

## FOCUS SECTION

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# BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

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*The Brothers of the Christian Schools, popularly known in the United States as Christian Brothers, have made numerous significant contributions to the development of Catholic education. Building and staffing schools, colleges, and orphanages, producing textbooks and catechetical materials, advocating for the poor, and creating new models of Catholic education are among their many successes. Manhattan College, St. Mary's Press, and San Miguel Schools are all products of this community of Catholic educators.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Brothers of the Christian Schools, known in the United States as the Christian Brothers or, more recently, the De La Salle Christian Brothers, were founded in France in 1680 by Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Declared by Pope Pius XII to be the patron saint of those who teach young people, de La Salle wanted the members of his Institute to be devoted entirely to the work of Christian education in the schools (Salm, 1996). For that reason, he made it a rule that his Brothers would never aspire to Holy Orders, and he would not even allow them to teach or study Latin (Loes & Isetti, 2002). Since the founder's time, the ministry of the Brothers has extended from an almost exclusive commitment to primary schools to educational institutions and enterprises of various kinds.

The first permanent foundation of the Christian Brothers in the New World was made in 1837 at Montreal, which served as a base for further expansion in Canada and the United States. In 1845, a Brother from Baltimore who had made his novitiate in Montreal opened the first Brothers' school in this country at Calvert Hall in Baltimore. In 1848, four French Brothers came to New York to take over the school at St. Vincent's Parish on Canal Street (Gabriel, 1948). Within a year, the parish school was augmented by a small academy that a few years later would become De La Salle Institute, an independent secondary school. There was also at Canal Street a boarding academy that ultimately evolved into Manhattan College. Two years after arriving in New York, in 1850, the Brothers took over the direction of an orphanage in Troy, New York (Chrysostom, 1873). Thus a pattern

was set for the future that would see the Brothers engaged in elementary schools, secondary schools, and 4-year colleges, as well as welfare and child-care institutions.

The success of the ventures at Calvert Hall and at Canal Street led the bishops to ask the Brothers to take over other parish schools in Baltimore, New York, and other cities as well. The leader in this early expansion was Brother Facile, a French Brother who had been appointed to oversee the growth of the Institute in America. At first, his principal concern was with the elementary schools and the orphanages, institutions very much in line with the Institute's tradition of free education for the urban poor. But he was realistic enough to open academies to provide support for the parish schools and orphanages and otherwise to expand the work of the Brothers beyond what was the practice in France in order to meet the needs and the opportunities of the Church in America (Gabriel, 1948).

Brother Facile soon found an able auxiliary and his eventual successor in the person of Brother Patrick Murphy. Born in Ireland, he emigrated with his parents to Canada when he was only 3 years old, and as a young man entered the Montreal Novitiate. In 1844, he was given the religious habit and the name Brother Patrick. Quickly recognizing the talent of the young Brother, Brother Facile took him as his secretary and translator to accompany him on his visits to the United States. In 1853, he sent Brother Patrick to St. Louis to stabilize the precarious situation of the boarding academy in that city (*The Life of Rev. Brother Patrick*, n.d.). The institution soon prospered, and it was Archbishop Kenrick who suggested to Brother Patrick that the academy might serve as a minor seminary if only Latin could be taught (Isetti, 1990).

At that time, Latin was required not only for the training of Catholic clerics but it was considered the backbone of the curriculum in every liberal arts college. Fortunately, Brother Patrick was elected as a delegate to the Brothers' General Chapter held at Paris in 1854 (Chrysostom, 1873). He was able to persuade the Superior General to grant to the American Brothers a dispensation from the Rule that forbade them to teach Latin. On his return to St. Louis, after introducing courses in the classics, Brother Patrick applied for a charter to the State of Missouri, and in 1855, the academy was incorporated as Christian Brothers College, the first excursion of the Christian Brothers into the field of higher education (Gabriel, 1948).

