

From Reims to Rome: 90 years of the Generalate

The year 2026 marks **the 90th anniversary of the beginning of community life at the Generalate in Rome (1936-2026)**. This is a historic milestone in the long journey of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, from a small neighbourhood in Reims to its current headquarters.

Through the centuries

It all began in **1682**, when Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the first teachers moved to *Rue Neuve* in Reims. That first dwelling, situated in a poor neighbourhood, effectively became the Congregation's first true Mother House. In the years that followed, the Institute's administrative centre moved in step with the development of its work: from Paris (1698) to Rouen (1703, at Saint-Yon, where the Founder ended his earthly life), via Lyon following the upheavals of the French Revolution.

During the nineteenth century, the headquarters returned to Paris, first to *the Maison du Saint-Enfant-Jésus* (1821) and then to the famous *Maison Saint-Joseph* on Rue Oudinot (1847), eventually accommodating over 540 Brothers and novices by 1890. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the anti-congregational laws in France (the 'Combes Law' of 1904) forced the Institute into exile to Lembecq-lez-Hal, in Belgium.

The turning point of 1928 and the invitation to settle in Rome

The opportunity to find a permanent home arose in the late 1920s. Following the Lateran Pacts (1929), Pope Pius XI invited religious institutes to establish their headquarters in Rome.

On 26 October 1928, Cardinal Camillo Laurenti sent a letter to the Brothers of the General Chapter inviting them to consider moving to Rome "*close to the common Father of the faithful [...] to give the Institute ever-renewed vigour and growth*". The Brothers' response was immediate: the General Chapter voted unanimously in favour of the move.

1935-1936: A monumental building project

In 1929, the Institute purchased a plot of land measuring approximately 24 hectares to the west of Rome, just two and a half kilometres from Vatican City, near the historic chapel of the Madonna del Riposo.

In **1935**, the foundation stone was laid. What followed was an extraordinary feat of engineering and human endeavour for the time: **15 months of construction** and as many as **800 workers labouring round the clock**.

In **1936**, the majestic building finally opened its doors, marking the beginning of community life at the new General House. The following year, in **1937**, the sacred relics of Saint John Baptist de La Salle arrived there, and the foundations were laid for the first La Salle school in the area.

The Second World War: a refuge and a hospital

A few years after its inauguration, the outbreak of the Second World War put the House's existence to the test. With the establishment of a temporary headquarters in Mauléon (France), the Roman building became a place of refuge and charity:

- **In 1941:** The House was converted into **the St. Joseph's Hospital** ('Princess of Piedmont Centre for the Disabled'), accommodating up to 500 wounded soldiers.
- **In 1943:** The Holy See placed the House under its direct protection, exempting it from military searches and requisitions.
- **In 1944:** The building went through a difficult period, initially being used as a *Feld-lazarett* by German troops and subsequently as *the 48th British General Hospital* by British troops, whilst remaining a key centre for the training of the Italian Brothers.

On **1 May 1945**, with the end of hostilities, the building was returned to the Institute and fully resumed its original function.

A centre for formation and fraternity

Institute's global governing centre, but also as a hub for academic, pedagogical and spiritual life:

- **In 1951**, the main chapel was solemnly consecrated to Saint John Baptist de La Salle.
- **In 1957**, **the Jesus Magister Institute and Boarding School** was

founded, a faculty affiliated with the Pontifical Lateran University for the study of theological and pastoral issues.

- In the same year, the **Guadalupana Sisters of La Salle** arrived to assist the bursar of the time, and they remained to help at the House for a long time.
- Over time, the centre has also opened its doors to other religious communities, such as the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and the Sisters of St Felice of Cantalice, as well as to centres of excellence in Lasallian education, such as the **CIL (International Lasallian Centre)** and the Lasallianum.

Memorable visits and meetings

The Generalate has also had the honour of welcoming distinguished guests in recent years, such as:

- **Mother Teresa of Calcutta** (7 March 1979), who met with CIL participants and offered a profound reflection on the vocation of the Brother.
- **Pope Saint John Paul II** (21 November 1981), on a pastoral visit to the community.
- **Fr Robert F. Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV** (April 2014), who led the Brothers' retreat during the 45th General Chapter.

A look to the future: continuous renewal

Furthermore, over the years, the Generalate has been able to renew itself constantly in order to respond to the demands of the times.

Indeed, various renovation projects have been undertaken: from **the Sanctuary** in the 1980s, to adapt it to the aims of the post-Vatican II era, to the historic spaces within **the modern La Salle Museum**, and to a number of **communal rooms**.

Today, celebrating the **90th anniversary of the General House in Rome (1936-2026)** means not only remembering the past, but reaffirming the commitment of a global family that continues to educate and form young people with the same dedication and vision that inspired Saint John Baptist de La Salle over three centuries ago: to transform lives through education, wherever there is a need.

- **Download the 90th anniversary exhibition of the Generalate here (in Italian)**

1) Passed in France on 7 July 1904, this was the measure by which the French government, led by Émile Combes, banned all religious orders from teaching within the country.