

## **LA SALLE: THE MEMORY OF THE INSTITUTE 300 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH. INVOCATIONS AND PROVOCATIONS FOR THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the context of the tercentenary of the death of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, this article invites us to generate new dynamism to recreate the reading of the Lasallian memory. Lasallian history is a relevant one and must be read in the context of the new educational and pastoral needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century society and the Church.

**Keywords:** Holy Founder; fidelity; dynamism; memory; provocations; invocations; Lasallian educational service; Lasallian history; educational mission; Christ; vocation; meaning.

### **Introduction**

This year 2019, which marks the jubilee of the 300th anniversary of the death of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, is dedicated to Lasallian vocations. Indeed, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (F.S.C.), was a French priest born in 1651 and died in 1719. He was beatified in 1888, canonized in 1900 and proclaimed universal patron of educators in 1950. For us Lasallians, the celebration of the tercentenary is a wonderful opportunity to revisit the life of our holy Founder, to re-read the great history of the religious Institute he founded and the journey of our spiritual family over the centuries.

This tercentenary brings us once again the gift of reaffirming our emotional, spiritual and intellectual fidelity to the Holy Founder; thus fulfilling the recommendation of the conciliar decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, which the institutes bring to light and faithfully maintain the spirit of the founders and specific intentions as well as the healthy traditions, which together constitute the heritage of each institute (Paul-VI, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1965). This "Sacred Heritage" is essential to the extent that according to Halbwachs (1994), "to appreciate exactly one religious step or progress, men must remember, at least in general, where they started from".

This fidelity to the Founder must be creative, for according to Sauvage (2001) it "will only be authentic to the extent that it is lived within a creative dynamism rooted in the Gospel and open to the present needs of the world and the Church". Indeed, the Founder is not "an oracle" from whom one could still "expect a ready-made solution, elaborated yesterday, to the problems that confront us today... The charity resides in the living Body today » (Sauvage, 2001).

Through the topic of our discussion: "La Salle: the memory of the Institute after 300 years of his death. Invocations and provocations for the 21<sup>st</sup> century", we want to go back into the great history of the participation of the Lasallian family in the establishment of the kingdom of God in the world, through the struggle against ignorance that is fatal to the soul. To do this, we will first clarify the terminology.

## **I- Clarifying terminology**

This work of clarification focuses on four key terms: memory, death, invocation and provocation. Memory can be defined as the totality of the traces left by a person or a group of persons, an event in history, and thus perpetuates the existence of the person or event. Memory, according to Delporte (2010) is "the ability to make the past present". It also refers to the human capacity to recall an event from the past, and thus to learn or benefit from it. The memory of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is, therefore, all the significant events that have occurred over the past three centuries.

As for the term death, in Latin "mortis", it derives from the Latin verb "morire" which means "to cease living". The noun death, therefore, refers to the fact that a human being completely and definitively ceases to live. From this point of view, the death of Saint John Baptist de La Salle represents the end of his earthly existence. This, in the theological language, corresponds to his birth in heaven, that is, in the kingdom of God. The death of John Baptist de La Salle is for us Lasallians, his entry into the kingdom of heaven, his coronation in heaven.

With regard to the noun invocation, it comes from the verb invoke, in Latin "invocare", which consists in using important facts or events in the life of a person or a society to justify, clarify or explain a current situation. In this perspective, the invocation in this work will consist in calling upon significant events in the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, in the history of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and in the great Lasallian family, to support his commitment to the service of the Church and Society today.

As for the term provocation, it is a noun derived from the verb provoke, from the Latin "provocare", which is the act of pushing, inciting or challenging someone to perform an audacious, ambitious act. Provocation is therefore an incentive to take a bold, intrepid action. From this point of view, starting from the great challenges facing society and the Church today, we will invite our Lasallian family to be bold, to leap of faith, to act with "a grain of madness", as Thomas Sankara would say.

This work will simply consist in revisiting the life of the Holy Founder and the history of our Lasallian family, since the entry of Saint John the Baptist into the glory of the Father, by calling

upon some very significant acts, to launch new challenges for the Lasallian family, such as going "beyond borders". The aim is to showcase the contribution of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the Lasallian family to the construction of a more just, fraternal and prosperous world.

