

La Salle's Impact on Education – some Contemporary Views

Over the years a number of writers, looking at the work of John Baptist de La Salle from a wide variety of perspectives, have stressed its importance and significance in the field of education. Among such appraisals might be cited the following:

The largest and most influential of the teaching orders established for elementary education was the "Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools," founded by Father La Salle . . . in 1684 . . . As early as 1679 La Salle had begun a school at Rheims, and in 1684 he organized his disciples, . . . and outlined the work of the brotherhood. The object was to provide free elementary and religious instruction in the vernacular for the children of the working classes, . . . His work marked the real beginning of free primary instruction in the vernacular in France . . . (Cubberly: 347-48)

The list of those who were at once the products and the stimulators and shapers of the Catholic Reform in France could be greatly lengthened . . . High on it would be the name of John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) who, impressed with the paucity of schools and the need of teachers, resigned his comfortable post as canon in the Cathedral of Rheims, begged funds to found schools, opened (1684) a normal school, developed an educational method which earned him the title of "father of modern pedagogy," . . . and founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. . . . (Latourette: 878-79)

Jean-Baptiste de La Salle was indeed an extraordinary man . . . He would, of course, have been the last to regard his work as unique, vastly ahead of his time, and stamped with the seal of genius; but it was so none the less.

He devoted his whole life to this unforeseen vocation to teach. He was to be nothing but a pedagogue, but in the noblest and fullest sense of that word. He had the primary and indispensable quality of a teacher, an understanding of children; he knew them and loved them . . . His experience was unrivalled and his splendid book, Conduite des ecoles, shows him to have been a brilliant theorist. He regarded the ability to adapt oneself to a child as the foremost quality of a teacher, to be direct and realistic in order to reach the child's understanding. For that reason he did away with the teaching of Latin in beginners' classes, . . . (Daniel-Rops: II, 91)

Belonging properly to the last ripples of the Counter-Reformation in France, there is one further name and one further foundation . . . which can hardly be omitted – those of St. John Baptist de La Salle and the teaching institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools . . . Educationally, St. John Baptist paid unprecedented attention to the proper technical training of the teacher, . . . Starting with elementary schools, the brothers . . . widened in time the scope of their activities, . . . (Evenett: 85-86)

In spite of what might be regarded as some inaccuracies and misstatements of facts by these authors, all of them agree on the importance of the work of the Founder. Naturally then, this might lead one to ask what exactly was the total educational achievement of John Baptist de La Salle. Basing itself primarily – almost exclusively – on the work of his pioneer biographers, Frere Bernard, Don Maillefer, and Canon Blain, this paper will attempt to enumerate and to describe briefly his achievements in the field of education – as perceived by some of his contemporaries.

However, before attempting this it might be good and necessary to say something about the quality of the three pioneer biographers. The works in question are The Admirable Designs of Divine Providence in the Person of the Venerable Servant of God, John Baptist De La Salle, Priest, Doctor of Theology, Former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, and the Founder of the Institute of the brothers of the Christian Schools by Frere Bernard, The Life of John Baptist De La Salle, Priest, Doctor, former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, and the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by Dom Francois Elie Maillefer, and The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, published anonymously in Rouen in 1733 by John Baptist Machuel. The first of these survives only in the manuscripts of 1721, of which just 86 pages, covering through 1688, remain. For the second, we have two manuscripts, dated 1723 and 1740 respectively. And the third is now recognized as the work of Canon John Baptist Blain, also a resident of Rouen. However, beginning in the years from 1721 to 1740, these three works have elicited mixed reactions from readers, students, and historians.

To begin with, all three authors – though each in his own way had access to first hand sources. For as Blain indicates:

. . . immediately following the death of M. John Baptist de La Salle, Brother Barthelemy . . . began taking means to collect various memorabilia written by the Brothers; one of them put these in order; later on the Canon biographer entered into communication with him. (CL 4: X)

In addition to having questioned the same eye-witnesses and based themselves on their accounts, the three authors also required their basic information in yet another way. Both Maillefer and Blain more or less docilely followed Brother Bernard or another yet unknown text, written prior even 1721. Likewise, if as Maillefer says, Blain plagiarized his 1723 text, the Benedictine's 1740 work borrowed freely from that of the canon of Rouen. (CL 4: XI) Their shared use of such

common sources, then creates the possibility that they have real historical value. So Georges Rigault does not hesitate to assert that one cannot write about La Salle without having recourse to the pioneer biographers, who if they based themselves largely on the same sources, did write from different perspectives. For brother Bernard wrote as a disciple of the Founder's old age, Dom Maillefer, as his nephew, and Canon Blain, as a close friend. (II) Thus, each might present the same material from a different, but not necessarily an incompatible or much less a contradictory, point of view. Still there is another side to this story.

