

# Walk Before Me....

## HOW DE LA SALLE CROSSED SO MUCH OF FRANCE ON FOOT

*[The following text is translated and adapted  
from sections of "Marche en ma Présence,"*

*Monsieur De La Salle 1651-1719. 2eme*


*EDITION by Charles Lapierre, Frère des Écoles Chrésiennes.*

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Our age – from an ecological, sporting and health viewpoint- has come to revalue the importance of walking. What a difference there is today and how difficult it is for us to evoke the trips made by our ancestors! Our roads and our means of transport are so different from theirs. Fortunately, the contemporaries of Louis XIV did not miss out on telling us their stories of travelling on foot, by horse coach or by water by adding certain personal impressions to the dryness of whatever official texts we have.

That is why we can learn something through the example that Jean-Baptiste Colbert – from Reims just like De La Salle - created in 1669 the Corporation of Bridges and Roads and recommended to local officials the improvement of the roads divided into the following categories: Royal roads, at least 10 metres broad, allowing for coaches to go side-by-side ; roads 5 metres broad, which led to cities or eventually to a royal road; private roads, which could be 1 metre 50 and very small tracks reduced to 50 cm for people riding on horseback.

These are interesting dispositions and the insufficiency of credit available made them inefficient especially after Colbert's death in 1683. Thus, the result was that the roads from Paris to the provinces become impassable during winter at least for about 30 km away from the city.

Madame de Sévigné, going from Bourbon L'Archambault to take the waters, writes from Nevers on 20th September 1687: *"How extraordinary beautiful are the roads... People responsible have done wonders... Instead of going directly to Moulins, we are going straight to Bourbon...ten leagues; how advanced that is."* But two days later from Bourbon she records: *"how long these 10 leagues, continual rain, endless roads, always on foot for fear of the coach turning over on the very terrible ruts."*

**De La Salle knew it well** – he did not have to leave a coach to walk these dreadful ruts on foot and he also knew the potholes in which the Queen's ladies remained stuck on a journey from Versailles to Bar-le-Duc... he knew them so well that, according to his biographers, at least on one occasion he just missed out losing his life when he fell into a snowdrift and ruptured himself in finally struggling out!

What happened on these journeys? What kind of people walked like him on foot with the risk of being crushed by a carriage or a coach going at full speed or encircled by a troop of sheep or of horned beasts, or blocked by a caravan of slow paced carts, carriages carrying barrels of wine or wheat or straw, or being knocked over by a horse, or by being having your goods stolen or having yourself assassinated by a troop of brigands! Certainly, all wonderful people, too poor to use another means of transport which meant you had to pay. But also as M. Heron de Villefosse recalls:

*...a crowd of nomads. A regulation of 1625 classed among the vagabonds:*

## VOYAGES & FONDATIONS





## De La Salle walks through his own 'dark night'

**Few people on earth would have walked as much as John Baptist de La Salle.** Without leaving the hexagon in France how many leagues [league=4 km] he walked: many times from Reims to Paris; from Paris to Rouen and back to Reims; from Rouen to Mende; from Mende to Marseille; from Marseille to Grenoble; from Grenoble to Parmenie; practically all the time on foot, only sometimes with a horse.


Why all these journeys and different directions through all these periods? Like Abraham, the father of believers, De La Salle had received from God a mission to carry out. There was no other way of doing it other than simply setting out, a shepherd of a more or less docile flock, a peddler of the good news greeting people in the service of the kingdom of Jesus, a pilgrim sustained by prayer.



***Shoes were his instrument of work just as the bicycle, motorbike, the train or the car are for the worker of today. In spite of the thickness of the soles and the good stitching, how many pairs of shoes altogether must he have used between 1680 and 1719 in the service of the children of artisans and the poor?***

Three centuries later we are not simply following him in all the details of his journey, but realizing that in one of the most challenging times of his life he walked in the presence of God even while, as his biographer Blain writes, “God said nothing more to him and left him in darkness.”

In his history of “the great roads of France” M. Héron de Villefosse writes “that from the time of the Celts to the time of Louis Philippe it took practically took the same time to go from Calais to Marseille.” Who walked on these roads?



*Young barbers who pulled out unwanted hair; prostitutes, tooth pullers, sellers of drugs, tournament players, puppeteers, singers, tumblers at fairs, former soldiers or deserters, wandering monks, sellers of images or prayers. The police regarded all these more favourably than peddlers and travelling merchants whose outlines are known to us through images.*

Among so many different people - sometimes dangerous – M. De La Salle had encounters whose meanings went beyond classification... at least by transforming his walking alone into a spiritual retreat he preferred the small paths to the roads ...where he was guided on the way by the voice which always was giving instructions from Abraham, the Father of Believers, *Walk in my presence and be perfect.*

It is difficult to walk during a heavy storm. For a period of 12 years, the deep faith and the peaceful energy of the Saint impresses us. Up till 1712 he goes on foot but it then takes him more than two years of wandering around before he rediscovers the direction he wishes to take. The biographer tells us, *"God no longer spoke to him."* People know the expression *the dark night of the soul*, this darkness which recalls in some way Jesus Christ and those three days between his death and resurrection for just as Jesus came forth alive again from the tomb, so too did John Baptist de La Salle.

