

The year 2000 – 2001 marks significant anniversaries of De La Salle: his birth in 1651, his elevation to sainthood in 1900, and the Church's declaration of him as Patron of All Teachers in 1950. Accordingly, we highlight his life and ministry along with the educational movement that continues to be lived out today.



DEDICATED TO THE LASALLIAN EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF THE DISTRICT OF SAN FRANCISCO

# Signs of Faith



*Who is  
Saint John Baptist de La Salle?*



*Brother Luke Salm, FSC*

Who is Saint John Baptist de La Salle?  
Brother Luke Salm, FSC

---

There is hardly a Catholic anywhere who does not know all about Saint John the Baptist, the son of Zachary and Elizabeth and the Precursor of Our Lord who we learn about in the Gospels. Not that many are familiar with the person, the achievement, and the vision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the oldest son of a well-to-do family, prominent among the upper merchant class. After graduating with top honors from the University College in Reims, he went on for graduate study in theology, was ordained a priest, and eventually earned the degree of Doctor of Theology in 1680.

At that moment, as a devout 30-year-old priest, recently ordained and with first-class academic credentials, he had an influential network of family and friends ready to further his prospects for a distinguished career in the Church. It was only a matter of time before he might have been a bishop or maybe a cardinal. And so he might have lived and died and then been completely forgotten.

But something happened to change that scenario. The young Father De La Salle suddenly found himself involved with a small group of barely literate young men trying to teach poor boys in the rundown charity schools in the parishes of the city. For these men, it was a living of sorts, at least until something better might come along. In those days, schoolteachers had no social or professional status, no standards to meet, and little motivation to stay with the job any longer than necessary. The leader of that little group in Reims was an older layman, Adrien Nyel by name. He was a good man, enthusiastic and idealistic, but with little sense of how to run an organization, or how to keep a good thing going once he got it started.

And so it happened, almost by accident, that Father De La Salle gradually assumed the leadership of that nondescript band of lay teachers. At first he helped pay their rent. Then he moved them into a house near his own. When he saw close at hand how uncultured and uneducated they were, he invited them to his home for meals to try to improve their knowledge, their religious practice, and their table manners. Then, much to the shock and chagrin of the family, he decided to bring them into his home to live. Finally, in 1682, he moved with them to a rented house in a poor neighborhood. From that center, this first community of teachers staffed three parish schools. It was the beginning of what today is the worldwide Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Through all of this, De La Salle himself did not fully realize what was happening. It was only years later, as he himself tells us, that he realized that God was leading him, one step at a time, to commit himself entirely to the development of the schools. To appreciate the significance of what his reluctant newcomer on the educational scene was able eventually to achieve, we have to remind ourselves of the school situation in the France of 1680. The university system, which provided a classical education from grade school through to the doctorate, was in place and had been for centuries. But that was accessible, as it had been to De La Salle, only to those who were socially and financially in a position to afford it. Apart from the university schools, the only elementary education available, and that also at a price, was from teachers in what were called the "little schools" who made a living running a school by themselves, usually in their homes.

As for the poor, nobody much cared. Although the pastors were supposed to provide charity school for their parishes, most of them were poorly run, there was little discipline, attendance was not enforced, the students were unkempt and prone both to lice and vice, the teachers were incompetent and poorly paid, and the school itself might be closed down for long periods at the slightest excuse. True, there were some attempts in 17<sup>th</sup> century to reform the parish charity schools, but these initiatives were widely scattered and had little permanent impact on the distressing educational scene. De La Salle realized that the unskilled workers and the poor, being usually little educated, and occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their families, could not give their children the instruction they needed, much less a suitable Christian education. It was to procure this advantage for the children of the workers and the poor that he established what he called the Christian Schools.

But the Institute of the Christian Schools might not have been established at all if De La Salle had not been willing to put his own spiritual formation and advanced education at the service of those in need. In the process, he created a new type of school system for the elementary education of the poor, a new set of standards that would transform teaching school in a profession and a vocation, and a new community of consecrated lay teachers as a new form of religious life in the Church.

To achieve all of this, to enter into the world of the poor with creativity and authenticity, Father De La Salle had to sacrifice all of his personal ambition, his family fortune, his ecclesiastical honors, his comfortable lifestyle, and even his personal reputation. People thought he was crazy. His own family disowned him. The educational authorities of the time had him hailed into court, condemned, and fined because the educational policies he introduced threatened to break down the established social barriers. In his determination to give rich and poor the same education in the same classroom, and all for free, he had to act against the law.

Then there were the Church authorities. Pastors, bishops, and even the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, hounded De La Salle relentlessly. They could neither understand nor control this persistent innovator who didn't want his Brothers to be priests, who had his own ideas about how to run a school, and how to make the Christian message appealing to those who rarely heard good news of any kind.

De La Salle did not limit his educational vision to gratuitous elementary schools for the poor. He realized that there were other needs. Well-trained teachers were high on his list of priorities. On three distinct occasions he was able to establish experimental training schools for lay teachers. Aware that there was no provision at the time for working teenagers to continue their education, De La Salle founded a Sunday program of advanced courses in practical subjects just for them. He opened a boarding school with offerings in advanced technical or pre-professional courses, unavailable, unheard of, and unthinkable in colleges and universities. He pioneered in what we now call programs in special education to backward students. He opened one of the first institutions in France to specialize in the care and education of young delinquents.

The creative vision of this man has survived for more than 300 years and inspires the Brothers and their lay colleagues in more than 80 countries all over the world. This worldwide extension of De La Salle's work has provided opportunities to apply the Founder's vision to new times and new circumstances. In this country, for example, the Brothers have typically extended their work to secondary schools and to university colleges, while continuing to maintain welfare institutions and other educational works devoted to the direct service of the poor. More and more, the Brothers have come to appreciate the important contribution of lay teachers and administrators to the schools and join together with them in what is perceived as a shared mission. No matter what the institutional framework, the vision of De La Salle remains alive in educational communities that are characterized by high standards of teaching, good relationships between teachers and students, high priority given to religious education, and an overriding concern for the poor and for social justice.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle, known to relatively few Catholics, had as his patron the better-known Saint John the Baptist. But De La Salle wanted the Institute of the Brothers and the Schools that he founded to have the same mission as the Precursor, to prepare the way of the Lord and make straight his paths. It is not wonder that John Baptist de La Salle was declared a saint by Pope Leo XIII in 1900 and was named patron saint of all Christian teachers by Pope Pius XII in 1950.



*"Generosity is the motive power of all noble actions,  
and perhaps the germ of all virtues."*

*"The more edifying your conduct,  
the greater will be your power to draw others to God."*

*"Our zeal is known by the example we give."*

*"They who win hearts control the world."*

*"The characteristic of zeal is activity."*

*"God is the only master to whom we may safely give our hearts."*



