



**Suffer the Little Children  
To Come Unto Me**

**James J. Casey**



The renowned Mazuet and Sons studio of Bayeux, France, created for the Brothers of the Christian Schools the stained glass window, **Suffer the Little Children to Come Unto Me**. It was initially installed in the Brothers' house of formation at Pocantico Hills, N.Y. in 1909. In 1930 it was moved to St. Joseph's Novitiate in Barrytown, N.Y. It is due to be installed in the **Chapel of De La Salle and His Brothers** at Manhattan College, Bronx, N.Y. in 2016.

“**A**nd people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.’ Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them.” (Mk 10:13-16. See also Mt 19:13-15; Lk 18:15-17 and Mt 18:1-5)

This Gospel event expresses the foundational meaning of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. When the children wanted to approach Jesus his followers tried to exclude them, but Jesus rebuked them pointing to the significance of the children, “for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven” and further, the importance of children as models, “whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.” What could Jesus be suggesting? It is the childlike qualities of innocence and purity of heart, Jesus reminds us, rather than the worldly qualities of greed, selfishness, and self-aggrandizement that lead to the fullness of life. “I have come that they may have life and have it to the fullest.”(Jn 10:10)

It is precisely this concern for children and the desire to preserve their innocence and purity of heart that St. John Baptist de La Salle responded to in 1680 by founding the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Reims, France. At that time the dignity of the poor, their significance and importance, especially that of poor children was ignored and denied while the children of the noble and wealthy class were privileged and provided for with an exclusive education. It is this response to the needs of poor children that the Archbishop of Paris acknowledged in proclaiming a triduum in celebration of the beatification of John Baptist de La Salle in 1888 when he said: “Every word of the Divine Master in the Gospel is marvelously fertile, and almost invariably this fertility manifests itself by an institution which Providence raises up at the hour marked in the decrees of God. Our Savior said: ‘Suffer the little ones to come unto me’ and the Church has always surrounded the little ones with tender care. But a permanent institution was needed for the exercise of this solicitude.... God raised up the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

“The children of the working classes were calling out for disinterested and competent masters who would train them at the same time in knowledge

and in virtue. The servant of God was called upon to undertake this work. As it so often happens with the founders of orders, John Baptist de La Salle does not at first perceive the extent of the enterprise he was destined to achieve.... He strips himself of all his goods, and distributes them to the poor. Thus poor himself, he goes generously forth with disciples equally poor, to the service of the working classes, who call out his self-devotion. Then began that powerful attraction which has never ceased to draw thousands of children to the Christian schools.”

With the fire in the heart of John Baptist de La Salle, the face of the world is changed forever. Pope Leo XIII recognized this in his canonization decree on May 24, 1900: “For, it was because he burned with that super eminent charity of Jesus Christ, which surpasses knowledge, that John Baptist generously abandoned family, dignity and riches, to renounce himself, and that, applying to himself these words of Jesus Christ, Suffer children to come to me, he devoted himself entirely to the gratuitous education of the children of the people in religion and in knowledge of the arts.”

With St. La Salle’s commitment to embrace the poor, no longer would poor children be denied the opportunity to contribute in significant ways to the world. So they could have access to their everyday world and a chance to live life to the fullest, the Brothers taught them in their native language rather than Latin, a radical idea in 17th century France. The “Rule” of the Brothers reflects the concern De La Salle had to empower the poor so they could have an impact on the social realities of their time: “By their entire life and teaching inspired by the social teaching of the Church, the Brothers prepare their pupils to create more just relationships among the peoples of the world.” (The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 40c, Rome 2008) As a result, the face of the world is changed forever with access to education for the poor provided by the followers of De La Salle and his Brothers.

By giving the poor child an opportunity to learn and contribute to society, the Brothers validated the dignity of the poor and the child. Just as in the Gospel story, Jesus reached out and touched the children, so too, down through the years numberless children taught by Brothers were touched in significant ways that affirmed the value of their lives. This was the spark that enabled them to light the fire of confidence and rise above

despair and degradation to which they might otherwise have been condemned. These children have risen through all levels of society, making civic and public contributions, some as president and prime minister of their country, some actively involved in movements of justice and peace while still others gave themselves by following in the footsteps of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and, like him, rose to the glory of sainthood.

All this was made possible because St. La Salle and his Brothers were willing to “suffer the little children to come unto [them].” They opened themselves to the poor by giving up attachment to things, by teaching the poor without any expectation of personal material reward. In fact they gave themselves selflessly while affirming the very self of their students in a personal way. The Brothers’ Rule makes this commitment explicit: “The members of this Institute are called by the name of Brother. By the fraternal character of their community life and their active and selfless presence among those they serve, the Brothers witness to the possibility of creating true brotherhood among people and nations.” (The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 9, Rome 2008) In the meditations written by St. La Salle for the Brothers during their time of

retreat he encourages them to see themselves in the role of Guardian Angels for their students. (Meditations for the Time of Retreat, 208.3) Thus teaching for the Brother encompassed more than imparting knowledge of a specific subject. St. La Salle encouraged each Brother to see his life as relational. Their spiritual development, their very fullness as a person, consisted not in an internal focus, but in transcending self by embracing each child in a personal way with openness and acceptance. In doing so, the Brothers would respond not just to educational needs, but also to the particular needs of each child. Through this personal responsiveness, affirming each child as a precious gift to the world, the Brother could touch the child in a transformative way. (See, The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 13, Rome 2008) What Jesus said to his disciples might well be said of the Brothers: “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Mt 25:40)

St. La Salle reminds the Brothers of the spiritual reward of a life lived as a gift to others: “an angel said to the Prophet Daniel: *Those who instruct many people* in Christian justice will shine like stars throughout all eternity. [Dan. 12:3] They will shine, indeed, in the midst of those whom

they have instructed, who will eternally bear witness to the great gratitude they have for so many instructions they have received from their teachers..." (Meditations for the Time of Retreat, 208.2)

In the more than three hundred years since Saint John Baptist de La Salle responded to the needs of his time by inviting others to join with him in founding the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, countless lives have been touched. That fire in his heart spread and burned in the hearts of others who were inspired to embrace the "little children" by reaching out and touching them, not just their minds but their hearts as well. That fire in the heart of St. John Baptist de La Salle was the *agape* love of which St. Paul speaks in chapter 13 of his first epistle to the Corinthians. It is the deep concern, respect, and acceptance of the other that affirms and supports them in their very uniqueness. St. La Salle and the early Brothers in their wisdom understood that this communal love mirrors the love of God for humanity and it was essential to their mission if it were to be more than a momentary innovation. The Brothers trusted that their communal relationship founded on *agape* love would sustain them in the challenges imposed by the radical form of education that they were establishing. It

would also enable them through their choice of poverty, their non-attachment to material things, to be selflessly available to embrace and affirm each child. Thus they chose by vow to remain together: *"The solidarity among the Brothers that results from their vow of association for the service of the poor through education gives support to the apostolic activity of the Institute."* (The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 39a, Rome 2008)

Today, by association throughout the world, teaching for Lasallians remains more than conveying knowledge of specific subjects. It involves embracing and affirming the whole person so that person can be all he or she can be in the process of creating the just world De La Salle called for.



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**Cover photo:** The bas-relief of St. John Baptist de La Salle with the children is above the door to the former novitiate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Barrytown, N.Y. The Latin phrase translates: "Suffer the little children to come unto me."