

# 95. STABILITY

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*The words "stability" and "stable" occur only some dozen times in De La Salle's writings, and yet his life and achievements after 1680 show the importance of the stability of individuals during the foundation of the "Society of the Christian Schools", and later for its success and continued existence. We shall base our study of the subject on the biographers' accounts of De La Salle's life, on his writings, and especially on the formulas of vows.*

## 1. THE PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

Numerous historians of education in 17th century France speak of the notable lack of stability among the teachers of the "little schools". Their analysis of the causes reveals the following: the method of recruitment, the lack of training, difficult living conditions, the variety of responsibilities, contracts which gave little security, the low salary, etc.

The difficulty of the work, the large size of the classes, the dilapidation or unsuitability of the premises and, as likely as not, the teachers' tendency to move from place to place, were also factors leading to instability among teachers. As this was a well-known char-

acteristic of teachers, the attitude towards the profession was generally a very negative one.

It needed all the efforts of educational pioneers concerned for the future of the schools to convince teachers of the need for some stability, and subsequently, to give their profession some dignity and status in society. Among those who tried to change the attitudes of teachers, with greater or lesser success, we find Jacques de Batencourt in Paris (Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet), Charles D emia in Lyons, Nicolas Barr e in Paris, and a number of others. It was De La Salle, however, who had the greatest success.

This historical background helps us to understand

the emphasis of the Founder of the Christian Schools on stability among his followers. No doubt he saw in it a source of mutual encouragement for the Brothers

within their own congregation, and of greater confidence in the Christian Schools in society as a whole. There were setbacks, however.

## 2. DE LA SALLE'S PAINFUL EXPERIENCE OF INSTABILITY

Without going into detailed explanations, it is useful to recall some of the difficulties De La Salle had to face over the 40 year period he spent founding the Institute. His first biographers describe them in some detail, but we shall restrict ourselves to a brief historical survey.

**2.1. The first group of teachers** recruited by Nyel and De La Salle in 1679-1680, disintegrated steadily and completely, despite receiving financial support and spiritual and professional formation. This proved to be a cruel disappointment for the young canon, who was much affected by it (CL 7,168-174).

**2.2. A second crisis in the young society** occurred in 1683 and 1684. There was now a new group of teachers, who were not yet religious, and who were being offered a way of life with no guarantee of material security. These came to De La Salle now to speak of their quite legitimate worries about the future. After much reflection, De La Salle sought the advice of Nicolas Barré, who recommended him strongly to divest himself completely of his wealth: his canonry, his inheritance. The personal discernment De La Salle was obliged to make on this occasion, and which is reported by Blain, shows clearly his fear that once

again his teachers could leave him and thus deal a fatal blow to his young society (CL 7,191f).

**2.3. In 1691** there was **another crucial period**, during which, as Blain tells us, the young society once again "faced ruin" (CL 7,312). The biographer writes that, because of new defections of Brothers in Paris and Rheims, the lack of formation of several others, the death of some and the fatigue of many others, the very survival of the society was threatened. De La Salle's solution to the situation was the "heroic" vow of 1691.

**2.4. There were other painful events** in the years that followed. Among others, there was the departure of Nicolas Vuyart, the break-up of the Marseilles community in 1712 (CL 8,81f), and the defection of several Brothers in the North of France during the Founder's absence from 1712 to 1714 (CL 8,107-119).

All these events led the Founder to realise the importance of the stability of the members of the society, especially as he gradually discovered, through faith, God's plan for him. In his determination to respond to God's call, he became convinced that "God's work" called for a radical commitment and stability, however difficult this might prove.

## 3. INTRODUCTION OF THE VOW OF STABILITY

### 3.1. The "heroic" vow of 1691

In 1691, De La Salle's young society faced ruin, and yet he was convinced it was doing "God's work". In his desire to continue this work he decided to associate some Brothers more closely with himself. This is the explanation of the commitment made on November 21st 1691 (CL 10,116 = EP 1).

It is enough to read the text and to consider its language, to see that the three signatories of this pact committed themselves irrevocably to support the society, if necessary, to a heroic degree, such as begging for alms. The fidelity of each one — his stability — is stated in unequivocal terms. It is an act of

faith in God's fidelity to the ministers he has chosen to further his loving plan.

### 3.2. The 1694 vows

By 1694, the community had established its own identity sufficiently to enable De La Salle and 12 Brothers to take an important step by pronouncing perpetual vows of obedience, association and stability. It was the first time that the third vow was formally mentioned. It could be thought that the idea of stability was already sufficiently expressed by making perpetual vows. The Brothers, however, wished to mention it explicitly in order to give it more force.

### 3.3. After 1694

Subsequently, despite some minor alterations in the formula of the vows, the vow of stability was maintained. An examination of the formulas of vows prior to 1725, the date of the Bull of Approbation, reveals that, while all the members of the community made the vow of stability after 1694, this vow did not necessarily mean that they were making a perpetual commitment. During this period of the history of the Institute, stability was understood as a commitment to remain in the society for the period for which one had made vows. This is borne out by the formula for triennial vows made by Brother Irénée on September

25th 1716 (CL 3,20). The formula of vows of the serving Brothers was no different from that of other Brothers. The commitment to stability, therefore, concerned all the members of the Institute who made vows. It is interesting to note that stability was observed, *de facto*, by the Brothers without vows who were part of the Institute for two centuries.

