This introduction will have four parts, first, in order to appreciate the spirituality of seventeenth-century France, a description of the state of religious practice at the end of the sixteenth century; second, a brief summary of De La Salle’s contact with the French School of spirituality; third, a selection of passages from De La Salle’s meditations to show how he made use of the principal themes of that spirituality, and fourth, how he developed an original spirituality for the community of Brothers he established, which is pertinent to all Christian teachers today.

I

Religious Practice in France at the End of the Sixteenth Century

Before illustrating the spirituality of De La Salle with selections from his meditations, it seems advantageous to describe the state of religion in France at the end of the sixteenth century, in order to understand better the spirituality of the seventeenth century, which was in large part a reaction to that condition. This will also help understand better the spirituality of the Founder.

“To speak of the decadence of religion in France at the end of the sixteenth century has become commonplace, both for historians and biographers.” After 40 years of civil war, the social structure was riddled with the worst disorders, and the practice of religion had become increasingly abandoned. At all levels of the Catholic hierarchy, made up of men from the upper class, there was every sort of intrigue and complicity to maintain privilege and gain promotions to higher status and greater financial benefit.

To understand this behavior and the greed that also possessed the noble and bourgeois classes, it is necessary to know that for many years numerous families had taken advantage of the connection between politics and religion to improve their financial and social position, which originally had been won with great effort. The sense of honor and of ancestral tradition forbade any return to the past. Everyone understood clearly that the one sure way to add to the glory of the family name and to strengthen its position in the social order was through the power of money.

The Church was rich at this time, and France was rich, very rich.
Church wealth was equal to more than one-third of the total wealth of the entire nation, and this ratio was continually increasing in favor of the Church. To secure an appointment in this ecclesiastical organism was sure to be rewarding, so applicants were always at hand.

The financial power of the Church could have created serious problems for the unstable government of the monarchy if the Concordat of 1516, in exchange for certain royal privileges granted to the clergy, had not given the king control of a large number of Church positions that provided those who held title to them with considerable financial benefit. The king had, in effect, a kind of treasury of bonuses to distribute under the guise of rewards for good servants of the state.

By the system of commendam, the king would assign ownership of abbeys, parishes, and even bishoprics to people who were ineligible according to Church law. Such titulars could be secular priests, members of the laity, women, even young children, who would receive the tonsure to make them technically qualified for the benefits. Sully, a Protestant and friend of Henry IV, was given four abbeys. A deputy chosen by the titular would then carry out the function in return for a small part of the revenue. More often than not, the titular never appeared in the assigned diocese or monastery. This system naturally led to an almost complete separation of the spiritual responsibility from the financial revenue attached to it.

In convents the abbesses and prioresses were elected in most cases and lived in their convents. Nevertheless, the king could suspend the election and name whomever he pleased. In this way the Abbess of Maubuisson, who had been elected in good and proper form, was deposed by Henry IV in favor of Angélique d’Estrée, sister of his mistress, the beautiful Gabrielle. It was customary to choose titulars of 15 to 18 years of age; Jacqueline Arnauld, the future Mother Angélique, was Abbess of Port Royal at the age of eleven.

When families had one of their members receive such an honor, they did all they could not to lose it. Every means was appropriate, even the most fraudulent. In this way a worldly clergy was created, people incapable of performing worthy priestly functions, whose main preoccupation was to increase their revenue.

Most bishops were members of the king’s court, literary or military personalities, diplomats, or financiers. Many of the candidates for the priesthood were much more interested in the chance to make
money than in the opportunity to serve as priests; ordination was often conferred simply for the asking. The ignorance of the priests, especially in the rural areas, was shameful. Many of them were given over to wine, lust, and witchcraft. Teaching the people the faith was not high on the list of their activities.

Religious priests were not much better. Religious houses for men and women were often a refuge for boys whom their families wanted to disown or girls who had no dowry. Most of the monks never made a novitiate, and in a number of abbeys, military service replaced the practice of prayer for many of their members. This situation did not seem to bother the titulars who had been assigned; in fact, any effort to reform the situation would probably have had a negative effect on their revenue.

In the face of this less than fervent clergy, it is not hard to imagine the religious spirit that characterized the Christian people and the religious life of France at the end of the sixteenth century. The structure was there. Bishops and priests held their positions. Churches gathered in the faithful. Monasteries housed the monks; convents, the nuns. The people came together mostly for display. But all these externals had little or no religious substance. The separation of the revenues of the Church from the spiritual responsibilities produced a similar separation of external appearances from personal morality. A person could easily claim to be a Christian and even a priest, but that could be no guarantee of any personal commitment. The performance of the external acts of religion was most often a social and political duty, not an expression of profound faith.

This, then, was the situation in France at the end of the sixteenth century: a true and profound interior spirit was not generally considered fundamental to the Christian life. The task, therefore, of spiritual leaders and their followers was to bring to life this essential element of Christianity.

The outstanding religious event of the sixteenth century was undoubtedly the Council of Trent (1545–1563), with the great movement for reform that it planned for the whole Catholic Church.

The Fathers of the Council placed the execution of their decisions in the hands of the bishops. But, as noted, the bishops of France, with few exceptions, were in a poor condition to make any significant
changes. Their feeling was that such a reform was an untimely interference by a foreign authority in the functioning of a system that belonged to the king. This is the principal reason for the delay in following the directives of the Council.

Nonetheless the situation in France was not entirely bleak. There were some points of light, shining and giving promise for a bright future.

A few austere religious orders remained untouched by the general moral decline of the times, and faithful Christians turned to them. Among these orders were the Capuchins, established in France in 1573, who were fervent observers of the Rule of Saint Francis. Their heroic life and their mysticism attracted people of all ranks and nurtured their devotion.

The Carthusians, a cloistered and contemplative order, were venerated for their special way of life, their mortification, silence, and solitude. Their religious spirit and the originality of their monastic practices also drew the elite of France to join them.

