

St John Baptist de La Salle and Prayer

by Bro John Deeney FSC

In his Gospel Luke tells us that Jesus went through all the towns and villages teaching the people. In a quite literal sense John Baptist de La Salle followed in Jesus' footsteps in this essential mission. In an age when travel was laborious, he walked the alleys, streets and roads of his homeland in order to set up schools and spread the good news of God's love and salvation. Pope Paul VI has reminded us that this gospel has the energy capable of transforming people's lives from within and that we are called to evangelise not only individuals but the roots of cultures. In our own age, when travel is extensive and easy and communications permeate the fabric of our day, how do we measure up to the command to live and spread the gospel? This book is designed to ask that question and to help each of us to create a living answer. The 'journey' of John Baptist's life took him from Rheims to Paris, then to the centre, south and east of France. More significantly it also took him from ease to hardship, from affluence to poverty, from a position of influence to one of insignificance. He did not see any of these transitions as random chance or even as principally the result of his own choices. He saw them as God's hand guiding the course of his life. He was consistently attentive to the discovery of God in the events of his life and in his associations with others for the fulfilment of God's purpose. It is a mode of perception very suited to the rush and complexity of modern life, demanding as it does prayerful reflection, sharing with others and apostolic action.

The splendid gothic cathedral of Rheims is where the Kings of France were once crowned. It is a refined building of soaring columns, stained glass and myriad shapely sculptures. Here, in 1667, the 16-year-old De La Salle was appointed a canon for life and given a substantial stipend to go with the privilege. He processed, elegantly dressed, into the carved choir stalls each day and sang the office with the other canons. Sixteen years later, the 32-year-old priest persuaded the archbishop to accept his resignation. At this crucial stage of his life he took the step of joining his fortunes with those of the poor group of teachers whom he had recruited to teach in the schools for the poor. Stepping into that alternative lifestyle was just as much a challenge as going today into the ambit of deprived and disorientated youths or into work with drug addicts. But in his case there were no suitable wages to justify it and no escape to genteel life after working hours. He and his Brothers had chosen to live with the poor and consequently to be poor.

His commitment was radical. In fact, it shocked his family and many of his contemporaries. And it was with a mere two of his Brothers that he went further and made the breathtaking vow to continue their association for the work of the schools even if it meant they were 'obliged to live on bread alone'. But although his life became a statement about the social and spiritual needs of his time, what he did bears no comparison to modern 'radical' protest, the shock tactics of some campaigners, the confrontational violence of others. His radicalism was a direct response to the call of God in his life. Over the years he was gently drawn in to carrying out what God wanted of him. Aged 28, on a doorstep in Rheims in 1679 he had met Adrien Nyel just arrived in the town and had offered to help in his work of setting up free schools for the poor. It was a moment whose consequences he was unable to foresee, 'one commitment leading to another,' as he was later to say.

De La Salle acted in a spirit of faith. Once he was clear about what God wanted of him he went ahead even if it was not obvious how that action could be accomplished. Allied to this strong faith was a zealous drive, which made him prepared to suffer all kinds of attacks and setbacks in order to help those in need. He and the early Brothers worked intensively and creatively to provide a model of education that would enable youngsters to grow into well-balanced emotional, intellectual and spiritual persons. The legacy of his work across the world proves that his faith and his efforts were not misdirected.

As Founder of the Brothers, De La Salle was strongly guided by reflecting on the experience of events in his life. As a man of prayer, he was also shaped by his daily reading of Holy Scripture. For him this was the word of God for all Christians in all times and for him personally as he worked his way through the joys and difficulties of his life. So it is fitting that Scripture is the key source of inspiration in this book, the one that underlies and tests all the other contributions. His own life and writings are the second major strand so that we can draw courage from the example of one who has led the way in such a striking fashion. His under-

standing of God calling lay people to ministry in the Church, teachers in particular, is one that speaks to our times. He still also provides rich practical advice for teachers and those working with young people and we would all do well to recall frequently the phrase that he instituted in the schools and communities, "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God". Modern writings then complete this compilation. These latter are a necessary glimpse of God at work in the people of our own time and culture. They enable us to relate our own experience to that of enlightened contemporaries and they challenge us to respond.

God's plan for De La Salle did not include living a quiet, untroubled life. His life and his talents were for sharing. If at one time his Brothers thought that the sharing was just for them and their students, that era has certainly passed. The founder of the Brothers is seen now first of all as a gift to the whole Church, one of the foundation blocks. He is also valued as a great pioneer in education. He is then the particular gift of God to those many people who encounter something of his legacy in the course of their lives and are drawn together by it. And that now includes a rich variety of people, some working with youth, others with adults; some studying, others retired. Some are married, some single; some are brothers, sisters or priests; some have degrees, others practical skills. There is a place for all, just as there is in Jesus' parable of the Wedding Feast. Nor do we have to be the smartest in order to join in. We need to be honest people aiming to do our best, learners and listeners centred on God. This book is an invitation to that heavenly feast. We won't fail to get there if we keep in mind that our life is a journey of faith into love.