Finally, we should recall that the vow of stability was mentioned in the petition submitted by the Brothers to the Holy See with a view to obtaining recognition for the Institute, as also in the Bull of Approbation granted by Pope Benedict XIII in 1725, and in the *Rules* which were modified as a result.

## 4. LASALLIAN STABILITY AND CHURCH TRADITION

The concept of stability went back a long way in monastic life. It is interesting to see to what extent De La Salle was inspired by this tradition and applied it to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

### 4.1. Monastic stability

Towards the end of his work on *The Spirituality of the New Testament and of the Fathers* (see bibliography), and speaking of western monasticism, Louis Bouyer explains how St Césaire of Arles introduced the obligation of stability in his *Rule of the Monks* at the beginning of the 5th century. He writes: "The great innovation of Césaire, however, by which he announces and prepares the way for the work of St Benedict, will be, together with the strict requirement of having all things in common in the monastery, that of stability. By means of it, and for the first time, an end was put to the confusing multiplicity of attempts — all destined to fail — to found congregations, which up till then had drained the energy of western monasticism" (pp. 605-606).

The same idea, says Bouyer, was taken up in the *Benedictine Rule*: "The first chapter declares, after a somewhat unflattering portrait of the kinds of monks existing at the time, that the author intends to write for Cenobites. The completely individualistic Sarabaites, and the Gyrovagues who spent their time moving from monastery to monastery, having been condemned, the Cenobites are declared *fortissimum genus*" (p. 609).

Bouyer continues: "However, the author of the *Rule* was so convinced that stability was a condition *sine qua non* of monastic life, as he understood it, that he wanted, in spite of the possible risks of which he must have been aware, the abbot to be elected for life; and, for the same reason, the postulant to make a commitment 'to be a soldier of Christ' for the whole of his life under his guidance. This second aspect, stability, is deliberately as much a characteristic of the Rule as its clear teaching and detailed prescriptions regarding the abbot. [...] Benedictine stability does not stifle this idea of being 'a soldier of Christ', but rather it forces the monk to interiorise the concept in a radical way. Stability is the condition which makes obedience possible and, by it, obedience is revealed as the great means to achieve detachment. This is the principle on which the *schola*, that is, the monastery, is founded, and its safeguard is the stability of both the abbot and the monk. [...] Stability, obedience, humility are in the service of an ideal as old as the very beginnings of monastic life, and one that is biblical *par excellence*: that of a life in which faith, faith in Christ and his sovereignty, subsumes life in its entirety" (p. 612).

De La Salle was very probably inspired by this monastic view of stability. The extracts we have quoted emphasise both its geographical nature — the monk bound to a monastery and to his abbot — as well as its spiritual nature — stability seen as a response to God's fidelity through faith, and by sharing in the accomplishment of his work of salvation.

#### 4.2. Other ways of establishing stability preceding the vows of the Brothers

During the period just prior to the foundation of the Institute of the Brothers, a number of developments occurred in the Church regarding the vow of stability. In accordance with the guidelines of the Council of Trent, which finished in 1563, St Pius V had restricted the right of the bishops to found or accept in their dioceses new congregations of the common life with simple vows or without vows. Only new congregations with solemn vows could be authorised. In practice, this prohibition had little effect, because new religious institutes which were subsequently founded ensured the stability of their members by requiring them to make a private vow of chastity, or some other similar commitment.

A good example in this connection is the Company of Jesus. Ignatius Loyola introduced an interesting innovation in the area which interests us: in the Company, in addition to regular members who made solemn vows, there were also priests who had the role of spiritual coadjutors, and lay persons who had that of temporal coadjutors. These two categories did not make solemn vows but only perpetual simple vows.

This innovation — religious with perpetual simple vows — caused much controversy in Roman circles. They found it difficult to accept that there could exist a kind of stability which was expressed through perpetual vows made by persons who did not make solemn vows.

And yet, in 1546, Pope Paul III declared that sim-

ple perpetual vows were true religious vows. This did not prevent discussion on the matter continuing. In 1584, Pope Gregory XIII finally settled the question in the Bull *Ascendente Domino*, which stated that persons pronouncing simple perpetual vows were truly religious. Despite the universal character of this Bull, it was often interpreted, even in Rome, as giving a special dispensation applicable only to the Company of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

The new “societies of apostolic life” which appeared in France at the beginning of the 17th century are significant also in this connection. They ensured stability by a “contract of incorporation” which implied the acceptance of their aims and of the norms which governed the society. These contracts can be compared, at least, as far as their significance is concerned, with the 1694 formula of vows.

