

THE INSTITUTE OF THE BROTHERS  
OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

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CONTRIBUTION OF  
JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
(1651-1719)

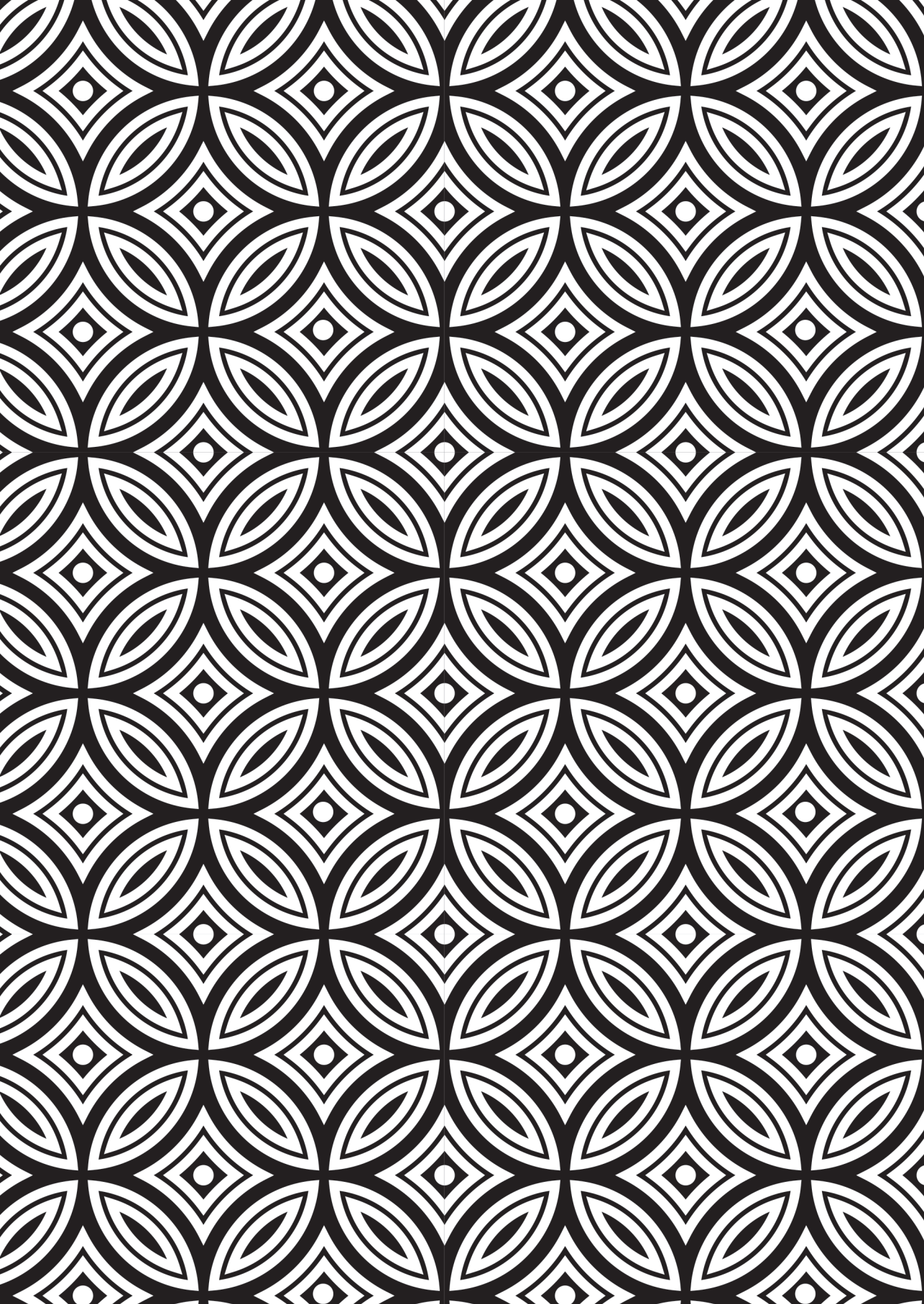
TO THE ESTEEM FOR THE TEACHING  
PROFESSION

BROTHER ANTÓN MARQUIEGUI, FSC



MEL BULLETIN

52



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PROFESSION**

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**BROTHER ANTÓN MARQUEGUI, FSC\***

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
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## CHAPTER I

### QUESTIONS THAT GUIDED THIS RESEARCH

1.1. Approach to the problem	9
1.2. Type of research	10

## CHAPTER II

### JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE (1651-1719)

2.1. A man of his time	12
2.2. The school came to meet La Salle	12
2.3. Serving the “Christian School” and the “Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools”	14
2.4. Pedagogical influences on John Baptist de La Salle	15
2.5. A son of his time who went beyond his limits	17
2.6. A personal touch	17
2.7. From preaching to dialogue and personal conversion	19

**CHAPTER III**  
**APPRECIATION FOR THE TEACHING PROFESSION**  
**IN LA SALLE'S WRITINGS**

3.1. A full-time professional	27
3.2. A person worthy of confidence	29
3.3. Representative of Jesus Christ	29
3.4. Guardian Angel of his pupils	30
3.5. The teacher as an older brother	31
3.6. Spiritual paternity/maternity	33
3.7. Professional expression of the baptismal commitment	33
3.8. Ministers of the Church and of the State	34
3.9. Creators of an efficient and flexible school model	36

**CHAPTER IV**  
**ESTEEMING THE TEACHING PROFESSION:**  
**CONSEQUENCES AND DEMANDS**

4.1. Exemplary conduct	39
4.2. Ardent zeal	40
4.3. Thorough training	41
4.4. Dignified life conditions for teachers	42
4.4.1. Material life conditions	42
4.4.2. Health care at work	46
4.5. Society's appreciation for the teaching profession	47
<b>BY WAY OF CONCLUSION</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>ANTÓN MARQUEGUI</b>	<b>62</b>

# INTRODUCTION



In my professional journey, I have met fellow teachers who had reached a personal blossoming in the joy of serving others, which appeared and was perceived by their colleagues and the students in their charge. I have also coexisted with teachers for whom this professional practice was too much of a burden.

The present research aims at studying more closely the contributions of John Baptist de La Salle to the esteem for the teaching profession. It is part of an academic requirement to obtaining a doctorate in education science from the *Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador*<sup>1</sup>.

This MEL Booklet wishes to share the more striking results of this research, with the aim of supporting the Institute's efforts to associate with those serving in education and acting as agents of social transformation. This sharing will help them perceive themselves as participants in the Kingdom of God in this world within their own historical context.

In Chapter 1, I present some of the concerns I had in beginning this work and regarding the type of research I was undertaking, concerns that resulted from a re-reading of La Salle as a human being trying to respond to his personal crises and existential questions.

Chapter 2 places La Salle in his historical context, which conditioned but did not determine him, for in the novelty of his enterprise he discovered how to esteem his teachers, who at the beginning caused him awful disgust.

In Chapter 3, I try to identify nine elements of the esteem for the teaching profession.

In Chapter 4, I study the consequences and demands of this esteem, both for teachers and society. The chapter ends with a contextualized re-reading of La Salle's "founding" system, with the purpose of enlightening the reader so that he/she can live the same dynamics that John Baptist de La Salle experienced in his adventure led by God.

The questions at the end of each chapter can be useful in discussion and formation meetings with teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> UPEL, "La Universidad de los maestros". Caracas, Venezuela. 2012.

CHAPTER I  
QUESTIONS THAT GUIDED  
THIS RESEARCH

## 1.1. Approach to the problem

To improve education, it is crucial to give the teaching profession all the importance it deserves. This subject has been taken up in international agreements such as *The Regional Education Project for Latin America and the Caribbean* led by UNESCO (2002), and the *Regional Education Project for Lasallian Latin America* (PERLA - 2001). The latter understands the appreciation for teaching as an expression of creative fidelity, which is a challenge constantly posed to the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the different national and international meetings and Chapters.

The radical dignity of all human beings is the source of human rights and of the rationale they share. For this reason, it would not be logical to admit different degrees of dignity among people, and therefore we should reject any attribution of dignity and the effects of such attribution. Consequently, no professions are more dignified than others, since all contribute to the collective well-being and respond to a need. However, society can attribute higher value to some professions, especially when they preserve life itself, health, coexistence or the full development of the next generation – as well as, it is true, when their practice offers better material and economic conditions.

Living out our own dignity has an ethical dimension. People who intentionally leave aside their own dignity to obtain advantages, avoiding the categorical imperatives of their conscience, perpetrate an equally subjective act of self-degradation or set out a process leading to it, which is witnessed by themselves and others.

When people speak about the teaching profession's dignity, they are referring to the *subjective* experience of such profession, although most of the time they pay more attention to the work conditions – salary, work environment, nutritional needs, lodging, health, professional improvement and upgrading – affecting teachers in an *objective* way.

We cannot infer concrete guidelines in this regard from De La Salle's heritage but rather general and specific inspirations that can help us understand the complex reality of the teaching profession and its exercise, and contribute to the improvement of education and pedagogy.

John Baptist de La Salle is better known for the institutions that carry his name than for his life, actions and writings. In the present research we intend to let the reader know about his concrete contribution to the esteem of the teaching profession.

## 1.2. Type of research

The present investigation has consisted in finding and interpreting hidden meanings regarding the esteem for the teaching profession in the writings and life of John Baptist de La Salle (1651 - 1719), knowing that, as far as this issue is concerned, he lived halfway between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will frame this historical figure and study the social, political and cultural coordinates that defined his position, to highlight how valuable and daring his contribution was. The references to texts or quotations from La Salle are taken from the *Complete Works* in Spanish<sup>2</sup>. I followed the same abbreviations used by this book when quoting documents.

