of 1683-84, he gave away all that he had to feed the poor during a particularly severe famine in France. Thus he joined his Brothers in true poverty and broke down the barrier that separated him from them. Now, they would all be fully dependent on God.

For a person of De La Salle’s background and position as a priest to accept barely literate laymen as equal colleagues, as his Brothers, was quite unheard of. Yet, early on, De La Salle realized that the community had to govern itself from within, rather than from the outside, whether by a bishop, a parish priest, or even himself. At the Brothers’ General Assembly in 1686, a distinctive habit was approved, a vow of obedience was taken, and the name “Brothers of the Christian Schools” was officially adopted.

In 1688, he and two Brothers traveled to Paris, where in short order they revitalized the school for the poor in the parish of St. Sulpice. This work was important because it established the group’s autonomy and freedom from direct diocesan control, and it allowed the Brothers in Reims to begin to develop without leaning on De La Salle’s constant presence.

As the work began in Paris, first at one school and then at several more, a new challenge appeared. Schools for the poor such as those that the Brothers ran were meant to be restricted to the certified poor. However, the Brothers did not distinguish in their admissions between poor and non-poor. All were welcome to their free schools, and many wanted to come, including those whose families were not on the parish’s Poor Register. The fee-taking teachers filed suits for infringement on their business and violation of the established regulations. This hostility, in suits, harassment, and even violence, continued in Paris for the next 15 years.

In 1694, the first assembly to be known as a General Chapter was held, at which perpetual vows of obedience and association for the educational service of the poor were taken for the first time by De La Salle and 12 Brothers.

De La Salle and the Brothers began to fortify their Society, strengthening and expanding the already flourishing schools and communities and providing for the young candidates asking to join. De La Salle spent time writing various texts, both for the schools and for the Brothers, including everything from a student reading text on politeness and decorum to a detailed method for the Brothers’ interior prayer.

Between 1694 and 1709, many new schools opened, several others closed, and legal battles raged on. In Paris, as lawsuits were decided against him, he began to wonder if the welfare of the community and the prosperity of the work required his personal withdrawal from the scene.

De La Salle journeyed throughout the south of France for more than two years, visiting schools, teaching, and spending personal time in retreat. His physical health was poor (his rheumatism was chronic); his long labors had worn him out; the difficulties in Paris continued to be a personal challenge, and the future was not clear. He pondered the continued usefulness of his presence within the Institute that he had worked so hard to establish.

His prayers for guidance were answered when the Brothers summoned De La Salle back to Paris. As the Brothers in Paris opened the door to him, De La Salle said, “Here I am. What do you want me to do?”

“Since it is your responsibility to teach your students about God, you must first become aware of the action of God in your life. Teach by example. Put into practice what you want your students to believe.”

—From John Baptist de La Salle’s Meditations

1670: John Baptist de La Salle enters the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris.
1672: John Baptist de La Salle’s parents die within eight months of each other. He leaves the seminary and returns to Reims to be head of the family and guardian of his six brothers and sisters.
1678: John Baptist de La Salle receives a licentiate in theology and is ordained a priest, having continued his studies in Reims.
1679: A chance encounter at the convent of the Sisters of the Child Jesus on the Rue du Barbâtre with schoolmaster Adrian Nyel, who had just arrived from Rouen, involves John Baptist de La Salle in starting free schools for poor boys in Reims. John Baptist de La Salle invites into his home on the Rue Sainte Marguerite both Adrien Nyel and his 14-year-old apprentice.