

# **I, John Baptist de La Salle**

**by Brother Leo Kirby, FSC**

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## Introduction

You see, 1980 is the 300th birthday of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. For this occasion some Brothers asked me to write about the Founder of the Brothers, John Baptist de La Salle, something that would interest young people of college and high school age.

I, Brother Leo Kirby, the man who wrote this booklet, made several attempts, but I was too romantic and philosophical about the whole approach. Some Brothers who know the young better than I do said, "They'll never read it." One Brother told me, "Tell it to them straight, in a personal sort of way." I think that young people today are like that—personal, straightforward, and honest. This was good advice.

That's when I began to write his life as if John Baptist de La Salle were writing it. It's a kind of bold approach, a mixture of both fantasy and reality—fantasy in the sense that a twentieth-century author is writing for a seventeenth-century person; reality in the sense that the life described is a real person's life and history—but done in a straightforward, personal way.

I was reluctant at first to try it out this way, but I began thinking that the whole of life is a mixture of reality and fantasy. Take my life, for example, as a Brother living in your own time and place. I sometimes dream about being in a school where there are no financial problems, where the youngsters in it are docile, cheerful, and grateful, where the people I live with in community always agree with my way of doing things. The reality, however, is that my school is in a financial crunch, the young people in it are sometimes more rebellious than docile, sometimes depressed

and ungrateful, and the Brothers I live with don't always like the way I do things.

I think too that the fantasy world has always had great appeal for people of all ages. Disney World seems to attract young and old alike. Likewise, fantasy movies like *O God*, *The Muppet Movie*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Star Trek*, and *Superman* hold great interest for both young and old. Steve Allen's TV show, *The Meeting of the Minds*, does exactly what I attempt here: to bring to the twentieth century a person who lived over three centuries ago.

So I'll try to write Saint La Salle's life in the fashion of an autobiography. I hope I don't bore you with it. As a young man, I used to dislike autobiographies; the people who wrote them frequently bragged about themselves in a sneaky sort of way. Nonetheless, autobiographies today are more real, I think; authors of biographies tend to talk too much and to insert their own opinions too easily. Sometimes they are too easygoing with the facts, because the biographer is writing about someone else.

I, Brother Leo Kirby, have a right to write in this way about Saint La Salle, because I joined the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools as a young man and have been in it for almost fifty years trying to live in Saint La Salle's spirit. I have the privilege and honor of calling myself a new kind of Founder and a new kind of John Baptist de La Salle—the right to say, "I, John Baptist de La Salle."

Because of this method of approach, I will be torn between pride and modesty, but in most cases pride will win out. After all, Saint La Salle is a man for our times, and so am I. You'll have to watch out for one thing as you read this booklet: once in a while, I may start speaking about myself instead of about John. If I do this occasionally, I know you will be patient with me, an old man, who is very proud of being a Brother, a new and old John Baptist de La Salle.

One final word. Do not be fooled by the way Saint La Salle downplays his achievements. He is beyond doubt an educational

genius and a pioneer in modern educational methodology. Besides, he is a radical and a revolutionary, a man who in his life got down to the roots of the Gospel message and revolted against the unfair distribution of wealth in his own country. He did not study liberation theology; he lived it. So, read the story of his life with the knowledge that it is the story of a great man who refused to brag about his life. Only his disciples can do that. That is why the boasting is reserved for the introduction and the conclusion, which I, Brother Leo Kirby, am writing.

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**I, John Baptist de La Salle**





Come  
Follow  
Me

## Roots and Wings

I, John Baptist de La Salle, was born in a day and age and place quite different from yours. The day was April 30, 1651—more than three hundred years ago! The age was the Golden Age of the Great Monarch, King Louis XIV. The place was Rheims, the famous city in the wine country of northern France.

Europe in my day was a jigsaw puzzle, constantly changing. In that continent of mine, we had Catholic countries like France, Spain, Austria, and Italy, and Protestant countries like northern Germany and other northern parts of Europe. Because I came from France, I was a Catholic.

During my childhood my country was just recovering from the ravages of a religious war. In Rheims there weren't many Protestants, so it was hard for me to understand what the fighting was all about. As a young person of the twentieth century, perhaps you can't understand either why England and Ireland don't get along. In my day I tried to help solve in some small way that Irish-English problem by taking into our schools some Irish boys whose fathers were fighting against the English.

At any rate, I was born in Rheims, a city famous for its wines, its cloth, and its cathedral. As a child I enjoyed the excitement of the big city. I took great pleasure in watching the parades in honor of Saint Remi after the pestilence of 1659, in window-shopping with my younger brothers and our friends, in ogling the window displays of the hemp merchants, in watching the blazing bonfires in the streets celebrating the Treaty of the Pyrenees, and in running after the glittering, happy marriage processions on their way to Notre Dame Cathedral.

I enjoyed the wine too. We called it champagne, after the region of Champagne in which we lived. In your day and in your country, champagne and wine are generally served on big occasions; in my day we had wine on the table every day of the week. One of your English authors once remarked that wherever the message of Christ is lived and preached, there is laughter and dancing in the streets and good red wine flowing at the tables; *Benedicamus Domino*.

At any rate, I was a city boy, and I never regretted it. In founding schools later on, I always preferred city schools to country schools, because in the cities there was always more to do, more to see, more to learn, and more people to meet.

I had a great family, loving parents and grandparents, loving brothers and sisters. My father was a judge, full of compassion for the people who stood before him. I think his liking for music and art made him sensitive to the people he judged. He was a just man in the fullest sense of the word. My mother was one great woman, full of concern and love for her family. My paternal grandparents died quite soon after I was born. My mother's parents were the kind of grandparents every child should have, full of love and encouragement for their grandchildren. I think I was a favorite of my grandfather. He and I frequently visited the vineyards he owned, and he loved to teach me to recite my prayers. He often said the prayers of the Church, called the Office, and he taught me how to recite them.

I had ten brothers and sisters, but four of them died in infancy. Of the seven children who lived, I was the oldest, and I had a great deal of responsibility thrown upon me early in life. Some people claimed I was too serious for a little boy, but I was not able to play and have a good time all day long. Frequently I had to mind my brothers and sisters and sometimes help them in their studies. You will understand that if you are the oldest offspring in your family.

