

The Writings of John Baptist De La Salle

Writing was an important and essential part of the busy life of John Baptist de La Salle. And his writings fall into two main groups, works dealing with spiritual subjects and educational works. The former were intended primarily for the use of the Brothers. These include The Common rules of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, The Advice to the Brothers in Charge, The Collection of various short Treatises for the Use of the Brothers, The Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer, The Meditations for the Time of Retreat, and The Meditations for Sundays and Principal Feasts. Another spiritual work would be his letters to various Brothers and other persons, a relatively small number of which have come down to us. The educational treatise which La Salle wrote for the Brothers was The Conduct of the Schools. The works composed for use by the students are The Duties of a Christian, The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility, The Exercises of Piety which are performed during the day in the Christian Schools, and Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass, Confession, and Communion. Most of the original editions of these works contained no evidence definitely establishing La Salle as their author. Nevertheless there is weighty evidence indicating these are his writings. On one hand is the testimony of his pioneer biographers, Canon Blain and Dom Maillefer, OSB, that he wrote these works. On the other, is well established tradition in his religious Institute which has always credited him with being their author.

Any evaluation of La Salle's writings must keep several things in mind. First, while the Founder had been trained in the classics, he had not been trained to express himself in his native tongue. Therefore, at times his French style leaves something to be desired. Second, La Salle was greatly influenced by the age in which he lived, particularly by the Catholic Reform and the different schools of spirituality which developed at this time in seventeenth century France.

Third, he wrote only as occasion demanded. As a result, seldom are his ideas on any given topic in a single place or set forth in a systematic fashion. Lastly, many of his ideas are far from being original. As was customary at the time, he borrowed freely from other writers, altered their ideas to suit his own thinking or purpose, and hardly ever bothered to credit his sources. And it seems both necessary and appropriate to develop this last point at some length.

During the “Splendid Century,” in several important ways both writing and publishing were basically different from what we know and take for granted to-day, particularly in advanced countries. The concept of “intellectual property”, the idea that a work belongs to its author and he has a right to profit from what he wrote, hardly seems to have existed. There was no such thing as a “copyright” as we know it. So it was considered neither a crime nor a sin to copy the work of someone else and to publish it as one’s own or for one’s profit. The all too common plight of authors during the “Age of Louis XIV” is described by Maillefer when he asserts, that Blain “...has not scrupled to copy me word for word in some places,” and also “...he has not judged fit to acknowledge his source.” (Maillefer, 1963, iv) Of course, the Benedictine does not mention that for his own work, in the 1740 version at least, he made free use of Blain’s ideas without in any way acknowledging his source. (Bannon, 1988, 4) In his turn, La Salle seems to have done one or the other of these things on numerous occasions. However, for him this was very much a two-way street. Good evidence exists that in the early 1700’s an enterprising printer published a “pirated” edition of Christian Civility without consulting its author or giving him any credit, and simply pocketed the profits for himself. So in conclusion, it might simply be said that here at least the Founder showed himself to be very much a man of his age.

Another idea very dear to modern man, “freedom of the press” – be it real or imaginary – also did not exist in the seventeenth century Europe. In France as in most of the other

monarchies of the day, government control of all publications and censorship were taken for granted. In Great Britain, where after the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, “freedom of the press” was established by law, authors and publishers alike claimed the government found other and effective means to control the number and content of publications. In the France of Louis XIV and John Baptist de la Salle, permission had to be requested and obtained before it was legal to publish any work, even a textbook for primary school children. If granted, a permission was usually valid for a stated period of time, for instance, five years. This is why at the end of a work such as Christian Civility, in addition to an “Approbation” given by the Church authorities, there is also the “Privilege of the King.” Beginning with the words, “Louis, by the grace of God, King of France and Navarre,” it indicates that it is legal to publish the work in question – which had to include a copy of this permission. How easy or difficult it was to obtain a permission such as this is not easy to say. But would this explain why the first four editions of the Collection, beginning with that of 1711, were published in Avignon, then under Papal rather than French control. Also, it might be noted that people who wanted to publish a work critical of the royal government or the Catholic religion found means to get around these restrictions. One used most frequently was to have the work printed in Holland, with a fake “Privilege of the King.” Such works were often freely circulated in France. However, if the authorities discovered them, they would, be confiscated and publicly burned. In this way, the government showed its determination to control what was printed in the country and read by its subjects.

