Chapter – I

LIFE HISTORY OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

“God guides everything wisely and gently and does not do violence to the inclination of men. Therefore, when He determines to urge me into devoting myself completely to the care of schools. He did so in a manner that escaped my knowledge over a long period of time, with the result that one commitment led to another, that I had not foreseen in the beginning”.

These words testify to the visionary zeal and spiritual commitment of De La Salle. Total surrender to the will of God is not a loss of freedom. In fact it is a novel opportunity to serve the poor, the downtrodden, the abandoned to render the spiritual journey meaningful. What is very vital is to remember that this unconditional submission portrays an evangelist, who took upon himself, the role of a humble man who could perform meticulously the duties assigned to him. The mystery of God is brought home to his children who turnout to be both practitioner as well as service minders. In the bargain the whole experience as well as exposure gains in intensity and momentum culminating in total self fulfilment.

De La Salle was born at Rheims in France on 30th of April 1651. He was baptised on the same day at his Parish Church, Saint Hilary. He was the eldest son of Louis and Nicolle De Salle. Since his infancy, he had a natural inclination towards piety. Temperamentally serious, he spent his precious time reading valuable books. In fact his father encouraged the child prodigy by grooming him in moral and spiritual values.

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1 Doctrine Spirituelle de Saint Jean-Baptiste De La Salle Confirmee Par Ses Examples, Lasallian Publication (Hereafter referred as LP) Paris, 1900, p.681.
He began his educational career at Rheims University and in 1769 acquired the degree of Master of Arts. At a very early age he cherished the dream to consecrate to God through his priesthood. His father however entertained the hope that his son would opt for law and maintain the family tradition. But De La Salle preferred to obey his conscience and dedicate himself towards church service. Consequently he received the tonsure in 1762 and was solemnly installed as cannon of the metropolitan City, Rhiems in 1767. The religious position endeared him towards the church and its ceremonies. Barely 16 years old De La Salle publicly performed his religious duties with fervor. He understood the obligations and fulfilled the entrusted duties to the best of his abilities. Thus the gradual structuring and spiritual guidance to the community turned out to be the major focus of the Founder’s entire life.

After De La Salle completed his classical literary and philosophical courses he was dispatched to Paris to enter the seminary of Saint Sulpice. During his tenure he attended to the lectures on theology at the Sorbomme. He distinguished himself both by his godliness as well as dynamism and the intellectual aptitude he brought into play while handling theological subjects.

However personal problems put him through a series of trials and tribulations. His dedication to god took a backseat. His mother died in 1671 followed closely by his father’s demise a year later. This situation warranted him to leave Saint Sulpice. New responsibilities weighed heavily on his young shoulders. His entire interest was devoted to his domestic affairs and with clear planning he managed to steer clear of both professional and public problems. It was a period of intense mental struggle displaying his own fears and phobias. De La Salle took recourse to prayers and guidances given by close diplomatic advisers. Worth mentioning is Nicolous Roland, cannon and theologian of

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4 Ibid., p.66.
Rheims who was considered to be a man of great spiritual judgement. The friendship resulted in the future educational reformer to be ordained as Subdeacon at Cambrai by the ArchBishop\(^5\).

After a spell of four years, he was elevated to the post of deacon at Paris by Francois Batailler, the Bishop of Bethlehem. At this juncture he tried to obtain the permission of the archbishop of Rheims to resign his canonry and engross himself in his parish work. Although his friend Nicholas Roland encouraged him to accept the job his archbishop refused his request. De La Salle conceded to the decision and returned to Rheims and once more pursued his studies to prepare for his ordination to his priesthood. Thus he was ordained as a priest by archbishop on Holy Saturday at the very young age of 27\(^6\).

The young Priest turned out to be a model of self effacement. His biographers affirm that persons thronged to his mass to be both enlightened and involved. After that innumerable people sought his counsel to be benefited by his spiritual guidance. In June 1680 turned out to be a milestone in his career with De La Salle being conferred the doctorate in theology\(^7\).