In 1861, Brother Patrick was transferred to the academy at Manhattanville, at the time outside the limits of New York City. As he had done in St. Louis, with vision and determination he introduced significant changes in the curriculum to the point where, in 1863, the institution was chartered by the State of New York as Manhattan College with Brother Patrick as its first president (Costello, 1980). In that same year, La Salle College in Philadelphia received

its charter from the State of Pennsylvania. In the ensuing years other colleges followed, notably among them Rock Hill College in Maryland in 1865, St. Mary's College in San Francisco in 1868, and Christian Brothers College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1872 (Gabriel, 1948).

Brother Patrick did more than open schools; he wanted to do all he could to maintain their quality not only by good teaching but also by providing suitable textbooks. He had known the Sadlier family in Montreal and had easy contact with their New York office on Barclay Street (Chrysostom, 1873). He engaged them in some projects at first, but soon set up an independent operation that the Brothers could control (*Minutes of the Council*, 1866). Out of this would eventually develop the series of Christian Brothers' texts in the elementary school subjects that were used nationwide in Catholic schools, even those not conducted by the Brothers.

By the year 1862, there were already some 200 Christian Brothers in the United States conducting educational institutions at every level in Baltimore and Philadelphia, in New York City as well as Albany, Troy, Utica, Rochester, and Yonkers in New York State, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, St. Louis and Carondelet in Missouri, St. Augustine in Florida, New Orleans, Galveston, and Santa Fe (*Register*, 1862). Whereas the pioneer Brothers had come from France, these institutions were staffed by young English-speaking Brothers trained in the Montreal novitiate, most of them recruited in Ireland long before the De La Salle Brothers were established in that country (Chrysostom, 1873).

In 1864, the Brothers in the United States were constituted as a separate province with its headquarters in New York (*Minutes of the Council*, 1866). In 1866, Brother Patrick was appointed the Provincial Visitor. If the establishment of the Christian Brothers in America was due to the pioneering effort of Brother Facile, the expansion and diversification of the Institute, with its distinctive American character, was the result of the energetic leadership of Brother Patrick. In 1868, he summoned Brother Justin from Baltimore to lead a group of eight Brothers to establish the Brothers in California. In 1870, the communities of the Midwest were separated from New York to form the St. Louis province. In that same year, Brother Patrick sent Brother Botulf from New York to the precarious foundation in New Mexico with the injunction, "Make it work!" Make it work, he did and Santa Fe was added to the St. Louis province. In 1878, the province of Baltimore was separated from New York and given its own provincial (Gabriel, 1948).

One of the unforeseen results of the introduction of Latin into the Brothers' colleges was the appointment of Dr. Silliman Ives as Professor of Latin and Greek at Manhattan College. He had been an Episcopal bishop until his conversion to Catholicism in 1852. Ten years later, at a reception for

Archbishop Hughes at Manhattan College, Dr. Ives volunteered to establish and direct an institution to protect and preserve the faith of orphaned and delinquent young boys. Brother Patrick volunteered to provide Brothers to staff the institution that opened a year later and eventually became known as the New York Catholic Protectory. Within 5 years, the Protectory housed over 1,000 children, a figure that was tripled by the end of the century. Meanwhile, since 1859, the Brothers had opened an orphanage in Carondolet near St. Louis, with others to follow in Chicago, Syracuse, and Halifax. In 1888, the Baltimore District opened St. Francis Vocational School in Eddington, Pennsylvania, and in 1896 the Philadelphia Protectory was built on the scale of its namesake in New York (Gabriel, 1948).

As already noted, Brother Patrick was the impetus for the Brothers to enter into the field of higher education. Although not the original focus of the followers of de La Salle, the colleges of the Brothers had a significant impact on the history of the American Church. Once the American Brothers were dispensed from the ban on teaching Latin, they were asked by American bishops to maintain the colleges for two reasons: first, to provide the children of immigrants with access to the professions of medicine and law in a Catholic setting; second, to serve as minor seminaries for young men aspiring to the priesthood. Many bishops preferred the Brothers in this capacity since, unlike the practice in colleges staffed by the clerical orders, the Brothers would not be tempted to lure away to their own congregation men aspiring to the priesthood. This was an important factor in the development of an American diocesan clergy and was recognized by many bishops as such. It is estimated, for example, that by the end of the 19th century, more than half of the priests in the New York archdiocese were graduates of the Brothers' college (Costello, 1980).