Now, what about the sources La Salle consulted or used when composing his various writings? Well into the present century, in general his religious sons seemed to have believed that all or most of La Salle’s writings were original works, and that he was not indebted to anyone else for either the concept or the contents of any of his works. One source of this idea

was the belief that the Founder practiced most rigorously the prescriptions regarding religious poverty which he laid down for his disciples. Like them he was said to have had no private possessions, particularly something of great value such as a large collection of valuable books. Also, usually he made even his longest journey on foot, carrying with him only his clerical cloak and his Breviary. So even if he had owned an extensive library, his method of travel would have prevented him from having it on hand in the different places in which he composed or revised his writings.

However, there is very solid evidence which shows that La Salle did have a rather extensive private library, one which at that time represented a significant investment. The starting point is a story recounted by Frère Bernard who left us an incomplete biography of the Founder. He said that when the Saint gave away his wealth, his confessor advised him to retain a sum which would provide him with an income of approximately 200 livres a year. It is very interesting that later on this turned out to be the stipend which La Salle usually asked for each Brother teaching in a charity school, enough to support him for one year. Among other things the Founder used this money to purchase books for himself and his communities. Over the next thirty years or so, with this money he would have been able to acquire a relatively large number of books.

Canon Blain also mentioned this library of the Saint. He records how, several months prior to his death in April 1719, the Founder donated these books to Brother Barthelemy, who replaced him as Superior General of the Institute. The fact he did this by a formal legal action suggests that this collection of books was rather extensive and had a significant cash value.

However, we do not know what volumes were included in this collection, or what other books might have been available to him and consulted by him to a greater or lesser extent. But

along with a number of others, Brothers Anselme D'Haese, Albert-Valentin, and Jean-Guy Rodrigue as well as M. Georges Rigault have done much to identify the most likely sources of some of the Founder's ideas or even certain works from which he borrowed extensively when writing a particular book. And on the basis of this information it seems possible to identify some or all of the main sources used by La Salle when he composed a specific work.

To begin with the Common Rules, it appears that La Salle drew heavily on the rule or daily schedule of the famous St. Sulpice Seminary in Paris. Even though he spent only a short time there as a student, less than two years in the late 1660's, he seems to have been very familiar with the prescriptions of this rule and to have had a high opinion of it. Also, like most authors of a religious rule composed after the mid-1550's, he was influenced by the ideas of Ignatius Loyola as set down in the rule written for the Jesuits. However, since his disciples were lay religious, engaged primarily in a teaching apostolate, he did modify the prescriptions of one or the other of his sources to suit the different situation of the Brothers.

To a certain extent, La Salle's treatise dealing with the method of interior prayer which he designed for the use of his religious sons is more of an original work. Still it does show the influence of certain Capuchins, a reformed branch of the Franciscans which emerged during the sixteenth century, as well as of the two great sixteenth century Carmelite mystics, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. And the sections dealing with the Presence of God, which the author emphasized strongly in his text, show the influence of yet another Carmelite, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, whose book dealing with this topic was readily available in Paris after 1694. Likewise, ideas of other French writers of the Catholic Reform such as Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantel as well as Cardinal Berulle and Mère Marie de l'Incarnation are evident in various place along with those of Jesuits such as Father Lallement.

What is original, then, if this is the case? In brief, the Founder did not simply repeat what one or even several of these authors had already said. Rather, while borrowing their ideas to a greater or lesser extent, he modified them significantly to suit his own thinking and what he considered the specific needs of his disciples. In this way, then, he produced what became a new and different presentation on prayer.

