

THE MEMOIR ON THE BEGINNINGS¹

John Baptist de La Salle's *Memoir on the Beginnings* has never been found as an integral document, but it is referred to and quoted several times by Blain.² Brother Bernard writes in his biography³ of De La Salle (1721 manuscript):

Our servant of God himself [De La Salle] gave a summary in a manuscript, written in his own hand, that had remained unknown for more than twenty years and was fortunately discovered during the Founder's stay in the south of France. [Bernard, *Life*, Book I, p. 284]

The Founder's words, in **block letters** in the following excerpts, are understood to reflect the contents of the *Memoir on the Beginnings*. Note has also been made of the use of the French terms *conduire* and *conduite* ('to guide, lead' and the associated noun) and various terms relating to 'care'.

'I had thought,' he wrote in a memoir [*un Mémoire*] which he composed later on to inform the Brothers about the means Divine Providence had used to establish their Institute, **'that the care [*conduite*] which I took of the schools and of the teachers would only be external, something which would not involve me any further than to provide for their subsistence and to see to it that they carried out their duties [*emploi*] with piety and assiduity.'** [Blain, *Life* (Book One), p. 77; CL 7: 167]

For fear that the reader may think that we are simply imagining these dispositions of his, let us listen to what he himself had to say. **'It was,'** he declares in the memoir mentioned previously, **'by these two events, namely by my meeting Monsieur Nyel and by the proposal made to me by this woman, that I began to take an interest in [*prendre soin*: 'care of'] the schools for boys. Prior to this, I had never given them a thought. The suggestion, of course, had been made to me before. Several of Monsieur Roland's friends had tried to motivate me to accept, but the proposal had never made any impression on my mind, and I had never considered carrying it out.**

Indeed, if I had ever thought that the **care** [*soin*] I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project. For since, naturally speaking, I considered the men whom I was obliged to employ in the schools at the beginning as being inferior to my valet, the mere thought that I would have to live with them would have been insupportable to me. In fact, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted for two years. It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, who guides [*conduit*] all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development [**'care': *soin***] of the schools. God did this in an

imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led [conduisit] to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning. It was, then, entirely wrong for people to accuse him of ambition and of seeking in a lowly condition and a poor and austere life the means of exalting himself and of winning worldly honour. [Blain, *Life* (Book One), p. 79-80; CL 7, p. see Maillefer, *Life*, p. 31; CL 6, p. 31.]

De La Salle sensed that his exhortations on confidence in God and abandonment to Providence were not effective but without knowing exactly the reason. These forthright peasants, strangers to subterfuge, did not leave him very long in the dark. They stated with utter frankness that their unrest was due to a lack of certainty and assurance concerning their status. They reminded him that there was nothing fixed or stable in their situation, that he himself could see that his project was suffering reversals. For their part, it would be a sorry thing for them to sacrifice their young manhood for a clientele that would forget them, leaving them in their old age without any place to rest from their labours and forced to spend their last years and to end their days in dreary indigence.

In saying these things, they did not say everything. They had another reply to all the exhortations made by their Superior about abandonment to Providence. But they did not yet dare to articulate it, out of embarrassment and respect. Although there was truth in it, it would be impolite, and they feared to offend a man who had done so much good for them and who gave them no grounds for complaint. But these peasants, who had never cultivated the art of dissimulation, could not keep back forever the reply that they had on the tips of their tongues, an answer as straightforward as it was telling. Although not very courteous, it did have a ring of truth about it. Because of its apparent sincerity, it was able to produce all the effect that God intended it to have. However, they kept quiet for a few days. During this period when their tongues did not as yet reveal the workings of their minds, the wealthy canon kept insisting on confidence in God and exhorting them thereto by quoting the very words of the Gospel on full abandonment to the care of Providence.