The years that intervened between his ordination to the priesthood and the establishment of the Institute of teaching brothers was spent in carrying out the last will and testament of Nicolas Roland. The Philosopher, Thinker had invested De La Salle with the charge of running the newly established congregation of the sisters of Child Jesus. Nicolas Roland had fervent faith in De La Salle’s enthusiasm, grit and tenacity. The trust unconsciously engineered De La Salle towards his life work. According to him “By those two events, namely my meeting monsieur Nyel and the proposal made to me ................. that I began to take an interest in the schools for boys. The period lasted for just

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\(^7\) Isidoro D; Maria, Vita Di San Giovanni Battista De La Salle, Turin, RL 5, LP 1957, Paris, p.709.
2 years. During this time he was also preoccupied with his functions as cannon. But in 1679 he was requested to assist Adrien Nyel in opening a free school at Rheims. But once more he withdrew from the job feeling it to be a life mission. But very soon he was lured from seclusion to opening another free school at Saint Jacques Parish\(^8\).

De La Salle may have been instrumental in opening the elementary free schools at Rheims. But being humble by temperament he allowed his companion to share all the honours resulting from the venture. It is there he was unconsciously attracted to the task. He made it a point to visit the teachers regularly and encouraged them to suggest methods and means by which they could attain definite results\(^9\).

Sensing the discouragement of the teachers, he undertook to accommodate them after school hours towards practical usage of time. He was also humane enough to understand difficulties in the cost of living. He was gracious enough to permit them to have meals at the table and also shelter them under his roof. This paved the way for an intimate fellowship with the teachers of the poor. “It was indeed his love that induced De La Salle to devote himself to the young teachers of Rheims. They were like abandoned sheep without a shepherd. He assured them the responsibility of uniting them\(^10\).

De La Salle had definite plans for the future. He was honest enough to keep himself ready to follow the guidance of God’s providence. He resigned his canonry in 1683 and was generous to distribute his fortunes to the poor giving convincing proofs that he was capable of making necessary sacrifices towards completing the good work he had done. When friends and kinsfolk protested at his philanthropic nature, he humbly answered that he was simply

\(^8\) Bernoville, Gaetan, Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Alsatia, Paris, 1944, p.283.
\(^10\) Ibid., p.279.
the representative of God and if need be would beg arms. This abandonment to
divine providence and consequent detachment from all worldly things
contributed to the special characteristic of De La Salle. This dependence on the
will of God became henceforth the foundation of Christian schools all over the
world\textsuperscript{11}.

1694-1717 was the most critical phase in De La Salle’s educational
career. The institute was weakened my deaths and defections. De La Salle
found it extremely difficult to find even two brothers who were willing to bind
themselves by vows to maintain free schools. What is more, the founder felt
persecuted by ecclesiastical authorities. He suffered humiliation of being
replaced for a time by reverend B. Bricot in 1703. One of his most trusted
disciples disderted him. The next 10 years turned out be a Herculean struggle
for the very preservation of his institute. He was slandered with justice denied
to him before the civil tribunals. After 35 years of hard labour, his missionary
work seemed to be almost on the verge of collapse. But his confidence God
proved invincible and he never felt discouraged or broken hearted. In 1717 he
campaigned for the election of the superior general. His basic motive was to
have a brother elected during his life time and thus perfect the government of
the institute in accordance with the rules he had formulated. Br. Barthalamy
was a choice of the assembled brothers. Thus the institute turned out to be an
accomplished fact. This was a Red letter day in the career of De La Salle. His
bond with the brothers was tightly knit. Basically unassuming he chose the
burden of labour and also observed the common rules. He never left them to be
engaged in works of his own\textsuperscript{12}.

