

# **The Vows of the Brothers in the History of the Institute**

(To the Committee of Vows – 1974)

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The study that follows has three principal parts:

- 1) the importance given to the structure of vows at the beginning of the Institute and in the lives of the Brothers at that time;
- 2) the meaning of the vows according to the formulas of 1691 and 1694;
- and 3) the vows of the brothers at the beginning of the Institute and the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in particular.

## **I. The importance given to the structure of vows at the beginning of the Institute and in the lives of the Brothers at that time**

### **A. The introduction of vows**

- B. Vows and commitment
- C. Structures in the Institute
- D. The secondary position of the vows.

In a sense the vows were introduced rather early into the community that formed around De La Salle, whose association with teachers began in 1679. In the next three years, he played an increasingly greater role in founding and directing schools as well as in leading the small group of teachers. It was at first gradually and then totally that he began to link his lot in life with theirs. He formed them into a community by becoming part of it himself. As his commitment became increasingly fulltime, it led him to make certain irreversible decisions:

- in 1682, along with them, he moved out of the De La Salle household;
- in 1683, he renounced his canonicate;
- and in the winter 1684-1685, he distributed his wealth to the needy.

According to his first biographers, it was at the end of 1681 or at the beginning of 1682 that the community began to take shape: it included a common residence, meals together, group experiences and, starting in the winter of 1684-1685, a distinctive garb.

It was probably at a meeting in Rheims on the Feast of the *Holy Trinity*, 1686, that the brothers took a temporary vow of obedience. The members of this assembly arrived at this rather modest decision after contemplating binding themselves for the rest of their lives by the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Very few members of the original group of teachers that De La Salle had met in 1679 were still in the community. Hence only a few of those first members were at the meeting of 1686. In fact, the new life-style of the small group living in community resulted in most of the teachers withdrawing while at the same time new candidates with a talent for teaching, some spiritual formation, and a disposition for living in community asked to be admitted. This occurred at the beginning of 1682. In all, then, it took only four or five years, even less for some members of the 1686 assembly, not only for the actual

introduction of vows into the community of De La Salle, but also for the teachers to envisage binding themselves definitively by the three traditional vows.

The desire to adopt the three vows “of religion” in the community of De La Salle appears to have been with the brothers throughout the lifetime of the Founder. Their wishes were fulfilled when while taking steps to obtain pontifical approbation, Rome informed them that they would receive papal recognition only by expressly introducing the three traditional vows into their vow formula. The brothers pronounced the five vows in 1726.

In contrast to this development, it is possible to take the position that the vows were introduced progressively and at a relatively late date. First of all, the vows of 1686 were limited in their object (only the vow of obedience), limited in their duration (only temporary), limited by those who took the vows (only members of that assembly). They had no public character.

It is only on November 11, 1691, at a time of crisis when the newly founded community seemed on the verge of disappearing, that De La Salle bound himself definitively by vow with two companions, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, to establish the Society of the Christian Schools.

The association planned at that time took shape only on the Feast on the Trinity, June 6, 1694, when De La Salle pronounced a perpetual vow with twelve companions whose names were recited as each one pronounced his vows. The object of these perpetual vows was clearly defined: association to keep together the gratuitous schools; stability in the said Society; obedience to the body of the Society and to the superiors. Fifteen years had elapsed since the first steps were taken; twelve since the first community was formed. Finally, it was a rather limited nucleus of brothers who took vows at that time.

The same vows were taken during the whole lifetime of the Founder. In fact, numerous brothers bound themselves thus to the Society for their entire life. In certain cases the age of those taking vows was rather young and the lapse of time between their entry into the Institute and perpetual profession very short. Nevertheless, it is only seven years after the death of the Founder that the brothers added the vows of poverty and chastity to the three vows that they were already taking.

Even then, the Institute's decision to adopt the three traditional religious vows did not mean that from then on all the brothers took the vows of religion nor that the Institute became a religious congregation. Of course, the brothers and well informed outsiders might have thought that the Bull of Approbation constituted the brothers as a “religious order” and even, according to Blain, that their vows were “solemn” ones. But the brothers allowed this misconception to exist when it suited them. Otherwise they insisted on their status as laymen. Whatever that situation may have been, it was only at the time of the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1918 that the vows in the Institute became properly speaking “vows of religion” and that the Institute became canonical “religious”; and in 1918 the Institute gave no evidence of hesitating to choose to be a religious congregation.

Still, from the viewpoint of the Institute's early history, it would have been theoretically possible for the Brothers to have chosen a type of Society where they would live together without vows. According to the studies of Brother Maurice Auguste, such a choice would have been just as conformable, if not more so, to the intentions of the Founder. One should be prudent in drawing conclusions from this data since the juridical character of the Institute is relatively recent and we lack certitude about De La Salle's

intentions. Nevertheless, it is probable that the Founder did not envision that his Society would be counted among the religious congregations with simple vows. Furthermore, there is no proof that he would have wanted the introduction of the three traditional vows.

It was only in 1918 that the vows became obligatory in the Institute for all members starting at the end of the noviciate; from then on, one could really be a brother only by taking them. It even became an article of Rule that perpetual vows has to be pronounced after a period of temporary vows. Up until 1918, one could be a brother for a longer or a shorter period of time, even until death, without ever taking a vow. No doubt this was the exception, but it is no less an important fact which the legislation of 1918 has made us lose sight of. The proof of this is that *Renovationis Causam* had little impact on us even though it went back in theory to our oldest and longest tradition, that of allowing someone without vows to be a member of the Institute. In fact, *Renovationis Causam* goes beyond our former practice in that it allows for the total suppression of temporary vows whereas, up until 1918, admission to perpetual vows necessarily supposed a period of temporary vows.

## **B. Vows and commitment**

It is evident, then, that **the vow commitment cannot be understood apart from the other important considerations**. First of all, it is not the vow structure which constitutes the Brother or even defines his commitment. *This was evident in de La Salle's case*. It was not a vow structure which indicated the steps of his progressive commitment to the teachers and as he strove with them to carry out God's plan to serve "poor and abandoned" youth. His commitment involved his whole life, which he understood as a response to God's call to cooperate in carrying out his plan in favor of young men "far from salvation".

This life commitment of the Founder was both existential and transcendent; his commitment to God took shape and was strengthened by his everyday fidelity to the Brothers and to youth. The important point is that he made the decisive and radical option for the apostolate of the Institute before the vow of 1686 and *a fortiori* before those of 1691 and 1694. What is more, the step taken in 1691 with Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart can be explained only by their previous life commitment. In other words, De La Salle and his two companions do not commit themselves by vows *in order to* commit themselves existentially; they commit themselves by vows *because* they are already existentially committed. At a time of crisis, they reaffirm the resolve which for years had already guided their actions and their life. The same thing may be said with regard to the vows taken in 1694 by twelve brothers. These vows were intended to consecrate rather than constitute the association envisioned from the very beginning and clearly projected in 1691. For De La Salle, the act of 1694 ratified that of 1691 as well as the whole life commitment which was expressed and renewed at that time.

It is now possible to understand the part played by the vow structure in the larger context of De La Salle's existential commitment. The vows of 1691 and 1694 ratified and expressed his life commitment. They situated it in the totality of a life whose meaning had become clear in successive stages; they affirmed the unity of his personal existence summed up at an important moment of time. The formula reveals the historical problems and the difficulties as they were encountered and foreseen. Besides, by affirming and celebrating in some way his life commitment, the acts of 1691 and 1694 reinforced and gave it a second start. It is worthwhile noting that the vow of 1691 was pronounced by

De La Salle at a time when his previous efforts seemed to be doomed to failure since the community was on the verge of abandoning its work.