The founder's justly famous educational treatise, The Conduct of the Schools, also shows the influence of previous works that were both well known and readily available in France prior to 1700. One of these was Father Damia's Remontrances et les Règlaments, published in Lyons, and a second was The Parish School of Father Jacques de Bathencourt, published in Paris in 1654. It has been suggested that La Salle could have become familiar with this latter work while he was a student of St. Sulpice. And certainly there are striking similarities as well as significant differences between these two manuals of practical pedagogy. In addition, if as noted by Brother Timothy, the second Brother Superior General, La Salle borrowed ideas from those Brothers who were most successful in the classroom, it is also possible that he obtained some ideas from other experienced teachers. Among these could have been Adrien Nyel and his spiritual director, Father Barré. And the most original portions of this work might be the sections on teaching the vernacular and use of the simultaneous method in the primary schools.

Beyond any doubt, the source of the Founder's book of religious instruction for the pupils, The Duties of a Christian, is a similar work by Claude Joly, bishop of Agen, published in 1686. The topics covered, the order in which they are presented, and many of the questions and answers are very similar in the two works. However, there is one significant difference between the two. At times, the Bishop of Agen very clearly stated the Jansenist or the Gallican position on some topic or the other, rather than orthodox Catholic doctrine. In each such case, La Salle

made significant changes, showing his loyalty to the Pope and his complete rejection of Jansenist teachings. Still, La Salle's debt to Claude Joly for this work is strikingly evident.

La Salle's all time "best seller," Christian Civility, once again shows his knowledge of and his indebtedness to Father Damia. The latter's Treatise on Civility, published in Lyons in 1685, definitely influenced the content of the Founder's volume on politeness. Equally influential if not more so was Antoine de Courtin's French Civility, first published in 1671 and revised in 1702, shortly before the appearance of the first edition of Christian Civility. Many practices advocated by Courtin are mentioned by the Founder, and many of his ideas are reproduced almost word for word, though the author is given no credit for them. However, once again there is a major difference between the two works – the Christian attitude stressed by La Salle and not found at all in the earlier volume. Repeatedly he tells his readers that by being real ladies and gentlemen at all times and in all they do, they will practice the Christian virtues required of those who must live and work with other on a daily basis. In addition to being a manual of practical politeness for everyday living, this work is also a book of religious instruction.

Besides using this book which served as an advanced reader in the Christian Schools to provide religious instruction, La Salle also used another means which was quite popular and readily available in seventeenth century France. During the "Splendid Century" there seems to have been a number of musical tunes well known to all of the common people. Songs set to these tunes were frequently used to inform the urban masses about current events and to mold or to express "public opinion" concerning the religious or other controversies of the day. Even the "Sun King" attached great importance to these songs since they provided his subjects with a means to criticize him as well as his policies. At times he tried without any great success to

suppress one of these compositions or to apprehend and punish its author. The Founder was able to put the students' familiarity with these tunes to good use.

Hymns as well as songs with political implications could be and were set to these tunes. Since the pupils knew the music already, it was easy for them to learn and to sing these hymns. Few of the seventy-six hymns in La Salle's collection were original. Six of them were sung on a regular basis at the beginning of the daily religion lessons. Of the remainder, thirty set forth the principal Catholic beliefs and forty dealt with the more important feasts of the Church. They were sung to an interesting collection of melodies drawn from the ones mentioned above. A Christmas hymn was sung to the tune of "Charmante Gabrielle," a song attributed to Henry IV and honoring one of his mistresses. A drinking song "Prenons tous le verre en main," or "Everybody take his glass," provided the melody for a hymn for Ascension Thursday, and an Advent hymn was set to the tune of a love song, "Tous le bourgeois de Chartres," or "All Gentlemen of Chartres." If nothing else, these hymns show the Founder's willingness to borrow from any useful source as well as his awareness of what was happening in the bigger world around him.

