

De La Salle and His Brothers: An Adventure in Education

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Introduction

In a recent feature story in *The New York Times*, Henry Evans, editor of *Explorers Journal*, described an adventure as "an expedition gone wrong. If you had an adventure," he said, "you didn't take into account all the known variables." This might just as well describe the history of John Baptist de La Salle and the congregation of teaching Brothers that he founded. It corresponds to the often quoted remark of De La Salle himself that if he had known in the beginning what was in store, he would never have had the courage to go through with it.

This year the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers world-wide celebrate the beginning of that adventure just about three hundred years ago. Like all adventures that disregard the known variables, the precise moment of the beginning is problematic. The first schools that De La Salle had anything to do with were opened in 1679, so in one sense the celebration comes a year too late. The teachers were not organized into a stable and independent community until 1682 when they were called Brothers for the first time. In that sense we are two years ahead of schedule. The distinctive habit of the Brothers was adopted in 1684 and the first commitment by perpetual vows did not come until 1694. So perhaps we should go home right now and come back in fourteen years. Or better yet, we might keep the celebration going until 1994.

But what did happen in 1680? In that year, De La Salle, who had already rented a house next to his own for the rough and uncultured schoolteachers, decided to invite them in to take their meals with him. He wanted to keep his eye on them, teach them manners, and otherwise introduce them to the civilized arts. What we may well be celebrating in this year of 1980, then, is the tercentenary of the day the Brothers for the first time learned how to eat with a knife and fork.

The Founder

There was nothing in De La Salle's background to prepare him for the educational adventure he was destined to undertake. He was born in Rheims in 1651, the eldest of eleven children, seven of whom survived beyond infancy. The family belonged to the upper bourgeoisie, not noble, but distinguished and comfortably well-to-do. The father, Louis de La Salle, was a magistrate of the presidial court at Rheims; the mother, Nicolle Moët, came from the very same family that still today produces fine champagne. The children were raised in an atmosphere of piety and culture in a well-appointed ancestral home that survives to this day. Excursions into the surrounding countryside of the Champagne region were frequent, as were soirées and entertainments in the house in town. The father is known to have been a true humanist with an appreciation of good music, conversation, and books. In addition, the mother was more than ordinarily devout.

John Baptist himself was a pious lad who took the first tentative step toward the priesthood by receiving the clerical tonsure when he was only eleven. At the age of fifteen, he was made a canon of the Rheims cathedral. That required his regular attendance at the daily office and the more solemn functions in the cathedral. In return, the teen-age cleric received a stipend that in today's money would amount to about \$10,000 a year. When John Baptist was twenty-one years old, his parents died within months of each other, leaving him with the care of his younger brothers and sisters. He was able, however, to continue his theological studies and in 1678 he was ordained a priest.

If there was nothing in the family background to prepare De La Salle for an adventure in the field of education, the same is even more true of the education that he himself received. The course of studies and the teaching methods had changed little since the Middle Ages. The curriculum was designed to educate the elite few who were destined for the university studies required for careers in medicine, law, or the Church. The vehicle for instruction was Latin with the classical authors as the basis for the courses in grammar and rhetoric. The study of rhetoric was followed by two years of philosophy derived from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. There were no courses in history or the rich contemporary literature of seventeenth-century France. The philosophy of Descartes was explicitly proscribed as downright dangerous. At the conclusion of the philosophy courses, the successful students received what then passed as a Master of Arts degree. John Baptist was awarded his degree *summa cum laude* at the age of eighteen.

De La Salle began his university studies in theology at Paris, but the untimely death of his parents brought him back to Rheims. He enrolled in the university there and followed the program of candidates for the priesthood required to this day. There were the usual courses in advanced philosophy, fundamental theology, patristics and moral theology, as well as the dogmatic tracts on the Trinity and Incarnation, Grace and the Sacraments. We know the names of the teachers that De La Salle had both in Rheims and in Paris. Documents survive attesting to his scholarship and there is even a set of course notes taken down by one of his classmates. The knowledge of the students was tested by a series of oral examinations – proof against cheating – scholastic disputations, written essays and the public defense of a thesis. De La Salle received the STL degree, the licentiate in theology, in 1678, the same year that he was ordained. He was vested in the scarlet robes of a Doctor of Theology in 1680. That is something else worth celebrating after three hundred years, at least by those of us who hold the same degree.