The Jesuits came to France in 1552. Through their distinguished collèges they developed a growing influence among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Their theologians and spiritual writers had a strong influence on the religious thought of the seventeenth century.

The example of the religious orders of men was soon followed by congregations of women who were equally fervent. Madame Acarie (1566–1618) led a community of outstanding religious and invited the reformed Carmelites of Teresa of Jesus to come from Spain.

Through the efforts of Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629), seven Spanish religious founded the first French Carmel in 1604. Several other contemplative congregations soon followed. Congregations of the active life were founded about the same time and developed rapidly: the Ursulines (1596), the Daughters of Notre Dame (1607), and the Religious of Notre Dame of Lorraine (1618), founded by Peter Fourier (1565–1640) and Alix Le Clerc (1576–1622).

A list of the books printed during the sixteenth century testifies that devotional writing of all sorts was abundant. It is, therefore, possible to give a fairly clear picture of the kind of reading that was
done by the literate, pious people of the time. Unfortunately, there was an almost complete lack of original French works, and the literary and spiritual quality was poor. Most of the good books available were translations into French of Latin translations by the Carthusians of Cologne of books by German or Flemish writers. There were also translations of the Spanish books of Louis of Granada (d. 1588), Teresa of Jesus (d. 1582), John of the Cross (d. 1591), Peter of Alcantara (d. 1562), and Louis du Pont (d. 1624). From Italy came the spiritual writings and the biography of Saint Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510), published by the Carthusians of Bourgfontaine through numerous editions. A collection of the meditations of Matthias Bellintani (d. 1611), The Practice of Prayer or Contemplation, was popular at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Nevertheless, the need for a basic reform was great, and great spiritual leaders in France responded with the development of a spirituality that has won for seventeenth-century France the titles, “the golden age of spirituality” and “the great age of the soul.”

Outstanding among those leaders were Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622), author of Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God; Pierre de Bérulle, often referred to as the Founder of the French School of spirituality; Charles de Condren (1588–1641), successor to Bérulle as Superior of the French Oratory; Jean-Jacques Olier (1628–1680), Founder of the Sulpicians, and John Eudes (1601–1680), Founder of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary. Each of these leaders called for a reformed and pious clergy and thus had an influence on John Baptist de La Salle, but De La Salle eventually developed an original spirituality for the Brothers of the Christian Schools and, indeed, for all Christian educators.

II

John Baptist de La Salle and the French School

In 1651, when John Baptist de La Salle was born, the chief representatives of the French School of spirituality, Bérulle and Condren, were dead; their two most faithful disciples, Jean-Jacques Olier and John Eudes, were still living. Olier had six more years to live and would spend them in ill health, retired from his work as pastor of Saint Sulpice and devoted to the revision of his writings on the
essence of the Christian life. Eudes would live almost 30 years longer, ardently promoting devotion to the hearts of Jesus and Mary while carrying on a rough battle against the untiring opposition of those opposed to his spirituality and practices.

At what moment in his life was the young John Baptist put in contact with the spirituality of the French School? He had occasion at an early age to meet with several devout priests reputed for their knowledge and wisdom. Among them was the Canon Pierre Dozet, Vicar General, Chancellor of the University of Reims, and relative of the La Salle family, who encouraged John Baptist to receive the tonsure when he was not yet eleven years old. A few years later, in 1661, Canon Dozet resigned his canonry in favor of his young cousin. Such events indicated that as a youth, De La Salle was already aspiring to the priesthood and had the intellectual and moral predispositions for such a state in life.

His parents could afford to have John Baptist attend excellent schools, the Collège des Bons Enfants and the School of Theology of the University of Reims. In 1670 he was admitted to the Sorbonne in Paris to study for a doctorate in theology. Here he met with the disciples of Olier at the seminary of Saint Sulpice and for a year and a half had the benefit of Sulpician formation under the spiritual direction of Louis Tronson and François Leschassier. He could not have found a better way to become familiar with the spirituality of that time.

The death of his mother in 1671 and that of his father nine months later, in 1672, put a premature end to De La Salle’s stay in Paris. He had then to take responsibility for the care of his four brothers and two sisters, as well as the family estate. Nonetheless, he managed to continue his studies for the doctorate in theology and ordination to the priesthood. A close relationship with Canon Nicolas Roland, founder of a congregation of women dedicated to the education of young girls, and a chance meeting with Adrien Nyel, a layman devoted to the education of poor boys, led John Baptist to be involved in the establishment of schools and the training of teachers for the Christian education of the poor. In the process he saw the urgent need to provide spiritual formation and pedagogical guidance to these teachers, recognizing as he did the great importance of the schools.

Eventually, John Baptist was led to give up the wealth and social prestige of his canonry and to use his share of the family estate to buy
food for the poor people of Reims in a time of famine. This was a major conversion for John Baptist: he was stepping out of one world and into another that was diametrically opposed. With patience he gradually assembled a group of young men who were willing for the glory of God to commit themselves completely to the human and spiritual education of poor children. The program organized by De La Salle had a tremendous impact on the primary school in France. He divided the large class of children into small groups according to their level of learning, adapted an earlier simultaneous method of teaching groups, rather than instructing each student one at a time, and taught children to read the mother tongue, French, instead of Latin, the usual practice at that time. In addition the method of discipline and order established in the classes and in the school brought about extraordinary educational results in a short time.

De La Salle envisioned the spiritual and moral formation of children through the school. He knew that to achieve this result, the teachers would be the major force. He prepared the Brothers for their encounter with the students by making them aware of the presence and action of God in their own life and the dignity and importance of the mission that God had entrusted to them:

Adore God’s fatherly Providence in your regard. He withdrew you from the world in order to prepare you to acquire the virtues you need to do your work well and to educate a great number of children in the Christian spirit. (MDF 131.1)

For De La Salle the spiritual formation of the teachers was uppermost in preparing them for their work with the children. To achieve this formation, he wrote rules to guide them and meditations to teach them the principal themes of spirituality for a Christian educator.