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## **The First Visit to the South (Midi)**

### **April-August 1711**

At this time in his life De La Salle visited the communities opened in the South. He experienced not only the condemnation from the *Chatelet* but also the death of his sister, Marie, at the age of 57. We know how close he was to his sister but, as far as we can tell, it was only on his return to the North that he went to Épernay for the marriage of his younger brother Pierre. It seems likely that he also went to Reims to visit the tomb of his sister.

In a letter addressed to Brother Gabriel Drolin dated from Marseille 24th August 1711, M. De La Salle announces in a postscript *"I am returning to France"* which means *"I'm returning to Paris."* This return to France by De La Salle passed via Avignon which he left on 2 September, passing by Alès, Les Vans, Mende and Grenoble where the register of the school expenses mentions in 1711 a payment of 50 livres paid for the arrival of M. De La Salle and the sending of two Brothers.

## Second Visit to the South

**18th February 1712 – 10th August 1714**

For the next two and a half years M. De La Salle lived in a very different country from that of the calm Seine river and its peaceful tributaries. From Marseilles where he lived 11 months, to Grenoble where he lived another 10 months, passing via Mende where he stayed on two occasions, there was nothing that would remind him of the Champagne countryside or the countryside near Paris where he usually used to walk. The exuberant spirit and the singing accent of his new companions on the road were only the expression of temperaments very different from those who come from the north and not easily understood.

In the previous year his first trip had been too short for him really to take this into account but this time he became more acutely aware of the reality. This led him to a very practical conclusion found in a letter to Brother Gabriel Drolin written from Marseilles in July 1712:

*It will be difficult to send you a Brother who hasn't yet begun his novitiate because in this part of the country where I'm now travelling they want people from this part of the country because of the difference which there is between the language here<sup>1</sup> compared with that of the rest of France".*

The visits of the Founder to these communities established in these far-off provinces contributed, even when it was followed up with some hesitation, in organising his institute in France in a region which he knew only by reading about it or by hearsay.

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## The Bourbon Road

There were two principal routes that a Parisian could take to go towards the south or MIDI. There was the Bourbon Road, passing via Nemours, Montargis, Nevers, Moulins, Roanne. More frequented was the "Burgundy route" – a "cruel road" according to Madame de Sévigné - passing through Montereau, Sens, Joigny, Auxerre, Montbard, Dijon, Chalons, Macon. Both roads terminated at Lyon and from Lyon you went along the Rhône river or more frequently you could go via water.

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<sup>1</sup> Occitan, the language of Languedoc

There is no doubt that M. De La Salle took the first route to go to Provence, the “Bourbon road” which had him stop at Moulins where the Brothers had been settled for about a year. From Lyon the traveller directed himself by short stages towards Avignon. Since 1703 his disciples had a school under the gaze of the Pope in this city, part of the Comtat Venaissin and the territory of the surrounding Papal States.

