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The Crisis of 1712-1714 for John Baptist de La Salle and His Society

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Introduction

An Appendix in a previous *AXIS* publication "Providential Encounter at Parménie,"³ a study by the late Lasallian scholar Brother Leo Burkhard of an important phase of the life of John Baptist de La Salle, refers to a critique by Burkhard of the position of two contemporary authors of Lasallian studies concerning De La Salle's departure from Paris during the years 1712-1714 (De La Salle died in 1719). The two authors [referenced in the article],⁴ among others, have interpreted this departure as a "schism" in the Institute in which some Brothers abandoned the Founder; and the Founder in turn seems to have abandoned the Institute that he founded. This departure has been characterized by such terms as "the great crisis of the Founder's charism," "rupture," "effacement," "abandonment." By an analysis of texts of early biographies of the Founder (Blain and Maillefer) used by the authors in question, as well as other texts, and statements by a respected historian of the Institute, Georges Rigault, Burkhard proposes to show that this is an erroneous interpretation of this critical time in the life of De La Salle.

Two matters constitute the proximate background to understanding this period in the life of De La Salle. One was the famous "Clément affaire" concerning a young layman named Jean-Charles Clément, still a minor [not yet 25 years old], who urged De La Salle to open a training school for teachers in Saint Denis. The down payment supplied by De La Salle for a purchase of a house made possible the opening of the school in 1709. Clément did not honor his promissory note to repay De La Salle, and all attempts to make a settlement were useless. De La Salle offered to withdraw from the project without compensation, but Clément's father wanted the vindication of his son through a public and juridical condemnation of De La Salle for suborning a minor. Without waiting for the final judgment, De La Salle left Paris abruptly in February 1712 to visit the foundations in the South. De La Salle was condemned by the court on 31 May 1712.⁵

The second situation was caused by the Founder's impression, which later was proved unfounded, that the majority of the Brothers in Paris were beginning to side with the "enemy," probably Joachim Trotti de La Chétardye,⁶ the pastor of Saint Sulpice who became a staunch opponent of De La Salle, and with others who wanted to impose a new form of government on the Society.

For Burkhard, the "Providential Encounter at Parménie" of De La Salle with Soeur Louise Hours symbolizes the "high point" – its apex on a lofty hill in Dauphiné – of the 1712-1714 crisis. This is the context for the remarks of Burkhard that follow.

The Crisis of 1712-1714

Before beginning to consider the important part of this account (“The Providential Encounter at Parménie”), it would be good to take note of the entire situation of the Society founded by De La Salle from the moment of his unexpected departure from Paris in 1712. There were about one hundred members [of the Society] at the time, residing in twenty-two communities, of which fifteen were in the north: Rheims (1680), Guise (1682), Rethel (1683), Laon (1683), Paris (1688), Chartres (1699), Calais (1700), Troyes (1701), Rouen (1705), Saint Yon (1705), Darnétal (1705), Dijon (1705), Saint Denis (1708), Versailles (1710), and Boulogne (1710). About ninety Brothers were living in these communities, subject to Brother Joseph (Jean le Roux), Visitor, who was living in Paris, but not in charge of the Brothers in Paris who were subject to Brother Jean Jacquot.

There were seven communities in the south: Avignon (1703), Marseilles (1706), Mende (1707), Alès (1707), Grenoble (1708), Moulins (1710), and Les Vans (1711). About twenty Brothers were living in these seven communities, subject to Brother Ponce (Poncelet Thissieux), Visitor, who was living in Avignon.

In the Paris region, there were [three units]. The [first unit was the] Administrative Offices of the Society, located on rue de la Barouillère, in the parish of Saint Sulpice, under the jurisdiction of the parish priest, M. de La Chétardye. It consisted of: a) the Novitiate, under the direction of Brother Barthélemy (Joseph Truffet); b) the Procure, under the direction of Brother Thomas (Charles Frappet), whom M. de La Chétardye “would ever hold in high esteem”; c) the Secretariat, held by Brother Antoine (Jean Partois); d) the Residence of the Visitor, Brother Joseph, and of the Director of the schools of Paris, Brother Jean Jacquot; and e) the Brothers teaching in the three schools of the parish on the rue Princesse, the rue du Bac, and the rue Saint Placide.

The [second unit was the] Saint Denis School, near Paris, directed by Brother Jean-François (Jean Bouqueton), which was able to continue despite the closing of the [teacher-training] seminary, thanks to its independent founding contract.

The [third unit was made up of the] two schools in Versailles, that of Parc-aux-Cerfs and that of Saint Louis.

On leaving Paris in an unexpected manner, but obliged to do so, due to his having been convicted, De La Salle left the Society in a sad and anxious situation of uncertainty. Would he be pursued by officers of the law and imprisoned? Would he ever be able to return? What would become of him?

The Account of Events according to the Early Biographers of De La Salle

Here the first biographers of the Founder – and after them many other biographers, editors, and commentators – give us their versions, various and sometimes contradictory, of this episode in the life of De La Salle in which the high point will be his meeting with Soeur Louise Hours on the hill of Parménie, quite distant from Paris.

The goal of all my Lasallian research has been, indeed, to shed light, if possible, on the enigma of the Founder’s sudden departure from Paris in 1712. I am going to examine certain texts that

concern it, the major source of information being the very first biographies of De La Salle. There were three “first biographers.”

Brother Bernard (Jean Dauge),⁷ wrote in 1721, two years after the death of De La Salle. He was a member of the community of Grenoble during the Founder’s stay in Dauphiné; but, unfortunately, I am not able to quote him as his manuscript concerning this period has not survived. Nevertheless, the beautiful title of his book tells us much, even without this particular text: *The Admirable Action of Divine Providence in the Person of the Venerable Servant of God, John Baptist de La Salle.*

Dom Elie Maillefer,⁸ De La Salle’s nephew, a religious, longtime librarian of the monastery of Saint Remi in Rheims, scarcely knew his uncle. He was only four years old when the latter left his native city in order to settle in Paris in 1688. Maillefer wrote in 1723.

Canon Jean-Baptiste Blain,⁹ chaplain and “ecclesiastical superior” of the Brothers at Saint Yon, wrote in 1733 two large books of 946 pages. He had the advantage of being well acquainted with the Founder during the last four years of his life, as well as with the members of the administrative team who governed the Society during the absence of De La Salle, and who were at Saint Yon after 1715.

Maillefer wrote a second version of his book in 1740, doubtless upset because the Brothers had not approved the first and had kept it without publishing it, having entrusted the job of writing the official biography to Canon Blain.

[In addition,] *Georges Rigault*,¹⁰ the [early twentieth-century] historian of the Society [of the Brothers of the Christian Schools], may be considered a very valuable secondary source. He has this to say concerning the first biographers:

Where Blain sees a sort of flight in the hero’s leaving after the very serious judicial decisions, he dramatizes; he expands and simplifies the story after the manner of a hagiographer of the Golden Legend. And his entire account of the events of the “southern” years of the Saint is conditioned by this point of view. The situation is clear and not nuanced, the individuals firm with conventional attitudes, the facts stripped so as to elicit compassion or blame.¹¹

Maillefer refuses to commit himself on this matter. It is true that he sins by omission. Between the exaggerations of one of the biographers and the reservations of the other, we are left with incertitude. And unfortunately we have few witnesses able to help us.

On the whole, we do not have here the help of Blain, of Maillefer, and of the diverse editors. [Rather, we have the] interesting interpretations from the general history of the Society. To quote Rigault: “From our point of view, the work and the days of Saint John Baptist de La Salle from 1711 to 1714 served to solidify the foundations of the South.”¹²

I am completely in agreement with the historian Rigault here; but in order to understand the importance of this time in De La Salle’s life, it would be good, I think, to quote the text of Blain

himself concerning this “flight” since it has created a myth that the Founder had abandoned his Society during this time.