After such a long and tiresome course of study, thoroughly classical and clerical, De La Salle was probably ready for some kind of an adventure. In fact, by the time he had completed his own formal education and donned the doctor's hood that adventure had actually begun. It was destined to lead him into a social and educational milieu that was the very antithesis of everything he had experienced up to that time, both at home and in school.

His venture into the educational field began not with boys but with girls, with a community, not of Brother's but of Sisters. Only a week or two after his ordination in 1678, De La Salle's close friend and advisor, Nicolas Roland, died. In his will, he left a small teaching community known as the Sisters of the Infant Jesus to the care of his friend. They were in the process of trying to obtain ecclesiastical and civil approval; in this they were ultimately successful, thanks to the

guidance and influence of John Baptist de La Salle. To this day the Sisters in Rheims look to him as their second Founder, after Nicolas Roland.

One day in 1679, as De La Salle was going to meet the Mother Superior of this community, he happened to encounter an enthusiastic and zealous layman named Adrien Nyel at the convent door. Nyel had just arrived from Rouen with a fourteen-year-old assistant and letters of introduction to the Sisters. He was interested in opening a school for poor boys in Rheims as an extension of work he had already begun in Rouen. De La Salle agreed to do what he could to help. He brought Nyel to his home where he then assembled some influential clerical friends to win their support for Nyel. It was necessary to proceed cautiously, since the city authorities were reluctant to allow new charitable enterprises that would put undue strain on the municipal resources. After some discussion, it was agreed that the pastor of the Church of Saint Maurice, Father Dorigny, a cousin of De La Salle, would provide room and board for Nyel and his young assistant. It was there in 1679, sometime in April, that the first school for poor boys in Rheims was opened. The adventure had indeed begun.

But De La Salle did not know that it had begun, much less did he suspect where it would lead. Once the school was opened, he no doubt thought that his part in the affair was concluded. He merely kept himself available in case Nyel should need further help. The call came very quickly. There was a rich and dying widow in the parish of Saint Jacques who wanted to provide for a charitable school in her neighborhood. Mistrusting the enthusiasm of Nyel, she insisted on dealing with De La Salle in making the arrangements. It soon became apparent that Nyel was better at starting new enterprises than he was in dealing with the teachers he recruited for the two schools. De La Salle was called upon to help in keeping them organized.

It should be kept in mind that in those days no special training or commitment was required to teach in the schools for the poor. The pay was poor, and any semiliterate person was considered equal to the task, which was classified as unskilled labor. De La Salle began to realize that if the schools were to produce any significant results for the poor lads who came to them, more was needed. Before the year 1679 was out, he had rented a house for the teachers next to his own and so became ever more deeply involved in their formation. Requests were soon pouring in to open new schools, not only in Rheims but also in the surrounding towns of Champagne. Nyel was often on the road and engaged in these negotiations, leaving the teachers in the care of De La Salle. Eventually Nyel withdrew from the Rheims adventure altogether and returned to Rouen where he died shortly thereafter.

Meanwhile, it became increasingly evident to De La Salle that he had gotten himself involved in a project worthy of all his time and talents. When the lease on the house next door expired, he moved the rough and uncouth teachers into his own home, much to the shock and dismay of his more respectable relatives. Most of his own brothers and sisters had already left home or did so shortly thereafter. In 1682, he sold the family house and moved with the teachers into a house he rented midway between the two schools. Within a short time, all the teachers recruited by Nyel abandoned the project. They were unwilling to share the meager financial rewards of their work and even more reluctant to submit to the intellectual and religious discipline demanded of them by De La Salle. His effort to transform what had been considered a menial job into a vocation worthy of total commitment was more successful when new recruits soon came to take the place

of those who had left. Thus was formed on the Rue Neuve in Rheims the first community to call themselves Brothers, dedicated to the apostolate of the Christian Schools and totally under the direction of John Baptist de La Salle.