Initially inspired by Bérulle, Condren, and their disciples, he gradually developed an original adaptation that established him as a master of Christian spirituality.

III
Themes from the French School in De La Salle’s Meditations

Rayez has remarked that De La Salle took whatever was good for his
purpose wherever he found it and was “extraordinarily attuned to the
spiritual influences of people and writings that were available at the
end of the seventeenth century.” 16 The themes De La Salle developed
were already present in the writings of the French School of spirituality
and other spiritual leaders of his time. His genius was to adapt
these themes to a spirituality for Christian teachers.

Four themes have been selected to show the influence of the
French School upon De La Salle and to reflect his own creativity.
These themes are theocentrism, christocentrism, the action of the Holy
Spirit, and the human person before God. After examining them, we
will show how De La Salle personalized them in his own spirituality,
as developed in the meditations.

**Theocentrism**

When Bérulle speaks of God, he insists on the majesty (grandeur)
and the holiness of God, which he worships in the admirable unity of
nature and adores in the Trinity of Persons. Whether he contemplates
God in the absolute quality of the divine essence or imagines God
deliberating in council with creatures, for Bérulle there is nothing great
except God. This is how Bérulle and his followers define a major and
primary basis for their spirituality, theocentrism. This was a reaction to
the neglect of God in sixteenth-century France and to the humanism
that pervaded much of whatever spirituality did exist; it was also a
response to the appeal for reform by the Council of Trent.

In his meditations De La Salle presents God as infinitely superior
to all created things:

*To whom ought we to give ourselves if not to the One from
whom we have received everything, who alone is our Lord and
our Father, and who, as Saint Paul says, has given being to all
things and has made us only for himself?” (MDF 90.2)*

For Bérulle there was nothing more natural than for a creature to
offer God the homage of adoration and of abandonment to the divine
will. Condren and Olier use the term “sacrifice-adoration” to express
this submission to the divinity. Because the creature is nothing before
God, it can only glorify God by self-destruction, by the sacrifice of its
being after the example of the Incarnate Word, in particular by the
depprivation of personhood in the humanity of Jesus, as well as by the
sacrifice of the Cross.

Lasallian spirituality is closer in this to Bérrulle than to Condren. When De La Salle describes the attitude of the Virgin Mary before the work that God accomplished in her, he expresses his own feeling of how a person properly responds to the generosity of God:

*By a special privilege, she already enjoyed the use of reason [at the moment of her birth] and made use of it to adore God and to thank him for all his goodness. From that time on, she consecrated herself entirely to God to live and to act only for him during the rest of her life.*

*She professed her nothingness profoundly in the depths of her soul, acknowledging that she owed everything to God. She admired interiorly what God had done in her, saying to herself what she later declared in her Canticle, God has done great things in me.* (MDF 163.3)

**Christocentrism**

Bérrullian spirituality places the mystery of the Incarnation at the center of the Christian life. A person contemplating the Incarnate Word contemplates the Father, of whom the Son is the perfect image. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, bond of love and unity among the Divine Persons and source of the creativity in the Incarnation of the Word. By his sanctifying action, the Son returns to the Father as origin and source of everything, all that is achieved in the work of God. This is the basis for the divine pattern (*exemplarisme*), an intuition dear to Bérrulle.

By considering the states and the mysteries of the life of Jesus, a person achieves an intimate union with him who is “the perfect servant, the perfect religious of God, the perfect adorer of the Father.”

Several expressions of Saint Paul on this theme can be found again and again in Bérrulle’s writings: “It is no longer I who live, but Jesus who lives in me” (Gal 2:20); “Have this mind in you which was also in Christ” (Ph 2:5); “May Christ dwell by faith in your hearts” (Eph 3:17). In the French School, this is the summit of the whole life of a Christian.
Lasallian spirituality develops its fundamental orientation from this *Christocentrism*. Sharing in the mystery of Christ and uniting with him are at the heart of De La Salle’s meditations for his disciples:

*Attach yourselves only to Jesus Christ, his doctrine, and his holy maxims, because he has done you the honor of choosing you in preference to a great number of others to announce these truths to children, whom he loves so specially.* (MDF 167.2; see also 59.2, 102.2)

In this spirit De La Salle made the phrase, *Live Jesus in our hearts, forever!* the greeting of the Brothers whenever they wished to begin a conversation and also at the beginning and the end of their principal actions.

**The Action of the Holy Spirit**

The Spirit of love and unity holds an important place in the spirituality of the French School. Bérulle writes, “I desire that the Spirit of Jesus Christ be the Spirit of my spirit and the life of my life.” Olier encourages his disciples to give themselves completely over to the Spirit and to allow him to act in them. Eudes advises, “Have a great care to give yourself to the Holy Spirit of Jesus, so that he will find you without attachment to your own spirit, . . . will have full power and freedom to act in you according to his desire, . . . and will guide you in the way that pleases him.”

Lasallian spirituality gives a central role to the Holy Spirit; it is the soul of the entire life of the Brother:

*You need the fullness of the Spirit of God in your state, for you ought to live and be guided entirely by the spirit and the light of faith; only the Spirit of God can give you this disposition.* (MDF 43.2)

*You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts, but this you cannot do except by the Spirit of God. Pray to him to give you today the same grace that he gave to the holy Apostles. Ask him that after filling you with his Holy Spirit to sanctify you, he will also communicate himself to you to procure the salvation of others.* (MDF 43.3; see also 43.2)
The human person before God

The nothingness and the weakness of the sinner are confronted by the majesty (grandeur) and holiness of God. This emphasis on the nothingness and the sinfulness of the human person is a fundamental characteristic of the French School of spirituality. The pessimism of Bérulle regarding the sinful human condition, and even more the pessimism of Condren and Olier, reflects clearly a Platonic vision of God. Condren writes that God is “...so great, so pure, so living within himself, so separated from a creature, and the creature so unworthy, that if God only looks at a creature, it would be destroyed and consumed in his presence because of his great holiness.”