'Men of little faith,' he said, **'by your lack of trust you set limits to a Goodness that has no limits in itself. If that Goodness is indeed infinite, universal, and continual – as you do not doubt – it will always take care of you and never fail you. You seek assurance, but does not the Gospel provide it? The words of Jesus Christ are your insurance contract; there is no compact more reliable, because God has signed it with blood and has affixed to it the seal of infallible truth. Why then do you grow distrustful? If the positive promises of God cannot calm your uneasiness and your concern for the future, what is the point of looking for an investment that will produce a comparable income?**

'Consider the lilies of the field [see Mt 6.28ff.], for it is Jesus Christ himself who urges you to reflect on them and on the wild flowers of the countryside and to see how richly God has adorned them and made them beautiful. They lack nothing, yet Solomon himself in all his glory was less splendidly attired. Open your eyes and see the birds that fly through the air or the little animals which creep

upon the ground: not a single one of them lacks what is needed. God provides for their necessities. Possessing neither cellars nor barns, they find everywhere the food that Providence has prepared for them. They do not sow or reap, yet they find their sustenance. The heavenly Father takes care of them. If his generous and kindly concern [‘his cares’: *ses soins*] extends to even the least insects which men trample underfoot and even to the grass that dries out and serves as fuel for the fire, how can you believe, you men of little faith, that he to whom you consecrate your labor will abandon you in your old age and leave you to finish in misery a life spent in his service?

‘Therefore, stir up your trust in the Lord’s infinite goodness, and honor God by leaving in the divine hands the care of your persons. Be not troubled about the present or disquieted about the future, but be concerned [‘apply your cares’: *soins*] only about the moment you must now live. Do not let anticipation of tomorrow be a burden on the day that is passing. What you lack in the evening, the morrow will bring you, if you know how to hope in God. God will work miracles rather than let you suffer want. In addition to the words of Jesus Christ, I offer you as proof the universal experience of the saints. Providence performs miracles daily, and they cease only for those who have no trust.’

Such words so full of truth might have been decisive if he who uttered them with such conviction had been as poor as he was virtuous. But the speaker was a wealthy canon. [Blain, *Life* (Book One), pp. 104-6; CL 7, p. 187]

Tired of simply thinking these thoughts, one day the schoolmasters summoned up their courage to the point of expressing their grievance and gave De La Salle one of those blunt, direct replies that the heart feels is unanswerable: ‘You speak with inspiration amidst your ease, for you lack nothing. You have a rich canonry and an equally fine inheritance; you enjoy security and protection against indigence. If our work fails, you risk nothing. The ruin of our enterprise would not affect you. We own nothing. We are men without possessions or income or even a trade to fall back on. Where can we go, and what can we do if the schools fail or if people tire of us? Destitution will be our only portion, and begging our only means to relieve it.’

Although neither courteous nor gracious, this reply contained enough truth to penetrate an upright heart. De La Salle had not expected such a remark. Because unforeseen, it proved all the more effective. His self-love did not deceive him. The reproach of the schoolmasters was indeed ungracious, but he paid no attention to their manner and only weighed its veracity. His probity forced him to admit that they had been right in speaking to him thus. The Holy Spirit joined his voice to theirs and called to him even more clearly and vehemently in the depths of his heart. [Blain, *Life* (Book One), p. 107; CL 7, p. 187]

THE REASONS THAT MOTIVATED DE LA SALLE TO RESIGN HIS CANONRY

The following are the reasons which convinced him and which he kept repeating to himself:

‘1) I have been reduced to silence. As long as I am not poor myself, I have no right to speak the language of perfection, as I once did on the subject of poverty. I cannot speak of abandonment to Providence, so long as I am comfortably insured against penury; nor about perfect confidence in God, if my sound investments leave me no reason for worry.

‘2) If I remain what I am and the schoolmasters remain what they are, their temptation will persist, because its source will continue to be there. I will not be able to remedy it, because they will always find in my wealth an obvious and even plausible argument to justify their doubts about the present and their concerns for the future.

‘3) Sooner or later, such a temptation, so justifiable in appearance, will not fail to produce the effect that the devil hopes it will achieve. The teachers, whether in a group or one by one, will forsake me, leaving my house empty for the second time and the schools without anyone capable of conducting them.

‘4) This desertion will make a good deal of noise in the city. It will frighten off any who might have entertained the idea of becoming schoolmasters. Their vocation will wither; even before they enter, they will be seized by the same misgivings as those who have just left.

‘5) Without a dependable staff of teachers, the schools will fail. In this case, the heirs of the foundations will claim the funds contributed for their maintenance.

‘6) Thus, little by little, the Institution of Christian and Gratuitous Schools will be buried beneath its ruins, and it will be useless ever to think of reviving it.

‘7) Even supposing that all these results do not follow, must I – can I, even – act as the Superior of these schoolmasters without giving up my canonry? How can I combine my assiduous presence in the house, so as to be at their head during the exercises of piety and to keep watch over them, with attendance in the choir for the canonical Office? Are these two positions [*emplois*] compatible? If not, I must give up one or the other.