Events moved swiftly from then on. There was still enough uncertainty in the adventure for the Brothers to take the Founder's injunction to trust to God's Providence for the successful outcome of their work, with a grain of salt. After all, they reminded him he was a priest and a canon of the Cathedral as well, with a steady source of income and a wealthy inheritance to fall back on. De La Salle admitted that they had a point. After seeking advice and after much opposition from his archbishop, De La Salle resigned his lucrative post as canon in favor of a poor priest. In the following winter when Rheims was suffering from a terrible famine, he liquidated his entire personal fortune and gave the proceeds to help feed the poor of the town. From here on, there was no turning back.

The young Society, despite ups and downs, misunderstandings and outright persecution, grew and solidified. Startled by the death of a Brother he had earmarked for the priesthood in the hope of providing for a successor, De La Salle became convinced that his Society should be composed exclusively of laymen, committed to the apostolate of the gratuitous schools. The strange habit that the Brothers wore in those days – calf-length robe, a long cape with hanging sleeves, a broad-brimmed hat, and heavy boots – set the Brothers apart from both the clergy and from secular laymen. The sense of association was very strong, as was the devotion and fidelity of the Brothers to their Founder and his vision. There were some experiments with various forms of schools: teacher training centers, especially to train rural schoolmasters, one or two boarding schools; a school for prisoners; and even a Sunday academy for those who wanted to cultivate the graceful arts. But for the most part, the Brothers taught in elementary schools in the poorer parishes, and always gratuitously. The instruction was given in French rather than in Latin and the simultaneous method of teaching, not universally in vogue at that time, was employed to achieve the most practical results. The emphasis was very much on the basics for the skills that would be useful in helping the students from poor families to earn a living and improve their social and financial condition. The work spread from Rheims to Paris, then to Provence and the cities in the South, to Rouen and the cities in the North. By the time of the Founder's death in 1719, there were Christian Schools, as he called them, all over France.

In what sense can this beginning be called an adventure? Sometimes the impression is given that De La Salle was an educational innovator, a creative genius who burst on the educational scene without preparation or precedent. That is not quite the truth. Eighty years before De La Salle, Pierre Fourier had founded a congregation of religious Sisters devoted to the education of poor girls. The Sisters employed in their schools many of the same policies and methods, including simultaneous instruction, which De La Salle was to adopt later on. There was an anonymous work published in Paris in 1654 called *L'Escole paroissale* that provided some fresh ideas on how a parish school ought to be conducted. In 1666, Charles Démia, the founder of the Sisters of Saint Charles, addressed his famous manifesto to the influential citizens of Lyons, demanding that something be done for the education of the poor in order to eliminate the social and political evils that were rooted in poverty and ignorance. Long before he met De La Salle, Adrien Nyel was part of a movement, already underway in Rouen under the direction of Father Nicolas Barré, to provide a suitable education for children of artisans and the poor.

What was distinctive about the Lasallian contribution was the lasting impact that it had on popular education. One explanation for this may lie in the hidden designs of Divine Providence. But it also affords a good illustration of the relationship that classical sociologists postulate between charisma and institution. Unlike many of his predecessors, De La Salle was the sort of charismatic leader who attracted to himself and his work a close knit and loyal band of dedicated disciples. It was De La Salle with his Brothers, that gave the charism, the vision, the adventure if you will, an institutional form. It is that Institute, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, that has borne that charism, kept the adventure alive, and made it available to all the succeeding generations for the last three hundred years. It is time then, to shift the focus from De La Salle to his Institute.

The Institute

Although the educational adventure did not end with the death of the Founder in 1719, it seemed at first as if it might. All during the rest of the eighteenth century, the Brothers were tenacious in resisting any developments or change that might depart not only from the spirit but also from the letter of the legacy that De La Salle had left behind. It was enough to be content with the extraordinary numerical growth, from little more than one hundred Brothers in 1719 to just about one thousand in 1792. However, there were no new adventures into new areas of the educational apostolate. Even more surprising, as Battersby notes, is that there was no inclination to spread the work outside of France.

