

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Faith of De La Salle

Frederick Martin, F.S.C.

Philippine Studies vol. 9, no. 2 (1961): 282—293

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

The Faith of De la Salle

FREDERICK MARTIN, F.S.C.

THE year 1960 marked the tenth anniversary of two papal letters of notable import to the Catholic world. The first of these, which pertains to educators and education, proclaimed St. John Baptist De La Salle Principal Patron Before God of All Teachers; the second was *Humani Generis*, an encyclical letter concerning "some false opinions which threaten to undermine the foundations of Catholic Doctrine." But significant as these two documents are, any notable commemoration, comment or re-evaluation of them, either in La Sallian publications or in other Catholic periodicals, were conspicuously absent. Of course, it was not to be expected that they would receive the same type of publicity and investigation on their tenth anniversary as they did upon their issuance in 1950. Nevertheless, both the proclamation concerning St. John Baptist De La Salle and the Encyclical Letter, *Humani Generis*, are worth reconsidering. The heavenly patronage of the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is surely still operative; and, judging by the errors discussed in recent magazine articles, both here and abroad,¹ it is evident that false opinions concerning Catholic doctrine have not ceased to exist with the appearance of *Humani Generis*.

¹ Gerald W. Healy, S.J., "Situation Ethics: A Summary", *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* (April, 1960), pp. 300-319. John A. King, O.M.I., "Intellectual Liberty in the Church" *THE HOMILETIC AND PASTORAL REVIEW* (September, 1960), pp. 1109-1120.

In this article we do not intend to scrutinize the papal encyclical nor to expound the patronage of St. John Baptist De La Salle, as such. Rather we wish to concentrate on those aspects of the life of this saint which demonstrate that he is a model of that orthodoxy in doctrine and of that loyalty to the Church which are advocated by Pius XII in *Humani Generis*. Also, we intend to demonstrate that it was both providential and fitting that Pope Pius XII proclaimed De La Salle the Patron of All Teachers shortly before issuing his famous encyclical; that the encyclical is directed to a great extent to the very people of whom De La Salle is a patron; and that there exists a striking parallel between the spiritual doctrine of this saint and the message contained in the encyclical of Pius XII.

In *Humani Generis* Pius XII inveighs against the dangerous liberties being taken by Catholic theologians, philosophers, and scientists, as also against the radical views of teachers in Catholic universities, religious houses of studies and seminaries. Some scholars and teachers, exaggerating the powers of human reason and overestimating the validity of modern archeological, biological, and technological discoveries, have been propagating dangerous views with regard to Holy Scripture and the origin of the human race. Others, despising human reason and belittling Thomism and scholastic philosophy, claim that any kind of philosophy, even dialectic materialism or atheistic existentialism, can be reconciled with Catholic doctrine. In holding these rash views, Catholic scholars and teachers do so in opposition to several papal encyclicals, for they claim that encyclicals do not form a part of papal infallibility, and therefore need not be accepted.

DE LA SALLE, MODEL OF ORTHODOXY

But this entertaining of dangerous religious views and this lack of respect for papal authority for which Pius XII reprimanded certain Catholics were even more marked three hundred years ago. In 1651, when John Baptist De La Salle was born in the cathedral city of Rheims, France was no longer the traditional Elder Daughter of the Church. On the con-

trary, the land of St. Jeanne D'Arc and St. Louis of Poissy had become a family of delinquent and disobedient children in discord with their holy Mother the Church. Ten years before the birth of De La Salle, a decree of the Holy Office had condemned the errors contained in the posthumously published book, *Augustinus*. Written by Corneli Jansen, bishop of Ypres, this book, which purported to be an interpretation of St. Augustine's doctrine on Grace, was even more forcefully condemned the following year, 1642, by Urban VIII's *In Eminenti*. But the hierarchy and clergy of France, (being the forerunners of those Catholics whom Pius XII castigated for rejecting the teachings of at least four modern encyclicals²) refused to abide by these decrees. Thus the entire life of De La Salle was lived amid an atmosphere of dissidence, in which the papacy was belittled and the Pope's infallibility denied and ridiculed. So pernicious and deeply rooted were the Jansenistic errors, and so recalcitrant and disobedient were the French hierarchy and theologians, that over a period of sixty years (roughly corresponding with the life span of De La Salle) no fewer than twelve papal decrees by six different Pontiffs were launched against Jansenism and its adherents.