I don't remember much about my childhood; nothing really big happened in it. I suppose you could say I was a fairly smart,

normal child who went to school, played games, and slept and ate at home with my brothers and sisters. They say that I lived in the Golden Age, but there was really nothing spectacular about my life; I didn't meet the famous people of that age, and I played no part in the great events that took place in it. My parents belonged to the rich class, but not the very rich. Anyway, according to the situation of the poor in those days, they were quite wealthy. My parents, however, were never smug about being rich. They took life seriously and lived it generously and lovingly for my brothers and sisters and me.

We lived in a very religious atmosphere in our country, but superstition and ignorance existed among the people. You have less of those in your times, because education is provided for everyone. This ignorance and superstition caused some of our people to distort the Christian message and to follow leaders who overemphasized one truth or another. My parents were staunch, educated Christians. Their influence is probably the reason that even as a seminarian, I enjoyed teaching catechism to the street-wise kids in Paris and that as an adult, I began opening schools for children who couldn't read or write.

At any rate, we lived in a Christian atmosphere, not only in my family but also in society at large. It was a life-affirming, positive world, where most people knew they were on their way to another place, where laughter would ring out, the dance had just begun, and the best wine was about to be served. Just the thought of that future place, which we called heaven, put wine on our dinner table and laughter and dancing into our home. You might say that people had a compass in those days. Our heroes and heroines were the saints. My grandmother used to read the lives of the saints to me when I was young. She wanted me to become a hero, but I never really made it.

One thing about our life in the seventeenth century that puzzled me more than it disturbed me was the terrible difference between the rich and the poor. In your day you have a large middle class; in our day we had only rich and poor. The rich were very

rich; the poor were very poor. The rich looked down on the poor with contempt; the poor looked up at the rich with hatred. The ordinary poor person did not read or write; both were considered a useless luxury—the rich liked it that way. “Kept them in their place,” they said. The schools were bad; the teachers, worse. About one hundred years after my death, the French Revolution broke out because of this very bad social conflict.

The Church, so closely allied with the state and tied into the whole system, stood more on the side of the rich than of the poor. The clergy, whether noble by birth or not, frequently behaved like nobles.

To a certain extent, I looked down on the poor myself until later on in life, when I had the chance to meet good friends who thought otherwise and the opportunity to teach the children of the poor. As a young boy, I associated mostly with people who were fairly well off. I was not exactly a snob, but I was coming close. I dressed rather elegantly too; once I was reprimanded in school for being too fancy a dresser. I was not putting on airs precisely like the noble class, but I guess I was getting to that point.

Well, anyhow, as I hinted before, I didn't have much of a childhood, being the oldest child. As was the custom in my day, I went to a school called the *College des Bons Enfants*, “The School for Good Children.” That name didn't always fit: we weren't always good, and not all of us were children. I stayed there all through what you would call elementary school and high school, even through part of college.

Believe it or not, at the “advanced” age of 11, I received the tonsure. This ceremony of cutting some hair off the top of the head symbolized that a young boy was destined to become a priest. At that time I didn't really understand what a priest was, but like you when you were that age, I played grown-up, and I sometimes played being a grown-up priest. At 16, however, I became more serious about it when my uncle handed on to me the job of publicly reciting the official prayer of the Church. This sort of thing was more a diocesan scholarship than a job. Such an honor was

frequently given to a young man to encourage him into the priesthood and to give him some financial assistance while he studied in the seminary. However, it was not just an honorary office; it did take up a good deal of time. I sort of enjoyed it though, partly because it broke up the monotony of my life, partly because I liked to pray, and partly because it brought back memories of the times when I used to pray with my grandfather.

At the age of 18, I received my master's degree from the University of Rheims, which was an extension of the *College des Bons Enfants*. You see, in my day we had longer school hours and more days of school, so that I guess you could say that I was at 18 a little more advanced than a young person of the same age in your day. Still, a master's degree in my time simply meant that a student was ready to begin university studies.

At 19 I left home to study for the priesthood in Paris. I had thought of becoming a judge like my father, but by this time I felt a strong inner urge to become a priest. I guess you could say it was a call, but it was a silent sort of call, more like a whisper than a shout, something like the rustling of a breeze.

When I was 20 years old, my mother died at the age of 36; the very next year, my father died at the age of 47. I don't like to talk about that time much; it was one of the darkest periods of my life. After my parents died, I had to leave the many good friends I had made in Paris at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice and return home to take care of my brothers and sisters. This changed my life. Still, I had my brothers and sisters, and my father had made everything official by naming me the legal guardian of both the family and our property.

So, at the age of 21, I was the head of a family and on my way to a career in the priesthood; nevertheless, according to French law in those days, I was still a minor. Legal adulthood in my county began at the age of 25. I guess you could say that my parents had given me both roots and wings. I was rooted in my family, my faith, and my city, yet I was speedily on my way to other places.

All these events made me more serious than I should have been at so young an age. But still, because of my parents, my grandparents, and my brothers and sisters, I had a great deal of quiet cheerfulness about me. Later on, I was able to encourage the teachers who worked with me in the schools to be cheerful and not to go around with faces like prison doors. I suppose you could say that I had a joyful peacefulness about me. If you get a chance to see Leger's portrait of me, you might catch what I mean. There's a modern version of that portrait, done by a very fine Brother and artist, in the first sketch in this booklet.

In those difficult days, I received great help pursuing my studies and bringing up my brothers and sisters. Financially, I received much help from my grandparents and my family inheritance. In addition, I had my annual salary—about \$10,000 in your money—as an official reciter of the daily prayer of the Church.

Eventually, my younger sister left home to join the Sisters, and my grandparents took care of my older sister and my baby brother. Even though technically I was still the guardian of all my brothers and sisters, I had direct responsibility for only three of my four younger brothers. I am quite proud of the way they turned out: two became priests; the other became a responsible husband and father.

As in most families, we had some tragedies. In addition to the sudden death of both my parents and the infant death of four of their children, my sister in the convent died at the age of 25, and my youngest brother had to be sent to a mental institution. Life was not always easy for us.

This was a very busy period in my life. I was trying to settle my father's estate, and I was taking care of my brothers while staying in touch with my two sisters and my youngest brother. You can understand why I had such a hard time keeping up with my university studies. I was forced at this time to balance the responsibilities of being the head of a family with the demands of preparing to become a priest. That is why, I suppose, I never became what some people called a "sacristy priest," a type of priest

sheltered from real life by the artificial life of the seminary and by the protected life of a rich family. That is the reason why I later reacted against the clericalism of the age whereby some priests considered themselves high and mighty as a clerical elite, a sort of nobility within the Church. Later on in life, I was able to live with rough, uncouth, poorly educated teachers whom I would have looked down on earlier as unworthy to be my servant. As I mentioned before, I could have become a pretty good snob. Thank God, my good friends in the seminary and the poor people I met saved me from this.