Considering himself in Paris as though in enemy territory and seeing everywhere only secret or open persecutors and cowardly or perfidious friends, De La Salle left the city the day following his condemnation, during the first week of Lent in 1712, to escape from the ultimate excesses of the persecution, in accordance with the advice of Jesus Christ, *When they persecute you in one city, flee to another*. De La Salle buried himself faraway in Provence. He did not return to Paris until he could do so in safety, that is, when his secret and implacable persecutor who had stirred up all the other adversaries could no longer do him any harm.¹³

If we were permitted to judge the actions of the saints, who conform to principles so markedly different from those of other people . . . , we might be tempted to condemn the precipitate and secret flight of De La Salle to Provence. It occasioned great turmoil in his Institute and came near bringing about its ruin. It would seem, in fact, that before taking this resolution or before leaving Paris – or at least after his arrival in Provence . . . , the holy Founder should have informed the Brothers, let them know where they could write to him, answered them, directed them by letters from his place of retirement, and, in short, appointed the Brother whom he felt best qualified to take his place in Paris, one whom the others would then have honored as their Superior in his absence.

The servant of God did none of these things. He went into hiding in the most distant provinces and did not want to let anyone know where he was going. He remained there unknown and did not reply to the letters he received from the Brothers. He did not even designate anyone to replace him during his absence. Finally, as far as the Brothers in France¹⁴ were concerned, he showed no sign of life or movement, as though he were actually dead. No doubt, a man as wise and enlightened as he must have had serious reasons for acting this way, but it is impossible for us to guess what these reasons were.

Did he not want to accustom the Brothers to get along without him and thus oblige them finally to choose one of their number for their Superior, a thing they had never wanted to do while he was among them? Perhaps he carried humility and the low sentiments he entertained of himself to the point of considering himself as a source of malediction and the cause of the troubles that constantly beset the Congregation. Perhaps he thought that some of his own disciples had gone over to his enemies and that he could no longer trust anyone. Perhaps, finally, he wished to persuade his adversaries that he no longer intervened in the government of his Institute, hoping thereby to disarm their ill will.

Whatever may be the truth about this matter, we are reduced to mere conjecture, since De La Salle never wished to give any explanations on this score, although he was frequently asked to do so. Yet his precipitate and hidden flight gave rise to several difficulties that followed . . .¹⁵

With regard to this “flight,” Maillefer has his reservations and, as Rigault has said, “sins by omission.” Maillefer’s text is very simple:

Hardly had he begun to enjoy the peace and solitude of his novitiate than new troubles arose over the house in Saint Denis which he had purchased several years before to set up a school for training country schoolmasters, of which I spoke earlier. He was blamed for the purchase of the house on the grounds that he had suborned a minor, and the case was brought to court. We have already noticed during the course of his life how much he detested lawsuits. No matter how serious the charges made against him and despite the perfectly good title he possessed to the house in question, he preferred, following the Gospel precept, to give up more than was asked than to go to court to protect his own interests. He had not found a better way to bring these legal cases against him to a close. He always used this method, for he had never allowed himself to be dominated by acquisitiveness. He was so little preoccupied with such secular matters that during the time others were heatedly pursuing the effort to take this house away from him, he left Paris for a visitation of his new establishments in Provence.¹⁶

Blain then offers us four options to explain this “flight” of the Founder to the south. I am summarizing them thus: 1) to oblige the principal Brothers to choose a superior from among themselves; 2) humbly, he believed himself responsible for all the difficulties which had happened to the Society; 3) the thought that some of his disciples were working with his enemies; and 4) to persuade his enemies that he was not engaged in the government of his Society in order to give them no reason to pursue the matter.

Maillefer proposes a fifth: De La Salle went to visit the new foundation in the Midi.

Let us recall that the options proposed by Blain are nothing but conjectures, as he himself admits, and that the one proposed by Maillefer is an incontestable historical fact. By means of documents found, historians have been able to trace the journey followed by De La Salle in visiting the communities of the South. The two biographies would have been able to furnish the principal reason for his departure, which seemed precipitous and secretive. He had a summons against him to appear in court! Rogier himself had alerted the Brothers! If he had remained in Paris, he risked being arrested and thrown in prison. It was as sad as that. We can say, therefore, that he left Paris in order to save his Society from being ruined.

After reading the text of Maillefer, and more so that of Blain, we have the impression that the Founder left Paris without preparing the principal Brothers for the shock that his departure during the night and in secret would produce. Unfortunately this impression remains to this day, and yet the truth is totally other. I am going to cite shortly a text from the same Blain concerning this departure, a text which has too long remained forgotten and totally ignored by the biographers and modern editors.

But before doing that, however, we have to examine the texts of two commentators from our times who have chosen, it appears, the third reason given by Blain, namely, the thought of the Founder

that some of his very disciples were working in concert with his great enemy. The two authors with whom we are concerned are Brother Miguel Campos¹⁷ and Brother Jean-Louis Schneider.¹⁸

Brother Miguel Campos: An Interpretation

Brother Miguel Campos, in *Cahier lasalliens 45* (January 1975) that is entitled *L'itinéraire évangélique de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*,¹⁹ has a section on the study of the “crisis in Paris” under the title: “Self-Effacement for the Good of the Society.”²⁰ He states regarding the first biographers:

Their cultural and chronological proximity to De La Salle makes the first biographers the primary source of his life story. Nevertheless, one must not minimize the fact that they considered John Baptist a saint and that, because of this, their accounts have certain *a priori* judgments. They make a version of “the De La Salle event” valid and rich, of course, but a version which it is necessary to consider with some reservations.²¹

Campos concludes his introduction with this statement:

We are, therefore, proposing to suggest another version than that of Blain and those who followed him, who were preoccupied with stressing the sanctity of the Founder, without taking sufficiently into account either the historical weight of the facts, or De La Salle’s understanding of them.²²

Campos also quotes André Rayez, SJ, who gave us the beautiful treatise on “The Spirituality of Self-Abandonment: Saint John Baptist de La Salle.”²³ He had this to say:

Oratorical developments, either pious or of authentic spirituality, not supported by the documents or indisputable facts do not therefore authorize attributing the events to the venerable personages about whom they are written. Do we not occasionally risk – Rigault, more than once, thought so – taking the thoughts and accounts of Blain himself for those of John Baptist de La Salle?²⁴

Let me pause here a moment to state very simply that I am one of those “utilizers of Blain” who believes very profoundly that “the Founder’s personal holiness underlies his whole achievement, and no account of his life can be satisfactory, or even coherent, if it ignores it.”²⁵

The Institute has a very precious document that is preserved in the Rome Generalate archives,²⁶ which was used in the process of beatification of the Founder. Its authenticity is beyond questioning. I refer to the very long letter of Father Charles de la Grange addressed to Father Guiart, the pastor of St. Peter’s parish in Laon. The Brothers there had heard of the humiliations heaped upon their Founder in Paris and had asked their pastor, who had close ties with De La Salle because of the presence in his parish of the Sellier family who furnished five vocations to the Society, to write to Father La Grange in Paris, requesting him to make a serious inquiry as to the critical situation there. The letter helps us penetrate into the very soul of the Founder and confirms the high degree of holiness the Founder had already attained at that time. It also proves the

responsibility of M. de La Chétardye in the developing crisis of the Society, which finally forced the Founder to leave Paris. Rigault places all the blame on M. de La Chétardye, although there were others involved.

We should recall what De La Salle told his disciples during the attacks by the Writing Masters against his work:

If this undertaking is from God, who can destroy it? If my work does not come from God, I would consent to its ruin. I would join our enemies in destroying it if I thought that it did not have God for its author or that he did not will its progress . . . Let us abandon ourselves to his guidance. If he takes our work in hand, he will, to further its progress, make use of the very ones who are so determined to destroy it.²⁷

Campos tells us that he is going to deal with the matter in three parts.²⁸ The first two are of interest here:

The *key-event* . . . [Key-event is] the term that he uses to refer to the difficulties and hindrances that the Founder had to overcome throughout his life, including the serious crisis in Paris *that obliged him to leave the Brothers' scene*.²⁹

The *power-word* . . . The key-event should include in some way the “letter from the Brothers” . . . a power-word that made him *return to his Brothers* with a new resolve. Just recalling some letters, written in the final years of the life of the Founder, will shed even more light on the sense of *his return to the Society*.³⁰

I have italicized the words that attracted my attention most particularly. The author seems to have De La Salle both leaving and returning to the Society. Campos explains himself:

We must then, in this chapter, consider in retrospect the course of the previous events which culminated in the Paris crisis, so as to study just how the impetus that he set up and organized, is inseparable from a renunciation and self-effacement, or to employ Pauline language, annihilation.³¹

A text from Brother Yves Poutet³² that Campos quotes seems to point in the same direction. I refer, of course, to the phrases I have highlighted above:

The many pressures, the numerous suggestions of De La Chétardye had the advantage of clearly bringing to light the degree to which the Lasallian views were solid. Attacked for twelve years *with the exception in part during two years (1712-1714)*, they were rediscovered intact in 1714. Their solidity was confirmed.³³

The years 1712-1714 were not an obscure period in the life of the Founder, nor a period during which he excluded himself from the Society. The important work De La Salle was doing constantly and consistently in the communities of the South between 1712 and 1714 was inspired

by his special charism as a Founder and by his vow of 1691. This historical fact cannot be overlooked.

