. Mindful of the needs of the poor, a regular

calling had become firmly planted, and the care he showed in fulfilling his family responsibilities foreshadowed the characteristics that would



Left: The courtyard of the Hôtel de la Cloche, the birthplace of John Baptist de La Salle where he lived until the age of fourteen. Middle: The front of the Hôtel de la Cloche. Right: The area around Reims is known for its rich farmland. De La Salle's mother's family, the Moët's, kept extensive vineyards in the countryside.

become a Founder of a religious order and a Saint. As the 350th anniversary of his birth occurs on April 30, 2001, it becomes ever more apparent that the life he lived was the life God led him to live. At one point, De La Salle wrote that if he had known what was in store for him, he would not have even begun the task.

The foundation was established in his early life. While it might have been expected that he would follow in his father's footsteps as a magistrate of the presidial court, he chose to pursue the priesthood and underwent an official ceremony at the age of ten to confirm his intention. At sixteen, he received the distinguished position of canon, a title that brought with it both church responsibilities and church benefits. At age 19, De La Salle studied at the Sorbonne while residing at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris, founded only twenty-five years earlier in a spirit of clerical renewal mandated by the Council of Trent a century earlier. Saint Sulpice was notable for a

task of the seminarians was to teach catechism to the poor. When he was compelled to return to Reims eighteen months later upon the death of his parents, his vocation began to develop in ways he would never have anticipated. Named in his father's will as executor of the estate and guardian of the younger children, John Baptist returned to Reims and dutifully and capably assumed the duties of head of the household. The 21-year-old seminarian – still technically a minor, since the age of majority was 25 – had four brothers and two sisters to take care of. Surviving documents show that his duties as guardian of his siblings and administrator of his family estate and properties were handled with meticulous care and administrative acumen. In the meantime, he pursued his studies and his path to the priesthood: he was ordained a subdeacon in 1672, a deacon in 1676, and became a priest on April 9, 1678. As for his studies, he received a licentiate in theology in 1676 and a doctorate in 1680. Through all of this, the roots of his religious

emerge during the course of his involvement in the world of education.

The beginning of his involvement in the world of education – at least the visible beginning – came at that convent door of the Sisters of the Child Jesus in April of 1679 where he happened to encounter another man coming to call on the Sisters. Adrian Nyel was a layman who had worked in Rouen for many years providing schooling for the poor, and a wealthy widow had asked Nyel to see about founding a charity school for boys in Reims. Nyel's first call in Reims was at the convent of the teaching Sisters. Following their meeting, De La Salle invited Nyel to stay at his home while he consulted with others in Reims on how to start the proposed school for poor boys.

De La Salle's help was effective, and a school was soon opened. Shortly thereafter, another wealthy woman in Reims told Nyel that she also would endow a school but only if Monsieur La Salle would help.

De La Salle agreed and gradually began to help support the teachers, even renting them a house to live in. Now he found himself becoming drawn into a world to which he had been a stranger, the world of the poor – a world of disadvantaged students, uncultured teachers, and parents chronically oppressed by poverty. De La Salle could not deny the needs he saw so immediately before him.

Within a short time, Nyel was off to other towns, starting yet more schools. De La Salle knew that the teachers in Reims were struggling, lacking leadership, purpose,

not shake the conviction that he was doing something in accordance with God's will for him. When, a year later, his family home was lost at auction because of a family lawsuit, De La Salle rented a house into which he and the handful of teachers moved, a house that would come to be called "the cradle of the Institute." One biographer has called the walk across town to this undistinguished home in the poorer part of town De La Salle's personal Exodus. It was here that those who had joined this new enterprise with De La Salle first began to call themselves "Brothers".

"It never would have occurred to me that I would ever take charge of the schools and the teachers. Not that such a plan had never been proposed to me. But it never became part of my thinking and I certainly never had any intention of putting it into practice."