Even Brother Timothy, second Superior-General after the Founder, considered Brother Bernard's work as little more than a skeleton, the outline or rough draft of a more complete and satisfactory biography. In addition, since his 86 pages which have survived cover only up to 1688, to say the least it is sadly incomplete. So if what remains of this work had the advantage of having been written less than two years after the death of its subject and of having been retouched by Canon Jean-Louis de La Salle, the brother of the Saint who "was most involved in his preoccupations and his initiatives . . .," it hardly gives a complete picture of the Founder's life and work. (Rigault: II)

At the same time, if – as Maillefer himself says – "intelligent persons . . . were very satisfied with his work . . .," Brother Timothy did not share this opinion. For while he might have limited himself to providing a "concise life of the Founder, presented in a conscientious and reticent fashion, but one "adequate to give an idea of his sanctity," his work was also judged to be incomplete as well as unsatisfactory. (Rigault: III, V) Still, like the work of Brother Bernard, this biography has the advantage of having been written very soon – probably within three or four years – of the death of its subject. Also, even if it was somewhat incomplete, Blain testified to its accuracy on many points when he, in the words of the Benedictine, did "not scruple to copy me word for word in several places," if without acknowledging his source. (Maillefer: V; CL 4: XI)

This brings us to the work of Blain. Hardly anyone who has read it would disagree with the statement that the author attempted to write a biography which was "very detailed," and which, in his own way, he tried hard to make "very edifying" so as to satisfy a wish of Brother Timothy and presumably of the other early Brothers. (Rigault: V) At the same time, though, few would disagree with the comment of Maillefer, "The great portion of the facts he recounts . . . are enshrined, if we may use the word, in a confused mass of poorly chosen pious reflections." (V)

Or with that of Pere Jean-Claude Garreau, written in 1760, “The author . . . tries to say absolutely everything about his subject . . . so as a result . . . the life of M. de La Salle is no better known than if he had never written this work . . .” (CL 4:IV) At the same time, if anyone finds this last evaluation too harsh, he would hardly disagree with Rigault’s comment, “He is a preacher much more than a historian. He tries, he irritates . . .” (VI) Finally, a reader may think Pere Rayez, S. J., summarized the situation well in these words, “He is an old style biographer, too often a panegyrist. At times an inept apologist who denies existing difficulties and brilliantly demolishes the adversaries of his hero . . .” (CL 4: VI) So all these things led a modern critic to say that any advantages Blain had as a writer did not fully compensate for his deficiencies. Mentioned among these latter were that he was “Disorganized, profuse . . .” so that “our author without doubt has irritated, in many cases discouraged, generations of readers who approached him with much good will.” In addition, “He was confused, and he continues to lead astray a large number of biographers who have tried during two centuries to clear up his tedious passages . . .” (CL 4:V)

This is the negative side of Blain’s work, something which certainly cannot simply be ignored or overlooked. But there is also a positive side. For as Reyes asserts, this work written by a contemporary and a witness, so soon after the death of his subject, and based on interviews with those who knew him first hand, remains a source without equal regarding La Salle’s life. (CL 4: V) In his turn Rigault says that Blain’s work shows good will and achieves his end of showing us more clearly the greatness and sanctity of its subject. At the same time, he adds, it provides facts and information that can be found nowhere else. (VI) Frere Maurice-Auguste also saw real value in Blain and insists he remains indispensable for anyone who wants to study the life of the Founder. (CL 4: V, VI) Such assets of this biography, then, might to a certain extent outweigh some if not all of its liabilities. For along with Brother Bernard and Don Maillefer he does give a firsthand account of how some contemporaries saw the setting in which La Salle lived and worked as also his achievements in the field of education. Therefore, with the trepidation as well as some confidence in its major sources, this paper will attempt to show how some men and women of the Splendid Century perceived the educational activity of John Baptist de La Salle. Borrowing from Dickens, as far as schools for the poor children were concerned, it might be said that La Salle lived in the best of times and the worst of times. Among the institutions that suffered severely during the “Wars of Religion” that ravaged France from around 1560 to 1590