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<sup>2</sup> Congregación de los Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas - La Salle (2001). *Obras completas de San Juan Bautista de la Salle*. Madrid: San Pío X.

## CHAPTER II

JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
(1651-1719)

## 2.1. A man of his time

John Baptist de La Salle lived in a concrete cultural and socio-historical context, which we will study to appreciate better both the biographical and bibliographical information about him. We can only interpret this historical figure through our own vision of the world, which is very different from that of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup>. The educational and school realities which are nowadays common practice did not exist at that time, so we need to understand the worldview that our historical figure shared with his contemporaries.

To carry out this task, several important elements can be recognized in his life and work, but La Salle's true originality lies in his personal synthesis and the way he implemented it, thanks to which he created a viable model of school that has lasted several centuries.

## 2.2. The school came to meet La Salle

Born in Reims, France, in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, into a rich and noble family, he became a young canon of Reims cathedral, was ordained a Catholic priest, and finished his studies with a doctorate in theology. He seemed to be following a ready-made path... However, the circumstances of his life unexpectedly introduced him to the world of education. John Baptist de La Salle called these circumstances "the conduct of God in my regard".

Canon Nicolas Roland (1642-1678), born in Reims like John Baptist, opened a school for poor girls in the city. He counted on a community of teachers, the Sisters of the Child Jesus. On his death, he left to La Salle, newly ordained, the charge of spiritually accompanying and helping this community in their legal proceedings.

In March 1679, La Salle met Adrien Nyel in the house of the Sisters of the Child Jesus. They had different reasons to be there. John Baptist was making a routine visit to the Sisters, while Adrien wished to open schools for the poor children of Reims like those he was running in Rouen under the guidance of Father Nicolas Barré (1621-

1686). He had brought a special message from Madame Maillefer for her nephew De La Salle, asking him to help Adrien Nyel in his foundation. This lady was Nyel's protectress, especially in financial matters, which were obviously very important. This visit took place several months after the death of Nicolas Roland, who thus could not fulfill his desire to open schools for poor boys in Reims.

At that point, La Salle was only a fly on the wall. We do not know what conversation he had with this strange visitor and Madame Maillefer. What is clear is that, shortly after this episode, schools began to take up all his time. We see him looking for premises to be transformed into classrooms and for men to be turned into teachers. Not long after, he started trying to train them, although he had no firsthand knowledge of what this meant. He also needed time to provide these teachers with living conditions, such as shelter, food and clean clothes.

The fact of arriving with his teachers to dine at his home one day in 1690 was a scandal for his family, which was modelled by social conventions. They stayed there for a year, after which they moved off together to another house. There they began to feel like a group, a society of teachers aimed at opening schools they called "Christian" to indicate the model of school they thought society was needing.

From this moment on, La Salle had to face another dilemma: whether to remain a member of the Council of Canons or keep serving a community that increasingly demanded his presence and dedication. After arduous discernment, he wrote: "my vocation as canon has abandoned me". And being convinced that God wished to make use of him in this new community, he handed in his resignation as a canon of the cathedral of Reims. He did not belong there anymore. His 'theological place' was elsewhere, among his "Brothers", who had begun to call themselves thus following the example of the first Christians. The expression "theological place" is present-day terminology and indicates the hermeneutics used to evaluate and discern the will of God concerning a person or a church community.

The memory of this personal crisis led him to write:

*"God, who governs all things with wisdom and gentleness and who does not usually force the inclinations of men, wishing to involve me in taking over*

*entirely the care of the schools, did it in an imperceptible manner and over a long period of time so that one commitment led me to another without my having anticipated it in the beginning” (Memoir on the Origins, MSO 6).*

### **2.3. Serving the “Christian School” and the “Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools”**

“**D**ivine service in the cathedral” had abandoned him as a lost vocation, and he had to take a turn towards his personal mission. God was calling him elsewhere. This man who trusted in Divine Providence sometimes made a stop on the way, and under this perspective – namely, that God led him little by little, *from one commitment to another* – he wrote down his experiences and interpreted them as a believer and a man of the Church.

From then on, his life followed three programs:

- a. Forming teachers to take care of Christian Schools in the cities, and of the “country schools” that were far from urban centers.
- b. Finding “founders” for the schools, that is, individuals or institutions who could set up a fund to enable economic sustainability over time.
- c. Visiting and following up the schools and communities of teachers that were spreading through the geography of France, first in the northern region and then in the south.

He also hoped to open and keep up a school in Rome near the Pope. For a long time, this project was merely a wish but eventually became a reality. We know about his efforts in this regard thanks to the multiple letters between La Salle and Brother Gabriel Drolin, who was sent as a pioneer to this mission<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Each of these programs implied several tasks, which this investigation cannot mention. To see the span of La Salle’s work, the reader can consult, among others, the excellent works of Lauraire, Bedel, Poutet and Pungier, as well as the Chronology designed by Valladolid, which presents the actions and documents related to La Salle on a day-by-day sequence.



The school came to meet La Salle in two ways: first, through his spiritual counsellor, Nicolas Roland<sup>4</sup> who, as mentioned above, had founded the Sisters of the Child Jesus, a group of consecrated women living together and running a school for poor girls; and second, through Adrian Nyel, a lay man whose interest in opening new schools matched his rush to hand them over to someone of good will, so that he could continue founding other schools. Additional influences came from the parish school ran by the community of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet in Paris, and from Charles Démia (1637-1689), with his project of schools for the poor in the diocese of Lyon.

To end this section, I would like to recall an acknowledgement made by the French Prime Minister, Michel Rocard, in May 1989, on Réunion Island, in the presence of John Paul II, which was recorded by Basset:

*“Our people (the French people) are proud of having given John Baptist de La Salle to the world in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a great benefactor of humanity. He was one of the great teachers of modern times since he deeply renewed pedagogical methods but, above all, because he understood the importance of educating working-class children”* (Michel Rocard, 1/5/1989).

## **2.4. Pedagogical influences on John Baptist de La Salle**

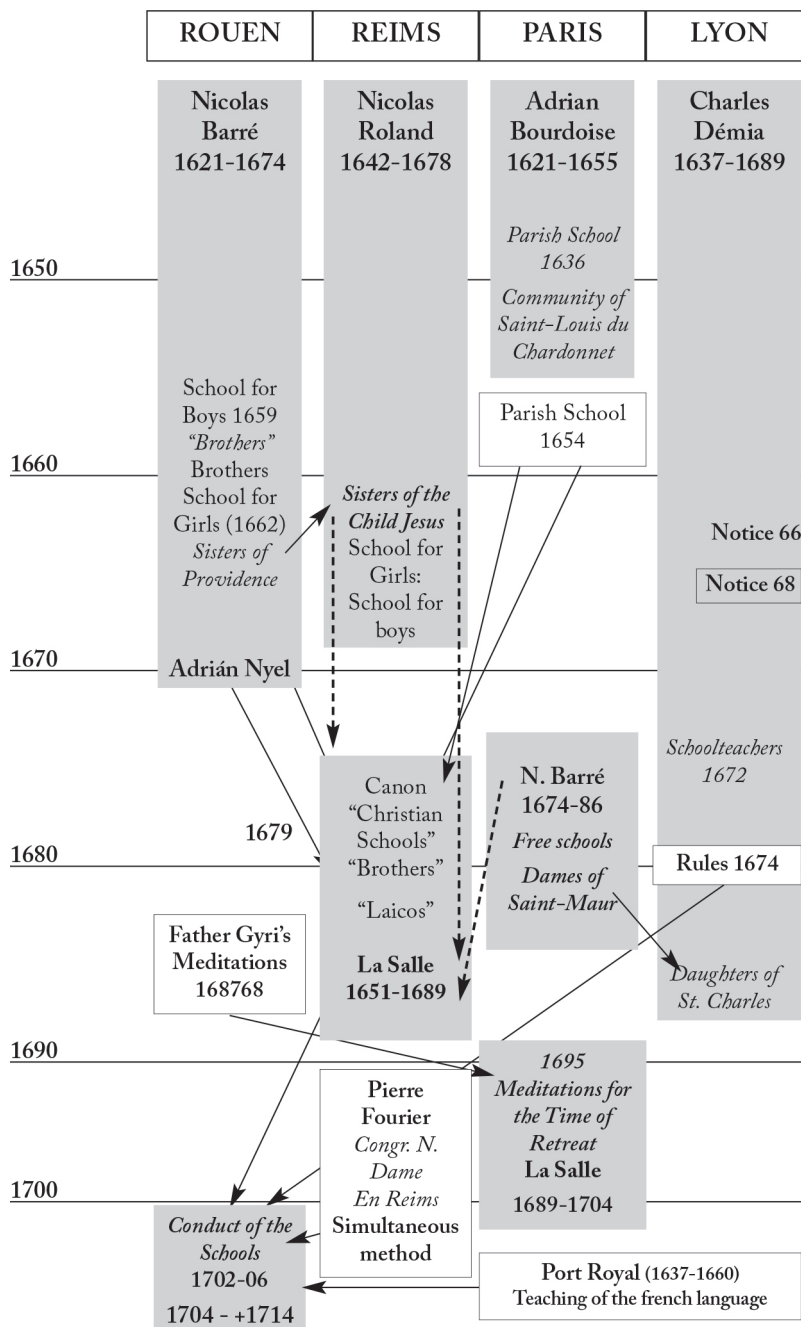
**W**e have attributed numerous educational innovations to La Salle without being aware of the influences and movements concerning schools for the poor that were already present in his context. As a synthesis, the following table shows the most important influences coming from the four cities of Rouen, Reims, Paris and Lyon:

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<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Roland (Reims 1642-1678), beatified on October 16, 1994 by John Paul II.

