

legacy of De La Salle conveys a spiritual doctrine that is especially suited for people engaged in the Christian education of youth. His meditations are concerned with the everyday life of teachers and with their religious formation, without separating their personal consecration to God from an apostolic ministry immersed in the daily problems of a demanding work. Recently a study of the sources of *Meditations for the Principal Feasts* was published in an effort to stimulate a return to these texts, which are so replete with authentic Lasalian spirituality.⁸

Appendix C sets forth briefly the arrangement and the content of the texts of MDF and MTR, the various editions published through the years, and the sources of some of the texts in the light of published research during the past 30 years.

This introduction will have four parts, first, in order to appreciate the spirituality of seventeenth-century France, a description of the state of religious practice at the end of the sixteenth century; second, a brief summary of De La Salle's contact with the French School of spirituality; third, a selection of passages from De La Salle's meditations to show how he made use of the principal themes of that spirituality, and fourth, how he developed an original spirituality for the community of Brothers he established, which is pertinent to all Christian teachers today.

I

Religious Practice in France at the End of the Sixteenth Century

Before illustrating the spirituality of De La Salle with selections from his meditations, it seems advantageous to describe the state of religion in France at the end of the sixteenth century, in order to understand better the spirituality of the seventeenth century, which was in large part a reaction to that condition. This will also help understand better the spirituality of the Founder.

“To speak of the decadence of religion in France at the end of the sixteenth century has become commonplace, both for historians and biographers.”⁹ After 40 years of civil war, the social structure was riddled with the worst disorders, and the practice of religion had become increasingly abandoned. At all levels of the Catholic hierarchy,

made up of men from the upper class, there was every sort of intrigue and complicity to maintain privilege and gain promotions to higher status and greater financial benefit.

To understand this behavior and the greed that also possessed the noble and bourgeois classes, it is necessary to know that for many years numerous families had taken advantage of the connection between politics and religion to improve their financial and social position, which originally had been won with great effort. The sense of honor and of ancestral tradition forbade any return to the past. Everyone understood clearly that the one sure way to add to the glory of the family name and to strengthen its position in the social order was through the power of money.

The Church was rich at this time, and France was rich, very rich. Church wealth was equal to more than one-third of the total wealth of the entire nation, and this ratio was continually increasing in favor of the Church.¹⁰ To secure an appointment in this ecclesiastical organism was sure to be rewarding, so applicants were always at hand.

The financial power of the Church could have created serious problems for the unstable government of the monarchy if the Concordat of 1516, in exchange for certain royal privileges granted to the clergy, had not given the king control of a large number of Church positions that provided those who held title to them with considerable financial benefit. The king had, in effect, a kind of treasury of bonuses to distribute under the guise of rewards for good servants of the state.

By the system of *commendam*, the king would assign ownership of abbeys, parishes, and even bishoprics to people who were ineligible according to Church law. Such titulars could be secular priests, members of the laity, women, even young children, who would receive the tonsure to make them technically qualified for the benefits. Sully, a Protestant and friend of Henry IV, was given four abbeys. A deputy chosen by the titular would then carry out the function in return for a small part of the revenue. More often than not, the titular never appeared in the assigned diocese or monastery. This system naturally led to an almost complete separation of the spiritual responsibility from the financial revenue attached to it.

In convents the abbesses and prioresses were elected in most cases and lived in their convents. Nevertheless, the king could suspend the election and name whomever he pleased. In this way the Abbess of Maubuisson, who had been elected in good and proper form, was deposed by Henry IV in favor of Angélique d'Estrée, sister of his mistress, the beautiful Gabrielle. It was customary to choose titulars of 15 to 18 years of age; Jacqueline Arnauld, the future Mother Angélique, was Abbess of Port Royal at the age of eleven.

When families had one of their members receive such an honor, they did all they could not to lose it. Every means was appropriate, even the most fraudulent. In this way a worldly clergy was created, people incapable of performing worthy priestly functions, whose main preoccupation was to increase their revenue.