'8) True, a canon's prebend [= stipend] is not in itself an obstacle to good works, and sedulous ['care': *soin*] attendance at the Office to chant God's praises does not prevent him from rendering other services to the Church or from devoting himself to the salvation of souls. He can divide his time between these two noble functions and prove that a canon does not have to be idle outside the choir. He does not need to seek in this title a plausible pretext to leave the choir, only to enter upon a rest that lasts all day, to grow stout in sweet indolence, and to do no work in the Lord's vineyard. But can I at the same time be a good canon and a faithful Superior of a Community which requires my presence constantly? If I fulfil the function of Superior properly, I will have to omit all the duties of a canon, since if I must always be in the house, I can never be in the choir. If these two duties cannot be reconciled, I must choose between them. Five or six hours a day spent in reciting the Divine Office would make too great an inroad on the assiduous presence which I owe to the house I direct.

'9) Now, in the choice I must make, what should be my determining consideration? What should tip the balance? The greater glory of God, the fuller service of the Church, my own higher perfection, and the salvation of souls: these are the ends I must propose to myself and the aims which must govern my choice. If I consider only these exalted motives, I must resign my canonry and devote myself to the care of the schools and to the training of the schoolmasters who direct them.

'10) Finally, since I no longer feel any attraction to the vocation of a canon, it would seem that it has already left me, even before I have given it up. This calling is no longer for me. While I entered it through the right gate, indeed, it seems to me that God is opening another door before me today so that I may leave it. The same voice that called me to it seems to be calling me elsewhere. I hear this in the depths of my conscience; this voice speaks when I consult my conscience. True, since the hand of God put me in the state in which I now am, his hand must take me out of it. But is he not showing me clearly enough today another state that deserve the preference and toward which he is leading [*mener*] me by the hand?' [Blain, *Life* (Book One), pp. 111-113; CL 7, pp. 191f.]

The famine which raged in 1693 and 1694 brought in other young men who had nothing to eat and who were looking for some way to survive. These, too, did not remain very long. The rigorous penance repelled those whom hunger had induced to enter, and they preferred to take their chances with starvation outside rather than remain and have food at the expense of their bodies. Others, led by the Spirit of God, were impressed by the good example they found. These soon gave proof of a strong vocation. The happiness that shone on their faces betrayed the fervour that filled them, as did the willingness they showed to lead a crucified life. Thus the house was like that great net in

which all sorts of fish, good and bad, were caught, but the heavenly Master did not delay in sorting out the good and rejecting the others. At most, one or two out of a dozen finally remained. Yet this little company of choice souls eventually reached the number of thirty-five who persevered with unconquerable courage in a house which was a center for poverty, penance, humiliation, and mortification.

ONLY TWO OF THOSE WHO REMAINED WERE REALLY POOR

What made God's action appear most obvious was that among this number, only two were really poor lads. The others came from comfortable homes and could have lived at ease by remaining there, but good example and fervour made them enjoy living in a house which offered them nothing but contradiction to nature and rejection by the world. This abundant grace, which made the water spring out of the rock, which transformed the bitter waters of mortification for these true Israelites, was the reward won by the generous sacrifices De La Salle had made of his canonry and his family wealth.

'Ever since I gave up everything,' he himself often said, **'I have never met a single candidate tempted to leave us on the grounds that our Community was not endowed.'**

These are the concluding words in his memorandum [*le memoire*] which we have used up to this point since beginning this second book. [Blain, *Life* (Book Two), p. 307]

¹ This version compiled for Lasallian Education Services (Melbourne, Australia) by John Cantwell, FSC.

² Jean-Baptiste Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools: A Biography in Three Books* (ed. Luke Salm, FSC; trans. Richard Arnandez, FSC; Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, Christian Brothers Conference, 2000. [First published in Rouen, 1733]).

³ In *John Baptist de La Salle: Two Early Biographies*, by Dom François-Elie Maillefer, OSB and by Brother Bernard, FSC (ed. Paul Grass, FSC; original trans. William J. Quinn, FSC; rev. trans. with notes by Donald C. Mouton, FSC; Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996). Maillefer completed one ms. in 1723, which he reworked in a 1740 edition. The former has not survived, but there are two near-identical copies (1766, and around 1775). Brother Bernard's work exists in a copy of his original ms., which was dated 1721.