

## LIFE &amp; WELLBEING HISTORY



Stella Maris College, Gzira.



The reliquary containing the mortal remains of St. John Baptist De La Salle in the chapel of the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome.



The original collar and rabat worn by De La Salle at the same museum.

# Saint John Baptist De La Salle: pioneer of modern education



FABIAN MANGION

John Baptist De La Salle is a source of inspiration for many educators around the world, providing them with insight into the way education should be imparted to youth and to children with different needs. This he did especially through the Congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools which he founded.

After their expulsion from France in 1903, the De La Salle Brothers spread all over Europe. Some of them settled in Malta and started carrying out their mission here.

Their first house with a college was opened at Cospicua in 1903; the second was inaugurated at Sliema in 1904. The latter house, under the name of Stella Maris College, was transferred to Gzira in 1938, and the former, under the title of De La Salle College, moved to Vittoriosa in 1939.

The Frères, as they became known locally, were of great benefit to Maltese society. They taught at the Floriana Seminary (1903-1904), at St Joseph Institute, Santa Venera (1905-1923), as well as in the Oratory at Birkirkara (1912-1916).

They were also entrusted with the training of male teachers-to-be in State schools (1947-1973). This teaching started in St Michael's Training College in St George's Bay, St Julian's, which was, in 1956, relocated to the new modern building at Ta' Giorni, St Julian's.

Today, the spirit of Lasallian education, pioneered and nurtured for a long time entirely by generations of Brothers, has been enlarged and enriched by the gifts brought by others who became associated within this mission, sharing the same zeal and the same sense of vocation inspired by the charisma of John Baptist De La Salle.

Born in Rheims on April 30, 1651, into the aristocracy of the very class-conscious 17th century France, De La Salle was, in his early years, almost completely cut off from any relationship with the lower orders of whose very existence he was barely aware.



De La Salle College, Vittoriosa. PHOTO: NEIL FARRUGIA VELLA

Shortly after his ordination to the priesthood on April 8, 1678, a series of providential circumstances set him firmly on the road that was to lead him to the eventual foundation of a religious order which, though unconventional in conception, owing to circumstances of time and place, was to prove in the years that followed extremely beneficial to the Church.

In the mind of John Baptist De La Salle, the work of the Brothers as teachers was indistinguishable from their work of

self-sanctification, which is the primary aim of all religious orders. The task of teaching children, and especially the underprivileged, was thus given a further incentive and teachers' status was enhanced because of the mystical value attached to the work.

In an era when social services are so plentiful and varied, it is difficult for us to imagine the plight of the underprivileged in Europe of the 17th century. Their lot was a sad one and it required courage of the highest order to abandon a life of ease and comfort in the

ecclesiastical state, with untold possibilities for advancement, in order to associate with people of an inferior station in life.

Yet this is precisely what De La Salle did once he became convinced of the necessity of establishing schools for the poor. For these schools to be established on a firm and solid foundation it would be quite useless for him to lead from behind. There would be no half-measures for De La Salle. He would become one of the brethren; he would lead the same life as they led and he would personally supervise their training.

*“Despite the failure of his training colleges in his lifetime, De La Salle’s idealistic notion of teachers gave the world a vision that was to revolutionise education”*

To do all this he had to face the future with heroic fortitude and break all ties with his wealthy and comfortable past. He resigned his canonry of Rheims Cathedral, he left his home and family and distributed his wealth among the poor. Through long periods of prayer and retreat he braced himself for any sacrifice the Lord would demand of him – and demands were made often enough – in the course of a life destined to be one of exceptional heartbreak and suffering.

Having set his course, he started on his life's work with absolute fixity of purpose, concentrating particularly on the training of his Brothers both as religious and as teachers. For them he wrote his *Conduite des Écoles* (1695), which has become a classic in Lasallian circles and beyond, and, though requests came in for new schools from far and wide, he refused to take on more than he could adequately cope with, since he considered proper teacher training the first requisite for his schools to bear fruit.



John Baptist De La Salle on his death bed surrounded by his fellow Brothers, by Giovanni Gagliardi, 1901

During holidays he would gather around him the youngest and least experienced Brothers and he would devote a long time to the completion of their religious, professional and pedagogical training.

As the founder of a religious order, his efforts were naturally concentrated on his own brethren but he was farsighted enough to realise that, though he could not possibly cope with all the requests from parish priests and others for the opening of new schools, he could make a valuable contribution towards the training of potential teachers for villages which his order could not reach directly. In this respect he was a trailblazer in the work of teacher-training.

He saw plainly that the keystone of his whole structure was the teacher, especially where schools for the poor were concerned. The foundation of an order of exclusively lay religious was the saint's way of solving part of the problem: his Brothers would never be numerous enough to satisfy all the demands that would flow in, and in any case, he was not prepared to send out his Brothers separately: three would always be an absolute minimum, a principle from which he never departed.

No one realised more clearly than he did, or endeavoured to pursue more consistently, the principle that a system of education must be built on teachers, and although this meant that he built more slowly, he built on sure foundations.



The original cassock worn by De La Salle at Museo La Salle, Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome.



The chair used by De La Salle in his classroom at the same museum.

Christian values, as the saint fully realised that an educator is not one who teaches merely the subjects of human learning to his pupils. This teaching would prove barren were it to be divorced from Christianity as a life to be lived and not merely a series of religious truths to be believed.

The true Christian educator, in the concept of De La Salle, will so integrate his religious teaching with the other subjects taught at school that he will show in no uncertain manner his conviction that religion is the heart of the matter. No education can be complete without it. In the saint's ideal, the teacher is to be, at all times, an exemplar of true Christian virtue.

On April 7, 1719, in Rouen, France, as one who drops off to sleep after a great struggle, John Baptist De La Salle passed away.

On February 19, 1888, Pope Leo XIII declared him blessed, and on May 24, 1900, he inscribed him in the catalogue of the saints. On May 15, 1950, Pope Pius XII declared him heavenly patron before God of all educators of young people.

Today, as we celebrate the tercentenary of his death, one cannot fail to remember that, through the toils and sufferings endured during a long life of privations and difficulties, St John Baptist De La Salle raised schoolmastering from a despised occupation to the rank of a fundamental profession and a religious vocation. For this, the whole teaching world owes him an immense debt of gratitude.