

THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

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ABSTRACT

The appropriate leadership style of St. John Baptist de la Salle is Servant Leadership described by Robert Greenleaf and Larry Spears. De La Salle's leadership is characterized by his vision, listening, and community building. His leadership faced many challenges. He succeeded with the Brothers in fulfilling his vision of a community of teachers dedicated to the education of the poor.

Key words: servant, vision, community, schools.

INTRODUCTION

De La Salle, a CEO

In 2004 Napoleon G. Almonte of De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines, published a treatise entitled *De La Salle, CEO*. In this book Almonte portrays St. John Baptist De La Salle as a CEO and applies ten principles of corporate leadership to the works of De La Salle. On the cover is a well-recognized portrait of De La Salle dressed in a business suit and tie. Applying each corporate principle, Almonte compares De La Salle to famous giants of the international corporate world. On the back cover, Br. Armin Luistro, F.S.C. points out interesting aspects of this book. First of all it is written by a laymen. Almonte intended to make De La Salle relevant to modern day education and current corporate governance. Luistro points out that this book is also somewhat unusual because it does not focus on De La Salle's saintliness. While saintliness is not the focus, it is not ignored. Almonte respectfully does not rule out saintliness as a possibility for corporate leaders.

Other kinds of leadership

Besides corporate leadership there are other paradigms, theories, and styles of leadership put forth in self-help books and the corporate world. There are also leadership paradigms, theories and styles applied in education and religious ministries. Among these are Servant Leadership, Transformational Leadership Democratic Leadership, and Situational Leadership. These can also be applied to the life and works of St. John Baptist De La Salle. Applied here will be Servant Leadership as presented by Robert K. Greenleaf in his essay, *The Servant as Leader* published in

1970. This approach to leadership has grown in popularity and today there are many publications and programs which grew out of Greenleaf's paradigm. Greenleaf's concept has been presented by Larry Spears who has gleaned many important characteristics of successful Servant Leaders. Larry Spears was the President and CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in 2005. He has been very active in educational presentations of Servant Leadership. St. John Baptist De La Salle possessed to some degree all of the characteristics of Servant Leadership described by Larry Spears.

Lasallian leadership

Leadership is important in the Lasallian world community. The inclusion of Lasallian partners in all Lasallian apostolates has brought to bear the training and development of Lasallian Leaders to carry out the charism and legacy of St. John Baptist De La Salle in their respective Lasallian institutions. There are educational programs such as the Buttimer Institute, Lasallian Leadership Institute, Lasallian Social Justice Institute, Huether Conferences and SIEL which engage Brothers and Partners together to instruct and inspire them to take leadership roles throughout the Institute. With these programs to train Lasallian leaders, more information about the leadership of St. John Baptist De La Salle himself may be helpful and useful.

The main focus here will be to apply Servant Leadership to St. John Baptist De La Salle as Founder. This style of leadership is particularly appropriate in the story of the founding of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Other areas of leadership should not be forgotten, especially the spiritual and prophetic leadership which are essential to the charism and legacy of the Institute as it is today as a global community of brothers and partners. The spiritual and prophet leadership of De La Salle play in the background for this examination of De La Salle's journey as founder and leader of the first brothers. The expectation of the application of Servant Leadership is that De La Salle's leadership may be an inspiration and a model for those in Lasallian leadership positions.

Servant Leadership Theory

While the leadership and accomplishments of St. John Baptist De La Salle are comparable to famous CEO's of the corporate world today, the context of his work was founding a religious community dedicated to the education of poor boys in France. There are similarities with several characteristics of various other leadership models such as Democratic Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Situational Leadership, or Functional Leadership, to name a few (cf. Vector Study, 2013). Accepting the premise that one style does not fit all and all do not fit any one style, De La Salle very likely will not completely fit into any one style. He was in many ways unique. While he was an innovator, he also used many other sources in implementing his vision. One type of leadership style that seems very much like De La Salle's leadership is Servant Leadership as envisioned by Robert Greenleaf.

Robert Greenleaf first used the term *servant-leadership* in an essay published in 1970 entitled *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf had worked as a management researcher and educator for AT&T and a consultant for several institutions including MIT and Ohio University. Inspired by a short novel, *Journey to the East*, Greenleaf concluded that a great leader is first experienced as a servant who is motivated to help others. Briefly stated, according to Larry Spears a promoter of Greenleaf: "Servant leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision making." (Spears, 2005, p. 2). Founding a religious society of teacher Brothers, De La Salle's leadership also exhibits these features of Servant Leadership.