## Pedagogical Influences on John Baptist De La Salle

Seminar of Saint Sulpice



Sources: Bedel 1998, 34; Poutet, 1994, CL 56, 49-64; Lauraire 2007, CL 61. Developed by the author.

## 2.5. A son of his time who went beyond his limits

There are years when nothing seems to happen. Routine grinds time with the millstone of unquestionable certainties. Everything seems predictable. But other years resemble an earthquake: they suddenly burst into history bringing novelties that smash our iron-cast certainties and relegate them to the filing drawers of oblivion and nostalgia. During these years, we always find men and women who are at the crossroads of their century but envision other ways of living together and relating to each other. The fall of the Berlin Wall is a milestone lying in our recent memory, and other facts are even more so, such as the demonstrations against the Egyptian regime and its fall in 2011, the events in the Arab world, their struggle to defend human rights and aim at democracy in their own way. These are turning points in history.

John Baptist de La Salle lived at the crossroads. Son of the French *Ancien Régime*, he was a precursor of the Revolution whose motto was “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity”. In the domain of religion, concerning the Catholic Church he belonged to, he was shaken by the criticism coming from Protestant Christians. During his life, he clearly showed his fidelity to the Church, but also his counter-culture tendency within the same Church, namely, his resignation from the canonry in favor of the life of a simple priest with no links to nobility or to his family, and the adoption and defense of a non-clerical style of fraternal community life.

## 2.6. A personal touch

If we admitted a determinist approach to human behavior, La Salle would be remembered today as a pious priest linked to the hierarchy of Reims or Paris, and having nothing to do with popular education and the teaching profession. Nevertheless, in 1950 he was named *Patron Saint of Teachers* by the Church, because of his unique commitment to education and the formation of teachers.

What happened? How can we explain such a change in the life of this 17<sup>th</sup>-century man?

Fortunately, we count on La Salle's personal report, and although its original manuscript is missing, we find quotation-marked references in two of his first biographers, Maillefer and Canon Blain. The document in question is entitled *Memoirs of the Beginnings* (MOB), La Salle's report on his personal experiences. This transition he went through was a dramatic fact indeed, but without any magic illuminations or sudden apparitions of a supernatural character. From his providential perspective – convinced of the gentle intervention of the Creator in the lives of human beings – La Salle gave an account of what happened to him. His discernment of the will of God, was a search and construction method regarding his own life. He discovered that God's plan for him was different from what he had initially thought. La Salle stated that God led him gently – because God is never violent with people – little by little, from *commitment to commitment*, according to his own words in the *Memoirs of the Beginnings*.

He initially went from the disgust and lack of esteem towards his teachers to an external proximity as a benefactor without establishing personal links (MOB 4), and finally formed a community with them, although the revulsion still lasted two years (MOB 5). By living together, they gradually conceived a new way of being a teacher and a Christian, and he, a priest, discovered himself a new lifestyle.

From a theology founded on the distinctions stemming from the sacrament of Holy Orders, which highlights the hierarchical concept of the Church and the mission, he moved to a theology based on Baptism, which levels all Christians by acting as the foundation of every vocation, way of life, and evangelizing mission.

For most people, certain facts turn into events. However, there was no precise, concrete fact on a given date for La Salle, but rather a process which, according to his own words, "carried him over" for a certain time. It is not surprising that he interpreted his experience this way, but it is unusual how seriously he took the course of events. He prayed, took advice from wise and consistent people, and finally

decided, while putting his will in line with the will of God, which he discovered sometimes in peace and sometimes in a traumatic way.

La Salle stated: *“almost naturally, I valued as less than my servant, especially at the beginning, those I had been forced to employ in the schools. I would have found the simple idea of having to live with them unbearable”* (MBO 4). A qualitative leap led him to this other statement: *“Jesus Christ has chosen you among so many others to be his cooperators in the salvation of souls”* (MR 196.2.1). Another similar phrase regards the souls in purgatory, not children (MR 185.3.2). La Salle directly experienced a change in his esteem for the teaching profession, and for those who practiced this saving ministry, and conveyed this esteem in his writings several times, but he did so mainly through his pedagogical and spiritual work. La Salle came to change his perception by gradually following the teachings of Jesus in the gospels.

We can look at things “with the eyes of flesh”, perceiving them as phenomena, as something exterior and apparent (see his *Method of Mental Prayer*). Another way of knowing consists in looking at things in depth “with the eyes of faith”, perceiving them as epiphenomena, noticing the underlying and deeply human reality – according to God’s viewpoint, as La Salle would say. With the eyes of flesh, the teaching profession is an unexalted role, which does not bring about a better quality of life or a higher social rank. With the eyes of faith, by contrast, teachers see their profession as highly dignified.

## **2.7. From preaching to dialogue and personal conversion**

**A**t the beginning of 1683, material needs, especially food, were not assured, for those were years of general penury and bad harvests. La Salle noticed his teachers’ discomfort and discontent. To use the words of Maillefer, *“since they were reduced by their state to very basic needs and had no funds, they sometimes had thoughts of defiance which agitated them, and threw them imperceptibly into despondency and discouragement”* (Maillefer 2, ms. of Reims, CL 6, p. 55).

La Salle responded by giving them what he had learned during his formation, that is, a sermon on Divine Providence..., an exegesis of the passage in which Jesus asks his disciples to not be attached to food, drink and clothing by giving them the birds and the lilies of the fields as an example (Matthew 6:29).

This time the sermon fell on good soil and they understood it perfectly, but discovered a contradiction between the message and the messenger. Here is the response the teachers gave to their preacher:

*“It is easy for you (to trust in Providence), since you are financially set up for life. If this collapses (the Christian Schools project), you will keep your well-being and security, while we will be unemployed”* (Blain 1, CL 7, 187-188).

La Salle’s shot backfired, and the challenger was challenged. What was going on? Above all, it was an ‘otherness’ moment, an otherness that had not been clear until then. La Salle had to begin a true dialogue. His wise soliloquy, disembodied and repetitive, was over. The ‘other’ became ‘another me’ with his own voice. The teachers had something to say, they were also persons<sup>5</sup>. This intimate meeting with them brought about a change of roles: from teacher to apprentice, from evangelizer to evangelized. What had been an asymmetrical relation until then became horizontal, with both parties giving and receiving, teaching and learning. In this new relationship, he discovered their ‘personhood’ and realized they were ‘others’ who challenged him and made him see things more realistically. Having been until then the ‘object’ of his support, formation and accompaniment, they became a ‘subject’, and La Salle, quite surprised, accepted something that was not in his plans.

*“La Salle had been hit full force with these arguments and admitted that they were right in the reproach they made against him. As a result, he concluded that the best thing he could do was to rid himself of everything and resemble them in everything”* (Maillefer, *ibid.*).

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<sup>5</sup> In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire highlights the importance of using people’s own words to bring about their liberation, which should be pedagogy’s final goal.

The questioner was questioned, and he took it seriously, *they were right*. Otherness emerged in the most genuine style of Emmanuel Lévinas, who sees the other as the possibility of recognizing oneself. This Lithuanian philosopher states that we are witnessing how the myth of *man as an end in itself* – a paradigm of western philosophy – comes to an end. “*Everything comes to pass as though the ego – the identity par excellence from which every identifiable identity would derive – were wanting with regard to itself, did not succeed in coinciding with itself*” (Lévinas 1972, p. 115). This author criticizes philosophies that overlook otherness, because they do not make us take charge of the other as an irreplaceable factor in the generation of our own identity. “Humanism of the other” is the only humanism possible (Begrich, 2007, 72). This other ‘me’ thinks and expresses him or herself and thus exists (Descartes), and grants me identity when I become responsible for him or her (Lévinas).

Back to the teachers, beneficence, charity, and service to society coexisted for them with precariousness, uncertainty and the permanent threat of unemployment. Love in poverty cannot last! A generous performance in school needed a basic socio-economic support. This was an important first lesson La Salle had to learn. How daring they were in presenting their point of view! What incited them to do it? Strength in numbers, the confidence in them La Salle had shown? We do not know. What we do know is that they had the opportunity to have their say – in the best of agreements with Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. And “their” word strongly displayed its content and meaning for La Salle.

This experience transformed the relationship between La Salle and the teachers he was assisting. After this dialogue, he became a new person and discovered the value and quality of those to whom no importance was assigned. This experience was so powerful that it brought about real ruptures. It was an event that truly captivated La Salle. His family, the clergy, and the society of Reims realized this, and complained about his attention, closeness and conviviality towards them, and even more so, about their life project aimed at establishing Christian and gratuitous schools to help the children of manual workers and poor people out of their situation of abandonment.

These schoolteachers were important not so much because they could transform the lives of abandoned children but because they could turn a priest, a Canon of Reims, into a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, a person who related to others with respect and a sense of otherness.

Lucia Weiler, a Brazilian theologian, says something similar when referring to the meeting of the Syro-Phoenician woman with Jesus of Nazareth in the gospel of Mark (7:24-30). She characterizes it as an event in which Jesus, the itinerant preacher, learns that cultural, religious and economic differences and distances are surmounted by human fraternity. A preacher became the recipient of preaching; an excluded woman, out of her very exclusion, became the bearer of wisdom. The pagan woman helped Jesus realize that he had not been sent only to the Jews but to every human person of all cultures and all times (Weiler 2010, 42)<sup>6</sup>.

