

# SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

HIS LIFE AND LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY



SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE (1651–1719) is a familiar name to those who attend or have attended a Lasallian school sponsored by the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (De La Salle Brothers). De La Salle founded a major religious institute, and Pope Pius XII proclaimed him the patron saint of Christian educators. De La Salle systematized and put into practice many educational methods considered standard today, including establishing centers for training teachers, instructing an entire class of pupils simultaneously, using the native language to introduce reading and writing, grouping students according to achievement, reporting their progress on a regular basis,

involving parents in the school, and giving students meaningful roles in the classroom.

Today's Christians can find inspiration in De La Salle's spirituality. He listened to people, saw needs, felt compassion, prayed for God's Spirit, and acted decisively. He lived Gospel values and gathered co-workers to effect social change. De La Salle heard the cries of poor people in Reims, in Paris, and throughout France. He recognized that poverty, ignorance, and oppression spawn crime, sin, and destruction, and that to break out of the cycle of poverty into which they are born, poor children need an education that enables them to earn a decent living and to live with dignity as Christians. Providing a quality education for the children of poor people and common laborers is the revolutionary action that John Baptist discerned as his mission from God.

French society in the late 1600s regarded teaching in the few charity schools that existed as work fit only for people who could find nothing else to do. Yet despite the strenuous objections of his relatives and friends, De La Salle, a member of a distinguished family, not only formed a community of teachers to serve poor children but also gave away his inheritance and his position in the clerical establishment to live among the poor families he served.

Relying entirely on divine Providence, De La Salle showed that pursuing the way of the Gospel—devotion to ordinary tasks, no matter how humble—leads to holiness and the touch of God's love. He did not separate spirituality and day-to-day decisions about practical matters that express God's will.

#### EARLY YEARS

Born in 1651 into a relatively wealthy family of Reims, John Baptist received tutoring at home until he reached the age of nine. At age fifteen, he inherited a canonry at the Cathedral of Reims, an honor that provided additional income to his family. It seemed likely, at the time, that he would eventually join the company of the rich and famous clerics of France. In October 1670, after one

year of theological study in Reims, De La Salle entered the major seminary of Saint Sulpice, in Paris. As part of the seminary routine on Sundays, he taught religion to children in the parish of Saint Sulpice, located in one of the capital's poorest neighborhoods.

The course of De La Salle's life changed at the death of his parents. When the family council appointed him, the oldest son, to take charge of the family estate and to be the legal guardian of his brothers and sisters, De La Salle left Paris and returned to Reims.

#### EMERGING MISSION

Realizing that he needed a spiritual guide, John Baptist chose Fr. Nicolas Roland, a fellow canon at Reims. This relationship led to De La Salle's mission in life. Roland encouraged him to complete his studies for the priesthood, and in 1678, at age twenty-seven, De La Salle was ordained. Two weeks later, Roland died, having named De La Salle as executor of his estate and legal guardian of the community of sisters Roland had founded for the education of poor girls.

During a visit to these sisters, John Baptist met Adrien Nyel, a layman from Rouen who had come to Reims to establish a free school for elementary-age boys. When Nyel explained his intention, De La Salle invited him to stay at his home, where they began to plan the school together.

As a result of De La Salle's contacts, the pastor of Saint Maurice agreed, in April 1679, to open a free school for boys in his parish. Because of the school's success, two more free schools in Reims soon opened, all under Nyel's direction. Despite their success, the three schools had problems; their supervision demanded more attention than Nyel could give. The teachers were young, untrained, and in need of direction, and the classrooms were crowded. Around Easter of 1680, after sizing up the situation, De La Salle decided to invite the teachers into his family mansion for their meals. This way he could work with them and, he hoped, improve their teaching skills and motivation. The institute of the

Brothers of the Christian Schools dates its foundation from this event.

De La Salle's plan for the teachers worked: they improved, as did order in the schools. Even so, he was in a quandary. He wanted the Christian Free Schools, the name he and the Brothers later chose, to fulfill their mission, but success would depend on steady increases in the teachers' competence, which, in turn, would depend largely on his continually working with them. He was not at all sure how involved he should become with these schools and the teachers.