The vow commitment was also a *personal* commitment that resulted in a freedom from the world by fixing one's sights on God. However, this is so only because a person takes a step that affirms and strengthens human solidarity. It was *with* men that De La Salle committed himself. It was *in order to* establish an association (1691) and to give it consistency (1694) that he committed himself by vow. It is specifically to serve human beings ("poor and abandoned children") that he simultaneously committed himself and joined others in order to found a community dedicated to the purpose which was its very reason for being. Here again, the vow commitment had its meaning and value in the light of a broader existential commitment which gave it direction and meaning.

Something happened much later that sheds light on just how serious the vow commitment of the Founder was. In the well known letter of 1714, the principal brothers in Paris commanded De La Salle, then in the Midi, to return to take up the government of the Institute. They expressly referred to the vow he took twenty years earlier. "*We command you in the name and on the part of the Body of the Society, to which you promised obedience, to look after the general government of our Society at all times*".

It is evident that the initiative of the brothers and their very language referred back to his vow commitment. It is also clear that De La Salle yielded at that time by fidelity to his vow. However, to understand this unusual exchange in a juridical and mechanical fashion would lessen its significance considerably.

Here again, this command and this obedience have to be seen in their existential context. For one thing De La Salle was at that time uncertain. He seemed no longer capable of discernment. The initiative of his followers gave him a clear, objective path to follow. He did not respond like a robot, but like a man who had discovered his way. Here again, fidelity to the "vow" is only the image of fidelity to himself, to his life, and to his life-work, obscured for a while by seeming contradictions. For another thing, it should be clearly understood what constituted this crisis which De La Salle faced during a period of great darkness: it involved the very meaning of his life. He believed that God had called him to found the Society of Brothers and everything seemed to indicate that he had failed, that he had been mistaken. It is his very relationship with God that had been struck a blow. The brothers, as a matter of fact, seemed to reject him; the Institute appeared to be breaking up into little cliques; ecclesiastical superiors had been appointed in contradiction to what had been decided shortly after the profession of those who took the vows in 1694. In such a situation, what did the brothers' letter mean? That the Society had a sense of itself, that its members believe this to such an extent that they came together on their own initiative, that they acted as the spokesmen for the "Body of the Society". As a result, everything became clear, and De La Salle could take up his work again.

Nevertheless, he certainly did not comply materially and mechanically to an order received. The brothers' letter, in its content as much as by the bold initiative it represented, brought him back to his whole life commitment. He responded by going beyond the letter's command in order to be even more faithful to this commitment. The brothers had asked him to resume the work of the general running of the Society. His response went beyond the demand for he returned only in order to bring about something that had always appeared to him to be of the utmost importance if the Society was to take definitive form, namely, to hand over the overall government of the Institute to a brother. Immediately upon his return, he shared the leadership with Brother

Barthélemy and he steered the Institute toward the General Chapter of 1717 which named his successor. In any case, this is a good example of how the Founder's commitment went far beyond obedience to a vow.

The fact that a life commitment can go beyond the vow commitment and, in fact, explains it appears also *in the case of the first brothers*. At least, that can be concluded from the biographies of the Founder when they refer to the young men who joined up with him at the beginning of 1682. It was a matter of conscious and resolute decision for these brothers to take up a new life which would put them in touch with an authentic spiritual master and make them available for an urgent and efficacious service to men. Several among them even gave up their initial orientation towards the priesthood. They did not enter into a structure, a well-defined state of life officially considered as accepted. But they committed themselves to a life that seemed at the time being growing at Rheims. Their life commitment came from a *liberty*, an interior movement allowing them to discern De La Salle's evangelical spirit, and from a desire to give themselves to the service of the poor. The commitment by vow came later. They would live their commitment progressively with the temporary vow of obedience only in 1686 and perpetual vows in 1691. The vow eventually expressed what they had first of all lived: the association to keep free schools, a life of obedience, and stability.

### **C. Structures in the Institute**

Nor is the structure for committing oneself by vows sufficient to constitute or define the *community* or the *Society* that formed itself around De La Salle. The earliest text of De La Salle that we have reveals his conception of the Institute. It is the *Memoir on the Habit*, written no doubt at the end of 1689 or the beginning of 1690 to defend the brothers' public image and to claim internal autonomy for the community now become interdiocesan. Obviously the text insists on the rather unusual habit, opposed by the pastor of St. Sulpice, explaining its functional nature and its importance for the special identity of those men who were neither clerics nor seculars. But even more than a form of dress, the Founder was defending an idea that he considered very important, the internal autonomy of the community, which was contested by the pastor of St. Sulpice who wanted the brothers to wear the ecclesiastical habit. This defensive stance led him to take a strong stand for the role the habit would play in the birth of the Institute and the uniform understanding of its identity. "*Before this special habit...*" "*Since this habit...*," he builds several paragraphs on this contrast. But the text evokes the principal structures which defined the community at that time: members followed a rule, were not independent, held no property, lived a common life. There is no talk here of vows, although these were already present, no doubt largely because these vows were neither taken by everyone nor were they official. In any case, a structure based on a commitment by vows did not seem to be decisive for constituting the community nor for deciding who belonged to it.

It was in 1726 that Chapters XVII: *On the Vows* and XVIII: *On the Obligation of the Vows of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* were added to the Rule; the Rule of 1705 and of 1718 had nothing similar. These absences can be explained and certainly too much weight should not be given them since, as was noted above, the vows were introduced into the Institute as early as 1686 and 1694. Yet the legislation of the Founder did not give them a constitutive importance for the community.

*Structures* obviously existed in the community of De La Salle from the very beginning. The Founder and the brothers spent a great deal of time in their elaboration. The Rule was written much later in comparison with the usages of common life which were



established at once: the style of life, the exercises, and everything held in common. Structures of government were devised as well; the lay character of the Institute was defined and maintained; the unity of structure was affirmed and defended in the course of important disputes. The vows appeared as one of those structures but only as one of them, and not the most decisive one.

With regard to this structure, and in general those structures just spoken about, a comparison between the attitude of De La Salle and that of the brothers will help show its meaning. Now, the Founder's biographers show a certain slight difference, not to say divergence, between the mentality and preoccupations of the brothers and those of De La Salle. It seems that the brothers pressed more for the vows than the Founder did although, at the time of the first assembly of 1686, the initiative for taking vows appeared to come from De La Salle himself. But his role seems to have been especially one of taking care that things did not go too far: at the outset the brothers wanted *perpetual* vows of chastity and obedience and even, according to the second Maillefer biography, of poverty. De La Salle kept them from moving too swiftly. "(He) does not want to rush into anything; he tells them that for the present it is sufficient to bind themselves by the vow of obedience for one year only, and to save their good will for another time, meanwhile they will have the leisure to prove themselves after more experience." It took eight years before De La Salle consented, at the insistence of the brothers, to permit twelve of them to take perpetual vows of association, stability, and obedience. The brothers appear to have put great weight on commitment by vows in order to keep them faithful. De La Salle was more reserved; he believed that the commitment by vow would have meaning and effectiveness only to the extent that it were to express a life commitment come to maturity over a long period of time and, above all, lived out. He was justified by the facts for from the very beginning a number of brothers who took perpetual vows left the Institute.