“Me and them” – two realities separated by a social chasm (Scheiner 2005, 68) – became an “us” which they developed and invented together, while defending the groundbreaking project they shared, to which they committed themselves for life. They initially sat around the same table; then they also shared a roof. It was no longer Nyel’s or La Salle’s project: the collective venture of the Christian schools was beginning. The teachers in these schools were no longer mere executors but creators, researchers who, through trial and error, found effective methods of teaching, to be systematized later.

There were other outstanding episodes of otherness regarding the relationship between the teachers and La Salle. For example, he was forced to modify the terms of the service contract agreed with the city of Rouen in 1707 at the request of the teachers, this time in writing, because their life conditions did not allow them to give adequate attention to their pupils and were damaging their health. Not only did he listen to them, but otherness led him to set up new contracts and achieve better conditions, initiatives he undertook when he became aware of an exploitation that was unacceptable even for an extremely austere lifestyle.

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<sup>6</sup> Weiler Lucia, *Mulher siro-fenícia: um encontro transgressor e revelador*, en Revista CLAR, año 48, N° 1, Enero-Marzo 2010.



In 1714, seven years later, La Salle reaped the rewards of this otherness that had led to a respectful dialogue. Having withdrawn to the South of France, he got a letter from his “Brothers” ordering him to return to Paris and take over again the society in which they had sworn to be associated for life.

*“Our very dear Father,*

*We principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in mind the greater glory of God and the greater good of the Church and of our Society, recognize that it is of grave importance that you return to take charge of the care of this holy work of God which is also yours, since it pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and to lead it for so long.*

*Everyone is convinced that God gave you and gives you the graces and talents necessary for governing well this new Company which is so useful to the Church, and with justice we render testimony that you have always guided it with great success and edification.*

*For all this we most humbly beg you and order you in the name of and on the part of the Body of this Society to which you promised obedience, that you return to take up immediately the general governing of our Society.*

*In witness whereof, we have signed. Done in Paris this April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1714. We are with profound respect, our very dear Father, your very humble and obedient inferiors<sup>7</sup>.*

In 1680, La Salle brought the teachers to his home; in 1714, the teachers brought La Salle to lodge with them. The roles were reversed thanks to the dialogue relationship they had held for more than 30 years.

Those he had once considered below the level of servants had become the brothers who took his word seriously and gave him orders in the name of fidelity to a commitment made among equals. This unique event allowed La Salle to experience first-hand the potential of a dialogue relationship which, he realized, was a means to trans-

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<sup>7</sup> Villalabeitia Josean (2014). *La carta de Parmenia*, p. 2.

form – through the sustained exercise of the teaching profession – those children who were destined to street life.

Teachers enable hope for society – not the kind of teachers who simply repeat things, but those who know the children “entrusted to them”, each child with his or her own peculiarities. Teachers become facilitators, cooperators in the salvation of children precisely when they assume a relationship of true dialogue, which considers “The Other” as an equal, as someone who challenges and calls for a utopian venture.

## STUDY AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

### Rereading the life of John Baptist de La Salle

There were moments in John Baptist de La Salle's life that generated crisis and allowed him to modify his vision of the teachers.

1. Give an account of La Salle's initiatives to support Adrien Nyel's project in Reims. Try to retrieve his feelings about the teachers according to his *Memoirs of the Beginnings*.
2. What happened to make us say that the person who preached about confidence in Divine Providence was called into question by the first teachers?

The change in his esteem for the teachers took place when the relationship with them became a true dialogue.

1. Tell about some relationship of true dialogue you have lived as an educator and its consequences for your professional life.
2. Establish connections between fraternity and dialogue relationships.
3. Have a group discussion about the attitudes that can bring about a relationship based on true dialogue in your school at all levels.
4. Share about the feelings that La Salle must have had since he received the "Letter from the Brothers" in Parmenie (1714) until he returned to Paris to take over leadership of his teaching-Brothers society. Likewise, what could have been the feelings of the first Brothers?
5. According to the experience of association you are living, what feelings predominate among the Brothers and the Lay Lasallians?

**CHAPTER III**

**APPRECIATION FOR THE  
TEACHING PROFESSION IN  
LA SALLE'S WRITINGS**

The following nine categories referring to the esteem for the teaching profession are found in the writings of La Salle:

1. Full time professional
2. Teacher, a person worthy of confidence
3. Representative of Jesus Christ
4. Guardian Angel for his pupils
5. Teacher and older brother
6. Spiritual fathers and mothers
7. Blossoming of baptismal commitment in a profession
8. Ministers of the Church and of the State
9. Creators of a model school which is efficient and flexible

These categories were never assembled as a collection by La Salle, and remained scattered through his writings. We have put them together in this work to better understand the topic.

### **3.1. A full-time professional**

In June 1694, there was a gathering of the “principal Brothers” – name given to those who directed schools or communities – and after a retreat session they felt the need to choose a Superior for their community, which was already present in several cities. La Salle insisted that it was time for him to stop leading the community, and that one of them should assume this responsibility. They decided to vote, and La Salle was elected Superior. But La Salle was a priest, and they did not want this election to be interpreted as a precedent, so they made an important decision: “In this society-fraternity no one who has received Holy Orders will be admitted” and, apart from La Salle, no ecclesiastic would become Superior of the Society.

There were still many vestiges of a clerical vision in the Church and Society, and the insistence on a community being composed solely of lay Religious was perceived as counter-cultural and, in a certain way, prophetic within the Church. This still applies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so we can imagine what it meant in La Salle's time: a community of teachers who wanted to remain lay, and consecrate themselves to God in a commitment for life, practicing their teaching profession by leading gratuitous Christian schools.

According to La Salle, teaching had to be a full-time commitment; the demands of this profession called for an undivided person who did not have to mind other matters. He defended this full-time profession at the service of the poor and their children (Poutet, 1994.88). His approach of total availability and devotion contrasts with the present situation in many countries, where teachers must jump from school to school to make ends meet, or look for a second job in their free time to satisfy their needs and those of their families. This speaks about the pertinence of La Salle's approach.

At that time, teachers who worked for a parish or church center were frequently asked to carry out an endless number of tasks linked to the Church. But La Salle demanded freedom from other jobs for his teachers, because they should not be distracted from their school ministry. For La Salle, teaching was enough of an ecclesial ministry and distractions were unnecessary, no matter how "ecclesiastical" they were.

For La Salle, the teaching profession makes sense in itself, it has a complete identity, and demands great devotion. This goes counter to the utilitarian conception of the teaching profession as a bridge to another career which may offer more prestige and better economic conditions. La Salle asks the teacher to concentrate on the humanizing impact – "salvific" he would say – of the teaching profession. You cannot profit from the profession for your personal ends. You must give up your own interests to concentrate on the needs of the pupil. From this follows the importance of knowing and listening to the pupils' deepest preoccupations and accompanying them through this primordial passage towards becoming better, wiser and more virtuous citizens.

### 3.2. A person worthy of confidence

The children “that have been entrusted to you”, “that the parents have entrusted to you”, “that Jesus Christ has entrusted to you”, “that the Church has entrusted to you”: these are variations of an expression that La Salle often repeats. It has several connotations.

These children you are teaching belong to someone, they have parents. You, the teacher, are only exercising a vicarial service. Your work, your ministry, is “in the place of”. They are not your children. They have been entrusted to you by people who love them dearly. They count on you, teacher, and you are worthy of confidence. Whoever is worthy of confidence has a special dignity and, as a result, deserves esteem. This implies ongoing formation to keep up with the confidence you have received.

We can mention a piece of biographical information that indicates this insistence on confidence: La Salle refers to the teachers who were being trained at *the seminary for country-school teachers* located in the arrondissement of Vaugirard, Paris, as “the teachers that God has confided to me” (Blain 1.281).

### 3.3. Representative of Jesus Christ

La Salle told his teachers: “*A good rule of conduct is to not make any distinction between the affairs proper to your state and the affair of your salvation and its perfection*” (CT 16.1.4). Both pupils and teachers are destined to have life and to have it in abundance (John 10:10b), which includes the present life (materially and spiritually) and the afterlife.

For La Salle, the teacher is a baptized person, a Christian who leads a life worthy of such a personal event. For those who have emerged from the French school of spirituality, the centrality of Jesus Christ’s message and mystery – the incarnate Christ, the envoy of the Father for the salvation of humanity – applies to all Christians. We

can see La Salle's Christ-centered attitude in the watchword he adopted, which became a sign of recognition among the members of his society: "*Live Jesus in our hearts*" to which one replies: "*Forever!*" (Déville, 180).

This context allows us to understand and appreciate the insistence, unusual at that time, on a transcendental and profound vision of the teaching profession. La Salle, who consecrated most of his life to the formation of teachers, wanted them to be thoughtful people, deeply convinced that their work was not simply a means to make a living but, above all, an opportunity to participate in the Savior's designs. The Christian Schools were a gift from Divine Providence aimed at the children who were destined to condemnation, now and in the afterlife, so that they did not go astray, could realize that they were loved and cherished by God, and become good people. The first two *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* develop this idea (MR 193 & 194), which is recurrent in La Salle's writings.