On the basis of the information currently available, the most original of La Salle's works seems to be the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, popularly referred to as the Retreat Meditations. In recent years these writings have been studied at great length, some might say to the neglect of other of his works which are equally important or even more so. But nowhere is the Founder's high opinion of the mission of the teaching Brother better stated than in these sixteenth meditations. The nature of their apostolate, what is required to perform it effectively as the work of God, the practical difficulties the Christian teacher can encounter, how these might be successfully dealt with, and the reward the faithful religious educator can expect in the next

life as well as this one, are all discussed in some detail. As the author himself asserted, these writings have great value for all “who are engaged in the education of youth.

The Meditations for Sundays and Feasts, which includes some 191 meditations, is the longest of La Salle’s spiritual works. Essentially didactic in nature, each meditation leads to some conclusions about the Brother and his work. In each and all of them the author’s purpose, “to form his sons to their duties as religious and school masters,” is clearly evident. In the meditations for the various Sundays as well as for certain major feasts, the Gospel reading for the day was used to supply a theme. When necessary, the author paraphrased it very liberally in order to bring out and to stress the special position and obligations to the Brother as a Christian educator. A good example of how he did this can be seen in the meditation for the first of the Rogation days, the Monday prior to Ascension Thursday. Ignoring many ideas proper to the liturgy of the day, the founder stressed how important it is for the Christian teacher to provide for the spiritual instruction of his pupils, especially if they are poor children. Many other meditations in this group are developed in a similar manner.

The remaining hundred or so meditations in this collection are based mainly on the lives of various Saints to whom the Founder had a particular devotion or which he thought had a special relevance to the work of his religious sons. As is brought out in a detailed and very scholarly work by Brother Jean-Guy Rodrigue (Cahiers lasalliens # 47), three main sources provided the material on which the Founder based these meditations. One was the Roman Breviary, particularly the lives of the Saints as found in the Second Nocturnes of their feasts. Since he faithfully recited the office of the Church everyday, he was quite familiar with these accounts. The other two sources were the Lives of the Saints by Francois Paris and by Pierre de Ribadeneira, both of which were widely circulated in France around 1690 or even a little earlier.

In addition, on occasion he made use of texts from the New Testament, particularly the French translations by Amelote.

All that has been said so far about La Salle's writings and the wide variety of sources he consulted and used quite freely could easily lead to the conclusion that most, if not all, of them were not original. However, as might easily be observed, and as has been asserted by several of those who studied one or the other of them in some detail – for instances Brothers Albert-Valentin and Jean-Guy Rodrigue – they do possess a certain originality. Mainly this is because at times La Salle emphasized things not given that much attention by his sources, or because he expressed his ideas differently than the authors from whom he borrowed even at great length. Similar examination of the Founder's other writings not yet specifically mentioned would simply reinforce this conclusion. Therefore, now it might be more profitable to turn to a somewhat different aspect of his writings.

One reason why the writings of John Baptist de la Salle are one of great value to modern readers is the image they give of the man himself. This is important for a number of reasons, such as the fact that the pioneer and basic biography of La Salle remains that by his friend Canon Jean-Baptiste Blain. Seemingly endless and difficult to read, it remains a work to be consulted by anyone wishing to study the life of the Founder. In it, though, the author created an image of his subject as an austere and penitential person who was a model of any and all virtues. This is because "...Mortification and prolonged prayer were seen, in 17th century French Spirituality, to be indispensable but sure means" of obtaining the grace of God, and because Blain's primary concern was to edify his readers. And to do so he presented a prolonged lesson in Christian perfection which he illustrated by examples drawn from La Salle's life story. Today this tends to turn people off or simply to repel them. At the same time, though,

...it frequently happens that the type of sanctity of which Blain proposes M. De La Salle as a model is directly at variance with the Founder's manner of acting – as described by Blain himself – and at variance with the writings of the Founder which the biographer transmits. (Bannon, 1988, 9-10)

And now it is some of this self-revelation of the Founder through his writings which will be examined.