This may also be seen in another matter that is related to the vows. In the biographies of the Founder another important difference, if not divergence, between the master and his disciples had to do with the *official approbation of the Society*. It would be an exaggeration to say that De La Salle was not concerned about it. He sent Gabriel Drolin to Rome, for example, and that indicates at least a certain orientation toward the recognition of the Society by the Holy See. Yet this motivation hardly appeared in his correspondence with Drolin. The brothers, on the other hand, were much more concerned about such juridical recognition. Several times the Founder cautioned them on this point, requesting them not to give priority or even exclusivity to this justifiable goal. The first real steps toward the recognition of the Institute by Rome were taken after the Founder's death.

The biographies as well as the whole history of De La Salle allow the following interpretation. The Founder's entire life was certainly motivated and given its dynamism by his fundamental goal: to establish, strengthen, and assure the continuity of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, which he saw to be vitally and urgently necessary for the salvation of a vast segment of youth, namely, poor and abandoned children. All his efforts went toward the achievement of this goal. However, rather than rely on extrinsic means for the solidity and existence of his Society, he wanted it to be self sufficient. In particular this meant, first and foremost,

a) that it be constituted of men who would volunteer freely and were aware of their life commitment as well as its urgency and necessity. The difference between the first group and the second in 1682 illustrates this. The first teachers were not entirely willing

recruits. They belonged rather to the category of hired helpers. The difference in 1682 was that level-headed, free men joined up.

b) The Founder was concerned, secondly, that these men would be spiritually committed and live according to the spirit which this implied, in particular with an awareness that they had answered a call from God to a human endeavor. He insisted that they see the urgent needs of abandoned youth and understand them in the light of an ongoing history of salvation; that they recognize in the loving teaching of neglected youth that a salvific event was being carried out for both the young and themselves; that this was transforming their existence and opening up access to their liberty as the children of God; that daily effort was needed to live this important message of salvation as disinterested, attentive, competent and courageous ministers of the kingdom of God in behalf of this neglected youth. All of this is particularly clear notably in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

c) In the third place, he wanted the Society to become both the object and the incentive of this life commitment for men freely associated and responsible for their common apostolate and for the shape that the Society would gradually assume. Of course, this Society could not exist without structures. However, De La Salle appeared more concerned about the authenticity and vitality of the structural process rather than the nature of the structures resulting from it. He held to the structures because they expressed and construed a kind of association understood as a manifestation and context for their mutual education here and now in the living reality of the Gospel. Thus it was important to the Founder at the outset that the elaboration of the structures should truly be the work of the brothers themselves; that the Rule be lived by them before it was codified. De La Salle considered it most important that all the brothers participate freely in organizing it. Furthermore, the organization was elaborated only in reference to the *raison d'être* of the Society. Thus it was out of its own strength that the Society was established and kept together and not primarily by exterior structures of juridical approval. The latter were not neglected, but De La Salle requested those brothers who were overly concerned about obtaining official approval to seek their personal and community assurance primarily in their lived commitment, viewed in its spiritual meaning and importance as well as in the way its structures evolved from within.

This is the broad reality which had its part to plan in structuring the commitment by vows; the reticence of De La Salle when faced with the urgings of the brothers reveals clearly his fundamental intention. On the one hand, he did not hasten the introduction of perpetual vows, even though he accepted and even encouraged this step when he thought it corresponded to and would strengthen the lived reality. On the other hand, the content of the commitment that he favored was defined by starting from the experience of the Society in view of better carrying out its apostolate: association to maintain the free schools, stability, obedience to superiors and to the body of the Society.

Here again, the difference, and perhaps the divergence, of perspective between the Founder and his disciples becomes particularly meaningful, especially when it is a question of the vow structure. When De La Salle, in 1686, spoke of vows, the brothers seemed to think immediately of the three traditional vows. No doubt this meant that they tended to seek their identity by referring to already existing states of life and categories.

In short, their desire for the three vows was in effect a search for an extrinsic identity. The refusal of the Founder, as well as the content given the vows of 1686 and 1694, arose from an entirely different point of reference: the act of commitment by vow should

express a life experience, proclaim this experience, and in proclaiming it strengthen and broaden its scope.

**D. The secondary position of the vows.**

One other remark should be added. The spiritual teaching of the Founder on commitment and on fidelity had very little reference to the vows that were taken. There is only one explicit text on this subject; it is found in the *Collection* of 1711 in the chapter entitled, “*What the Brothers of the Christian Schools Are Obligated to by the Vows.*” This text is rather juridical in style, and contrasts with the overall teaching of De La Salle. On the whole, the Founder describes the commitment and fidelity of the brothers in terms of person and of relations: “to be faithful to these young people who are confided to you, faithful to the task to help them lead a useful human life in society and open to a filial spirit...”; in terms of fidelity to the spirit; in terms of real solidarity with the men one has joined and with whom one is associated. Also, from another viewpoint, when De La Salle referred to the Gospels as important for his brothers, this had nothing to do with an abstract and stunted understanding of the three evangelical counsels. First of all, De La Salle referred constantly to the whole Gospel; secondly, he referred the brothers to the meaning and dynamism of the Good News of Salvation in terms of entry into the life of adopted sonship, universal brotherhood, growth in the Spirit; finally and especially, the Gospel is regarded and presented by him as an actual reality, an event of today which reaches into the heart of the brother who is an agent chosen by God to do his work and make the Gospel a living reality.

In this perspective, the theme of consecration is much more decisive than that of the vows. This can be seen in the very formula of the vows. However, De La Salle did not so much develop a theory of consecration for the brothers as help them to see in their daily lives a real experience. They were consecrated to poor and abandoned youth in order to contribute to their full liberation. He urged them to live this reality of their lives by “honoring their ministry”. He encouraged them to consider and to live this everyday reality as a history of salvation, begun at creation, accomplished in Christ and whose fulfilment was, at one and the same time, already taking place and still awaited. Finally, for De La Salle, religious commitment was neither something added to nor different from human commitment. The vow commitment contained nothing of a religious superstructure.

<b>Formula of Vows 1691</b>	<b>Formula of Vows 1694</b>
<p>Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,            prostrate with profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, <i>we consecrate ourselves</i> entirely to you</p> <p><i>to procure by all our power and all our efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools</i> in the manner which will appear to us to be most agreeable to you and most advantageous for the said Society.</p> <p>And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, ... we, now and forever, until death or the completion of the establishment of the said Society,</p> <p><i>vow association and union to procure and</i></p>	<p>Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,            prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, <i>I consecrate myself</i> entirely to you</p> <p><i>to procure your glory</i> as far as I am able and as you will require of me.</p> <p>And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, ... promise and <i>vow to unite myself and to live in Society</i> with...</p> <p><i>to keep together and by association</i></p>



<p><i>maintain</i> the said establishment, even when we shall be the only three to remain in the said Society and we shall be obliged to beg and live bread alone.</p> <p>Wherefore, we promise to do unanimously and with a common agreement all that we shall believe in conscience and without any human consideration to be for the greatest good of the said Society</p> <p>Done this 21<sup>st</sup> day of November feast of the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin.</p> <p>In testimony whereof we have signed.</p>	<p><i>gratuitous schools</i>, wherever I may be, even if I were obliged in order to do so, to beg and to live on bread alone, <i>or to do whatever in the said Society at which I shall be employed, wether by the body of this Society, or by the Superiors who will have the government thereof.</i></p> <p>Wherefore, I promise and vow obedience to the body of the Society as well as to the Superiors; which vows of association, as well as stability in the said Society, and of obedience, I promise to keep inviolably all my life.</p> <p>In testimony whereof I have signed.</p> <p>Done at Vaugirard, this 6<sup>th</sup> day of June, feast of the Most Holy Trinity, in the year one thousand six hundred and ninety-four.</p> <p>De La Salle.</p>
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## II. The meaning of the Vows according to the formulas of 1691 and 1694

- A. A reminder of the past and hope for the future
- B. Commitment expressing a prior commitment to the plan of God
- C. Commitment to an established yet open-ended apostolate
- D. A commitment to a personal and community search
- E. Thrust and structures of the commitment

It remains to examine the meaning of the vows according to the formulas of 1691 and 1694. In light of what has just been said, it is worthwhile studying, however briefly, the formulas used by De La Salle and by the brothers at the time the vows were taken in 1691 and 1694. Certain historical facts aid in understanding these formulas properly.