### 3.4. Guardian Angel of his pupils

We come across the term 'angel' 350 times in La Salle's writings according to the Lasallian Vocabulary. It appears 54 times with the adjectives *custodian*, *guardian*, *protector*, and *tutor*, always as a special and personal help leading people to salvation. It was the classical doctrine on angels in the Catholic theology of the time. Custodian or guardian angels were clearly a 'special assistance' for the faithful. Both the extended and the abridged catechisms, as well as the *Duties of a Christian*, fully present the notion that La Salle had of the angels (Vol. 1, sub voce: *ange*; Vol. 3, sub voce: *gardien*).

What is new is that he applied this notion to the teachers and their protective role regarding the students. He dedicates two *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* to this topic, the fifth and sixth, nowadays numbered 197 and 198 in the *Complete Works*. When he writes that *those chosen by Providence for the education of children must fulfill the functions of Guardian Angels* (MR 197.1), he is referring to the



care and vigilance in order to avoid evil (MR 194.2.1) by offering a *more penetrating knowledge leading to the true good*, given that children at birth are like a mass of flesh, and their mind does not emerge from the matter in them except with time and becomes refined only little by little (MR 197.1.1) because their spirit is still insufficiently developed and attached to physical things. Being a practical man, La Salle indicated two concrete activities regarding the teachers' role as guardian angels: 1) *you must help them understand the maxims as set forth in the holy Gospel*, and 2) *you must guide their steps along the way that leads them to put these maxims into practice* (MR 197.2.1).

### 3.5. The teacher as an older brother

The teachers that La Salle accompanied needed to find something that could characterize them. They worked together in the same school, and lived under the same roof as a community. They were not priests and did not aspire to the priesthood. Therefore, they began to call themselves “brothers”. Blain says about this:

*“Brother’ was the name that suited them and which they adopted. This name reminded them of how great their task, the dignity of their state and the sanctity of their profession were. This name taught them that charity should set them in motion, lead all their processes, and animate all their words and works. It meant that, being Brothers among themselves, they should give each other proof of tender but spiritual friendship; and that, considering themselves as **older Brothers** of those who listened to their teaching, they should exercise this ministry of charity with a charitable heart”* (Blain CL 7, pages 240-241, my emphasis).

From this moment on, the Society of the Christian Schools became a fraternity which took the first Christian communities described in the Acts of the Apostles as its model and image.

Adding the adjective *older* to the noun *Brother* is typical of La Salle. The term “older brother” (*frère aîné* in French) refers to someone in charge of his siblings in their parents' absence. In the society

La Salle lived in – plagued by frequent wars, droughts, famines, and their disastrous consequences – there were many orphans, for whom the figure of “older brother”, far from being a decorative term, was oftentimes a reality.

The expression ‘older brother’ involves a contradiction, or rather a tension, between two terms. The word “*brother*” means having the same origin and blood, sharing the same home, and being heir of the same family. This speaks of plain and horizontal relationships, and indicates an equal treatment. By contrast, the word “*older*” suggests difference, primacy, hierarchy, vertical relations, and domination. This tension, which will always be present, is softened by the Christian demand of authority as service portrayed in the Gospel: “*If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all*” (Mk 9:35). “*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve*” (Mt 20:28). “*You know that among the gentiles the rulers lord it over them, and great men make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen. No, anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant*” (Mt 20:25-26).

As an older brother, the teacher does not cease to be a sibling to the children in his care due to the authority role he plays. He is still a brother, a son of the same Father, but bearing the responsibility to make them grow, watch over their needs, protect them from danger, and correct them if necessary.

In his own family, La Salle had exercised the role of “older brother” with his younger brothers and sisters. This life experience allowed him to propose such a role to the teachers with firsthand knowledge. He took the role of “older brother” very seriously indeed, without needing to find inspiration in any author or use any quotation. He had played that role before, and wanted the teachers to do the same with the children entrusted to them.

### 3.6. Spiritual paternity/maternity

The teaching profession has a relational character. It is not an end in itself. Teaching transcends the teacher: it places him or her ‘in front of’, ‘next to’, and ‘in relation with’ others. Paternity/maternity generates a relationship based on blood and nature, while an educational relationship stems from the confidence that fathers and mothers (MR 199.1.1), the Church, and God himself (MR 200.1.1) place on the teacher.

La Salle repeats this many times in his Meditations: *the pupils have been entrusted to you, they are under your guardianship, under your guidance* (MF 175.3.2), *under your care* (MF 180.3.2), *under your direction* (MF 169.3.2; 203.2.2) *as substitute for the father and mother* (MR 203.3.1.), *for Providence has entrusted them to you* (MR 208.3.1), *and you are in charge of them* (MF 157.2.2; 182.2.1) *as spiritual fathers* (MF 157.1.2) *of the souls that are entrusted to you* (MF 182.2.2). To sum up, the teachers in their role *replace the parents* (MR 193.2.2).

Teachers take the place of the parents in their spiritual function, and therefore they acquire a spiritual paternity/maternity. In an effusive meditation about Saint Joachim – father of Mary, the Mother of Jesus – La Salle states that teachers “*have been destined by God to produce children for Jesus Christ and even to produce and engender Jesus Christ in their hearts*” (MF 157.1.2). This category is related to that of the godfather/godmother, who transmit not material life but the life of the spirit, and bear a singular responsibility.

### 3.7. Professional expression of the baptismal commitment

La Salle had the intuition of establishing a Training College for lay teachers in Rue Neuve, the poor section of Reims, that was already operating in 1690, where young men lived for two or three years while they received formation in piety and in matters pertaining to their ministry as rural teachers. Not only were they trained

as teachers, but they discovered their baptismal commitment, which united them to Jesus Christ in his salvific mission.

Conceiving a professional accomplishment of the baptismal commitment was a novelty in the ecclesiology of that time. “*Do not make a distinction between the duties of your employment and those of your sanctification*” was La Salle’s *leitmotiv* for the exercise of a profession that regards temporality, “mundane” and not spiritual matters. La Salle’s intuition about the vocation to sanctity of all the baptized through the responsible exercise of their profession was to be expressed three centuries later by Vatican II in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

*“If therefore in the Church everyone does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God (cf. 2 Pet 1:1). And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ” (Lumen Gentium 32).*

### **3.8. Ministers of the Church and of the State**

**W**e come across the idea that the teacher is a minister of the Church and of the State when La Salle refers to formation for the teaching ministry, an activity that the students for rural schools and the society-community of the urban teachers shared. In the *Memorial on the Habit* (circa 1689) we notice that ‘*ministry*’ in this context means the same as the old Spanish word ‘*mester*’, which indicates an occupation or trade, a service to society.

La Salle knew well the terminology that was used to indicate the efficacy of the sacraments. Immersed in a mentality derived from the world of metaphysics and the supernatural, using the metaphor of the ‘*minister*’ for the teacher came easily to his mind. And yet there was a difference: the school is not one of the sacraments the

Church has recognized, although it is a sacrament of God's love for each new generation, since the self-donation of the teacher turns it into an effective means of salvation for the students. Therefore, teachers have great dignity when they celebrate the sacrament of the school. I agree with Fr. Emilio Blasov<sup>8</sup> when he says: "For a shop teacher, the workbench is an altar on which he officiates his praise to God".

Equating teachers with ministers of the Church was a corollary of La Salle's attentive reading of the Gospel in the context of a fraternal community modeled on the first Christian communities. This was certainly audacious, and would only make real sense within the ecclesiology of communion and of the 'People of God' derived from Vatican II three centuries later. It brought a transcendent understanding of a simple profession: temporal matters transcend themselves, they express eternity, definitive reality.

According to La Salle, the children entrusted to the teacher were equally subjects of the temporal authorities. He took Saint Louis, King of France, as a model for his teachers:

*"In your work you ought to unite zeal for the good of the Church with zeal for the good of the nation of which your disciples are beginning to be and one day ought to be perfect members"* (MF 160.3.2).

Then he explained what the good of each student meant:

*"You will procure the good of the Church by making them true Christians, docile to the truths of faith and to the maxims of the holy Gospel. You will procure the good of the nation by teaching them how to read and write and everything else that pertains to your ministry regarding exterior things. But piety must be joined to exterior things; otherwise, your work would be of little use"* (ibid.)

These are the reflections of a practical man who, according to his worldview, could not separate material needs from the spiritual

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<sup>8</sup> Emilio Blasov (Trieste 1921 - Caracas 2004). Diocesan priest, Archdiocese of Caracas, Venezuela. Director of the *Association for the Promotion of Popular Education* (APEP).

needs that regarded the afterlife. La Salle stated that earthly tasks have the character of an ecclesial ministry several centuries before this was officially understood by Vatican II.

### **3.9. Creators of an efficient and flexible school model**

La Salle envisaged teachers that were active in their natural environment, that is, the school: they were responsible for and creators of the school setting. He was able to test his experiences regarding the school against the needs of people, the world of relationships, the *Offices for the Poor* that municipalities were opening, and the ecclesiastical kind of authority exercised in parochial schools. The Christian School as a concrete institution comes from the decantation of these experiences.

Financing should not interfere with the autonomy of the educational and administrative management, nor with the gratuity of the education offered to the children and their families. To gain more autonomy, the schools depended on the *Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, which eventually became the Institute bearing the same name.

Concrete needs elicited different answers: attention to deported foreigners, Sunday schools for young people who had to work all week, reeducation schools for youngsters deprived of liberty because of their inappropriate and criminal behavior, and vocational schools. There was no fixed model. There was a spirit: offering efficient solutions, in which the students were at the center of the educational process and the teachers were mediators of their salvation. Teachers were not to act in isolation but as part of a teaching society – an association for the educational service of the poor, as one would say nowadays.