Some people, at that time and later on, made much of my intelligence, mainly because I did well in my studies and graduated *summa cum laude* with the master's and later with my doctorate in theology. I never really considered myself an intellectual—just a practical man who did what he had to do. I had head knowledge from my studies, but I had heart knowledge from the tragedies I had been through and from my close association with the problems of everyday living.

This period between 1672, when my parents died, and 1678, when I was ordained, was a sort of advent period, a waiting period. I was waiting for ordination, of course, but I just wasn't sure of what I was going to do with my life as a priest. I wasn't sure whether to continue the relatively easy life to which my position as a canon and a doctor of theology entitled me or to side with those zealous priests who were trying to work for the good of ordinary people. I had a feeling that God in some way would point out the way to me. It did not take God long to show me the way through certain events in my life and certain people I met.

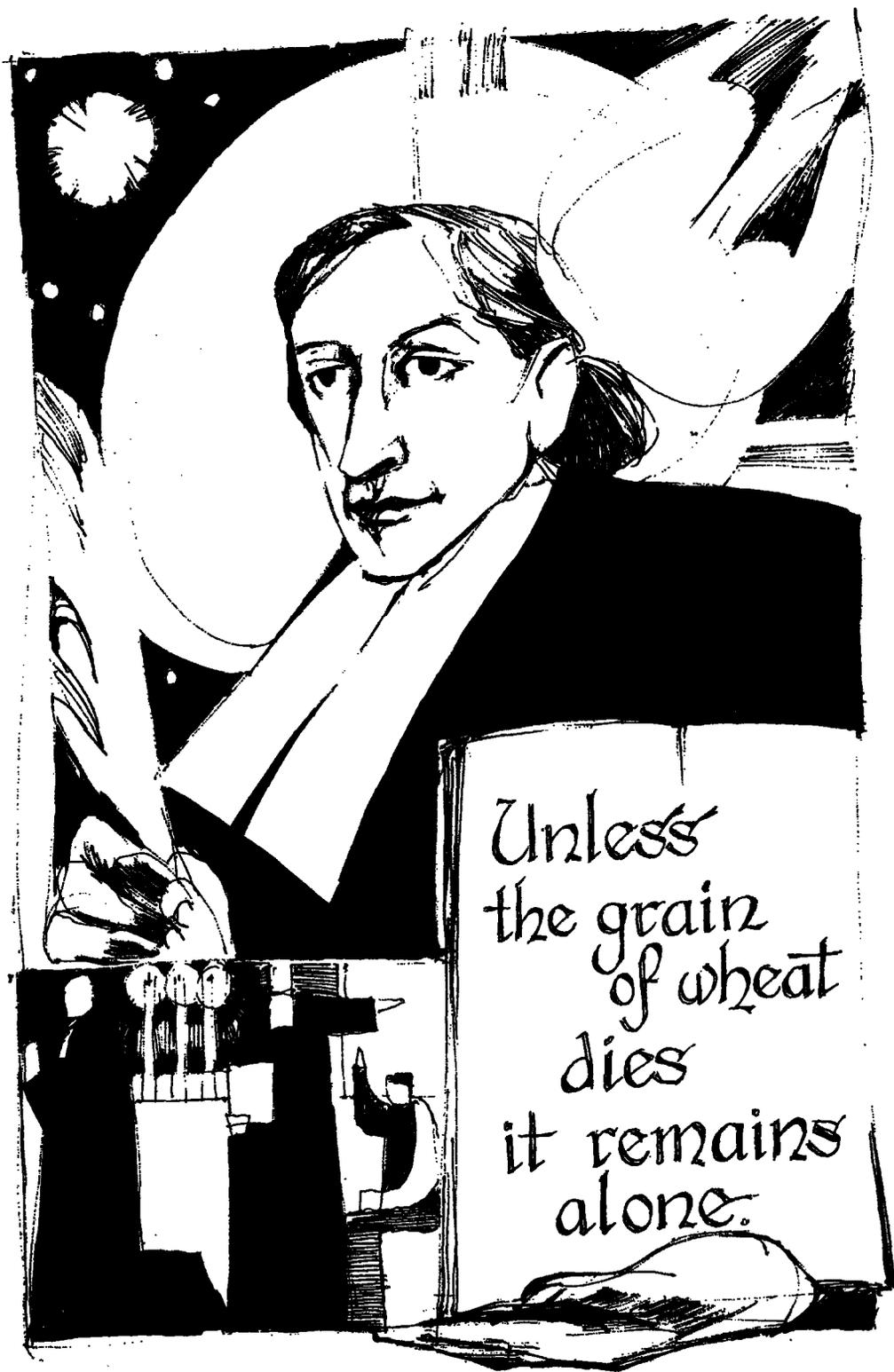
I had become the executor of the will of my closest priest friend and the protector of the order of teaching Sisters he had founded. In this way I began to get interested in the education of the young and to meet people engaged in that work. While visiting these Sisters one day, I met a man, Adrien Nyel, who had been sent as a messenger to these women by a rich lady in Rouen, who had heard of their skill in conducting schools for girls. Now

this lady wanted to open a school for boys in the city of Rheims. After chatting for a while with Adrien Nyel, I invited him and his traveling companion to stay in my home until they could get settled.

Adrien Nyel has been put down in history as a “gypsy” by nature, a “fly-by-night” who never completed anything, someone who always had his eye on the next thing to do, without paying much attention to the job at hand. I think this is unfair, for this man from Rouen, a loving and zealous educator of 53, had been founding and directing schools for some 27 years. He had what I might call “gleams of splendor” within him. From my experience in taking over the family, tying up the loose ends of two estates, ensuring continuity of a religious order of Sisters, and picking up my interrupted seminary studies, I was more a continuator who had learned to carry through on projects already begun. Adrien Nyel, who later became a good friend of mine, was by experience and nature an originator of projects. I guess he was the spark; I was the bush he set afire. Together, I think, we made a pretty good team.

I can truly say that he was the principal person through whom God helped me see what I had to do with my life. God made use of Adrien Nyel to get me involved with the work. He and I both looked outward in the same direction, a direction that led to the slums of cities all over France and, in particular, to the street-smart kids in the slums of Rheims. Little did I know where I was headed. If I had known, I wouldn't have touched the project with the tips of my fingers.

