

La Salle Connection - Episode 8: “To feel in tune with the Church”

“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 Connection La Salle, we are going to discuss Jean-Baptiste de La Salle’s decision to send two Brothers to Rome.

This took place in 1702. In his will, he explains why he did so. He says, “First, I recommend my soul to God and, next, all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools with whom he has associated me. I urge them, above all else, always to show entire submission to the Church, especially in these evil times, and to give proof of this by never separating themselves in anything from our Holy Father the Pope and from the Church of Rome, always remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to ask God for the grace that their Society might always be entirely submissive thereto”.

De La Salle speaks frequently of those “evil times” in which he found himself living. They were linked to the differentiation of religions and cultures in Europe, and the birth of nation states. In France, this took on, above all, a Jansenist character – a doctrine that was not purely religious, but which had political and economic consequences. The core of the debate centred on the relationship between freedom and grace. For the Jansenists, freedom is powerless in the face of God’s grace. And once grace takes hold of a person’s life, everything is set in a fixed order that cannot be changed.

This is why, in politics, they emphasised individual rights and democratic participation. This was set against the backdrop of an absolutist monarchy. In the economic sphere, they maintained that the pursuit of one’s own interests, when undertaken in collaboration with others, generates wealth within a culture of hard work, honesty and austerity. Hence, the bourgeoisie, the clergy and the magistrates of the bourgeoisie were strong supporters of this doctrine. The De La Salle family, amongst many others.

La Salle wished to emphasise his loyalty to the Church in contrast to Jansenism.

And for that reason, he sent these Brothers to Rome. They were two Brothers, Gabriel and Gérard Drolin, who were brothers by birth. They travelled on foot for three months and were hoping to find a way to work as teachers in Rome, in a culture of which they knew nothing, starting with the language. Gérard was unable to settle in and returned to France. Gabriel secured a post as an assistant teacher after three years. It took a further four years for him to establish his own school.

He wrote a great many letters to the Founder, and we have the replies in which the Founder guides him in his quest, because that is what matters: the quest of a man, of a community, striving to feel in tune with the Church, to be faithful to the Church. To feel and think as the Church thinks. We, too, live in difficult contexts, contexts of divisions within the Church, of diversity. It falls to us, too, to seek!

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.