

DE LA SALLE AND TRAINING SCHOOLS FOR TEACHERS (1/2)

A CHERISHED DREAM OF THE FOUNDER

In the studies which have been made on De La Salle and his work, there is one project which has suffered from benign neglect, perhaps because it did not achieve its intended result, perhaps because the attempts ceased before his death, but it is difficult to believe that he ever completely gave up on the idea. I am referring to the steps De La Salle took to firmly establish a teacher training program for rural teachers.

Much has been written about his establishment of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools as it is officially known, and more popularly "Christian Brothers" or "Lasallian Brothers". It was due to the chance encounter of two men, Nyel and De La Salle, in the reception room of the convent of the Sisters of the Child Jesus on March 9, 1679 that in the designs of God was born a Society which was to become the Community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

However, if we read his biographers carefully, it becomes evident that from the outset De La Salle entertained the idea of training teachers for rural schools. When Blain speaks about the foundation made by De La Salle in the Parish of Saint Hypolite of Paris, he tells us: "No other institution fascinated him more. His plan included the Institute of the Brothers for the cities as well as the formation of school teachers for the rural areas". (1) Elsewhere he continues: "He was convinced that there would always be something missing in his Institute or that it could not render the Church those services it deserved as long as rural areas were not provided with the same kind of teachers available to the cities; i. e., devout teachers who were well prepared to educate and instruct youth in all that is necessary for salvation". (2) Both of these quotations confirm the statement of Brother Maximin when, speaking about the "Normal Schools of St. John Baptist de la Salle", he says that after his Religious Congregation, there was nothing that occupied his thoughts and zeal more than truly efficient Normal Schools (in the pedagogical terminology of the day) for the training of lay teachers for rural areas". (3)

A PROJECT SPECIAL TO THIS INSTITUTE

From his very first years of working toward the organization of schools, we can see him taking steps, setting the stage, so that while children in the cities were being provided with teachers dedicated to their salvation by means of schools, the rural children would not be deprived of equal opportunities.

In his "Memorial on the Habit", a very important document which he composed around Christmas time of 1689 in Paris defending his position relative to the Habit of the Brothers against M. Baudrand the parish priest of Saint Sulpice who intended to change it, he clearly states: "In this community (its members) operate gratuitous schools only in cities, in which they teach Religion every day including Sundays and feasts.

They also devote themselves to the training of teachers for rural schools in a house other than that of the Community, which we refer to as "a seminary". Those in training remain only a few years until they are well prepared both in piety as well as in what concerns their work as teachers." (4)

The reasons for this separation during formation and later in place of ministry we already mentioned when we discussed how De La Salle differed from his predecessors. Reviewing them quickly, we could say that they were basically due to the strong spirit of community which he wanted for the Brothers. He was faced with the resounding success of the Christian Schools due to the new teachers he was training. However, in the same rural villages there were not enough children to occupy the time of two or three Brothers and this was the number required to form a community. On the other hand, the number of students was sufficient to occupy a lay teacher who could live in the village, and since he received the same kind of training and formation as a Brother, he could achieve the same results with the village children. Besides, lay teachers could also help in the parishes with the liturgical service, an area in which the Brothers did not wish to become involved because they wanted it perfectly clear that the Brothers were not clerics.

THE ORIGINAL INTENT

During the entire life of De La Salle as the founder of schools, the concept, the project and the realization of training schools for lay teachers was always on his mind. It was an enterprise from which not even the most serious difficulties, not even the betrayal of those he trusted could dissuade him.