The years between 1679 and 1685, which I will now tell you about, were the pivotal years in which God took charge of my life, years in which I made incredibly big decisions that changed the whole course of my life. One Brother called them the incarnation years, a time in my life when I incarnated myself with the poor of this world. Later I would tell our Brothers to see Jesus under the poor rags of the children they taught.



Unless  
the grain  
of wheat  
dies  
it remains  
alone.

## The Seed Years

I was 28 years old when I began to make some big decisions, and these big decisions led to more radical ones a few years later. Some claim—I really don't believe this—that an adult peaks at the age of 30. I like to think that a person is always growing up, always maturing and developing. Well, anyway, I was 28 when I invited Nyel and his young companion into my home to stay for a few days in order to get their school started. That might seem insignificant to you, but for me, as I look back, that invitation was a rather impulsive act, almost as if someone else had prompted me to do it. Certainly they were not the typical kind of guests we invited to stay overnight in our home. Besides, I had just met them. Anyhow, because Nyel was dressed somewhat like the country priests who occasionally stayed with us, he caused no great stir among my relatives and neighbors. His companion, just 14 years old, was a symbol, as I look back, of all the young we Brothers would later take into our schools and into our hearts.

I invited both of them into my home, and some of my priest friends and I helped them to get the school started. I was thinking that was the end of the business when to my surprise another rich lady, this time from Rheims, asked me to open a second school for poor boys. This we did. Now this second school I considered my own responsibility, because I hired the teachers for it and helped out the pastor, a priest friend of mine, with their salaries.

The next thing I knew, I was a sort of leader with these teachers, praying with them and giving them some advice with their class work and their personal problems. Before I knew it, I was renting a house for them so that the teachers from both schools

could live together. With Nyel frequently on the road to look over prospects for other schools, I was the logical one to help iron out any school and personal problems that might arise. I soon began to invite the teachers into my home for meals. That was 300 years ago; some historians have put that year, 1680, as the year the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was born. So let's say the year 1980 is the 300th birthday of the Institute. Actually, the birth of the Institute was more a process than an event, more a series of events than any one event. I could say that the Institute was being born all during this period between 1679 and 1685.

The following year, when I turned 30, I made a bigger move. I invited all the teachers, about half a dozen or so, to live in my own home. This move did not sit too well with my relatives. As I look back, I think they thought I was losing my mind. The move was hard on my three brothers; in fact, one of them moved out. My brothers were always a great support to me in my work, especially the two who remained. None of them was really angry about the teachers' coming into our home, but they weren't exactly happy about it either.

Well, anyway, when some people living in cities near Rheims got news of the fact that our teachers knew how to run excellent schools, they asked us to help them teach their children. So during this period we opened schools in four cities close to Rheims. People began to realize that we were especially good in teaching religion. About two centuries later, Pope Pius X officially named us "The Apostles of the Catechism."

One time on the way back to Rheims from one of these towns, I was caught in a blinding blizzard and got lost. While stumbling around, I fell into a deep ditch and almost died in it, both from the cold and from the fall itself. People said afterward that I was mighty lucky to get out of that ditch alive. I never really did get over that fall; years later it caused severe rheumatism, especially in my knees. Bones, you know, have long memories.

It was some time later that we decided to call ourselves Brothers, not schoolmasters, and to wear a type of clothing that distin-

guished us from both the laity and the clergy. The name and the unique clothing gave us a certain identity, and we felt proud of ourselves, in spite of the fact that some people poked fun at us in the streets. The title, the uniform, the ridicule, and the hardships served to unite us all the more. I was being drawn into the whole business one step at a time by the teachers, by the poor children they taught, and especially by God, who acted through them. A number of our teachers, however, found the life too hard to take, so it was around this time that some Brothers became restless and complained about their harsh life.

The life was harsh: the classes were large; the food was plain and meager; the furnishings were makeshift; the day was long with class duties and community prayers. Some teachers died of exhaustion; others left the work. I tried to get them to trust in God's Providence, but they said, "It's OK for you to talk about Providence; you're still getting a salary, and you have your inheritance to fall back on. What about us? We've got nothing." They had a point.

They got me thinking, so I went to seek advice from a close friend of mine, who was quite a holy priest. In life I often got by, as the saying goes in your language, with a little help from my friends. My adviser told me to fish or cut bait, to get into the work completely—to give away my privileged, well-paid position in the cathedral and donate my inherited money to poor families who were starving because of the current famine—or to get out. I did exactly what he told me to do: I gave up my salaried position to a poor priest, and I gave away my money to feed the hungry. From that time on, I got much closer to the Brothers and to the children they taught. I could now truthfully say, "We Brothers." There was no turning back; I was burning bridges behind me. Without realizing it, we Brothers had become radical Christians and, like the birds of the air, totally dependent on Providence.

Toward the end of this period, I opened a school to train teachers. Later on, some historians would call this school the first of its kind in history. They're probably right. Such a move got to

the heart of the educational problem in my day— incompetent teachers. You see, all during my life that was my big dream, to put good teachers into the classrooms of our schools.

In my day almost anyone could become a teacher; no certificate or degree was needed. Those who couldn't do anything else became teachers. As a result, the people who became teachers were often poorly equipped for their work. Many were ignorant and uncouth, unable to teach because they didn't know how, unable to train others in good manners because they had none. Teachers were on the bottom rung of the occupational scale.

If I were asked what was my greatest contribution to education, I'd have to say that it was recruiting quality teachers and giving them a sense of pride in their work. I gave them deep religious motivation, a sense that they were people of destiny called by God to do a great work for God and for humanity, that they were Ambassadors of God, and that the children they taught were their riches.

So there it was. The Rubicon had been crossed, the dice cast. I now lived with the Brothers. They had a name, a uniform, and a reputation. After giving up my inheritance and my cathedral salary, I became known as the young priest who had founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools.



## The Growing Years

I think of those years I have just described, from 1679 to 1685, as the years when the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was fashioned in the womb of history by the hand of God. In 1686 I held a General Assembly of the Brothers, and twelve of us made vows for one year. As if in celebration of our birth, we went in pilgrimage to Our Lady of Joy, where I celebrated Mass at the shrine and gave Communion to the twelve Brothers. It was a good time, a sort of honeymoon period in my life. I was young and vigorous, 35 years old, and the whole new venture was bracing and exciting.

During the six years after this so-called honeymoon period, dark clouds began to appear on the horizon in the form of troubles with Church officials, conflicts with established groups of teachers who charged fees, hassles over court appearances, seizure of our schools by the courts, and deaths and departures of our Brothers. To make matters worse, my health began to decline. At the height of the storm, three of us made a vow for life to keep the Institute alive—to beg for alms and to live on bread and water if that's what we had to do to make it prosper. I was now 40 years old.