My curiosity reached a high point. I asked myself just where Campos wanted to go. I have followed his account of the “facts” in question, the very same that I have already shared with you, from after 1682 when De La Salle understood and accepted the heavy burden that divine Providence had confided to him, knowing full well that it was throwing a challenge to the “institutions” of his epoch and that he himself was to become the target of savage opposition. Campos follows a clear line exposing what he calls some “doubts” which troubled the Founder concerning his role in the Society and his manner of governing. To my astonishment I read, at the end of the account, this surprising declaration of Campos when speaking about De La Salle:

The facts seem to tell him that God did not want him any more among the Brothers. The impact of this must have been extremely dramatic for De La Salle as he was touched in the deepest area of his personal identity, the consciousness of a calling with a mission: this vocation which he had so clearly had in view since 1682 and which had uprooted him from his world to insert him in the world of the teachers of the poor.

The shock was shattering, since it shattered the irrevocable decision expressed in the vows of 1691 and 1694. De La Salle found that he was abandoned by the Brothers. The vow of association, which had united them in a common journey in view of a common mission, seemed to him to have been put in question by this “abandonment” by the Brothers. Abandoned by the Brothers, abandoned by God. The religious experience of De La Salle, or if one prefers the “dark night” to employ an expression traditional in spirituality, is not the product of disembodied ideas, but it lives in the very flesh of the facts of his life. To question his place in the Society is inseparable, consequently, from the high religious idea that he had of the work of God, of his consciousness of sin and also of his *having been abandoned by the men who had made with him the vow of association*. Such is the context of Lasallian annihilation: not only the loss of reputation, of his place in the world, but the necessity to “leave” the very community that had given sense to his life.³⁴

One can ask from where had come this idea that the Brothers had abandoned the Founder. The situation is very serious, even of extreme consequence. Blain had suggested it as the third among the reasons for the departure of De La Salle. It is in drawing conclusions from the Clément lawsuit that Campos uses it; and it comes directly from Blain, at least partly. Campos writes:

[According to Blain,] the greatest suffering [of De La Salle] consisted in the impression that he had that the majority of the Brothers in Paris had abandoned him and had placed themselves on the side of those who wished to impose another type of government on the Society of the Brothers.³⁵

Here is the exact text from Blain to which Campos refers:

What affected the Founder most keenly was that he imagined that all the Brothers in Paris were on his enemy's side. It was a false impression, because during his absence, the Brothers in Paris remained in his regard what they had been when he was present among them: obedient and inviolably attached to his person.³⁶

The big difference between the two texts is surprising. Why did Campos omit the most important phrase in Blain, regarding the fidelity of the Brothers in Paris? If that phrase is a true one, and history will prove it incontestably so, as we will see, Campos' position becomes untenable.

The Brothers in Paris, the principal Brothers, are the very same who had defended the Founder so bravely against the Vicar General and the Cardinal himself in 1702. It is really difficult to imagine treason on their part in 1712, and Blain recognizes this.

Campos continues: "We do not know to what degree Blain's affirmation is exact. What is certain is that the crisis which the Clément affair created protracted the conflict between the two forms of government in the Society."³⁷

The idea that De La Salle had that the Brothers in Paris were on the enemy's side came from the fact that Brother Barthélemy, who believed he was doing what was just, had sent De La Salle the two writs in which the holy Founder was identified as Superior of the Brothers in Rheims but not in Paris. These terms, which had been expressed by his rival, allowed him to be suspect of the faithfulness of his disciples in Paris and to fear that they were already committed to the schemes of his enemy. For, he may have been saying to himself, why send me the writs where such words are employed, if this was not to let me know that they no longer regarded me as their Superior?

This suspicion was false. Brother Barthélemy had sent the writs to him merely believing himself obliged to inform him and to give the facts as to what had transpired in his absence. We know, on the contrary, what Blain has just said, that what De La Salle had imagined was an unrealistic notion.³⁸

Concerning the "conflict between the two forms of government in the Society" that Campos mentions, I see no connection with the Clément affair. It is true that, in his collaboration with the opposing party, M. de La Chétardye has succeeded in seeing to it that De La Salle left Paris. He thought, perhaps, to proclaim victory. In fact, well before the Clément affair, and confident of a long absence of the Founder, he attempted to offer the principal Brothers a new form of government. The latter, on the strength of their success in 1702 and confirmed by the written and signed agreement of 9 January 1703, rejected it immediately.

But let us return to Blain's text, inexactly quoted by Campos³⁹:

After the departure of the holy man, the Brothers received two summonses: one from Rogier, who had gone over to the other side, although he had been De La Salle's intimate friend, and the other from M. Clément, the father. In both of these documents, De La Salle was treated with extreme discourtesy. In particular, they made it a point to call him *a priest of the diocese of Rheims* and *superior of the Brothers of the said house*, not Superior of the Brothers of Paris and Saint Denis.

All these expressions revealed the evident collusion between his legal adversaries and his great enemy. The man who for ten years had been striving to take away from the Founder the government of the Institute he had created and whose only purpose was to force him to go back to Rheims with the Brothers there, so that he himself could take over the control of those in Paris, revealed his intentions by such statements and showed clearly that it was he who had once again pulled all the strings in this latest persecution. He finally succeeded in his design and triumphed over the servant of God.⁴⁰

What follows in Campos' account is a series of affirmations based on the "doubts" that the author attributes to De La Salle, and this despite the warnings of Blain: *the notion is unrealistic ... the Brothers have always remained faithful ... the suspicion is false ... we cannot speak about conjectures*. Campos finds that the Founder *doubts that he knows how to govern ... he also doubts the compatibility of his role, we might say, of his personal charism within the community ... he doubts the honesty of his Brothers*. I think that one might say that these "doubts" are nothing but guesses.

Listen to what De La Salle himself says in *The Rules Which I Have Imposed upon Myself*:

8. I will always regard the work of my salvation and the founding and governing of our Community as the work of God. This is why I will abandon the care of both to him to bend myself only to his purposes. I will often seek his guidance to know what I must do for the one or the other. I will often repeat these words of the Prophet Habakkuk: *Domine opus tuum (God, the work is yours)* (Hab 3:2).

9. I must frequently remind myself that I am only an instrument which has no value except in the hands of the Master Craftsman. For this reason I must wait for the promptings of Providence before I act but not allow them to slip by once I perceive them.⁴¹

This text of the Saint himself explains his conduct much better than that given by his biographers and commentators.

The important work De La Salle was doing constantly and consistently in the communities of the South between 1712 and 1714 was inspired by his special charism as Founder and by his vow of 1691. This historical fact cannot be overlooked.