The formula of 1686 was not preserved. It is not impossible that at that time a text, more or less like the ones we are going to examine, was used. Brother Maurice Auguste has proposed a "maximum" text which could have been used, but this is a hypothesis.

The formula of 1691 was that of the vow taken by De La Salle and by Gabriel Drolin and Nicholas Vuyart on November 21 of that year. It was a "secret" vow: this can explain why no handwritten copy is remaining. It has been preserved by Blain. Its authenticity is beyond doubt, and it is likely that Blain learned of it from Drolin himself after his return from Rome.

The formula of 1694 has come down to us in fourteen copies: thirteen in the Book of the first vows, the fourteenth, on a simple piece of paper, entirely in the hand of the Founder. This formula remained substantially in use until the reception of the Bull, and essentially we still use it. But it was only in 1694 that each of the thirteen persons making vows named the twelve others with whom he was committing himself.

The formula of vows which is considered the work of De La Salle is no doubt original. Brother Maurice Auguste's study shows how its particular tonality is far removed from the dry juridical language of any number of previous texts as well as from the flowery and redundant language popular in the Founder's day.

Finally, in both of these cases, we are dealing with significant and rich actions, not with conventional and predetermined acts.

### **A. A reminder of the past and hope for the future**

De La Salle and his brothers did not begin by pronouncing vows. The vows grew out of a historical process at a given time. They recalled an *experience* that was first of all lived.

It was a *human* experience of an association that took birth and progressed with men whose names we know; a human experience of a specific enterprise which gave rise to the community and gave life to its inspiration and its structures: the community was destined to carry out an urgent task, the "salvation" of neglected youth; a human experience of a difficult undertaking: when those who vowed themselves spoke of "begging alms and living on bread alone", it was not an echo of romantic heroism, but a reference to something already experienced in the Society.

It was a *religious, Christian and spiritual* experience in the strongest sense of these words. In particular, this is the meaning of the reference to the Trinity in the introductory words of the formula. It signified that these men were entering into existential dialogue with the living God who had called them and was sending them forth. But this religious experience is not to be understood as dissociated from human experience.

The formula of vows, by recalling a lived experience, affirms its *actuality*: here and now, in the very act of committing oneself by vows a person's previous history is given expression and, in a sense, brought to completion. When De La Salle pronounced the vows with Drolin and Vuyart in 1691 and with his twelve companions in 1694, this constituted not only a ratification of the past, but also a crucial reinforcement of the hesitant beginning they had already experienced. The full force of these acts is shown by the historical context: the vows of 1691 started from a hopeless situation, but it established a three fold basis upon which the community consciousness of the young Society could be built; the vows of 1694, agreed upon at the end of a ten-day meeting, effectively made explicit a community consciousness welded together during those days of deliberation and of retreat. The very next day, making explicit reference to this act of association, the same twelve brothers decided that a future superior would be one of their own number and not a priest.

Thus, at a crucial point of time, by accepting and affirming their experience in the act of committing themselves by vows the brothers opened up the totality of their future personal history which was tied inseparably to their work. This dynamic opening to a future, which each brother committed himself to realize in a community, is inseparable from an openness toward God. Such an understanding gives a broader meaning to expressions such as "I consecrate myself entirely to you". Too often the totality of the consecration is analyzed in static categories: I give to God all that I am, all my goods, my affectivity, my liberty, my time. This vow formula suggests another totality, a more human one, by clearly opening out to an objective yet to be carried out. At the same time, the image of the God to whom one consecrates himself is not so much that of a sovereign requiring "everything", or even of a tremendous Lover, although this is not necessarily excluded, as that of a living Power who, while he welcomes the here and

now, is also moving toward a future. A brother making vows is like a worker whose work is already carried out in this very consecration, but at the same time in the process of completion; and one associates himself with this objective as a free and responsible person. This leads to an entirely different notion of fidelity, oriented much more to the future rather than to the past.

## **B. The commitment by vows expresses a Mystery being worked out in history**

At the outset the two vow formulas refer to the mystery of the living God, the Trinity, and love, in the solemn language of theocentric spirituality typical of that time. Everything starts from the living God. Everything goes back to him and to his Glory. But this theocentrism should not obscure the importance of man, his history, his becoming, his responsibility, and his initiative. The historical and concrete dimension is present everywhere in the vow formulas.

- There is explicit mention of the real men who commit themselves and with whom one is committed. There is no anonymity, no otherworldliness.

- Importance is given to human initiative, good will, human activity (cf. “to procure by all our power and all our efforts...”, “to procure your glory as far as I am able...”).

- Mention is made of the precise concrete objective to which the brothers are committed : a temporary but also definitive objective at the time of the vows of 1691 (to procure and maintain the said establishment) and a permanent objective (to have gratuitous schools). This objective is to be given its full historical force: the gratuitous schools are those schools in which the brothers are working, which allow those poor and abandoned young, for whose salvation the brothers consecrate their lives, to have access to a rudimentary culture and education in the living faith. The historical importance of this concrete objective has to be emphasized in order to understand how it constituted a satisfying and decisive *raison d’être* for those who discovered it along with De La Salle during the course of their lives. It meant much more than “teaching school” or “having schools” in a general kind of way.

The historical and concrete situation is at least implicit also in the human process of discernment whereby this response is given day by day. The formula of 1691 is particularly explicit: “to do unanimously and with a common consent all that we believe in conscience to be of the greatest good for the Society”. The vow places emphasis on this objective of discernment: it also entails serious consequences as well as a leap into the unknown. In the formula of 1694, this human process of discernment is more implicit. Nevertheless, one can compare “obedience to the superiors and to the body of the Society” (1694) with “to do unanimously...”: obedience supposes discernment.

The theocentric dimension should not be dissociated from the concrete historical dimension. Mystery is actualized in history. Note here the significance of the words, “and for this end,” “that is why,” which show that it is really in association that the consecration of the brothers to God is accomplished ; it is in the school work that the glory of God is sought. Note also the parallelism between the two expressions of 1691 and 1694:

1691	1694
<p>We consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure... the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools.</p>	<p>I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory</p>

This parallelism is explained by comparisons with the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* which are a commentary on the expression, “I consecrate myself entirely to you”. There we find expressions such as: “to give your life to contribute to the salvation of youth” (198,2); “to sacrifice yourself and to spend your whole life in order to give them a Christian education” (201,3); “offer yourself to God in order to help the children confided to you to the extent that he will ask it of you” (197,2).

With regard to the expression “to procure your glory”, a glance at the word “procure” in the vocabulary of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* shows the equivalence between “procure the glory of God” and “procure the salvation of children”. *The glory of God is a man fully alive!*

On the other hand, concrete human history, with all its contingencies and the consequences that flow from responsible human commitment, derives its total importance and meaning from the fact that by it is accomplished effectively the work of salvation of man by God, that is, “the glory of God”. A religious orientation to life does not dispense from the great consequences of human options and activities; in fact, it is the contrary that is true.

