

# THE TEACHER'S SAINT

JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
PATRON SAINT OF TEACHERS



George Van Grieken, FSC

## INTRODUCTION

Saint John Baptist de La Salle was born in 1651, lived a life that he had never anticipated, and passed into eternal life on April 7, 1719, in Rouen, France. Canonized in 1900, he was declared the Patron Saint of All Teachers of Youth on May 15, 1950. This short book fills in some of the details of his remarkable life.

Here was someone who founded a new way of teaching and a unique set of Catholic schools, called the “Christian Schools” in his time. Run by a group of men who were called the Brothers of the Christian Schools, they became today’s Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (De La Salle Christian Brothers), with its mission “to provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to it.” (*Rule*, art.3)

It was De La Salle’s persistent, faith-filled, and zealous pursuit of where God was leading him that resulted in the worldwide educational movement that is still growing every year, animated by Brothers—the consecrated religious men who dedicate their lives to this same mission—and many other educators who are inspired by Saint John Baptist de La Salle’s charism.

There is something in his story, in his writings, and in his living spirit that plants itself in the hearts of teachers everywhere. From whatever background and from whatever culture, they find themselves drawn to an educational vision and approach that reminds them of why they became involved in teaching in the first place. Here is a person and a charisma worth knowing, especially for those involved in education. Here is a remarkable individual who continues to shape the educational world of today in ways he could not have imagined, inspiring educators of all kinds, shaping how they see students, teachers, and the activity of teaching. His writings, insights, and example wonderfully and naturally resonate with the experience of educators everywhere.

John Baptist de La Salle is someone who is a true saint for all teachers.

— *George Van Grieken, FSC*

## DE LA SALLE'S WORLD

De La Salle grew up in a world without electricity, cars, TV, radio, phones, texts, computer, or internet. He couldn't simply flick a switch to have light, couldn't go fairly quickly almost anywhere he wanted to go, couldn't check his facts on the smartphone, and couldn't communicate instantly with almost anyone in the world. His was a world of candlelight, horse carriages, walking, libraries, letter-writing, conversations and house visits, frequent illness or death, and firm social classes and cultural limitations.

This was the age of King Louis XIV, the “Sun King” who ruled France with an iron—if clever—fist. It was an age when social standing, good manners, benefices, political intrigue, and grand living were the rule. And that was just in the Church! The State had all of this plus it was engaged in one war after another, taxed the population as much as it could tolerate, followed a system of governance and justice that had as many exceptions as it had applications, and for a time built up France's status to that of a “superpower.” Along the way, the poor remained quite poor and many of the rich became even richer, although a good number of the more

industrious artisans, shopkeepers, and minor officials managed to have an increasingly influential voice in public affairs.

Economically, Europe was a mixed bag of “haves” and “have-nots,” with certain countries or areas within a country enjoying prosperity while other areas languished. Customs duties had to be paid at each town or province through which products passed. As a result, smuggling was an accepted way of life. European economies, being based largely on agriculture, experienced frequent crises, especially if a particular year’s crops failed. When these crises happened, starvation and widespread epidemics were sure to follow.

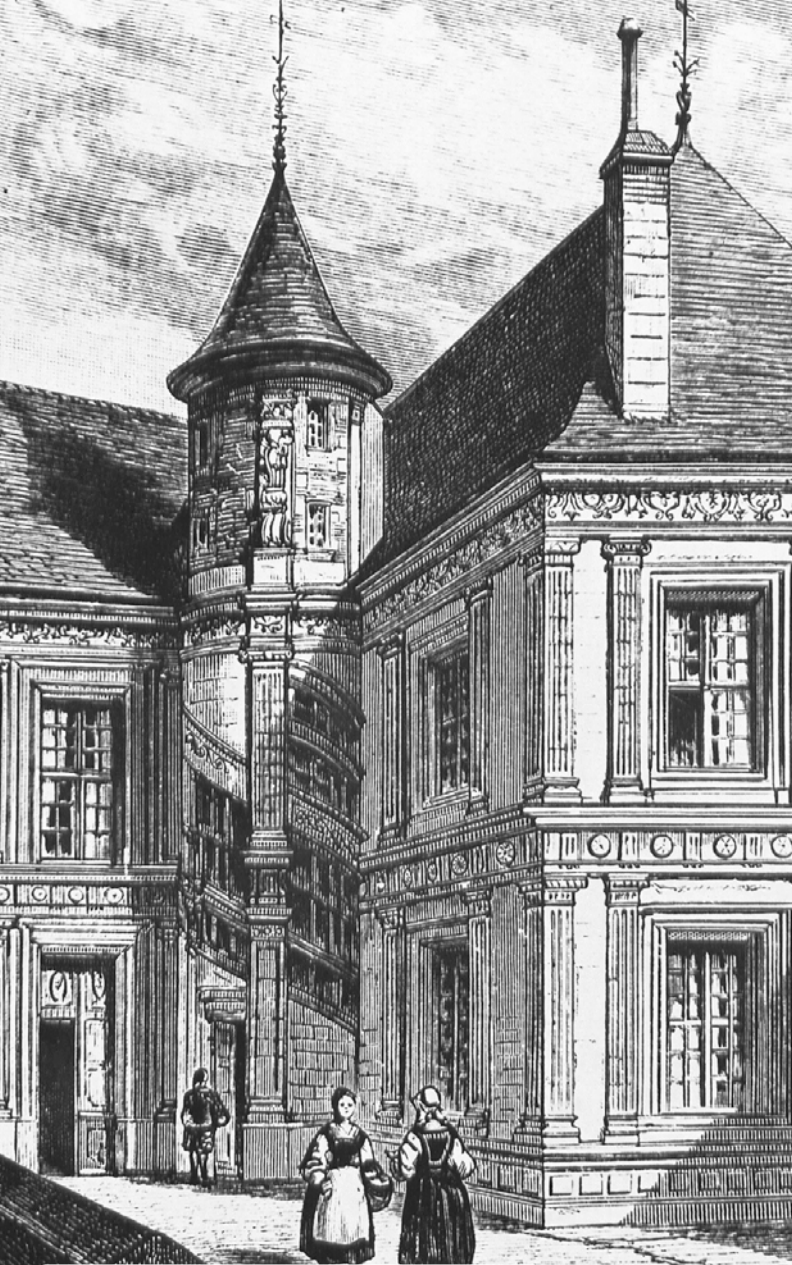
Two-thirds of the over 20 million French people lived in the countryside in small villages of two or three hundred. These villages provided the agricultural base on which the country stood. One-fifth of France’s land was occupied by small farms that supported the rest of the population. People in both the countryside and the towns rose at dawn and retired at sunset. Six or seven day workweeks were the norm, with each workday lasting up to 14 hours. The French daily diet for most people consisted mainly of coarse bread, cheese, and some meat for their one cooked meal a day. For vegetables, there were onions that would be added to thicken a simple grain stew, various locally grown vegetables if you could afford it, and herbs that garnished the rare beef, mutton, pork, rabbit, fish, or fowl. Drinkable water was scarce and iffy. The beverages of choice