Brother Jean-Louis Schneider: An Interpretation

Brother Jean-Louis Schneider in *The Lasallian Charism* has a section entitled "1712-1714: The Great Crisis of the Charism."⁴² The title, I very frankly admit, *immediately* gave me certain uneasiness. This feeling increased upon reading the section in the first paragraph: "Now the conflict was to become situated at the very heart of the relations between John Baptist de La Salle and his Brothers, not in the field of the mission, but in that of association and its significance."⁴³

This astonishing statement would demand, it appears to me, some serious explanations, some solid base, some indisputable proof; but the author leaves us waiting and turns to the after-effects of the Clément lawsuit. He writes:

But a serious faux pas by Brother Barthélemy, when he sent him by post the text of the judgment of the tribunal of Le Châtelet which had condemned him, created a deep misunderstanding between Monsieur de La Salle and the Brothers . . . John Baptist de La Salle thought that the former (Brother Barthélemy) had taken sides with his “enemy” and was rejecting him . . .⁴⁴

Here Schneider quotes the same text that Campos used as the basis of his reason, that De La Salle imagined that all the Brothers of Paris were already loyal to his enemy.⁴⁵

I have [noted] a considerable number of affirmations by Schneider, all conjectures, which show a “rupture” in the relations of the Founder with his disciples, especially with the principal Brothers. He uses the following to support his main thesis. They are:

- something seems to have broken down between De La Salle and his Brothers.
- the reciprocal misunderstanding is, without doubt, increased by the differences in age as well as attitude between De La Salle and the Brothers.
- there is no longer communication between the Founder and the “responsible person” for the communities of Paris.
- the trouble that De La Salle has in his relations with the Brothers.
- especially his relations with the Brothers of Paris are not reconciled.
- a predisposition toward the Brothers in Paris who had been lacking in faithfulness.
- there is then a personal bond between him and certain Brothers (including some Brothers who counted in his eyes) that had been broken.
- the split between him and the Brothers persists.
- John Baptist de La Salle was not able to regain the confidence of the “associates,” better still (or worse) he did not want to regain it.
- John Baptist de La Salle, doubtless, did not notice whether the attitudes of his Brothers had changed.
- above all, the communication with a numbers of Brothers who were important to John Baptist seemed broken.

According to Schneider, these “ruptures” are the cause of the serious crisis in the Lasallian charism. He writes:

The accumulation of rebuffs, the difficult relations with some Brothers, the projects which were failing, caused him [De La Salle] doubts. *“He began [as Blain states] to ask himself whether his mission really was from God and whether a work that everybody opposed was not, in fact, the creation of his own spirit.”* Here, therefore, was a man who had reached the twilight of life (he was 62, which was considered old age at that time), who had embarked on great enterprises, had caused dozens of young men to follow him, had seen several of them die at the work, had struggled against ecclesiastical, civil and corporation powers, to advance what he believed to

be the work of God for the salvation of the children of artisans and the poor, and who was now asking himself if he had wasted his life! These reflections are troublesome and painful. They appear after almost two years of difficulties that had ended in setbacks. Especially, the union with many of the Brothers who were important to John Baptist de La Salle seemed broken. With whom will he live in the Society now? What is the value of the Vow of 1691, or that of 1694?⁴⁶

A Continuation of the Account of Events according to the Early Biographers of De La Salle

These thoughts are, for sure, troublesome and painful; but are they really those of De La Salle? Was his charism in a great crisis? History shows the contrary. And if there is no historical basis sustaining such thoughts, should one not consider them imagined or only guesses, as so many others that the good Canon Blain has liberally strewn in the life of De La Salle? The true feelings of the Founder are to be found in his own writings, and in this particular case: *The Rules I Have Imposed Upon Myself*⁴⁷; the *Heroic Vow of 1691*⁴⁸; the *Common Rules*,⁴⁹ where an entire chapter is dedicated to “The Spirit of this Society which is the Spirit of Faith”; and above all this beautiful excerpt relating to the persecutions and trials that he had to suffer all his life, and which are considered as his *way of the cross*:

If persecution is proof that a work is of God, let us rejoice, our Society is his work; the cross which is everywhere, testifies to this. And this work of God, who would be able to destroy it? If God is not the principle source, I accept its destruction. I would work along with our enemies to destroy it, if I thought that God was not its author, or that he did not want it to continue. So, let's leave it to his care. If he takes our work in his hands, it will be to promote it, despite those who are resolved to destroy it.⁵⁰

After this study of the texts of the two Brothers, based on the well-known account in Blain, it would not be lacking in interest to consider a second version by the same biographer, which seems almost totally unknown. It can be found in what Blain calls *A Short Collection of the Lives of Some Disciples of M. de La Salle*,⁵¹ a sort of appendix to the life of the Founder to which the Canon seems to wish to return and amend some conjectures and exaggerations in his first book. Let us remember that Blain, who wrote in 1733, had lived very close to Brother Barthélemy at Saint Yon the last five years of his life (1715-1720). To respect this latter, without doubt, the biographer fills a half-page with the title of his account: *A Short Version of the Life of Brother Barthélemy, the First Superior General of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools after M. de La Salle*.

The holy Founder looking upon himself after the example of his divine Master, open to contradiction, persecuted on all sides in Paris, and an object of envy to certain people, because he was so much a part of the new community which they wanted to govern in their own way, decided to give in to them and get away from them, so as to divert from his children by his leaving, the newest blows which they had heaped on the father. But before disappearing, he carefully examined before God which of the Brothers he should ask to take his place to direct the Society.

He preferred Brother Barthélemy, because he possessed the qualities proper for governing, steadiness and vigilance, warmth and firmness, as well as piety and discretion. The more the holy man thought about this before God, the more he was confident in his choice. Nevertheless, before announcing the decision, he wanted to test the Brother with other proofs, and to see if his strength was up to the task. Finding him solid and firm, he talked with him about his plan, and gave him the necessary instructions to maintain order and regularity and informed him how he should act in his absence. This done, the man of God, convinced that he had nothing to fear about his Society, as the rudder was in the hands of a good pilot, disappeared and left *everybody* in ignorance of the place of his voluntary exile from Paris.⁵²

This expression *everybody* ought to mean the members of the opposition party in the lawsuit, the legal persons and also most of the Brothers of the North, for Blain says immediately afterward that “with the exception of some Brothers, everybody else was not aware, in good faith, of this mystery.” The *some Brothers* [here mentioned] are certainly the principal Brothers, those charged with the government of the Society.

Then Brother Barthélemy found himself all alone at the head of the orphan company... As he took over the government, in order to become acceptable to the Brothers, he needed an exhaustible source of charity and patience, as well as to prudently direct all his actions. The first advice that such an enlightened virtue inspired in him was not to present himself as a substitute for their true and aged superior. Accordingly, he wrote to all to comfort them in his absence, and to assure them that he was in good health, that he and others knew just where he had gone to hide himself to avoid persecution; and, while awaiting his return they would be able to write him as per the intentions of their common father, and that he would do whatever possible to satisfy all. This act of prudence assisted them in listening favorably to his proposal.

Of all the members of the Society, there were no more than two or three who did not want to submit to this new head, and who caused a rift... The principal Brothers got together, quite irritated with these disturbed members, and wasted no time in removing them from the group, for fear that their bad example might grow. Peace was thus reestablished in the Society, by the wise actions of Brother Barthélemy.⁵³

Brother Leo Burkhard: An Alternative Interpretation

I see in this text the verification of Blain’s statement, which my two confreres have chosen to ignore in their accounts, regarding the departure of De La Salle from Paris after the Clément lawsuit: “During his absence the Brothers in Paris remained in his regard what they had been when he was present among them, obedient and inviolably attached to his person.”⁵⁴

There was no rift. The majority of the Brothers did not abandon him and did not place themselves on the side of those who wanted to impose another type of government on the Society. Blain will state later that the idea of a new form of government was aborted at birth.

Before taking up again my own account that I interrupted to engage in a friendly debate with my two colleagues, I would like to cite another very pertinent passage from [Institute] historian Georges Rigault:

One of the reasons for the long visits of M. de La Salle to the provinces of the south-east was his desire to prepare the way for his eventual successor, so in acting with the latter as a father who leaves to his oldest son, now arrived at his majority, broad independence, this would be at a risk of some disappointments. Many times, during the existence of the Founder, we have seen appear this profound idea, prompted by wisdom as well as humility. It is seen even in the firm decision of certain men and certain circumstances and which also existed even in contrary individual actions of M. de La Salle. A man steps aside so that his work no longer depends on himself, so that it accomplishes its goals which go beyond personality, beyond a single life.⁵⁵

[The facts indicate that] John Baptist de La Salle,⁵⁶ condemned in the Clément lawsuit, was obliged to leave Paris, secretly, for the good of his community. He was at fault, he knew, although in good faith, for having negotiated the purchase of property with a minor. He accepted this responsibility; and in the spirit of faith, he considered his conviction as the will of God in his regard, a new cross that he had to carry. For how long? He did not know. He also looked upon this occasion as a good moment to oblige his disciples to forget about him as Superior, something for which they had never wished while he was with them. To elect a Brother as Superior was, however, a serious necessity, intimately bound with the charism of their Founder, in order to assure the future of their Society, such as he considered it. But, what could they do?