– John Baptist de La Salle

and training, and he found himself taking increasingly deliberate steps to help this small group of men with their work. First, in 1680, he invited them to take their meals in his home, as much to teach them table manners as to inspire and instruct them in their work. This crossing of social boundaries was one that his relatives found difficult to bear. In 1681, De La Salle realized that he would have to take a further step – he brought the teachers into his own home to live with him. De La Salle's relatives were deeply disturbed, his social class was scandalized, and they thought he was carrying the Gospel a bit too far. But De La Salle could

Community life became formalized, teaching and procedures at the three schools became more regular, some men left and new candidates came. Within a year, in 1683, the Brothers became concerned about their stability and their security as part of this untested enterprise. De La Salle replied with an inspiring talk about trusting God. Their rather rough response was that it was easy for him to talk, being a wealthy man by birth and a canon with a large, annual income. They were poor men, with no skills and no prospects. If the schools should fail, he would be no worse

continued on page 7

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1680: *John Baptist de La Salle receives his doctorate in theology. Pictured here is Collège des Bons Enfants where he went to school. Today, it is a government school.*

1680: *John Baptist de La Salle takes the struggling group of school teachers into his home for meals, meetings, and prayer. This is considered the founding of the Institute.*

1683: *De La Salle joins the Brothers in their poverty and dependence on God by resigning his office as canon and using his personal fortune to feed the poor during a famine.*



1684: *Louis XIV, after the death of Maria Teresa, marries Madame de Maintenon.*



1686: *First General Assembly of the Brothers, in Reims. A distinctive habit and the name "Brothers of the Christian Schools" are adopted, and a vow of obedience is taken. Ecclesiastical authorities reject the appointment of Brother L'Heureux. De La Salle resumes the office of superior.*

1687: *Archbishop Fénelon publishes his Treatise on the Education of Girls.*



1688: *In response to a request by Claude de La Barmondie, the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, the Brothers assume direction of a school in Paris, their first enterprise outside of Reims. The Brothers are feared as competition by the for-profit educational establishment: lawsuits, conflicts, and harassment will continue for two decades.*

During the famine of 1683-1684, De La Salle distributes his wealth by providing food to the poor.



Painting by Giovanni Cagliardi (1901), at the Generatore, Rome.

The France of De La Salle

France at the turn from the 17th century to the 18th was a society divided and stratified in ways that ours is not, but with some characteristics that may be familiar. There was heavy taxation, the poor stayed poor, the rich got richer, and as the Middle Ages truly ended and the age of commerce and science began, the bourgeoisie were beginning to exercise more influence, partly because social influence was beginning to become based more and more on money rather than sheer status. Birth was still important, but it was no longer the only measure of worth. Merchants, tradesmen, city council members, professionals of all sorts jostled for influence and standing, working their way ever higher into the upper classes of the bourgeoisie. France had much wealth, yet there was frequent economic crisis, partly from incessant, expensive wars, and there was periodic famine and consequent epidemics of disease, for the economy was based on agriculture and the country's well-being was thus susceptible to drought or blight. Two-thirds of the population of 19 to 20 million lived in the countryside, many of them poor and unprovided with education. The Church was wealthy and intricately intertwined with the state. The parish was a civil administrative division as well as an ecclesiastical one, where registers of births, deaths, and marriages were kept. The parish was used as a territorial framework for the registering of population and the levying of taxes; and parishes were responsible for providing education of the poor. But the results were highly inconsistent. There was wealth, power, and influence available in city, state, and church for those who were positioned to grasp for it. But the poor and destitute, of whom there were many, were in a position of insecurity, dependence and inferiority perhaps difficult for us to imagine.

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1690: There are defections and deaths among the Brothers, opposition from authorities, and a near-fatal illness for De La Salle. The Brothers open the establishment at Vaugirard, outside Paris, including the first formal novitiate.

1691: De La Salle and two Brothers swear a "heroic vow" to establish the Institute even if all others leave and they are reduced to begging for their bread.

1694: At the first General Chapter, De La Salle and twelve Brothers make perpetual vows, and the first Rule is adopted.



1699: The Brothers open a school in Chartres; schools are opened in 18 more cities in France over the next two decades.