Larry Spears has been a faithful disciple and promoter of Greenleaf's concept of Servant Leadership for many years. From Greenleaf's writings, Spears identified ten characteristics of the Servant Leader. He briefly describes each one: 1. Listening, 2. Empathy, 3. Healing, 4. Awareness, 5. Persuasion, 6. Conceptualization, 7. Foresight, 8. Stewardship, 9. Commitment to the growth of people, and 10. Building Community. (Spears, 2005, p. 4). In his essay Greenleaf says:

The Servant Leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead... The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1970, p.15).

From the outset, De La Salle is the servant accepting the stewardship of maintaining several schools for the poor. Eventually, he accepts responsibility and leadership for the schools and the teachers. His involvement comes from his awareness of the situation and a conceptualization and foresight which grows into a vision which drives him to overcome obstacles. His vision is to form a society, a community of men dedicated to the education of the poor. All along, he continues to serve the needs of the school masters. When they reproached him for his blind spot, his wealth and position, he listened and he responded with empathy. Resigning his canonry and divesting himself of his wealth, he led them with persuasion backed up with his example. Throughout his life, De La Salle remained committed to the growth of the Brothers as educators and spiritual men. Most important to De La Salle and the Brothers was a commitment to community and acting "together and by association." All of this was in service to the poor.

ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE AS THE SERVANT LEADER OF ROBERT GREENLEAF

Awareness leading to a vision

Simply put, being a leader implies someone is going somewhere and others are following behind. For others to follow, a leader must inspire his followers with confidence in his vision, his purpose or goal, and his ability to head in the right direction.

A mark of a leader ...is that he is better than most at pointing the direction. As long as he is leading, he always has a goal. It may be a goal arrived at by group consensus; ... or the leader, acting on inspiration... But the leader always knows what it is and can articulate it for any who are unsure. By clearly stating and restating the goal the leader gives certainty and purpose to others... (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 17).

De La Salle certainly had a goal or vision which he eventually passed on to his disciples and which inspired himself and others to commit themselves to the education of the poor. This vision is what kept De La Salle and the Brothers he served striving to develop excellent schools and kept them going forward in spite of crushing obstacles from powerful political and ecclesiastical forces.

The first chapter of *De La Salle, CEO* is titled "Corporate Leadership Principle One: Offer a Vision." The chapter begins with a quotation from Br. Gregory Wright, F.S.C which highlights the characteristic of awareness cited from Greenleaf by Larry Spears: "The writings of La Salle show him to have been a man very much aware of the society in which he was working, the problems that the common people faced, and what the suitable means of influencing that society and dealing with those problems might be (Almonte, 2004, p. 264).

Vision here is not a mystical experience, but a prophetic one arising from an awareness of a particular situation calling for action. Descriptions of other leadership styles also speak of vision.

Vision. Outstanding leaders articulate an ideological vision congruent with the deeply-held values of followers, a vision that describes a better future to which the followers have an alleged moral right.

Leadership and Vision. Many definitions of leadership involve an element of goal management vision. A vision provides direction to the influence process (House and Podsakoff, 1994, p. 2).

The double contemplation

Larry Spears speaking of Greenleaf's servant-leader characteristics does not use the term *vision*, but writes of awareness and conceptualization as characteristics of the Servant-Leader. De La Salle's vision arises from his awareness and his conceptualization of the Christian School managed by a dedicated community of teachers. This awareness and conceptualization is referred to by Br. Luke Salm as "the double contemplation":

In his prayer, John Baptist de La Salle experienced what the Brothers call a double contemplation. On the one hand, he contemplated the goodness and awesome power of the divine will that all should be saved; on the other, he contemplated at first hand the situation of the neglected children of the poor. He saw how far they were from the salvation that God wanted for them...

Out of the double contemplation, De La Salle became aware that he had a mission from God to be a Founder. He realized that salvation for the young, the poor, and the disadvantaged could come from a community of teachers who would provide them with a human and Christian education in the Christian Schools (Salm, n.d., p. 8).

The challenge

How does a young priest from a well-to-do family in 17th Century France convince young men with little education and few means to dedicate themselves and their lives to teaching poor boys, relying only on faith in Divine Providence to feed, clothe, and shelter them through years of famine, extreme weather conditions, and fierce opposition from established clerics and well paid professional teaching masters? This is what De La Salle did, and he did so by serving their needs.