With the Institute now situated in several cities of France, I made sure that the schools in these cities were firmly established before I would even consider opening another school. I did not want to make Nyel's mistake. In his goodness of heart, he would open up one school and then start another before the first school had taken root. At this period I had become both a starter and a continuator; I did not want anyone to start something I could not continue.

Gradually we opened schools all over France. We even sent a Brother to Rome to start a school there as a symbol of our allegiance to the Pope. As I look back on the establishment of our schools, I think it was our teachers who attracted parents and students to our schools: honest educators, full of love and enthusiasm for the work, having a good grasp of the subjects they taught and a practical knowledge of running a class. In your language you would say they had know-how; therefore, they were confident and proud of themselves. The students caught their confidence and pride and respected them for it. The Brothers loved their work, whereas the ordinary teacher of my day hated it.

As I hinted before, I was a city boy at heart, and I never really got over it. As I grew up, I began to understand more and more that the city schools were more important than the country schools. I guess you could say that cities in general have always been like the fireplaces of the world, radiating light and heat into the surrounding darkness. I didn't forget the countryside. I trained teachers for some of the numerous little farming villages in France, but I mainly wanted to get our Brothers into the big cities.

I guess you could say that we had a city strategy, although we didn't think of it that way at the time. We just naturally concentrated on the more populated areas, not only because city schools were more influential but also because I didn't want to send our teachers indiscriminately into every tiny village that needed one. With the Brothers concentrated in large cities, I could visit them more often and get them together more easily for retreats and what you would call workshops. Besides that, a Brother would be less lonely in a large city where he had the company of his Brothers. In the country, as used to be the case in your country schools, the school was isolated, with just one classroom and one teacher. I always insisted that there be more than one Brother in each school. You see, in those days of hardship and adventure, the Brothers needed the support that community life could give them. In those early days, the Brothers had a closeness brought about by suffering, hardship, and the joy and pride generated by doing

something beautiful for God—helping “seedling barbarians,” as one priest called them, become filled with the Christian spirit.

I have been called a pioneer in discovering certain methods of teaching that sheer necessity forced me into. For example, we taught in French, not in Latin. It seems incredible, doesn't it, that children learned Latin first in order to be taught the other subjects in that language? It shows the big influence of the Church and the clergy in those days. Besides, it was the state's way of keeping poor people from getting an education. Only the rich could afford to spend time learning Latin. Latin had snob appeal.

Well, anyway, I would have none of that, both from principle and from necessity. Our youngsters were mostly poor children working either in shops or on farms. They could not afford to spend a great number of years in school. Teaching them Latin first and after that other subjects like reading and writing would have been a waste of time. I received a great deal of flack for that innovation from other teachers, from Church officials, and from certain members of the government. The big force behind their protests was that they wanted “to keep the poor in their place.”

Some fifty years after my death, the Brothers were subjected to the same kind of criticism that I received in my lifetime. According to our critics, we were “upsetting the applecart,” the whole system that “kept the poor in their place.” One author accused my Brothers around 1760 of “ruining everything, teaching reading and writing to people who ought never to learn anything but to handle the plane and the file.” Another wrote that the only way to stop the Brothers was to get them out on the farms and have them plow the land instead of cultivating the minds of people who didn't need an education. That critic was Voltaire, supposedly one of the great French intellectuals of that time.

Another method I started was teaching a large number of students at the same time, instead of instructing each one separately. It seems incredible that teachers in those days tutored one student at a time, at the teacher's desk, while trying to keep all the others quiet. Sometimes that was pure pandemonium. In our schools we

were forced to teach all the children simultaneously, because the number of children who came to us was so great and our classes were so large. It was utterly impractical to teach one student at a time while the others wasted time or got into some kind of mischief. This individual tutoring was also the invention of the wealthy, who were used to getting tutoring at home before going to school at the age of nine. Poor parents could not afford the time to teach their children; besides, they didn't know enough to teach them. As our Rule put it, "The Institute was founded for the children of the working classes and the poor, who do not have the knowledge or the time to teach their own children."

I don't want to give you the impression that the Brothers just taught subjects and not the individual students in the class; in my time the Brothers knew very well how to personalize their teaching. One of my primary principles in education is that the teacher must know each student in the class, not as a number but as a person. The teacher, like a good shepherd, ought to know each student by name. We were just as concerned with the progress of the individual as with that of the group.

I wanted my Brothers not only to know their students but also to love them with the tenderness of a mother and the firmness of a father. I wanted my Brothers to know their students so well that the type of instruction they gave would hinge on the type of student they were teaching. I wanted the Brothers to encourage the slow students and somehow manage to promote them. I wanted the Brothers to study the newcomers and, above all, not to punish them, for they did not yet know them. If students were stubborn and proud, I wanted the Brothers to correct them privately, not publicly. If students were giddy or timid, I wanted the Brothers to be patient. If students were spoiled or bossy, I encouraged the Brothers to assign them a special job in the classroom, such as taking care of the writing materials. You see, I wanted the Brothers not only to touch minds but also to touch hearts.

Teaching such large classes while being sensitive to each student in every class was hard, back-breaking work. Some of our

young teachers who were just beginning would easily become discouraged. I remember writing to one of them, telling him to begin courageously to teach badly, because in the beginning no one is perfect, or even skillful, at anything.

During all the time the schools were being established, there were problems and difficulties of every kind. When we were first starting out, we took them in stride, but after a while they sort of wore me down. I can truthfully say that in my 40s and 50s, and even two days before my death, I was either dragging myself into court, fighting pastors over salaries and the running of the schools, battling landlords over rent, making court appeals, paying fines, moving back furniture seized by the courts, justifying our clothing with one bishop or our teaching in French with another, or repairing classrooms vandalized by outside teachers' groups. Many teachers who came to us found the life too hard and left us. Some priests who had hired us wanted to control us and make of us a mere diocesan order. What got to me is that all these persecutions were the work of good people. This sort of opposition sapped my energy and shook my confidence.

We were called into court many times by the teachers who charged a fee for their services. We never charged a penny, but we ran such good schools that not only the poor but also the rich enrolled. We received court orders to teach only poor students who could not afford to pay a fee, but it was difficult to distinguish between those who could and those who could not pay. It was unfair to exclude well-off students from the schools the Brothers ran with such efficiency, intelligence, and enthusiasm. I lost one lawsuit and much money in an apparently airtight case when a friend of mine refused to testify on my behalf. That was what you would call in your language "a real bummer." Still, the world veritably beat a path to our door because we made a better type of school.