were the so-called charity schools for the poor children. However, the restoration of peace under Henry IV saw the real beginning and the full flowering of the Catholic Reform in that country. One aspect of this movement was a great interest in reviving these schools where necessary as well in opening new institutions of this type. Among others, Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul, Cardinal Richelieu, M. Olier, Charles Demia, and Grignon de Montfort devoted considerable effort to this work. (Rigault: 15, 24; Barnard: 1; Daniel-Rops: 337-40) Therefore this movement did not lack influential leadership. In addition, on the local level Bishops such as le Tellier in Rheims and Colbert in Rouen as well as their colleagues in Avignon, Chartres, and Marseilles – to mention but a few – showed a real interest in founding and maintaining such schools. (Barnard: 28; Blain: I-2, 68, 166; II-3, 12; Maillefer: 98, 126, 134) Various priests, ready and able to act effectively on the parish level, such as Canon Nicholas Roland, Pere Barre, Father Nicholas Dorigny, as well as two pastors of St. Sulpice in Paris, Fathers de Le Barmondier and de La Chetardye, could be mentioned as representatives of a much larger group. (Bernard: 27; Blain: I-1, 49, 55, 98; Maillefer: 7, 11, 29, 119) In various localities, these clergymen could count on the support of influential laymen such as the Duke de Mazarin, the Marquis of Colembert, and the Duke of Bethune as well as that of M. Camus de Pont Carre along with rich and influential citizens in cities such as Rethel, Marseilles, Laon, and Guise. (Bernard: 45; Blain: I-1, 74, I-2, 179; II-3, 21; Maillefer: 20, 23, 98, 124) Nor should the contributions of pious lay women such as Madames de Maillefer, de Guise, de Croyeres, and de Chateau-Blanc, often the main sources of financial support for such schools, be forgotten. (Bernard: 23, 40; Blain: I-1, 49, 57; I-2, 196; Maillefer: 10-11, 23, 112) Finally, as regards the interest in education of the common people, mention might be made of that shown by some parents in the parish of St. Sulpice. For when the policies of the pastor threatened the continued existence of these schools, they quickly made their views known, forcing him to change his policies so that these schools could continue to function. (Blain: II-3, 43-44) More will be said about this last incident a little bit later.

Particularly worthy of mention among so many who saw the need for and the advantage of these schools were some of the clergy of Chartres. These priests expressed their ideas on this subject thus:

. . . one of the main causes of the indocility, immodesty, ignorance, and the obviously disorderly lives led by the majority of the children in the city, . . . is . . . that either there are no gratuitous schools for the poor, or . . . the schoolmasters and the mistresses who . . . have conducted these schools . . . do not fulfill their tasks for the children's good . . . In

particular, some gratuitous schools should be set up for the benefit of the poor children who . . . remain without instruction, do not frequent the schools, run wild, and so are easily perverted and become incorrigible. (Blain: I-2, 166)

It might be noted that their ideas on this subject are very similar to those La Salle set down in the first two of his Retreat Meditations and in Chapter I of the Common Rules.

Certainly, then, during the “Splendid Century” great interest in schools for poor children was shown by a large number of those who were very influential members of his society as well as numerous other people. So at this point it might seem safe to say that for La Salle or anyone else interested in devoting his life to this work, it would appear to have been the best of times. Unfortunately, however, there is another side to this story.

In seventeenth century France, rightly or wrongly a charity school was perceived essentially as a religious house. When discussing city government during this time, a modern author describes the problem this view created:

. . . the establishment of a new religious house raised all sorts of municipal problems. Would the parish priest’s income fall off? Would the revenue of the other houses of religious decline? If the order was a mendicant one, what would be the effect on the town charities? Teaching orders were, however, welcome . . . Finally, all towns fought hard, but generally unsuccessfully, to prevent the Jesuits settling in their midst. (Lewis: 162)