De La Salle's first step was to be convinced himself. All he needed to do was to open his eyes and his heart to the world he lived in. Surely he saw the poverty of the destitute and the working classes and their children growing up virtually alone, practically abandoned while their parents toiled to bring home barely enough income for a meager subsistence. He writes about this many times in his meditations, especially the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

The encounter

Providentially, De La Salle met a man who had a sort of plan. In March of 1679, De La Salle met Adrian Nyel at the home of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus. Adrian Nyel needed help with his plan to open a school for poor boys in Reims. De La Salle had already helped the Sisters of the Infant Jesus establish a school for girls. Now he was asked to help Nyel establish a school for poor boys. Nyel had worked with Reverend Barré in Rouen and Canon Roland, who had left the care of the Sisters

of the Infant Jesus, to De La Salle upon his death (Blain I, 2000, p. 68). At first, De La Salle was happy to help Nyel with advice, contacts, and a few amenities. Then De La Salle met the teachers! Was it possible that these poor souls could take care of themselves, much less do anything to really educate the poor children of Reims? They had no lodging, no food, not much education themselves, no manners, no teaching skills, and no heart for teaching poor boys fresh off the streets. De La Salle's perception of these school masters was not very good. In his *Memoirs on the Beginning*, De La Salle wrote: "...I considered the men whom I was to employ in the schools in 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." (Blain I, 2000, p. 80). This situation was not a formula for success. Thus began De La Salle's involvement in the Christian education of the poor.

De La Salle must have immediately begun to see the value of an undertaking to educate poor boys. He would later articulate this belief so fervently and with such clarity in his *Meditations*, especially the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. However, at this time, he had no intention of taking responsibility for this work. De La Salle helped Nyel find a parish willing to open a school funded by Madame Maillefer. Then De La Salle helped provide lodging for the new school masters in a house he had leased. He helped feed them with meals brought from his own home. He observed that they were not very organized and not very responsible over all. When the lease ran out, he knew that he could not just abandon them to themselves if the school was to survive. Then he did the unthinkable: he opened his own home to them much to the consternation of his own family. In his own home he could offer some support and meet with them to help them with managing their teaching. He also tried to give them religious instruction and prayer which he believed was necessary to motivate them. There, he could also provide them with a stable, orderly environment from which to work. Within a year, De La Salle was able to find another residence for the school masters and he actually moved in with them. By this time, it was clear to these school masters, that De La Salle was making this job a real commitment. Some of them could not accept this and eventually all of these first teachers left. For De La Salle, this was not a failure.

The operation of the school was soon to attract better educated and dedicated teachers more open to the prospects of a serious commitment to educating the poor. This first school turned out to be very successful and soon there were requests from other pastors. These schools were called "Christian and Gratuitous Schools". In spite of De La Salle's cautions, Nyel opened more schools, leaving them to be managed by De La Salle. (Blain I, 2000, p. 95).

Thus it was that De La Salle was drawn into what would become his life's work. He realized that this is what God wanted him to do (Blain I, 2000, p. 80). Up to this point, De La Salle in the words of Greenleaf, demonstrates "...a natural feeling that one wants to serve". One could argue that De La Salle was inspired to serve beyond a "natural feeling".

Nevertheless, De La Salle went far to serve Nyel and these first school masters. He saw the need to educate the poor. He saw the plight of those first school masters recruited by Nyel, and he did what he could to help them succeed, and for the most part they did.

Building a Community

Spears (2005) includes in his list of characteristics of servant leadership, the building of a community. Greenleaf (1970) actually sees modern society and institutions as somehow in danger of losing a sense of community which he sees as necessary for the health and well-being of individuals. He proposes that it is necessary to rebuild community.

All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his own unlimited liability for a quite specific community related group (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 40).

From the first encounter with the new schoolmasters, De La Salle laid the foundation for a community of teachers to operate schools. At first De La Salle leased a house for the teachers. When the lease expired, he brought them into own home. This caused quite a problem with his family. June 24, 1682, De La Salle moved out with the school masters to another house he rented on the *Rue Neuve* some distance from the Cathedral (Bédel, 1976, p. 47). This house Blain calls the cradle of De La Salles's Institute. This is considered the first community started by De La Salle (Blain I, 2000, p. 90).

At first, bringing these school masters together under one roof was simply a practical matter of having them together for the purpose of serving their needs. In time this became the seeds of a community. De La Salle imposed a regular schedule for them. Being held to daily schedule may have been difficult for some of them and the reason why they chose to leave. De La Salle's penchant for a regulated life is attributed by Blain to his experience at the Seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris. After the death of his parents, he imposed a regular schedule on his own family, a source of criticism by outsiders (Blain I, 2000, p. 40).

Accepting to live a more regulated life, was a mark of the school masters commitment to the schools. Besides giving order to the lives of these teachers, their being together had other benefits. They had the support of De La Salle and also important, they could support each other. It is likely that De La Salle shared conversations with them about their challenges and "best practices" in the classroom. This type of information would later be the foundation for a manual for classroom management and running a school, *The Conduct of Schools*.