In all this my health began to go downhill. I hesitate to talk about my health, but the physical suffering I experienced during life had a great deal to do with the way I looked upon things. I had severe attacks of rheumatism ever since my accident in the

ditch; this injury plagued me all my lifetime. My knee injury was considerably aggravated in Paris when I fell on an iron spike fixed into the ground. That injury kept me in bed for some six weeks. From then on, the rheumatism in my legs became much more painful. Besides the rheumatism, I developed very bad headaches. I think these arose from my continual anxieties with the schools, with the courts, with the opposition from other people, and from fighting the pain in my body. In addition to rheumatism and headaches, I had severe attacks of asthma all my life.

I don't want to make a big deal of it, but this was a time of suffering in my life. The honeymoon was over. In all these troubles, the thought of the presence of the Brothers, of God, and of Jesus sustained me. Later on, we would make the saying "Live, Jesus, in our hearts" the password of our community.

My life during this period was extremely busy. I was continually visiting the Brothers and the students in the schools, and I usually traveled on foot. In my day we had three forms of travel, but they weren't jet, train, and bus; they were stagecoach, horse, and our own two feet. I usually walked, because either a horse or a horse-drawn carriage was too expensive. This constant walking was hard on me; sometimes I had to travel in snow, sleet, or rain.

One time it took me three days to rush from Rheims to Paris in hot July weather, a distance of some 75 miles, to be at the bedside of a dying Brother. He was dead when I arrived. I was exhausted by the journey and crushed by the death of this Brother friend of mine.

The following day, I was so ill that the Brothers called in a priest to take care of my soul and a doctor to take care of my body. I was in agony from the bladder trouble brought about by that grueling walk and in great pain from the rheumatism that had flared up during the journey. The doctor said that the treatment would either kill me or cure me. It almost killed me, but after six weeks in bed, I was able to get around once again. I rarely spoke or wrote to the Brothers about my health problems; they had troubles enough of their own.

When I wasn't visiting the communities or the schools, I would do substitute teaching for an ill or absent Brother or write letters to the Brothers in various communities. I wrote to each Brother at least once a month. If I lived in your day, I probably would have telephoned. One biographer estimated that I might have written about 18,000 letters. It could be true, but who cares? My letters to my Brothers were mainly letters of encouragement. I was greatly encouraged by their replies to me. I guess you could call these letters spiritual direction by mail. I would rather think of them as correspondence among friends and Brothers. With travel so difficult, this mode of communication was practical, effective, and inexpensive.

Besides the letters, I wrote a number of books. I began writing rather extensively in the winters of 1694 and 1695, when I was bedridden with several bouts of rheumatism. From that year until my death, I was either writing new books or revising and reprinting old ones. You can say that for me in my 40s and 50s and in my old age, writing was a hobby, one I was forced into by the demands of the schools and the communities. In all, I'd say I wrote about a dozen books. Many were community efforts by all the Brothers, especially our Rule of religious life and our guide to classroom management. These books were on and off the back burner during some forty years of trial and error.

Because I was very involved in the prayer life of the Brothers, I wrote a method of meditation and some books of meditations for the Brothers and several prayer books for the students. In one meditation I told my Brothers that they ought to engrave the word of God on the hearts of the children they taught. The students' day was quite long and tedious, so I put into their prayer books some lively hymns adapted from love songs and drinking songs of my day. I also wrote various kinds of textbooks, again with the help of the Brothers. Some of these books sold remarkably well in my lifetime and after, especially the three-volume catechism, which went through more than 250 printings. Another popular one was the book on etiquette, which was printed more than 100 times.

One English author, Matthew Arnold, about a century later, called this book "a minor classic."

So my life was full, but at 60 years of age, I was tired, physically exhausted, and, what was worse, worn out psychologically and spiritually. Without feeling sorry for myself, I had become bread broken for my Brothers and for their students. I felt scooped out, hollowed out. It was a hard time, something like what one author has called "the dark night of the soul." In your day you might say that I had a nervous breakdown, but it really wasn't that. It was a feeling that my work was done and that I needed to withdraw from it, not only for my own good but also for the good of the Institute I had founded. It was a kind of let-down after a lifetime of hectic activity and after most of the big goals had been achieved. In your language you might call it "burnout."

That is why in 1712, when I went to visit our Brothers in the cities of southern France, I stayed down there for more than two years, not only visiting the Brothers' communities but also spending a great deal of time in several monasteries, where I was able to put things in focus and pray to God for guidance. Finally, the principal Brothers in Paris sent me a letter commanding me to return to Paris "to resume without delay the responsibility for administering the Institute." If they had suggested my return or had only hinted at it, I would not have gone back. But a command! After all, I had given my word to obey, and my word was my bond. I returned and said to them, somewhat as Samuel did before the Lord, "Here I am; I have come. What do you want of me?" The year was 1714, and I was 63 years old.

My health continued to fail, and less than two years later, I was bedridden for some ten months. On several occasions over the years, I had tried to hand over the leadership of the Institute to the Brothers, but I never succeeded. In fact, I almost had a revolution on my hands when one archbishop tried to replace me with another priest. But now it was different; the Institute was firmly established, and my health was failing rapidly. The time was ripe for new and more vigorous leadership. I called a general meeting

in 1717 of some sixteen of our leaders, and I finally persuaded them to elect someone else to lead them. I could now rest in peace.

For the next two years, I enjoyed my leisure and my retirement, but I knew I was on my way to another place, where life would begin anew. I loved my life on earth, but I always kept in the back of my mind the thought that there was a better time coming up. It was like a melody in my mind. Just two days before my death, I received word from the archbishop that he had revoked my faculties, my permission to act as a priest in the diocese, because of a misunderstanding between a parish priest and me concerning the continued absence of our delinquent boarders from the parish Mass. Without being melodramatic, I guess you could say that the Lord was asking me to drink this chalice to the dregs.

Some biographers report that at my death in 1719 at the age of 68, people in the streets shouted out, "The saint is dead." Some twenty years earlier, when a woman had called me a saint, I had roared with laughter. I did the same thing after my death; I'm still laughing.

The biographies written about me quite soon after my death—by a priest friend, a Brother friend, and my own nephew—told my story pretty well, except that they were so intent on getting me recognized as a saint that they forgot that I am a man. The biographies written after that time are full of facts about my life—some accurate, some inaccurate—but in general, no biographer has put his finger on what really made me "tick."

