



Sanctity Made Visible: The Relic of St. John Baptist de La Salle as Visual Catechesis in Santuario de La Salle

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Catholic tradition has long affirmed the didactic and sacramental role of materiality in the life of faith. Sacred objects and spaces, when reverently presented and thoughtfully engaged, can form consciences and shape spiritual imagination. Among the most tangible manifestations of this principle are relics, which serve not only as devotional objects but also as instruments of catechesis. Far from being passive remnants of the past, relics function as embodied testimonies to sanctity, theological witness, and Christian vocation. Their presence in sacred architecture transforms space into a site of spiritual instruction, affective memory, and theological encounter.



This is especially true in the Santuario de La Salle, located on the De La Salle University Laguna Campus in Biñan, Laguna, Philippines. Here, a first-class relic of St. John Baptist de La Salle—a fragment of his bone—is solemnly enshrined, offering a visceral and visual catechesis to all who visit. Gifted to the Lasallian District of the Philippines by the General Council of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 2011, during the Centennial Celebration of Lasallian presence in the Philippines (1911–2011), the relic stands as a sacred gesture of communion and continuity. It anchors the Lasallian mission in the universal Church’s recognition of sanctity, inviting Filipino Lasallians to draw near to the founder not only through study and service, but through sacred presence.

This article explores the theological, spiritual, and catechetical significance of the relic of St. John Baptist de La Salle within the Santuario, considering its role as a silent teacher, a symbol of vocation, and a visual catechism for Lasallian educators and students today.

Theological and Historical Foundations of Relics

A. The Theology of Relics in Catholic Tradition

In Catholic theology, relics are not revered for their physical properties, but for what they signify: a participation in the holiness of the saints, who themselves are reflections of Christ. The veneration of relics is grounded in Scripture and tradition. In the Old Testament, the bones of the prophet Elisha restore life to a dead man (2 Kings 13:21), while in the Acts of the Apostles, handkerchiefs touched to the body of Paul bring healing (Acts 19:11–12). These passages reflect a consistent belief in the sacramental nature of matter, which continues in the Church’s understanding of relics.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms this practice: “the religious sense of the Christian people has always found expression in the various forms of piety... such as the veneration of relics... These expressions extend the liturgical life of the Church” (CCC, §1674–1676). By venerating the relics of saints, the faithful honor God’s work in their lives, expressing gratitude for their witness and drawing strength from their example.

Relics are typically divided into three classes: first-class relics, which are parts of the saint’s body (bone, blood, hair); second-class relics, which are items the saint used or wore; and third-class

relics, which are objects touched to a first- or second-class relic. All three classes communicate the same theological message: holiness is real, embodied, and historically grounded.

B. Relics as Catechetical Tools

In a media-saturated world where meaning is often mediated through sight and experience, relics offer a countercultural catechesis—one that speaks through presence rather than proposition. The relic is a living sign, not a relic of superstition. It teaches the faithful that holiness is not an abstraction but an invitation. As theologian Paul Tillich (1959) argued, symbols “participate in the reality to which they point.” The relic, then, becomes a sacramental sign of vocation, memory, and hope.

Relics teach affectively. They evoke reverence, reflection, and encounter. For students and teachers within the Lasallian tradition—where formation emphasizes the whole person—the

relic becomes a formative presence, a theological narrative inscribed in matter. It anchors Lasallian spirituality not only in pedagogical texts but in bodily testimony.

St. John Baptist de La Salle: A Saint for Educators

A. Biography and Canonization

Born in 1651 in Reims, France, St. John Baptist de La Salle was a diocesan priest who discerned a radical vocation: to dedicate his life to the education of poor children through the formation of lay teachers. He founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and pioneered numerous educational innovations, including teaching in the vernacular, group instruction, and teacher training. His pedagogy emphasized discipline, presence, and faith in God's providence.

Canonized in 1900, he was later declared Patron Saint of All Teachers by Pope Pius XII in 1950. His sanctity lies not in martyrdom or monastic austerity, but in the dignification of everyday vocation—particularly that of educators. His life and legacy have shaped over a thousand Lasallian institutions worldwide, including schools, colleges, and universities in the Philippines.