Recently The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility was described as a Lasallian writing, as much so as the Collection or The Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer. And it was suggested that its value lies not so much in its description of what were considered good manners during the “Splendid Century” as in the valuable insights it provides about its author. Called at times La Salle's “best seller,” since it went through some one hundred seventy-six editions and was re-published well into the nineteenth century, it is more than just a book of politeness. To begin with, it shows the Founder was, in the best sense of the term, a man of his age. One concern widely shared during the reign of Louis XIV was to reestablish the position of the Christian gentleman. By what he says and how he says it, the Founder shows himself to have been very much of a gentleman, one who – as it was said – “pleases others in order to please himself.” Also, his easy familiarity with the customs and practices of polite society suggests very strongly that he had learned these things since his earliest years and made them his own by practicing them in his family setting. When he spoke about good manners, it was as one who influenced the actions of others because his conduct was consistent with his words.

However, La Salle was not just a gentleman, first and foremost he was a Christian in all that he did and how he did it. For certain his was not the only, and many would say the most

important, book of politeness to appear around or soon after 1700. Also, all these volumes shared a large number of features, Christian Civility as well as the others. Yet his work was significantly different. Above all this was in the spirit which he said should inspire and the motives which he suggested for practicing decorum – meaning respect for oneself – and politeness – meaning respect for others. Constantly and consistently he based himself on Christian motives, frequently supporting his position by quoting what he considered appropriate passages of Scripture. A modern Biblical scholar might say he misquoted Scripture, but this would miss the point. Always the motive he proposed for acting in a particular way was more important than the Biblical passage he used to convey this message.

At the same time, La Salle also showed himself a perceptive person, very much aware of life around him during the “Splendid Century.” At this time the French language was still in the process of development, something well known to the government which was trying to do something about it. Among other things, there was no uniformity in the language, and the people in one part of the country might have great difficulty in understanding what those in another area considered good and proper French. The Founder saw the advantages of knowing the national language and of speaking it properly. As a means of achieving this, he suggested mixing with and associating regularly only with those who knew French well and spoke it properly. In many ways this was a most practical suggestion.

In spite of the rules he imposed on himself and the life cycle he chose to live, La Salle was fully aware of common practices in his society. He knew that for business and social reasons among others, people had to meet with their friends, and that meals taken together provided a common and popular way of doing this. He did not oppose this practice but rather suggested how to make these gatherings as pleasant as possible. For instance, if you as a guest

notices the host has prepared a large amount of food, it could be very proper, in a nice way, to encourage others to partake generously of the food provided. Primarily this would be to show the host how much you appreciate the good meal he has provided. On the other hand, if the amount of food prepared does not seem adequate for the number of guests, you might take very little so as to make sure there was enough for others. Here, as when dealing with a variety of topics, he shows a great sensitivity for others and seems to suggest that, among other things, politeness is showing sensitivity for the needs and feeling of others.

However, the Founder never allows this sensitivity towards other to degenerate into weakness. He has his principles to which he firmly adheres and which he expresses quite clearly. Social gatherings can provide occasions for exchanging news and gossip about others, absent as well as present. Also, some guests might think that they can entertain others by telling improper stories and using language unbecoming to a Christian. La Salle insists that a polite person will avoid such conduct, show his displeasure and disapproval of it when possible, and try not to associate with people who act thus. In this situation as well as a number of others, he was very firm regarding what was right and wrong, what was proper and improper conduct.

Still he was not rigorous or a “kill joy.” Gambling was widely practiced and generally approved of in his society. And he said it was perfectly acceptable under certain conditions. But he insisted you should not gamble with people who cannot afford to lose the money they might wager or who play for excessively large sums of money. Also, if you engage in any games of chance, he said, you should be prepared to lose and to be a good loser – if and when this is necessary. In general, he accepted the human need for relaxation and recreation, only insisting that these be done in a proper and Christian manner.

In yet another ways La Salle shows both an awareness and an understanding of life as it is. When discussing clothing and what is proper for a given person in view of his situation, he had some advice for any young man who was contemplating marriage and courting his bride to be. He said that when a youth is going to court the young lady of his choice, he should not dress like someone who thinks he has a clerical vacation and is studying for the priesthood. The style and type of clothing proper to the latter would be out of place for a young man in this situation. Little seems to have escaped the notice of this man who in his time was regarded as a model and holy priest.