Govern the fifteen northern communities under the substitute, Brother Barthélemy? Yes, all the while facing up to the opposition of M. de La Chétardye and of Abbé de Brou, the ecclesiastical superior appointed to replace Abbé Bricot.⁵⁷ But, to elect a Brother Superior in the absence of De La Salle and without the agreement of the southern communities, certainly not.

De La Salle saw, rightly so, in his estrangement from the Capital, the providential occasion to busy himself with these southern communities, in view of uniting them strongly with those of the north. In fact, we shall see the Founder later, on his return to Saint Yon, required Brother Barthélemy to write the southern Brothers to obtain their agreement concerning his own position in the Society. There were seven communities in that region, with about twenty Brothers who were isolated, so to say, from the center of the Society. His actual presence among them was absolutely indispensable to assure his association with them in heart, spirit, and evangelical mission. It is also of great importance for the success of this mission that he meets with the Bishops who had called them to their dioceses, as well as with the benefactors responsible for supporting their schools. This is above all the case for Avignon, the city of the popes, which served as a tie-in with Rome and with Brother Gabriel Drolin.⁵⁸

It is this city, principally, that he passed through in April of 1712. Brother Ponce, the Visitor in charge of the southern communities, was residing there. Had there been a confrontation between the two of them? This word sounds a bit strong, given the peaceful character of the Founder who was so well acquainted with his disciple, having already had difficulties with him on several

occasions. Was there discussion of his personal behavior and of his relations with the other communities under his charge? Of course. Whatever happened, we know that the Superior had removed him from his position as Visitor and had sent him to the community of Saint Yon, near Rouen in the north. He never arrived there. Blain, who loves to exaggerate a bit, says that this Brother provided himself with some cash and left the Society. It appears that De La Salle was not made aware of this until much later, through Brother Bernardin. It must have given him much suffering as with the case of Nicolas Vuyart,⁵⁹ all the more since, the Founder having appointed him to this position, he considered himself, in all humility, responsible for his mistakes.

Painful instances such as these, which he had to confront during his entire life, did not prevent him from pursuing his mission, even when he faced even greater dangers. The Brothers at Avignon had wanted to keep their father with them as long as possible and begged him not to travel in the mountains of the Gévaudan⁶⁰ in order to visit the communities of Mende and of the towns near there. This country is quite harsh, frightening even, the roads dangerous where one might have reason to fear a bad encounter at almost any time. It was country controlled by the Camisards⁶¹ who had rebelled against the king, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and where a priest risked being assaulted. De La Salle's nephew, Maillefer, says that his uncle "ran the risk more than once of losing his life while traversing the difficult mountains of the Gévaudan, a place of dangerous precipices. He avoided this peril miraculously."⁶² The biographer speaks of visitations made to the communities of the Brothers and to the people of the region at Ales, Les Vans, Gravières, Uzès, and Mende. It was in this last town that we find De La Salle in the months of June and July of 1712. It is there, it seems, that De La Salle received the news of the closing of the [teacher-training] seminary at St. Denis and the two court decisions, those of May 31 and of June 15, at the end of the Clément lawsuit. It seems curious that Maillefer does not speak at all about this; and we have seen that Blain has created his own faulty interpretation of the affair which, besides, he does not mention where De La Salle received this news.

Thanks to the details provided by Blain in his *A Short Version of the Life of Brother Barthélemy*, and I must admit and to his honor, to the volumes of research by Brother Léon de Marie Aroz, the mystery surrounding the departure of De La Salle from Paris disappears in large part. The holy Founder had very well prepared his administrative team and, above all, Brother Barthélemy whom he had chosen as his substitute during his absence. There was neither rift nor divisions between him and his disciples. Sadness, misunderstandings, anxiety, yes, certainly, on one or the other part, for the Founder loved his disciples tenderly, said his very first biographer, Brother Bernard. And Canon Blain adds this beautiful expression regarding the visits of De La Salle to the communities which he had come to visit: "He was welcomed by the Brothers on the way like a father whose children love him tenderly."⁶³

Two other testimonies exist, which I have encountered, which affirm these conclusions I have derived concerning the stay of De La Salle in the South. Brother Émile Lett, in his book *The First Biographers of M. de La Salle*,⁶⁴ clearly states as well established fact that the Founder had not fled nor abandoned the government of the Society in going to establish schools in the South.

Aroz, in *Cahier lasalliens 40*, declares: "Contrary to the words of Blain mentioned before, M. de La Salle had not stopped keeping in contact with the Brothers, in particular with Brother Thomas

in Rouen, with Brother Barthélemy in Paris, with Brother Joseph in Rheims, during the two years 1712-1714 when he was away from the capital.”⁶⁵

We have already seen that Brother Thomas, the bursar, and Brother Joseph, the Visitor, were members of the administrative team residing in Paris near Brother Barthélemy. They were often on the road, however, as Aroz notes; and the Founder knew where to write to them.

On leaving Gévaudan, De La Salle headed for Marseilles, the most important port on the Mediterranean. He had high hopes for his work in this city and for opening a novitiate that was essential to the expansion of the Society in this region. From there, also, he would be able to take a boat for Rome and visit Brother Gabriel Drolin who had opened his school near the Vatican but who was still alone; and if Providence desired it, he would be able to approach the Holy Father and request the approbation of his young Society. He certainly was not at all able to imagine that his stay in Marseilles would be one of the greatest disappointments in his life.

From the moment of his arrival, De La Salle met with a large group of various people favorable to his work. Msgr. de Belsunce found a house with a garden for him, along with all that was necessary, and even found some postulants for him. The novitiate was opened under the direction of Brother Timothée and prospered for several months. There was talk of placing the Brothers in charge of all the charitable schools of the city.

And, at this time, a favorable occasion presented itself and De La Salle reserved two places on a boat leaving for Rome. He was going to take Brother Bernardin with him and leave him in Rome with Brother Gabriel Drolin. At the moment of boarding ship, the reverend Bishop arrived on the dock and begged the Founder to delay his trip so as to open a second school in the city. For the humble priest, the word of the Bishop was the voice of God. He returned to the community and solemnly declared: “God be blessed! Here I am, back from Rome. It is not his will that I should go there. He wants me to busy myself with something else.”⁶⁶ And this soon proved to be so, unthinkable and incomprehensible, as the parish priest of St. Martin, in one fell swoop, told him that he did not want the Brothers any more. The school did not open.

This setback, if it may be referred to as such, must have had a profound influence on De La Salle as it was connected with the enterprise which he had begun with Brother Gabriel Drolin, more than ten years previously, and with the Heroic Vow of 1691 which obliged both of them to set up and maintain the foundation of their Society, regardless of whatever difficulties may arise. It also contravened the general plan of the Founder in the organization and functioning of the Society in collaboration with the Bishops of the important towns so as to have normal schools, a plan elaborated in the interesting *Manuscript #103* still kept in the archives in Rome.

But there is something even worse than all that – a sudden and complete change on the part of the benefactors. The eagerness with which Marseilles had come to his help turned against him in a violent persecution. Where did this so radical change come from, and so quickly? Doubtless, the cause must be attributable to De La Salle’s position regarding Jansenism. We can believe the explanation that the historian of the Society gives, more so than that of the other more recent writers who speak about the authoritarianism of the clergy.

At Marseilles, M. de La Salle entered an environment in turmoil. He had too much wisdom and too much charity to enter into controversy. But he was too loyal not to speak his mind when involved, whether asked or not, in the stormy dialogues. They learned quickly that he would accept, without protest or reservations, the final decisions that would come from Rome. It was thus that the congeniality with which he had been received at first abandoned him. Marseilles rejected him with as much passion as it had greeted him. It is nothing more than something strange and unexpected.⁶⁷

But that which caused the most pain to the Founder was the insubordination of two of his own disciples, who were at the St. Laurent school and who told him “he had come to Provence only to destroy instead of building up.”⁶⁸ They refused to allow him to live in the novitiate and to be part of the religious exercises of the community, under the pretext that this would disturb the school activities. They had very easily received the support of the benefactors of the school who accused De La Salle of being too severe. The Founder was patient for a short time, but eventually he sent Brother Henry to Mende.