One study, however, gets down to the heart of the matter. The author, a Brother, remarks that when I wrote my *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, I was really telling the story of my life. He is right. In a sense, what I have just written here is my second autobiography; however, there is a big difference between the two. *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* gets at the spiritual underpinnings of my life, whereas what I have written here mainly describes the facts while saying very little about my so-called spiritual odyssey.

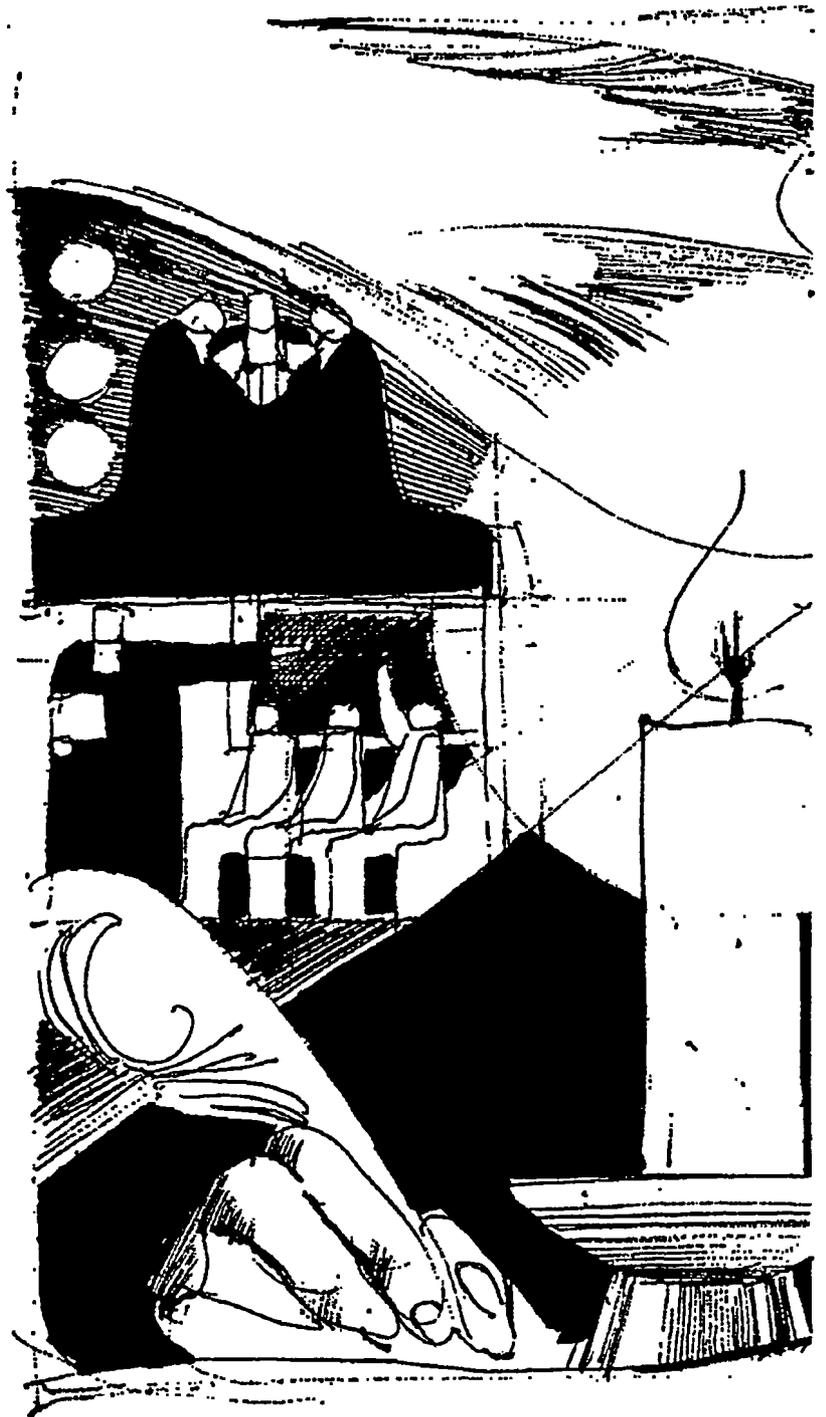
Those sixteen meditations describe a peak experience. The author of the study speculates that when I wrote them, I was like an Alpine climber who had painfully scaled a rugged mountain and at the top could view the complete path traveled.

What I saw clearly when I wrote those meditations at the end of my life was that God had pushed me into this work gently but firmly. I was merely an instrument in God's hands. The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was, and is, the work of God.

That's why I insisted that the spirit of faith be the fundamental spirit of the Brother. The Brother is a vine attached to Christ; the Brother is God's coworker and ambassador and a guardian angel to his students. That's why I insisted on zeal as the other principal spirit of the Brother, for zeal is nothing more or less than faith spilling over in love: God's love, a deep and mighty overflowing of graciousness and *faith-full* love upon the world.

The Church officially declared me a saint in 1900, but that is the honor not of one man but of a whole society whose work I will describe briefly in the closing chapter of this booklet. You might say that I was officially declared a saint not just because I am a saint but because the hundred or so Brothers who lived with me and the thousands who came after me are saints. Thousands upon thousands of Brothers, living and dead, were officially made saints that 24th day of May in the year 1900. The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, we Christian Brothers, we happy band of saints and sinners, was declared holy on that day.

How about you, my young pilgrim colleague on the way? Do you ever dream of becoming a saint?





I am the vine  
you are  
the branches  
...you shall bear  
much fruit.

## The Harvest

Well, they certainly did make a big noise about my life and death. As I mentioned before, I didn't have much to say about either my life or my death. God was leading me on all the time by the people and the circumstances in my life. All I did was follow the path to which the finger of God was pointing. When the time came for me to die, I could not say, "Wait a minute, Lord; I have a few things to take care of." No, God just crooked a finger at me, and away I went.

In a real sense, though, I didn't die. I live on in my Brothers who have come after me; they're all over the world by now. I have become immortal and ubiquitous, not just in the next world but also in this one. Someone has said that "the Institute is now John's place in the world." My Institute is not just a thing but a host, a crowd of people—thousands upon thousands of people who have lived and died in it, all over the world, and millions upon millions who have shared and still share its spirit. Right now in your day, thousands of my Brothers and their colleagues are living the faith and expressing it in love for hundreds of thousands of our students and their families.