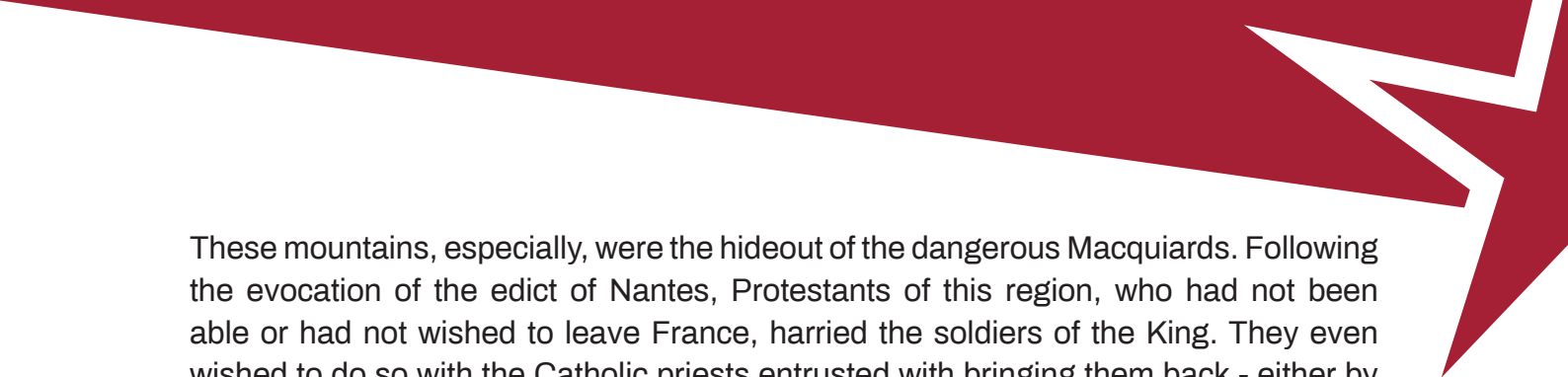


La fabrication d'une route sous Louis XIV avec des pics, des hottes et des brouettes, d'après la *Géométrie pratique* de Manesson-Mallet (1702). (Plon - J. Da Cunha)

## In the country of the Camisards

The Brothers welcomed De La Salle with even greater joy than usual because his visit was so unexpected. But he stayed only long enough to rest after the first stage of a journey, the remainder of which presented many difficulties. He was not uninformed about the risks that he was running but was aware of the quite special situation of these three schools. First of all, if the distances between Avignon, Alès, Les Vans and Mende are not exaggerated, you have to remember that this was in the Cevennes mountains and the altitude was greatly higher than that of the hills of Champagne or the hills around Paris. There were no roads in these mountains and the paths wound through rocks and shrubbery providing obstacles for the feet of the person walking. Moreover, from the end of March to the beginning of April, springtime had hardly arrived in the south of the Massif Centrale and there was still a lot of snow.





These mountains, especially, were the hideout of the dangerous Macquiards. Following the evocation of the edict of Nantes, Protestants of this region, who had not been able or had not wished to leave France, harried the soldiers of the King. They even wished to do so with the Catholic priests entrusted with bringing them back - either by inclination or by force- as members of the so-called Protestant Reformed Religion as it was called. To recognise one another during the night they wore a white shirt over their other clothes. Hence the name given to them of Camisards.

Just south of Alès lived their principal leader Jean Cavalier. Nearby the Massif Soubeyran was a place of grouping for the Huguenots of this area. At Alès, two Protestant preachers were killed in 1702 and another was hung in 1718 so any vengeance by the Camisards was not without reason.

De La Salle, not unaware of the dangers he was facing, set off courageously. But he made himself take into account the very special situation of the three schools of Alès, Les Vans and Mende opened between 1707 and 1711 under conditions defined fairly well in André Latreille's "History of Catholicism in France." With regard to the Institute founded by De La Salle the author writes:


*In the final years of the reign of Louis XIV, De La Salle's little company received encouragement from the government interested in beginning small schools as a way of forming children of these "newly converted" people, which encouraged the establishment of the Brothers in the Huguenot country.*

Halfway between Avignon and Alès the Founder stopped at Uzès. He did so to greet the bishop upon whom the parish of Les Vans depended. Mgr Poncet de La Rivière received him with great pleasure.

He congratulated him on the courage of the two Brothers who for more than a year had taken in hand the school in this locality and he wished to keep them forever. De La Salle respectfully spoke against this. The Brothers, he said, must always remain available and flexible enough to be assured to improve their professional improvement and also to the continuity of the works confided to their Institute. The Bishop allowed himself to be convinced and the Founder continued his journey in ordinary dress so as not to draw any attention on himself from the Camisards whom he might meet.

He remained a few days at Alès with the Bishop and the municipality greeted him in a festive way. The Brothers told him about their difficulties with certain pupils who, against their will, assisted at the catechism. The fact was that the school was supported by the government to receive children of former Protestants. Those who were converted in spite of their preference would prefer to have their own schools as they were before the edict of Nantes (1686) but De La Salle preached them patience and respect for everybody.





Upset by the attention which he received, De La Salle shortened his stay and set out on the 43 km which separated him from Les Vans. At 5 km from this locality the parish priest of Gravières certainly wished to keep him. Pierre Meynier, prior of Saint-Victor, had been entrusted by Mgr Poncet de la Rivière to help the Brothers of Les Vans spiritually. He gave such veneration to their superior that it made him leave, explained with some humour by Canon Blain:

*It certainly was a feast for this Prior when he saw the holy man in his house and he did everything possible to keep him there. If he had hidden this concern in his heart, he would have had the joy of satisfying his stay for a long time and very frequently; but in giving too much honour to the man who fled he obliged him to leave his house.*


Finally, to Les Vans. After the very difficult tortuous and stony climb, what joy it was to pass a couple of days with two of his generous disciples, as fervent as the Bishop had praised them. They also often had difficulty in making their “new converts” listen. The support of the Council of Ville was sometimes necessary in the school where however the sons of Catholics and the sons of Protestants were received equally.