Likewise, it can be said that in numerous other ways La Salle accepted life as it was. One's social class and standing were very important in seventeenth century France. Always the founder was aware of his position in society, its obligations and privileges. In the best sense of the term he lived up to his position. Thus he was able to insist that his readers be aware of their position and standing, while accepting it and its obligations. At the same time, though, he insisted that everyone – regardless of his or her position – deserved respect and should respect himself or herself. One way of doing this, he insisted, was to be polite to all whom one encountered, whatever the time or place. This was an important idea that he lived and tried to share with the students for whom he wrote Christian Civility.

More could be said about the Founder as he reveals himself in his “best seller,” but enough has been said so that now it is possible to describe the author as he shows himself in this work. Among other things, he appears as a man full of energy and vitality, a man of action. But also he is a disciplined person who knows how to use his energy, when to stop and when to keep on going. At the same time he appears as a stable and tranquil person, not easily disturbed or who does not show he is being disturbed. Neither is he an emotional person, someone who has

acted only or primarily according to his feelings. And in all things he shows great moderation in his ideas as well as in his words. This is true in spite of the fact that at times he condemns certain actions and things. For when compared to some of his famous contemporaries, such as Bishops Bossuet and Fénelon, his restrained language and moderate ideas become even more striking. Perhaps all these things are true because both his ideas and his language, as well as the spirit which inspired them, show him to be very human, a human being in the best and fullest sense of the term. And this somewhat different image of the Founder should be recalled when the more austere one presented by Blain, and to a lesser extent by Maillefer, is mentioned.

Without making any effort to discuss and to analyze all the surviving letters of La Salle that have come down to us, some of them might be examined because of how they re-enforce and add to the image of the saintly priest as it emerges in his book of politeness. Here two groups of letters are of particular interest, members 13 to 32, all written between 1704 and 1716 to Brother Gabriel Drolin in Rome, and numbers 106 to 118 along with number 131, all addressed to various women, most of whom were nuns.

Beginning with the letters to Gabriel Drolin, these are of interest because they are the largest number addressed to a single individual, are comparatively lengthy, and contain some special material. Their addressee is of some interest among the early Brothers for at least two reasons. In November 1691, along with Nicolas Vuyart he was chosen by the Founder to join him in making the “Heroic Vow,” by which the three promised to remain in the Institute – even if all the others left – and to live on bread alone in order to continue the work of the schools. Unlike Vuyart, Drolin was faithful to this vow. Also, in 1703 the Founder sent him to Rome to open a school there so as to show the loyalty of the Brothers to the Pope and to begin the process of obtaining papal approval of the new religious order. Drolin remained in Rome for almost 26

years, much of the time conducting his school by himself, and returned to France only in 1728. For these reasons La Salle's letters to him are somewhat different and special.

For many the best remembered incident in the Drolin correspondence deals with what now seems like a trifle. While the Founder usually had little money, for a number of years Drolin was dependent on him for support. So many of his letters to La Salle asked the Founder for money which it was not easy for him to find or to transmit to Rome. On one occasion, a French cleric named M. Leroy had supper with Drolin shortly before returning home. When he met La Salle, this priest mentioned the good bottle of wine they had shared during this meal. La Salle's question to Drolin was, why are you always asking me for more and more money if you have a wine cellar with such good wine in it? Here do we see a Saint jumping to a conclusion and making much out of nothing, as humans all too frequently do?