What started as a convenience for De La Salle to care for the first school masters eventually became part of his conceptualization or vision. In the beginning, the little community of schoolmasters was actually serving more than one school. Nyel had opened other schools in other parishes in Reims, and later he worked to open schools in Rethel, Laon and Guise. De La Salle may have included the teachers from these schools in other towns in the gatherings from time to time to give them support as well.

De La Salle's community was not very stable at first. With some notable exceptions, many of the school masters did not stay with De La Salle. Some De La Salle dismissed for lack of success in the classroom. Other left on their own.

De La Salle began to sense some anxiety among the teachers who did stay. The issue was more than just a regulated life. The issue was their security. They were being asked to commit long term to the schools. If the schools did not succeed, they would be left with nothing to survive on. De La Salle tried to convince them they should trust in Divine Providence to provide for them. This is when the schoolmasters pointed out that De La Salle did not appreciate their situation because he did not have concerns about his security with his personal wealth and his steady income from the canonry to rely on. This openness caught De La Salle off guard. He was momentarily speechless. They had not only questioned his commitment to the Christian Schools, but they challenged his attempt at a most eloquent and persuasive argument (Blain I, 2000, p. 107). After careful consideration and consultation with his spiritual director and the bishop, De La Salle made the heroic decision to divest himself of his canonry and his inheritance. Managing to take this action was not a simple task. He was strongly advised not to take this drastic measure. When he actually accomplished this

task, he became the target of much criticism from his family and the public.

Aside from being a priest, De La Salle was now on an equal footing with the brothers. Not only did he set an example, but he could be more persuasive. While he did impose a regular schedule for the community, the schoolmasters were not at all bound to stay. Those really committed to the education of the poor and the Christian Schools still relied heavily on the service of John Baptist De La Salle. If De La Salle still had any hope of serving as a parish priest as his spiritual advisors recommended, that hope was rapidly diminishing with his growing commitments to the Christian Schools and the Brothers who taught in these schools. De La Salle's biographers refer to De La Salle's *Memoirs of the Beginnings* in which De La Salle tells the story of his being drawn in to take over the care of the schools "in an imperceptible manner" (Bédel, 1996, p. 43).

Becoming a Society of Brothers

By 1686, De La Salle had completely taken charge of the schools and the schoolmasters from Adrian Nyel. Nyel had decided to leave the schools up to Divine Providence and he retired to Rouen where he died two years later (Blain II, 2000, p. 172). By now the schoolmasters had been living a community life pretty much guided by De La Salle with a regular schedule. The community was group of teachers living together and operating schools together. They pooled their resources and shared their expertise. They also began to call themselves Brothers. They had to rely on the charity of benefactors because the schools did not charge any tuition. The concept of the "Christian and Gratuitous Schools" and the success of these schools must have enjoyed a good reputation judging from the requests for schools coming in from various parishes and surrounding communities.

The principal Brothers

The group by now had some veteran members that De La Salle referred to as the "principal Brothers". These Brothers were now somewhat older and more experienced men who had been with the community from the earliest years. These Brothers were clearly more committed to the education of the poor for an extended and indefinite future. It was these members of the community that De La Salle relied on when resolving issues and making important decisions. This group of men was not a just an exclusive club loyal to De La Salle. As Brothers gained experience and grew in their commitments, they were included among "the principal Brothers" and participated and contributed to the wisdom and welfare of the community.

The first general assembly

In the spring of 1686¹, De La Salle gathered twelve of the principal Brothers for a retreat in Reims beginning on the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord (Bédel, 1996, p. 58). What De La Salle and the community of Brothers had in mind was the formation of:

"...a regular Community with a special garb, rules and constitutions to establish among them a perfect uniformity and in all things conformity with their vocation... to make of them a society having but one heart and one soul, like the early Christians..." (Blain II, 2000, p. 173).

¹ There is a discrepancy surrounding this date. Blain puts this meeting in 1684. Maillefer and Bernard put the meeting in 1686. Later researchers tend to agree with the latter.

Here Blain makes a profound statement about John Baptist De La Salle and a decision about his approach to leadership in this formation of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools:

To succeed in this, De La Salle thought that he should not impose any of his personal preferences. In his humility, he did not think that what needed to be done should come from him. Although destined to be the father of a new family made up of men who looked on everything by the graces which he received in his protracted communing with God, he grew more and more humbly distrustful of self. He would have considered questionable anything that might have been decided by his own choice (Blain II, 2000, p. 173).