This period of growth and conciliation came to a swift and unexpected end with the French Revolution. By the time the worst excesses were over, the Institute had all but disappeared. The Brothers had all been dispersed and secularized; some were jailed, exiled, or executed. The Superior General himself was in jail and beginning to show the physical and mental strain. All that was left were two small schools in Italy with only a handful of Brothers barely hanging on. But somehow the charism and spirit of adventure prevailed. The shock of discontinuity was enough to spark the determination to begin anew, in effect to refound the Institute. Little by little the Brothers who survived began to regroup their forces and find new recruits to help meet the challenge of rebuilding the life of the Church in France.

The process of refoundation was so successful that by the end of the nineteenth century the Brothers had grown from almost nothing to an educational force 15,000 strong. More significant than the numerical growth was the geographical expansion. The Institute during this period spread to every part of the globe and recruited men of varied racial, national, and cultural backgrounds into the association of Brothers. The charism and vision of the Founder began to take on new meaning in the novelty and diversity of the educational needs the Brothers were called upon to serve.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the new foundations in the United States. As the immigrant generations of Catholics in this country became upwardly mobile, it was no longer necessary or desirable for the Brothers to limit their teaching to elementary parish schools. Responsive to the call of the Church, the American Brothers embarked on new adventures, opening secondary schools, boarding schools, military academies, and orphanages. The most

revolutionary development of all was the venture of the Brothers into the field of higher education. The needs in that area were particularly acute. A college degree was necessary if Catholics were to break into the professional fields of law and medicine, engineering and teaching. At the same time, it was important that such an education be provided in an atmosphere where the Catholic faith of the students and their immigrant origin would not be the object of attack or ridicule. Furthermore, the American Church was faced with the problem of building a native clergy and colleges were needed to provide the requisite instruction in the classical languages. The bishops preferred the Brothers' colleges for this purpose. They realized that, unlike colleges conducted by orders of priests, the Brothers would not be tempted to lure young men with a priestly vocation into their own novitiate and away from the diocesan seminary. In this adventure into higher education, therefore, the Brothers saw that it was necessary to depart from the letter of the Founder's prohibition against teaching Latin and his preference for elementary education in parish schools for the poor.

This innovative approach did not sit well with the higher superiors in France. The mistrust of the American adventure by the superiors of the Brothers was only part of a larger climate of mistrust of the American Catholic experience by Church officials in Rome. It was the era of the *Syllabus of Errors* of Pius IX, the definition of papal infallibility by the First Vatican Council, the condemnation of Americanism by Leo XIII and of Modernism by Pius X.

For the Brothers, these tensions came to a head in what became known as the Latin Question. Despite reasoned and respectful argumentation by the American Brothers and earnest entreaties by the American Bishops, the superiors insisted on the letter of the *Rule*, forbade the teaching of Latin. Also, to drive the point home more effectively, all the Brother Presidents of the American Colleges, including the President of Manhattan College, were transferred and assigned to teaching duties in the grammar schools of France and Egypt.

This could have been a mortal blow and, indeed, some of the Brothers' academies and colleges had to close. But the spirit of adventure again prevailed. In the colleges that survived, the Brothers began to open their eyes to new opportunities in higher education, especially in science, engineering and business. In a way, they had a jump on those institutions that were still rooted in a purely classical approach to higher education. It is ironic that by the time the teaching of Latin was restored to the Brothers, by the intervention of the Pope in 1923, it was already apparent that quality education, even in the humanities, was quite possible without Latin and Greek.

The Second Vatican Council and the General Chapters of 1966 and 1976 have opened the way to a new era in the history of the Institute. Three hundred years after the foundation, and almost two hundred years after the near dissolution of the Institute in the French Revolution, we again confront essential change. We do not know what the future holds. That is what makes it an adventure.

Before we move into the unknown, it might be appropriate after three hundred years to take stock of where the adventure has led us thus far. One way to do this would be to ask the question: What is a Brothers' school? The school has been, still is, and perhaps will always be the dominant mode in which the Brothers educate. If we can succeed in isolating the qualities

that are distinctive of a Brothers' school, we can better appreciate what it is the Brothers can bring to new forms of educational activity and the new adventures in education that lie ahead.

