

## DE LA SALLE AND TRAINING SCHOOLS FOR TEACHERS (2/2)

### THE PARIS PROJECT

De La Salle moved to Paris in 1688. Ten years later, in what was called Grandmaison, it seems that among other programs existing in this house, there was also a kind of "seminary" for rural teachers (1) under the direction of Brother Nicholas Vuyart. It could be that it functioned in conjunction with the novices (pretty broadminded for those times!), but it does not seem to be concerned only with novices, according to Guibert.

It is in the parish of Saint Hypolite in Paris where the teacher training program for rural teachers reappears. This was in 1699. Encouraged by the enthusiasm of the parish priest who had requested Brothers for his school, and financed by the contributions of various benefactors, De La Salle re-opened the "seminary" on Rue de l'Ourcine. The two Brothers of the school also assumed the operation of the "seminary". The director was Brother Nicholas Vuyart "whom De La Salle considered as one of his best men (2) and who, it seems, had already prepared a couple of young men then teaching in Rethel (1683-1685) according to the wishes of the Duke of Mazarin. This was to be the first Normal School with supervised student practice, because one of the two classes it scheduled was to be taught by student teachers under the supervision of a master teacher.

Regulations for the student teachers were similar to those of the Brothers: "Rising at four-thirty, and retiring at nine. Prayer, spiritual reading, examination of conscience were part of the routine, along with instruction and activities proper to their profession... Silence and recollection were common practice along with all that went into the ordinary day of the Brothers, (3) The program of studies was similar to that of Rheims, with additions and modifications. Included were catechism, reading, grammar, spelling, arithmetic, the system of weights and measures, and Gregorian chant which would be useful in their function of assistants to the parish priests of rural areas. It was, for a century and a half before, what it would continue to be afterward; that is, a formal obligation for parishes to organize elementary schools, and teachers had to be trained.

We have no way of determining the number of student teachers who were certified in this program, but we can give here a typical testimonial concerning the effectiveness of this "seminary". A priest wrote this in 1719: "My country and I owe an eternal debt of gratitude to De La Salle. It was his kindness which furnished me four young men to teach in the neighborhood of Saint Marcial. They were well prepared and very zealous. One became a priest". (4)

Unfortunately, Bro. Nicholas Vuyart lost his head over the money to which the parish priest of Saint Hypolite made him a legal heir. He abandoned De La Salle and once he had broken off his commitment, the seminary began to decline in 1704. Perhaps the whole affair began because of the strategy adopted to save the "seminary" which was prospering, at the time of the Court case of Chatelet on the 29th of August. De La Salle would not allow the proposed dissimulation and insisted on the principle of "together and by association". However certain Brothers implemented their plan to pretend not to belong to the Institute in order to save the school and the "seminary". Eventually both disappeared. It seems that later on Vuyart requested his re-admission and De La Salle, who never harbored rancor toward anyone, was disposed to receive him with fatherly forgiveness. However, according to his custom, he consulted with the Brothers before taking a decision and after hearing their objections he decided against the re-instatement.

### NEW EXPECTATIONS WITH ABBÉ CLÉMENT

Another attempt would be made in Paris itself. De La Salle was convinced of the need for these training schools and whatever had to be done to get them going would be done. During the spring of 1708 the Brothers had come to Saint-Denis, a small town to the north of the capital. While negotiations were still in progress, a young man by the name of Abbé Clément, son of the King's surgeon and aspirant to the rich monastery revenues of St. Calais comes into the scene. Impulsive and eager to achieve something significant in the field of education, he contacts De La Salle. The founder senses that something is not right. They meet off and on during the course of the year and then, because of the recommendation and strong approbation of Cardinal de Noailles, the interest of Madame de Maintenon and even of Louis XIV, the "seminary" is opened at Easter of 1709. Three Brothers take charge of it, one of whom teaches Gregorian chant. They used the same format previously employed with the same happy results. Except for a temporary closure during the famine, everything seemed to indicate that the cherished dream of De La Salle was finally to be realized, and that his tenacity was to be rewarded.

However, once more money and social status caused the failure of the training school for rural teachers and this time it involved disgrace and humiliations for John Baptist de La Salle.

Toward the end of 1709, Abbé Clément received his coveted prize of the Abbey of St. Calais as well as a position as Canon of the Cathedral of Le Mans. Dominated by vanity and ambition, he began to lose interest in the humble work of the "seminary" for rural teachers which he formerly considered a worthy project for both his youthful dreams and his money. In 1711, his father received the title of nobility from the King, and from then on his aversion turned into disdain. He not only ignored his former friends but also became ashamed of the projects to which he had committed himself, refusing to repay the loan which De La Salle had made to him and insisting that he had been forced to support the foundation of the "seminary".

