

# Jean de la Salle (1598-1639)

## “The Ardor of His Zeal Compensated for the Short Span of His Existence”

Vicente de Dios Toribio, C.M.

The Congregation of the Mission began in Folleville (January 25, 1617) and continued with the assistance of Madame de Gondi, Marguerite de Sully, “our first founder” (*What remedy can we put in place?*); with the foundational contract to establish a missionary association, a contract that on April 17, 1625 was signed by Vincent de Paul and the de Gondi’s. This formal ceremony took place on the de Gondi estate and was witnessed by two notaries. The Congregation continued when three other priests signed a contract of affiliation and when on April 24, 1626 ecclesiastical approval was received from the Archbishop of Paris, Jean François de Gondi<sup>1</sup>.

Here for the first time we find the name of Jean de la Salle in what is considered a primary source (his name does not appear very often). Who is this missionary? He was born in Seux, in the diocese of Amiens on September 10, 1598. After completing his studies at the Sorbonne he was ordained in 1622. Four years later he joined Vincent and together with Monsieur Portail and Monsieur DuCoudray signed the document that joined the four of them together. Vincent was recognized as the superior of this new foundation<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *A curious case of a community being approved before it existed! In fact, just four months later, on 3 September, the first three companions signed in the presence of a notary, the act of affiliation to the infant congregation, company or confraternity. These were Fr. Portail and two priests from the diocese of Amiens: François de Coudray and Jean de la Salle who had been living with Vincent since March and April respectively.* JOSÉ MARÍA ROMAN, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, Medisende, London 1999, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> Coste says: *Two names are missing from the foot of the Act of Association, namely, those of Berlin and Louis Calon, Doctor of the Sorbonne. All that we know of the former is what Saint Vincent tells us in a letter dated December 16, 1634, of which we have an extract. According to the biographer of James Gallelant, Louis Calon was one of those priests “in whom sanctity, knowledge, zeal and simplicity were happily combined.” He entered the College des Bons-Enfants on July 1, 1626, with the intention of sharing the life and works of*

In Vincent's letter of 1626 we find a more complete description: *Jean de la Salle, whom Saint Vincent calls a "great missionary" and whom the Bishop of Beauvais considered the "most gifted expositor" he had ever known (Conference of Saint Vincent, August 5, 1659 – cf. vol. XII, no. 210), was born in Seux, (Somme), September 10, 1598, and offered his services to Saint Vincent in April 1626. In 1631, he was preaching in Champagne; in 1634, 1635, and 1636, he was working in Gironde and the surrounding areas. When the internal seminary of Saint Lazare opened in June 1637, he was entrusted with its direction. The following year he returned to his missions, after which he was engaged in the ordinands' retreats until the end of his life. He died October 9, 1639, much regretted by Saint Vincent, who lost in him one of his best workers*<sup>3</sup>.

In 1626 Vincent was forty-five years old; Du Coudray was forty, Portail was about to turn thirty-six and Jean de la Salle, with twenty-eight years, was the youngest. He would only live another thirteen years before he would die in 1639, but *the ardor of his zeal compensated for the short span of his existence*<sup>4</sup>.

While he was the youngest he was not the most intellectual of the group. This was not because he was lacking in intelligence as we have seen from the testimonies of the bishop of Beauvais as well as Vincent's evaluation. Rather his two companions were older and were more intelligent.

What were Jean de la Salle's ministries and virtues? His first ministry was preaching missions; then, he was appointed director of the internal seminary and lastly was involved in the ministry with the ordinands. We add here that in the beginning of his ministry he was very influential in establishing the Confraternities of Charity.

## The Confraternities

The establishment of the Confraternities was not a ministry that was expressly entrusted to him but resulted from a relationship of mutual esteem on the part of Louise de Marillac and Jean de la Salle. On more than one occasion Louise asked Vincent to send Jean to one place or another to establish the Confraternity or to speak to groups that were

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*his associates, but was soon forced to abandon the idea on account of ill-health. He returned to Aumale, of which he was parish priest, but for all that he never ceased to belong to the Congregation and to labor at the work of the missions.* PIERRE COSTE, C.M., *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, The Newman Press, Westminster (Maryland) 1952, Vol. I, pp. 153-154.