B. Lasallian Spirituality and the Veneration of Relics

At the heart of Lasallian spirituality lies a profoundly incarnational vision of faith—one that discerns the presence of God not primarily in extraordinary phenomena, but in the ordinary rhythms of daily life: the classroom, the school corridor, the struggles and triumphs of the learner, and the quiet dedication of the teacher. As St. John Baptist de La Salle taught, “God is so good that having created us, he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of the truth” (*Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, 1994, MTR 193.3). This theological vision insists that grace is mediated through human encounter, through relationship, discipline, teaching, and presence.

Within this context, the veneration of relics—particularly that of De La Salle himself—resonates deeply with the Lasallian worldview. Unlike spiritualities that emphasize flight from the world or mystical detachment, Lasallian spirituality is concrete, historical, and embodied. The relic of St. John Baptist de La Salle, a first-class fragment of his bodily remains, is not venerated as a magical

object, but as a tangible witness to a life of holy fidelity to God's mission in the world. It becomes a sacred sign that sanctity is not only possible, but already realized through educational vocation.

“You can perform miracles by touching the hearts of those entrusted to your care,” De La Salle once wrote (MTR, 1994). The relic becomes a silent yet powerful confirmation of this truth: the miracle is not in the relic itself, but in what it represents—a life wholly given to God through service to others, especially the poor and the young. In venerating the relic, the faithful is not merely paying homage to the past, but awakening a sense of present mission. The relic is not a museum piece; it is a call to action.

Moreover, Lasallian pedagogy has always valued formation that is affective and experiential. The presence of the relic in the Santuario is a form of affective catechesis—it invites emotional engagement, reflection, and vocational discernment. Standing before the relic, a student may come to recognize that sanctity is not reserved for priests or religious alone, but is accessible in one's own context—in study, leadership, service, or fidelity to daily duties. For Lasallian Brothers and lay partners alike, the relic affirms that their vocation to teach is not merely professional but profoundly spiritual.

Veneration also fosters communal identity and continuity. In a global Lasallian family that spans centuries and continents, the relic becomes a shared spiritual anchor. It connects Lasallians in the Philippines to their founder in France, and to generations of Brothers and educators who have gone before them. As Pope Francis reminds us in *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018), the saints “encourage and accompany us” (§3). The relic enshrined in the Santuario is a material expression of that accompaniment—a reminder that we walk not alone, but in communion with the holy ones who have paved the way.

In the end, the Lasallian veneration of relics is not about elevating a single saint above others, but about affirming that his life—and ours—can be a path to union with God. In the relic of De La Salle, matter becomes memory, memory becomes mission, and mission becomes an invitation to sanctity.

The Santuario de La Salle in the Philippines: Sacred Space and Relic

A. The Enshrinement of the Relic

The relic of St. John Baptist de La Salle, enshrined within the Santuario de La Salle on the De La Salle University Laguna Campus in Biñan, Laguna, is a first-class relic, specifically a bone fragment of the saint. This sacred relic was a gift from the General Council of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Rome, given to the Philippine Lasallian Family in 2011 to commemorate the Centennial Celebration of 100 Years of Lasallian Mission in the Philippines (1911–2011). Its arrival was both a spiritual milestone and a symbolic affirmation—bridging the global Lasallian tradition with the vibrant and growing Lasallian educational mission in the Philippines.

Although the relic was received in 2011, it was solemnly enshrined in its permanent home on November 21, 2022, during the liturgical blessing and dedication of the newly

constructed Santuario de La Salle. This date, the Commemoration of the Heroic Vow, also holds significance in Lasallian spirituality, as it recalls the total offering of one's life to God—a gesture echoed in the life and legacy of St. La Salle. The enshrinement was celebrated through a solemn Eucharistic celebration, attended by Brothers of the Christian Schools, academic leaders, student representatives, alumni, and mission partners, all of whom witnessed the formal dedication of the Santuario as a spiritual and formational center for the Lasallian community.

