

ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

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Pioneer in educating Catholic youth.

JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, educational pioneer, founder of the worldwide Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, commonly called the Christian Brothers, was born in the cathedral town of Rheims, France, on April 30, 1651. His parents were people of standing, his father holding a judicial post. From childhood he gave evidence of such unusual piety that he was designated for the priesthood. At eleven he received the tonsure and at sixteen became a canon of the cathedral chapter at Rheims. Later he was sent to the seminary of St. Sulpice to complete his studies. The young canon, handsome in appearance and scholarly in his tastes, seemed destined for high ecclesiastical preferment. Soon after his return to Rheims he was to discover his true life work—the education of the poor. It was to be a long, hard struggle, with few tangible rewards, but he unquestionably started a movement which was to result in furthering free elementary instruction.

The social orders of seventeenth-century France were still cast in a rigid mold. Education, with rare exceptions, was for the rich and noble, and quite beyond the dreams of the great mass of the people. Their pitiful ignorance became the lifelong concern of John Baptist de la Salle. From the outset of his career he was thrown into contact with poor children. His first post was

spiritual director of the Sisters of the Holy Infant and the orphanage they conducted. Through this work he came into contact with a wealthy woman, one of his own relations, who urged him to found a similar refuge for orphaned boys. A lay teacher, Arien Nigel, joined him, and such a home and school opened its doors. It was so successful that soon another institution of the same type was set up in the diocese. Father John now saw the way clear before him he must devote his whole energy to the case of education. But to educate you must have teachers, and the preparation of young school masters to teach in these schools was his initial task. He invited a number of them to come and live in his own home that he might have more time to train and counsel them. His brothers objected to having their house taken over in this manner, so Father John moved with his group to more suitable quarters.

An Institute Founded

Since only a religious community could furnish a permanent and continuing supply of teachers serving without pay, an Institute, a sort of teaching brotherhood of young men who were attracted to a life of service, was formed. The novice teachers took the three usual vows, but not Holy Orders. Another vow, that they would dedicate

their lives to teaching the poor, specializing as catechists, was added. A rule was drawn up; it provided that the Brothers should be laymen and that no priests could ever become members.

Father John Baptist soon decided to resign his canonry to devote his full attention to the establishment of schools and the training of teachers. He had inherited a considerable fortune, and this might have been used to further his aims, but on the advice of a saintly priest, Father Barre, of Paris, and after much prayer for God's guidance, he decided against this course. He sold what he had and sent the money to the poor of the province of Champagne, where a famine was causing great suffering. His enterprise must henceforth depend on the charity of others, and from this time on his own life was lived in the true ascetic pattern.

The Institute grew rapidly, and soon there were so many applications from young men of fifteen to twenty years of age that a junior novitiate was formed. Also, from many parts of France, parish priests were sending their promising young men to be trained so they might return to serve as schoolmasters in their own villages.

A Philosophy of Education

What may be considered the first Normal School was now functioning, and this became the first novice house of the order. Here Father John Baptist wrote his *Manual for Christian Schools*, setting forth his original and practical ideas of education. To him we owe the separation of pupils into classes according to their stage of mental maturity. He also introduced teaching in the vernacular, that is, the use of French instead of Latin. He knew the importance of the eye in learning, and made great use of the blackboard. Included

in the curriculum were courses in ethics, literature, physics, philosophy, and mathematics.

Such a movement was sure to arouse opposition, and many obstacles and protests had to be overcome. The schools for poor boys in Paris were attacked by Jansenists, by layteachers and tutors, who perhaps felt their own position and livelihood jeopardized; and by others who on principle did not approve of education for the "lower orders," save training in the manual crafts and trades. After a time it became evident that the schools had come to stay, and the persecutions gradually ceased.

Schools for All Classes

Although the schools had originally been founded for orphans and the children of the poor, a new departure was made at the request of King James II of England, who was then living in exile. He urged the founding of a college for the sons of his adherents, mainly Irish, who were living in France, and Father John opened such a school for fifty young men of gentle birth. At about the same time he started a school for boys of the artisan class. Here technical instruction was combined with religious exercises, and this type of school became very popular. There were also schools started for "troublesome boys," now usually called "juvenile delinquents." Efforts were thus being made to meet the needs of all types and classes of boys and young men. This constantly expanding work required insight and adaptability in an unusual degree.

Father John Baptist's later years were spent at the College of St. Yon, in Rouen, where the novitiate had been transferred in 1705, after it had functioned for some years in Paris. In 1716 he resigned from the active direc-

tion and government of the Institute, and from then on would give no orders, and lived like the humblest of the brothers, teaching the novices and young boarders. He wrote for them several treatises, including *A Method of Mental Prayer*. Worn out by illness and austerities, he passed away on Good Friday, April 7, 1719, at the age of sixty-seven. Six years after his death, the Christian Brothers' institute was recognized by Pope Benedict XIII, and its rule approved. Father John was canonized in 1900. To his valiant efforts we owe in large part the acceptance of the idea of universal education.

In spite of internal difficulties, chiefly concerning the degree of austerity to be observed by the Brothers, the schools spread and flourished up to the French Revolution. During that period

of persecution, the Christian Brothers were at one point reduced to twenty active members. However, when the ban was lifted by Napoleon I in 1799, the community sprang back to life with remarkable resilience. During the nineteenth century the schools expanded steadily; then, from 1904 to 1908, there was another setback: 1285 establishments were closed by legislative decree in France. Meanwhile the Brothers had established themselves in other countries of Europe, in England, Ireland, the Levant, North and South America, the West Indies, and Australia. Their first school in the United States was founded in 1846; today many of them are on the college level.

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