De La Salle's unwavering loyalty to the Vicar of Christ and the Church of Rome, despite the insidious Jansenistic influence which pervaded the very air he breathed, can be seen by the prompt obedience and true enthusiasm with which he received the Bull *Unigenitus Dei Filius*. Issued by Clement XI on September 8, 1713, this papal bull was a condemnation of the 101 Jansenistic propositions contained in Pasquier Quesnel's *Reflexions Morales*. As soon as the Bishop of Grenoble, M. de Monmartin, promulgated this bull in his diocese (February 1714) De La Salle sent copies to all his communities. He then gathered together all the Brothers of Grenoble to emphasize the significance of the bull and to explain the meaning of its contents. To the chagrin of the Jansenists, he who seldom broached the topic in private conversation champion the bull

² Leo XIII's PROVIDENTISSIMUS, Benedict XV's SPIRITUS PARACLETUS, and Pius XII's DIVINO AFFLANTE SPIRITU and MYSTICI CORPORIS.

and defended the position of the Church whenever he was consulted by those respected his sanctity and good judgment.

To the modern reader, the conduct of De La Salle in this matter may appear not the least extraordinary. As a Catholic priest it was to be expected that he, like almost all Catholics outside of France, would accept the papal pronouncement; and that, as the founder of a non-clerical religious society, he would instruct his subjects concerning it. In fact, St. John Baptist De La Salle did nothing more than what Pius XII admonished all Bishops and Superiors General to do with regard to *Humani Generis*.³ However, against the backdrop of the religious controversies of that period, De La Salle's open defense of *Unigenitus* was more than an ordinary and automatic reaction.

Moreover, the unquestioning acceptance of *Unigenitus* by De La Salle and by the other loyal clergy of France takes on a new meaning when one considers that the bull was a conciliatory revision of the papal brief *Universi Dominici Gregis* of 1703, which had been rejected by Louis XIV and the ecclesiastical authorities of France because it allegedly contained certain expressions contrary to Gallican liberties. But neither did *Unigenitus* enjoy complete acceptance. A few years after its apparent acceptance by the Church of France, it was rejected and denounced by the Sorbonne, by the Universities of Nantes and Rheims, and by several bishops, among whom was the very Bishop of Grenoble mentioned above. In 1717 these perfidious prelates and university faculties drew up another appeal to Rome, thus forming a party called the Appellants. Clement XI in 1718 condemned the appeal and excommunicated the appellants in still another Bull, *Pastoralis Officii*. But Cardinal De Noailles of Paris, who many years before had hastily and blindly granted ecclesiastical approbation to Quesnel's *Reflexions Morales*, refused to accept even this latest papal condemnation. Finally, after many pleas and threats on the part of the Sovereign Pontiff, and after a half-hearted negative compliance on the part of this proud and stubborn

³ HUMANI GENERIS, N.C.W.C. translation, pp. 18-19.

Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal De Noailles a few moments before his death at last accepted unconditionally all the decrees of the Vicar of Christ. How different from all this feigned acceptance and proud recalcitrance was the prompt, categorical, and irrevocable obedience of St. John Baptist De La Salle!

The faithfulness to the Church of the Holy Founder and his Brothers caused them to be persecuted and despised even before their acceptance of *Unigenitus*. An example of such persecution occurred when St. John Baptist De La Salle went to Marseilles in 1711. He was received so graciously and was paid such respect and honor that as one of his early biographers put it, "he was received as an angel from heaven."⁴ The bishop and priests of the diocese gave financial aid to his schools and novitiate and even carried on a campaign for encouraging vocations to the new society of teachers. But the supernaturally-minded De La Salle, realizing that the cross, the sign of trial, suffering, and contradiction, had been the trademark of his previous foundations, became suspicious of this exaggerated adulation and solicitude. Soon his suspicions were confirmed. While the respect of the faithful was a sincere tribute to his holiness, all the apparent favor shown him by the bishop and clergy was but a ruse to entice this holy priest and his influential schoolmasters into the Jansenist camp. De La Salle was well aware that if he joined with the Jansenists or at least simulated a sympathetic attitude toward their cause his institute would be firmly established in Southern France. Nevertheless, at the opportune time he fearlessly professed his obedience to the Holy See and declared that he recognized the Sovereign Pontiff and no one else as the supreme authority in religious matters. Immediately, encouragement and cooperation were transformed into opposition and contradiction. His society all but ruined in Marseilles, De La Salle withdrew from that hotbed of religious discord.

