

JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE AND MEMORANDUM ON THE HABIT

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ABSTRACT

This reflection was carried out under the studies of La Salle and his legacy, led by Brother John Crawford at the University La Salle Philadelphia. It is published in recognition of the efforts made by the author to understand, so original, and updating the experience of John Baptist de La Salle by one of his personal papers, as is the Memorial on the Habit, written in Paris between 1689 and 1690.

On February 24, 1688, John Baptist de La Salle, a thirty-seven year old priest from Reims accompanied by two laymen, arrived at the parish of Saint Sulpice in Paris to begin work on opening a free school for the children of the poor and crowded neighborhood. They arrived at the invitation of the pastor there, who must have received word from the townspeople in Reims about this peculiar group of laymen and their "community of Christian Schools". Undoubtedly, the word "peculiar" could not have been far from the pastor's tongue that day as La Salle arrived with two men donning, under peasant coats, apparently somewhat outrageous (relative to the clerical styles of the times, one assumes) black robes with a split white collar. The arrival of the men in Paris would prove to be a seminal event in the formation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, chiefly because of their organizational expansion beyond the Archdiocese of Reims. It was yet another step in the early journey of discernment that La Salle and the Brothers took together, a step that would help shape La Salle's life and the birth of the Institute by instilling a more salient sense of identity within the community. As La Salle would no doubt be the first to claim, God had brought them to Paris to expand and continue the mission; he might have just wished that God had inspired them to dress a little less noticeably.

By the time of their arrival in 1688, La Salle and the Brothers were well-versed in disputes with clergy at various places in Church hierarchy. From the regal archbishop to the petty, meddling priests on the ground in Reims, it almost seemed like every man in a cassock had a de facto objection to some aspect of the laymen's lives, such as the election of a lay superior from one of their own. Thus, it was necessary for La Salle and these early Brothers to establish in the early goings, that theirs was a community that would be self-discerning and self-determination. It is no surprise, then, that this independent spirit appears most fervently in La Salle's "Memorandum on the Habit," a defense of the Brothers' robes written in response to the insistence of the pastor of Saint Sulpice that they wear more clerical cassocks. But what starts as a defense of the Habit quickly evolves to a defense of the community as a whole, in particular its right to determine its

own mission and lifestyle. The document therefore is critical to understanding the life of La Salle and the history of the Brothers, as it clearly discloses the development of a shared sense of purpose, unity, and identity between the man and the early Brothers. 47

Anyone familiar with the writings of St. John Baptist de La Salle would be able to recognize the *Memorandum on the Habit* as a quintessentially Lasallian text. Of the initial aphorisms in the document (structured as a catalogue of reasons for wearing the habit), key Lasallian buzzwords appear. La Salle makes it clear in the document that the community is "religious", which means "those who live in it follow a Rule and are dependent for everything, having no personal possessions, and treat one another as equals" (La Salle, 2002:181)¹. By explicitly identifying the Brothers as a "religious community," as well as comparing the developments of his community with that of the Jesuits and St. Vincent de Paul, La Salle makes it clear that the Brothers consider themselves as living a religious life, and, by extension, see themselves as self-determinant and self-discerning. Such a designation might seem obvious to the modern Lasallian reader; however, at the time, the Brothers were not legally recognized by the State or the Church. With nothing binding the men to the community but a shared sense of religious identity and conviction, men could (and would) come and go as they pleased and the communities could not own property. Thus, the informality of the community's status demanded that La Salle and the Brothers do everything they could to build up a stronger and more cohesive religious community. La Salle remarks that "some of them [the early Brothers] have even admitted several times that they had considered leaving and would have done so had it not been for the habit" (La Salle, 2002:189). He also cites Vincent de Paul, arguing "Monsieur Vincent judged that a distinctive habit was essential, in a sense, to hold the allegiance of the members of his congregation" (La Salle, 2002:188). La Salle then applies Vincent de Paul's logic to his own community by remarking "it seems more suitable for the welfare of a community that the habit be distinctive from its foundation" (La Salle, 2002:188). He recognized that, not only does the habit provide a sense of identity in the day-to-day life of the Brothers, but it also provides a sense of tradition and continuity for the still emergent community. Thus, the primary function of the habit for the Brothers was to foster a distinct internal spiritual identity and a more tangible collective cohesion.