#### TEACHERS LIVE WITH DE LA SALLE

John Baptist sought the advice of Fr. Nicolas Barré, a man widely known for his work in establishing schools for poor children in Rouen and Paris. Barré's counsel was distressing and dramatic: he urged De La Salle to live with the teachers. In spite of the social disparity between the teachers and his own family, De La Salle decided to move the schoolmasters into his home when the lease on their rented house expired, on June 24, 1681. Anger, disbelief, and accusations of madness greeted this decision, but De La Salle persevered in his belief that providing disciplined, competent teachers was the work God had given him.

As requests came to open other free schools for boys, the teachers began to grumble about their insecurity and the hard life of religious discipline. John Baptist urged them to rely on Providence, but they reminded him that he would have no worries if the schools failed; he was independently wealthy and had a lifetime position as a cathedral canon.

Once again, De La Salle prayed to know God's will and turned to Father Barré for advice. Barré suggested that if De La Salle wanted these schools to prosper, he should resign his canonry and distribute his inherited wealth to poor people. If God wanted the Free Christian Schools as they were known to flourish, God would see to it. Many of De La Salle's friends and family opposed this radical recommendation, but after a long

period of prayer and consultation, he resigned his canonry, on August 16, 1683. In the winter of 1683–84, he distributed his inheritance to the Reims victims of the record-breaking famine then raging throughout France. He became as poor and reliant as the school-teachers on God's Providence.

#### FORMING COMMUNITY

De La Salle implemented the most useful methods of instruction in the schools and negotiated to open new Christian Schools, which were free of charge. He also began forming the teachers into a community of faith. They followed a schedule that included specific times for prayer, meals, study, and work. Some teachers left, unwilling to undertake such a rigorous lifestyle, but a small number remained.

John Baptist was now totally committed to the community of teachers. To establish their unique identity as laymen dedicated to the Free Christian Schools, they decided to call themselves Brothers and to adopt a simple attire that distinguished them from both clergy and well-to-do citizens.

In the spring of 1686, John Baptist convened the principal Brothers in a general assembly that adopted a distinctive habit, chose the name Brothers of the Christian Schools, and decided that the Brothers would make a private vow of obedience for three years. De La Salle persuaded them to choose one of their own to be the superior; they reluctantly agreed. Nonetheless, the archbishop of Reims—disturbed that one of his priests should have a Brother, a layman, as his superior—demanded that De La Salle resume the direction of the Institute.

#### ESTABLISHING MORE SCHOOLS

In February 1688, De La Salle and two Brothers arrived in Paris to accept the invitation made two years earlier by the pastor of Saint Sulpice, in Paris, to take charge of its free school. De La Salle knew that if the work they had started in Reims was to gain a firm foothold, the Brothers had to establish Christian Schools in the

## IN THE WORDS OF SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

### CALLING

*"You have been chosen by God to make Jesus Christ known and to proclaim him."*

MEDITATIONS

### TOUCHING HEARTS

*"Do you have a faith that is such that it is able to touch the hearts of your students and inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you could perform and the one that God asks of you, for this is the purpose of your work."* MEDITATIONS

### FAITH AND PROVIDENCE

*"The spirit of this community is, first, a spirit of faith, which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute all to God."*

RULE

### THE EYES OF FAITH

*"Look below the rags of the poor children whom you teach, and see the Christ-child lying in the manger."* MEDITATIONS

### TRUTH

*"God is so good that, having created us, he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of truth."* MEDITATIONS

### SALVATION

*"Make no distinction between the duties of your profession and those that refer to your salvation and perfection. Be convinced that you will never achieve your salvation nor acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your profession, provided you do so with the view of God's will."* RULE

### JESUS

*"Jesus Christ wants you to understand . . . that the more your work for the good of your discipline is given life by him and draws its power from him, the more it will produce good in them."* MEDITATIONS

### THE POOR

*"Every day you have poor children to instruct. Love them tenderly as this saint [Saint Cajetan] did, following in this the example of Jesus Christ. . . . These poor are also the ones whom God has entrusted to you and to whom you are obliged to proclaim the truths of the holy Gospel."* MEDITATIONS