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## Visit(s) to Mende

We don't know whether John Baptist de La Salle stayed at Mende during his first trip to the Midi in 1711. It can neither be proved nor disproved. Whatever the case, he arrived in the capital in the month of May 1712.

Since leaving Avignon he had just walked from Marseille which he had left at the end of February or the beginning of March for 190 km on a road elevated 23 metres above the height of the Rhone river to 733 metres along alongside the river Lot. Not without some difficulty he had crossed the steep Cevennes and then the leafless Causse mountains. So here he was now at Mende, the small town dominated by the two spires of the young cathedral. He was received enthusiastically by the bishop and the governor of the city. The bishop who had asked for the Brothers had died five years previously. His successor, Mgr Pierre Baglon de La Salle de Saillan invited the founder to eat at his table but the latter refused it basing himself on the rule which forbade his followers to eat outside the community. Brother Timothy, whom we find soon enough at Marseille, was directing the Lasallian brotherhood and wished to keep his superior there for some time. But, as Canon Blain emphasises once again, the pressure to know the founder of the Brothers required a very large number of visits which robbed him of his time.



He therefore took the decision to leave as soon as possible without any great noise and without taking any rest because of the very many people who wanted to stop him. Mende would see him once again in June -July 1713 but for the moment he took the road again in the direction of Marseille.

An interesting insight into the reality of travelling on foot at this time comes from the instructions given to Brother Mathias when he was transferred from Mende to Avignon:

*“Leave on 9th June early in the morning to get as far as Villefort. On that same day stay at the White Horse. It’s almost outside the town of Villefort. You will find a Brother who will join you there. You need to set out at dawn from Mende as it’s a journey of seven leagues [28 km]. To get there you will have to leave fairly early, but the days are long at this time of the year.”*

Brother Mathias was taking the direct route from Mende to Avignon. De La Salle was going via Alès and bypassing Avignon. When he entered Marseille, he would have walked over 70 leagues [280 km].


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## **Welcomed and rejected at Marseille**

At Marseille between June 1712 and 1713 De La Salle, after the euphoria of a warm welcome, experienced the coldness that followed. This in some way strengthened the wound he was already carrying. The result was that the dark night surrounded him even more than the warm welcome. In April 1706 De La Salle was writing to Gabriel Drolin in Rome:

*We are getting Brothers in Marseille shortly. There are about 200 pupils in only one school and there are other schools in the different quarters. We will eventually have all of them. We have to hope that our Brothers will increase more and more; that God will bless us and increase our numbers to run the schools well.*

This indicates a double interest in the new foundation. First, the Brothers were assured of soon being in charge of all the schools in Marseille; secondly from Marseille it would be easier to take the normal route towards Italy. This would maintain relationships with Rome by sending Brothers. The first part of this programme seems to have been realised when De La Salle had hardly set foot in the city. From all sides there was a great interest in what he was doing. Priests, magistrates, pious lay people put themselves at the service of the Brothers and their founder. A renowned Jesuit priest spoke in his favour; there was an insistence that he open the novitiate as soon as possible.



Young men were brought to him to hand them over to Brother Timothy whom we have already met at Mende. After this he went to Notre Dame de La Garde without whom nothing important could be done at Marseille. He invited the two Brothers in the school to share the life of the novitiate, spiritual exercises, meals, recreation so as to penetrate the novices more and more quickly with the spirit of their activities. Everywhere De La Salle very quickly established a reputation as a man of solid good sense, profound faith, clear understanding and evenness of soul. His availability brought a great deal of support for him on the part of the most humble as well as the most influential.

A classical cooling off however took place in the course of the months. The enthusiasm became less. Already in July De La Salle was writing to Brother Gabriel Drolin:

*I would have liked, my dear Brother, to come to see you. I was already to go with a man named Michel Ricordeau who has gone on to Rome a month ago, but something happened to me during this time that stopped me from taking the voyage. Things have not gone very successfully.*