<sup>3</sup> CCD, I: 30, note, 1.

<sup>4</sup> PIERRE COSTE, C.M., *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 153.

already formed in order to renew their initial fervor. In the exchange of correspondence between Louise and Vincent there are frequent references to Jean de la Salle. *Notices* has preserved a letter that Jean wrote to Louise on February 9, 1630 in which he responds to the questions that she had formulated. Here are some of his words:

*Madame, I praise God for having given you such a good beginning and for not denying you the gifts of his Spirit and all that is needed to achieve His great glory. I assure you that I leave everything in your hands. I am pleased with the zeal and the devotion of the Ladies of Charity [...] Here is what I am able to say. I fully recommend these good Ladies and particularly the individuals who will hold official positions. Give them encouragement and I promise to remember you and them in the holy sacrifice of the Mass. Remain in the love of our Lord and of his blessed Mother. Your humble servant.*

Many years later Saint Vincent would write to Saint Louise and as occurred on many occasions he speaks to her about her son Michael. He tells her that her son spoke to Father de la Salle and told him that he aspired to the priesthood because that was what his mother (Louise) desired. Vincent tells us that this should not be her desire: *Allow God to lead him; He is more his Father than you are his mother and loves him more than you do. Allow Him to guide him*<sup>5</sup>.

## The Missions

For Saint Vincent the missions were the most important and unavoidable ministry of the Congregation, all the rest was complementary. It appears that Jean held and lived this same conviction. Certainly all of Saint Vincent's missionaries preached the missions; this was why they entered the Congregation. It is admirable to read the list of the places where the missions were preached and it is moving to listen to the testimonies of so many personal conversions. The missions that Father Jean de la Salle and Father Jean Brunet preached in the Diocese of Bordeaux were commented upon: *they spent part of the years 1634 and 1635 in the diocese of Bordeaux. Whenever a mission was announced the faithful poured in, sometimes from great distances*<sup>6</sup>. In a letter that the two wrote to Saint Vincent they stated: *The faithful come from far away. They are so anxious to make a general confession that they wait their turn for weeks at a time without returning home and would rather die than lose this opportunity of making their*

<sup>5</sup> CCD I: 506.

<sup>6</sup> PIERRE COSTE, C.M., *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 35.

peace with God. There are some who accuse themselves quite loudly so as to humble themselves more<sup>7</sup>. On December 7, 1634 at the request of Jean de la Salle, Saint Vincent wrote to Jean de Fonteneil, vicar-general of the Diocese of Bordeaux the following solemn letter:

*M. de la Salle has written me several times about the fondness Our Lord has given you for our modest way of life, for himself, and for M. Brunet, and about the ardor with which you work for the salvation of the poor, and for us when the occasions arise. Now, for all that, Monsieur, I thank you most humbly and beg Our Lord Himself to be your thanks and reward and to shed upon you more and more abundantly His graces and blessings.*

*O Monsieur, how my heart is filled with consolation every time the above-mentioned M. de la Salle writes to me about your zeal for the salvation of souls, your diligence in winning them over, the blessing Our Lord is bestowing on you, and the solid virtue you possess! I assure you. Monsieur, all that gives me a joy I cannot express to you and a very special fidelity in asking God to be pleased to continue for you and to increase the same graces within you.*

*That, Monsieur, is the reward you may expect from us for the many, many acts of charity you incessantly perform for us there. I add to that the offering I am making to you, Monsieur, of the Little Company and its services, and my own in particular, with all the affection and humility of which I am capable. This gives me the confidence to recommend myself to your holy prayers, I am, in the love of Our Lord, Monsieur, your most humble and obedient servant<sup>8</sup>.*

Father de la Salle became seriously ill during the missions in Bordeaux and was confined to bed for an extended period of time. When he was able to walk he returned to Paris where he initiated another ministry: director of the internal seminary.

