

LET US REMEMBER ...

WE ARE IN THE HOLY PRESENCE OF GOD



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A HISTORY OF
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BOOK REFERENCE

Introduction

Chapter 1 - Early Days

Chapter 2 - A Question of Curriculum

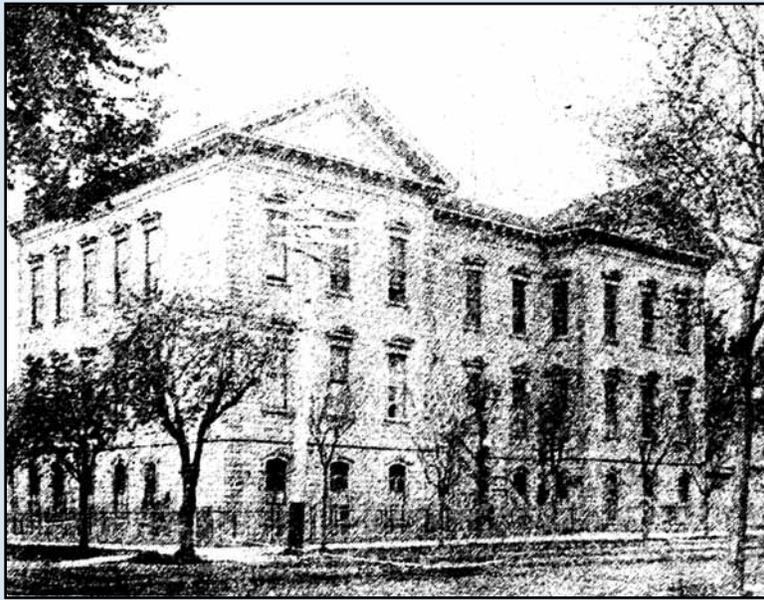
Chapter 3 - The Founder

Chapter 4 - From Old to New Again

Chapter 5 - Fight to Survive

Chapter 6 - The Times Are A'Changing

Chapter 7 - New Beginnings



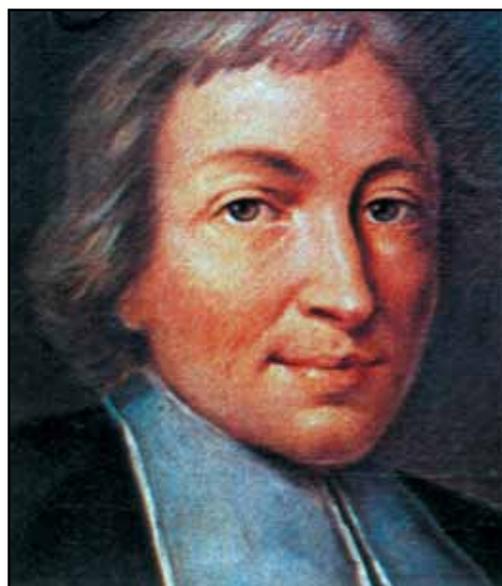
*This book was written to honor all of the
dedicated teachers and staff who have so warmly
welcomed the students into their lives
with wisdom and enthusiasm.*

THE FOUNDER

John Baptist de La Salle was born April 30, 1651 in Rheims, France, a beautiful, historic city, where French kings were ceremoniously crowned upon ascendancy to the throne. His was a family of aristocracy, with his father and grandfather magistrates of the Presidential Court of Rheims. Likewise, his mother's family, the Moet's, had direct ties to nobility in Rheims going back at least three centuries. The cloth and fabric trade was the primary source of the couple's wealth. Also, as a Moet, John Baptist's mother quite possibly derived direct income from her family's extensive vineyard holdings. John Baptist was the oldest of ten children born to the de La Salle family, seven of which lived to adulthood.

By age ten, John Baptist had made the decision to study for the priesthood, signaling his intentions with his participation in an official ceremony in 1661. Just short of his sixteenth birthday, de La Salle was made a Canon of the Cathedral, an honor that recognized his intent to enter Holy Orders. It was a title that in the day brought both prestige and personal benefits, but also responsibilities, ones that John Baptist assumed in earnest and diligence.

De La Salle began his formal studies for the priesthood in 1670 when he entered St. Sulpice Seminary in Paris. He could not have known it at this point in his education, but de La Salle had taken the first steps toward his life's work. St. Sulpice had the seminarians teach catechism to the poor in Paris. Profoundly moved by this experience, de La Salle had decided this to be a path he must follow. During the same era, John Baptist was also named executor and administrator of his parent's vast estate with their recent passing.



De La Salle did return to Rheims as his legal duties required him to do and proficiently served in the capacity as both an administrator of his family's fortunes and also as guardian to his six younger siblings. However, at the same time, John Baptist continued his religious studies, unswerving in answering his vocational calling.

John-Baptist was ordained to the priesthood in 1678. The following year, de La Salle had a chance meeting with Adrian Nyel, a layman who had spent many years in Rouen, France working to provide education for the poor and who had been approached by a wealthy widow about doing similar work in Rheims. Interested in what he saw in Nyal's service to the downtrodden, de La Salle found himself becoming more and more involved in education. What had started as simple charitable assistance was now becoming de La Salle's focus.