The need for an internal cohesion that the habit addressed in community life was accompanied by a need to distinguish the community publicly from other clergy and religious at the time. The document, of course, in providing a dissenting section which argues against the suggestion of donning clerical robes, implies that the pastor at Saint Sulpice insisted that the Brothers wear such clothing. La Salle provides a number of reasons asserting that such an arrangement would jeopardize the community from inside and out. Under the section "Objections to wearing the ecclesiastical habit," La Salle makes clear his expectation that the lay community is just that, exclusively lay: "the members of this Community of the Christian Schools... have not pursued a classical education—and never will- and... neither can nor do perform priestly functions or wear a surplice in church" (La Salle, 2002:189). La Salle rightly feared that those early Brothers could easily be taken advantage of by the often already overworked and understaffed pastors of the impoverished urban parishes that the community worked in. He also feared that such a wardrobe would, in drawing comparisons to the clergy, inflate the egos of the Brothers, which would

¹ Editor's note: References to *Memorandum on the Habit* have been confronted with the text: John Baptist de La Salle (2002). *Rule and Foundational Documents*. Maryland: Lasallian Publications, Christian Brothers Conference.

consequently draw their attention away from their responsibilities, the students (cf. La Salle, 2002:190) La Salle was finally concerned that wearing anything other than the habit would lead to confusion among the public (and incoming novices, more importantly) with regard to who exactly these men were and what their life was like. As one can see, the decision of the community to remain exclusively lay, so that it could focus entirely on their mission, was well-established by the time the document was written. The habit was just one more issue that La Salle would not compromise on; the community was so steadfast in following this particular part of the Rule that La Salle remarks of the linguistic distinction that they felt compelled to draw: "we call this habit a robe to distinguish it from a clerical cassock" (La Salle, 2002:184).

It is quite clear, then, that the primary purpose of the Brothers' robe was its aesthetic value; it makes essential contributions to the community's collective identity and cohesion, both internally and externally. One might consider this line of reasoning to be more theological and social than practical, but La Salle makes it clear—almost painstakingly—that their robe was not without its practicalities. "The cloaks or overcoats that the Brothers of the Christian Schools wear were given to them to guard against the cold" (La Salle, 2002:184), La Salle remarks. He continues to say: "At that time, cloaks were widely worn, and we judged them to be proper, useful, and comfortable attire for schoolmasters, particularly those who must leave their community residence and go to schools in distant districts" (La Salle, 2002:184). Physically, the ecclesiastical cassocks that the pastor is supposed to have suggested instead were cumbersome: "the long mantle would get in the way of their work...with this garb, they could not easily move among their students, line them up, or keep them in order when they escort them to the parish church and remain with them there.... [And] there is a danger of knocking over most of the smaller children on one side or the other while trying to place them in line" (La Salle, 2002:191). The list of such practicalities goes on and on. One can see in this line of reasoning a sliver of the pragmatic prowess La Salle and the Brothers brought to the curricula in these schools. The well-publicized practical genius that John Baptist de La Salle displayed in his catechetical techniques is seen plainly here. However, also present in this practical line of reasoning is a portrait of La Salle as a shrewd negotiator. In referencing the responsibility of the Brothers to take the children to mass, La Salle is indirectly reminding the pastor of how successful they have been at restoring a sense of order among the children (who used to run rampant in the streets). He ever so subtly, reminds the pastor that he needs the Brothers more than the Brothers need him.

The shared sense of spirit and mission of John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers is seen broadly and plainly in the *Memorandum on the Habit*. The document also gives the modern reader an enjoyable insight into both the early life of the Brothers and the breadth of character that La Salle demonstrates throughout his foundational stewardship of the Institute. Did the Brothers look a bit "peculiar" in their plain, black woolen robes and peasant coats? To the modern reader, surely; to the late seventeenth century Parisian, the Brothers still most likely would have stood out. But there were plain theological, social and practical reasons behind adopting the habit, their habit. To the Brothers themselves, the habit was a representation of the equality of the community under God, their shared sense of mission and purpose, and would become perhaps the most important source of tradition and continuity with the past in the original Rule. To the people they served the Brothers' robes were distinctive and inspired no confusion as to who the Brothers were and what they did. Unfortunately for the pastor of Saint Sulpice, he happened to be the last parishioner to discover just who the Brothers were and why; but he would soon find the reasons. One only wonders if he expected sixty-four of them.