Perhaps more by grace than by nature, St. John Baptist De La Salle was a calm man who rarely lost his composure and

⁴ Canon Blain, *SPIRIT AND VIRTUES OF BLESSED J.B. DE LA SALLE*, trans. from the French (Tours: Alfred Mame and Sons, Publishers, 1890), p. 13.

was seldom provoked by personal opposition. Consistently, he refused to defend his reputation or to dignify with a reply the calumnies hurled against him. Yet his biographers tell us that he was vehement and adamant when he spoke in defense of the Pope and the authority of the Church. When Cardinal De Noailles unjustly deposed him from the superiorship of the congregation he had founded, De La Salle uttered not a word; when D'Auvigné, the Archbishop of Rouen, castigated and insulted him, he took his leave respectfully and courteously; even when the same prelate deprived the Saint, on his very deathbed, of his priestly faculties, "he suffered this indignity, which was the last inflicted on him, without losing his customary peace and tranquility, and even spoke of it in a manner gay and contented without showing the least annoyance or resentment."⁵ Persecution, calumny, and ridicule left him as silent and meek as Christ before Pilate and the Sanhedrin.

But while St. John Baptist De La Salle bore without complaint all personal insults no matter how contumelious, he immediately protested when his loyalty to the Church was questioned. When the Dean of Calais had included the name of John Baptist De La Salle among the list of Jansenist sympathizers which was circulated throughout that diocese, the Holy Founder immediately wrote a letter to the Brother Director of the Calais community, politely but firmly denouncing this gratuitous listing of his name and re-stating his abhorrence of Jansenism.

My dear Brother, I do not think I have given occasion to the Reverend Dean to say that I am one of the appellants to a future Council. I have too much respect for our Holy Father the Pope, and too great a submission to the decisions of the Holy See, to acquiesce in such a thing. I wish in this matter to imitate St. Jerome, who, on the occasion of a difficulty in the Church... thought it his duty to consult the Chair of Peter, upon which, he said, he knew the Church was built...

Neither the Reverend Dean nor anyone else should be surprised, therefore, if I, following the example of this great saint who was so

⁵ W. J. Battersby, *ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), p. 289.

enlightened in matters of religion, should declare that it suffices me to know that he who today sits in the Chair of St. Peter has condemned by a Bull, accepted by almost all the bishops of the world, one hundred and one propositions from the book of Father Quesnel, and if, after such an authentic decision of the Church, I should say with St. Augustine that the case is ended. Such is my sentiment in this matter and my disposition; it has never been anything else and I shall never change it.⁶

As De La Salle had no doubt anticipated, remembering the repercussions in Marseilles which had followed his profession of fidelity to Rome, almost all financial support of the Christian schools in the diocese of Calais was withdrawn. But such reprisals were more a joy than a sorrow for De La Salle and his Brothers. As Saints Peter and John had rejoiced on being scourged for the name of Christ, the Holy Founder and his religious willingly suffered insults and privations in the name of Christ's Vicar.

This fidelity on the part of the Brothers to the authority of the Church continued after the death of De La Salle. During another controversy with the Jansenists in the same city of Boulogne, Brother Bartelemy, the first Brother to be Superior of the institute, declared that his views on the matter were identical with those of his holy predecessor. After this avowal, the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Boulogne were replaced by Jansenistic schoolmasters. But these hirelings and impostors, recognized as such from the very beginning by both the pupils and their parents, soon had to relinquish their post, and the Brothers were asked to return.

If it was a great joy and consolation for De La Salle to witness the steadfast loyalty of his Brothers to the Holy See, it was perhaps the greatest sorrow of his life to learn that his youngest brother, Louis De La Salle, who was a priest, had joined the Jansenist faction known as the Appellants. Many years before, the entire De La Salle family had abandoned and disowned their eldest brother John Baptist who had debased himself by teaching poor ragamuffins. Only Louis remained by his brother's side, even at times acting as a substitute teach-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

er in the poor schools. Now, as the life of St. John Baptist De La Salle, a life marked by innumerable crosses and trials, began to fade, this holy man had to experience the greatest sorrow of all: Louis, who had remained so loyal to his eldest brother, had turned traitor to Mother Church.