The Brothers' School

Thus far we have traced the educational adventure of De La Salle and his Brothers from a historical perspective. This concluding section will be more reflective. For this purpose, it is possible to suggest six elements which, taken together, constitute the concrete and distinctive reality of the Brothers' school where the meaning of the whole adventure comes together.

The first such characteristic [of the Brothers' school] is a sensitivity to social needs. This is what started the adventure in the first place. The Founder became increasingly aware that the Christian schools were one solution to the urgent needs of the artisans and the poor. The *Rule* of the Brothers says: "The vocation of the Brothers is a total commitment directed to the service of the poor through education." And again: "In his educational activity the Brother ... shows a special concern for those who lack material goods, personal talent or human affection; this is the essential part of his mission." Even when they are teaching the well-to-do, the *Rule* reminds the Brother that he is to teach "all his students that they have a responsibility to bring the reign of justice and charity to all the world."

The social problems of today's world are no less acute but much more complex than they were in the Founder's time. And they are much less susceptible of direct and easy solutions. In our secularized society, a religiously motivated or sponsored approach to social problems is not always welcome or even possible. Many situations of social injustice cry out for radical solutions that demand resources that the Brothers simply do not have. For these and other reasons, the Brothers in many parts of the world feel justified in extending their educational work to secondary schools and colleges, to the suburban apostolate as it might be called.

Yet, despite all the complexities and rationalizations, the Brothers know that they could not lose their traditional sensitivity to the needs of the poor without losing their identity. That is why the tuition in a Brothers' school is kept relatively low. The Brothers try to expand scholarship programs, to make exceptional arrangements for the less gifted students and to treat them with special concern. In the United States, there is a national committee of Brothers that serves as a stimulus and a resource for our schools to introduce and to improve courses in social justice. These courses are designed to provide not only instruction in abstract principles but also to sensitize students to global social needs and, where possible, to provide some direct field experience in social action. The Brothers themselves, unwilling to lose this perspective in the relatively affluent ambiance where so many of them live and work, are becoming more conscious of the need to adopt a simpler life style, to become themselves involved in movements to alleviate world hunger, cut consumerism and change the social structures that perpetuate oppression and injustice.

The second but not secondary characteristic of the Brothers' school is the importance given to religious education. This, too, means something different than it did in the Founder's day. Society today is no longer religiously homogeneous; it is not exclusively or dominantly

Christian, much less Roman Catholic. The 1966 *Declaration on the Brother in the Modern World* recognizes this when it says:

Not all of those who come to a Christian school are necessarily looking for an education that is explicitly Christian. A keen sensitivity to the requirements of religious freedom obliges us not to impose indiscriminately the same catechesis on all of our students, especially when they are more mature.

For this reason, we recognize that religious education today can mean many things. It can help a student understand his religious experience and commitment at the deepest level of maturity and freedom. Religious education reveals the element of mystery in human existence, the possibilities that transcend the empirical order and the horizons that expand the meaning of what it is to live and to die. Religious education is value-centered education concerned with all that relates to life, love, trust, fidelity, freedom, justice, and brotherhood. Religious education raises doubts about limited perspectives and unexamined presuppositions; it raises the questions that can lead from agnosticism to faith. A religious educator knows how to lead students who no longer respond to traditional doctrines and creeds, legal codes or sacramental cult, to seek new words to express what they doubt and what they believe, to externalize their awe at transcendent mystery in sign and ritual that they can relate to, to identify their failure and repent of sin, and to live out their commitment in justice and love. This in no way excludes the opportunity that the Christian school has to provide students, when it is appropriate, with formal instruction in the Christian faith and, even better, an introduction to the more profound implications of the religious truth they already know and accept.

A third characteristic of the Brothers' school is commitment, in association, to teaching as a vocation. It was at once the most difficult task and at the same time the most noble achievement of John Baptist de La Salle to bring the Brothers to see that the teacher does not merely work at a job. He has a vocation and a mission. The work that he does in the classroom has a significance that is worthy of the commitment and dedication of a lifetime. This commitment takes place in a community where teachers are associated together to live out their vocation to teach. In the vow formula of the Brothers, essentially unchanged since the Founder's time, the Brother begins by declaring that he consecrates himself entirely to God to procure God's glory as far as he is able. Then the Brother says:

For this purpose, I promise to unite myself and to remain with the Brothers of the Christian Schools who are associated together to engage in educational work for the service of the poor.