On a different level, the Founder tried to give Drolin in written form the spiritual direction and help he gave his other disciples by word of mouth. His concern for this Brother, alone and in a difficult situation, is very evident in what he writes and how he expresses himself. Frequently, La Salle is mentioned as a very capable spiritual director, widely consulted by others as well as by the Brothers. Valuable insights into his skill and methods can be found in these letters. But the Saint also provided his religious son with another type of support. Isolated during many years, Drolin could have begun to feel he did not belong and was no longer a member of the community. To assist his disciple in Rome to overcome this problem, contrary to his custom – and come might say contrary to the Rules of the society even – La Salle provided him with news about the growth of the society and about the Brothers, mentioning a number of them by name. Human as well as spiritual support was needed by Drolin in Rome. Aware of his situation, the founder went out of his way to provide one as well as the other.

Two of the Drolin's early confreres mentioned by name in these letters are Brothers Albert and Ponce. At one time or another each was active and successful in the schools in Southern France, in places such as Avignon, Marseilles, Mende, and Valreas. Both seem to have been capable school men who contributed much to the common apostolate. When mentioning them, La Salle seems to go to great lengths to give them the credit for what was done, in no way trying to claim any for himself. He was a man who did not fear to have and to employ capable and successful helpers in his work. Also, he seemed to be able to find such men, put them in the places where they could do well, and allow them to do the work assigned them. Are these characteristics essential to a good administrator, whether in 1700 or in 2006?

Quite often a loneliness, different from that experienced by Drolin in Rome but just as real and difficult to endure, is the lot of the administrator, particularly one exercising authority for a long time. Did La Salle have this problem? Blain would hardly have thought of mentioning such a fact, and nothing in Maillefer hints that the Founder had this difficulty. However, in some letters to Drolin, what is said and how it is said, suggests that La Salle was writing to someone with whom he had a very special bond – the “Heroic Vow” – and to a man with whom he could share things he could or would not tell others. If this reading of these letters is correct, they show us yet another aspect of the man who was John Baptist de La Salle.

Unlike the frequently mentioned and often studied “Drolin correspondence,” the second group of letters – numbers 108 to 118 plus 131 – have not received much attention. Perhaps this is unfortunate since they provide insights about La Salle which could help correct a common misconception regarding him. Because he refused to allow his grandmother, Mme. Moë de Bruillet, into his bedroom when he was seriously sick in 1691, La Salle has been described as having a very severe or even anti-Christian attitude toward women. This image of the Founder

might be as inaccurate as it is unfair. Along with the eleven meditations he composed for the feasts of various women Saints, these letters show a different attitude on his part.

Four of these letters are addressed to a lay woman, the remaining ten, to various nuns, one of whom was his niece. As in the letters to Drolin, their contents show the skill and ability of the Founder as a spiritual director. In addition, the Saint showed he could be a demanding spiritual guide, challenging those whom he directed. However, at the same time he shows the greatest respect for those he was directing, along with a confidence they can and will rise to his challenges. All of this is evident in his letter to his niece, Jeanne-Remiette de La Salle, a daughter of his brother Pierre. She had joined the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, founded by St. Peter Fourier for the education of poor girls. As the time for her religious profession drew near, Sister Françoise of Saint Agnes, as she was called in religion, invited her uncle to join her for the occasion. While declining her invitation, La Salle did so in a manner calculated to give her an example of the humility, obedience, and detachment required in her life as well as his. Also, while doing so, he shows her the great affection he had for a relative who was embracing a state of life similar to his. Written in 1718 as his life was drawing to a close, it is far from showing the lack of affection for family of which his grandmother had accused him. This letter as well as the others in the group do show us a man somewhat different from the one portrayed by Blain.

At this point other less frequently read and studied writings of the Founder could be cited to show additional facets of this complex and interesting human being. But enough has been said to make a point. Certainly La Salle's spiritual as well as his educational works should be read for their content. If certain of his ideas are somewhat dated, in many ways others are still very relevant for us today. At the same time, though, it is also worth the reader's effort to seek

out the man who conceived and expressed the ideas set forth in them. Intentionally or not, he does reveal himself in many ways in these writings. So they are a valuable, if not fully used, source of information about the man, the educational pioneer and innovator, and the Saint who was John Baptist de La Salle. As such they are a most important supplement to his first biographies and should be used by all those who want to learn about him or to know him better.

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