The expression “heroic” has real meaning (“to beg alms and to live on bread alone”). Its radical and totalizing character comes to grips with a human, visible objective, seen in its eschatological significance, that is, in its noble role of manifesting and carrying out the work of salvation.

Compare the expressions:

1691	1694
to procure by all our power and all our efforts	to procure as far as I am able

The “as far as I am able” may appear subjective and even a bit weak, a sort of “I’ll do my best”. But the comparison with the 1691 parallel sheds another light on this formula by objectifying it “by all our power and all our efforts”. This takes seriously the idea of ministry in all its concrete details, about which the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* speak so often (“you should esteem your ministry,” “you should examine how seriously you have carried it out...”); this is the living out of the talents that the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* refer to also. It is especially important to note the weight given to the educational relationship with these poor and abandoned children. In the exercise of this ministry, the educational relationship is obviously manifest but so is the consecration of oneself to God. This is evident from the stress in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* on the apostolic activity, the site of the evangelization of the apostle, of his growth in Christ.

Compare the expressions:

1691	1694
to procure the establishment... in the manner which will appear <i>to us</i> to be most agreeable <i>to you and</i> most advantageous for the said Society.	to procure your glory... as you will require of me.

The formula of 1694 refers generally to the will of God and could be understood in an overly individualistic way or in a passive or fatalistic way. But in the light of 1691, it could

be understood in an entirely different way, in greater human and religious depth. The formula of 1691, on the one hand, expresses that the search for the will of God is brought about by a human and community discernment; on the other hand, the reference to the glory of God is not dissociated from the search for the good of the Society; but, of course, as the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* show, especially in the theme of judgment, the search for “the good of the Society” must be referred constantly to the finality of the Society and to “the glory of God”.

### **C. Commitment to an established yet open-ended apostolate**

At the time they took vows, both in 1691 and 1694, De La Salle and his brothers knew enough about life to grasp precisely and in all its details their specific work; although it was already begun, their task was to consolidate it by coordinating its different parts.

The gratuitous schools for abandoned youth demanded that a Society be constituted, a Society of men grasped by the living God in the very needs of these young people who were far from salvation, a Society of men who desired, by giving themselves entirely to procure the salvation of youth, to work for the glory of God. The experience of De La Salle with his brothers, as well as his spiritual commitment, also emphasizes each of these elements, but their true meaning is understood only if each element is seen in reference to the others and to the whole. Otherwise the totality risks being broken into tiny pieces, destroying it through stress on the particular elements: the CONSECRATORY “tendency” (emphasizing “the religious life”); or the COMMUNITY one (priority is given to the community); or the SOCIOLOGICAL one (“the return to the poor”); or the CATECHETICAL or the WORK-THEORY (the work of the schools); or the PEDAGOGICAL.

The vows pronounced by the brothers in 1691 and 1694 proclaimed the reality of their project and gave it solidity by witnessing to its various parts and by expressing their will to bring it about.

This apostolate of the Brothers is also *open-ended*: it has to do with a future to be brought about. Commitment does not concern itself with keeping things as they are, with obligations to be fulfilled. It is a history to be carried out in a definite way, requiring a permanent search, a community of discernment, some reference to an objective. The act of commitment has to do with successive and unforeseeable commitments, when each moment is given as much fullness as possible (“as far as I am able”). It is an attempt to live this fullness in reference to an objective that transcends the instant in which it is actualized, with everything, as it were, in perpetual motion.

This analysis is particularly important and may be confirmed by the spiritual doctrine of the Founder, especially in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, as well as by the way he understood his own life (“one commitment led me to another...”). Such an analysis would replace the tendency to concentrate on details or on a juridical view of the vow commitment, particularly in association with the three vows — although the “explanations” of the obligations of the vows, even in the lifetime of the Founder tended to be moralizing and to make of the vows an end in themselves.

### **D. A commitment to a personal and community search**

Up until this point the emphasis has been on the personal dimension of the commitment. Each brother pronounces the vow. Each brother recognizes in his personal existence the call of God and, in the expression used in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, he takes responsibility (“Take the responsibility to sacrifice yourself...”). Each brother tries to answer according to his own personality (“as far as I am able”); to



make of his response a personal adventure in which his relationship to God is expressed and not someone else's ("as *you* will require of *me*").

But at the same time, it is also a *community* commitment: it is formulated by men who together commit themselves; it aims essentially to constitute an association. This association must be understood in all its dimensions, especially in its historical, personal and transcendent origin and in its finality. This association has for its objective a common mission whose realization demands a community of discernment and of action.

It is important to note here again the vital link between two dimensions: the personal relationship to God comes about and is deepened by the mediation of the community. "I consecrate myself entirely to you" corresponds to "I promise and vow to unite myself".

Furthermore, the personal realization of a life given to the service of God is mediated by a community service:

"to procure your glory" corresponds to "to keep together gratuitous schools".

The search for the will of God, different for each person, is realized in an activity of community discernment:

"as you will require of me" corresponds to "to do unanimously and with a common agreement", "obedience", and "whatever employment I shall have".

On the other hand, the community constitutes neither an end in itself nor a constraining group. It exists only by the free consent of persons, not only in its beginning but continually. Each person in community remains perfectly open to the God who has grasped him personally, while the community loses all human meaning as religious if it is not a place of liberation of persons. The community faces God; it is an education in the Gospel love and fidelity toward God, a place where one and all celebrate the marvels of the love of God for his people, a place to discover and marvel at the ever fundamental fidelity of the Living God. In addition, the personal commitment to the community has reference to the apostolate of the community. The parallelism between the formula of 1691 and the formula of 1694 shows that obedience (1694) supposes a discernment of the context in which each brother exists (1691): each of the brothers who made vows in 1694 commits himself to "the body of the Society, and each also is a living member of this body.

To sum up, a person commits himself in order to live his life, his own history, together with others. Each person as well as the community is transcended by reference to the God living in man and by reference to the glory of God through the activity of man and for the salvation of men: points of reference that are transcendent but also historical.

## **E. Thrust and structures of the commitment**

What is the relationship between the inspiration motivating the brothers and the structures underpinning their commitment? The two vow formulas reveal a thrust toward God by responding to his initiative and a thrust toward the salvation of children. This thrust or inspiration is primary, but the structure given to it is equally visible, even in its juridical reality: it is a community structure with a clearly recognizable external form and a clearly defined task. The structures express the thrust and make it concrete. The thrust gives rise to and sustains the structures. Yet this dialectic seems to have disappeared once the "vows" were imposed as a pre-established structure which one has to make.

### III. The Vows of the Brothers at the beginning and the Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience in particular

#### A. The disadvantages of the canonical three Vows

B. The role given the three Vows by the Founder

C. The role given the Vows after the death of the Founder

The relationship between the original vows of the brothers and the canonical three vows requires some development. Therefore, this last section is divided into three parts: a review of the disadvantages of the canonical three vows; the place of the three vows; the place of the three vows in the Founder's mind and at the beginning of the Society; and the shift that took place once the canonical three vows were introduced into the Society.

The canonical three vows have not been without their disadvantages. The three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience have become obligatory for all recent religious orders; they form part of the canonical definition of religious life. Nevertheless, historically they were not professed from the beginning nor are they metaphysically indispensable nor even universally explicit. Some recent authors, and this was the sense even of the studies of St. Thomas, try to show their necessity and the evidence for their general usage. This is certainly better than a narrow and juridical understanding of the three vows. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether anthropological analyses are in tune with the present mentality. The studies made by the Committee on Vows, limited as they are, have shown that they are not. Here, then, are the principal disadvantages of the three vows and the way in which they are most often understood. These can be grouped in **five** separate sections, all inter-related.

