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A pioneer of education who dreamed of a school open to all is how Pope Francis described Saint John Baptist de La Salle, in the audience granted this morning to the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the community he founded, on the third centenary of his death.

A brilliant and creative innovator in his vision of the school, in the concept of the teacher and in teaching methods, Saint John Baptist de La Salle developed the firm conviction that education was a right for all, including the poor. Therefore, to dedicate himself to the education of the most disadvantaged social class, he established a lay community to pursue this ideal, convinced, the Holy Father emphasized, that “the Church could not continue to ignore the social contradictions of the time that she is called to confront”. This conviction led him to institute an original experience of consecrated life: the presence of religious educators who, without being priests, would interpret in a new way the role of ‘lay monks’, immersing themselves fully in the reality of their time and thus contributing to the progress of civil society”.

With his new concept of the figure of the teacher, born of the intuition that teaching should not merely be a job, but rather a mission, Saint John Baptist de La Salle “surrounded himself with people adapted to the popular school, of Christian inspiration” and “consecrated every energy to their formation, becoming himself an example and a model for those who had to exercise a service at the same time ecclesial and social, and working hard to promote what he defined as the ‘dignity of the teacher’”.

He also undertook bold reforms in teaching methods to respond to the needs of the age. He substituted Latin, the usual language of teaching, with French; he created more homogeneous learning groups; and he founded Sunday schools for adults and two homes, one for young delinquents and one for the rehabilitation of prisoners. The Pope affirmed, “He dreamed of a school open to all, and for this reason he did not hesitate to face also extreme educational needs, introducing a method of rehabilitation through school and work”.

The Holy Father exhorted the spiritual heirs of the mission of Saint John Baptist de La Salle to “further and imitate his passion for the least and the rejected”, and to be “the protagonists of a ‘culture of resurrection’”, urging them to go in search of “those who are found in the modern ‘sepulchres’ of confusion, degradation, hardship and poverty, to offer the hope of a new life”.

The forms of proclamation of the Gospel, he concluded, “must be adapted to the concrete situations of different contexts, but this also involves a effort to be faithful to the origins, so that the apostolic style that is proper to your religious Family may continue to respond to the expectations of the people. I know this is a task that inspires you, and I urge you to journey courageously in that direction”.
