

A NEW BIOGRAPHY OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

Charles LAPIERRE, Brother of the Christian Schools, "*WALK IN MY PRESENCE*" - John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719), Caluire.

The Book: Format 21/24 — 200 pages. — The first page contains, as well as the title, a fine portrait of de La Salle, attributed to Pierre Léger, and the signature "De La Salle." On the back cover page there is a "portrait from life" of de La Salle by his nephew, François Hély Maillefer. (Life of M. De La Salle, 1740, Ed. 1980)

The Author: Brother Charles Lapierre, 69 years old, at present provincial secretary at Caluire (Rhône). Born in Chambéry, Savoy, Brother Lapierre taught in several schools both primary and secondary. He played an important part in the formation of the Brothers as sub-director of novices and director of scholastics. Charmed by the Founder, he studied his life and writings, absorbing thoroughly his spiritual doctrine and educational ideals.

Documents: The book contains numerous documents which enliven the text. A new map of the postal routes of France, 1738 — an outline map of the journeys of de La Salle showing foundations and stopping places — nineteen pages of documentary illustrations (list of illustrations is given on page 8) — an explanatory list of technical words and an account of people mentioned — a chronological table of the life of de La Salle paralleled by contemporary events. A bibliography is given on pages 199 to 200.

The Text: Printed in clear characters on quality paper, the text is very easy to read. The titles and sub-titles serve to give a sense of space as well as guiding the reader.

The Preface: p. 25, explains the choice of title taken from Genesis, 17,1. Like Abraham, de La Salle was an indefatigable traveller in the literal sense. He was even more so in the spiritual sense for, in obedience to God's call, he covered an immense distance from the Hotel de la Cloche to the final meeting in Saint Yon. The quotation from Genesis, given in full, is eminently applicable to him, "Walk before Me and be perfect."

Since we are talking about a journey it may be more natural to divide it into stages rather than chapters. As stage follows stage the reader discovers the characters encountered on the way, the travelling companions, faithful and unfaithful, friends and enemies.

First Stage: Earliest Steps (1651 to 1679) pp. 29 to 44

The reader makes the acquaintance of the de La Salle family. John Baptist is the eldest of eleven. He sees him living and working. He follows him to the seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris. He sympathises with him on the untimely deaths of his mother and father. He admires his gentle guardianship of his younger brothers and sisters.

After the death of his spiritual director, Nicholas Roland, the young priest, already a canon for several years, of the cathedral of Rheims, takes charge of the Sisters of the Child Jesus. Then begins:

The Second Stage: The Unknown Road

A meeting with Adrien Nyel, lay apostle and founder of schools for the poor, set de La Salle on a road which led him where "he did not wish to go" or rather where he never thought he would go. "One commitment led to another," he writes, "without my having foreseen it from the beginning." In four

progressive stages, the young canon, well bred and well provided for, finds himself poor among the poor, at the service of the poor and surrounded by schoolmasters whom he had formerly considered as inferior to his valet". 1682. Soon he is a brother among brothers. Even though he is superior, he wants to enforce nothing by authority.

We next follow de La Salle to Paris for his new foundations. 1688. There we share his trials: law suits, illnesses, betrayals. Nothing prevents him from following his path, his eyes fixed on the goal of giving the Brothers control of their "Society" which will be composed only of laymen as it is to this day.

Third Stage: Storms (1700 to 1714) pp. 89 a 124

The author carefully describes the school desired by de La Salle: a useful school; a school where the human person is respected; a school of good manners; a nursery for Christians. Such a school will be conducted by committed religious teachers to whom no development will be forbidden provided it be for the service of youth and particularly the poor. That the wheat may grow the grain must die in the ground. De La Salle is attacked on all sides: parish priest, archbishop, writing masters, schoolmasters, preceptor of Paris, all combat this "priest from the diocese of Rheims who calls himself Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Rheims." To these trials are added the death of his sister and especially the defection of Nicholas Vuyard and several others.

Fourth Stage: Journey through the night

For the holiday makers of to-day it is the road to the sun but for de La Salle it was a nightmare journey through Mende and Avignon to Marseille. The "holy priest" knows the "dark night of the soul": doubts about his mission and abandonment by not a few of those he trusted. He remains steadfast in his faith thanks to prayer in a retreat which he wishes to prolong. The poor drag him from his retreat to teach them himself in Grenoble. He finds peace in Parmenie. From his disciples comes an appeal or rather an order to resume his functions as Superior. "I must obey the Brothers" writes de La Salle, and he returns to Paris.

Fifth Stage: Towards the final meeting (1714 to 1719) pp. 157 to 193

Many more "troubles" arise: from ecclesiastics, his own family, the Brothers. They cause him great suffering but they do not prevent his preparing the election of Brother Barthélemy as Superior General of the Institute he founded and over which he discreetly watches from Saint Yon, near Rouen, where he now lives.

Here he writes the admirable "Meditations for Time of Retreat" and the "Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer." The founder and the man of prayer are here clearly revealed.

On Good Friday, 7 April, 1719, John Baptist de La Salle meets, at last, the God in whose presence he has so faithfully walked.

As a concluding note Brother Lapierre writes "An open letter to de La Salle." In it you can sense the filial love, the respectful admiration and the lively humour of the disciple who can make the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools known and loved.

Appreciation: Written in a lively style, well researched, and clearly presented, this book is intended for all Christian educators whose patron is St. John Baptist de La Salle; for students and their parents and for every Christian anxious to know the life of the Church.

The moderate price (60 FF) should assure a wide readership. For many people this work will form a useful introduction to the writings of de La Salle himself and to the more important works cited.

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