On the basis of some unpleasant personal experiences, La Salle probably would have tended to agree with the appraisal of the situation, except where it said, “Teaching orders were, however, welcome. . .” His efforts to obtain ecclesiastical and governmental approval for Canon Roland’s order of sisters and their schools might have convinced him that the civil authorities regarded schools for the poor as mendicants and reacted accordingly. For all too often public opinion opposed founding new institutions of this type and supported the action of the authorities in their regard. (Bernard: 24-25; Maillefer: 11, 12) However, in Rheims in 1679, by founding a school under the patronage and control of M. Dorigny, pastor of St. Maurice Parish, he overcame this obstacle and opened what became his first school. (Bernard: 26-28; Blain: I-2, 51, 55; Maillefer: 14) But the later difficulties he experienced on several occasions with the schoolmasters of Paris, even when the pastor of St. Sulpice had founded and was supporting a school, showed what could happen to a charity school under the best of conditions. (Blain: I-2, 82-85; II-3, 47-57; Maillefer: 50-52, 109-110) Likewise, the difficulties M. Colbert experienced in 1705 when

he tried to introduce the Brothers into Rouen should not be forgotten. (Blain: II-3, 25-28; Maillefer: 98-100) So the fact that by 1725, as in mentioned in the Bull of Approbation, charity schools founded by La Salle and his Brothers existed to some 15 different French dioceses – along with one in Rome – was presented as a significant contribution to popular education and an achievement which showed his skill in this difficult matter as well as great determination on his part.

However, community opposition to opening new schools for the poor children was not the only or possibly the most serious obstacle to doing this good work which seemed to have so much support from so many influential people. Key to the success and continued existence of any such school seems to have been the quality of its teaching staff. For a lack of competent teachers could make it impossible both for a school to succeed and to continue functioning. And very soon after he involved himself in the schools for the poor boys, La Salle became keenly aware of this basic fact. Nyel, so capable of founding schools and getting them off to a good start, quickly brought this problem to his attention. Concerned more with multiplying the number of schools than in assuring their quality, as soon as one or a set of schools was established and functioning, Nyel would be off to open another school in some other locality. By acting thus he left these recently founded schools to survive as best they could – if they could do so. Once he was no longer with them, the teachers became careless in doing their work while each followed his own fancy or whims in his teaching. Lack of uniformity and consistency among the teachers soon made it impossible for the school effectively to do its work. As a result it was simply a matter of time until the teachers abandoned the work of those who had founded the school withdrew their financial support from a work which was obviously a failure. (Blain: I-1, 58, 63, 63-64, 77; Maillefer: 15-16) The basic cause of this problem was easily seen.

Once La Salle in effect replaced Nyel, assuming control of the schools centered in and around Rheims, the problem persisted. For even when he had a better class of teachers, more fervent in their Christian life, the “Brothers,” as they now called themselves, lacked preparation for their work. They did not know how to control a class so as to maintain order among their numerous pupils. Also, frequently they had not sufficiently mastered even the basic rudiments of knowledge they were trying to share with their students. As might be expected, they made serious mistakes in dealing with the children which led to a loss of any prestige with and control over their charges. Good will they had, but this did not make them successful teachers in what

was at best a difficult situation. (Blain: I-2, 24-26) However, the first schools with which La Salle became involved had no monopoly on this problem which was so detrimental to the successful functioning of any school. When in February 1688, he and two of his Brothers arrived in Paris to begin work in a school in the Parish of St. Sulpice, they encountered the following situation:

The establishment was a regular bedlam, where disorder and confusion reigned. There was no sign of any rule, any kind of discipline or method, so essential when dealing with a large number of students. The doors were open from 5 to 10 A.M. and from 1 to 4P.M. The children came and went as they pleased.

Nothing began or ended at a fixed time. Everything took place as chance or caprice dictated . . . Catechism was rarely taught, and never according to any system. Outside class time the pupils gathered in the courtyard and played cards or dice. This gave rise to bad conduct . . . There was no piety among the students, no good behavior in this assemblage of rowdy children, run by people who had no piety themselves. (Blain: I-2, 71)

As the pioneer biographers agreed, no improvement in the charity schools was possible until something was done to improve the quality of their teachers. So they assert that one of La Salle's major achievements was that having perceived the source of a basic problem of these institutions, he devised a practical solution for it. (Bernard: 2-3)

Good schools, he realized, required qualified and competent teachers – men trained to do this particular work and formed to be effective teachers. Quickly he came to see that this meant they had to be men with what might be considered supernatural or religious qualities as well as certain natural qualifications. So his first concern was to help those recruited by Nyel, who had persevered in the work, as well as the new subjects he attracted to this task, to become men of this type. For instance, because they worked on a daily basis with numerous children, they could not be guided by or follow only their natural instincts. Then, having made himself aware of the special characteristics, including a number of basic Christian virtues, required of those who would do this work well, he set about helping them to develop these traits. (Blain: I-1, 76, 79)