The brothers motivated by De La Salle determined to live as brothers.
Modelling their lives on the precepts of the Gospel, they resolved to live in

\textsuperscript{11} Carron, abbe, Le Tendre Ami Des Enfants Du Peuple Ou Vie De Iabbe J.B.de La Salle, Instituteur

\textsuperscript{12} Sauvage, Michael, Catechese et Laics au Ministere De La Parole et Mission Due Frere-enseignant
seclusion for one year. They also went for religious clothes that would distinguish them from the rest of the society. The habit that the brothers wore proved to be rediculous to the members of Rheims society. Consequently, they were a butt of redicule to the onlookers. The Brothers refused to be humiliated by such criticisms since they were zealous of serving the will of God\textsuperscript{13}.

Wishing to provide the essential education for the poor and the unrecognized, De La Salle welcomed all those who wished to avail the education offered by the brothers. This resulted in all kinds of students enrolling themselves to be future scholars. Some of the students were too poor to pay tuition fees. These students caused disruption in the running of the schools. The brothers had no choice, but to resort to corporal punishment. But the parents objected to the manhandling of the children. In turn they confronted De La Salle for giving freedom to the brothers but De La Salle meekly bore the criticism and continued to encourage the brothers to teach classes with discipline and control\textsuperscript{14}.

De La Salle was pained to learn of the death of his counsellor friend Adrien Nyel. He had relied on Nyel to open schools in other towns. He had persuaded DLS to take charge of the schools in major cities. He also proved to DLS to be a source of inspiration both towards establishing schools and moulding teachers into an organised brotherhood\textsuperscript{15}.

De La Salle’s popularity in running disciplined schools in Rheims spread far and wide. Priests from rural towns and villages began to clamour for schools organized by the brothers in their areas. John De La Salle was however firmly decided against the idea of sending single brothers to conduct schools in rural areas. Keeping in mind the demands of the rural parish priests he decided

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.473.
\textsuperscript{15} Battersby, W.J., De La Salle. op.cit., p.207.
to compromise, on the grounds that these parishes supply suitable teacher candidates. He also assured to train these candidates sufficiently for them to return to their own parishes. Totally 30 students assembled at the newly formed teacher training school called Grand Maison. They lived in separate rooms but followed the rules and regulations of the brothers. Besides young men who were novices were also housed in the same place. Known as the juniorate some of them who favoured brotherhood were given admission and those unwilling were sent away.\(^{16}\) Thus the brothers sparked off interest among the well to do people De La Salle felt sufficiently armoured with his achievement to establish schools in the capital city of Paris. Father De La Barmodiere invited De La Salle to open a school in the Parish of Saint Sulfa. He and two brothers arrived in Paris on Feb. 1668. The Father also invested them with the charge of running another school, that was operating in R’ue Princess. The schools under the banner of Fr. Compagnon was called the little schools. No time limit was set either for the opening of the school or the duration of the lessons. Consequently students came and went as long as the profit margins were maintained. The brothers however pressurised De La Salle to interfere with the running of the schools. The Father had no choice but to handover the school to supervision of the brothers. Chaos disappeared and students were disciplined. Naturally, the profit margins came down and an irked Father tried to bring about the dismissal of the brothers. De La Salle took this as a challenge and employed a technician to study weaving and knitting, to train students for careers of their vocation.\(^{17}\)

Fr. Baudran now succeeded Fr. Barmodiene who asked the brothers to open another school in the same Parish. This brought about great opposition as brothers came into direct conflict with the little schools writing masters. They were of course, corporation schools and teachers in these schools felt the newly installed schools to be a threat to their livelihood. Matters came to court and the

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.102.
verdict was unfavourable to De La Salle. This proved to be the starting point of many more court cases in various parts of France. It also proved to be a time of great hardship for the brothers. They were practically suffering from starvation. The meagre stipends proved taxing to their health and moral well being. De La Salle remained devoted to his task and wrote ‘Memoir Sur Habit’ a document to set things right. The continuous strain De La Salle was exposed to made him seriously ill. Undaunted he returned to Rheims to bring back order to the brothers who resided there. He had to also battle with other problems. The training school for teachers along with the juniorate had collapsed. Most of the brothers employed in teaching the schools had left. The few who remained were over worked and exhausted. Extortion, Malnutrition De La Salle’s acts of mortification had virtually driven him to the corner. It looked De La Salle might not survive and was given last function.\(^{18}\)