A court case ensued. De La Salle was charged with taking advantage of a minor. At first he decided to defend himself by presenting his evidence in the case -13 letters written by Clément to De La Salle- over the course of the entire planning stage. He left this documentation in the hands of "trusted people in authority" (5). Unfortunately, few there are who cannot be suborned with money. These trusted friends turned against him and the whole Parisian atmosphere became hostile to him. After doing all he could poss-

ibly do, to no avail, flight (6) remained his only alternative; so on February 18, 1712 he went South whence he had come scarcely 5 months previously.

On June 15th, a second judgment of the Court adjudicated the house of Saint Denis to Rogiers, one of the "trusted people in authority", and ordered the Brothers and De La Salle to vacate the premises. Thus the training school for rural teachers perished for the third time. After all the work he had invested in his dream which, after the Congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, was dearest to his heart, he had just suffered another severe set-back. He felt both discouraged and very tired. It was the moment of his dark night of the soul which would be dispelled by the peace and tranquility of Parménie. De La Salle would die without the consolation of seeing a single teacher training center in operation, but his sons, faithful to the vision of their Founder, have successfully established teacher training centers or Normal Schools on every continent throughout the 300 years of Lasallian history.

### IN THE HANDS OF PROVIDENCE

From all this, it is clearly evident that, for De La Salle, it was of vital importance to give teachers a proper formation if education was to enjoy continuity and effectiveness. With this conviction, he founded a Congregation of men consecrated to God by vocation to exercise the ministry of Christian education. They were to remain lay Religious, not clergy, so that nothing, not even the attractions of the priesthood, would distract them from their primary mission. They would live in community so that "together and by association" they could better do the work which God has entrusted to their care. And yet, almost as if there were something more the Institute had to do, from the very beginning he envisioned the formation of lay teachers as collaborators in the Lasallian project, to go where the Brothers could not go – to the small towns and villages.

Given the above, no one can say that this idea of De La Salle concerning the training schools for rural teachers was only sporadic or incidental. We have witnessed him constantly striving to begin again whenever circumstances, which were always external to himself and to his work, brought his efforts to naught. Just consider the 29 years (1683-1712) during which De La Salle tried to establish various "seminaries". Sixteen years went into projects, transactions and more or less stable establishments. And 13 of these years saw the full implementation of these incipient Normal Schools. These 13 years are more than the few days or the few months which we commonly ascribe to their functioning.

If De La Salle proposed to himself the re-formation of the popular school of the Seventeenth Century, he very intelligently undertook the re-formation of the principal factor in

the system of education: the teacher. This has to be fundamental in any attempt to improve the school. Any other attempt at reform, be it through creative concepts or through administrative shake-ups is doomed to ultimate failure. Thus it is that the greatest Lasallian contribution has been a focus on the teacher as the means and the condition of the true reform. During his whole life, we see him dedicated to improving his teachers, be they Brothers or not, by way of written pedagogical works, catechisms and spiritual writings. If we find him teaching classes in Dijon or Grenoble it is only due to special circumstances on which he substitutes for a Brother who for some reason cannot meet his classes.

The excellent results of his method of teacher training were immediately recognized and praised. We know of the letter sent to Brother Bartholomew, the first successor to De La Salle in the government of the Congregation, by one of the priests of the parish of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet to which we have already referred. Blain himself says: "He saw his work and his concern rewarded as he contemplated the blessings God had bestowed upon these young teachers in the schools of the villages to which they had returned. They would bear much fruit and would be the "good odor of Jesus Christ" by their example, their piety and zeal, and by their dedication to the duties of their profession" (7). And this must be the true purpose of Lasallian teacher training, not only to impart excellent professional skills, but above all, to enkindle that religious zeal which is indispensable for the complete fulfillment of so exalted a mission. This is what really makes a true Christian teacher.

No wonder that Pope Pius XII, on May 15, 1950 proclaimed St. John Baptist de La Salle "Patron before God of all teachers".

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(1) Aroz, C. L. 41, p. 37.

(2) *Rivista Lasalliana*, Vol. I, p. 196. "Il suo migliore discepolo".

(4) Blain, C. L. 8, p. 179. Cf. Brother Maximin. *Op. Cit.* p. 38 and Gallego, S. *San Juan Bautista de La Salle*, I, p. 314, note 61.

(5) Balin, C. L. 8, p. 77.

(6) Blain, C. L. 8, p. 78.

(7) Blain, C. L. 7, p. 279.