### HOLY SPIRIT

*"You need the fullness of the Spirit of God in your state, for you should live and be guided only according to the spirit and the light of faith. It is only the Spirit of God who can give you this disposition."* MEDITATIONS

### COMMITMENT

*"God, who guides all things with wisdom and severity and whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He did this in an imperceptible manner and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning."* MEMOR

### MISSION

*"You are called by God to your work: You are the ones whom [God] has chosen to help in His work by announcing to these children the Gospel of his Son and the truths that are contained in it."* MEDITATIONS

capital. Their first school served two hundred poor boys. The Brothers grouped the boys by age and imposed order and a daily schedule. The priest who had been in charge of the school became jealous of the Brothers' success and started a rumor campaign against them. Nevertheless, the school thrived, and the pastor eventually put the Brothers in charge of other schools in the parish.

John Baptist continually searched for the most effective ways to educate poor children. He insisted that French be the language of instruction. Today it seems obvious that children learn best in their native tongue, but in De La Salle's time, elementary schools taught children to read and write Latin first and gave only minimal instruction in French. As another practical measure, De La Salle and the Brothers published their collected wisdom from these early years in a manual titled *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*. This book gave specific guidelines on such topics as "What Is Done During Breakfast and Afternoon Snack," "Reading the Chart of Syllables," "Training to Write Well," and "Prayers Said in School Daily." The manual integrated the Gospel into all aspects of life in the Christian Schools.

Problems continued to plague De La Salle, however. In Paris, the Christian Schools, charging no fees, posed a threat to teaching associations that required students to pay. Two of these groups filed lawsuits against De La Salle, twice seized the furniture of the Paris schools and forced their temporary closure, and continually harassed the small community of Brothers.

The Brothers led a hard life. Many died young from the diseases easily contracted in the crowded schools and streets. Exhaustion and stress made others vulnerable to discouragement. Some left to make a better living for themselves by using the skills they had learned as Brothers. John Baptist suffered a near-fatal illness.

In 1691, De La Salle could see that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools stood on the verge of collapse. He and two senior Brothers made a vow to keep the Institute alive—even if they were the last ones

left and had to live on bread alone. Soon more men joined, and the crisis passed. De La Salle opened a novitiate to train young men in the Brothers' life with a minimum of outside interference. On June 6, 1694, Trinity Sunday, De La Salle and twelve senior Brothers made the first perpetual vows in the history of the Institute.

#### **STRENGTHENING THE MINISTRY**

In 1699, in Paris, De La Salle designed the Christian Academy, a special program for poor young men under the age of twenty who had been working since childhood and lacked any sort of education, especially religious education. On Sundays and holidays, young workers learned reading, writing, arithmetic, drafting, and religion.

In 1705, the Brothers began to take charge of schools for poor boys in Rouen, and John Baptist established the novitiate there, at Saint Yon. The Brothers opened a boarding school at Saint Yon that included commercial courses, an innovative departure from the classical curriculum. When Rouen authorities asked De La Salle to take delinquent young men into his care, he set up the first reformatory school in France. By 1710, the Brothers had opened Christian Schools in over a dozen more cities in France.

#### **FACING MORE CHALLENGES**

In the winter of 1708–09, another severe famine swept through France, leaving thousands dead. The Brothers suffered along with everyone else. In Chartres alone, five Brothers died. In 1712, a wealthy benefactor in Paris reneged on his promise of financial support and even proceeded to have De La Salle fined and nearly jailed.

Between 1711 and 1714, De La Salle made two visits to communities established in the south of France. It was a difficult time. In 1713, a group of benefactors in Marseille withdrew their support over a policy dispute, and some Brothers in the south of France opposed De La Salle because he called them to account for deviating from the Rule of the Institute. One community refused him its hospitality altogether.