In some of these societies — in the Eudistes, for example — the members made a commitment to be faithful, not for the purpose of practising the evangelical counsels, but in order to exercise an apostolic ministry.<sup>2</sup> This was also the case at the beginning of the Brothers’ Institute.

Two of the great promoters of societies of apostolic life in France were Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle and his disciple, Jean Jacques Olier, Founder of the Priests of St Sulpice.

As we know, De La Salle was greatly influenced by the Sulpicians, and his ideas regarding stability owe a great deal to what he observed in his contacts with them.

## 5. THE MEANING OF LASALLIAN STABILITY

### 5.1. Stability and mobility

Although De La Salle was well-informed regarding monastic tradition and what was common practice among societies of apostolic life, he invented another kind of stability, adapted to the nature and aims of the *Society of the Christian Schools*. A closer examination of this question will help us to understand more fully the nature of Lasallian stability.

First of all, it should be noted that the vow of stability in the 1694 formula of vows is associated with the promise of total personal availability: “in whatever place this shall be” and “to do in the said society whatever work I shall be assigned” (CL 2,42 = EP

2,0,3). This has continued to be the case throughout the history of the Institute, even if, after the Bull of 1725, it was expressed in a slightly different way. In other words, Lasallian stability is not geographical, unlike that of the monk who is bound to “his” monastery.

This commitment to be ready to go anywhere one is sent, has nothing in common with the instability of the teachers of the Little Schools: it is exercised within the well-defined framework of association. The vow of stability goes hand-in-hand with a “vow of obedience, whether to the body of the society or to its superiors” (*id.*), who can ask a Brother to move for the

sake of the common good. This can involve taking the place of another Brother, taking up a post of responsibility, changing the nature of one's work, and always for the good of the whole network of schools. It is impossible to dissociate from the Brothers' availability the functional nature of the body which constitutes the Institute or, at least, one of its structures.

### 5.2. Stability and association

Stability, which is a long-lasting commitment, is an integral element of the undertaking "to conduct together and by association gratuitous schools" in the service of the poor. This stability is not a passing infatuation, however enthusiastic, but a desire to devote oneself permanently to this work, with other persons.

The present formula of vows says: "to conduct together and by association schools for the service of the poor", and marks a return to the functional dimension of the 1694 formula. For any association to be effective, there has to be a certain permanence, a certain fidelity on the part of its members.

### 5.3. Stability and the "work of God"

However, for De La Salle, the primary aim of his work is not simply human and utilitarian: it is to accomplish the "work of God", the eternal plan of salvation fulfilled in history. Stability has, therefore, a spiritual dimension, which is more important than all the others: proclaiming the Gospel to the poor.

In this sense, it is beyond human analysis and can be understood fully only in terms of the theology of salvation. Lasallian stability has to be analysed in the light of Holy Scripture<sup>3</sup> and in the context of the missionary tradition of the Church. This is the ultimate explanation of Lasallian fidelity.

De La Salle, having realised this clearly from the moment he involved himself with schools, dared to commit himself, and urged the Brothers to commit themselves courageously, in their turn, to the task of accomplishing this "work of God" among the children of the artisans and the poor.

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*The vow of stability goes back to the very beginning of the Institute, although, up to the appearance of the Code of Canon Law in 1917, the Institute admitted also, as permanent members, Brothers without vows, some of whom gave proof of their stability by remaining in the Institute to the end of their lives.*

*The question arises whether one needs to be a Brother in the present canonical sense in order to profess stability. Is the stability involved here one that is connected to the the social entity of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, or is it a stability in the service of the poor through education, bringing together persons from different walks of life? This question has considerable importance at the present time when, not only the apostolic mission, but also the charism handed down by De La Salle, can be shared by religious and lay persons.*

*In the midst of the rapid changes in mentality and behaviour in our societies, what meaning and value can there be in stability? How can it be reconciled with the equally recognised need for adaptability? How can it be reconciled with the knowledge that certain values are understood differently nowadays, and in the light of the weakness of our nature, especially regarding fidelity? The answer to these questions can lie only in a greater understanding of the real situation of the persons from different walks of life, who associate together to take part in the Lasallian mission to educate and evangelise, a mission which continues in the world of today the same "work of God" pursued by the Founder. It is clear, therefore, that any consideration of the meaning of stability has to bear in mind the need to be faithful to Lasallian history and, at the same time, to adapt to the educational and pastoral conditions of the contemporary world.*

1. Cf. ALVAREZ GOMEZ, J., *Historia de la vida religiosa*, Madrid, 1990, p.168-169. (Paris, Cerf, 1988) which, under four headings, analyses succinctly the action of God in the history of salvation : the fidelity of God, the fidelity of man, the fidelity of Jesus, the fidelity of the faithful of Christ.
2. Cf. ALVAREZ GOMEZ, p. 348.
3. See, for example, the *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*

#### Complementary themes

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|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Association           | God's work          | Retreat         |
| Brother's dress       | Imitation of Christ | Rule-Regularity |
| Consecration          | Obedience           | State           |
| Fidelity-Perseverance | Poor                | World           |

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