In other words, the decisions were to be made by the body of the society, “together and by association”. This is the expression used today by the Brothers in reference to their community. This expression was used very early in the Formula of Vows in 1694 and is still used in the formula of vows.

...to keep together and by association gratuitous schools...” (De La Salle, *Rules and Foundation Documents*, p. 204).

This was to become the operating principle of De La Salle and the Brothers.

De La Salle Listens

De La Salle had two concerns which guided his leadership: 1. He placed a high value on the virtue of humility. This project was not about him. The efforts De La Salle made to grow in humility is a major theme of Blain’s biography of De La Salle. 2. De La Salle believed very firmly that this creation of a new religious community should be God’s creation, not his. This society was the embodiment of his conceptualization, the vision of a community of teachers dedicated to the Christian and gratuitous education of the poor. In his contemplation this was what God wanted as the means for accomplishing the salvation for all people.

La Salle recommended to these 12 “principal Brothers” to first make a retreat, to take into account the value of the regularity they presently practiced, to give any new regulations a “trial period” before making them permanent, and to commit themselves by making vows. He insisted they speak their minds freely on these matters. He would simply listen and follow faithfully their decisions (Blain II, 2000, p. 124):

But how could they overcome his humility on this point, which allowed him only the right of listening, of asking for their opinions, and of going along with the majority? Not that he failed to assist them with his insights or to redress their opinions when these were neither correct nor judicious, but he did this in such a way that his own self-love found no satisfaction in doing so, and their liberty of offering their advice and defending their opinions was not at all interfered with. (Blain II, 2000, p. 175).

Greenleaf puts significant importance the servant leaders reliance on listening:

I have a bias... which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*. When he is a leader, this disposition causes him to be seen as servant first... I have confidence in this approach... because true listening builds strength in other people (Greenleaf, 1970, pp. 18-19).

There are other times when De La Salle listened to the Brothers and others. He did not always respond immediately. His silence was occasionally looked upon as indecisiveness or inability to

lead the Brothers. About silence, Greenleaf says:

One must not be afraid of a little silence. Some find silence awkward or oppressive...It is often a devastating question to ask oneself, but it is sometimes important to ask it... "In saying what I have in mind will I really improve on the silence?" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 19).

After a time of retreat the assembly settled on name for the society, how they should dress, regulations about meals, and the matter of vows. Thus did De La Salle, Servant-Leader, lead these first Brothers to take the first steps to form their Institute, with vision, listening, persuasion and community-building. They were still not a society as yet with official recognition as a religious Institute, but they were recognizable as a community of teachers for Christian Schools committed with vows.

OBSTACLES, CHALLENGES, CRISES IN THE LEADERSHIP OF DE LA SALLE

De La Salle did not wear the mantle of leader or superior easily

From the very beginning, De La Salle had been "drawn in" to his engagement with the schoolmasters and the running of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. In the beginning, the opening of schools and the management of the schoolmasters were Nyel's responsibility. De La Salle was merely helping where needed. In time, Nyel just let De La Salle take full responsibility and De La Salle committed himself to the success of the schools and the means necessary for them to continue. De La Salle generously took care of these first schoolmasters even to the point of impoverishing himself. Finally, De La Salle had helped them form themselves into a kind of community. At this point, De La Salle wanted them to choose one of their own to be in charge.

"Dispensability"

The Seventh Principle cited by Almonte (2004) in his analysis of De La Salle as a corporate CEO is "Make Yourself Dispensable" (Almonte, 2004, p. 76). This is related to an aspect of leadership which is to enable others to lead.

A glaring issue in the life of John Baptist de la Salle and the Brothers was the fact that he was a priest, a member of the First Estate, and the Brothers were laymen. Try as he might, De La Salle was not able to pass on the leadership to one of the Brothers. First of all, the Brothers were very attached to De La Salle as their "Father", a term of endearment not just a title for a priest. At first he convinced the Brothers to elect one of their own to be Superior. This first attempt to have one of the Brothers take over the leadership ended when he was witnessed by another priest asking permission of Brother Henri L'Heureux, who had been chosen as Superior at De La Salle's urging. This priest reported what he saw to the bishop. The bishop absolutely would not allow any of his priests to be subordinate to a layman. De La Salle had to take up the position of Superior of the Brothers once again. Then De La Salle tried another plan. Unfortunately De La Salle worked to have Henry L'Heureux ordained only to have him die just before ordination. Shaken by this event, De La Salle resolved that only a Brother could eventually be Superior of the Brothers and that the society of teachers would be lay in character only (Blain II, 2000, pp. 219-231).