- The canonical vows constitute an impersonal, abstract, objectification of a structure that is already pre-established. How can this lead to a vital, progressive, unique commitment of a person? How can *the history of a personal adventure* be recognized and encouraged? How can this vowed commitment be directed toward *a future* to be accomplished? How can the fragmentation implicit in three distinct vows be reconciled with the unity of personal growth? How can a commitment to three "virtues" (or three areas of "renouncement") be harmonized with the full dynamics of life commitment to an apostolate which constitutes existentially the reason both to live and to give up one's life? How is it possible without intellectual acrobatics, to perceive and to live the relationship between a service of men and a commitment by three distinct vows?

- The canonical vows imply a concept of the "religious life in general" that is much too broad and abstract. All religious Institutes pronounce the same three vows. Juridical explanations tend to presume that there is a universal and identical set of obligations flowing from the vows; as a result they touch only the limited and secondary parts of a person's life. In this approach, the best analysis of human nature often ends up in a presentation of man in himself and not of *this* man, of *these* men committed in a specific, historical way. Finally, the vitalizing *raison d'être* of consecration in any Institute hardly appears in the three set vows: the dynamism of a community apostolate is completely missing in such a structure which nevertheless claims to be "essential" and all embracing.

- There is a static, moralistic, and often narrow view of morality implied, if not in the three vows, then at least in the way they have been traditionally presented and in the mentality that still prevails because it was reinforced or expressed by such

presentations. The only alternative is that the vows become meaningless as a person tries to be faithful to his life and its meaning.

– In the long run the vows tend to weaken the demands of the Gospel by identifying the three vows with the three “evangelical” counsels. They do this by setting up a system of Gospel based life-style divided into two parts, one for religious, one for non-religious; by eliminating in practice the dynamic element of growth into the life of Christ, and by creating a separation between Gospel and life.

– Finally, the vows imply a dubious understanding of what God is, of his will, of the relation to the world, and of the nature and mission of the Church. In short, the theological presuppositions of the entire notion of vows are inadequate.

## **B. The role given the three Vows by the Founder**

The role assigned the three vows by the Founder at the beginning has already been treated above. It was shown that a commitment by vows, intended to express and to give a thrust to a person's life commitment, is not built around the canonical three vows. This is clear from three areas. First of all, there was the everyday experience of the first brothers.

There is no doubt that De La Salle and his brothers **lived** poverty, celibate chastity and obedience in their community.

*In terms of poverty*, there is the fact that De La Salle stripped himself of his goods in order to be as poor as the teachers with whom he cast his lot; the poverty of the brothers was very real throughout the life of De La Salle. This poverty was not misery; for the Founder, whenever he signed a contract for a school, made sure that the two hundred pounds of income necessary for the subsistence of each brother was included. He himself, in giving up “all” his goods, kept an income of two hundred pounds. This was a necessary and a vital condition to insure the gratuity of the schools. Nevertheless, the brothers lacked necessities and were forced to beg. Although the Founder worked to reverse this situation, he urged the brothers to accept it. Their poverty was a community poverty, equally and uniformly borne by all.

Then there is the question of *celibacy and chastity*. The Founder preferred the word chastity to celibacy. Although he hardly ever wrote about the meaning of the celibate state, he always spoke of it as something to be sought after. There are a few explicit references; for example, when the brothers were discussing the vows, Blain has them say, “Why not take the vow, it would give us the merit of a virtue that we are already practicing and consecrate a state that we have already chosen”. In fact, among the young men who joined De La Salle in 1682, there were some seminarians who had already considered living in a celibate state of life. A Memoir preserved in the Archives of Rouen states expressly: to respond to needs as they arose, “*he assembled young non-married men*”. The celibacy of the brothers was thus lived and desired by each person and by the Society. Nevertheless, it is not certain that this was something proper to De La Salle or a situation common to all school teachers at that time.

*Obedience* was also lived and experienced in the early days of the Institute: there was a dependence on superiors whether for important decisions or in the case of the details of everyday life, in a system that strikes us today as overwhelmingly constrained. Nevertheless, De La Salle's correspondence allows us to nuance the rigor of the legislative texts; for example, he dialogues with his brothers whenever there is something that concerns their work and he is attentive to their desires and needs. Also, according to the biographers, certain of his commands were accepted with difficulty or

even rejected by the brothers. This happened notably in the case of those brothers who refused to pursue further studies because they were too busy with the Sunday schools. Some who had studied lost their vocations and those who resisted apparently meant to keep theirs

Finally, as noted already, the vow of obedience was the first to be taken in 1686 and one of the three taken starting from 1694.

Thus poverty, chastity, and obedience evidently were not only lived and experienced but also were constitutive of the Institute and of the style of life of those committed to it. It is not surprising, then, that the brothers should have thought of the three vows of religion once they began to consider taking vows; furthermore, it is now clear why they accepted without any difficulty the requirement laid down by Rome as a condition for approbation and so introduced, in the documents accompanying their request in 1722, the petition to take the vows of poverty and chastity.

In the themes he treated in his **spiritual doctrine**, the Founder gives evidence of concern for the requirements of poverty, chastity and obedience as he presents their meaning and positive worth.

This is true for *celibacy*. Although De La Salle never wrote specifically on this point, he insisted more on purity than on celibacy. His theology was marked by an understanding of the body different from ours: in his view purity makes one like the angels, and thus he associated purity with mortification of the senses. Although he himself gave spiritual direction to many religious women, he rarely referred to women and one cannot say that he ever manifested a very positive attitude in their regard. Nevertheless, his writings do not contain the exaggerations of misogyny frequent in spiritual literature; his instruction on marriage in the *Duties of a Christian* was not negative, even if it is not entirely satisfactory from today's point of view. And he was not often given to exalting the celibate state at the expense of the married state.

In the view of De La Salle, chastity received its particular value from a Christological perspective; he encouraged the brothers to cherish purity as Jesus did. More often he approached this subject from a moralistic viewpoint. Reference to the apostolate of the brother was likewise present in his appreciation of chastity as, for example, when he emphasized, somewhat harshly in the Rule, the necessity of purity for the brother. Yet he did not have the obsession, too often found in later official teaching of the Institute, where the pupil appeared in an exaggerated way as a danger to the purity of the brother.

While he cautioned the brothers against “particular friendships”, he expressly avoided requiring the brother to deny his affectivity but rather to let it blossom into an effective love with regard to “those confided to him”; he even spoke about having a “maternal tenderness” for the students.

Nor was real love excluded from its community manifestation. Note the following comparison in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

Ephesians V: 25 reads: “But love your *wives*”;

in his writings this becomes “you ought to show that you love *those whom God has confided to your care*”.

The motive remains the same: “as Jesus Christ has loved his Church” (201,2).

Even more meaningful is the Founder's language when he speaks of purity of heart, of interior purification, of purity of intention. La Salle's teaching never remains at the level of exterior acts but he always encourages the brother to live according to the spirit, the interior, or the heart.