Unlike many church relics placed near the main altar, the relic of St. La Salle in the Santuario is housed in a dedicated reliquary room, located within a quiet, contemplative area adjacent to the main sanctuary. This intentional architectural placement allows for personal veneration, prayer, and reflection, distinct from the central liturgical activities at the altar. The room's minimalistic design, in keeping with the Santuario's overall architectural language, creates a space of reverent stillness, drawing attention to the relic not through grandeur but through the invitation to encounter.

The reliquary itself is dignified yet simple, crafted to reflect the humility and pedagogical focus of St. La Salle. The installation of the relic within the Santuario signals a profound transformation of the space: from a place of worship to a site of pilgrimage and spiritual formation. It serves as a physical and theological focal point, linking the Eucharistic table (the altar) with the witness of the saint (the relic)—a convergence of grace and vocation. In this way, the Santuario becomes not just a chapel for campus use, but a national spiritual center for the Lasallian family, offering a sacred space where the past meets the present, and where every visitor is reminded of the call to holiness and mission in their own life.

B. Liturgical and Architectural Catechesis

While the relic of St. John Baptist de La Salle is not situated directly within the main sanctuary of the Santuario de La Salle, it is by no means separated from the spiritual and theological life of the space. Housed in a dedicated relic room located just outside the main body of the church, the relic occupies a distinct architectural threshold—a place of quiet transition between the sacred assembly of communal worship and the intimate space of personal veneration. This spatial separation is not a detachment, but a pedagogical and spiritual gesture that highlights the relic's contemplative role within the overall liturgical environment.

The relic room, designed in continuity with the Santuario's minimalist aesthetic, is marked by simplicity, natural textures, and an abundance of natural light. Stone and wood surfaces, unadorned walls, and clean architectural lines evoke a sense of monastic quiet—fostering interiority and attentiveness. This design choice aligns with Lasallian spirituality, which emphasizes simplicity and depth over spectacle. As Bishop Robert Barron (2011) has observed, sacred architecture ought to function as a “lens” through which the divine mystery is glimpsed; the relic room, in this case, becomes a space for encounter and discernment, a kind of oratory for the modern soul.

While physically outside the sanctuary, the relic's location is liturgically and theologically connected to the altar through symbolic continuity. As the Second Vatican Council's *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) teaches, in the liturgy the Church is in communion “not only with the members still here on earth but also with those who have gone before us marked

with the sign of faith” (§8). The relic room—accessible before or after Mass, and during moments of quiet pilgrimage—reinforces this theological principle: that the saint is not a distant figure of the past, but a present intercessor and model of Eucharistic life. The physical movement from altar to relic room becomes a spiritual progression—from the reception of grace in sacrament to the imitation of grace in life.

During certain feast days and Lasallian celebrations—such as the Feast of St. La Salle (April 7), or Founder's Day,—the relic is incorporated into liturgical rites through processions, veneration, and special prayers. These events are not mere ceremonial gestures; they become powerful acts of visual catechesis, especially for students and young educators. Seeing the relic carried with reverence, hearing its story proclaimed, and being invited to reflect on one's own vocation through its witness—all these moments embed theological meaning into ritual and space. Moreover, the natural light that enters the relic room, often falling gently across the reliquary, creates a theological ambience that evokes Christ's words: “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). The changing light throughout the day serves as a visual metaphor for spiritual illumination—drawing the visitor not only to remember De La Salle's life, but to allow it to shed light on their own. The relic room thus becomes a theological classroom without words—a space where formation happens through stillness, sight, and presence.

In this way, the liturgical and architectural design of the Santuario and its relic room reflect a coherent catechetical vision: that the life of the saint flows from the altar, and returns to it in the witness of those formed by his example. The relic is not a static museum object, but a living threshold of grace, a material reminder that sanctity is possible, and that each life, like De La Salle's, can become a temple of God's mission in the world.