The enemies of De La Salle were not accusing him of his orthodox views. Rather, they were attacking his work insidiously in order to distance its author from a place that preferred to do without him. They used all kinds of pretexts, much as in Paris, in order to get rid of him. They accused him of being too rigid, intransigent, and obstinate. They caused the novices to be disgusted with their calling. They tried to win over his Brothers. They ended by publishing a libel full of calumnies and of all that might be able to make him repugnant and have him lose all respect. De La Salle was reliving the condemnation that he had suffered after the Clément lawsuit.

As on several other occasions, in moments of crisis, the Founder wrote a *Memoir* in order to defend himself. In this, according to Blain who had a copy in his hands, M. de La Salle wrote that what the Church had to fear from a party which was gaining strength day after day and that he could foresee with sorrow the wounds that the Spouse of Christ would have to endure from such enemies.⁶⁹

This is a common tactic used by some who slowly seduce others more noted for their intellectual gifts or their works. To win over a person so honestly esteemed as De La Salle, whose holiness was evident in everything and whose Society had spread throughout France from the north to the Midi, seemed to the Jansenist party to deserve all their efforts. The holy priest saw the trap and escaped it, preferring to lose his works rather than the purity of his faith.

Some outstanding people, although very weakly attached to their Catholic faith, had fallen into the trap. The Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, Louis-Antoine de Noailles, was among that number; and the Bishop of Grenoble, Msgr. de Montmartin, soon was another. People had tried in vain to win over Cardinal Le Camus. This outstanding prelate, despite the general esteem in which he was held, did not hesitate to consult Soeur Louise about this matter. De La Salle himself consulted Soeur Louise about the Jansenist problem.

Let us return to Marseilles for the moment. The situation of the Founder had become more and more intolerable, and his presence could not but aggravate the situation.

He saw clearly that Providence did not want him to remain there. As for his Brothers, he would have sent them elsewhere if this had not been contrary to the advice of his spiritual director, Canon Alexandre Baumer, the parish priest of Saint Laurent where he celebrated Mass for them and their pupils. A pious lady in the parish, who had been deeply moved seeing him at the altar, told the parish priest not to let him remove the Brothers. “They were,” she said, “like the mustard seeds in the gospel. They will multiply.” This prophecy was realized as the biographer took care to prove in speaking of the trials of the Founder in Marseilles:

It is true that the Society had not lost anything, and that it had greatly profited from the injuries which it had received earlier. In fact, there is no city in France which has shown such great interest in the Christian schools and the good will of the Brothers ... There where M. de La Salle had planted among the thorns and the cross, is where the Brothers are producing with abundance.⁷⁰

The cross, at Marseilles, was heavy for the Founder to carry, perhaps heavier than all the others, given his age, his health, his labors and trips, his daily penances and, above all, the troubling deceptions which he had experienced. Was he discouraged? Yes, humanly speaking. To use the words of Aroz, “the human concealed the divine” for a short time. A kind of *loving agony* entered his soul, love for the Society which he fathered and which he must save, at any price, and sorrow for his disciples whom he loved despite the faithlessness of two or three. He recalled the words that Brother Henry had told him, without shame, “You have come to Provence only in order to destroy instead of building up.”

His charism, his spirit of faith, his vows, the rules that he had made for himself, his total abandonment to Providence and – why not say it? – his personal holiness, far from wavering, sustained him. Having planned to leave the city for the good of the Society, and unknown to his enemies, he informed Brother Timothée and Brother Bernardin of this. He led the few novices who were still in the novitiate on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Garde, a sanctuary situated on the summit of a rugged rocky mountain rising above the old port. He prayed to the most holy Virgin, put his Society under her protection, and confided to her the young men who were with him. Referring to the port, he probably told them, as he had written elsewhere, “that faith is like a fisherman who launches his boat in a stormy sea without oars and without sails.”⁷¹

The evening before his departure, De La Salle must have spent hours in prayer in the novitiate garden. He had such a custom. But this time, was it not for him the garden of Gethsemane? The following morning, at an early hour, he took up his Founder’s cross, left the city, and began the rough climb, on a zigzag path, to the grotto of Sainte Baume, a very famous pilgrimage site in that region. It is there that Saint Mary Magdalene, according to tradition, took refuge in the last years of her life to do penance for her sins.

Along the way, he must have stopped a few times, to rest himself. Was it near a pine or a cedar, all shriveled up, twisted and racked by the winds of the Midi? Did he recognize in that, perhaps, an image of himself?

It was spring. The clumps of lavender and broom were in full flower, purple of the passion and gold of the crown. The holy pilgrim must have certainly reflected that, on his gospel pilgrimage over the years, the price, its cost, and the reward of holiness, is crucifixion.

It was Lent, and this mountain is his Calvary. On reaching the summit, he must have heard, in his very soul, the cry of the dying Christ: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁷² He prostrated himself at the foot of the cross, as Saint Mary Magdalene had done, and yielded his will entirely to that of God.

As night was approaching, he walked down to the hermitage on the north side of the mountain, where he remained, perhaps a few days, before resuming his journey to the monastery of St. Maximin. He spent forty days and nights in that quiet place, much as Christ did in the desert, devoting himself to prayer and penance, and following the stern program of the monks. He offered all this to the Lord for the good of his Society. He spent some time also with his writings, all designed for the use of his disciples.

During this time, the holy Founder, because of the impression which remained that God had abandoned him, must have had to travel what the spiritual writers call *the dark night of the soul*. He revealed this to us in his letters and meditations, telling us that on such occasions, we ought to take the same means that he took to secure peace of mind, that is, to abandon oneself totally to the will of God.

Unfortunately, some modern writers, as we have already seen, have erroneously interpreted his conduct at this time, and have wanted us to believe that the Brothers had abandoned him; that there was a rift in Paris; that he saw himself as obliged to leave the Society; and that he fled from his responsibilities. This has been called the *great crisis of his charism*. But the Brothers had always remained faithful, as we are going to see proof thereof shortly in a beautiful letter – the letter of Easter Sunday in 1714⁷³ – that they sent De La Salle from Paris; and as to the charism of De La Salle, it remained always strong.

For the moment, I am going to quote a passage from Brother Yves Poutet, who had a contradictory point of view in his book entitled *John Baptist de La Salle in the Difficulties of His Own Time*:

The multiple pressures, the numerous suggestions of La Chétardye were able to bring about, in the light of day, how solid were the Lasallian principles. Fought over during twelve years, *set aside only partly during the two years (1712-1714)*, they were kept unchanged in 1714. Their soundness had been proven.⁷⁴

I have put in italics the expression that appears to me to be poorly placed in a text otherwise clear and precise. The historical facts are there to prove that De La Salle had never abandoned his charism, neither in part, nor ever.

The years 1712-1714, as difficult as they were for the principal Brothers in Paris, as well as for all the northern Brothers who found themselves without the charismatic presence of their father and Founder, cannot be seen, historically, as a period during which he had excluded himself from the

Society, or even from the very idea of the enterprise which he had founded, which Poutet refers to as “Lasallian principles.”

If the Founder had intended to remain in isolation at St. Maximin, or in any other quiet place in Paris, and to abandon entirely his Society to the care of Providence, which in itself is very problematic, Maillefer tells us:

That he never spent any time with this idea which was only momentary, so to speak; and that he still had the same caring for his children whom he considered as those that God had entrusted to him. And when he left Marseilles, it was not in a bad mood, nor due to anger. He had nothing in mind in this but to keep peace and deprive his enemies of any new reasons to harm his Brothers for he left them in hopes that they would be left alone.⁷⁵

De La Salle, following during this time of solitude *the rules which he had imposed upon himself*,⁷⁶ very simply was preparing to continue his journey and complete the mission which had been given to him by the Holy Spirit, the very source and strength of his charism.