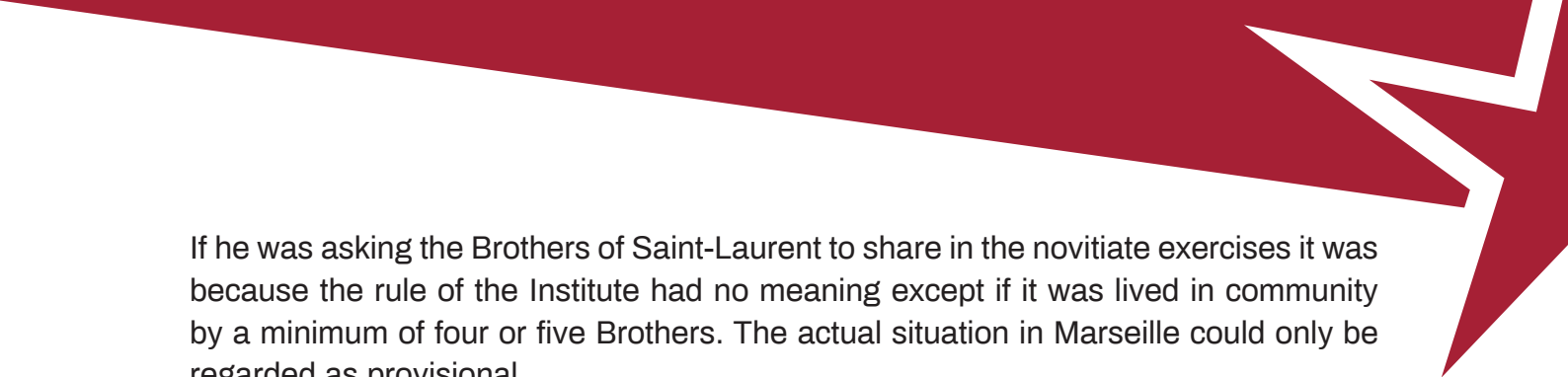
The reference is fairly clear. First of all, wishing to confine the school to the Brothers, the parish priest changed his mind: he preferred priests. From this first obstacle De La Salle was not particularly worried as he writes on 16 December:

*We need to wait for some months for the novitiate to begin so that they can be formed during four months, either to go and see you or else to send somebody else.*

Canon Blain did not like the Jansenists but they were not the only ones who inspired this grouping against M. De La Salle. It was true that his position in favour of the Holy See, his rigorous orthodoxy concerning theological problems displeased the innovators and the people who did not like anybody who did not think as they did. Why was De La Salle wishing that the schoolmasters remain simple laypeople when there were priests willing to take part in it? What was the idea of using these people in places other than Marseille? Was he thinking of sending the novices recruited in Provence to Rome when they would have been maintained by the school board in Marseille?

Just as it was in Paris in 1702 it was his followers who sold out their master. The only Lasallians in Marseille for some six years were two Brothers - excellent teachers, who directed the school of Saint-Laurent - but who lived with their independence. They did not really accept the demands of M. De La Salle and complained about it to the members of the school board. These people in their turn intervened with the founder who stated clearly that the destiny of the Brothers of the Christian schools was not to live simply as two people depending on parishes and the support of the school board.





If he was asking the Brothers of Saint-Laurent to share in the novitiate exercises it was because the rule of the Institute had no meaning except if it was lived in community by a minimum of four or five Brothers. The actual situation in Marseille could only be regarded as provisional.

De La Salle's declaration was quite clear. Some of his listeners understood and approved. Others who seemed more numerous and more influential simply said according to Maillefer that

*... he's a hard man, inflexible in his mind and there is nothing to do to win him over. They indeed discredited him in his ideas and made him appear hateful to those who preferred to listen to them.*

So, the project of opening these schools was stopped, the novices one by one became discouraged and left the house. Nothing remained of the hope formerly retained with regard to four schools in Marseille in the hands of the Brothers. Nothing seemed to indicate any future for the Brothers.

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## **“Here I am, back from Rome!”**

In two letters written from Marseille to Brother Gabriel Drolin De La Salle speaks of going to Rome. He seemed to put a lot of importance on this trip. Marseille would be a point of departure for Rome. At what stage did De La Salle decide he was going to go? The fact reported by his biographers surprises us and moves us at the same time. He had booked a place on a boat with a Brother. The two travellers were waiting on the quay for the signal to come aboard. The Bishop of Marseille came by and was astonished with this meeting. After a moment of conversation M. De La Salle and his companion left the port and returned to the house. To the somewhat astonished Brothers at this short return, their Superior simply allow himself to say,

*God be blessed! Here I am back from Rome as it's not his will that I go there just now. He wishes that I be employed at something different, something new but what was it?*

## The dark night and the desert

13 months after fleeing from Paris and having lived through these recent events at Marseille, De La Salle now seems to have come to a period in his life where he doubted his particular role. Perhaps Blain knew this because De La Salle shared these experiences with him in the last years of his life at Saint-Yon:

*He began to doubt whether what he was doing really came from God. Was the work that everybody seemed to be opposing really something he was pursuing for selfish reasons?*

In his usual way he addressed God to be clear about what he was doing:

*In his doubts and his difficulties, he sought light from God and consulted the Divine Oracle but this abandonment by men seemed also to lead to an abandonment by God. He no longer experienced any taste for divine sweetness. God seem not to be saying anything to him and left him in darkness.*

What did De La Salle do this time at this time in his life? If we look at one of his meditations, we read:

*Let us be supported by the firmness of our faith no matter even if we have no particular feeling about God and if we don't have any sort of inclination to move towards God.*

Since his followers rejected him and he believed that his presence at least was drawing down unfortunate consequences in Marseille just as happened in Paris, he succumbed to the temptation of the desert. Is not this the place where ordinarily God meets his servants?