## STUDY AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

### Esteem for the teaching profession

1. La Salle offered a key perspective to help teachers appreciate and value their profession, namely, the spirit of faith. How would you explain to a colleague who has just joined the practice of teaching the way in which the spirit of faith is applied to daily activities, and how do you get him or her to swiftly become passionate about school work?
2. When teachers have family responsibilities, how can they live a full-time dedication to the teaching profession?
3. Are any of the characteristics indicated above new to you in one way or another? If that is the case, discuss with your work group the things that have surprised you.
4. Which characteristic are you most identified with? Share with one of your colleagues the way in which you embody this characteristic in your profession and school practices.
5. We participate in the design and implementation of the kind of school we want through the elaboration and execution of the educational project. How do you personally live this creative participation?
6. Indicate the connections between this collective creativity and Lasallian association.

# CHAPTER IV

## ESTEEMING THE TEACHING PROFESSION: CONSEQUENCES AND DEMANDS



La Salle wanted “*schools and classrooms to run well*”. His periodic letters to the Brothers insisted on this demand (Cf. Letters 34.18; 41.3; 57.12; 75.8). He kept in mind that, if schools were to run well, teachers should be consistent with the esteem and dignity they enjoyed, and act accordingly. Therefore, he spoke about the consequences of this esteem, which stems from the teachers’ substantial contribution to the development of the children entrusted to them. Five categories summarize these consequences: the first three refer to the teacher as such; the fourth, to the dignified living conditions the teacher must enjoy; and the fifth deals with the acceptance offered to the teacher by society.

#### 4.1. Exemplary conduct

*Pupils need to make progress. Therefore, there should be order, respect and a work environment* (C 57.10). Silence favors attention, order and a better use of time, as well as the teacher’s health. It should be an active and productive silence. *If teachers were to hold their authority towards the students, they should adopt simple manners which convey the Spirit of God* (C 18.13), *be discreet within the school* (C 34.8), *observe a prudent conduct, which is exemplary and free from passions* (MF 178.1.2), *restrained and modest, according to the role of teachers* (MF 128.1.2). He recommended *punctuality at the beginning of the lessons, otherwise disorder in class is guaranteed* (C 57.11), and *much patience with the pupils* (C 56.3). *Teachers should model whatever they teach* (C 2.1). *Preach by example and practice what you want to instill in your disciples* (MF 100.2.2). *Edification and good example are the first things you need* (MF 91.3.1; MR 194.3.2; 195.3.2).

Teachers should also avoid behaviors that were not up to their noble mission, such as *leaving the classroom* (C 12.25); *being absent* (C 56.5), *lazy* (C 78.15), *superficial* (C 99.1; GE 7.4.13) or *impatient* (C 47.12); *shouting in class* (C 99 passim) and *acting impulsively* (C 34.7). All this does not contribute to order or discipline. La Salle also made an interesting statement: *mood-motivated actions are typi-*

*cal of animals, not human* (C 93.1.2). Mastery of oneself and ‘gravity’ avoid these inappropriate forms of behavior.

La Salle made a series of recommendations about how to correct pupils in a beneficial way. Knowing human weakness well, he writes: *“If it happens that you have been aroused by some passion, avoid making any correction while you experience this emotion, because then the correction would be very harmful to your disciples as well as to you. In those situations, focus within and allow the time of anger to pass”* (MR 204.2.2). The reasoning goes on: *“When correction is administered through passion and without God in view, it serves only to turn the disciple against his teacher and to arouse in him feelings of revenge and ill will, which sometimes last a long time”* (MR 204.3.2). On the contrary, *“show them so much kindness when you give corrections that although you might cause them pain, they will not be angry at you but will show you gratitude for the good you have done for them, and great regret for their faults”* (MR 204.3.2).

## 4.2. Ardent zeal

La Salle required an “ardent zeal” from his teachers (MR 198.3.2). The mere title of Meditation 201 is already meaningful: *“The obligation of those who instruct youth to have much zeal to fulfill well such a holy a work”*. Then he explicitly says: *“Act in such a way through your zeal that you give tangible proof that you love those whom God has entrusted to you (...) by procuring for them the help of instruction”* (MR 201.2.2). *“The zeal you are obliged to have in your work must be so active and so alive that you can tell the parents of the children entrusted to your care what is said in Holy Scripture: ‘Give us their souls; keep everything else for yourselves’ (Gen 14:21). That is, what we have undertaken is to work for the salvation of their souls. It is also the only reason you have committed yourselves to take the responsibility to guide and to instruct them”* (MR 201.3.2). It is a matter of offering them abundant life: the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next. A comprehensive ‘we’ appears in this text to indicate a group of people who is responsible for conducting the instruction of the children. According to La Salle, whoever works in the school must

be full of zeal, not only the Brothers. The practice of association is implicit in this text.

### 4.3. Thorough training

La Salle was aware of the poor training teachers had in his time. He discovered that forming the members of his Society was an important part of his new vocation. For this purpose, he created a novitiate that offered at least a year-long training course for the new teaching Brothers – who were receiving invitations to take up new projects of Christian schools – and for the rural-school teachers. He devoted at least forty years of his life to the training of teachers.

Teachers needed thorough training: *“Strive to know God so well through reading and prayer that you may be able to make him known to others”* (MD 41.3.2). Responsibility for the children’s ignorance would be culpable if it was due to the teacher’s ignorance or to a careless instruction: *“If they do not know religion because you do not know it well or because you are careless in teaching it to them, you are a false prophet”* (MD 60.3.1).

Knowing school life from experience, La Salle was convinced that the lack of professional training brought about boredom in the classroom, and could promote the dropping out of school, which was so dreaded and detrimental (GE 16.2.11).

## 4.4. Dignified life conditions for teachers

### 4.4.1. Material life conditions

“*H*uman beings live not on bread alone” (Mt 4:3-4). Jesus does not deny the need for daily bread, since he knows day-to-day reality and is aware that, without material support, life is not possible nor any other service or mission.

La Salle knew this very well. He solved the possible contradiction between offering free education (in the “Christian and free schools” he had created) and ensuring decent life and work conditions for the teachers by obtaining “founding for the schools” – an expression he did not coin himself but which he took so seriously that seemed inherent to the model of school he invented, in contrast with the ‘little’ or primary schools of the time.

He understood well that the fact of paying school fees, however modest, would become an obstacle for children, whose salvation he was trying to assure by means of the Christian Schools. Such requirement would prevent salvation for all and, therefore, would be to the detriment of “*the glory of God*”, *who wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth*. “*The Glory of God is a human being fully alive*”, according to Saint Irenaeus (130-201). Following this theological reasoning, La Salle realized, without saying it explicitly, that “the glory of God is that children are attended to in school”.

*Besides being beneficial for children and one of their rights, free education for all is beneficial for society*, according to Charles Démia’s “Opinions” (Avis), which La Salle most probably knew. La Salle feels and advocates that education is for everybody, and that its viability cannot depend on the parents’ decision. It is not a private contract between parents and teachers: the responsibility lies on society. It concerns society as such and the bodies it creates to this effect, which guarantee universal access to education. In this sense, La Salle realized that education was a public good.

### **What did “founding a school” mean?**

“Founding” meant creating a fund whose revenues covered the living expenses of one or several teachers, the rent or amortization of the school premises, and the school’s operating expenses. The greater the number of teachers, the larger the fund was. Capital was not touched. They only used the fund’s revenues, which came from an interest percentage rate that varied according to the school’s location. The “founding” was done according to a legal contract between the parties. For La Salle, “founding a school” meant ensuring profit-making funds, and not simply inaugurating a new school.

### **Whom did La Salle rely on to “found a school”?**

His first sponsor was Jeanne Maillefer<sup>9</sup> through Adrien Nyel. There is also a reference to Mrs. Levesque, widow of Mr. Croyères, who sponsored a school in the parish she attended (Bédel 1998.37). *Founders* included private donors, men and women; authorized representatives or delegates of municipal councils; municipal service offices; bishops and parish priests; and even kings like Louis XIV and Louis XV. These were personal or institutional funds, and were granted while donors were alive or through testaments in favor of a school or the community of Brothers running it.

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<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Dubois, wife of Ponce Maillefer, known in La Salle’s biography as Mrs. Maillefer. Saturnino Gallego, 114.

### La Salle's efforts regarding the foundation of schools in 1710

PLACE	SCHOOL	"FOUNDERS"	AMOUNT	DESTINATION
<b>Reims</b>	Several	Canon Santos Ferry	50£ (sterling)	Brothers
<b>Paris</b>	Saint Denis	Marie Poignant	Legacy	Increase the school's fund
<b>Boulogne</b>	Not stated	Administrators of the Hospice	150£	Foundation of the school
<b>Boulogne</b>	Not stated	Abot de la Cocherie	300£	Foundation
<b>Boulogne</b>	Not stated	Marguerite de Quesnel Bishop	100£ (1711) 250£ (1711)	Increase the school's fund
<b>Versailles</b>	One School	The Crown	Full funding	School
<b>Aubenas</b>	Les Vans	Not stated	A 7000£-fund with 350£ of rent (more funding in 1711)	Two Brothers
<b>Moulin</b>	Not stated	Pierre Perrin	Increases to 100£	Brothers
<b>Reims</b>	Not stated	Father Henri Legoix	Legacy of 500£	Brothers
<b>Troyes</b>	Not stated	The city	300£	Improve the house and the school

Source: Valladolid (1994) *Cronología lasalliana*, Roma. Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas, p. 182-184. Developed by the author.

### **A century and a half later**

A document dated more than a century later shows that the “foundation” system of the Christian Schools run by the Brothers of the same name was well known by French society.