De La Salle does not accept this dark view of the creature before God, but he does insist on the need to recognize “the dependence we have on God and how undeserving we are of enjoying the benefits and happiness of his holy presence.” When he uses the expressions “annihilation” and “nothingness,” which are so much a part of the vocabulary of the French School when speaking of creatures, his teaching never encourages the self-destruction of the person in order to give honor to God. De La Salle writes, “All creatures . . . must abase themselves and acknowledge their nothingness before God in the sight of his glory and majesty” (MDF 169.1), but he insists only that this ought to lead a person to “a feeling of adoration at the thought of God’s presence” (MDF 90.1).

Unlike the French school, De La Salle uses the word “destruction” almost solely in reference to sin. Instead, he uses expressions such as “strip yourself” and “empty yourself” in order to give place entirely to God and his Spirit.

Because you cannot seek anything but God there [in solitude], your first thought is to empty your heart of all created things in order to be able to fill it entirely with God. (MDF 180.2)

The feast of the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew gives De La Salle an opportunity to show how far this stripping of self and this possession by God can go:

This saint endured [the torment of being flayed alive] with such patience that he seemed to be dead and no longer have feeling, for he was so filled with the Spirit of God that the interior feelings that enlivened his soul continually raised him to God and
seemed to deprive his body of the feeling natural to it. (MDF 159.3)

To achieve this stripping of self, or annihilation, asceticism is needed. For Bérulle the practice of mortification does not aim at the destruction of the creature, which belongs to God, for this would be an offense against the Creator; rather, mortification aims at the use of the creature (human nature), because sin is the abuse of human nature.

Condren and Olier, however, take the absolute position without qualification that the creature is nothing and sinful; therefore, they see no solution to the human condition other than the destruction and annihilation of the creature, and this they see exemplified in the annihilation of the human person of the Incarnate Word.

Lasallian spirituality follows more the asceticism of Bérulle than that of Condren and Olier. Though his recommendations to his disciples and his own personal practices of mortification of the senses are rigorous, in his writings De La Salle puts the emphasis on fidelity to the duties of state, observance of the daily spiritual exercises, attention to little things, in a word, on the mortification of the spirit and mind.

There is no corporal mortification prescribed in the Rule of the Brothers. Instead De La Salle urges his disciples to accept, and even love, the sufferings of the day in imitation of their teacher, Jesus Christ, and in living the Pascal Mystery, or simply as a condition of the Christian life:

You have to suffer a constant martyrdom that is no less violent for the spirit than Saint Bartholomew’s was for his body. You must, so to speak, tear off your own skin, which Saint Paul calls the old man, in order to be clothed with the Spirit of Jesus Christ, which is, according to the same Apostle, the new man. Let this, then, be your effort throughout your life, so that you may truly become disciples of Jesus Christ and imitators of this holy Apostle in his martyrdom. (MDF 159.3; see also 89.2, 152.3)

De La Salle does use Condren’s idea of destruction of the spirit (mind) when he writes about obedience, a topic that will be treated below.
IV
John Baptist de La Salle’s Originality

Unquestionably the spirituality of De La Salle was influenced by the major themes of the French School, as well as the spirit of reform created by the Council of Trent (1545–1563), of which the French School was certainly a part. Although these elements did give him his general orientation and guide him on his own spiritual journey, John Baptist nonetheless formed a spirituality of his own out of his personal experiences and the need to adapt his teaching to the particular circumstances he encountered. De La Salle gave to the Church a spirituality that is altogether original, one that is uniquely suited for people who are dedicated to the Christian education of children, especially of the working class and the poor.

By studying the human and spiritual development of De La Salle when he was a young priest, it is possible to gain an insight into the principal characteristics of his own spiritual life. His first biographers describe various influences that guided him during his years of study in Paris and Reims and the doubts he experienced in choosing a suitable apostolic service. In all these experiences, he focused on doing the will of God, and he searched for this will in the events of his life as well as in the whole context of his human existence. He was a man of God, imbued with faith and zeal for God’s glory, trained and guided by a solid theological foundation. Out of this wealth as a person, he designed for himself and then for his disciples a spiritual doctrine adapted to their role as Christian educators in the service of the poor, encouraging them by his example even more than by his words.

The French School developed its spirituality largely for the clergy. De La Salle’s spirituality was addressed specifically to a group of men who were not clerics, the Brothers of the Christian Schools. De La Salle gave up his social status, his family, his canonry, and his inherited wealth to establish the community and to devote all his time and effort to the formation of its members. His writing was aimed at this purpose, to confirm the Brothers in the spirit of their vocation and their profession as teachers. Originally, these men were uncultured and uneducated (De La Salle ranked them below his valet); under their Founder’s guidance, they underwent a conversion at which he labored for a period of forty years.
Early in his association with the teachers, De La Salle put himself at their level, lived their life, learned firsthand their problems and their weaknesses, and encouraged and supported their efforts day by day. Gradually, he helped them appreciate the importance and the greatness of their work, and he engaged them in a style of life open to the demands that come from the call of God. He gave them a spirituality for the educational activity that they were carrying on with poor children.

Rather than turn the teachers’ focus away from their daily work, the interior life that he developed led them to be aware that school is the place in which to meet God in the concrete events of their personal experience.

The following themes of Lasallian spirituality for teachers are the principal elements developed by De La Salle in collaboration with the Brothers.