Sainte-Baume, the Capuchin convent in Mende, the brotherhood at Grenoble the visit to the Grande Chartreuse and Parmenie were all six steps on a road with some surprising detours as he sought for light.

## Sainte-Baume

To the east of Marseille, the massif of Sainte-Baume preserves the memory of Mary Magdalen. She was supposed to have lived a time of prayer and penance in a grotto 900 m high. By narrow and tortuous ways leading from Gemenos to the grotto De La Salle remembered the saint as a model of fidelity to Jesus Christ, asking of his disciples in the meditation for the feast of Mary Magdalen:

*Are you faithful to follow Jesus Christ just as much when he causes you to suffer as when he fills you with blessings?*

For 40 days [without changing his clothes we are told] he shared the life of the Dominicans in the monastery of Saint-Maximin. Applying himself to God alone he forgot about everything else. If his thoughts recalled his Brothers or his persecutors, it was simply to lead him to pray God to sustain the one and to convert the others.

Did he really envisage at this time to finish his days at Saint-Maximin as some of his biographers insinuate? Perhaps, but the call of duty was stronger than that of the pleasure that he experienced in solitude. He went back and avoiding Marseille returned to Mende, going via Avignon, Alès and Villefort.

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## Two months in Languedoc

When De La Salle returned to Mende he found a community that was upset. The director, Brother Bernardin, who had recently come from Marseille, was an excellent religious but did not have that same authority over the Brothers that was needed. Moreover, the very small and cramped house was not an easy place for the surviving community. The Founder therefore stayed at the convent of the Capuchins at the disposition of the Brothers and the pupils during the day and he continued the rhythm of reflection and prayer which he had followed at Saint-Baume. Brother Timothy arrived to tell about the closing of the novitiate in Marseille because there were no more postulants. He asked his superior what he should do. De La Salle replied to his questions:

*God be blessed, my dear Brother! Why are you addressing yourself to me? Don't you know that I am not able to command other people? Are you ignorant that very many Brothers no longer wish to have anything to do with me?*

The doubt still lingered in De La Salle, but it returned always in spite of the work which he had founded as is witnessed by what now follows.





Mademoiselle Anne Lescure of St Denis had founded in Mende a school for little girls for those who had pass from Protestantism to Catholicism. She had gathered around her some generous women who were known among people as the 'United.' At the suggestion of her bishop, Mlle. De Lescure begged De La Salle to advise them with regard to the formation of their small company. He agreed to this and the people certainly appreciated the advice given so that their foundress proposed that he concern himself with their story. For this effect she offered to pay him his pension for life and after his death to add a third Brother to the two others in Mende if they agreed to remain there. This was something the holy man was not willing to listen to.

But he did without any difficulty accept a horse when it was offered to him. Towards the end of the month of July he continued his journey with this new companion. He had something like 70 leagues to travel if he went via Le Puy where some community had been planted seven years ago. Somewhat shorter from Mende would be if he went by Valence, down to the Rhône and then followed the river Isère as far as Grenoble, provided of course that he preferred paths for horsemen.

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## **Another 'Heaven' and Another 'Earth'**

In Grenoble De La Salle began a period of 10 months interrupted only by a pilgrimage to La Grande Chartreuse and two periods at Parmenie. His spiritual sons welcomed him with tenderness and did all they could to help him forget the persecutions he has suffered in Paris and in Marseille. Canon Blain writes without exaggeration:

*From Mende he went to Grenoble where he hoped to find another heaven and another earth and did find a deep calm among his Brothers who certainly understood and profited by his presence.*

The house where the Brothers lived was between the river Isère and the first slopes of Mont Rushais in the quarter known as Saint-Laurent. Along a long narrow street, the Brothers' house, very like other houses, included the school of the Brothers. At the top of a spiral staircase there was a room and small oratory where De La Salle installed himself to work and to pray. We have a document in his own hand which tells us that on 9 August 1713 he sent Matthieu Petit, the printer at Grenoble, all the necessary papers for the reprinting of his book The duties of a Christian towards God and the Means to be able to acquire them, divided into two parts and printed for the first time in Paris in 1703. Resting from the weariness of his last trek, calmed by the fervour and affection of the small community of Grenoble, De La Salle decided to make a pilgrimage to the Grande Chartreuse.