Trouble in Paris

In 1688, De La Salle answering a request went to Paris with two Brothers to take over the parish

school at St. Sulpice. Being established in Paris had been a goal since 1683 (Bédel, 1996, p. 70). Fitting into an established school was not easy. At the urging of the Brothers, De La Salle managed to let the Brothers take over the school and run it like other Christian Schools. Later De La Salle opened a school on *Rue de Bac*. The success of De La Salle's schools drew the attention and envy of others. There was trouble from the teachers of the "Little Schools" or "*Les Petits Écoles*" challenging the gratuity aspect of De La Salle's schools. Then there were law suits by the Writing Masters who made a living teaching calligraphy and who were losing students to the Christian Schools where student could learn basic writing without paying. They also brought up the matter of the ability of the students to pay. These challenges involving lawsuits weighed heavily on De La Salle who remained determined to be faithful to what he saw as God's mission entrusted to him. He would also have difficulties with the local pastors interfering with the Brothers. These challenges would last for many years, almost to the time of his death.

Another Challenge

Later on, when two of the novices complained to the pastor of St. Sulpice about the harsh treatment by a novice master appointed by De La Salle, the Bishop appointed another priest to replace De La Salle after an investigation. The Brothers embarrassed De La Salle by refusing to accept anyone but De La Salle as their Superior. This resulted in the Bishop demanding and receiving an apology from De La Salle. It was evident that the Brothers appreciated De La Salle's leadership which he would have gladly relinquished with gracious humility (cf. Blain II, 2000, Chaps. 17 to 19). There were other attempts by De La Salle to have the Brothers choose one of their own to no avail.

Other services

Both in Reims and in Paris, De La Salle was petitioned to send Brothers to open schools which could only afford to support one teacher. Since De La Salle insisted that no Brother be sent alone, he had to decline the request. To accommodate these requests, De La Salle offered to train teachers sent to him. In Reims the effort at a teacher training school failed because there was no funding. In Paris he tried to secure funding for a teacher training school. This was part of another vision of De La Salle and his desire to offer a Christian education beyond the larger cities (Maximin, 1922, p. 10).

Monumental Failure and Betrayal

This effort at serving the rural parishes led to two unfortunate events in the Founder's life. The first was a school for the country teachers at St. Hyppolyte in Paris in 1699 that he had given over to the care of one of his most trusted Brothers, Br. Nicholas Vuyart. Vuyart, Drolin and De La Salle had made a heroic vow in 1691 to work for the success of the Christian Schools even if they had to live only on bread and water. The school was a legacy in a will by a priest put in Vuyart's name since the community of the Brothers was not a legal entity. Vuyart abruptly resigned from the Brothers and claimed the school for himself. Vuyart mistakenly thought that his action could save the school in some way. The benefactor immediately withdrew the funding, and the school closed. When Vuyart asked to be re-admitted to the Brothers, De La Salle refused to readmit him at the insistence of the other Brothers. This must have disappointed De La Salle, but he once again listened to the Brothers. Thus he honored his commitment to the society (Maximin, 1922, p. 17).

The brink of disaster

The second attempt and failure was even more disastrous with the most serious consequences. In 1707, Jean Charles Clément, a young prelate in his early twenties from a prominent family in Paris, offered to fund a teacher training school. De La Salle was not comfortable with the young priest's enthusiasm and there were legal issues involved. The young priest was most insistent and continued to petition De La Salle to accept his offer. Finally De La Salle agreed with certain guarantees in place to accept his offer to help fund a teacher training school. De La Salle put up a loan along with his friend M. Rogier which Clément promised to pay back when he reached the age of 25 which was the age of legal majority in France at the time. Meanwhile, Clément was given a benefice and became the Abbé Clément. With his benefice, he could have paid the loan back; however, the Abbé Clément's father insisted that his son not pay back the loan because he was a minor at the time of the agreement. He further accused De La Salle of "suborning a minor" and extorting funds (Bédel, 1996, p. 103)

Suborning a minor and extortion were serious charges with fines and imprisonment as possibilities. Along with his difficulties with challenges from the writing masters and challenges to his leadership from certain pastors, now De La Salle faced the prospects of serious litigation. Still, the Brothers were depending on De La Salle's leadership and were not prepared for any other arrangement. This period in De La Salle's life and that of the Institute was very unsettling with serious threats to the very survival of the whole undertaking by De La Salle and the Brothers.

