

The Founder as Uncle

Illustration by Robert Rigot

Quite rightly, we hear and read a lot about John Baptist de La Salle as saint, founder and educationalist. It is helpful, perhaps, to reflect that each of those titles, representing his significant achievements, includes the ups and downs of being part of a big family. One of his roles was to be an uncle to 22 nieces and nephews. This sketch is about one of them in particular, Jeanne Remiette.

John Baptist's mother, Nicolle Moët de Brouillet, gave birth to a further ten children after John Baptist. Four of them died very young. Her and Louis' sixth son, Pierre, born in September 1666, was followed by two more sons, and outlived all his siblings. Jeanne Remiette was one of his six daughters.

Pierre's godparents were his sister Marie and his brother John Baptist, now fifteen and already named a canon of Reims. Following the death of their parents in 1671-72, he became tutor to his three brothers, including Pierre, but according to his biographers, Pierre was alienated from his big brother by Jean Maillefer, his brother-in-law who was married to Marie de La Salle.

Nonetheless, when Pierre, who became a magistrate like his father, married Françoise-Henriette Bachlier in 1696,

it was his brother John Baptist, 'priest, Doctor of Theology, canon of the church of Reims, vice-promoter of the Archbishop of Reims', who received the promise and consent of marriage. The couple named their first son John-Baptist Louis, after his uncle and his grandfather. John-Baptist Louis became a Benedictine monk in the same abbey as Jean Maillefer's son, another nephew of the Founder's, François-Élie.

It was Dom François-Élie Maillefer who wrote the first complete biography of John Baptist de La Salle, acceding to a request 'from certain devout people', no doubt members of the extended family. There is a certain irony in the fact that some earlier members of the Founder's extended family had, according to the same biographer, taken exception to his having the socially quite unacceptable teachers eat at his own table.

Françoise-Henriette and Pierre's next child, Jeanne-Remiette was born a year after her brother John-Baptist Louis. At 17 she became a novice in the convent of Our Lady in Reims, where she had been a boarding student, and made her final profession two years later, on 13 June 1718, as Sister Françoise of Saint Agnes. Her younger sister, Jeanne-Elisabeth, was a member of the same Congregation.

By this time, and to De La Salle's great relief, Brother Barthélemy had been elected Superior of the Brothers. The Founder had been living at the rented Saint Yon property in Rouen, had travelled to Paris to secure its purchase, and had spent some five months in seclusion at the Seminary of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, not far from the Sorbonne and the seminary where he himself had studied.

Convinced that he would only be in the way if he went back to Saint Yon, he was only persuaded to return to his community on 7 March 1718 by command of the Superior, a little over a year before his death. During that time, at the request of the General Assembly in 1717, he prepared a revised version of the Rule based on the Brothers' discussions. He also provided some suggestions to be incorporated into the Conduct of the Christian Schools, which was published in 1720.

It was also during this time of 'retirement' that he received a letter from his niece, Jeanne-Remiette, Pierre and Françoise-Henriette's daughter. We do not have her letter, but we are fortunate, as we are to have the few letters of his that have survived, to know something of De La Salle's reply at least as quoted by his biographer Canon Blain. It is his second reply, as he says, because he was not sure that the first had reached her, and he wrote it sometime between late May and 13 June 1718, the date of Jeanne-Remiette's profession.

He thanks her for letting him know about her profession and shares her joy and her desire to consecrate herself 'entirely to God' – the language of his and his Brothers' own vowed commitment. He assures her of joining his prayers to hers and says how much he would love to be present with her in Reims, but that two things prevent him. The first is that he is the only priest at Saint Yon for fifty people (including the Brothers and the various groups of boarders, and the property is a long way from town and the nearest priest. The second reason, typical of his submissive attitude following the election of Brother Barthélemy, is that 'having a Superior, I am not my own master'.

He concludes,

'So I ask you to be very content that I join you in this holy undertaking in the same sentiments which God will give you in making it.

I am, with my best regards and all possible affection ...'

Preoccupied with a focus on the Founder's saintly humility, Blain does not tell us whether he signed the letter 'Your loving uncle, John Baptist'. We'll have to ask his niece.

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Lasallian Reflection is developed by the Lasallian Formation for Mission Team.

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