Brother Patrick was elected the first American Assistant to the Superior General in 1873, the first time that the American Brothers had one of their own at the center of the Institute in France (Gabriel, 1948). For almost 20 years he tried, not always successfully, to bring the French superiors to understand the American Catholic culture where religious liberty and diversity could thrive with a separation of church and state. The controversy over Americanism and *Testem Benevolentiae* of Pope Leo XIII (1899) did not improve the image of the Americans in the eyes of the French Superiors, who were fearful that the American Brothers were abandoning the poor and the spirit of their vocation.

Brother Patrick died in 1891, and in the General Chapter of 1897, despite urgent pleas from the American hierarchy, which only seemed to make matters worse, the ban on teaching Latin was reinstated (Isetti, 1990). Many of the colleges had to be closed and the others barely survived or reverted to

being high schools. Provincials and college presidents who had argued the case for Latin were removed from office and exiled to foreign assignments. Fortunately, all but one or two of them persevered in their vocation and were eventually allowed to return (Battersby, 1967).

The early years of the 20th century marked a low point in the history of the Christian Brothers in the United States. With its most distinguished and well-educated leaders in exile, morale was low and vocations were few. The new breed of provincial and local superiors tended to be known less for competence and creativity in educational endeavors and more for their piety and conformity to the letter of the primitive Rule. Few new enterprises were undertaken and requests for Brothers from bishops and pastors had to be refused. The personnel shortage was alleviated to some extent by the arrival of the Brothers driven from France by the secularization laws of 1904 and from Mexico by the revolution in 1914. Furthermore, vocations were flourishing in Ireland where the Brothers had recently been established and many of them volunteered to come to the US as missionaries (Gabriel, 1948).

While the colleges and academies were struggling to recover in the early years of the century, the work in the welfare institutions went on apace. A notable leader in this field emerged in the person of Brother Barnabas McDonald. Born in 1865, he entered the novitiate in 1885 and, after a few years teaching in elementary schools he was assigned to the "Placing Out" Bureau of the New York Catholic Protectory. It was not long before he realized that such an institution was not the best way to prepare young city boys to be sent to rural areas where there were few Catholic families. They were often exploited, given farm work for which they were ill prepared, in an environment hostile to the religious faith in which they had been raised. In 1894, Brother Barnabas was commissioned by the Archbishop of New York to undertake a wide survey of such institutions, a work that took 3 years to complete and involved travels to 10 states and parts of Canada (Battersby, 1970).

Returning to the Placing Out Bureau of the Protectory, Brother Barnabas opened a kind of halfway house in downtown New York called St. Philip's Home where boys discharged from the Protectory could live in a family-like atmosphere, learn to be independent of "bells and whistles," and ply the trades for which they had been trained. They were expected to pay for their board and assume responsibility for the good order of the house. This was the beginning of what became known as the cottage system, an alternative to the institutional model of caring for orphaned and wayward youth. To insure a better program of placement, Brother Barnabas developed a schedule of interviews and follow-up meetings with prospective families willing to accept and even sometimes adopt the youngsters from the institution (Battersby, 1970).

In addition to St. Philip's Home, Brother Barnabas persuaded the Board of Managers of the Protectory to purchase a large tract of land at Lincolndale in rural Westchester County, north of New York City. Operated as an adjunct of the Protectory, this facility, known as the Lincoln Agricultural School, provided sufficient space for several small cottages to house the residents as well as the buildings and equipment needed for a training program in farm skills. In this way, the young men were better prepared and more likely to find satisfaction in working on farms that were willing to give them work and a home (Battersby, 1970). In 1938, the Protectory itself would be closed and the agricultural school reorganized as Lincoln Hall. The Brothers remained in charge there until 1980.