It was Brother Bernardin who came to visit him in the monastery to let him know about the difficulties created by Brother Henry at Mende and to suggest that he go by there on his return to Grenoble, the only community in the south which he had not yet visited. The humble priest followed the advice of his disciple and left for Mende.

On arriving, he was told that there was no place there for him to stay. De La Salle accepted a room that Mlle. Lescure de St-Denis offered him. For this lady, the arrival of the Brothers' Founder was an act of Providence to assist her in composing the rules for the new religious community [of women], which she had just founded in her house that now was transformed into a convent. De La Salle accepted the work, but he also saw to it that he had time to take care of the situation among his own disciples. He joined them for their religious exercises and their recreations, visited the school, and visited the reverend Bishop to offer his respects and gratitude, as he did everywhere else.

What had occurred at Mende that required his urgent intervention? Blain relates: “The Brothers at Mende kept M. de La Salle away from their house and took possession of the funds given in his name to the community.”⁷⁷ The Founder went to a room which Mlle. de St-Denis had ready for him. He lived as if in “a real desert during two months.”⁷⁸

In *Cahier lasalliens 57*, which appeared in 1994, I have cited two excerpts from Blain under the title “Mende rejection and isolation,” which provoked objections from a long-term friend, the former Custodian of the Lasallian Archives in Rome, Brother André Rocher, a native of Mende and long-time professor at a De La Salle school in Grenoble. What is more normal than for an archivist to make an in-depth study of an important event that occurred in his native city! Rocher assured me that he was beginning this research and that he would share the final result with me, as soon as possible. I believe that an illness took him away before he was able to complete it, for I have not been able to find any such reference in the Archives, nor at Lyon, where he passed away.

We two had met, however, shortly before his death and in Mende! This meeting, although too brief, and extremely emotional, did not allow me to shed light on the “mystery” which always surrounds the stay of the Founder in that city.

We know that Brother Timothée, the Director of the novitiate, at the time left alone in Marseilles, came to Mende to find his Superior to give him the news and to ask for an assignment. The heartbreaking answer of the Founder still rings now-a-days in the hearts of his children:

What leads you to address yourself to me? Do you not know how unfit I am to command others? Can you be ignorant of the fact that several Brothers seem not to want me anymore and that these words of the Gospel seem to apply to me: “We will not have this man rule over us?” They are quite right, he added, for I am incapable of it.⁷⁹

I do not believe that we can take the last phrase of this text literally. It is simply an emotional testimony of the deep humility acquired already by the Founder at this stage in his gospel journey. Let us read again the ninth of the rules which he had proposed for himself:

I must frequently remind myself that I am only an instrument which has no value except in the hands of the Master Craftsman. For this reason I must wait for the promptings of Providence before I act but not allow them to slip by once I perceive them.⁸⁰

The Founder was well aware of the action of Providence in his life, and he allowed it to guide him blindly. Was it not Providence which was at the origin of the Society and of its rapid extension? Were there not [at the end of his life] almost 100 Brothers teaching the gospel to more than two thousand poor children in the twenty-two schools which he had founded? It is not surprising that one or the other of his disciples had left his vocation. These losses did not reflect at all poor leadership on the part of their Superior. The fact is that he continued to govern, and wisely, under the charismatic influence of the Holy Spirit. He had named Brother Timothée, replacing Brother Ponce, as Visitor of the schools of the Midi, with Grenoble as his residence.

The Founder retired to Grenoble, principally to get away from the entreaties of Mlle. de St-Denis who wanted him to remain in Mende, and also, to clarify his situation, if it is correct to refer to it this way, Grenoble being the last community that he had yet to visit, and then? ... He would have the time necessary to resolve the serious problem which bothered him, to return to Paris or not? Was he an obstacle for the future of the Society? Should he not withdraw completely into seclusion? His soul, wearied by the struggles of persecution and tormented by the formidable temptation to discouragement, needed to be strengthened by rest. But where to seek repose ... and when? ... and for how long...? The monastery of the Grande Chartreuse near Grenoble attracted him, without a doubt; and he had some writings to complete for the use of his Brothers: the *Common Rules*, the *Meditations*, and *The Duties of a Christian*.

And then Parménie....

Conclusion

By way of conclusion to this presentation of the difficult years 1712-1714, the words of [Institute] historian Georges Rigault seem most appropriate:

When in August 1714 the Brothers of Paris summoned De La Salle to return, they once again found hope for the future. The period just finishing seemed fraught with perils for the Institute: the outcome of the Clément lawsuit was a victory for the enemies of De La Salle; the long absence of the Founder seemed to give them a clear field. They were mistaken, but based on some semblance of truth, that the condemned man [De La Salle] had lost courage, that his voluntary seclusion was an abdication, that his troops, deprived of his leadership, would be unable to rally, that the debris of his work would become legitimate bounty. In truth, there was for Saint John Baptist de La Salle neither capitulation nor disaster; only a retreat, a changing of the front line, of objectives, in particularly difficult conditions ... He returns, having heard the signal of distress. At his return, all was saved. All that remained for him was to complete his personal sacrifice, so that on his personal humiliation, on his body, on his tomb would rise – as he fervently wished – the material and moral edifice of his Institute.⁸¹

The return to Paris saved the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from almost certain ruin. The providential encounter of De La Salle with Soeur Louise at Parménie was decisive in helping him listen to the voice of God calling him to return to Paris. It can be said, without hesitation: “On the hill of Parménie the fate of his young Institute was decided for all time.”

Notes

1. Brother Leo Burkhard, FSC, Ph.D. (1922 - 2007), is a well-known researcher and writer on the life of Saint John Baptist de Salle, founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Brother Leo's scholarly interest began as a young Brother in Louisiana, USA, when he read biographies of De La Salle and was especially intrigued by the role of Parménie in the history of the Brothers' Institute. Based on his readings he wrote a fictional history of De La Salle entitled *Master of Mischief Makers* in 1952, which was subsequently translated into many languages (French title: *Un Gamin de Paris*). This served as the inspiration many years later for a film on De La Salle. Brother Leo wrote his doctoral thesis on Parménie (University of Grenoble, 1964); *Parménie, l'étonnante et fascinante histoire d'une petite colline dauphinoise* (1976); and several other books about De La Salle, including *Rencontre Providentielle À Parménie*, a yet unpublished work in French. In 1990, the French government recognized Brother Leo's decades of work to restore the retreat at Parménie with the National Order of Merit. Brother Leo died in Denver, CO (U.S.A.) in 2007, and his ashes are now interred in the chapel at Parménie.

2. Brother Donald Mouton and Brother Paul Walsh translated, edited, and prepared this material for publication after the death of Brother Leo.

3. Cf. Endnote #4 of “Providential Encounter at Parménie” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 4, No. 1 (2013).
4. Brother Miguel Campos and Brother Jean-Louis Schneider.
5. Cf. Alfred Calcutt’s *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1993), 485-488 and 515-519 & Luke Salm’s *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), 145-149.
6. Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, 99-101.
7. “John Baptist de La Salle” in *Two Early Biographies (Maillefer and Bernard)*, translated by William J. Quinn and Donald Mouton (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996), 255-353.
8. “The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle: Priest, Doctor of Theology, Former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools” in *Two Early Biographies (Maillefer and Bernard)*, 17-254.
9. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle: A Biography in Three Books*, translated by Richard Arandez and edited by Luke Salm (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000).
10. Cf. Georges Rigault’s *History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools: The Religious and Educational Achievement of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*, Vol. 1, translated by Edmund S. Dolan and edited by Gerard Rummery, retrieved, under one of the files in the category “The Life of De La Salle,” from <http://www.lasallian.org.au/public/resources> on September 8, 2012.
11. Georges Rigault, *L’Histoire général de l’Institut des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes: L’oeuvre religieuse et pédagogique de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, Vol. I (Paris: Libraire Plon, 1937), 371.
12. Rigault, *L’Histoire général de l’Institut des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*, Vol. I, 372.
13. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 598.
14. That is to say, the northern provinces around Paris.
15. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 641-642.
16. “The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle: Priest, Doctor of Theology, Former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools” in *Two Early Biographies (Maillefer and Bernard)*, 147.
17. Brother Miguel Campos holds a doctorate in Theology from the Lateran Pontifical

University in Rome. An international scholar of great repute and former member of the General Council of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2000-2007), he is currently a Distinguished Professor of Lasallian Mission at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

18. Brother Jean-Louis Schneider was the Director of Lasallian Studies for the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from 2004 to 2009. A longtime member of the staff of the International Lasallian Study Center in Rome (CIL), he currently provides Lasallian education and formation sessions for the Lasallian educational network of the District of France.