De La Salle’s desire to serve, helped him to survive the illness. He decided that major decisions had to be taken. He acquired a property in the outskirts of the city where he could established a novitiate. His purpose in investing on the property was to renew the spirituality in the brothers and also provide them respite from the running the schools. The area proved ideal for the brothers to recuperate. The time had also come for them to go an long retreat. The retreat proved fruitful. De La Salle requested the participants to correspond with him regularly to enable him to respond and encouraged the brothers with saintly advice. Many of the letters from De La Salle are preserved in the institute archives.\(^{19}\)

Political conditions however, proved unfavourable. It was a time of war and famine and the inhabitants were subjected to cold, dampness and hunger. The brothers from the city communities visited the area during every vacation. In turn every brother was given novitiate experience. The brothers had to fortify

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\(^{19}\) Hermans, Alphonese, *op.cit.*, p.372.
themselves to put up with hard conditions. However some brothers gave in to their wordly desires and left the novitiate. The war also brought in the attacks by highway men. Travel proved dangerous and De La Salle was forced to take the brothers and novices for safety. Saint Sulfice refused to pay the stipends he had been witholding. This helped De La Salle to leave the running of the schools. Some of the older brothers got back to their own personal work\textsuperscript{20}.

De La Salle started writing about the brothers. He also got the help of the brothers to get their own opinions on the problems experienced. A compromise was arrived at and a code was formulated by which they could live. Thus it became the model code for the succeeding brothers who joined the schools overseen by De La Salle. The brothers had also requested De La Salle to permit them to make vows for life. After a day’s retreat, two brothers and De La Salle vowed obedience to the rule that was to be practised throughout his life time. De La Salle called for an election but it proved to be futile, since they considered him to be a worthy candidate. De La Salle got an undertaking from them that after his death they should elect one of their own and never ever contemplate on choosing a man in holy orders\textsuperscript{21}.

The need to train teachers for country parishes was permitted and De La Salle responded by establishing a school in Saint Hipolly Parish. He placed Brother Nicolas, his most trusted companion to run the school. To Nicolas Vuyart this was crucial, in De La Salle’s enterprise. The brothers were far from being a recognised legal entity. Since De La Salle could not function as a trustee of the endowments he decided to interest Nicolas Vuyart with a vested capital. Unfortunately he proved deceitful and very soon this school collapsed due to debts. Nicolas Vuyart was compelled to leave and every effort on his part to return was foiled by the brothers and De La Salle. The premises chosen

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.133.
by De La Salle proved too small to accommodate the brothers. Grand Maison was his next choice. De La Salle opened another school in St. Jerman District. The Parish schoolmaster put up a big fight for they considered it to be a threat to their very existence. The brothers failed in their first attempt in the court proceedings but since they did not charge for the services, the verdict was in their fervour. This proved to be another major feat in De La Salle’s achievement\textsuperscript{22}. 

De La Salle also helped the exiled king James second of England by setting up a school. Fifty boys who proved Loyal to James second. This effort proved to be a tremendous success as the school flourished for the boys.

De La Salle had been receiving requests to open schools at Charters, Calais, Troyes and Avignon to be run by brothers. After deep contemplation De La Salle yielded to the demand. At charters he met with a position from the clergy who insisted that teaching should be in Latin language\textsuperscript{23}. De La Salle proved adamant insisting that the children be taught through the Medium of French to ensure they were able to read and understand the vernacular. The brothers also were denied stipends and had to face financial problems. A pious lady came to their rescue leaving a legacy of 3,500 pounds. De La Salle also started Sunday Schools for young men who were employed but needed some education. The move was to prevent the young men going to the taverns and engage in drinking gambling and general debauchery. The strategy was to provide them moral training. Hence lessons like reading, writing arithmetic drawing and catechism were imparted to make them spiritually uplifted. The last years of De La Salle turned out to be storm-filled. In fact he had weathered. Many crises had done the remarkable job of keeping the society together. One major enemy was De La Chetadye who was bent upon destroying the brothers. He hatched plots and insinuated that De La Salle had lowered the brothers life 

\textsuperscript{22} Viola Galindo, Juan, Perfeccion y Apostolado En La Doctrina Ascetico Pedagogica de San Juan Bautis. de La Salle. Tejares-Salamanca, LP, Rome, 1964, p.276. 