## II- The invocations

Lasallian history is a history of faith, rich in its testimony of "passion for God and passion for man". In fact, John Baptist de La Salle was born and raised in a Catholic family. He was baptized and received his tonsure at the age of 11 and became canon of the cathedral of Reims at the age of 15. A student at the *Collège des Bons Enfants*, he later attended the major seminary of Saint-Sulpice and was ordained a priest in 1678. He obtained his doctorate in theology in 1680.

This journey is thus the true journey of a man of faith, a man of God, who dedicated his life to the proclamation of God's kingdom. Later, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, invited by Mr. Adrien Nyel, and moved by the situation of distress of the children of the poor and artisans, he founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This community of men of faith, exclusively lay, consecrated by religious vows, is dedicated to the human and Christian education of young people.

Since its creation, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has seen thousands of people dedicate their lives to it, in the educational service of young people and children, especially the most vulnerable, thus bearing witness to God's presence in the midst of His people. This Institute is truly a patrimony of the Catholic Church, especially through its 14 canonized members, its 150 blessed ones, most of whom are martyrs, and its 9 venerable ones. Martyrdom being the highest expression of a person's testimony of faith. Saint John Baptist de La Salle himself is declared universal patron saint of Christian educators.

He renewed 17<sup>th</sup> century French schools, making them accessible to the poorest young people of his time, and making them an instrument of salvation for the children of the poor and craft workers, thus announcing the "good news to the poor" (Lk 7:22). Among the major pedagogical innovations attributed to him are the foundation of the first religious congregation of exclusively laymen dedicated to education, the foundation of primary teacher training colleges, the simultaneous method, the prioritizing of learning in a native language, free primary education, organizing evening classes for young workers, structuring education in four areas: reading, writing, calculating and drawing.

The Lasallian family has subsequently shown itself to be very creative in seeking innovative solutions to the complex problems of the populations it serves. It has therefore diversified its training offer, covering both formal and informal education. Indeed, the portfolio of Lasallian educational service includes nursery, primary, secondary and university schools. There are also socio-educational centers for children at risk, young adults in marginalized situations and Lasallian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that support the mission, especially in the most fragile areas.

In terms of recent pedagogical innovations, we can mention the development of the ORA (Observe, Reflect, Act) method for the education of Baka children in the Cameroonian forest; the call center for children at risk of suicide in Australia, the mobile school for Gypsies in France, the Saint Miguel schools in the United States of America, the *Fondació Comtal* in Barcelona and the *Hogar Esperanza* in Chile.

A dive into Lasallian history reveals the reasons and motivations of the Lasallian educational mission. But before we can substantiate our point on this subject, it is necessary to clarify these two key terms, the reason and the motivation of an act. According to Sartre (1943), the reason for an act is "reason, i.e. the set of rational considerations that justify it... The reason is characterized by an objective assessment of the situation, in the light of a presupposed purpose and within the limits of a project from the self towards this end". As for the motivation of an act, Sartre defines it as a "subjective fact, that is, the set of desires, emotions and passions that push a responsible subject to perform a certain act".

From this premise, we can affirm that the reason for Goussin's (2001) Lasallian educational mission is to "build man and speak God" through the school. The description of the situation of distress of the children of peasants and craft workers - presented by Saint John Baptist de La Salle in meditation 194:1 - reveals this reason: to care for these children who are left to themselves, who roam and wander in bad company, and who indulge in a lazy life and sin (La Salle, 1993). Indeed, the Holy Founder is very clear: it is to remedy such a great inconvenience that God establishes the Christian Schools where people teach freely and solely for the glory of God (La Salle, 1993). The purpose of the Lasallian educational mission is therefore to remove children from the streets, from the clutches of ignorance, to instruct them in science, the arts and literature; and to prepare their souls for the knowledge of God.