19. *The Gospel Journey of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*.

20. *Effacement pour le bien de la Société*, 288-328.

21. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 63.

22. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 89.

23. “The Spirituality of Self-Abandonment: Saint John Baptist de La Salle” in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert Berger, 133-167 (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999). This article was originally published in 1955.

24. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 63.

25. William J. Battersby, *Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), 292.

26. Archives of the Generalate, item BJ 503-1.

27. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 534.

28. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 289.

29. For further understanding of this idea of Campos, see “‘Paroles-Force’ and ‘Événements-Clefs’” in *De La Salle: A Founder as Pilgrim* by Edwin Bannon (London: De La Salle Provincialate, 1988), 8-18.

30. Ibid.

31. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 289.

32. Cf. Yves Poutet’s *Le XVII^e siècle et les origines lasalliens: Recherches sur la genèse de l’oeuvre scolaire et religieuse de Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, 1651-1719* (Rennes, 1970). 2 Vols.; and Yves Poutet’s *Cahiers lasalliens* 48 (Rome, 1988).

33. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 30: reference to Poutet in note 1.

34. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 298-299.
35. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 296.
36. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 599.
37. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 296.
38. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 599.
39. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 296.
40. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 598.
41. *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), 200-201.
42. “1712-1714: The Great Crisis of the Charism” in *The Lasallian Charism*, Part IV, Section 7 (Rome: Lasallian Studies, 2006), 121-160.
43. “1712-1714: The Great Crisis of the Charism”, 121.
44. “1712-1714: The Great Crisis of the Charism”, 124.
45. *Cahiers lasalliens* 45, 296.
46. “1712-1714: The Great Crisis of the Charism”, 132-133.
47. *Rule and Foundational Documents*, 199-202.
48. *Rule and Foundational Documents*, 203.
49. *Rule and Foundational Documents*, 13-146.
50. Burkhard did not cite a source for this quotation.
51. *Cahiers lasalliens* 8, 1-95.
52. *Cahiers lasalliens* 8, 16.
53. *Cahiers lasalliens* 8, 17-18.
54. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 599.
55. Rigault, *L’Histoire général de l’Institut des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*, Vol. I, 370-371.

56. At this point in the text, Burkhard presented some additional information about the events that unfolded on and around the mountain of Parménie and that provide some more of the story of this important moment in Lasallian history. As it was really more of a long digression from the argument being presented in the essay about “The Crisis of 1712-1714,” the editors have moved this section to the endnotes, and its complete text is presented in what here follows:

I return now to the year 1711 which is clearly significant because of the intervention of Providence in the life of three people who come on the scene and meet eventually on the mountain of Parménie: the humble shepherdess Sister Louise, foundress of the retreat work that began on that height; John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of a new religious family in the Church; and the young lieutenant of the Royal Champagne regiment, the soldier of his Majesty Louis XIV, Claude-François Dulac de Montisambert. I have already related [elsewhere] the terrible trial which Sister Louise and the priest Roux endured and which might have been able to entirely destroy the work at Parménie.

We have also encountered M. de La Salle whose conviction during the Clément lawsuit left the young Society on the edge of ruin and obliged him to flee to the south of France. As to the young lieutenant, I only mentioned his birth in 1791, a year before M. de La Salle had professed his Heroic Vow to set up and maintain the establishment of the new Society, cost what it may. The story of this young man is altogether extraordinary.

From the age of fifteen, Claude-François had been accepted as a lieutenant in the regiment of Saint Ménéhoulde. He was courageous, amiable, generous, agreeable to deal with, and was loved by his companions in arms but did not know how to overcome his passion for gambling. He lost much money. Hoping to correct this, his parents made him join a regiment in Champagne, where they counted upon devoted friends among the officers. It was at that time that the battle of Malplaquet was waged wherein Marshal Villars was overcome by Malborough and Prince Eugène, on 11 September 1709. The intrepid lieutenant charged into serious peril with rare audacity. His companions were very badly treated; and he himself, after many hours of fierce combat, was pierced by a bullet. His wound, while quite serious, was not mortal. His long convalescence allowed him time to reflect on his past errors. He read the *Lives of the Saints* and meditated upon eternity. This was a definite, courageous conversion.

After the decision to dissociate himself from his former gambling friends, he soon became a model of regularity, order, and integrity for his regiment. After the Villars’ victory at Denain, he decided that he could be discharged with honor. He arranged the matter with his officers and left the regiment without returning either to his family or to his friends. He sold his horse, left his uniform in his room, and changed it for that of a peasant.

Claude left as a pilgrim headed for Rome. He stopped in Lyon where he prayed to

Notre Dame de Fourvière and visited the sick and the poor in hospices and in the hospitals. In Grenoble, he spent nine or ten months at the poor house where Canons Canel and De Saléon were the devoted administrators. He took care of the sick in the hospital and met another Canon there, the parish priest from Poligny, recently returned from the Abbey of Sept-Fons where he had hoped to become a Trappist. Surrounded as he was with numerous friends of Sister Louise, Claude was able to make a visit to Parménie, as did so many other pilgrims, but the time set by Providence for meeting her had not yet arrived.

1712 is the year of the canonization of Saint Félix de Cantalice. Claude attended the triduum in honor of the new saint and felt himself attracted to the Franciscan order. The superior required him to write to his father in order to secure his approval and the baptismal certificate without which he would not be able to become a religious. Dulac, fearing the consequence of such a step, sent his request from Switzerland and gave an Italian address where the letter was to be sent for an answer.

In anger, his father went looking for him in all the Franciscan houses of France, Switzerland, and Italy, with authorization from the highest ecclesiastical authorities. It was then that the prior at Grenoble, afraid for his monastery and fearing the problems that he foresaw, dismissed Dulac. Immediately Claude was obliged to flee. He visited the monastery of the Grand Chartreuse in hopes of being accepted there. After a short retreat, he was refused admission anew, and for the same reason. Claude became a pilgrim, crossed the Alps, and journeyed to Rome and Loretto.

Let us recognize, in passing, that these events happened at Grenoble before the arrival in that city of De La Salle, at the end of July or the beginning of August of 1713. I will take up this intriguing and even moving story, after having followed the journey of the Founder of the Brothers to Dauphiné.

57. Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, 104-108.

58. Cf. Alfred Calcutt's *Gabriel Drolin: De La Salle Brother, 1664-1733* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 2002).

59. Calcutt, *De La Salle: A City Saint*, 409-410.

60. Gévaudan is an historical area of France in the Lozère department; and it ceased to exist, as an identifiable department, after 1790.

61. The Camisards were Huegenots (French Protestants) of the rugged Cévennes region of south-central France.

62. "The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle: Priest, Doctor of Theology, Former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools" in *Two Early*

Biographies (Maillefer and Bernard), 148.

63. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 601.

64. Émile Lett, *Les premiers biographes de saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle* (Ligel, 1956).

65. Léon de Marie Aroz, *Cahiers lasalliens* 40 (Rome, 1975).

66. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 621.

67. Rigault, *L'Histoire général de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*, Vol. I, 376.

68. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 619.

69. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 617.

70. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 598.

71. The actual quotation is “A person who abandons himself to the Providence of God [thus showing a deep faith] is like a sailor who puts out to sea without sails or oars” (Meditation #134.1).

72. Matthew 27:46.

73. Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, 171-172.

74. Yves Poutet's *Cahiers lasalliens* 48 (Rome, 1988).

75. “The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle: Priest, Doctor of Theology, Former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools” in *Two Early Biographies (Maillefer and Bernard)*, 156.

76. *Rule and Foundational Documents*, 199-202.

77. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 628.

78. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 629.

79. Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, Book Three, 627.

80. *Rule and Foundational Documents*, 200-201.

81. Rigault, *L'Histoire général de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*, Vol. I, 386-387.