On the natural plane, he came to see that teachers were required not merely to know but to master, or know perfectly, the subjects they taught, such as reading, writing, ciphering, as well as Christian Doctrine. So he found knowledgeable individuals to instruct his disciples in these subjects as well as any others they had to teach. At the same time, he recognized that teaching even these basic subjects on the elementary level is a real art, one not easily and naturally

acquired. Therefore, he saw that the successful teacher is one who learns the rules of teaching and applies them methodically in his work. If in doing this he makes mistakes, he profits from his experience to learn what to avoid, what to change, and what to continue doing. Learning mainly from what he saw his more successful disciples do on a daily basis, between 1680 and 1719 La Salle in consultation with these men devised a suitable method of teaching. This he formulated and passed on to the early Brothers. (Blain: II-2, 25)

Because of the work they did in the charity schools, these teachers soon perceived their need for a support system if they were to commit themselves on a long-term basis to what was becoming for them an apostolate. Likewise, soon after La Salle became more deeply involved in the charity schools, Nyel's numerous and prolonged absences brought this need home to him. For quickly he saw that the lack of a support system for these teachers would only spell the ruin and the end of this good work. Therefore, somewhat hesitatingly and reluctantly, he set about to provide the teachers with the support they needed. (Blain: I-2, 61) In time his efforts would produce what seem to have been some unanticipated results. To begin with, most of those recruited by Nyel rejected what was becoming a quasi-religious form of life. However, these defectors were replaced by new recruits attracted to La Salle and this good work. These new masters willingly accepted the life style embodied in the support system established for them. (Bernard: 46-47; Blain: I-1, 72, 78-79; Maillefer 24-25) As a result, whether or not they were aware of it, they were on their way to becoming religious. For his part, La Salle became involved in forming a new and somewhat different type of religious order. Interestingly also, these schoolmasters seemed disposed to move more quickly and decisively than their Father and Founder thought was practical under the existing circumstances. So he had to restrain them, insisting repeatedly that they move ahead more slowly. The religious commitment they asked to make and the vows he persuaded them to settle for at the time are a good example of this interaction between the Founder and his early disciples. (Bernard: 72; Blain: I-2, 10-16; Maillefer: 38-40) However, in time and under La Salle's direction, they did initiate and continue a process by which they established themselves as a distinctive group, a different form of religious life in the Church. To do so they accepted a Rule, based on their lived experience, which over the years developed as a suitable guide for their lifestyle and apostolate. Also, their adoption of a distinctive type of dress, which eventually became their official religious habit, was another step in this process. And they announced these decisions to all concerned by no longer

calling themselves schoolmasters, but rather “Brothers,” a title with definite religious connotations. (Bernard: 65; Blain: I-2, 10, 17-23) Still, if La Salle was doing something different, reviving a style of religious life that had previously existed in the Church rather than creating something entirely new, he – and possibly most of his early disciples – could not break completely with the thinking of the times. Thus originally it was planned that the Superior General of the Order as well as the Directors of the larger communities or residences of the Brothers would be clerics. As a first step, Brother Henri L’Heureux was chosen to become a priest so that he could replace La Salle as Superior. His unexpected death prompted the Founder to decide that none of the members of his society would be clergy. Also, it was decreed that none of the brothers would study the classics so that they would not be prepared to enter the clerical state or tempted to do so. (Blain: I-2, 53-54; Maillefer: 57-58) These decisions were confirmed in 1694 when his disciples re-elected the Founder as their Superior, and a proviso was added to the minutes of their Chapter. It asserted that when the Society was more securely established, one of the Brothers – not a cleric from outside – would replace La Salle as their Superior. (Blain: I-2, 135-40; Maillefer: 70-71)

