

April 7

John Baptiste de La Salle (1651-1719)

John Baptist de La Salle is best known as the founder of the De La Salle Brothers. He was born in Rheims, the historic city where the French kings were crowned. His family were wealthy. A relation on his mother's side was Joseph Moët, the founder of the famous Moët & Chandon wine business.

He was a devout boy and committed himself to the church at 11 and was made a Canon of the Cathedral at 16 before entering the seminary. When his mother and father both died in 1672, however, he left the seminary to care for the education of his six younger siblings. He was ordained a priest attached to the Cathedral.

John Baptist de La Salle reached a turning point in his life was when he was invited by a Religious sister to help found a school for the children of poor families. The need for schools for children of poor families absorbed more of his time and attention. The morale of teachers, who were often badly educated and paid, was poor. John Baptist invited them to eat with him in his family home, upsetting many of his family by this transgression of social boundaries.

He eventually resigned his canonry in order to focus on the school and later founded a religious Institute - the Brothers of the Christian Schools (known as Christian Brothers in the United States and as De La Salle Brothers in Australia), so enabling him to form dedicated teachers. The formation of the Institute was difficult and faced many challenges before he could leave it in the hands of a dedicated and competent leader.

The school curriculum was designed for children who would otherwise have received no education. It included teaching in the vernacular rather than the conventional Latin, and grading children in classes according to their ability. He also established a college for the training of teachers.

He incurred sharp criticism on religious grounds for the novelty of an institute of laymen and sometimes for his focus on the poor. He was also criticised for his educational innovations that surrendered mystique for efficacy and educational grounds. But he persevered in his project, founding many schools, including schools for boys who had broken the law and technical schools.

He was canonised in 1900.

The De La Salle brothers came to Australia in 1906 and established schools in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, the Northern Territory and Queensland, carrying on the tradition of John Baptist de La Salle.