

Life of the Spirit

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A NOTABLE TERCENTENARY

ST JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, PATRON OF TEACHERS
(1651-1951)

BY

W. J. BATTERSBY, F.S.C., PH.D.



TERCENTENARIES are interesting events for they show that, if we give time time, it performs a double function. In the first place, the lapse of a lengthy period acts like a sieve, eliminating the dross and allowing only the finest to survive. Then a distance of time acts also like a distance in space; it enables us to view in perspective that which is too big to be seen close up.

For the proper appreciation of a man like St De La Salle, a hundred years was a minimum. In fact, it is only now, as the tercentenary of his birth approaches, that he is really coming into his own. The cloud of brilliant nonentities who crowded the forefront of the stage in his day has disappeared, and he is beginning to emerge so that we can see him in his true proportions.

There was little hope in an age of artificiality, wigs, powder and gay clothes, that one who undertook the task of educating the poor would attract the slightest attention. Teachers have never at any time enjoyed much glamour of popularity; only in some few individual cases has a grudging recognition been paid to them long after they have sunk, poverty-stricken, into the grave. And De La Salle did not expect even that. When Louis XIV reigned amidst his splendid court at Versailles; when Bossuet drew all eyes to the pulpit; when Condé and Turenne made the world resound with their military triumphs, and when Corneille, Racine and La Fontaine brought French literature to the peak of perfection, who would stop to consider a priest organising charity schools?

The fact that De La Salle, though of noble birth, had stooped to help the slums of Rheims, was looked upon by his class-minded compatriots not as an act of philanthropy or virtue, but as an unpardonable *faux-pas*. And when he resigned his canonry and gave

away his fortune to the poor in order to devote himself wholeheartedly to his task, he was marked down as crazy.

Yet it is clear to us today that what France needed, and indeed what all Europe needed, was not fine words or glorious deeds, but some improvement in the miserable lot of the common people sunk in ignorance, depravity and vice. The need was recognised even at the time, in theory, but the task was difficult; worse still, it was obscure, and so it found no devotees. It required the courage of a saint.

It was not merely a question of setting up charity schools. This was relatively easy. It had, in fact, been done over and over again, not by the State, for the State did nothing in education, but by zealous parish priests and others. But the schools collapsed. Time and money were invariably wasted, not because there were no pupils—there were thousands of them infesting the back-alleys and gutters of the towns—but because there were no teachers. It was not yet understood (and it may be doubted whether it is fully realised today) that what makes a school is not bricks and mortar but the teacher, and that the only real foundation of a system of education is the proper training of the teachers.

What makes De La Salle's greatness is that he seized this point and gave it practical realisation as far as it was humanly possible in the circumstances. The full importance of this matter is only just beginning to dawn on us today, for the question of education has at long last come prominently into the foreground of national life. The world has got itself into such a state that we have been forced back to an examination of our basic principles, and it has become obvious to all but the blind that the conflict of opposing ideologies has its origin, not in the arms factory, but in the classroom.

De La Salle made the training of teachers his life's work. He raised teaching from the depths of a despised part-time occupation to the status of an honourable profession. He did more; he raised it to the dignity of a religious vocation. For him, religion was the very essence of education, and a teacher's primary function was to inculcate virtue. His aim was not merely to impart knowledge, at the risk of turning out clever devils, but to make good Christians. For this reason he formed his masters into a religious congregation, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and composed for them a special Rule adapted to their work. Today the Brothers are spread all over the world, and they form the largest teaching Order in the Church.

De La Salle realised, of course, the need for secular teachers

as well as religious, and for these he founded Training Colleges, the first of their kind in the history of education.

Had he done only this, his name would have been for ever memorable, but he did more. He elaborated a complete system of education for primary schools, some features of which have been preserved to the present day. Thus, he discarded the traditional method of teaching to read in Latin before the mother tongue, and he popularised the simultaneous or class system of teaching, as opposed to the individual method. Were De La Salle to walk into an English school now, in fact, he would be amazed to find how many details of the system which he followed two hundred and fifty years ago are still retained, despite the advance in educational theory and practice since his day.

When De La Salle died in 1719, he left an educational legacy of some magnitude. Already, the Brothers of his teaching Order were at work in twenty-two different towns of France, as well as in Rome, and several books he had composed were regarded as educational classics. His method of school management was published under the title *The Conduct of Schools*, while some class manuals which he had composed subsequently went through two hundred and fifty editions.

But the human achievement of a saint, no matter how considerable this may be, is never the full measure of his greatness, for a saint is in himself a masterpiece of divine grace.

In the spiritual domain De La Salle ranks rather as an ascetic than a mystic, for his spirituality was directed more towards the acquisition of practical virtues than towards pure contemplation. There was a strong strain of mysticism in him, and he was capable of sublime elevations, but his mind was essentially practical. He was trained at Saint Sulpice in the purest tradition of the French school of spirituality, and his spiritual approach was influenced by the dominant characteristics of this school. He managed to avoid, however, the worst defects of the adherents of the *Ecole Française*; their severity, their contempt for human nature and their tendency towards exaggerated corporal mortification, with the result that his writings have not that repellant rigidity which mars some of the work of his contemporaries.

Amidst the religious aberrations of his time, Jansenism, Gallicanism and Quietism, he remained untainted. His respect for the Pope as Vicar of Christ and Head of the Church was exemplary, and he suffered bitter persecution from the 'innovators' for his loyalty to the Apostolic See.

There was little of the extraordinary in his life; nothing to strike

the imagination. He was the perfect type of the well-balanced, steady man, full of common sense; the enemy of exaggeration and precipitation. His one aim was to do the will of God in all things, and this path he followed with unflinching determination. He made the spirit of faith his guiding chart, which meant that he looked upon everything with the eyes of faith, that he did everything in view of God, and attributed all to God. His idea of perfection was this: 'never to perform a single action from natural impulse, through custom or any human motive, but always to act by the guidance of God, through the movement of his spirit, and with the intention of pleasing him'.

St De La Salle was canonised in May, 1900. Thus the golden jubilee of this event anticipates by only a few months the tercentenary of his birth. For this reason the two occasions are being honoured in one celebration. It was no doubt by a singular dispensation of divine Providence that the Patron Saint of teachers was raised to the altars at the beginning of the present century. Never was it more necessary than in our day to emphasise the necessity of the christian education of youth, and to offer to those engaged in this all-important task a shining light.



CHARITY AND THE WILL OF MAN (I)

BY

AUSTIN BARKER, O.P.



IN appraising the order and internal correspondence of the faith and human reason, St Augustine had used a phrase, in epigrammatic summary, which not only described his personal discovery and that of every convert to the Church, but also correctly stated the right causal sequence of these correlatives, Faith and Reason, in their continuous development: *per fidem venit ad cognitionem*. The phrase may even provide some explanation how philosophy even within its own sphere, needs and may receive assistance from the supernatural truths revealed by God. The student of Aristotle's metaphysics is often tempted to wonder why it was that the philosopher, who so clearly understood the first principles of reason and causality, and so explicitly deduced from them the existence of the First Mover and the Primal Intellect, failed to realise that all other beings must be moved and directed to the First Being by divine Providence; or again why, after analysing once and for all the principles governing the intrinsic