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1702: The Drolin Brothers, Gabriel and Gerard, leave to work in Rome.



1705: The Brothers open the establishment at Saint Yon, near Rouen, including a novitiate, a boarding school, and a home for delinquent boys. Formal permission is given to print all the works prepared by De La Salle for use in the schools.

1711: The Clément family secures a court judgment against De La Salle in Paris that costs the Institute money and property and publicly impugns De La Salle's integrity.



1712: De La Salle withdraws from Paris to visit the Institute's establishments in the south of France and to make an extended retreat.

1714: Summoned back to Paris by his Brothers, De La Salle obediently does as requested, preparing the next General Assembly and helping to revise the Rule.

off, whereas they would be back on the streets. De La Salle found merit in their observation.

He considered donating his personal wealth to endow the community. But after praying deeply and consulting widely, he decided that the Holy Spirit was leading him along a different path. So, in 1683, he resigned his position of canon at the cathedral and in the winter of 1683-1684 he gave away all that he had to feed the poor during a particularly severe famine in Reims. Thus he joined his Brothers in true poverty, and broke down the barrier that separated him from them. Now, they would all be fully dependent on God.

For a person of De La Salle's background and position as a priest to accept barely literate laymen as equal colleagues, as his brothers, was quite unheard of. Yet, early on, De La Salle realized that the community had to govern itself from within, rather than from the outside, whether from a bishop, a parish priest, or even himself. At the Brothers' General Assembly in 1686, a distinctive habit was approved, a vow of obedience was taken, and the name "Brothers of the Christian Schools" was officially adopted. A year later, De La Salle insisted that the Brothers elect one of their own as Superior. The Brothers reluctantly agreed, electing 24-year-old Brother Henri L'Heureux. De La Salle was the first to show strict obedience to him. Once it became known outside of the house that a priest had become subject to a layman, there was considerable upset in church circles. The idea of a cleric obeying a layman as his superior was

scandalous, and the archbishop quickly ordered De La Salle to resume the headship of the group. Nonetheless, De La Salle consistently found ways to allow the Brothers to take their governance into their own hands and resist efforts of various pastors and bishops to place the little community under their exclusive control. For instance, when after a few years the Brothers proved to be quite successful in Reims, the Bishop offered them his support in establishing new schools and maintaining the existing ones – if they would remain in his diocese alone.

This was a decisive moment for the identity of the fledgling community. Would they remain a diocesan group, confined to one area of France, or was their scope larger? De La Salle was already aware that the need for schools for the poor was acute in Paris, and he had promised a pastor there that the Brothers would come to staff a charity school. Hence, he declined the offer from the Archbishop of Reims, and in 1688 he and two Brothers traveled to Paris, where in short order they revitalized the school for the poor in the parish of Saint Sulpice. This work was important because it established the group's autonomy and freedom from direct diocesan control, and it allowed the Brothers in Reims to begin to develop without leaning on De La Salle's constant presence.

As the work began in Paris, first at one school and then at several more, a new challenge appeared. Schools for the poor such as the Brothers ran were meant to be restricted to the certified poor. Anyone who could pay a fee for education was "supposed to go" to the Little Schools or to the Writing Masters and their for-profit establishments. However, the

Brothers did not distinguish in their admissions between poor and non-poor. All were welcome to their free schools, and many wanted to come, including those whose families were not on the parish's Poor Register. The fee-taking teachers filed suits for infringement on their business and violation of the established regulations. This hostility, in suits, harassment and even violence, continued in Paris for the next fifteen years.

Back in Reims, meanwhile, other difficulties appeared. The sixteen Brothers were now eight because of defections. Opponents continued to oppose the work or tried to control it according to their own vision. Some devoted Brothers fell ill and died through overwork, and De La Salle himself underwent a long sickness that brought him near death. The prognosis for the new community and its work seemed suddenly bleak. Finally, the sudden death of Brother Henri, whom he had been training for the priesthood and whom he'd hoped would succeed him as Superior, hurt De La Salle deeply. Yet, with faith in God's Providence, he took Brother Henri's death as a sign that the Institute was meant to remain non-clerical in nature.