\textsuperscript{23} Fereres RB, Les Regles de La Biereseance de La Civilite Chretienne, LP, Rome, 1703, p.21.
style. Since brothers abandoned Grand Maison De Salle was asked to be relieved of his duties but the plot failed. But antagonism against De La Salle and his devoted brothers continued. Hence De La Salle was forced to vacate the Grand Maison. The treatment of brothers at the hands of De La Chetardye soon became public knowledge, but nothing could be done. Almost all the schools were virtually closed. The public reacted insisting that the schools were reopened De La Chetardye had no option but to seek out De La Salle and send the brothers back. De La Salle exacted the assurance that the brothers should be given a congenial atmosphere to perform their work in early October 1706. The schools reopened with the Brothers back at their teaching jobs.  

Thus despite the calamities that beset the brothers in Paris the reputation of being service minded and the excellent abilities in running schools drew the attention of the French people. Many merchants were for setting up committees to raise funds to meet the living expenses of the brothers. Since his health was failing De La Salle left the day to day affairs to be taken over by Brother Barthelemy. De La Salle was also determined that the brothers elect a new superior. Having this idea in mind he requested Barthelemy to visit all the communities. After a major retreat which began on Pentecost and lasted till trinity Sunday, the founder De La Salle felt the need to have one from among themselves as a next superior and Brother Barthelemy emerged the winner. They held meeting to revise the chapter. Brother Barthelemy sent copies to all the communities and directed all the brothers carefully.  

De La Salle realised his end was near. He busied himself with all the legal documents he has accumulated over the years on the institution of the brothers. He had also the personal problem of attending to his younger brother who had become mentally ill. He made provision for his children and took charge of the family matters. On the other hand he handed over the documents.

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and the collection of books to Bro. Barthelemy to ensure that they were accurately recorded and documented\textsuperscript{26}.

Finally, worth mentioning and recalling is the total sacrifice made by De La Salle when he willingly resolved to give away his wealth to the poor. He also resolved to contain himself to the necessities of life, depend himself on the charities of others to go to the extent of the total lack of everything and if need be pass the rest of his life in hard work. He also adopted the stand that nothing would affect him henceworth, whether it was mental humiliation or bodily pain. This act by itself testified to the spirit of a man who possessed the extraordinary virtue of a saint in making. To complete his missionary work of unusual calibre, he determined to establish the Institute of Brothers. He wanted to ensure he would provide them with the necessities of life. Their crusade was to serve the poor. Thus he preferred a poor and penitential life to all the comforts he might have legitimately enjoyed in the world. The contradictions and reverses that were a constant part of his life, never affected the peace of his soul\textsuperscript{27}.

De La Salle’s health was very poor and it was at this time he met with an unfortunate accident. Thus the during his last days in his life. He evinced the same spirit of sacrifice and humility which had marked his earlier years. On Holy Thursday he blessed the brothers assembled at his bed side. And gave his last words of counsel “In all things I adore the will of God is my regard”. He died on the 7\textsuperscript{th} April 1719 good friend at 68 years of age\textsuperscript{28}.

Lasalle was canonized by Leo XIII in 1900 on his 300\textsuperscript{th} Birthday. He was proclaimed by Pope Pius XII as heavenly patron of all teachers. His feast celebrated in India even today during the 1\textsuperscript{st} week of September coinciding with teacher’s day commerating the birthday of Dr. Radhakrishnan, the philosopher President of India.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27] Exercices de Piete qui se Font Pendant Le jour dans Les Ecoles chretiennes, LP, Rome, 1760, p.18.
\item[28] Le Maitre Chretien Selon Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, LP, Paris, 1951, p.142.
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