Trip interrupted

De La Salle had been visiting communities outside of Paris when he had to return to face trial. Certain matters were adjudicated, confiscation of property and payment of funds, while certain criminal issues remained to be settled. De La Salle had certain documents prepared and left them with someone to present in court. Apparently the documents were never presented in court. He then set off for southern France. His journey to the south was perhaps a convenient way for De La Salle to avoid the court scene. He also felt that since he was the target for attacks from certain clerics and the writing masters, he could best help the Brothers by his absence for a while.

A critical time

This trip to the south of France began a very controversial time in the life of De La Salle. Among some of his biographers, there is much conjecture about his motives, the lack of communication with the Brothers, and the situation of the Brothers in Paris, Versailles, and Rouen. Blain raised serious doubts about De La Salle's leadership at this time, suggesting that the perception of some Brothers that De La Salle had abandoned the Brothers led them to abandon their vocations. De La Salle left Paris on February 18, 1712 and did not return until 1714 (cf. Bédel, 1996, p. 164). During that period he visited various communities in southern France and spent some time making a retreat and withdrawing to places of solitude. He attempted to open a novitiate in the city of Marseille with Brother Timothée in charge. The arrangements at first seemed to be going well when there was a change of heart on the part of the bishop and the benefactors. This situation is attributed to De La Salle's opposition and objections to Jansenism and attempts by Jansenist sympathizers to disrupt De La Salle's efforts.

De La Salle retreats to solitude

The reactions to his visits to the various communities varied from joyous to unwelcoming behaviors on the part of some Brothers, some of whom had become lax in keeping the rule. In Marseille, De La Salle was accused of coming to destroy the community instead of building it. During this time, De La Salle withdrew to places which offered solitude, the monastery of Grande Chartreuse, the monastery of St. Maximin where he made a forty day retreat and finally Parmenie in the foothills of the Alps. It does seem from De La Salle's writings that he had self-doubts about his ability to lead the Brothers without drawing them into conflicts with clerics and others.

Uncertainty in Paris

According to Blain, meanwhile, the Brothers in Paris, Versailles and Rouen were in a quandary. They did not seem to know who was in charge. They looked to Br. Barthélemy who was the Director of novices, but he did not want to presume he was in charge because he had not received any definite instructions from De La Salle to that effect according to Blain. Also he seemed to go along with ecclesiastics who wanted to take control of the Brothers and the schools. There were priests who had been appointed as Superiors in each of the communities by the Bishop. This threatened to make each community autonomous and in effect break up the Institute (Bédél, 1996, p. 168). In legal documents, De La Salle was referred to only as Superior of the Brothers in Reims. Some of the pastors wanted to make changes in the rule of the Brothers. This proposal of a new system and changes in the Rule by certain clerics greatly upset the Brothers. The principal Brothers from these communities were concerned that the situation was grave and could lead to the total fracturing and collapse of the Institute. They finally drew up a letter urging De La Salle to return to take up again the central role of Superior, reminding him of his vow to the society (cf. Blain III, Chap XII). The letter is dated April 1, 1714 (Bédél, 1996, p. 100).

The Letter of 1714

This letter was in a sense a nuclear option. The letter seemed to be a daring move to confront De La Salle with the vow he had made to the society. In reality, the letter gave De La Salle no other option in view of his deep dedication to the will of God expressed by the Brothers wanting him to return to Paris and take up the leadership of the Institute. He may have never really relinquished the leadership of the Institute but actually he wanted to. It took some time for the letter to reach De La Salle. De La Salle hesitated and sought some advice. When he heard of the death of M. de la Chétardie, regarded as the "secret enemy" by Blain, on July 1st, 1714, he felt now was an appropriate time to return to Paris. He took a little time to tie up some loose ends, stopping in Lyon and Dijon on his way to Paris, arriving on August 10, 1714 (Bédél, 1996, p. 100).

De La Salle returns

De La Salle's return is portrayed dramatically, suddenly presenting himself to the Brothers who were astonished and overjoyed to see him. His simple words of greeting were: "Here I am, what do you want of me?" The Brothers responded promptly by asking him to take up again the leadership of the Institute. De La Salle at first praised their steadfastness in managing the governance of the Institute in his absence, as fragile as it was, and he tried to convince them that his leadership was not necessary. After some hesitation and conditions, De La Salle once again assumed the leadership of the Institute. However, at this point the leadership of De La Salle enters a new phase (cf. Blain

III, 2000, p. 660).

The New Phase Leadership

Taking on the leadership role, De La Salle is once again the servant-leader, insisting on the Brothers' participation in decision making and preparing them to take full responsibility for direction and success of the Institute. He made it a point to include the southern communities in accepting him as head of the Institute (Bédél, 1996, p. 77). When confronted by the ecclesiastical superior, De La Salle still had the authorization to hear the Brothers' confessions, but he refused to answer the question about who was the Superior of the Brothers because he said he did not know how to answer the question. The Brothers themselves stepped up to handle the situation basically saying they would decide by an election. That settled the matter.