**You are called by God**

God’s providential act was revealed to De La Salle in the action of those who joined him with the desire to conduct schools in the service of the poor. This was not simply the result of some accident, because for them there was little or no other employment. He was convinced through faith that the Lord Jesus had come into their life and that each one of them had received a personal call to come follow him. He constantly reminded his Brothers of this call:

*Adore God’s fatherly Providence in your regard. He withdrew you from the world in order to prepare you to acquire the virtues you need to do your work well and to educate a great number of children in the Christian spirit.* (MDF 131.1; see also MTR 193.3)

In their response to this call of God, the Brothers had experienced a divine event in their personal history. This specific intervention by God is often noted in De La Salle’s meditations, as when he describes the conversion of Saint Paul:

*How fortunate this saint was to be forestalled by grace and changed in an instant from a persecutor to an Apostle and a preacher of the Gospel!*
Rejoice with the saint over the special favor he received from God, and thank God for the grace he has given you in withdrawing you from the world and calling you to such a holy work of instructing children and leading them to piety. (MDF 99.1)

**Called to do God’s work**

Awareness of this special favor given to the Brothers was very gratifying and was meant to move them deeply with the sense of God’s presence in their life. But De La Salle calls the Brothers to realize that this grace was not intended to be jealously treasured for themselves alone. The good news of salvation, which gave them joy and transformed their life, must be passed on to the poor and abandoned youths entrusted to their care. When De La Salle speaks of the choice God has made of each Brother, he always joins to this choice the purposethat God has in mind:

*It is God who has called you, who has destined you for this work, and who has sent you to work in his vineyard. Do this, then, with all the affection of your heart, working entirely for him.* (MTR 201.1; see also MDF 87.2, 99.2)

**As co-workers with God**

For De La Salle, to work in the vineyard means to be partners with God to help in his work of announcing the Gospel of his Son:

*Because God in his mercy has given you such a ministry, do not falsify his word, but gain glory before him by unveiling his truth to those whom you are charged to instruct. Let this be your whole effort in the instruction you give them, looking upon yourselves as the ministers of God and the dispensers of his mysteries.* (MTR 193.1, emphasis added; see also MDF 3.2, 166.3, MTR 205.1)

To work in this vineyard also means to be co-workers with Jesus Christ in the work of saving children:

*Because you are obliged to help your disciples save themselves, you must engage them to unite all their actions to those of Jesus Christ, our Lord, so that their actions, made holy by his merits and his consecration, are able to be pleasing to God and a means*
of salvation for them. (MTR 195.1; see also 196)

For anyone who wishes to accomplish a work that is true and effective, it is most important to be like a branch attached to a vine:

*Jesus Christ wants you to understand from this comparison that the more your work for the good of your disciples is given life by him and draws its power from him, the more it will produce good in them.* (MTR 195.3)

In their mission to youth, De La Salle does not hesitate to call his Brothers ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ. (MTR 195.2, 201, 205.1)

**Especially for the poor**

Lasallian spirituality puts an emphasis on the service of the poor in the Brothers’ ministry as ambassadors of Jesus Christ. The Christian Schools were founded for those who could not pay for the education of their children, and this included most of the artisans and the working class of the time.

In *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, De La Salle asks the Brothers to study the signs of their times and to realize that poor children are being deprived of education. Then he adds,

*God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God.* (MTR 194.1; see also 193.2, 3, MDF 37.3, 132.2, 189.1, RC 1.5 and 6)

To proclaim the Gospel to poor children effectively, De La Salle saw the necessity in all education, especially in the education of the disadvantaged, for an affective bonding between the teacher and the students. For him this is an integral part of the spirituality of the teacher, based as it is on the spirit of faith:

*Every day, you have poor children to instruct. Love them tenderly, as this saint [Cyprian] did, following in this the example of Jesus Christ. . . . These poor children are also the ones whom God has entrusted to you and to whom you are obliged to proclaim the truths of the holy Gospel.* (MDF 166.2; see also 80.3,
In the service of the Church

To work in God’s vineyard also means to place yourself in the service of the Church and to hold in the Church a role of the highest importance, similar to that of the Apostles, of priests, and even of bishops:

You must, then, look upon your work, which has been entrusted to you by pastors and by fathers and mothers, as one of the most important and necessary services in the Church. (MTR 199.1; see also MDF 102.1, 145.3, MTR 193.3, 200.1)

In his meditation on Saint Marcellinus, bishop of Paris, De La Salle compares the apostolic responsibility of the Brothers to that of this saint:

In some sense it can be said that each of you is a bishop, that is, the vigilant guardian of the flock that God has entrusted to you. (MDF 186.3)

For building the body of Christ

To teach the truths of Christianity to children and to form them in the practice of religion are the main duties of the Brothers, with the intention of “building up the body of Christ which is his Church” (MTR 205.3).

This doctrine of the incorporation of all the members of the Church into Jesus Christ occurs frequently in De La Salle’s writings. In this he joins the teaching of the leaders of the French School of spirituality, who revived this theological truth which had lost “some of its force and influence in the work of scholasticism.”

The meditation, “Commemoration of the Souls in Purgatory,” especially carries the thought of De La Salle on this doctrine:

We are united with these holy souls by an external union, because we are all members of the Church and of Jesus Christ. We are also united with them in Jesus Christ through sanctifying grace, which we share with them. (MDF 185.2)
Through the action of the Holy Spirit

The Church, as a communion of believers, is also “the sanctuary where God dwells through his Holy Spirit” (MTR 199.3, 205.3).

Since the day of Pentecost, this Spirit of God has been among us to bring “a new law, the law of grace and love” (MDF 43.1).

De La Salle urges the Brothers to allow the Holy Spirit to live in them “to make it possible for you to live and to act only by the Spirit’s action in you” (MDF 43.1).

It is further necessary to ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to touch the hearts of those entrusted to them and to obtain their salvation (MDF 43.3, MTR 195.3, and 196.3). In De La Salle’s writing, the role of the Holy Spirit holds a central position.