As for the motivation behind the Lasallian educational mission, it is faith in Jesus Christ, which gives virtue, strength and effectiveness to every Lasallian educational action (La Salle, 1993). Hence the importance for the Lasallian educator to remain in Jesus Christ in order to bear fruit (Jn 15:5). A major act in the history of the Lasallian family and which makes this motivation of faith explicit is undoubtedly the heroic vow (November 21, 1691), through which Saint John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, consecrate themselves entirely to the Most Holy Trinity, for the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools, by vowing association and union to provide and maintain the said establishment, without being able to part with it, even though they would remain only the three in the said Society and would be obliged to ask for alms and to live on bread only (Goussin, 2001).

At the risk of being told by the angel: "Why are you still looking up to heaven? "(Acts 1:11), let us rather seek new apostolic fields in the midst of the new situations that are spiritually and humanely sustained by the children and young people of our time. For by repeating the deeds of our Fathers and our predecessors, we could end up deserting the places of our battles. Yet we must go down from the mountain to the valley to feed the Lord's flock as good shepherds smelling the smell of the sheep; work the Lord's vineyard as good winegrowers ready to give an account to the master of the vineyard as useless servants; put your hand to the dough like good bakers to offer the bread of life to humanity.

This retrospective look allowed us to become aware that we are carried on the shoulders of giants, heirs to a great story whose background is, as Augustine (1959) says, the love of God to the point of contempt for oneself. A story of men of conviction, for whom the educational service of the poor is an essential, not circumstantial, life option. Men of faith who do not distinguish between the affairs of their employment and the affairs of their sanctification and who respond to the needs of the Church and Society. In the rest of our work, we will identify some avenues for reflection on Lasallian responses to current challenges.

### III- The provocations

According to Jaulmes (2017), the world today is facing various major changes in climate, demographics, technology, economics, culture, politics, geopolitics and religion; and is experiencing serious security, migration, food and energy crises, leading to a change of era. The Second Vatican Council Fathers, in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, already stressed that:

...humankind is living a new age in its history characterized by profound and rapid changes whose consequences reflect on man himself, on his judgments, on his individual and collective desires, on his ways of thinking and acting, both with regard to things and to his fellow human beings (Paul-VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965).

We are now witnessing, politically and geopolitically, the questioning of the international order of 1945, the rise of extremist and nationalist parties, the multiplication of proxy wars used by the major powers to subdue and plunder the resources of other countries by exercising their "art of winning without reason", as The Great Royal would say (Kane, 1961). We are also witnessing the exploitation of the migration crisis, yet the consequences of "sin structures". Demographically, it is the aging of the populations of industrialized countries and the rapid growth of populations in developing countries, the debate on gender and sexuality.

At an economic level, we are witnessing the forcible entry of multinationals and non-governmental organizations into decision-making spheres, the widespread use of greenwashing, which hinders the fight against climate change, fake marketing and its corollary of consumerism and the culture of the disposable. In the security field, the world had never experienced such a threat characterized by cyber-crime, Islamist terrorism, violation of agreements against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the development of long-range remote-controlled hyper-precision weapons.

Technologically, we are living in an era of hyper-connectivity including teenagers, loss of control over personal data, the culture of velocity, immediacy and virality. The climax of despair is undoubtedly the invasion of social networks and the explosion of the fake news phenomenon, which destroys the foundations of social life.

On the religious level, the era is one of secularization, the elimination of God and the option for hedonism, in the face of a Church whose servants have been guilty of scandals, especially sexual ones. We live in a society whose traditional authority structures - family, Church, politics - are crippled by interest groups. But these challenges of society and the Church are in reality new

apostolic fields for us Lasallians; and they require innovative solutions to the complex problems faced by the young people and children of our time.

### **- The return to Christ**

The response of the Lasallian Family in this environment of great adversity or at least uncertainty must consist in a return to Christ: "Outside me, there is nothing you can do" (Jn 15:5). Saint John Baptist de La Salle was well aware of this, hence this prayer of the orator in discernment: "My God, I do not know if it is necessary to found or if it is not necessary. It is not up to me to establish communities or how to establish them. It is up to you, my God, to know it and to do it the way you like" (Sauvage, 2001). This primacy of God is reminded to us by the Brother Superior General:

For those of us who are Christians, our lives and ministry are founded on Jesus Christ and motivated by His desire that all people should enjoy the fullness of life (the Kingdom of God). For Lasallians from other religious traditions, you may consider integrating elements of the Christian and Lasallian perspective into your own understanding of God and the human family (Schieler, 2018).