Most bishops were members of the king's court, literary or military personalities, diplomats, or financiers. Many of the candidates for the priesthood were much more interested in the chance to make money than in the opportunity to serve as priests; ordination was often conferred simply for the asking. The ignorance of the priests, especially in the rural areas, was shameful. Many of them were given over to wine, lust, and witchcraft. Teaching the people the faith was not high on the list of their activities.

Religious priests were not much better. Religious houses for men and women were often a refuge for boys whom their families wanted to disown or girls who had no dowry. Most of the monks never made a novitiate, and in a number of abbeys, military service replaced the practice of prayer for many of their members. This situation did not seem to bother the titulars who had been assigned; in fact, any effort to reform the situation would probably have had a negative effect on their revenue.

In the face of this less than fervent clergy, it is not hard to imagine the religious spirit that characterized the Christian people and the religious life of France at the end of the sixteenth century. The structure was there. Bishops and priests held their positions. Churches gathered in the faithful. Monasteries housed the monks; convents, the nuns. The people came together mostly for display. But all these externals had little or no religious substance. The separation of the revenues of the Church from the spiritual responsibilities produced a similar separation of external appearances from personal morality. A person could easily claim to be a Christian and even a priest, but that could be no guarantee of any personal commitment. The performance of the external acts of religion was most often a social and political duty, not an expression of profound faith.

This, then, was the situation in France at the end of the sixteenth century: a true and profound interior spirit was not generally considered fundamental to the Christian life. The task, therefore, of spiritual leaders and their followers was to bring to life this essential element of Christianity.

The outstanding religious event of the sixteenth century was undoubtedly the Council of Trent (1545–1563), with the great movement for reform that it planned for the whole Catholic Church. The Fathers of the Council placed the execution of their decisions in the hands of

the bishops. But, as noted, the bishops of France, with few exceptions, were in a poor condition to make any significant changes. Their feeling was that such a reform was an untimely interference by a foreign authority in the functioning of a system that belonged to the king. This is the principal reason for the delay in following the directives of the Council.

Nonetheless the situation in France was not entirely bleak. There were some points of light, shining and giving promise for a bright future. A few austere religious orders remained untouched by the general moral decline of the times, and faithful Christians turned to them. Among these orders were the Capuchins, established in France in 1573, who were fervent observers of the Rule of Saint Francis. Their heroic life and their mysticism attracted people of all ranks and nurtured their devotion.

The Carthusians, a cloistered and contemplative order, were venerated for their special way of life, their mortification, silence, and solitude. Their religious spirit and the originality of their monastic practices also drew the elite of France to join them.

The Jesuits came to France in 1552. Through their distinguished *collèges* they developed a growing influence among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Their theologians and spiritual writers had a strong influence on the religious thought of the seventeenth century.

The example of the religious orders of men was soon followed by congregations of women who were equally fervent. Madame Acarie (1566–1618) led a community of outstanding religious and invited the reformed Carmelites of Teresa of Jesus to come from Spain. Through the efforts of Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629), seven Spanish religious founded the first French Carmel in 1604. Several other contemplative congregations soon followed.¹¹ Congregations of the active life were founded about the same time and developed rapidly: the Ursulines (1596), the Daughters of Notre Dame (1607), and the Religious of Notre Dame of Lorraine (1618), founded by Peter Fourier (1565–1640) and Alix Le Clerc (1576–1622).

A list of the books printed during the sixteenth century testifies that devotional writing of all sorts was abundant.¹² It is, therefore, possible to give a fairly clear picture of the kind of reading that was done by the literate, pious people of the time. Unfortunately, there was an almost complete lack of original French works, and the literary and spiritual quality was poor. Most of the good books available were translations into French of Latin translations by the Carthusians of Cologne of books by German or Flemish writers.¹³ There were also translations of the Spanish books of Louis of Granada (d. 1588), Teresa of Jesus (d. 1582), John of the Cross (d. 1591), Peter of Alcantara

(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”¹⁴ and “the great age of the soul.”¹⁵ 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,