De La Salle’s presence and insights did help eventually to resolve most of the difficulties that had been besetting the Brothers. After a year in Paris, De La Salle moved to Rouen, home of St. Yon—which housed the novitiate, a boarding school, and a juvenile center. The Brothers now constituted 23 houses and 34 educational establishments throughout France, with 100 Brothers and some 18 novices.

At four o’clock in the morning on Good Friday 1719, De La Salle made an effort to rise from his bed as if to greet someone, then joined his hands, raised his eyes to heaven, and died. He was buried on Holy Saturday in a side chapel of the local parish church, St. Sever. Throughout Rouen, and soon throughout the Society, word spread that “the Saint is dead.” But the providential extension of his life, work, and influence was just beginning.

A thorough but accessible biography of De La Salle is The Work Is Yours by Brother Luke Salm, F.S.C.; a more comprehensive one is De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor by Brother Alfred Calcutt, F.S.C. For a compact introduction to De La Salle’s life and times and achievement, and an analysis of the meaning of Lasallian education today, see Touching the Hearts of Students: Characteristics of Lasallian Schools by Brother George Van Grieken, F.S.C.

De La Salle—An Educational Pioneer

JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE WAS NEITHER A LOUD AND VOCAL REVOLUTIONARY, NOR A REFORMER WITH AN ABSTRACT PROGRAM OF HIS OWN DEVISING. He was an unassuming, quiet French upper-class gentleman, a cultivated priest who found God moving him to care in concrete ways for the education and salvation of the ones whom Jesus had called “the least of these.” Gradually, he became, somewhat to his own surprise, an educational pioneer. The following are some examples of his innovations in the world of education.

PRACTICAL CURRICULUM
The curriculum addressed the practical needs and realistic options of the poor. The average student in a charity school could not stay more than two or three years, since by age 14 many of them would have to be at work. Students were grouped by ability, and teachers made sure that a student had mastered one level before moving to the next.

FRENCH NOT LATIN
De La Salle saw that the charity school students needed facility in reading and writing the everyday language of business, commerce, and catechesis, not a language that they would little use.

SIMULTANEOUS INSTRUCTION
In De La Salle’s age, teachers customarily would privately engage one student at a time in a classroom of dozens of students. Instead, the Brothers’ new method was to divide a large class into small groups according to their level of learning and to involve whole groups in the lesson. The goal was to engage every student every day in as many ways as possible.

TEACHER TRAINING
De La Salle not only established pedagogical training for the Brothers, but he also created centers for the training of lay teachers who would serve in rural parish schools.

PERSONAL OBSERVATION
De La Salle and the Brothers studied each child’s capability, character, and needs and passed their notes on to the next teacher when the student moved on. This sort of psychological observation is now habitual.

BENDING SOCIAL BARRIERS
In their charity schools, the Brothers charged nothing, accepted no gifts, and allowed no distinctions between those who could afford to pay and those who could not. As more children of families who were better off came into the schools, boys from bourgeois families studied, played, and prayed with poor boys.

CIVILITY AND MANNERS
De La Salle wanted his pupils to learn how to act in the larger world. As the Brothers taught the boys reading and religion and math, so they taught them social and civil virtues, virtues very much De La Salle’s own—politeness, fairness, self-control, graciousness, prudence, and self-discipline.

1680: John Baptist de La Salle receives his doctorate in theology.
1680: John Baptist de La Salle takes the struggling group of school teachers into his home for meals, meetings, and prayer. This is considered the founding of the Institute.
1683: De La Salle joins the Brothers in their poverty and dependence on God by resigning his office as Canon and using his personal fortune to feed the poor during a famine.
1686: First General Assembly of the Brothers, in Reims. A distinctive habit and the name “Brothers of the Christian Schools” are adopted, and a vow of obedience is taken.
1688: In response to a request by Claude de La Barmondiere, the parish priest of St. Sulpice, the Brothers assume direction of a school in Paris, their first enterprise outside of Reims. The Brothers are feared as competition by the for-profit educational establishment. Lawsuits, conflicts, and harassment will continue for two decades.