The mystery of the Trinity and the work of salvation are fundamental to the mission of the Brother: called by God the Father in his providential care for his children, the Brother is given a task which unites him with Jesus Christ in his work of saving children, building up the Church as the city of God and the Body of Christ, and revealing to the heirs of God’s kingdom the mystery of the living God through the action of the Holy Spirit. But although he did indeed borrow from the Trinitarian themes of the French School, De La Salle created from them an original spirituality for the Christian educator. When we consider how De La Salle develops the theme of the human person before God, we see that he emphasizes several characteristics of this relationship to amplify the spirituality suitable for the special ministry of the teacher.

In the spirit of faith

The personal experience of the Brother in his call and mission is an experience of faith. De La Salle stresses this and makes the spirit of faith one of the vital signs of the young society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools:

The spirit of this Institute is, first, a spirit of faith, which ought to induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to
attribute everything to God. (RC 2.2 in CL 25:18)

To know God and his envoy, Jesus Christ, is for De La Salle the foundation of the Christian life. This knowledge is possible only by the light of faith. De La Salle describes the effect that faith has as the result of a personal experience with Jesus Christ:

Jesus Christ, entering a soul, raises it so far above all human sentiments, through the faith that enlivens it, that it sees nothing except by the light of faith. No matter what anyone does to such a soul, nothing can disturb its constancy, make it abandon God's service, or even diminish in the least degree the ardor it feels for God, because the darkness that previously blinded its spirit is changed into an admirable light. As a result, the soul no longer sees anything except by the eyes of faith.

Do you feel that you have this disposition? Pray to the risen Christ to give it to you. (MDF 32.2; see also MTR 193.1, MDF 96.1, 139.2)

Elsewhere he adds:

Your faith must be a light that guides you in all things and a shining beacon to lead to heaven those you instruct. (MDF 178.1)

Do you have such faith that you are able to touch the hearts of your students and to inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you can perform and the one that God asks of you, for this is the purpose of your work. (MDF 139.3)

In the spirit of zeal

It is characteristic of Lasallian spirituality that faith is never separated from zeal, which is the manifestation of faith:

The spirit of this Institute consists, secondly, in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear of God. (RC 2.9 in CL 25:20)

Thus, in the meditation on Saint Stephen, the first martyr, De La Salle presents the confrontation by Stephen of the Jews who disputed with him as typical of the relation between faith and zeal:
Was he [Stephen] not, in fact, inspired by this spirit when he spoke with such great zeal to the Jews and when several of them who disputed with him could not resist the Holy Spirit, who was in him and inspiring his zeal?

You ought to make known by your conduct, as he [Stephen] did, that you are true disciples of Jesus Christ, having only God in view in all your actions and announcing, with as much boldness and intrepidity as he did, the maxims of the holy Gospel. In all this what must strengthen your zeal as well as your faith is the fact that you announce these truths in your position as ministers of God. (MDF 87.1)

In this meditation De La Salle shows that faith serves as a guide and an enlightenment in the life of the deacon Stephen, who always guided himself and acted by the spirit of faith. These same expressions are used in Recueil: “The just, that is, true Christians, live by faith, because they are guided by and their actions are performed with views and motives of faith” (R 71 in CL 15:38).

Lasallian spirituality teaches that faith is especially guided and ruled in everything by the words and thoughts that come from the Scriptures. Saint Stephen is inspired precisely by biblical texts when he explains to his listeners all the benefits that God had bestowed upon their ancestors.

In Lasallian spirituality the action of the Holy Spirit is the essential and effective element in the effort of the Brothers to convert the heart and spirit of their students. The Holy Spirit lives at the still point of their being and prays in each of them (MDF 62.3). The Holy Spirit opens their minds and helps them understand and appreciate the mind of Christ (MDF 191.2). The Holy Spirit gives the vigor and power to proclaim the Gospel and touches hearts (MDF 43.3).

De La Salle spells out some of the effects of the faith of Saint Stephen: the power of the Holy Spirit living in him, his courage to denounce evil conduct at the risk of persecution and even death, his pardoning those who were attacking him, his joy anticipating the happiness of heaven.

By living the interior life
De La Salle encourages the Brothers to live in a constant search for the living God, for his will in their life, for the reign of God that is yet to come. He calls them to recognize each day the intervention of the Lord in their life and by an interior effort to live with an awareness of the presence of God. This interior effort is essential to the purpose of the Institute, that is, the work of evangelization.

**Based on asceticism**

The primary means to achieve this interiority is separation from the world and renunciation of its spirit, all of which De La Salle found incompatible with the search for God.

The more he finds their hearts empty of the things of the world, the more he makes himself known to them and fills them with his Spirit. (MDF 171.1; see also 174.1)

The rigor of De La Salle’s commitment to control and mortify his body and his mind seems extreme today. Rayez writes, “Even to the end of his life, the ideal that De La Salle sought was solitude, a hidden life, genuine poverty, and austerity.” He did not require his disciples to practice this ideal, but he did strongly urge them to have complete control of their senses, “allowing them only what is absolutely necessary for them” (MDF 80.1).

*If you give in to them, it will be quite difficult for you to control them later. Therefore, watch over them constantly, because no one can be sensual and Christian at the same time.* (MDF 95.2)

De La Salle insists on the importance of both external and internal silence in order to become interior.