Let us look at a well-documented fact that took place 161 years after the first Lasallian “foundation”. It is a letter dated February 11, 1840, from Father Marcellin Champagnat (1789-1840) to Cardinal de Bonald, Archbishop of Lyon. I am quoting Danilo Farneda; the letter in question was written precisely 121 years after La Salle’s death:

*“My Lord, our work is totally on behalf of the poor children of the rural areas and small cities. With the least possible expense, we strive to provide them with the Christian and religious instruction which the Brothers of the Christian Schools provide with such success for the poor children of the large cities”* (Farneda 6).

According to La Salle, teachers deserved dignified life conditions to exercise their profession without having to take on multiple jobs, which would limit their efficiency and prevent them from fully devoting themselves to their mission.

Another expression of esteem for the teacher was the fact that the Serving Brother could act as a substitute teacher when someone felt weighed down by schoolwork and needed to rest. It was a way of protecting the teacher’s health, as we will now see.

#### 4.4.2. Health care at work

La Salle's attention to detail regarding material resources in school, as well as certain measures he introduced, also indicated his concern about the teacher's health. His letters showed his interest for the teaching Brothers' health: he pointed out the need to attend the community recreations (C 10.7; 34.32), and recommended using the "customary signals" to promote silence (C 39.7). Directors were to be faithful to the Thursday afternoon walk, which favored the teachers' mental and physical health (Complete Works, Introduction, p. xxi).

*The Conduct of the Christian Schools* stipulated that classrooms had to be sufficiently aired; teachers should keep the class quiet and avoid straining their voice, by using the "signal" or clicker (a wooden device whose clicking indicated preestablished messages for the class without the teacher having to speak); school routines had to be followed (such as the management of study time, the use of manuals, textbooks, and posters with syllabaries for everyone, to avoid repeating the explanations). The setting up of various jobs in class allowed for the distribution of little tasks which kept the pupils busy and spared the energy of teachers, who would otherwise be quickly exhausted by the children's vivacity.

At the same time, the method of simultaneous teaching allowed for an efficient use of school time and space, which resulted in great saving of physical energy and contributed to the teacher's health.

Voice disorders were the most frequent reason for teachers to be absent from work due to health problems. Teachers in general did not know how to take care of their health, especially regarding their voice, which was their most important tool. La Salle took practical measures to prevent these health problems instead of having to cure them.

In the ideal constitution of a school, the *Conduct* foresaw:

*"There shall be at least five teachers. Four will take care of the school, one of whom will oversee the Community House. The fifth, [usually referred to as a "serving Brother"], will take care of the temporal needs of the house and, if need be, replace a teacher who might fall ill or need a few days' rest" (Conduct 25.5.5).*



## 4.5. Society's appreciation for the teaching profession

Before dealing with this topic, we must refer to several dichotomies that La Salle often mentioned. He frequently opposed two realities that pervaded the lives of teachers, indicating that they were to be held in tension. They were basically polarities between two visions of the teaching profession and the destiny of human beings in the world. We find these polarities in his writings: *present life and afterlife; the spirit of the world and the spirit of Jesus Christ; visible and invisible; things temporal and things eternal* (MF 183.3.2); *estimable in the eyes of the world or in the eyes of God* (cf. 2 Cor 4:14); *the wisdom of the world which conceals sin, and the spirit of Christianity which brings God's wisdom* (cf. MR 194.2.1).

The following expressions indicate that La Salle, within his realism, was convinced that the school had to earn the will of children, and the benevolence of their parents. Regarding children, the school had to prevail over the street, where they liked to spend all their time hanging around and playing. Parents, on their side, had a short-sighted vision of the school, which in their eyes was a waste of time because their children were idle instead of working to earn some money. Nowadays economists would refer to this kind of situation as having a high “opportunity cost”. In fact, the English word ‘*business*’ seems to be etymologically related to ‘*busyness*’, probably indicating that you need an active life if you want to thrive. In Spanish, the word for business is ‘*negocio*’ (from the Latin ‘*nec otium*’) which etymologically means ‘*without leisure*’ (‘*sin ocio*’).

Schools needed to earn social esteem, and thus La Salle tried to make sure that pupils felt happy after spending a day at school, so that parents would not have an additional reason to withdraw their children. Speaking about how to teach students to write, La Salle commented:

*“This manner of instruction will please the parents. The children will not fail to tell their parents that the teacher has taught them by making them write while supervised, that the teacher has personally guided their hand, and so on”* (Conduct 4.10.18).

In the chapter on holidays, the *Conduct* stipulates: “*Extraordinary holidays will be given on the day of the burial of a teacher who has died in the Community in the town*” (Conduct 7.3.7).

However, the later evolution of French society founded on the rationalism of the *Encyclopedists* was hostile to the instruction of the poor. The French jurist La Chalotais (1763), in his *Essay on National Education*, explicitly criticizes the wide formation offered by the Lasallian Brothers, whom he called “uneducated brothers” (frères ignorantins), because they allegedly managed to spoil everything: “*They teach reading and writing to children who should only learn to draw and to handle the plane and the file... The good of society demands that people’s knowledge should go no further than their occupations*” (CL Poutet 57, note 17, p. 43).

For Encyclopedists, Human Rights referred to the rights of the bourgeoisie, which was not interested in the universal right to education. Those who were “destined” to be exploited – initially by the monarchy and then by the bourgeoisie – only needed the amount of knowledge that would make them deserve exploitation; otherwise they could seek emancipation and liberation. They rightly said that these “ignorant brothers” spoiled everything! They needed to domesticate people, not to educate them.

The Lasallian Institute was restored in Lyon in 1802 and gradually expanded throughout France and other countries. But the strict Combes Laws of 1904 banned Religious Congregations from working in public schools, which forced many Brothers to leave France with indignation and arrive in other countries with enthusiasm.

## STUDY AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

### **Esteeming the teaching profession has consequences and demands**

1. Which of the three consequences for the teacher we have indicated (exemplary conduct, ardent zeal, and thorough training) is the most challenging in your professional life? Why? In what sense?
2. Describe what is being done in your work setting to ensure that teachers enjoy dignified living conditions.
3. How is the notion of “founding a school” implemented in your work setting to ensure children’s universal access to education nowadays? Do you see any other possibilities?
4. Share with your group how you take care of your health to maintain your educational practice with dignity down the years.
5. Propose an initiative to your fellow teachers aimed at fostering greater esteem of the teaching profession within the society where your educational center operates.

**BY WAY OF CONCLUSION**

Three hundred years separate the two historical contexts we have studied in this research: the 18<sup>th</sup> century of La Salle and our 21<sup>st</sup> century, that is, France before the French Revolution and our globalized and interconnected world. Esteem for the teaching profession was different in each of these contexts.

La Salle witnessed the process of urbanization in France at the dawn of Modernity and the Enlightenment, mainly in the cities of Reims and Paris. People were beginning to consider schooling as necessary in the process of displacement from the rural zones to the urban centers.

Today education is considered as an inalienable human right for everybody, and people feel entitled to educational services, which are not an act of charity, or an opportunity reserved for certain people at the expense of others. We live in a time in which states are signing global agreements regarding education, such as UNESCO's *Education for All* (2000) and the *20<sup>th</sup> Ibero-American Summit* (2010), which are to frame everything related to education and teaching for the signatory countries.

Our Lasallian language has shifted from “apostles of childhood” to “education workers”. In any case, the educational event – this personal relationship between an adult and a group of children aimed at educating them – is the same today as in La Salle's time. However, societies are becoming more complex, and new needs are emerging. Caring for the new generations and forming them become social, public, and political issues more than biological facts. Nowadays the educational process rests on several assumptions: humans take a long time to reach full development, and our newborns are the most vulnerable within the animal kingdom; there is optimism about human beings, because we can always develop, improve, and modify ourselves; and finally, we are aware of the undeniable way in which our relationships configure us.

There are signs of improvement in the esteem for the teaching profession, such as the (not always complete) abolition of patronage, in other words, the distribution of jobs and favors on an ideological

basis; the uprooting of non-professional motivations in the exercise of the teaching profession; the periodic assessment of the teacher's performance; and the creation of learning communities for teachers to improve their educational practice.

Understanding education as a human right implies the need for social control over it, as well as an ongoing evaluation of the teaching professionals' performance. The codes of professional conduct and ethics for teachers, and the disciplinary tribunals they entail, are not sufficiently known or considered in many countries.

Teachers are increasingly interested in equating their salary to that of other professionals, but many countries are not sufficiently considering this in their legislation. The same applies to the wages for the work they carry out outside the classroom, such as planning, assessing results, monitoring pupils and their families, acting as form teachers, and taking part in activities with colleagues aimed at improving professional performance. There are efforts within the teaching profession regarding ongoing formation through further studies and diplomas, which also involves better salaries and access to higher levels of study and teaching categories.

In La Salle's time, authorities had to be convinced of the need, usefulness and convenience of opening schools and investing in systematic education. Nowadays authorities take for granted the right to education, which is clearly stipulated in the Constitution of every country, and they praise the "high mission" teachers have. But we need to remind lawmakers, today as in the past, about the urgent need to invest in teacher salaries, which is an essential means to increase their own esteem for the teaching profession and that of society in general. Today as yesterday, a declared priority without a subsequent investment is a false priority.

By studying John Baptist de La Salle, we have discovered a man who did not withdraw from the contradictions of his time. He was able to amalgamate different initiatives, trends of thought, Church renewal efforts, contemporary authors' ideas, and individual projects to launch his innovative "Christian Schools" – a name that set

them apart from the existing “little schools” and the parish schools, which were also run for the benefit of the poor.