for the majority were watered down wine, cider, and weak beer.

In towns, the guilds (*corps de métiers*) were powerful fraternities of tradespeople such as butchers, barrel makers, carpenters, masons, writing masters, and others. They might be considered similar to the professional or trade organizations of today, although their advocacy posture bears more resemblance to that of today's unions. Each guild had regulations that governed its particular trade, specifying the number of shops, apprentices, clerks, and other details. This also applied to those providing education. Such guilds both ensured common standards, such as they were, and safeguarded an effective monopoly.

After the sporadic economic efforts of earlier Ministers of Finance, many of whom succeeded primarily in accumulating vast amounts of personal wealth, Louis XIV's finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1641-1683), initiated and subsidized basic and essential industries and soon turned France's economy around, increasing the government's wealth substantially. But deficit spending as a result of the Dutch War (1672-1679) caused his plans to unravel, and France's financial difficulties again dominated the economic scene. It was primarily this economic downturn that provided the backdrop for De La Salle's initial educational endeavors.

Taxation was a main source of income for the various governing bodies, but its collection was neither consistent nor fair. One author writes that the tax system in France at that time "would seem



*The inner court of the De La Salle house in Reims. This is a 19th century engraving by Joffroy of a drawing by Fichot. It would have been here that the family's children would often play.*

## THE EARLY YEARS

John Baptist de La Salle, called Jean-Baptiste in his native tongue, was the first of 11 children born to Louis de La Salle, who was a magistrate in the présidial court of Reims, and Nicolle Moët de Brouillet. Two younger sisters and two younger brothers died in infancy, something not uncommon at the time. The city of Reims, with its narrow streets, multiple churches, and large central cathedral, was home to an extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. From the time he was born on April 30, 1651, to the time the family moved several blocks away 13 years later, John Baptist grew up in a stately residence near the center of this city of kings and merchants, in a house that exists to this day. The courtyard and the street recess leading to the family home were the places where he played with his siblings, and the house with its Renaissance façade was the place where he first learned how to read and write, under the direction of a tutor. The nearby cathedral with its echoing ancient bells dominated the skyline as it dominated the pious practices of his family.

With relatives associated with both the cathedral and with various religious orders, John Baptist's



religious upbringing was thoroughly assured. At the same time, his upper-class family maintained a lifestyle in keeping with their station, employing servants and entertaining guests on a regular basis. While not pampered, one may assume that John Baptist led a comfortable existence, encountering none of the difficulties experienced by the poor or the destitute. During those initial years, it became evident that John Baptist had inherited the integrity and professional seriousness of his father and the human qualities and virtues of his mother, who had been brought up in the most exacting practices of Christian piety. Whether true or not, one account of his early life portrays the young John Baptist as someone who would rather



*The cathedral of Reims, which was still under construction during De La Salle's lifetime, although many parts of it were finished and used. He served as a canon here for 16 years. The painting is by Dominico Quaglio (1787-1837).*

listen to his grandmother read from the *Lives of the Saints* than join the family's musical soiree downstairs. We do know that he had a pious disposition and a quiet, studious personality.

It was generally expected that the eldest son of Louis de La Salle would follow in his father's footsteps with a law career. But from his youth, John Baptist had been attracted to the life of the

Church. After four years of tutoring at home, having learned how to read and spell from Latin texts, he was enrolled in the *Collège des Bons-Enfants*, an adjunct school of the University of Reims, in October of 1661. Near the end of his first year at the Collège, at the tender age of 10, John Baptist decided to officially aspire to the priesthood. At the invitation of his distant cousin, Father Pierre Dozet, chancellor of the university, he took part in a ceremony that included the cutting off of a small piece of his hair, called a clerical tonsure, to show his intention of becoming a priest. Afterwards, now wearing the black cassock, John Baptist continued to excel in his prescribed course of classical studies.



*A painting of John Baptist de La Salle as a young canon of the Reims Cathedral. He would have been 16-18 years old. It currently hangs in De La Salle's childhood home in Reims.*