Even before many of these events had taken place, in keeping with his concern to have the services of quality Christian teachers, La Salle set about founding and maintaining a novitiate. Here, in spite of great difficulties, he devoted himself to forming the new members of his society as religious and teachers who would commit themselves to continuing the work to which the groups had dedicated itself. First in Rheims, then at various locations in Paris, and later on in Rouen, the novitiates established by La Salle successfully pursued these goals. Finally, in 1717 as his life was drawing to a close, at his suggestion the Brothers elected Brother Barthelemy to replace him as their Superior General. At the same time, he prepared a final draft of the Rule which had been growing and developing over the years. In this document his disciples defined themselves as non-clerical male religious who lived in community and devoted themselves to the educational apostolate, mainly in favor of the poor. (Blain: II-3, 155-176; Maillefer: 148-152) By these actions a process begun some 35 or so years before was brought to completion. And when discussing these events, the pioneer biographers stress his important role in creating a distinctive type of religious life for men. Also, they show his contributions toward providing a corps of qualified teachers for his schools and assuring their future through the continued commitment of dedicated religious educators vowed to this apostolate. Expressing himself in a

very personal and interesting way, late in his life La Salle asserted quite emphatically that he had neither anticipated nor planned what he did in this matter. Rather, he insisted, it was God who subtly led him to become involved in and to accomplish what became his life's work. (Blain: I-1, 61) Among other things, by following the lead of God in this matter, the holy priest created a very effective instrument for bringing about significant changes in the area of popular education or schools for the masses. Now, what use was made of this instrument? To begin with, these men who had acquired the necessary self-discipline were able to develop a practical system for establishing and maintaining order in their individual classrooms and the schools of which they formed a part. The numbers and the backgrounds of their clientele made this essential if any teaching and learning were to take place. Still, by the standards of the times a humane form of discipline was used to establish this order. (Blain: I-2, 25) One of its key elements was "to schedule the time for all the school activities so that each one began at a fixed hour and lasted a definite time." Students for their part were required to be punctual, "entering and leaving the building at a precise time." To help them to do so, "the door was opened and closed regularly at the exact hour." "The periods for teaching reading, writing, ciphering and spelling were also precisely determined," so that "the children had enough time to learn these materials well without getting bored." And, of course, the daily catechism lesson as well as time for daily Mass were included in this timetable. (Blain: I-2, 73-74) In addition, "The students were divided into three classes so that they could be given lessons suitable to their age and advancement." (Maillefer: 45; also see Blain: I-2, 71) Through these means a distinctively Christian school – often called Lasallian – began to take shape. However, if it was well organized, it was not rigidly so. An example of this flexibility can be seen in the school the Brothers took over in the Parish of St. Sulpice. There the Program was modified to include manual training in which the children were taught how to knit stockings. To please the pastor this subject was retained in the school program and taught by a Brother specifically trained to give this instruction. (Blain: I-2, 74-76) By dividing the pupils into classes where they could be taught in keeping with the level they had so far achieved, La Salle also made an important and basic change in the elementary school. In effect he thus introduced the "simultaneous method," already widely used on the secondary and tertiary levels, into the elementary school. (Maillefer: 45) A second and equally important innovation he made was "to begin by teaching children how to read French, before teaching them to read Latin." When doing this he showed a knowledge and appreciation of the

existing situation as well as what was more suited to the needs of the students. The usefulness of knowing their native language and the fact that it was easier and quicker for them to learn French than Latin, were important considerations for him in this matter. These reasons, he said, were reinforced when the short time many of these boys could remain in school was also taken into account. Finally, he gave as an additional reason the fact that a knowledge of French could be helpful to them in later life, both for earning a living and for acquiring additional instruction in their Christian faith. (Blain: I-2, 171-72) By innovations such as these La Salle effected significant changes in the schools available to the urban masses, some of the poorest people of his age. But what effect, if any, did all these things have at the time? First and interestingly, the students rather quickly and easily accepted the changes and regulations which La Salle and the Brothers introduced in their schools. In general the boys submitted to them with little difficulty. This was so even when a wide variety of learning activities in some ways complicated the daily schedule of the school. Parents whose sons were eligible to enroll in a school but were not attending it often decided to send them to the institution because they saw the good it was doing for its students. As a result, often the number of pupils increased to such an extent that it was necessary to add more classes and employ additional Brothers in school (Blain:I-2, 75, 81). Likewise, as more trained Brothers became available; usually it was not necessary for La Salle to seek out places in which to establish schools. The orderly and successful functioning of his schools joined with the good conduct of their students led bishops, pastors, and other influential people who became aware of what he was doing to ask him to establish schools in their localities. The way in which the Brothers were invited to Calais and Rouen among other cities, are good examples of this phenomenon. (Blain: I-2, 177-178; Maillefer: 97-98) Lastly, when the actions of M. De La Chétardy left La Salle with no alternative but to withdraw the Brothers from the schools in St. Sulpice Parish (1706), the parents of the children thus affected forced this pastor to come to terms with the Founder. Members of the parish recounted in great detail all that the Brothers had done to help their sons and improve their behavior. Also, they described the great harm which they were sure would quickly follow if these schools remained closed. Within only three weeks the Pastor had to reverse his position and allow the Brothers to conduct the schools without any interference on his part. (Blain:I-3, 43-44; Maillefer: 109-110) Thus the pioneer biographers clearly indicate that La Salle's early disciples had many satisfied "customers" who were aware of what they were doing and greatly appreciated their good work.