De La Salle purchased property outside of Paris, at Vaugirard, and brought all the Brothers there for an extended retreat wherein he rekindled their fervor. In 1691, he also made a radical commitment to the work; he and two of his most trusted Brothers made a secret "heroic vow," committing themselves to the establishment of this enterprise ". . . even should we remain the only three members of the said Society, and should be obliged to beg for alms and live on bread only."

In 1694, the first assembly to be known as a General Chapter was held, at which perpetual vows of obedience and association for the educational service of the poor were taken for the first time by De La Salle and twelve Brothers. Again De La Salle, despite his wish for a Brother to have the office, was elected Superior, twice, as he made them vote again. He finally accepted this as God's will, but insisted that the Brothers declare, in writing, that their choice of their priest-

Between 1694 and 1709, many new schools opened, several others closed, and legal battles raged on. In Paris, some Brothers even turned against him, and as lawsuits were decided against him, he began to wonder if the welfare of the community and the prosperity of the work required his personal withdrawal from the scene. A new series of setbacks, culminating in a costly and embarrassing legal judgment – the Clément affair – convinced him that it was so.

**"If my work does not come from God,
I would consent to its ruin.
I would join our enemies in
destroying it if I thought that
it did not have God for its author,
or that He did not will its progress."**

– John Baptist de La Salle

founder as Superior was not to be a precedent for the future and that "henceforth and for all time no priest or person in sacred orders is to be accepted into our Society or elected as Superior, and that we shall never admit as Superior anyone who has not associated himself with us by the same vow as we have pronounced."

Now De La Salle and the Brothers began to fortify their Society, strengthening and expanding the already flourishing schools and communities, and providing for the young candidates asking to join. De La Salle spent time writing various texts, both for the schools and for the Brothers, including everything from a student reading text on politeness and decorum to a detailed method for the Brothers' interior prayer.

In 1709 an eager and wealthy young man named Clément pledged financial assistance to establish a teacher training school near Paris that the Brothers would run, and De La Salle lent him the money to open it. But the young man (not yet legally an adult, below the age of 25) reneged on his loan, and his influential father sued to invalidate the arrangement. When the case was decided in 1712, De La Salle was left without the training school or the property, ordered to reimburse all funds received, and had his honor impugned by a judicial condemnation on the very shameful charge of suborning a minor to extort money from him. De La Salle, always careful and

continued on page 11



1715: *Louis XIV dies and is succeeded by his five-year-old great-grandson, Louis XV.*



1717: *The second General Chapter elects Brother Barthélemy the first Superior General.*

1718: *De La Salle lives at Saint Yon, writing and ministering, but becomes increasingly ill.*

1719: *Madame de Maintenon, the widow of Louis XIV, dies, aged eighty.*



1719: *On Good Friday morning, De La Salle dies at Saint Yon, aged nearly 68. The word is passed through the streets of Rouen: "The Saint is dead."*

1724: *Royal letters patent are issued (State recognition of the Institute as a legal entity).*

1725: *Papal bull of approbation is issued (Brothers are recognized as Institute of Pontifical Right with Simple Vows).*

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1888: *On February 19th, De La Salle is beatified.*

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1900: *On May 24th, De La Salle is canonized.*

1950: *On May 15th, Saint John Baptist de La Salle is proclaimed Patron of All Teachers of Youth.*

A visit to Saint-Yon by the Archbishop of Rouen, son of Louis XIV's minister Colbert, accompanied by Pontcarré, president of the Normandy parliament. The Brothers had been at Saint Yon on the outskirts of Rouen since 1705, and it housed the novitiate, a boarding school and an establishment for delinquents. De La Salle spent the last years of his life there.