Before treating of the death of St. John Baptist De La Salle, we must mention a project which was very dear to his heart and which characterizes his undying loyalty to the Successor of St. Peter. In the year 1700, the founder sent two Brothers to open a school in Rome. They were natural brothers, Gerard and Gabriel Drolin. His motives in sending them to Rome were to establish his institute on the solid rock of St. Peter, to obtain from the Vicar of Christ the approbation of his Rules and Constitutions and the recognition of his new society as an official congregation in the Church, and to demonstrate his inviolable union with, and his complete submission to, the Holy See at a time when that authority was being belittled and even despised by so many of the clergy and hierarchy of France. So dear was this project to the heart of the founder that he chose for this mission Brother Gabriel Drolin, his most trusted Brother. Brother Gabriel's efforts to make a foundation in Rome proved fruitless for the first five years. His living amid great hardships in distant Rome grieved De La Salle. Nevertheless, both he and Brother Gabriel Drolin heroically bore their respective shares of these difficulties rather than abandon the hope of a foundation designed to show their allegiance to the Vicar of Christ and to get his apostolic blessing on their new congregation.

There is something so sacred and sublime about a man's dying requests and exhortation that the Old Testament, secular history, and biographical and fictional literature often quote the last words and wishes of great men. It is noteworthy, therefore, that one of the thoughts uppermost in the mind of De La Salle as he neared the end of his life was that the Brothers of his congregation should ever remain loyal sons of the Church. The grief-stricken men who surrounded his deathbed that Holy week in 1719 received a long exhortation, the beginning of which is as follows:

I commend to God first of all my soul, and next, all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools, to whom He has united me; and I recommend them, above all things, to be always entirely submissive to the Church and especially in these unhappy times; and, in order to give proof of this, never be at variance in anything with our Holy Father the Pope and the Church of Rome, always remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to beg of God the grace that their society may always be entirely submissive to the Holy See.⁷

PATRON OF ALL TEACHERS

Humani Generis, like most other encyclical letters, is addressed to all the hierarchy enjoying peace and communion with the Holy See; however, many of the paternal reproofs contained therein are directed to teachers who, abandoning the traditional teaching of the Church, have been propagating radical and unorthodox views. "Moreover, these opinions are disseminated not only among members of the clergy in seminaries and religious institutions, but also among the laity, and especially among those who are engaged in teaching youth."⁸ Even the great number of admonitions directed to theologians, philosophers, and scientists ultimately apply to teachers, for many of the former group are both scholars and teachers, and many others are authors of books and articles which influence teachers and the instruction they give. Therefore, either directly or indirectly, the admonitions of the Holy Father are directed to teachers. In the conclusion of his encyclical his Holiness makes this quite clear.

We charge the Bishops and the Superiors General of Religious Orders, binding them most seriously in conscience, to take most diligent care that such opinions be not advanced in the schools, in conferences or in writings of any kind, and they be not taught in any manner whatsoever to the clergy or the faithful.

Let the teachers in ecclesiastical institutions be aware that they cannot with tranquil conscience exercise the office of teaching entrusted to them, unless in the instruction of their students they religiously accept and exactly observe the norms which we have ordained. That due reverence and submission which in their teaching labor they must

⁷ A COLLECTION OF VARIOUS SHORT TREATISES, trans. from the French (New York: La Salle Bureau, 1923), p. 183.

⁸ HUMANI GENERIS, p. 7.

profess towards the Teaching Authority of the Church, let them instill also into the minds and hearts of their students.⁹

It is therefore both fitting and providential that three months before directing these admonitions to Catholic teachers, His Holiness gave all teachers, of both sexes, clerical, religious, and lay, and all preparing to become teachers, a special patron and intercessor who was a champion of orthodoxy and a defender of Papal authority.