And when necessary, these people were willing and ready to make their opinions known regarding the success of these schools. But the Founder did not stop here.

Having found a way of preparing teachers who could successfully conduct parish charity schools and instruct the large numbers of boys attracted to them, La Salle was only too willing to extend the scope of this very necessary work. One important means he used to do so represented a response to a two-fold problem, which Maillefer describes thus:

...pastors of country parishes were after De La Salle to send a Brother to instruct the children of their parish... he could not oblige them for he had made it a rule never to send fewer than two together and good order required that he not depart from this rule. The pastors found a compromise. This was to choose masters themselves for their parishes, and to send them to him to train them... (43-44)

His first effort along these lines in Rheims, which lasted from 1686 to 1690, is often regarded as a landmark in the history of education. By doing this La Salle, in effect, established the first Normal School or training school for teachers. It enrolled some 25 to 30 young men who, after completing their course of studies, returned to their home villages where they did much good work. The curriculum of this institution, it might be noted included both the subjects to be taught in the poor schools as well as the methods for teaching this material effectively. (Bernard: 85-86; Blain: I-2, 60-62; Maillefer: 43-44) Undiscouraged by what had happened to the institution in Rheims, in 1699 La Salle tried to open a similar training school for teachers in Paris in the parish of St. Hyppolytus. In its turn this institution functioned effectively for several years until the defection of Nicholas Vuyart led to its closing. Perhaps this school should best be remembered because of its great emphasis on practice teaching by the candidates, now an important element in all teacher-training programs. (Blain: I-2, 159-60; Maillefer: 94-95) Having seen the value of these seminaries for training future leaders, La Salle remained undaunted by these two apparent failures. So he tried once more in Paris – but without any success – to duplicate this feat. (Blain: II-3, 66; Maillefer: 124-25) And it is possible that once established somewhat securely in Rouen, he considered trying one more time. (Maillefer: 105-106) In all these instances his biographers show La Salle as keenly aware of the problems existing in so many of the poor schools due to a lack of trained teachers. Also, he is portrayed as finding an ingenuous and appropriate solution to these problems by doing something which is taken for granted today.

Lastly, in at least one instance his efforts in this field had an additional and unanticipated effect which has some special significance for us today. Conducting his Seminary for Country Schoolmasters provided La Salle with a means of reaching and influencing many more people through the numerous children taught by these rural teachers. However, he also asserted in The Memoir on the Habit that once they had completed the training he provided for them, “they have no further connection with the Community except in so far as is polite and becoming.” But he did add, “They are welcomed back for the purpose of making retreats.” Still, not long after he wrote these lines, events, brought about a change in his thinking. When in 1691 a novitiate was established in Vaugirard, the Founder decided to have some of the younger Brothers remain there with him even though a new school year would soon begin. In this way he planned to help some of his disciples to complete what he now viewed as their inadequate formation, even though he lacked other Brothers to replace them in the schools which he wished to continue. So in their place he employed some of “the young men who studied at the seminary for country schoolmasters in Rheims.” These teachers in their turn agreed to replace the Brothers who remained with him in the Vaugirard novitiate. Apparently this arrangement worked out in a satisfactory manner. (Blain: I-2, 103-104) Again La Salle was innovative in his approach to a problem. And here, do we not see him in some ways initiating what is now known as the “Lasallian Family?” This he did both by showing concern for the continuing formation of those he had trained as teachers and by employing them as “partners” in his work. Blain who recounts this incident, as well as many of his later disciples, might have been very slow to perceive the full significance of what the Founder did in this instance.