My crowd is everywhere. We are present in every continent but Antarctica and in scores of countries. We do many things. Mostly we run schools, but we have all kinds of schools and are engaged in different kinds of work.

We are totally present in Europe. We are behind the Iron Curtain in Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia; we are in Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg, and Holland; we are in Spain, France, Monaco, Italy, Turkey, and Greece; we are in Eng-

land, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Malta. In Africa we are in Egypt, Algeria, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Morocco; we are in Ethiopia, Madagascar, Reunion, the Congo, Tunisia, Togo, Nigeria, Mali, Mauritius, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa. In the Americas we are in Canada, Mexico, the United States, Aruba, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Panama, the West Indies, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador, the Antilles, Honduras, and Santo Domingo. In Asia we are Thai, Vietnamese, Indian, Pakistani, Filipino, Palastinian, Malaysian, Lebanese, Jordanian, Israeli, Japanese, and Sri Lankan; in Oceania we are Papuan, Australian, and New Zealander.

In short, we have quite a crowd in some eighty different countries and represent diverse cultures and backgrounds. We run good schools and are very serious about quality education. We are a no-nonsense group that wants to help the young and their families. We want our students to be successful in life, but mainly we want them to be good people, successful in living.

We are engaged in all sorts of work to achieve this end. We run schools for university-bound students and technical students; we teach seminarians, but we also teach prisoners and take care of delinquents. Under the sea we teach marine biology, and on land, agriculture. We conduct hacienda schools for the workers of landowners, and we teach the children of the rich who own the land. We treat drug addicts and alcoholics, psychotics and neurotics. We run boarding schools for the rich who need us and halfway houses and schools for emotionally disturbed children from the ghetto. We teach English as a second language, but we also teach university students how to read blueprints and write sophisticated reports. We are in poor neighborhoods, harnessing the energies of the very poor and organizing the school, the prison, the parish, or the neighborhood. We teach doctoral candidates and dropouts from elementary and secondary schools. We run adult classes in the parish, and we teach the parents of our students. We are on diocesan boards, and we are superintendents of schools.

We are in politics, organizing the people. We teach prisoners' children, the lame, and the blind.

Our Brothers are intelligent, well educated, compassionate, unselfish, and full of faith. We are all things to all people. Like any crowd, we have the poor amongst us, but we are all the richer because of them. It was because of all these Brother teachers that in 1950 Pope Pius XII named me Patron of all teachers.

So you can see that when God gets a thing started, it goes on and on. God sowed a seed in my country in France over 300 years ago, and that seed has grown to become a mighty tree with branches reaching out to embrace the entire world. I'm just part of that tree. I guess you could say that I'm the seed God planted to get the tree started. I had to die, like the seed, so that the tree might grow. Maybe that's why I had a lot of trouble and suffering in life. God gave me those troubles and sufferings so that the Institute might flourish.

I had nothing to do with it. Well, I did have something to do with it, but not much. It was God working in me who did it. Those biographies about me are always giving me the credit, whereas it was God's action through people and events that brought the Institute into being. God hasn't paid much attention to the claims of those biographers, though. God knows that I've always said that the Institute is God's work, not mine. God remembers quite well that the last words I ever did say on this earth are, "I adore in all things God's will in my living and in my dying."

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## Conclusion

Well, here I am back again, Brother Leo Kirby, who wrote this booklet. I've enjoyed putting myself in Saint La Salle's shoes. As I hinted in the introduction, I purposely had him put himself down, for that's the kind of man he was.

Even when people "accused" him of working miracles—like curing a wound on a boy's scalp, bringing a dying Brother back to life, quelling a raging fire with a prayer, or even multiplying bread during a famine—he always had some natural reason for the miracle or placed the "blame" for it entirely on God's shoulders.

I think John Baptist de La Salle is a great saint and hero for our time; we need heroes and heroines. We live in a time of great stress and strain, a period of anxiety, fear, and alienation for many people. Our time calls for heroes and heroines even more so than in the time of Saint La Salle. In his time there were wars and rumors of war; in ours we live in constant threat of a nuclear holocaust. In his time life was simple and relatively stable; in ours we are in a world of constant and revolutionary change.

We are called to face our world with the realism and faith with which Saint La Salle faced his—by looking up and seeing only Jesus in the events of our life. If we meet our world as Saint La Salle met his, we will see that "God indeed put the tiller of history in human hands" when he made our world and told us to "conquer" it.

Many of our heroes and heroines in the twentieth century are short-term; they are dependent for fame on a particular skill or event. We have movie stars and athletic heroes who rely on some

passing skill or physical endowment for their renown. We have generals, astronauts, and politicians whose glory is contingent generally upon a single event or a series of events. Our films, music, and plays tend in general to highlight short-term heroes.

There is no doubt that in our time and place, you and I have real heroes and heroines. Some are known, some not; some are sung, some unsung. Martin Luther King is known; so are Helen Keller and her teacher. Some are not so well known, like Matt Talbot from Ireland, who was once an alcoholic bum but became a very holy man; Tom Dooley, who died at 34 after taking care of the sick and dying poor in Vietnam; Dorothy Day, who renounced communism to spend herself for the homeless of this world. They are heroes and heroines because their whole life, at least the greater portion of it, was heroic.

My contention is that the principal heroes and heroines of our time are the modern-day saints. They might be ordinary people like our parents, some relative of ours, a sister who takes care of an elderly parent, a well-known and generous friend, an inspiring teacher or former teacher, an elderly person whose family has grown up and whose wife or husband is dead but who faces up to life with good cheer and with peace.

The hero or heroine might be an extraordinary person, such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who spent her life caring and loving the teeming, starving, and dying people of Calcutta. The Nobel Prize Committee deserves great credit for presenting to the world such a genuine heroine.

I have just offered you the life of one such hero, John Baptist de La Salle. He literally laid down his life so that the poor and illiterate children of France might live. He poured himself out; he emptied himself that others might be filled up. He was bread broken for the poor of the world. He did all this in a matter-of-fact way, responding to life with a full and willing heart. He had class. He did what he had to do. He said, "Here I am; I am present," each time life exacted some sacrifice so that others might live. He answered, "Present," to life each moment of his life.

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This man was no plaster saint; he was flesh and bone, heart and brain. He was no ethereal spirit, a nomad floating between heaven and earth; he was more like a tree with roots sunk into the good earth and branches pointing to the sky. He was a man standing between heaven and earth as a life-giver, cultivating growth in himself and in his brothers and sisters throughout the world.

He responded "Yes" to life.

Ladies and Gentlemen, life is now in session.

Are you present?