The same is true for *poverty*. Here again, De La Salle recalled its concrete requirements whenever necessary, but not too often and not exclusively nor even principally. Rather he emphasized the meaning of material poverty. For him it was intimately joined to a concrete apostolate: to go to the poor one has to share from within the poor condition of their lives. De La Salle was led to understand this existentially when he joined in association with the brothers. The poverty of the brother was also related to his apostolate; it was the poverty of a man who has to earn his living, to use his talents and not to be a parasite in the community. Poverty was linked to the apostolate by the Founder's insistence on a *gratuity* that ought to show itself in a material way; for example the brothers were not to accept anything from the pupils or their parents. Another essential dimension of the poverty of the brother was the community dimension, which the Rule emphasized in the chapter on poverty: the brothers were to have nothing of their own but everything would be held in common.

In the thought of De La Salle, the value of poverty was based primarily and especially on the Gospel, whose texts he considered to be the best source for understanding and reflection on the need to scorn riches. This was hardly a positive point of view, but the reference to the Gospel makes it possible for us to understand it and to situate it in context. The reference to Jesus Christ as poor was essential for the Founder, but he would not separate it from reference to the apostolate; the identification of the brother with Christ is an identification with the Christ who was sent to the poor in order to lead them to the Gospel. The Founder's notion that poverty is tied to work had its roots in the Gospel, either in St. Paul's, "No work, no food", or by the citation of the parable of the talents in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. Gratuity, too, was explicitly related to Paul's "preach gratuitously the gospel of Christ". The primitive community in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which held all its goods in common, was also for De La Salle an explicit point of reference.

*The meaning of poverty* was also deepened by the way the Founder spoke of *spiritual poverty*, of which material poverty is only a sign and an expression, necessary no doubt but not sufficient. According to the texts of De La Salle, the characteristics of spiritual poverty are humility of heart, trust in Providence, availability, welcoming others, having no attachments, and finally interior liberty coming from a love which gives without expecting anything in return. There, too, the Gospel reference was fundamental, whether in his commentary on the beatitude concerning the poor, of openness, of awaiting the Kingdom, and especially of the relationship to Christ not only as the model but also the Head to whom the Spirit unites a person and in whom he must grow. The dynamics of such poverty goes back to the dynamics of the Incarnation, "Christ became poor in order to enrich us with his poverty". In this perspective, it was essential to relate poverty to ministry in order to underscore the link between poverty and prayer: the brothers were encouraged to go to the poor with a poor heart, that is, not to have the attitude of ownership in the teacher-student relationship and, when one had done everything possible as a zealous servant, to await the results from God in thanksgiving and confidence. It is with the mind of an unprofitable servant that the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* encourage the brother to see the important link between spiritual purity and the prayer of thanksgiving.

This is far from a stunted view of religious poverty that carefully observes the juridical vow or is uneasy with deprivations; far also from hypocritical or merely juridical views of poverty which are boastful and proud. The *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* show that at its best the ideal of poverty proposed to the brother is no different from the ideal poverty in which the children should be educated. Simply stated, it is Christian poverty,



Gospel poverty, in all its dimensions, both interior and exterior. Certainly, from a twentieth century point of view, this perspective is not always complete: there is little place for temporal values or for a too facile acceptance of injustice and social inequality.

However, there is no need to condemn De La Salle. He was a product of his time. We should recognize clearly that the fundamental objective of each brother and of the Institute implied a liberation of young people from the oppression of their social condition, by giving them the possibility of becoming workers capable of earning their way and thus escaping the slavery of their low status in society. It is only in this way that the spirit of poverty can be taught to the pupils for the poverty of the brothers is a *voluntary poverty* and not one that is merely endured.

In his teaching, the Founder insisted on *obedience*. When read today, some of it is difficult to accept, particularly as it is found in the *Meditations* for the Sundays after the Epiphany. His teaching there appears to be scrupulous and even petty, suffocatingly finicky and oppressively strict with regard to the conditions of obedience. There is the exaltation of blind obedience: nothing escaped the precise command or the Rule; every initiative was forbidden. Not only was permission required to carry out almost any activity, but one had to give unconditional assent of the will to that of the superior to the extent of having a totally uncritical judgment. Such a conception of obedience cannot be defended, nor can a purely vertical authority nor the image of God implied by it. The observance of the Rule, on which the Founder insisted so much, was linked to this obedience .

Despite this negative aspect, what were the Founder's essential ideas with regard to obedience?

- First of all, to understand De La Salle, one must remember he was a product of his time, both sociologically (it was the time of the divine right of kings) and religiously (it was the time of Rancé, when the Jesuit theory of obedience carried great weight with all spiritual writers). Even though this influence lasted a long time in the church and in religious life, De La Salle was less excessive than others in this regard.

- Also, it should not be forgotten that De La Salle's teaching was probably influenced by his first experiences with the teachers recruited by Nyel. Those teachers were used to doing whatever came into their heads. The results were disastrous. For their own good the schools needed a common and firm direction.

- De La Salle's *practice* in regard to obedience helps us to understand and relativize his teaching. On the one hand, he himself welcomed occasions to practice obedience in community. He did not see his exercise of authority as an expression of his own superiority. When he gave commands, he was attentive to persons and respectful of particular circumstances and situations. His own obedience was scarcely blind or servile: at times he resisted authority and disputed commands. He was even accused at times of inflexibility and stubbornness. He refused to abandon a project that he had given his life to; and, in pursuit of his goal, he judged for himself what means to use to achieve it once he had consulted with others.

- If his teaching on obedience now appears austere, it is balanced somewhat by his teaching on *authority*, for the superiors commanded in the name of God only to the extent that they were willing to be humble and disinterested.

The Founder's fundamental ideas with regard to obedience have a permanent value even if they have to be put into a totally different language today.

- He insisted on adhering to *the will of God*. This is a permanent Gospel and Christian principle. It seems to me that one can renew it in two main directions: "It is the will of God that no one soul will be lost" and here we come especially to the theme, very important in the MTR, of the Brother as "God's worker", - the complementary direction of God's will "to do", linked with a theology of hope, insisting on the God 'who comes' through what man does by his responsible commitment.

- He saw obedience, especially interior obedience, as a participation in the Mystery of Christ. The will of God here is not something preordained. Rather it arises from within and causes the person to develop spiritually by teaching him obedience through suffering.

- He spoke also of obedience "to the body of the Society", an original expression no longer in use. One senses what perspectives of obedience to the community could contribute here but on condition however that one doesn't replace the authority of the superior by the oppression of the group, or the passivity of the subject by collective laziness.

- De La Salle regarded authority as a service to be rendered to the brothers.

- Finally, he considered the relationship to the apostolate, hence listening to God in others -in the young and in their needs ; obedience as fidelity and continuity in a project ; obedience as a community search for fidelity to this project.

**It is important to see the practice and teaching concerning the three vows in the ensemble of the Founder's experience and teaching.**

- To avoid missing the forest for the trees, it should be remembered that in his time the vows of the brothers were not the canonical three vows but those of association, stability and obedience, all in function of a specific apostolate and a precise goal. The dynamic *raison d'être* of the Society was for persons more than for a thing.

- Furthermore, even though De La Salle spoke about poverty, chastity and obedience, it was rarely in the context of "the three vows". The successive treatment of poverty, chastity, and obedience is found only in the Rule of 1705 and of 1718, in Chapters XVII, XVIII, and XIX. *At that time*, these chapters were not connected with vows at all. The vows had their place in prescriptions and considerations with regard to other areas of the brother's life. Chapter XII had to do with conduct toward the Brother Director; XIII toward the other brothers; XIV toward externs; XV toward the serving brothers; and XVI had to do with regularity. These were followed by chapters on silence and modesty. Hence it is the general asceticism of living in community that implies poverty, chastity and obedience, but his community life is not reduced to the three vows.