*We learn to speak to God only by listening to him, for to know how to speak to God and to converse with him can only come from God, who has his own language, which is special to him and which he shares only with his friends and confidants, to whom he gives the happiness of frequently conversing with him.* (MDF 64.2; see also 135.1)

Recollection in order to “live in the depth of the soul” is a means to facilitate attention and docility to the movement of the Spirit.
Following the spiritual writers of the seventeenth century, De La Salle emphasizes the importance of fidelity to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

When he studies the lives of the saints, he contemplates the intervening and effective action of the Spirit of God in them and the way they become aware of and carry out his will:

[Saint Norbert] was specially favored by grace and felt himself touched by an extraordinary movement of the Spirit of God. Leaving the [emperor’s] court, he withdrew entirely from the world to enter the ecclesiastical state. (MDF 132.1; see also 100.1, 118.1, 123.1, 143.1, 159.1, 161.2, 167.1, 174.2, 177.1)

**By attention to the presence of God**

Attention to the presence of God is an important element in Lasallian spirituality. “It is the soul and the support of the interior life” (R 119 in CL 15:62). This encounter with the “intimate guest of the soul, who takes possession of the soul and is in turn possessed by the soul”24 is the whole purpose of the effort to become interior, to be centered, and to become aware of the direction that life is taking.

De La Salle teaches the Brothers that they are loved by God with an intervening love and that the best way to respond to this love is to have all thoughts tend only to God and be entirely directed to him.

“Nothing shows better that we love another person than when we cannot help thinking about that person” (MDF 70.3).

The importance that De La Salle places on the presence of God is shown by the place he gives it in *Méthode d’oraison*, which he composed for the Brothers. Almost half of this treatise deals with the topic.

De La Salle says that the entire time of prayer can profitably be applied to the presence of God without any other subject for consideration:

*We must ensure that our mind remains filled with the thought of God’s presence as long as possible, and we must not go on to any other subject until we cannot pay attention any longer.*
In his meditations De La Salle speaks of the benefits a person derives from union with God: "happiness anticipated in this life" (MDF 179.3).

“It is also of great use to you in your work, because this work concerns God and aims at winning souls for him. It is, therefore, a matter of great consequence not to lose sight of God in your work” (MDF, *ibid.*; see also 67.1, 90.1, 95.1).

At every hour and half hour in school, the work of teacher and students would stop when the boy assigned rang the bell and the prayer monitor announced, “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God” (CL 24:76, 209).

**With total abandonment to God**

By attending to the presence and action of God, the Brother becomes aware of the fidelity of the One who chose him to do his work. Total abandonment to the guidance of the Spirit of God becomes, then, the surest way to realize the plan that God has for him.

This is another dominant trait of Lasallian spirituality. De La Salle lived this trust in submission to God so thoroughly that it could be said that he “is one of the best representatives of the doctrine of abandonment to God in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”

It was very early in De La Salle’s association with the Brothers that the element of abandonment became strong in his spiritual life, perhaps as early as 1682, when the teachers expressed concern about their future and confronted him with the fact that he could speak easily about trust in divine Providence, since he was a wealthy man.

This confrontation was for De La Salle a moment of profound conversion, to enter fully into the life of his poor teachers, to become one with them in their poverty, and in his own life27 to embrace the practice of total abandonment to Providence.

He understood that this abandonment to God, inspired and sustained by a living spirit of faith, is an effective element in an apostolic spirituality:
It is difficult to realize how much good a detached person is able to do in the Church. The reason for this is that detachment shows a deep faith. A person who abandons himself to the Providence of God is like a sailor who puts out to sea without sails or oars. (MDF 134.1)

The time of prayer is a special moment for surrendering to a total abandonment to God by faithful attention and response to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

Do you abandon yourselves entirely to this divine Spirit, so that he may ask of God all you need to have for the good of your own soul and for those in your care and so that you may act only by him? (MDF 62.2)

It is especially in the experience of dryness, when the absence of God becomes difficult to endure, that a person must wait in patience:

In your times of trouble, when you have had recourse to those who are appointed to guide you and they have been unable to provide a suitable remedy for your difficulty, God wants you, then, to remain completely abandoned to his guidance, awaiting from him alone and from his goodness all the help you need. (MDF 20.2)

De La Salle encourages the Brother to imitate Jesus Christ when he abandoned himself to suffering and death in accord with the will of his Father:

Adore these different dispositions of Jesus Christ, which were conformable to the plans God had for him. As he said, the will of his Father was his nourishment, that is, the rule and, as it were, the soul of his conduct.

Strive after the example of your divine master, Jesus Christ, to want only what God wants, when he wants it, and in the way he wants it. (MDF 24.1)

**In association**

To provide a Christian education for the children of the poor and
the working class, De La Salle planned to create a society of Brothers who would consecrate themselves by vow to announce the Gospel and at the same time provide in association a solid education in the fields of human learning and culture. Beginning in 1684, the teachers assembled with De La Salle expressed this identity in the title they gave to themselves, Brothers of the Christian Schools. This name included at the same time both the mystical and the social nature of their Gospel mission.

The formula of vows pronounced by a dozen Brothers with De La Salle in 1694 defines the character and the meaning of the Lasallian community. It pays supreme homage to the “infinite and adorable majesty” of the living God, who has taken hold of the Brothers and called them to him in the service of youth:

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I will be able and as you will require of me. (RC 116, CL 25:140)

As the formula of vows continues, it shows that the commitment of the Brothers is made only in community and that this community has no existence other than rooted in God and united with the poor:

For this purpose, I promise and vow to unite myself and to remain in Society with [each of the other Brothers is named] to keep together and by association gratuitous schools wherever they may be . . . and to do anything in the said Society at which I will be employed, whether by the body of the Society or by the superiors who will have the government thereof.

This Lasallian community does not exist without a tension between its transcendent dynamic and its involvement in everyday life, a sort of mystical realism: “It is born, becomes an organism, and establishes its identity and purpose in a movement coming from God that takes hold of each Brother to commit him to the service of the poor for the glory of God.”

With obedience and the faithful observance of the Rule De La Salle based the life of the community on two foundations, obedience and faithful observance of the Rule. He took every occasion to insist on the importance of obedience in a religious house:
Obedience is the principal and the most necessary virtue for religious people and all people living in community. (No. 40, CL 15: 23)

In his meditations De La Salle cites Saints Bonaventure, Teresa, Cassian, Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, and Ignatius of Loyola in order to confirm the necessity of obedience (MDF 7.2, 3).

