

DE LA SALLE: ONE OF THE PATRON SAINTS FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

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The dictionaries of Saints recognise a number of patron Saints for the world of education. Some of them go far back in Christian history, like Cassian d'Imola (honoured on 13th August by the Writing Masters in the time of the Founder), or Nicholas of Myra (Patron Saint of children, whose feast day on 6th December was a holiday of rule in the Brothers Schools), or Gregory the Great. Others are more recent, such as Don Bosco, patron Saint of Italian apprentices (17th January, 1958). Since 4th August 1880, Saint Thomas Aquinas has been the patron of Catholic "Scholae", which means Catholic Universities and Academies of Higher Education. On 13 August 1948, Pius XII proclaimed Saint Joseph Calasanctius "Heavenly patron of all Christian working-class schools in the world" (according to one source Joseph Calasanctius opened the first public school).

On 15 May 1950, the same Pope Pius XII named Saint John Baptist de La Salle "special patron in heaven, before the throne of God, of all educators of children and young people", engaged in teaching or in teacher training. (The text of this proclamation was printed in *LACE Magazine*, Issue 13, May 2000.) Fifty years later, it is time to have a look at the impact of Pius XII's action in relation to the Founder and the way its effects have radiated in ever-widening circles around the Lasallian world.

An imprint of beauty and a path of sanctity

The Apostolic Brief *Quod ait Sanctus Bonaventura* opens with a quotation from Saint Bonaventure: "The only true educator is one who can impress his pupils with an imprint of beauty, flood them with light and endow their hearts with manly strength". That gives the teacher-pupil relationship a status far beyond a mere passing on of knowledge!

First of all, it is not just a matter of preparing young people to serve the society in which they are called to live. Their vocation as human beings transcends social conditions. We achieve full humanity in the context of a culture, and the discovery of fundamental values in private and public life is made from generation to generation. This initiation, however, goes to the heart of the person, marking the disciple with a "stamp of beauty". The educational relationship involves not just the educator and pupil. There is also another sublime element present: the true, just and absolute factor of God who is, for believers, a personal being. Consequently, the Church pays great attention to "those whose mission it is to educate youth. Because, it is on teachers that the salvation and Christian development of young people largely depend". The utilitarian approach to education is an ever-present danger, and it is the teachers who hold the key to the future. They hold young people in their hands, and so they determine tomorrow's society. In this context, the Pope recalled the initiative of the Founder to extend his work to include a "seminary" for country teachers, the forerunner of later Teacher Training Colleges, "convinced as he was that this work [of teaching] was a very effective means of making progress in virtue and attaining sanctity". Pius XII went on to say, approvingly, that one indication of John Baptist de La Salle's view of the spirituality of the teaching profession as a "very effective means of perfection" lay in the fact that he did not want his disciples "to be raised to the priesthood for fear that they would turn away from teaching". Through this negative expression, the Pope emphasised the lay character of the Brothers' vocation and, in consequence, that of the countless numbers of Christian educators. It is their baptism which gives them the authority to look after the children, in order to open them to what is beautiful and what is true. This function can be lived as a ministry, a service in the Church, indispensable to its mission.

The right time for this message

It was the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the canonisation of John Baptist de La Salle that led the Brothers to ask the Pope to name their Founder as "heavenly patron before God of all teachers of both sexes, ecclesiastical or lay, whether actually fulfilling their role or studying in preparation for it". Pius XII, anx-

ious to offer "paths to holiness" to all Christians in the different spheres of life in the modern world, willingly consented. The succeeding years have shown the value of this step far beyond the boundaries of the far Institute and the Church. We simply have to look around us.

Pontifical declarations of this kind are not spontaneous happenings. Some special event, such as an important anniversary, provides the occasion for a group to suggest a step that the Sovereign Pontiff might wish to take. However, it would be a mistake to see such an announcement as simply the outcome of skilful manoeuvring by people with "good connections" in the Vatican. The Pope agrees to the request only if it is in line with his existing pastoral priorities. While not acting infallibly, Pius XII saw himself as acting "with full Apostolic Power". He wished to offer realistic models to Christians called to live a visibly Christian life in the modern world, giving them the example of saints less remote than those of the first centuries. (John Paul II, with his multiple canonisations, has gone we much further in this direction.)

I see the hand of Providence here. Since the issuing of that Papal decree, the "Brothers' schools" have been steadily converted (almost imperceptibly) into "Lasallian schools. The lay teachers who worked side by side with the Brothers, accepted the patronage of Saint John Baptist de La Salle enthusiastically. Today, Lasallian schools throughout the world are based on an association of Brothers and Lay teachers, and the Brothers represent only 6% of the teaching body. The number of Lasallian schools where there are no Brothers on the staff is increasing almost everywhere. That does not stop these Lasallian teachers recognising Saint John Baptist de La Salle as their founder.

Many other educators have been or are being trained in Lasallian Training Colleges and Universities, and even though they may never exercise their teaching function in a Lasallian school, they consider themselves as sons and daughters of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. As Brother Bernard, the Founder's first biographer, says when writing about the trainee teachers in the Seminary for country teachers: "those who returned to their parishes exercised their ministry with great piety and charity, always looking upon Monsieur de La Salle as their true Father". These moderns "sons and daughters of De La Salle" include Christians, Buddhists, Moslems, Humanists and people with no specific religious affiliation. They all find in the Lasallian educational and spiritual tradition sustenance for their dedication as men and women of faith. The inspiration that Christians find in viewing their educational work as a lived ministry, is equally available to men and women of other religious traditions.