## Visit to the Chartreuse

De La Salle, on foot, accompanied by a Brother, would have had to climb 1326m to a pass to reach the Chartreuse, the famous monastery founded by Saint Bruno, like himself a former canon of Reims. Whether or not he intended to repeat the solitude he had experienced at Saint-Beaume we do not know but he stayed only three days.

Upon his return to Grenoble, wishing to have some direct news of what was happening to his communities, he sent Brother Jacques to Paris and replaced him in class. The way in which he carried out this office of schoolmaster indicated the degree of satisfaction with which he undertook it. The strength of his youth, tempered now by age, was enriched by experience making him a perfect teacher. As his biographer says, his goodness, patience, gospel love of the poor led him to look after those in most need, teaching little ones their alphabet, helping others to read and write and learn the first lessons of Christian doctrine.

When Brother Jacques returned with better news than he had expected, De La Salle went back to his room, his prayer, his work and his correspondence. The news he received from Brother Timothy who was still director of Avignon assured him that in the MIDI the storms had calmed down, so the Founder judged that it was better for him to remain in Grenoble.



When the Bishop of Grenoble published in his diocese, a very strong Catholic diocese, the Bull Unigenitus in which Pope Clement 11th condemned Jansenism De La Salle, usually very discreet in matters of controversy, was concerned now with an event which divided the church in France. To his Brothers first of all and then to the people of Grenoble who asked him, he read and commented on the Bull of instruction with the sureness of a theologian, the clearness of a teacher faith and the charity of a Christian.

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## **De La Salle on the grill again**

We recall that De La Salle had first felt the attacks of rheumatism in Paris in 1694. His long walking through all kinds of weather with the cold and inevitable heat, the mediocrity of the heating in the majority of habitations and finally his difficult adaptation to the very strong climate in the Alps recurred again in the winter of 1713 and 1714. Very hard on himself, at first he let nothing appear but finally the day came when he could not get out of bed. The fever increased and the suffering became intolerable. He saw himself in danger to try again the remedies which had previously been successful. Once again, De La Salle found his cure on the grill. In a short time, he found some solace, and little by little regained his strength.

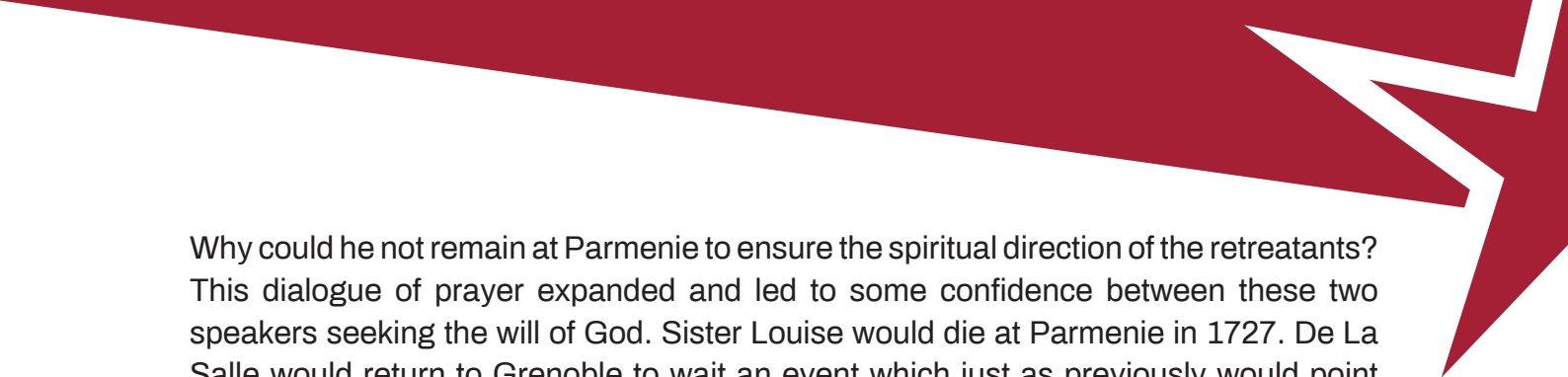
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## **The dawn that followed the night**

Jean Yse de Saléon, a priest friend of De La Salle since their time together at Saint-Sulpice, invited him to spend two periods as resident priest at Parménie, some 25km from Grenoble where an old monastery had been restored, largely through the work of a shepherdess known as Sister Louise.