Not only through the Seminary for Country Schoolmasters, however, did La Salle show his willingness to branch out into areas of educational activity other than the elementary schools for poor children. It was seen again, for instance, when he assigned some of the Brothers in Paris to conduct a school for 50 young Irish lads who were exiles in France. When James II of England asked the Archbishop of Paris to find a suitable place in which to instruct these refugee children, the prelate entrusted them to the care of the Founder. This temporary institution seems to have accomplished its objectives, for Blain says that these Irish youths “were soon in a position to fulfill honorably the various responsibilities

for which they were destined,” a verdict repeated by Maillefer. (Blain: I-2, 163; Maillefer: 81-82) At best information about the nature of this school is sketchy. However, possibly this was an effort in the area of non-classical secondary education or for teaching a second language to foreigners. In either case, once more his biographers show La Salle as pioneering yet another area of educational activity.

Very likely the larger number of the early Brothers were best qualified and suited to teach on the elementary level and spent their professional lives working in such schools. However, even not all these schools might have been exactly the same. Different situations in various places could have required adjustments in a school and its program. La Salle and his first disciples, though, seem to have had little difficulty in making such adjustments. In Calais, the chaplain of the sailor’s quarter desired a school suited to the special needs of the children from these families. At his request the Royal Government agreed to finance such an institution, which the Brothers conducted successfully during and after the lifetime of the Founder. (Blain: I-2, 181-82)

Another group of children in whose education the government took a special interest was those whose parents had been Huguenots but had recently converted to Catholicism. For if following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), numerous Calvinists had re-joined the Catholic Church, the government sought means to make sure these conversions were genuine. One way was to forbid any Huguenot schools while requiring the children from convert families to attend Catholic schools which were made available for them. The Bishop of Alais, who was very active in working with former Calvinists, greatly appreciated the efforts of the Brothers in such schools as well as what they achieved in them. (Blain: II-3, 61) So once again La Salle’s disciples showed they could adjust their basic school organization and program to a particular situation. And no matter how this activity might be viewed to-day, then they were seen as contributing effectively to what was termed “the extirpation of heresy” and praised both for the zeal they showed and the results they achieved.

At this point it might be good to recall two aspects of the background against which La Salle did his work. First, many charity schools had been seriously disrupted by the “Wars of Religion” which devastated late sixteenth century France. Second, even though many people showed great interest in these schools and promised financial support for

them, serious difficulties were encountered during the Catholic Reform when efforts were made to revive and expand these institutions. Therefore, during the “Splendid Century” many young men in their teens and older were both illiterate and lacking the skills needed to find steady employment. As a result they had difficulty supporting themselves and, later on, their wives and children. Also evidence suggests they were a source of major social and religious problems in various urban areas, particularly in the parish of St. Sulpice, then one of the poorest sections of Paris. Here they were a burden on society and unable to contribute to the economic growth of their country. Likewise, because they were poor and lacked regular employment, often they were led into many vices and lives of crime which ended in their moral ruin. Now M. De La Chetardye, whatever he thought of La Salle and however he acted towards him, was rightly considered to be a model priest and pastor of the Catholic Reform era. No one ever questioned his zeal for the spiritual good of his flock and of all its members, whatever their situation. One solution he saw for this problem was a program of “adult” or “continuing” education for these young men.

Thus from 1709 to 1715, under this pastor’s patronage and with his support, several Brothers conducted a Sunday school for this clientele. Carefully designed to meet their particular needs, in time it expanded its program in a variety of ways. Of course these young workers were given religious instruction in the form of catechism lessons. At the same time, less advanced students were taught to read and write so that they could achieve a basic degree of literacy. More advanced students, however, were taught arithmetic, drawing, geometry and similar subjects which prepared them to secure employment or to obtain better jobs. For his part, La Salle spared neither care nor expense to promote this educational activity. Thus, several Brothers were sent to get special training which would qualify them to teach the more advanced drawing classes. Unfortunately, once they achieved great proficiency in this subject, these Brothers withdrew from the institute so that they could profit personally from their skill. And when other Brothers were asked to take these special courses, they refused to do so – fearing the same thing might happen to them. These events forced the closing of this institution after it had functioned for about six years (Blain: II-2, 188, II-3, 12; Maillefer: 119-120). Still, once more, La Salle showed an ability to meet new and different

educational needs, even if he was not the first one to conduct this type of school (Blain: II-2, 188). And in doing so, he is shown as helping pioneer additional development of some neglected youth.