So successful was Brother Barnabas in his work with young boys and his creative approach to their training and education that he soon became a national figure in what he liked to call "boyology" (Gerard, 1966). In 1909, he was influential in persuading Bishop Shahan, rector of The Catholic University of America, to sponsor an association of Catholic charitable organizations and institutions that hitherto had little contact with each other or with public agencies. The result was the National Conference of Catholic Charities. Although Brother Barnabas was never an official of that organization, its officers always credited him with inspiring Bishop Shahan to bring it into reality (Battersby, 1970).

In 1914, Brother Barnabas was asked to serve on a committee established by the mayor of New York to investigate the reported widespread abuses in the management of private charitable institutions receiving public money. As the investigations began, there was strong opposition on the part of vested interests, including some Catholic officials who wanted no interference from outside. The members of the committee, Brother Barnabas among them, became the targets of a whispering campaign. The opposition was so strong that the Brother Provincial decided that it would be better if Brother Barnabas would resign. As the investigation proceeded, the unsanitary conditions and lack of professional training that prevailed in certain Catholic institutions were made public. There was outrage on the part of many clergy and religious who interpreted the work of the commission as an anti-Catholic conspiracy (Battersby, 1970).

Toward the end of 1914, when his 6-year term as Director of the Agricultural School expired, Brother Barnabas was assigned to St. Vincent's Orphanage in Utica where he was able to effect many positive changes in a short time. But a year later, the new Brother Provincial in New York ordered him to Toronto to be under the obedience of the Canadian Provincial. Apparently, there was pressure from some American bishops who were annoyed that he had signed the report critical of the abusive practices in

Catholic orphanages. In any case, he spent 5 years “in exile” working in the novitiate tailor shop. But his career in boy welfare was not to end there (Battersby, 1970).

In 1921, Archbishop McNeil of Toronto was planning to organize a survey of every aspect of social welfare institutions in his archdiocese, including hospitals as well as childcare institutions. He came to New York seeking advice as to who might undertake such a work. The Bishop of Brooklyn, a graduate of Manhattan College, spoke favorably of Brother Barnabas as an expert in the field of social welfare. As a result, the Canadian Provincial assigned Brother Barnabas to be at the disposal of the archbishop and to move to a Brothers’ community near the episcopal residence. The report that ensued stressed the favorite themes of Brother Barnabas, especially the cottage plan for housing, the need for professional training in social work for those who would direct or serve in such institutions, and a concern for their charges as children of God (Battersby, 1970).

Meanwhile the Knights of Columbus were beginning to take an interest in social work, especially as it concerned the welfare of young boys. Inevitably, Brother Barnabas was contacted and soon was given a leadership role in establishing suitable programs. Among these was the charge to establish a junior organization of Columbian squires and to develop a graduate course in boy guidance at the University of Notre Dame to be sponsored by the Knights (*Intensive Course in Boyology*, 1928). In gratitude for his initiative, in 1926 the University granted him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws (Battersby, 1970).

Assigned more or less permanently to assist the Knights in their endeavors, Brother Barnabas spent the last years of his life traveling from coast to coast to organize programs in leadership training or to lecture, sharing his expertise in child welfare and how best to meet the needs of the young (Barnabas, 1924). Soon the extensive travel took its toll on Brother’s health, which had never been good. Exhausted by his labors, he retired to Santa Fe and died on April 21, 1929, at age 64.

By the time Brother Barnabas died in 1929, a renaissance of sorts was well underway for the Christian Brothers in the United States. In 1923, with the intervention of Pope Pius XI, the General Chapter had voted to eliminate from the Brothers’ Rule the ban on teaching Latin, even though by that time Latin had ceased to hold the central place in higher education and the liberal arts. New leadership began to upgrade the level of education for the Brothers in training, and in due time it was the rule rather than the exception that a Brother would have a college degree before being sent out to teach. That was made possible in part by the university level colleges run by the Brothers in New York, Philadelphia, Memphis, Chicago, Winona in Minnesota, Santa Fe, and Moraga in California (Gabriel, 1948).

Except for the programs in welfare institutions, the characteristic work of the Brothers gradually shifted from the elementary schools to the high schools. As the original immigrant populations moved from the inner city to the suburbs, the Brothers' high schools moved with them to newly built modern buildings in airy surroundings. Good vocations abounded with somewhat more mature candidates coming directly from the high schools rather than from juniorates, which were gradually phased out.