But to be a disciple of Christ is simply to row against the current.

To achieve this, the Lasallian family has embraced the invitation of the Second Vatican Council that religious institutes share their charism with the laity and empower them in the mission. The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, over the past 50 years, thanks to the decisions of its Superiors and their leadership, has insisted on association with the laity. Important facts include, among others, the revision of the Brothers' formula of consecration consecrating the centrality of the vow of association; the concept of shared mission has taken on its full importance, and the formation of lay people and their empowerment has become an essential mission.

This change of direction is understandable, because the Holy Spirit speaks to the heart of every person. This theological truth broadens the conception of vocation. The call to holiness is addressed to all mankind, not only to priests, or religious men and women; not even to the baptized alone. From now on, every human being, indirectly, is a participant in Christ's mission: to lead people to know God and to save themselves. This close collaboration brings a new impetus to the Lasallian educational mission, which is regaining vitality even as the number of Brothers decreases. Today, the laity constitute an essential link in the Lasallian mission and are the guarantor of the Lasallian charism.

### **- A return to meaning**

Founded in Jesus Christ, the Lasallian family, in order to respond to the needs of the Church and society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, must continue and strengthen the Lasallian formation of Brothers and Laity, for greater vitality of the mission. Because more than ever, the educational service of the poor is of great necessity for the Church and society. Our Lasallian family must ensure the accompaniment of its members, so that they know how to choose good and reject evil, in this era of great confusion where the paths and landmarks are blurred, making discernment more difficult than ever.

Hence the need for a return to the meaning, to the deep meaning of things. It is by seeking and discovering the deep meaning of events that Lasallians will be able to continue to extend the kingdom of God, pushing the frontier of ignorance, fighting the good fight of faith, in the face of the major concerns of our era. Among these major concerns are the meaning of Christian marriage, which is a man and a woman, in a spirit of faithful love and whose primary purpose is the procreation and education of children; medically assisted procreation and the phenomenon of surrogacy; the migration crisis and exacerbated nationalism; and human and organ trafficking. Faced with these existential questions, the voice of the Brother catechist, the Lasallian educator, must be clear and audible, unambiguously, in order to carry the Word of truth, the light of true hearts (Ps 111:4).

This tendency to subordinate human beings to wealth and property, with new forms of slavery, excessive exploitation of natural resources in defiance of the climate and populations, the almost intentional maintenance of certain populations on the planet in poverty, requires a Lasallian response. Just as in the face of the phenomenon of fake news that threatens the foundations of society, there is necessarily a need for a return to the love of truth, of wisdom, through an education of thought, of conscience. And we Lasallians have a duty to bring the truth where there is error.

#### **- Momentum for action**

It is urgent to act, so that we do not have to react. We must train young people to commit themselves to changing the world, to making it better; that is, more just, more fraternal, more equitable. Young people who take initiatives against violence, consumerism and racism. Cautious young people, who do not measure the depth of the water with both feet. Young people who know how to discern and who are masters of their languages, thumbs, keyboards and mice in this era of social networks. Lasallians, we have to develop and nurture the creativity of the young people we serve. One of the possible methods is the seven keys to developing creativity, such as Leonardo Da Vinci, proposed by Gelb (2011):

1. *La Curiosità* (curiosity to know, learn and develop)
2. *La Dimostrazione* (self-experimentation)
3. *La Sensazione* (amplification of perception by the senses)
4. *Lo Sfumato* (tolerance of ambiguity, nuance, uncertainty and paradox)
5. *L'Arte/La Scienza* (solicitation of both hemispheres of the brain)
6. *La Corporalità* (the right balance between body and mind)
7. *La Connessione* (harmonization of a coherent whole through systemic thinking).

It is at this price that students will be empowered to act, and to affirm like Barack Obama: "Yes, we can!"

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