Painting by Giovanni Cagliardi (1905)

De La Salle: A Son of the Upper Class

John Baptist de La Salle was born into a comfortable and established level of the stratified French society, the upper bourgeoisie – his ancestors wealthy from the cloth trade, his father a lawyer and magistrate, his mother of noble family, people who lived a privileged life in a spacious mansion with servants, fine food and clothing, a well-stocked library, abundant educational opportunities, and cultivated entertainment. His father Louis was apparently a wise, conscientious, cultured man of the world, and both parents are said to have been devout in their practice of Catholicism. Young John Baptist seems to have been conscious from an early age of a call to the priesthood, and his father's cousin, Vicar General of Reims and Chancellor of the University, arranged for the boy to receive the “tonsure” at age ten, signifying his interest in the priesthood. This made the boy eligible for ecclesiastical benefices (without committing him irrevocably to the obligations associated with Holy Orders) even while he continued to attend preparatory school. De La Salle's later resourcefulness as an educational innovator is not owing to any experience of innovation or reform in his own schooling. The curriculum and method were staid and traditional; he studied Latin, Greek, and classical philosophy, reading only ancient authors, and science by way of Aristotle. De La Salle did well in his studies and took part in what are now called co-curricular activities: a role in a school play, a prize in elocution, and an honorable mention in declamation. The same priestly cousin who had invited De La Salle to receive the tonsure paid him a distinct honor when the boy was not quite 16 by resigning his office as a canon of the cathedral in favor of the boy. This was a distinguished ecclesiastical position (among the alumni of the cathedral chapter of Reims were popes, cardinals, and bishops). Duties of a canon were principally public prayer (daily liturgy of the hours and solemn liturgies on great feasts) and taking part in advisory sessions with the archbishop. The rewards were great: a house, a considerable yearly stipend, and concomitant dignity and prestige.

The Family of John Baptist de La Salle

De La Salle's Parents

Louis de La Salle (1625 – 1672)

The father of De La Salle was a distinguished magistrate of the presidial court of Reims. He married at the age of twenty-five and was a faithful husband and a devout father. Louis was highly respected in his profession and was a true humanist with an extensive library. He had a life-long interest in music and the arts, something which was not as evident in his eldest son. Louis provided well for all of his children, and in the case of De La Salle paid the significant expense of an education at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris.

Nicole Moët de Brouillet (1633 – 1671)



Of the landed gentry by birth, De La Salle's mother lost her claim to nobility by marrying Louis de La Salle, a bourgeois. Married at the age of seventeen, she bore eleven children during twenty years of married life and died eight months prior to her husband. Nicole Moët de Brouillet was known for her deep and genuine piety, and one biographer of De La Salle attributes to her the deep sense of the presence of God that was to become such an important part of De La Salle's spiritual vision.

De La Salle's Brothers and Sisters

Of eleven children in the family, four children died in infancy – Remy (b.1652), Jean-Louis (b.1663), Simon (1667-1669), and Anne-Marie (b.1656) – and seven survived into adulthood. This was something that was not uncommon during the 17th century.

Marie (1654 – 1711)

De La Salle's eldest sister, she is said to have had a beautiful voice and played a popular lute-like stringed instrument called a theorbo. After her parents' deaths, Marie went to live with her maternal grandmother, helping to care for her youngest brother, Jean-Remy, who was still an infant. In 1679 she married Jean Maillefer. Of the ten children of her marriage, five survived until adulthood, including one who became a Benedictine and eventually wrote about the life of his uncle, John Baptist de La Salle.

Rose-Marie (1656 – 1682)

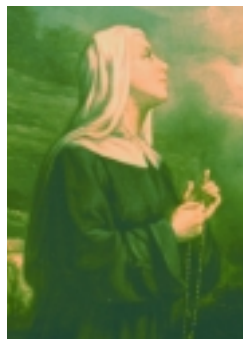
Affectionately called Rosette by De La Salle, Rose-Marie joined the Canonesses of Saint Augustine at the age of sixteen, just before the death of her parents. During the time before her own sudden death in 1682 at the age of twenty-five – the victim of poisoning from a badly-prepared medicine – De La Salle had taken affectionate care of her. He visited her at the convent, located near the Brothers' house on Rue Nueve, and his records show him buying her books, articles of clothing, and small personal gifts such as sugar, oranges, and an iron bedwarmer. He also provided her with a small annual income as pocket money.