The 1930s saw the growth of a nationwide catechetical movement to revitalize religious instruction at every level. The Brothers, especially in the high schools, had long seen the inadequacy of rote memorization of the catechism. Brother John Joseph McMahon of the St. Louis province was a pioneer in developing courses that would be centered on Jesus Christ and related to the life experiences of young people. To make his vision more accessible, in 1934 the Brothers of the province began publication of the *La Salle Catechist*. This in turn led to the eventual establishment of the St. Mary's Press on the college campus in Winona, Minnesota, that has since provided creative texts and other materials for use in schools and catechetical centers all over the English-speaking world (Erler, 1993).

Following Vatican Council II, in the renewal General Chapter of 1966, the American Brothers had the satisfaction of seeing one of their own, Brother Charles Henry, elected as Superior General, the first non-French Brother to hold that position (Salm, 1992). There was a bit of irony in the fact that, after all the disruption over the teaching of Latin, Brother Charles had a Ph.D. degree in Latin from The Catholic University of America.

The bright promise of the immediate post-conciliar years soon proved how ill-prepared was the Church in general and religious institutes in particular to adjust to change, diversity, and ambiguity. The resultant problems and disappointments are too well known to need enumeration or commentary here (Salm, 1992). It is possible, however, to cite some of the current initiatives that the Christian Brothers in this country have undertaken to assure the continuation of the mission inherited from John Baptist de La Salle.

The first is a new appreciation, based on serious scholarship, of the significance of the life, the vision, the accomplishments, and the living heritage of de La Salle. His extensive spiritual and educational works have been published in new English translations, as have scholarly biographies and other research projects related to the founder and his work (Salm, 1996). A variety of study programs and workshops attract large numbers of Brothers and lay associates to the point that the word "Lasallian" is beginning to have currency and meaning.

A second development centers on the concept of association. Now that the Brothers themselves are no longer the dominant presence in the schools,



what once were known as Brothers' schools are now better described as Lasallian schools. They continue to be characterized by the traditional emphasis on quality teaching, concern for the student as a person with a divine destiny, religious instruction with a preference for those most in need, in a non-clerical educational environment. From the time of the founder, the Brothers made a fourth vow of association to carry on the work of the schools and it was this concept of association that assured the success of the work from the beginning (Loes & Isetti, 2002). Now the Brothers are seeking ways to extend the concept of association to their lay colleagues, offering full participation in the mission and spirituality of de La Salle in a communal educational enterprise (Botana, 2003).

A third development in the Lasallian mission, rooted in the founding charism of de La Salle, is to develop more programs aimed at the direct service of the urban poor and disadvantaged. Notable in this regard is the network of San Miguel schools, named to honor Miguel Febres-Cordero, an Ecuadorian Brother and the first saint to be canonized from Ecuador. The first such school was established in Providence (Goyette, 2006), soon to be followed by one in Chicago, and has since spread to a dozen or so urban centers from coast to coast (*Directory of Schools*, 2003). In this work, the Brothers and their lay colleagues are assisted by young people organized nationwide as the Lasallian Volunteers. There are other similar projects, for example De La Salle Academy in New York City for gifted minority students, the Highbridge Community Center in the Bronx, De La Salle Blackfeet School in Montana, the LEO Center in Oakland, and Ocean Tides School in Rhode Island (Loes, 1998). Then there are the high schools that remained in the inner city, at one time academic institutions with a dominantly White clientele, now serving an almost exclusively minority population.

The De La Salle Christian Brothers in the United States are reasonably proud of their long history of service to the Church in this country. Like every other active religious institute they are learning that new situations demand creative approaches to their traditional ministries. In this spirit, they face the future with determination and hope that their tradition of quality education at every level, association in the educational enterprise, and concern for underprivileged youth will enable them to continue to make their distinctive contribution to society and the Church. All that is needed, apart from the providence of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is inspired leadership in the tradition of Brothers Patrick Murphy, Barnabas McDonald, and Charles Henry. The Brothers are convinced that such may already be present among them.

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