There is the commitment, there is the association, and there is the vocation.

In today's world there is a need to reaffirm the vocation of the teacher. Teaching is seen today less as a vocation than as a profession, with professional standards to be met on the one hand and professional privileges to be jealously guarded on the other. Teaching is not generally regarded as one of the more lucrative professions. In the wake of the upheaval that followed the Second Vatican Council, it is distressing to observe that while most Brothers want very earnestly to preserve the schools, not very many are willing to teach daily in the classroom. Brothers are

more and more attracted to careers as administrators and guidance counselors and in auxiliary services. Indispensable as these functions may be, the Brothers' school will lose an important part of its identity if the teaching staff does not appreciate the unique effectiveness of what happens between a competent committed teacher and the students he faces in the classroom.

For that reason, the element of association is important. In today's educational institutions this concept has to be, and indeed has been, expanded to include the lay and clerical colleagues of the Brothers. The traditional sense of association is now understood in terms of a genuine educational community where, in the pursuit of knowledge, persons meet persons, mind speaks to mind and heart to heart. The Brothers play an important part in this. The 1966 *Declaration*, already cited, challenges them to be "the animating force of the school." But the Brothers can only be this as long as their own attitudes and priorities reflect the importance of teaching as a vocation.

The fourth characteristic of the Brothers' school is the quality of the education that takes place there. That is what the word "Christian" originally stood for in the designation of the schools. The Founder favored the term Christian schools to distinguish the Brothers' schools from the other Charity schools of the day where chaos rather than quality prevailed. In contrast to noisy and filthy ruffians in the Charity schools presided over by underpaid and untrained teachers, De La Salle insisted on cleanliness, politeness, discipline and – what was most unusual for the time – regular attendance. His teachers, as we have seen, were dedicated and trained. This made scholastic progress possible. In a short time, the bourgeoisie, who would never allow their sons to mingle with the smelly roughnecks in the Charity schools, began to seek admission to the schools of De La Salle; happy now to have them receive their education side by side with the poor. The Christian school got to be known as the best school in town.

The Brothers still enjoy a reputation for running good schools. They have tried to keep the standards of scholarship high and to provide the best possible professional training for the Brothers. The reputation of the Brothers for maintaining discipline in the schools is well known and perhaps a bit exaggerated. What is less well known is the spirit of friendliness that the Brothers aim to have prevail in their schools. It is no accident that the Brothers are called brother. This two-fold spirit of discipline and friendship creates a climate that enhances the quality of the education that takes place in the school.

The loyalty of our alumni associations provides evidence for this. In today's world, where quality education is more genuinely available than it was in the Founder's time, it might be presumptuous to claim that the Brothers' school is always the best in town. But wishing is one way to make it so.

The fifth characteristic of the Brothers' school is its emphasis on the practical. De La Salle had a clear sense of what was needed to advance the social situation of the children of the poor. If not the very first to offer instruction in French instead of Latin, he argued for its practicality against the educational establishment of the time and demonstrated that it could work. He wrote a manual for the schools that puts the emphasis on the basics of reading, writing, and religious instruction with precise methodologies to produce effective results. The importance he gave to cleanliness and the rules of politeness made it possible for the children of the poor to move about

more easily in the stratified society of seventeenth-century France. The students left the Christian schools well trained in how to write business letters, contracts, bills of sale, and with other useful skills that would ensure a decent livelihood.

To this day, the Brothers' schools intended for the poor and disadvantaged still focus on training in skills and trades that will make the students useful to themselves and to society. When the Brothers extended their work to secondary schools and colleges, they brought their practical orientation with them. More than in most similar institutions, the Brothers' colleges, for example, tend to parallel instruction in the liberal arts with pre-professional training in specialized fields, especially business and engineering. The education of the Brothers themselves has tended to have a practical aim. More often than not, the training of the Brothers has been determined less by personal choice and more by the needs of the schools; advanced degrees are earned by the Brothers not so much for scholarly pursuits but rather to secure the credentials needed for the accreditation of the institutions in which they serve.