prudent, had paid a high price for his zeal. When the 61-year-old De La Salle foresaw that the judgment would go against him, he handed

a personal challenge, and the future was not clear. He pondered the continued usefulness of his presence within the Institute that he

helped him to see that God's will for him still lay with his Brothers, he returned to Paris. As the Brothers in Paris opened the door to him, he said, "Here I am. What do you want me to do?"

Understanding better than his Brothers that though he might be needed, he was not indispensable, he did not quite do everything they wished, for he allowed Brother Barthélemy, the novice master who had filled the void as nominal Superior after De La Salle had left, to remain in charge. De La Salle's presence and insights, however, did help eventually to resolve most of the difficulties that had been besetting them. After a year in Paris, De La Salle moved to Rouen with Brother Barthélemy and the novices. There at Saint Yon – which now housed the novitiate, a boarding school, and a juvenile center – he began to make arrangements for another General Chapter. The Brothers now constituted 23 houses and 34 educational establishments throughout France, with 100 Brothers and some 18 novices (and one stalwart Brother, Gabriel Drolin, on solitary assignment in Rome). After sending Brother Barthélemy on a tour of all the communities to gain their agreement to the assembly, the "principal Brothers" assembled in May of 1717. At the request of the assembly, the Founder drew up a definitive revision of the *Rule*, based on their discussions. The assembly formally elected Brother Barthélemy as the new Superior, and De La Salle was assiduous in obeying the authority of the new Superior. To one correspondent who could not break the habit of consulting him, he wrote, "I beg you for the love of God, my dear Brother, that for the future you think no more about



At Parménie in the south of France, De La Salle made several extended retreats, consulting with Louise Hours (1646-1727), popularly known as Sister Louise, who had established the retreat center. It was here that he came to realize that his work with the Brothers had not yet been completed. Pictured here on the left and middle is Parménie today. On the far right is a painting of Sister Louise.

all documents over to his lawyer and left Paris for an extended visit to the Brothers' establishments in the south of France – outside the Paris jurisdiction.

On this journey, which lasted more than two years, he grappled with the dispiriting evidence that his presence and activities in Paris had seemed to harm the Brothers' mission. Not all of the communities he visited in the south of France welcomed him, as he patiently tried to repair communities that were weak or in disarray. In Marseilles, he opened a novitiate to form Brothers for the schools of the area – only to see it close when the local views regarding the Brothers and the Church came into conflict with his own. In addition to helping the Brothers where he could, even doing classroom teaching at the school in Grenoble, he spent much personal time in retreat. His physical health was poor (his rheumatism was chronic), his long labors had worn him out, the difficulties in Paris continued to be

had worked so hard to establish. If it was now God's will to take him along a new route, he would follow. But where was God's will? He spent several weeks at a hermitage near Grenoble, called Parménie, conversing with a devout and pious visionary, Sister Louise.

While in Parménie in 1714, he received a letter from the assembled Brothers of the Paris area, where external authorities were again trying to tamper with the Brothers' self-governance and to rewrite their *Rule*. The Brothers wrote to De La Salle: "We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools . . . command you in the name of the body of this Society to which you have vowed obedience . . . to resume forthwith the general conduct of affairs." It seems that the independence of the Brothers that he had hoped for had different results than he had expected. The society was now capable of taking its destiny into its own hands, but the Brothers would do so by commanding him to return. After consulting with Sister Louise, who

consulting me on anything. You have your superiors whom you must consult on matters spiritual and temporal. For myself there is nothing now but to prepare myself for death which must soon make my final separation from all creatures.”