- De La Salle spoke little about *evangelical counsels*. When he did, as in *Duties of a Christian*, he made a distinction between precepts and counsels, but without applying it to different states of life. For him, the counsels were many: the works of mercy, the eight beatitudes, and other Gospel sayings. All Christians were obligated to these counsels. There is never any explicit or implicit reference in his writings to three traditional counsels that correspond to poverty, chastity, and obedience as three vows that a person takes.

- While the Founder did give an important place in his teaching to poverty and obedience, it was by no means a preferential or exclusive treatment. He saw the vows in context, in a vital dynamic relationship to the whole of the brother's life. Priority was given to the spirit of faith and zeal, to identification with Christ, and to docility to the

Spirit. From a certain point of view, the three vows did not even hold a place in the exterior or interior supports of the Institute.

- De La Salle's early experience with the brothers and his teaching which grew out of this experience received their dynamism from an understanding of the God who acts in men's lives and the glory that is his alone. In other words, De La Salle's life progresses hand in hand with his attentiveness to men and their needs. He reads the Word of God in Scripture and the Word of God in his daily life. The two go together. They are the starting point for the brother's consecration: he gives his life to God for youth; he gives his life to youth for God; and he gives his life to God *by* youth.

This is the proper perspective from which to view poverty, chastity, and obedience. Since the death of the Founder and the pontifical approval of the Institute, a shift took place once the three traditional vows were introduced.

### **C. The role given the Vows after the death of the Founder**

The vows of 1694 summed up in their words an understanding that men had been called to an apostolate and that concretely one gave his life for the sake of God in service to the poor. If one considers the vows in light of their role in a human adventure and in the teaching of De La Salle, their formulation in 1694 was rich and full of life. There was no need to introduce the explicit profession of the vows of chastity and poverty. These were already implicit in a vow formula that had the advantage of centering the attention of both the brother and the Institute on his own identity and on his unique apostolate, without in any way detracting from a total commitment. Juridically speaking, the brothers were not “religious”, but what would that have meant anyway?

At any rate, the brothers accepted, without any apparent difficulty, the explicit introduction of the three vows into their own original vow formula. They did this at the request of Rome and in order to obtain approbation for the Institute. It is questionable whether or not introducing the three vows did anything to aid the brother in understanding his commitment and his apostolate.

**In fact, it may be shown that, starting from the introduction of the three traditional vows in 1726, the meaning behind the commitment by vows was impoverished and greatly reduced.**

The basis for such a view can be found in the Preface written for the printed edition of the Rule of 1726. The Preface focused on the importance of observing the Rule and practices, which were “established by De La Salle in a most marvellous way and confirmed by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of Pope Benedict XIII”. Such a statement ignored the whole human process of progressively elaborating a Rule based on the participation of all the brothers. It sacralized and rendered untouchable structures and things. It led to the powerlessness of the person and it caused a dynamic community to be henceforth paralyzed in great part due to a pre-existing superstructure.

The author of the Preface moved from general considerations on the religious life to their application to the particular case of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The brother was defined in terms of extrinsic categories. The author appeared delighted by what he wrongly believed to be a positive gain through the canonical status of religious life. In contrast to this, De La Salle always started from the everyday experience of the brothers themselves and viewed this experience as something dynamically related to the plan of God. This teaching was part of the astonishing richness of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. But later it was little practiced in the Institute and it never became the inspiration for the spiritual life of the brothers.

The Preface insisted on the relationship between the observance of the Rule and fidelity to the **three** traditional vows. The vows were viewed negatively as the remedies for the three concupiscences, and the specific vows of the Institute were ignored. Once again there was no place for lived experience and concrete existential commitment.

Whereas the Founder had asked the brother to contemplate and live the Gospel, the author of the Preface presented the “evangelical counsels” in terms of a morality that has two parts, one for religious and one for non-religious.

When De La Salle wrote the Prologue to Chapter XVI of the Rule in 1718, he attempted to ward off any stifling of the life of the Institute by rigid structures. However, the Preface reduced the brother's fidelity to God to the dimension of an abstract observance of pre-established norms, considered as an end in themselves. It was no longer a question of the brother here and now being placed under the judgment of the living Word of God, but of an invitation to an almost mechanical practice of the articles of the Rule. The insistence on the equal worth of all the observances, the preferential treatment of examples taken from a casuistical study of the vows, showed that the perspective of De La Salle was lost. There is no more talk of a historical totality of a living covenant with men, of a continuous adventure, of an apostolate in the service of men for which the brother *is* responsible before God and from which he gets his meaning, fullness, and personal growth.

In the Preface, the identity of the brother was defined apart from any reference to persons (there is only a passing reference to children) or any reference to the constantly repeated call of the Lord from within the reality of history, relationships, and concrete commitments. Finally, there was a total absence of any reference to the spirit of the Institute (“That is to which the greatest attention ought to be given”) on which De La Salle insisted.

### **The suggestion : to reflect on the advantages and conditions of a purification and a renewal**

It does not seem to me that there is any dispute that this formulation introduces dichotomies at variance with the life and thinking of La Salle : between religious life and apostolate, prayer and mission, spirit of faith and zeal, charity and observance, love of God and of one's neighbour, religion and life, human experience and reference to God.

I am aware that one can find certain seeds of these deviations in the work of De La Salle himself, for example, the explanation of the Vows in the Collection put us on a slope of a moralising and atomising interpretation, even if it only refers to “specific” vows. But I think that, in general, the text was seriously unfaithful to the Founder, not only in regard to the MTR but to the passages in the chapters of the Rule itself, notably in Chapters 1 and 2 and in the prologue to Chapter 16.

I am also conscious that the Preface of 1726 results from the general teaching of the period: besides, it is made up of a tissue of borrowings from Rodriguez and Saint-Jure on the religious life in general. And if this teaching has been maintained in the Institute (the Preface would figure in the successive editions of the Rule up to 1901 and its spirit would remain alive well beyond 1901), and if, above all, the mentality to which it bears witness and which it supports has largely been honoured among us, it is because it corresponds to a general mentality, a conception of Morality and Religion. The spirit of the Chapter of 1966-67 orientated us towards quite different perspectives ; I won't labour the point.

But since the objective of the work of the CIV is the result of unease on this subject, it seems to me necessary to look at how we might renew the sense of commitment to the vows in the Institute. That is my suggestion. I will make it explicit in three directions:

First of all I want to make clear that I do not believe in any way in the psychological efficacy of a simply iconoclastic attitude. In other words, the objective doesn't seem to me to be to support the elimination of the three vows. It is after all possible to include the three vows in a dynamic perspective. Renovation is not destruction.

On the other hand it seems to me that a positive work is proposed to the CIV, in which it has already engaged.

This positive work seems to me to need to go in three directions:

- On the one hand and fundamentally, a reflection on the concrete conditions of the vital authenticity of the commitment of the vows (the commitment of a person, for a project in the service of man, etc...). It is in this line, I think, that our exchanges on the Promises, on individualisation of the commitment etc... were going .

- On the other hand, a theological and anthropological reflection on the commitment and on the vows; the reflection which we called last year "the main lines of a catechesis on the vows", seems to me to be of this type.

- Finally the historic milestones on the place and the real nature of the vows in the history of the religious life.

While much that has been said throughout this whole essay can be further developed and nuanced, it has helped to make clear to the Committee of Vows that fidelity to the thought of De La Salle can lead to proposing certain transformations of structure with regard to the vows. It is here that the path opened up by the Founder should be efficacious.