The Brothers take charge

The whole incident of De La Salle's long absence and the troubles in Paris made the Brothers conscious of the need for an arrangement for leadership succession that would insure the survival of all they and De La Salle had struggled for more than thirty years. They treasured De La Salle's guidance and the many services he had done for them. They realized that he could not be their Superior indefinitely. They still needed De La Salle to be Superior for a time if in name only to keep outsiders from interfering with their rules. They knew that the ownership of the Institute would soon be their responsibility completely.

De La Salle and Br. Barthélemy shared duties. De La Salle continued providing his priestly services for the Brothers, and Br. Barthélemy ran the novitiate at St. Yon and dealt with the day to day matters. De La Salle was able to spend time in solitude and prayer, and to complete some of his writings. Even with declining health, he did make visits to Calais and Boulogne.

With De La Salle's declining health and the sensitivity of the time with clerics in Paris continuing, the Brothers were ready to choose one of their own to be Superior. Legal documents were drawn up with lawyers in Rouen. Br. Barthélemy visited every community to secure an agreement to hold an assembly of "the principal Brothers" and every Brother in each community signed a register to that effect. These steps were carefully recorded and documented (cf. Bédél, 1996, p. 179).

May 16, 1717, Pentecost Sunday, the assembly began with De La Salle explaining the importance of the decision he was asking the Brothers to make. After two days of prayer, Br. Barthélemy was officially elected Superior. The Brothers also drew up a set of rules that would satisfy royal and ecclesiastical authorities. De La Salle did not participate in either the election or the drafting of rules. The Brothers then went through a process of ratifying the results of the election. De La Salle was requested to make the revisions of the rule according to the decisions of the assembly.

De La Salle was no longer Superior, but the decisions of the assembly did not end his role as servant-leader as he continued to give advice when requested. Br. Barthélemy continue to seek De La Salle's approval. De La Salle continued to pray for the Brothers, hear confessions, say mass and write books including the *Conduct of Schools* for the Brothers. Thus he continued serving the Brothers until the time of his death, April 7, 1719, Good Friday (cf. Bédél, 1996, p. 180).

CONCLUSION

The inspiration of Servant Leadership by Robert Greenleaf is appropriately applied to St. John Baptist De La Salle as Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Throughout his life from his first encounter with the founding of schools for the poor, De La Salle put himself at the service of teachers beginning with providing the most elemental needs of housing and feeding them. While he didn't think much of those first teachers, he appreciated their call to a mission even more than they did and worked with them to fulfill it successfully. In time, his growing awareness, a "double contemplation", led to a conception, a vision of a community of teachers truly dedicated to teaching the poor, associated and working together to run successful schools.

The hallmarks of De La Salle as a Servant Leader were: his vision arising from an awareness of the situation of the poor, his desire to serve the cause of teachers working to educate poor students, his willingness to listen, his ability to persuade and involve others in decision making, his building a community, his humility seeing the growth of his institute as God's work. The most difficult task for him was to pass on the role of leader and superior to one of the Brothers and to have them take ownership of the vision and the Institute dedicated to pursuing it. Along the way he and the Brothers met many obstacles and setbacks which they were able to overcome together and by association, by their faith in the mission and reliance on Divine Providence. The biggest test of his leadership came when he moved to Southern France, relying on the Brothers in Northern France to manage their situation.

When called back by a letter citing his vows to the society, De La Salle bolstered the confidence of the Brothers. After a time of dealing with ecclesiastical issues, De La Salle and the Brothers drafted legal documents and gathered in an assembly of the "principal Brothers" who finally elected one of their own as Superior. They drafted rules and documents ratified by all the Brothers that satisfied royal and ecclesiastical authorities. In a few years after De La Salle's death, the Brothers were able to secure papal approbation and letters patent assuring their legal status and freedom to govern themselves.

Applications

Today, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools along with the many partners around the world still carry on the leadership legacy of St. John Baptist De La Salle. If the concept of Servant Leadership still marks the style of administrators of the Institute itself and the many apostolates it serves, it rests on the vision of St John Baptist De La Salle pursued "together and by association" in the many communities attached to the ministries and the larger community of the Institute itself. Community directors, visitors, councilors, superior generals, presidents, principals, various board trustees, program leaders and teachers must see themselves as servant leaders. They must own the vision, listen, build community, share the decision making, embracing the importance of being God's instruments "together and by association".

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