The Relic as Living Catechesis: Vocation, Identity, and Formation

The enshrined relic of St. John Baptist de La Salle in the Santuario de La Salle stands not only as a physical link to the Founder but as a profound pedagogical and spiritual presence—a living catechesis embodied in matter,

memory, and mission. For the Lasallian community, the relic silently communicates a radical yet foundational message: sanctity is possible in the ordinary. As Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) affirms, relics “extend the liturgical life of the Church” by making the lives of saints tangible and accessible (§1676). In this sense, the relic becomes not an artifact of devotion but an educational icon of vocation.

For educators, the relic affirms that teaching is not merely technical or administrative—it is sacramental in the broadest sense: a visible sign of an invisible grace. The daily tasks of lesson planning, mentoring, and pastoral care become expressions of participation in God’s redemptive work. As De La Salle himself wrote, “You are called like the Apostles to make God known to others” (Meditations for the Time of Retreat, 1994, MTR 201.2). For students and young people, the relic offers a countercultural vision of greatness: one rooted not in prestige or achievement, but in faithful service, humility, and commitment to the poor and the marginalized.

This sacred object also fosters a profound sense of Lasallian identity and belonging. Venerated in a dedicated relic room within the Santuario—outside the main sanctuary yet intentionally

accessible—the relic invites pilgrims and passersby alike to pause, reflect, and remember. It binds together Lasallians from across the archipelago and around the world. Whether Brother, lay partner, student, or alumnus, all who gather before the relic are united by a shared spiritual ancestry and charism. They are reminded not only of what has been handed down to them but of what they are now called to hand on.

Formation programs built around the relic’s presence transform pilgrimage into pedagogy. Recollections, prayer moments, vocational talks, and quiet veneration are often integrated into institutional formation, especially for students, new teachers, and visiting delegations. These experiences offer more than religious instruction—they become embodied catechesis: a space where doctrine is not merely taught but encountered through place, presence, and proximity. As Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) emphasizes, such liturgical and devotional experiences deepen faith by engaging both body and soul (§7–8).

To stand before the relic is to enter into an encounter—not only with the Founder but with one’s own vocation. It becomes a spiritual threshold, offering Lasallians an opportunity to listen more deeply, to discern more intentionally, and to recommit more fully to the mission entrusted to them.

Memory, Mission, and Modern Witness

Yet, in an increasingly secular and digital age, relics—especially those of saints—risk being misunderstood, dismissed as medieval curiosities or even superstitious. The task of contemporary catechesis, therefore, is to frame relics not as magical or mystical talismans, but as theological symbols of the Church’s incarnational memory—expressions of belief in the resurrection of the body, the communion of saints, and the sacramentality of history (Belting, 1994; Kieckhefer, 2004).

Educators and ministers must accompany the relic with meaningful interpretative tools that guide the faithful into its theological richness. As Mitchell (2010) suggests, visual catechesis in minimalist spaces can be effectively enhanced by digital storytelling, curated panels, or prayer guides that evoke curiosity and deepen understanding. For the Santuario, this could include QR-code reflections, podcasts on Lasallian spirituality, or virtual pilgrimages that reach even those unable to visit Biñan physically. These tools ensure that the relic remains accessible without becoming over-explained, preserving the contemplative atmosphere while inviting formation.

More than that, the veneration of the relic becomes a statement of Lasallian mission in continuity. As the Church teaches, the saints are not only intercessors but “models and protectors of the faithful” (Lumen Gentium, 1964, §50). The relic of De La Salle models a life completely surrendered to the call of God through education.

It challenges the faithful not only to admire the saint, but to imitate him—to make their own lives into “relics of grace” by touching hearts, transforming lives, and remaining faithful in small things.

Thus, the Santuario becomes more than a building. It becomes a theological classroom without words, where light, silence, stone, and relic all speak. In this space, the relic is not a remnant of the past—it is a present and prophetic voice that teaches through the holy. As Lasallians kneel before it—in silence, in song, or in service—they respond not to a symbol alone, but to a living invitation to holiness.

“God has chosen you to make Him known to others.”

St. John Baptist de La Salle (MTR, 1994)

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