John Baptist grew up in a France that had very rigid social and class distinctions- the rich held the decided upper hand and the poor almost no chance to advance their personal lot. De La Salle willingly walked away from the life he was born into and was increasingly and profoundly drawn into a world of which he did not previously know- grinding poverty, disadvantaged students, and uncultured teachers. Moved so by those who "seemed so far from salvation," John Baptist focused on using his talents at the service of the children "often left to themselves and badly brought up."

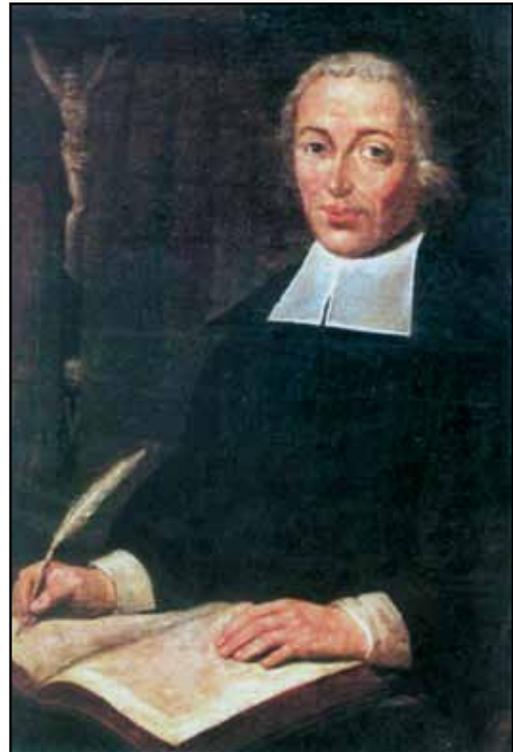
It was then that de La Salle stepped irretrievably into that world. He first invited the teachers of the poor into his home, fed them, and encouraged their efforts. He began with the basics such as table manners, simple courtesies, and instructed them in their teaching methods. Shortly thereafter, he gave up his position of Canon and all the prestige that went with it. De La Salle, during a severe famine outbreak in Rheims, gave away all his wealth to help feed the masses. In so doing, de La Salle, formerly a wealthy man and widely respected priest, now put his life in parallel with the minimally literate and unpolished layman. This was all for the cause of education of the poor who so desperately needed guidance and some hope. De La Salle then began the process of forming a new community of lay religious teachers.

Indeed, if I had ever thought the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project...God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, 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 way 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.

In 1686, the first General Assembly was held in Rheims with the name “Brothers of the Christian Schools” adopted along with a vow of obedience. One of the lay Brothers was elected Superior, at de La Salle’s insistence. Of course, the thought that a priest would be on equal terms with his fellow laymen was outrageous to the Church authorities. Nevertheless, the momentum of the community was to be unceasingly forward and they were to move independently from the Church. The resistance was often severe but the successes gained by the association of the Brothers were undeniable. Initially, the Brothers operated within the geographical diocese of Rheims and, as their work was shown to be so positive, the local Bishop even offered financial assistance. But, de La Salle was reaching another crossroad. The Brothers community started to look beyond their base, realizing there were other locales in France with acute need of assistance, first going west to Paris, opening schools there, before moving south.

Beyond the network of assistance in formation of the many schools, it was the method of instruction that has been so unique. This includes some characteristics that are so much a part of a Christian Brothers school today that we don’t even stop to think that it was a very radical departure from the ways of instruction that preceded it.

Firstly, de La Salle and his fellow Brothers taught in the vernacular. John Baptist also developed a formalized, systematic method of instruction, in the process, writing textbooks and teacher guides. An important emphasis that, of course, endures to this day, is the education of the whole person with a breadth of subjects and bringing religious study and prayer together with secular subjects. The students were taught in larger groups in the classroom as opposed to one or two students with a teacher. The students were sometimes grouped by academic ability so that individuals could be challenged with appropriate levels of difficulty of subject matter. De La Salle emphasized the teaching of polite manners and social decorum, leading to a student’s respect for both themselves and the school community. John Baptist is also credited with opening the first training school for teachers, founded in 1685.



It is the Holy Spirit who unites you, one to the other, not only that a new kind of school may be created out of your association together, but also that this Brotherhood that is rooted in the Gospel may spread far and wide. Such a school is a place for mutual evangelization, for sharing and support, for reconciliation, and forgiveness.

For essentially the remainder of his life, de La Salle worked tirelessly- really, to the point of exhaustion at times- opening schools, keeping other struggling ones afloat, humbly resolute in his calling to bring education to as many as he and his fellow Brothers could reach and serve. John Baptist de La Salle died in 1719 in Saint-Yon, Rouen, France. On May 24, 1900, de La Salle was canonized by Pope Leo XIII and was proclaimed the Patron of All Teachers of Youth on May 15, 1950. He left behind an amazing legacy of achievement in education. Today, there are over 5,000 Brothers and 75,000 lay teachers in more than 1,000 schools, colleges, and universities serving students in over 80 countries worldwide.

I tell you gentlemen, that if God, in showing me the good that would be done by this Society had also disclosed to me the trials and crosses which were to accompany it, I would have lacked courage, and, far from assuming charge of it, I would not dare to touch it with the tips of my fingers...In a word, if God had not stretched out His hand to sustain this edifice in a visible manner, it would long since have been buried in ruins.



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

(Author's note: Much of the material in this chapter was adapted from an article, John Baptist de La Salle: His Life and Times, in Signs of Faith, Fall 2000)