

La Salle Connection - Episode 7: “This is the God’s work”

“La Salle Connection” is a multimedia series designed to connect the Lasallian Family with historical events that continue to inspire Lasallians today.

In this episode of *La Salle Connection*, we’re going to talk about how our Father went through a long crisis in his life.

Between 1713 and 1714, De La Salle experienced a severe crisis; not only in his work, but also in his very being; a spiritual crisis. Biographers record this, and Jean-Baptiste Blain, one of the earliest, states that on a hundred occasions the work was on the verge of disappearing, of collapsing.

The problems had various causes. On the one hand, there were issues with the teachers’ guilds, which held a monopoly over fee-paying schools; the presence of these free schools, which made no distinction between their pupils, caused them financial difficulties. From the moment he arrived in Paris, De La Salle had many problems with them, and on more than three occasions the matter ended up in court.

As De La Salle did not have official authorisation to exist as a ‘body’ or organisation with his teachers, this created another problem: he was constantly in need of the support of a parish priest, a bishop or some organisation that would grant him the necessary authorisations to carry out his work.

During this time, De La Salle explored various options with other communities of priests who might support him, because the other issue at the root of the crisis he was about to face stemmed from the fact that this community consisted solely of laypeople and had no priest in charge. According to the ecclesiology of the time, this was inconceivable.

The climax of this problem stemmed from two specific incidents that led to betrayals by some of his friends. On the one hand, there was a legal case involving the Clement family: a young priest who had pledged part of his inheritance to establish a teacher-training college, but whose father subsequently

refused to allow this and brought a lawsuit against the Founder, in which a friend of his who was a notary, a certain Rogier, took the side of the Clement family rather than that of Monsieur De La Salle, which caused him great distress and a sense of betrayal.

The same thing happened with Brother Vuyart, one of the three who had taken the 'Heroic Vow' with De La Salle and who, when De La Salle lost one of these lawsuits whilst defending the educational work on which he was labouring, decided to leave the Brothers and declare that he had no connection whatsoever with De La Salle.

All these betrayals gradually led him to become convinced that he himself was the obstacle preventing the work from progressing. And so, in 1712, he decided to set out on a long journey to the south of France. There were several communities and works there that he wished to visit, and he began to do so. However, it turned out that in the south of France the Jansenists had gained significant influence.

Southern France, which until not long before had been independent of northern France, harboured a resistance to the king and to the centralism of Paris; this, to a certain extent, rubbed off on the presence of Monsieur de La Salle, who, moreover, constantly expressed his opposition to Jansenism.

This led to revolts amongst the Brothers, rejection by the Brothers – in one community, they were not even allowed to sleep in the house – problems with the novices, problems with the priests, which in turn caused problems with the bishop.

In short, a series of setbacks that gradually convinced him that he was the problem. And he was overcome by the temptation to distance himself completely from what he had created, to shut himself away in a Carthusian monastery, or to take refuge in a hermitage in a place called Parmenia.

We must not think of this crisis as something that led him to inactivity, for whilst in 1703 there had been 23 educational initiatives, by 1714 the number had risen to 53. Not all of them lasted very long; some were short-lived. But the creative drive of Monsieur De La Salle and his Brothers continued.

At the same time, the publication of books continued. De La Salle was a man on a quest, not one who stood still. Throughout this crisis, he drew strength from his

faith, from his belief that “this was God’s work” – however many doubts he might have had – and from the hope rooted in the memory that God had been with him. And in love.

He found support in Brother Jean Jacort, in his community in Grenoble, in the presence of someone he knew who, in his view, could be a great Brother – Brother Irénée – and in a woman he met on the hill of Parmenia, who offered him her advice: Sister Louise. It was these relationships that sustained him: his relationship with God and his relationships with those who showed him their support.

Finally, the letter sent to him by the Brothers in Paris in 1714 would ultimately confirm not only his membership of this community, but also his role as a Father. But that is another story.

In the next episodes, we will continue to share other significant moments in the life and work of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. You can find them at www.lasalle.org and on our social media.