De La Salle stayed at a seminary in Paris for several months to attend to some legal repercussions from the Clément affair – a process that providentially provided enough funds to purchase the property that the Brothers had been renting at Saint Yon. After returning to Saint Yon, he was ill for many months but rallied to complete his work, and then sank into terminal decline. Even on his deathbed his troubles did not cease. He learned that the Archbishop of Rouen had withdrawn his authorization to celebrate the sacraments for the community because of a dispute with the local pastor. Yet his long practice of self-effacement and submission to God’s will had made him tranquil in all situations. His Gospel journey had taken him long past the point at which any personal injustice could wound him. “Oui, j’adore en toutes choses la conduite de Dieu à mon égard.”

At four o’clock in the morning on Good Friday, De La Salle made an effort to rise from his bed as if to greet someone, then joined his hands, raised his eyes to heaven, and died. He was buried on Holy Saturday in a side chapel of the local parish church, Saint Sever. Since it was Holy Week, the more solemn funeral rituals were delayed until the following week. Throughout Rouen, and soon throughout the Society, word spread that “the Saint is dead.” But the providential extension of his life, work, and influence was just beginning. 🐞

A thorough but accessible biography of De La Salle is “The Work Is Yours” by Luke Salm, FSC; a more exhaustive one is “De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor Through Education” by Alfred Calcutt, FSC. For a compact introduction to De La Salle’s life and times and achievement, and an analysis of the meaning of Lasallian education today, see “Touching the Hearts of Students: Characteristics of Lasallian Schools” by George Van Grieken, FSC.

“Since I no longer felt myself drawn to the vocation of a canon, it seemed to me that the office of canon had left me long before I left the office of canon.

Although I entered it freely through an open door, it seems to me that today God is opening the door again so that I can leave it. ” – John Baptist de La Salle

Continuation of De La Salle’s Brothers and Sisters

Jacques-Joseph (1659 – 1723)

The next oldest boy of the family, he remained with De La Salle at the family home in Reims for five years after the death of their parents when he was not yet thirteen. In 1677, at the age of eighteen, he entered the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine in Paris. In due time, Jacques-Joseph acquired degrees in philosophy, civil law, and canon law, including a doctorate in theology. He was a professor of philosophy and theology and became prior of the monastery and pastor of the church of Saint Martin in Chauny, a post he held until his death in 1723.

Jean-Louis (1664 – 1724)

The only sibling to remain with De La Salle after he and the first Brothers moved out of the family home and into the simple house on Rue Neuve, Louis came to have the distinguished church career De La Salle could have had. A student at the Sorbonne and the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, he became a Doctor of Theology and later a Canon of the Cathedral of Reims. Louis supported his older brother’s work, heading a civil association that was formed to provide financial and legal support for the work of the Brothers in Reims.

Pierre (1666 – 1741)

Living with De La Salle from the age of six, when their parents died, until the age of sixteen, Pierre’s education was supervised by his oldest brother. After spending a short time with his oldest sister when De La Salle and the Brothers moved out of the family home, Pierre studied law and became a successful lawyer in Paris, eventually becoming magistrate of the Presidial Court of Reims, as his father had been. Married in 1696 at the age of twenty-nine to Francoise-Henriette Bachelier, a distant cousin, the couple had eight children. After the deaths of both De La Salle and Jean-Louis, Pierre reorganized the civil association that continued to support the Brothers’ work in Reims.

Jean-Remy (1670 – 1732)

Just over a year old when his parents died, Jean-Remy’s early years were spent with his oldest sister Marie at his maternal grandmother’s home. After Marie’s wedding in 1679, he returned to the family home at the age of nine to be with De La Salle, Jean-Louis, and Pierre. Two years later, when the family home was sold and De La Salle and the Brothers moved to Rue Neuve, Jean-Remy was sent off to boarding school. He had successive careers as an army officer, a judicial counselor, and a procurator of the court. Jean-Remy married in 1711 at the age of forty-one, but gradually began to exhibit strange patterns of behavior. By 1715 he had lost almost all control over his affairs and two years later was declared mentally incompetent. After Jean-Remy’s confinement to a mental institution, where he died in 1732, his two oldest brothers were generous in their financial support of his wife and children.