Once again in his life the Lord placed on his journey someone who would help him to clarify his ideas and pushing him forward. This was not as previously with the directors or formal orders such as he had received from Barré and Roland. It was simply an exchange between people. Sister Louise also doubted her vocation. She had been criticized by some, misunderstood by others - the Bishop of Lyon had even imprisoned her – she was very conscious of her own lack of culture for she was illiterate. Her question was, would it not be better for me to return to work with my cows and sheep? From his viewpoint De La Salle spoke to Sister Louise about his own hesitations. Should he retake the direction of the Brothers because practically everywhere he went he had raised up people who misunderstood him and destroyed what he wished to do?





Why could he not remain at Parmenie to ensure the spiritual direction of the retreatants? This dialogue of prayer expanded and led to some confidence between these two speakers seeking the will of God. Sister Louise would die at Parmenie in 1727. De La Salle would return to Grenoble to wait an event which just as previously would point out the direction for him.

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## **What had happened in Paris during his absence?**

Upon his return to Parmenie, he was to receive a message which would oblige him to take some kind of decision. During De La Salle's long absence, Brother Barthelemy, who was regarded as being in charge, had taken a decision to ask the bishops in the various dioceses where the Brothers were present to give them ecclesiastical superiors to help advise them. This action had the danger of changing the Brothers into separate communities depending on the diocese. While Blain tells us that "*De La Salle was strongly in favour of this and later stated that the Institute was greatly indebted to these gentlemen*" the Brothers thought otherwise... He alone had received the grace of being the Founder... He alone could govern in God's name... and that is why they sent him a message that was both tender and at the same time demanding that he retake the direction of the Institute by recalling the vow of association that he had taken and by which he had promised obedience to the body of the Society.

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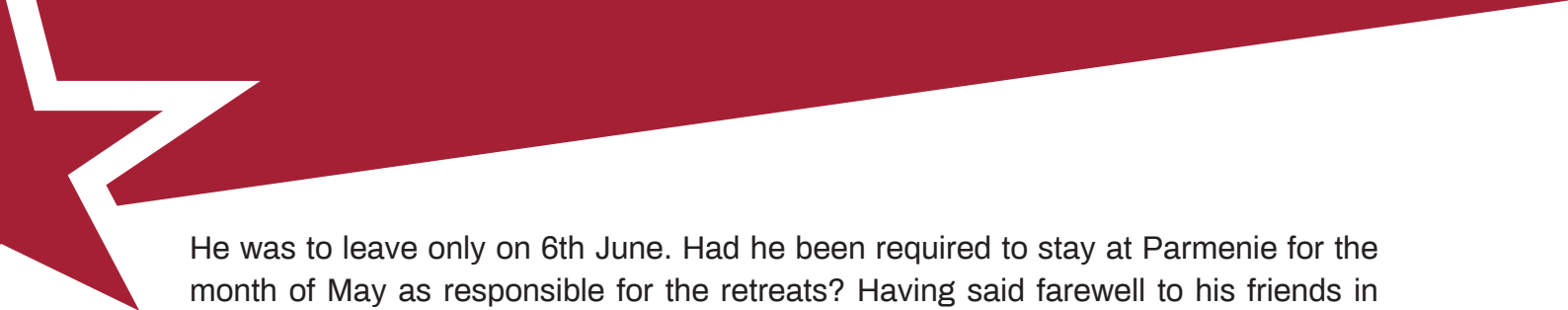
## **How was the letter received?**

Blain, undoubtedly informed by the Founder or by the person carrying the letter, writes:

*Having no doubt about the truthfulness of this letter, he remained speechless when he read it, uncertain whether to blame the courage of those who had written it, or praising the zeal that had inspired it.*

De La Salle had no difficulty in recognizing the signatures of his followers, especially when he found in the texts they sent, him elements that were for him a sign from God. This was exactly what he was looking for to find his direction. Formally, his followers reminded him of abandonment to Providence for complete dedication to serve the poor; now once again it was his followers using his own words to pierce the darkness that enveloped him. Through them, God was once again speaking to him and he no longer hesitated, saying to those who wished him to remain,

*I wish to obey the Brothers; they are commanding me to return to Paris.*



He was to leave only on 6th June. Had he been required to stay at Parmenie for the month of May as responsible for the retreats? Having said farewell to his friends in Grenoble and especially to the Brothers at Saint-Laurent, he set out and arrived in Paris on 10th August. Where had he been for some 70 days in June and July? There are three certain things: he made a pilgrimage to Lyon, he stayed four days in the community at Dijon and he was known to have been present in Reims.

How did he travel? We have nothing that prevents us from believing that he made use of the horse – the precious gift given him in Mende by Mlle. De Lescure.

We can only imagine how these long days of travel in the summer months confirmed his decision to follow what he saw as God's will for him, so succinctly expressed in the laconic phrase attributed to him when he arrived on 10th August in Paris at the community of Rue de Baroullière,

*What do you wish me to do?*

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