It is especially to the Brother Director as representing God that the Brother owes an entire obedience. “You ought to do nothing and to be involved in nothing except on the advice of your superiors” (MDF 107.2).

Faithful observance of the Rule, the second foundation of community, is no less demanding. It is striking to note how very precise and minute the details are that the Brother is called upon to observe in the most ordinary actions of the day: leaving everything at the first sound of the bell, closing the doors without making any noise, teaching catechism for all the time assigned, observing silence and reserve in the streets. “He who is faithful in little things will also be in those that are great,” says the Lord (MDF 92.1).

De La Salle quotes Saint Bonaventure:

*In [religious life] there is nothing small if everything practiced there is considered with the eyes of faith.* (MDF 142.3)

The rigor of De La Salle’s teaching on obedience and the observance of the Rule becomes more understandable when considered in the social context of his age. There are even more rigorous texts on these topics among his contemporaries. However, it can also be said that this teaching on obedience reflects certain truths of the Gospel that are still meaningful and significant in today’s world.

It must be remembered that the various prescriptions of the Rule were not imposed arbitrarily upon the Brothers. They collaborated with the Founder in formulating the Rule for their community after living it for several years. They themselves came to the conclusion, after much experience, that obedience and fidelity to the Rule were necessary to maintain the strong, cohesive spirit and discipline needed for the success of their project of schools for the poor. These virtues gave the Brothers staying power when they were faced with an
opposition that seemed to come from all sides, often when they were without support from those whom they were serving.

The members of the young community under the leadership of their Father and Founder were deeply aware that God was calling them to do his work, and they took heart from De La Salle’s own courageous abandonment to the Providence of God and from sharing with him a radical obedience to the Gospel. For De La Salle’s teaching on obedience to superiors was based on an interior participation in the mysteries of the obedience of Jesus Christ to his Father:

*We ought to obey them only because, according to the expression of Saint Paul, they are laboring for the perfection of the saints and the building up of the Body of Jesus Christ, who is our Head.* (MDF 72.2)

De La Salle encourages the Brothers to reflect on the inner meaning of the various prescriptions of the Rule. To acquire a complete fidelity to the Rule, never limit your view of the practices of community to their mere external matter, but focus only on the relation that they have to God’s will, which is the same for all of them, whatever they may be. (R 161 in CL 15:83)

De La Salle takes for his model the common life of the first Christians, and urges the Brothers to a union of mind and heart that ought to unite all the members:

*Deepen within you the conviction that in community you ought to live anew the spirit of the first Christians, who were all of one heart and one mind.* (MDF 113.2)

Without this union and love, community life loses its very reason for being and becomes a kind of hell (MDF 65.1).

De La Salle is not unmindful of the problems of living in community, and in several meditations he stresses the need for the Brothers to bear one another’s burdens. “*The way to maintain union in a community, in spite of all these different personalities, is to bear up charitably with the defects of one another*” (MDF 74.1).

For De La Salle, the community that is firmly united is an image of the mystery of the love that is in the Most Holy Trinity and participates in its unity, a union that resembles “the union among the
three Divine Persons” (MDF 39.3).

**Union of religious vocation and professional work**

The genius of De La Salle’s charism and of Lasallian spirituality lies in awareness of the union between the mission of teachers to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the professional work of teachers in the total education of their students. The Brothers learned this from De La Salle: to rely entirely on God by living in frequent remembrance of his presence, but still to keep in mind that the whole purpose of their call and the profound reason for their association together, is to conduct an excellent school as the medium for communicating the Christian spirit:

*Rest assured that you will never achieve your salvation more certainly and acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your state, provided you do so with the view of accomplishing the will of God.* (No. 184–iv, CL 15:95)

In his letters to the Brothers, De La Salle several times speaks of his desire that the school be well conducted: “Take care that your school runs well.”

He wants the students to make good progress in reading and writing; he sees the need for order, discipline, and silence in class; he urges the teachers to love their students *tenderly* in order to encourage them, in turn, to love the teachers and their school and be led thereby to the love of God. This is why he sees the need for professional competence and the value of community as a means to promote continually the professional growth of its members.

Together with the Brothers, De La Salle composed a manual, “Conduct of the Christian Schools” (*Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes*, CL 24), based on their experience and containing in great detail all the pedagogical methods needed to assure the successful operation of their schools.

The Brothers regarded their students as citizens of both their country and heaven. This was no fantasy for De La Salle. In his meditation on Saint Louis, King of France, he encourages the Brothers:

*In your work you ought to unite zeal for the good of the Church*
with zeal for the good of the state, of which your disciples are beginning to be, and one day ought to be, perfect members. You will procure the good of the Church by making them true Christians and docile to the truths of faith and the maxims of the holy Gospel. You will procure the good of the state by teaching them how to read and write and everything else that pertains to your ministry with regard to exterior things. But piety must be joined to exterior things; otherwise, your work would be of little use.

(MDF 160.3)

This concern for the eternal salvation and for the temporal wellbeing of the students is a specific trait of Lasallian spirituality and pedagogy. The authors of Annoncer L’Evangile Aux Pauvres give a good name for this in the expression “mystical realism.” The aim of De La Salle is to have his disciples unite closely the spirit of faith and of zeal, the practice of interior prayer, and the ministry of education.

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This introduction is condensed from an article written by Brother Jean-Guy on the influence of the French School of spirituality on De La Salle, which will be published in a book concerning the spiritual influences on the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

This introduction appears at the beginning of the MEDITATIONS produced in the United States. I have omitted the footnotes for references other than the Meditations references. Consult the printed version in MEDITATIONS for the other references. Jeffrey