HUMANI GENERIS AND LA SALLIAN DOCTRINE

But this connection between the Patronage of De La Salle and the Encyclical under consideration is a minor one. More important is the unanimity of thought shared by La Salle and Pope Pius XII. If we were to summarize the message of *Humani Generis* in a few words we could do so as follows: "Hold fast to what is of faith; shun novelties; follow the traditions of the Church; believe only what she believes; condemn what she condemns; approve what she approves, either by her Councils or by the Sovereign Pontiffs. In all things, render her prompt and perfect obedience."¹⁰ With these words St. John Baptist De La Salle forewarned the Brothers of his newly-founded congregation to keep themselves immune from the noxious heresy of Jansenism and from the anti-papal sentiments which were plaguing the Catholic Church in France.

If we single out La Salle's expression "to shun novelties," an expression which has been a by-word of orthodoxy among the Brothers of the Christian Schools for nearly 300 years, we can make the observation that the word "novelties" appears no less than six times in the very short Encyclical under consideration. If we accept as synonymous such expressions as "new theories," "innovations," etc., against which Pius XII warned the faithful, then the La Sallian expression appears on every page of *Humani Generis*. The admonitions given by De La Salle to safeguard his Brothers from the prevalent errors of his day is given by Pius XII to preserve all Christians from

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁰ A COLLECTION OF VARIOUS SHORT TREATISES, p. 128.

false doctrine and dangerous opinions being disseminated today. "Let no Christian therefore, whether philosopher or theologian, embrace eagerly and lightly whatever novelty happens to be thought up from day to day, but rather let him weigh it with painstaking care and a balanced judgment, lest he lose or corrupt the truth he already has, with grave danger and damage to his faith."¹¹

It caused the author of *Humani Generis* no little pain that some Catholics, while accepting *ex-cathedra* pronouncements of the Popes, refuse to abide by the teachings found in Encyclical Letters. He makes it quite clear that Catholics must believe all points of doctrine expounded by the Popes whether they flow from the Supreme Teaching Authority or from that which is designated as the ordinary *magisterium*.

Nor must it be thought that what is expounded in Encyclicals Letters does not of itself demand consent, since in writing such Letters the Popes do not exercise the supreme power of their Teaching Authority. For these matters are taught with the ordinary Teaching Authority, of which it is true to say: He who heareth you, heareth me; and generally what is expounded and inculcated in Encyclical Letters already for other reasons appertains to Catholic doctrine. But if the Supreme Pontiffs in their official documents purposely pass judgment on a matter up to that time under dispute, it is obvious that that matter, according to the mind and will of the same Pontiffs, cannot be any longer considered a question open to discussion among theologians.¹²

Since De La Salle was writing not for theologians or for college professors, but for humble school masters and their pupils, and since a cynical attitude towards the Pope was much in vogue among the French clergy, he discouraged not only external discussion of the Church's pronouncements but even internal doubts concerning them.

It is not allowable to doubt what the Church teaches; we must submit our mind to all her decisions in matters of faith and religion, with as much simplicity as we submit to the Gospel.¹³

¹¹ HUMANI GENERIS, p. 14.

¹² HUMANI GENERIS, p. 10.

¹³ EXTRACTS FROM THE SPIRITUAL DOCTRINE OF SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, (Paris, Procure Generale, 1910), p. 123.

It is for her to make the truth known to us; and we must receive it from her mouth without any doubt or examination. All we have to say to what she proposes to our belief is "I believe without hesitation."¹⁴

As we pointed out above, La Salle frequently reiterated these points throughout his controversies with the Jansenists; on his deathbed he left as a legacy to his Brothers his sincere loyalty to the Church.

CONCLUSION

We end this article with the hope that we have helped our readers to arrive at a richer understanding of St. John Baptist De La Salle's fidelity to the Catholic Church. It is quite characteristic of the unassuming and unspectacular life that he lived that this holy man, despite his being the Patron of All Teachers, a pioneer of modern pedagogy, and the founder of one of the largest religious societies of men in the Church, is, nevertheless, relatively unknown. May all Catholics show the same love and docility to the Church and to Her Visible Head as did this saintly man who, out of love and obedience to the Church, was wont to sign himself, "De La Salle, Roman Priest."

¹⁴ W. J. Battersby (ed.), *DE LA SALLE MEDITATIONS* (London: Lougmans, 1953).