This practical sense is so deeply rooted in the Brothers that as a group they sometimes seem to be almost anti-intellectual. This is not necessarily bad insofar as it keeps the attention of the Brothers centered on the needs of the students. However, there have always been some Brothers who develop into creative and productive scholars in their respective fields. In our colleges, particularly, and in some secondary schools as well, there are Brothers who argue that the most practical education is a sound theoretical one. In an age of technical know-how and explosive discoveries in empirical science, society needs theoreticians to think creatively and critically about what is going on in the world. It would not be a betrayal of the Brothers' sense of the practical if their schools also were to contribute a fair share of the future leaders in the humanities and the arts.

The sixth and final element that distinguishes the Brothers' school is rooted in the fact that, although the Institute has lived its history within the organization of the Roman Church, it has managed at the same time to keep a certain distance from it. The Founder did not want the Brothers to become dependent on any particular bishop or local Church authority. When threatened in one diocese, he would move to another. Since he did not want to model his Society too closely on any other religious congregation, he adopted a rather bizarre religious habit and moved very cautiously in the matter of religious vows. Much has been made of the fact that he sent a Brother to Rome, but this was less a gesture of subservience than an attempt to secure papal approval that would authenticate and protect the special character of his Institute. The total exclusion of the priesthood kept the Brothers out of the mainstream of ecclesiastical politics and theological disputes. De La Salle was careful, before his death, to arrange for the election of a Brother to succeed him as Superior. Fundamentally obedient and intensely loyal to the Church, he kept an independent stance for the sake of the imperatives he saw in the Gospel.

With some notable exceptions, this attitude has prevailed in the history of the Institute and in the Brothers' schools. It has helped the Brothers to be receptive to students of other faiths. In some cases, it has made them less cautious than clerics might be in encouraging an open and critical attitude to some aspects of Catholic policy and observance. The Brothers seem more inclined to emphasize the simplicity of the Christian lifestyle and to minimize manifestations of ecclesiastical pomp. Although the Brothers and their students respect and admire priests and the

priesthood, sometimes almost excessively, they manage by and large to dispense with the external deference due to clerical privilege and rank. Being laymen themselves, the Brothers understand and tend to support movements to give laymen and laywomen more leadership roles in the Church.

More than anything else, the Brothers have kept alive in the Church the spirit and reality of brotherhood. Brothers are not fathers in any sense of the word. The Brothers are happy that the horizontal model of brotherhood is replacing the vertical model of fatherhood in contemporary language and life. Some of the Brothers seem happy, too, at the realization that brotherhood implies sisterhood, that their brotherhood is the basis for an equal and equitable relationship with their sisters. In all of these respects, the fact the Brothers are brothers gives them an original and prophetic role in the life of the Church.

Those, then, are the six distinctive features of the Brothers' school. To recap them briefly, they are: sensitivity to social needs, religious education, teaching as a vocation, practical instruction, quality education, and a unique relation to the Roman Church. Many other schools, no doubt, manifest many of these same qualities. But taken together they seem to describe that elusive something that we call a Brothers' school. It is what we try to express when we say of one of our graduates, "Oh, he's a Brothers' boy!" That expression, by the way, will have to be revised now that the Brothers also teach girls. It won't quite do to say, "Oh, she's a Brothers' girl!"

Conclusion

This concludes our survey of the educational adventure of De La Salle and his Brothers. We know that there are more adventures that await us in the future, but that is not for analysis tonight. The Founder did not know what he was in for when he began, and neither did you when you came here tonight. But relief is on the way. Class dismissed.

Endnotes

1. This address was delivered on the occasion of the Inaugural John R. Mulhearn Lecture at Manhattan College on December 2, 1980.

2. Brother Luke Salm (1921-2009) was a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College for more than half a century. He was the first religious Brother and non-cleric to earn a doctorate in theology (STD) at The Catholic University of America (1955). He was an elected delegate of the District of New York to the 39th, 40th, 41st, and 42nd General Chapters of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; and he was a noted historian of the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.