His theological formation, as well as his administrative experience, helped him understand the reality of the poor and the teachers’ living conditions. According to the faith perspective that was typical of his time, and using the lights from Scripture he had, he conceived the human being as inclined to vices and immorality due to original sin. However, he saw the human being as perfectible, as called to enjoy the fullness of life, and considered schools and teachers as instruments chosen by God to bring about this fulfillment.

In a society in which religion was so important, La Salle called upon the best religious sentiments of the teachers and society to propose the excellence of the teaching profession. According to La Salle’s hermeneutics, the world is an effect of God’s Creation, in which human beings seek the will of God, exist to please God and share his/her happiness. The Gospels progressively influenced La Salle’s esteem for the teaching profession. One could speak of a first and a second La Salle, the turning point being the experience of intense dialogue with the teachers he was accompanying and assisting.

His point of departure was a deep vision of human life, which led him to discover the importance of the teacher and the school in God’s plan. La Salle asked his followers to overcome superficiality, to develop a deep vision of things, and of the teaching profession. He used the most noble epithets and analogies to help teachers interiorize, appreciate and esteem their profession. He asked every teacher to see the profession with the eyes of faith, to discover the greatness of a job that is so deeply involved with people and their happiness both as citizens and believers. This double target was the reason for the teaching profession’s greatness, importance and usefulness. La Salle disagrees with a social context that sees the teaching profession as a painstaking and low-prestige occupation. On the contrary, he praises it by using descriptions and Christian images that indicate his high esteem, such as guardian angels, representatives of Jesus Christ, messengers of the Church and the State, delegates of the parents, and older brothers, thus making them feel worthy of trust.

For La Salle, whoever contributed to children's development was worthy of the greatest praise, and could be compared to the saints and historical figures who devoted themselves to the education of children. Therefore, he generated an esteem for the teaching profession that was highly above people's general opinion in those days, which showed his innovative attitude and audacity.

This kind of teachers did not come out of the blue. They had to be trained, formed and accompanied to achieve the responsible exercise of their profession. Therefore, La Salle made a great effort to train educators, follow up beginning teachers, and keep records of the best educational practices. In his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* he emphasized the meaning of the teaching profession. The *Conduct of the Christian Schools* is a body of experiences systematized for the practical exercise of teaching. Novitiates (for the members of the Christian Schools Society) and Seminaries (for the rural teachers) were his attempts to provide systematic teacher training.

A practical man, La Salle knew that teachers – whom he conceived as exclusively dedicated to their profession – needed certain conditions to guarantee their health and quality of life. The need to assure these conditions led him to convince private individuals and public and ecclesiastical bodies to “found” his schools, a process that consisted in establishing a fund whose interests covered the teachers' living expenses and the school's operation.

Teachers have the privilege of deeply interacting with others. Helping to awake these developing human beings that are entrusted to them is an immense responsibility, given that teachers must lead children to discover their own potentialities. They teach them to be virtuous, and initiate them into a harmonious, respectful and productive coexistence. They permanently invite students to take charge of their destiny by developing their own virtues and potentialities, and are full of surprise and respect when students make decisions on their own.

Teachers thus witness the development of human life in its most typical aspects, such as the ability to decide and act by listening to the heart, which is the muscle of virtue and freedom. A humble teacher



also knows when is the right time to withdraw and let the students make their own decisions. The example of teachers who constantly search for innovation and new answers is more effective than many words. This is how a teacher's greatness and humility embrace.

Impressed by the reality of the school and the teachers he came across, La Salle committed for life to changing the practice of and the esteem for the teaching profession. It is worth mentioning that La Salle, given his providential perspective, attributed this impression to God's action, which led him, *from commitment to commitment*, to discover the greatness of the teaching profession. La Salle experienced the processual nature of human existence, and did not keep this knowledge to himself. It transpired in his lifelong dedication to accompany, form and share with a community of teachers. They discovered together that a life dedicated to teaching was worth living.

The exercise of the teaching profession allowed them to transcend, donate and fulfill themselves, in the context of a society that failed to perceive the high dignity of the teacher's mission. The spirit of faith – that is, the teachers' capacity to read life in depth according to what they wholeheartedly believe – was the hermeneutic tool that La Salle used and proposed to discover the dignity of the teaching profession, which became a vocation, not so much to make a living, but to fill life with meaning.

La Salle invites us to appreciate the teaching profession not for what it seems to be, but for what it really is in its profound human dimension, knowing that the teacher's mission has a creative and regenerative impact. He gives no importance to external opinions based on social stereotypes, nor to the voice of those who see the working and wage conditions of the teaching profession from the outside. The fact of achieving better material conditions is positive and necessary; but according to La Salle, if you truly understand the mission of your educational work, you will perceive the teaching profession as invaluable, as one of the most dignified professions you can pursue.

La Salle calls us to realize the intrinsic value of the teaching profession, and to take it on with pleasure, pride and responsibility.

## STUDY AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Applying the present text to our educational practices

1. Describe three aspects of your life as a teacher that this MEL Notebook has discussed. If possible, share the description with your study group.
2. Saint John Baptist de La Salle was named the Patron Saint of Teachers by Pope Pius XII in 1950. In your opinion, what aspects of his life, as developed in this MEL Notebook, made him worthy of this title?
3. Describe an aspect of your professional practice you could improve after reading this MEL Notebook. Share it with your group and ask your colleagues how they are living this concrete aspect.
4. Propose an initiative for your school aimed at fostering greater esteem of the teaching profession and a stronger vocational culture so that the new generations can join this beautiful vocation.
5. Summarize in a sentence your experience of reading this MEL Notebook.



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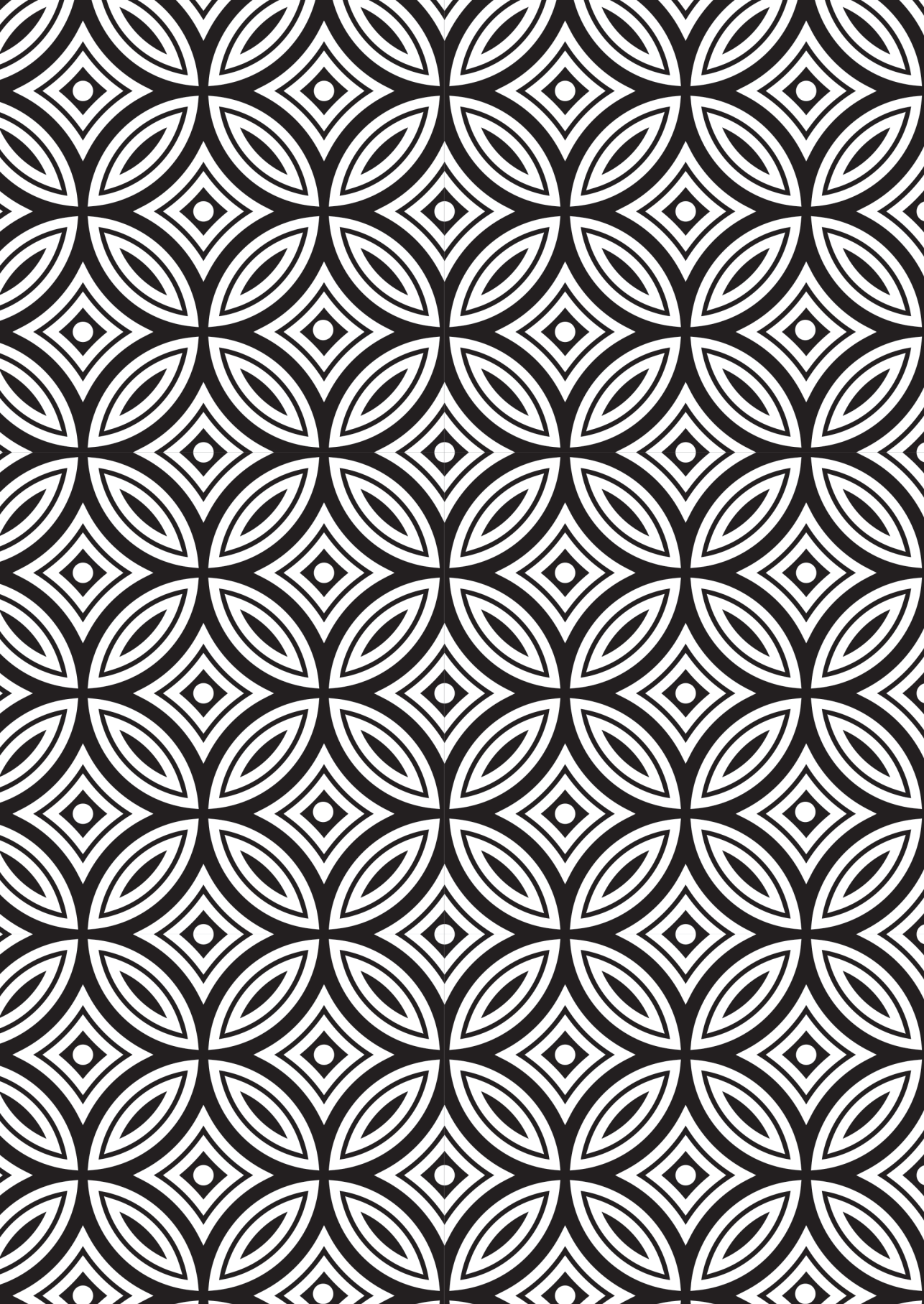
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