New research on the role of women in De La Salle's France

The *Christian Brothers Conference* has recently published a narrative and annotated bibliography by Dr Mary Catherine Fox, AFSC, entitled **"A Point of Departure for Further Scholarship: The Milieu of Women in the France of De La Salle**".

This seminal work explores different areas of women's lives in 17th-century France – birth, education, work, marriage, Church, widowhood and spiritual direction – offering a valuable insight into the daily reality of women in the world of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

A Life in the Service of the Lasallian Mission

Dr Fox is a leading figure in the Lasallian Family. As the founding dean of the School of Business at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota (where she held a 28-year career), she has dedicated her life to serving the Midwest District, the RELAN Region (Lasallian Region of North America) and the Institute at an international level. Among her many honors are the **Letters of Affiliation** received in 2014 and the prestigious **Brother John Johnston Award** in 2021.

Thanks to a Lasallian Research Grant awarded to her in 2024 by RELAN, Mary Fox was able to develop and structure this essay, the initial draft of which had been successfully presented in 2023 during the program on women in the Lasallian Family at the International Lasallian Centre (CIL) in Rome.

The rationale behind this work

At a time when the Institute is engaging in deep reflection on the role and governance of women within the mission, Dr Fox's work addresses a profound need. As she herself writes in the introduction:

"As interest grows in women's place in our Lasallian story, our ministries, and our governance, the need for further scholarship continues. The objective of this project, then, is both to ignite further research into the role of women in our

mission and ministries and provide a resource for future Lasallian scholars."

The research path is not, however, without its obstacles. In an interview given following the publication, Mary Fox explained how the sometimes-mixed reactions were the final impetus to complete the text: "The reaction to my presentation at the CIL in Rome in 2023 was most encouraging. At a later date presenting at the Brother John Johnston Institute, some participants were enthusiastic, while others suggested eliminating the presentation, as 'irrelevant'. That, of course, ensured that I would forge ahead. I was ever more convinced of the necessity of securing wider dissemination of the research, as well as greater awareness of this perspective on our founding history."

Although not a historian by training, Dr Fox has nevertheless succeeded in enriching traditional Lasallian historiography: "The surprise for me was discovering just how varied and fascinating the lives of 17th-century French women were! The more I worked, the more I became convinced of the need to bring this line of research into our 21st-century perspective, not to deny in any way what has been written in our Institute's history spanning over 300 years, but rather to enrich it with a different perspective."

An invitation for the future of the Lasallian Family

Each section of the essay concludes with practical insights and suggestions for future research, an invitation addressed in particular to the new generations of academics and researchers: "One of the true joys of research is discovering new questions to be explored, new lines of work to be mined and alternative stories to follow… My fervent hope is that reading this work will ignite future Lasallian scholars and scholarships".

Essentially, the author's intention with this essay is to: **shed some light** on women in De La Salle's time, **provide some hypotheses** about the lives of the mothers of our first students at Lasallian schools, and **provide today's Lasallians** with a deep understanding of who our female ancestors are within the Institute's historical mission.

As the Lasallian Family, we gratefully welcome the work of Dr Mary Catherine Fox, which reveals to us a history that continues to unfold as ever richer, more

inclusive and more fruitful.

The essay and the annotated bibliography are available for study and consultation via the official channels of the Christian Brothers Conference: Original article: here; digital publication: here.

* *Article written in collaboration with RELAN.*