

(d. 1562), and Louis du Pont (d. 1624). From Italy came the spiritual writings and the biography of Saint Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510), published by the Carthusians of Bourfontaine through numerous editions. A collection of the meditations of Matthias Bellintani (d. 1611), *The Practice of Prayer or Contemplation*, was popular at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Nevertheless, the need for a basic reform was great, and great spiritual leaders in France responded with the development of a spirituality that has won for seventeenth-century France the titles, “the golden age of spirituality”<sup>14</sup> and “the great age of the soul.”<sup>15</sup> Outstanding among those leaders were Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622), author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*; Pierre de Bérulle, often referred to as the Founder of the French School of spirituality; Charles de Condren (1588–1641), successor to Bérulle as Superior of the French Oratory; Jean-Jacques Olier (1628–1657), Founder of the Sulpicians, and John Eudes (1601–1680), Founder of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary. Each of these leaders called for a reformed and pious clergy and thus had an influence on John Baptist de La Salle, but De La Salle eventually developed an original spirituality for the Brothers of the Christian Schools and, indeed, for all Christian educators.

## II

### John Baptist de La Salle and the French School

In 1651, when John Baptist de La Salle was born, the chief representatives of the French School of spirituality, Bérulle and Condren, were dead; their two most faithful disciples, Jean-Jacques Olier and John Eudes, were still living. Olier had six more years to live and would spend them in ill health, retired from his work as pastor of Saint Sulpice and devoted to the revision of his writings on the essence of the Christian life. Eudes would live almost 30 years longer, ardently promoting devotion to the hearts of Jesus and Mary while carrying on a rough battle against the untiring opposition of those opposed to his spirituality and practices.

At what moment in his life was the young John Baptist put in contact with the spirituality of the French School? He had occasion at an early age to meet with several devout priests reputed for their knowledge and wisdom. Among them was the Canon Pierre Dozet,

Vicar General, Chancellor of the University of Reims, and relative of the La Salle family, who encouraged John Baptist to receive the tonsure when he was not yet eleven years old. A few years later, in 1661, Canon Dozet resigned his canonry in favor of his young cousin. Such events indicated that as a youth, De La Salle was already aspiring to the priesthood and had the intellectual and moral predispositions for such a state in life.

His parents could afford to have John Baptist attend excellent schools, the Collège des Bons Enfants and the School of Theology of the University of Reims. In 1670 he was admitted to the Sorbonne in Paris to study for a doctorate in theology. Here he met with the disciples of Olier at the seminary of Saint Sulpice and for a year and a half had the benefit of Sulpician formation under the spiritual direction of Louis Tronson and François Leschassier. He could not have found a better way to become familiar with the spirituality of that time.

The death of his mother in 1671 and that of his father nine months later, in 1672, put a premature end to De La Salle's stay in Paris. He had then to take responsibility for the care of his four brothers and two sisters, as well as the family estate. Nonetheless, he managed to continue his studies for the doctorate in theology and ordination to the priesthood. A close relationship with Canon Nicolas Roland, founder of a congregation of women dedicated to the education of young girls, and a chance meeting with Adrien Nyel, a layman devoted to the education of poor boys, led John Baptist to be involved in the establishment of schools and the training of teachers for the Christian education of the poor. In the process he saw the urgent need to provide spiritual formation and pedagogical guidance to these teachers, recognizing as he did the great importance of the schools.

Eventually, John Baptist was led to give up the wealth and social prestige of his canonry and to use his share of the family estate to buy food for the poor people of Reims in a time of famine. This was a major conversion for John Baptist: he was stepping out of one world and into another that was diametrically opposed. With patience he gradually assembled a group of young men who were willing for the glory of God to commit themselves completely to the human and spiritual education of poor children. The program organized by De La Salle had a tremendous impact on the primary school in France. He divided the large class of children into small groups according to their level of learning, adapted an earlier simultaneous method of teaching groups, rather than instructing each student one at a time, and taught children to read the mother tongue, French, instead of Latin, the usual practice at that time. In addition the method of discipline and order

established in the classes and in the school brought about extraordinary educational results in a short time.

De La Salle envisioned the spiritual and moral formation of children through the school. He knew that to achieve this result, the teachers would be the major force. He prepared the Brothers for their encounter with the students by making them aware of the presence and action of God in their own life and the dignity and importance of the mission that God had entrusted to them:

Adore God's fatherly Providence in your regard. He withdrew you from the world in order to prepare you to acquire the virtues you need to do your work well and to educate a great number of children in the Christian spirit. (MDF 131.1)

For De La Salle the spiritual formation of the teachers was uppermost in preparing them for their work with the children. To achieve this formation, he wrote rules to guide them and meditations to teach them the principal themes of spirituality for a Christian educator. Initially inspired by Bérulle, Condren, and their disciples, he gradually developed an original adaptation that established him as a master of Christian spirituality.

### III

#### Themes from the French School in De La Salle's Meditations

Rayez has remarked that De La Salle took whatever was good for his purpose wherever he found it and was "extraordinarily attuned to the spiritual influences of people and writings that were available at the end of the seventeenth century."<sup>16</sup> The themes De La Salle developed were already present in the writings of the French School of spirituality and other spiritual leaders of his time. His genius was to adapt these themes to a spirituality for Christian teachers.

Four themes have been selected to show the influence of the French School upon De La Salle and to reflect his own creativity. These themes are theocentrism, christocentrism, the action of the Holy Spirit, and the human person before God. After examining them, we will show how De La Salle personalized them in his own spirituality, as developed in the meditations.