We present here some anecdotes that reveal different aspects of the personality of good Father de la Salle:

We have selected two. Jean went to give a mission in Mesnil, Champagne. Faithful to the practice of giving missions gratuitously he refused to accept a donation from Monsieur de Gondi, a priest of the Oratory. Saint Vincent reprimanded him: *There is no objection at all to accepting alms from Father de Gondi. If you have already refused them, offer your apologies to M. Ferrat. Father de Gondi is our founder. We have no right to refuse what he gives us for the love of God any more than we would refuse a gift from someone who was not*

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<sup>7</sup> CCD, I: 271.

<sup>8</sup> CCD, I: 268-269.

*from the place where we were giving a mission. He then places before him the example of Saint Paul who never accepted anything from the place where he was working, but he took from the other churches in order to work in the new ones when the toil of his own hands was not sufficient*<sup>9</sup>.

The second anecdote refers to the different times that Saint Vincent remembered and praised Father de la Salle in his conferences to the Missionaries when he spoke to them about the virtue of chastity: *never give the mission to nuns, and do not receive any letters from nuns afterward, under pretext of advice they may request, etc. Tell them, as the late M. de la Salle told the nuns in Crécy, where he had gone one day to give the mission, "Do not write to me"*<sup>10</sup>. He elaborated on this in another conference:

*Before the foundation of the Company, the Bishop of Geneva, whom we had the honor of knowing and with whom we had the honor of conversing, obliged us to take on responsibility for the Visitation Nuns, and so we were bound to do this; it is a sacred pledge, what can we do about that? But, Messieurs, [...] I recommend that the Company never accept any ministry that might oblige it to direct, guide, and converse with nuns. Speaking of this, I can tell you that, at the beginning of the Company, we gave a mission in a village or hamlet where there were some nuns. They asked us to give them a few sermons and hear their general confessions, since we were hearing the confessions of the good people, which we did. Good M. de la Salle was there. After his return here, those good nuns wrote to him several times. As soon as he noticed that there was some attachment in that, M. de la Salle, who was a man with common sense, replied to them that they should be satisfied with what he had written to them and even said to them when he was in that place, that he had nothing more to say or to write to them*<sup>11</sup>.

Was Saint Vincent so rigid and mistrusting as he appears here? He was not and in fact he was always surrounded by women. But from the beginning he did not consider the spiritual direction of religious women as one of the ends of the Company which was dedicated to the service of the poor. To attend to both matters would result in one of them not being fulfilled in the proper way.

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<sup>9</sup> CCD, I: 133.

<sup>10</sup> CCD, XI: 161-162.

<sup>11</sup> CCD, XII: 343-344.

## The internal seminary

In 1637 Saint Vincent decided to establish the internal seminary in the Congregation. In the first years of the Congregation's establishment the members were ordained priests who immediately began to preach missions or preach retreats to the ordinands. Other aspirants, those not ordained, lived at Saint Lazare and were inspired by the example of the older missionaries, especially Saint Vincent, who, for all practical purposes, was their director. But as Abelly says, Saint Vincent on *seeing his Congregation take form, and knowing the importance of admitting only well-intentioned subjects called by God, he decided that those who came must first pass some time in a seminary under a director who would form them in the practices of the virtues and introduce them to the spiritual life. The first director chosen was Monsieur Jean de la Salle [...] the seminary began in June, 1637 in the house of Saint Lazare, where it has remained ever since, always blessed by God. Ordinarily there were about thirty or forty seminarians, both priests and clerics*<sup>12</sup>.

We know little about Father Jean in this ministry. Saint Vincent asked him to spend some months in the Jesuit Novitiate in order to understand his role as director and to adapt the practices of the Jesuits to the Congregation. *When he was in charge of the seminary he managed, in barely a year, to create such a pleasant and welcoming atmosphere that the older missionaries regretted that they and their contemporaries had not been able to enjoy such benefits*<sup>13</sup>. Why then did Father de la Salle remain in this position for only one year? We do not know. Perhaps he longed to preach missions or perhaps Vincent needed him for the missions in Saint-Germain-en-Laye which had been requested by King Louis XIII and which would begin in February, 1638.