At this time—a time of personal uncertainty and abandonment for John Baptist—the principal Brothers in Paris sent him a letter ordering him, in virtue of his vow of obedience, to help in their struggle with pastors over control of schools and “to return to the care and general direction of God’s holy work.” De La Salle obeyed and lived with the Brothers in Paris for about a year, but he stayed in the background and insisted that Brother Barthélemy function for all practical purposes as the Superior.

#### FINAL YEARS

In November 1715, when the conflict in Paris calmed down, De La Salle moved to Saint Yon, Rouen, where he completed his revisions of the books and manuals he had written over the years, gave spiritual direction to the novices, and worked with the delinquent students.

De La Salle urged the Brothers to convoke a general assembly to elect a new Superior of the Institute. In May 1717, sixteen delegates representing the 101 Brothers in the Institute gathered and chose Brother Barthélemy as their Superior. For the last two years of his life, De La Salle withdrew from any direction of the Brothers. He spent long hours in prayer, and people frequently sought his spiritual guidance. The Institute continued to grow and to spread throughout the cities of France.

After an illness lasting all of Lent, John Baptist de La Salle died on Good Friday, April 7, 1719, after saying his last words: “I adore the guidance of God in everything concerning me.” Pope Leo XIII canonized John Baptist de La Salle in 1900, and Pope Pius XII proclaimed him patron of Christian educators in 1950.

#### LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY

De La Salle’s spirituality is based on profound faith and confidence in a loving God, which develops from unselfish acts on behalf of teachers and children, whom he believes God has confided to his care. His meditations, letters, catechism, and manuals address the problems and the blessings of the Brothers’ day-to-day life in

community and their ministry of teaching urban poor children, free of charge. Although his writings are directed to the Brothers, De La Salle’s spirituality is relevant for everyone engaged in the spiritual journey of an educator.

The spirit of faith is central to the spirituality of De La Salle. Through prayer and meditation on the Scriptures, the Brothers grow in faith, and they encounter and are guided by God’s Spirit within them. De La Salle knows from experience that without faith the Brothers become discouraged and selfish and abandon the Gospel mission to which God has called them.

To De La Salle, God is Providence as well as Presence. He trusts totally in the love God has for everyone. No matter how many times his opponents attack him, people abandon him, or poverty leaves the cupboards bare, De La Salle knows that God will provide.

De La Salle includes zeal along with faith as the spirit of the Institute. Faith always generously produces good works and courageous love.

Finally, De La Salle needs others in community with him to discern God’s will. Throughout his life De La Salle turns to his spiritual directors, his Brothers, his family, and his friends, as well as to prayer, penance, and the Scriptures, to discern what God wants of him.

#### THE LASALLIAN WAY

Lasallian spirituality is especially suited to people who rise early, are busy with their job, are concerned about their community and their family, and are trying to lead a Christian life in the context of ordinary daily living. De La Salle taught crowded classes, traveled on foot to administer the schools, coped with legal problems and unjust attacks, suffered from chronic rheumatism and asthma, lived in poverty, and yet believed that God would guide and bless him every step of the way. To travel with De La Salle as a companion on the spiritual journey is to trust, like he did, that God will provide and lead the way.

These three simple, challenging, and inspirational instructions express Lasallian spirituality:

**LIVE IN GOD'S PRESENCE, AND TRUST IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE.**

If you remind yourself that God is present, you are more likely to act as God desires. "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." Remember that our good work is God's doing!

**READ THE GOSPEL, AND PRAY ALWAYS.**

Read the Scriptures daily. To be inspired by faith that is grounded in Jesus, encounter Jesus in the Scriptures. Besides meditating on the Scriptures and recalling the presence of God, praying regularly and interiorly is indispensable for nourishing a faith guided by the movement of the Spirit.

**WORK WITH THE POOR, AND WORK IN COMMUNITY.**

Join in community with others to see that people who are marginalized are confirmed in their dignity and included in opportunities to gain knowledge of truth—especially the truth of God's love.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Pray for us.  
Live, Jesus, in our hearts! Forever!

To order additional copies:



Saint Mary's Press  
702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1320  
800-533-8095 [www.amp.org](http://www.amp.org) [smppress@amp.org](mailto:smppress@amp.org)