The royal court resided in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Saint Vincent would have preferred that this mission would be preached by others since his Missionaries were dedicated to the poor and not the "great and influential individuals of the century." But Louis XIII asked for his Missionaries and Vincent had to cede to the king's wishes. The mission was difficult in its development but none the less successful. Among other things the missionaries had to combat scandalous nudity of many women of the royal court and in confession exhorted them to practice Christian modesty. The Missionaries were openly criticized but they continued to preach the gospel. Conversions occurred and because of their evangelization of the poor which those

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<sup>12</sup> LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God: Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New York 1993, p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> JOSÉ MARÍA ROMAN, C.M., *op. cit.*, p. 283.

missionaries preached, those who before insulted them now wanted to join the Confraternity of Charity and made concrete proposals to contribute their support. *Notices* tells us *that almost everyone in the royal house made an effort to take advantage of the opportunity to share in the grace of God that was given in such abundance.* This explains the letter that de la Salle sent to Father Jean Dehorgny, another great missionary who succeeded him as Director of the internal seminary: *Tell them in the seminary that without the mission of Saint-Germain-en-Laye thousands of souls would have been lost.*

When the mission in Saint-Germain-en-Laye was concluded Father de la Salle returned to Saint Lazare where he would undertake another ministry in which he would continue until his death.

### Retreats for the ordinands

Saint Vincent was dedicated to and dedicated his missionaries to giving retreats for the ordinands in order to provide the Church with better prepared priests. Later he dedicated himself to the ministry of seminaries in order to prepare priests who would be concerned about the poor. In 1628, with the help of three priests, he directed the first retreat for ordinands: *the retreats for ordinands were, in fact, a sort of professional sandwich course [...] It was a case of applying an urgent remedy to a state of affairs that called for immediate action*<sup>14</sup>. This retreat was very successful and was adopted in many dioceses as well as in Rome.

Saint Vincent wrote: *We have about seventy retreatants [...] M. Hopille explains the Pontifical and M. Hiobier gives the morning talk. Messieurs de la Salle, Dehorgny, Soufliers, Cuissot, and some of our young theologians help with the retreat. It is being held at the Bons-Enfants where things are working out better than we had dared to hope*<sup>15</sup>. We have a lengthy letter of Saint Vincent written on June 14, 1638 which reveals to us the ministry with the ordinands during these years. Vincent had been away and so spoke with Father de la Salle about many administrative details concerning Saint Lazare: rent, keys, individuals asking to become members of the Company, the purchase of fabric, money, a flock of sheep who would be spending the night in the stables of Saint Lazare, greetings for different people [...] as if Jean had substituted for him during Vincent's absence<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> JOSÉ MARÍA ROMAN, C.M., *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> CCD, I: 516.

<sup>16</sup> CCD, I; 478-480.

Father de la Salle continued in the ministry with the ordinands until the end of his life. We could say that this was his last work, the last flower joined to a crown that was already filled with much merit and many good works.

## The end

In October 1639, Saint Vincent, in a letter to a priest of the Mission and certainly to all the Missionaries in a circular letter, communicated the death of Jean de la Salle: *It has pleased the Divine Goodness to take to Himself good Monsieur de la Salle. He died of purpura on the feast of Saint Denis, between three and four o'clock in the morning on the fourteenth day of his illness. His death corresponded to his life. His acceptance of the good pleasure of God was constant from the beginning of his illness right to the end, without any contrary thought at all. He had always feared death, but, as he saw from the start that he was contemplating it with delight, he told me that he was going to die with pleasure because, he said, he had heard me say that at the end God takes away the fear of death from those who have feared it during this life and who practiced charity towards the poor. I cannot tell you the devout sentiments he has left in the Company*<sup>17</sup>.

Naturally, Saint Vincent informed Louise because the deceased had collaborated with her on many occasions: *I shall say just a word to you about the loss we have experienced in the late M. de la Salle and the one we are in danger of suffering. By the grace of God, my heart is at peace about it, seeing that is it God's good pleasure*<sup>18</sup>.

Father Jean de la Salle was one of the first three companions who joined Saint Vincent to initiate the development of the Company. He was simple, humble and an effective worker in all his ministries. The biographers of Saint Vincent say that he cried when Jean died; but then that would be natural because he had lost a beloved son. Jean was a missionary for only thirteen years, from 1626-1639, but the ardor of his zeal compensated for the short span of his existence.

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<sup>17</sup> CCD, I: 586-587.

<sup>18</sup> CCD, I: 580.