The first information we have goes back to 1683. Brother Dante found it among notes of Maille and Capillon, notaries of Rheims, as quoted by Lucard; and Brother Maximin discovered a document of Remi Favart, Doctor of Theology and Canon of Notre Dame of Rheims, dated April 2, 1683. Both quotations refer to the same thing and transcribe a content which is identical. "The house contracted to him for the sum of two thousand five hundred and fifty (livres) which is located on Grand Street of Rethel is the same sum as that said given him by someone who wishes to remain anonymous, on the condition that said house be used by the discreet and worthy person of M. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Doctor in Theology and Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims for the purpose of a gratuitous school for children which is being opened in said place of Rethel, and to house the teachers who operate it; likewise, if it be possible, there will be established a seminary for rural teachers for the diocese of Rheims. The above has been stipulated and accepted by M. De La Salle, present". (5)

Everything seems to indicate that this original plan was not realized for reasons which are quite evident. Primarily, he did not as yet have the personnel sufficiently prepared to undertake such an ambitious enterprise. Nevertheless it does tell us that from the very beginning of his work as a Founder (only 4 years after his meeting with Nyel) he has in mind to provide rural teachers independently of his work with the Brothers.

ANOTHER ATTEMPT

In that same year of 1683, De La Salle rented two houses next to the house on Rue Neuve where the Institute was officially born in 1682. One of them would be the home of the first Normal School on record in the history of education.

Zeal for the glory of God is creative and with parish priests begging for Brothers to teach in their parishes, De La Salle found himself with too few Brothers. In places where there were too few students to warrant the investment of a whole community, he suggested that these pastors send him devout and intelligent young men so that he could train them as teachers. The proposal was enthusiastically received and the first Normal School began, as close as we can ascertain, around Christmas time of 1685 with three candidates. S. Gallego states that this "is the humble beginning of the training school for teachers". (6)

Concerning this Normal School, Blain says that at one time there were up to thirty students and De La Salle saw that these student teachers could take the place of Brothers in small towns. (7) He was personally interested in them, although he appointed a competent Brother to direct them according to his programs and counsel.

We know from early biographers the kind of schedule and activities which were in place in this first training center. The students were taught reading, writing and plain chant as well as the skills necessary for the profession of an educator. Also indicated were the times for prayer, meditation, spiritual reading and other duties of Christian living. De La Salle describes it all in his already quoted "Memorial on the Habit": "They are in a house separated from the Community which we refer to as «a seminary». Those in training remain only a few years until they are well prepared both in piety as well as in what concerns their work as teachers.

They wear the clothing of ordinary laymen, preferably black or some other dark color, and they are distinguishable from other lay people only by their white collar (rabat) and their shorter haircut.

They are taught singing (Gregorian), reading and writing to perfection. Their food, lodging and laundry are furnished free of charge. Afterwards, a position is found for them in a town or village where they are to fulfill the office of teacher-cleric. Once they have been so placed, they have no further ties to the Community except those flowing from courtesy. However, they are welcomed any time they come to make a retreat." (8)

Occasionally, impressed by the atmosphere of recollection and devotedness of the house, some asked to join the community of the Brothers and they were welcomed. This, however, was actually the first school designed specifically to train teachers and "only teachers" as S. Gallego insists; that is, lay teachers in the strict historical sense of the term with no overtones of novitiate or seminary.

This first Normal School, opened toward the end of 1685, continued to flourish while De La Salle remained in Rheims. After he left for Paris in 1688, under the direction of Brother Henry L'Heureux and Brother Jean Henri according to Brothers Dante and Maximin, it began to dwindle and it finally disappeared in 1690. All told, we can see that it enjoyed three years of successful operation of the five years of its existence.

THE PROJECT OF MAZARIN

Before the Normal School in Rheims began, De La Salle was the lessee of a house which had not yet been used for its original purpose according to the contract drawn up by Favart and the wishes of Charles-Armand de la Porte, Duke of Mazarin. De La Salle began negotiations with him to open his "seminary" in order to produce a sufficient number of lay teachers to disseminate correct doctrine and Christian morality as well as solid citizenship throughout the lands of his duchy, as we read in the contract of the foundation dated August 20, 1685. The duke will pay for 17 people, their lodging and formation and De La Salle commits himself to furnish two Brothers who will be in charge of organizing the program. Besides, according to the contract, there is provision for the continuation of the work even should the community of Brothers dissolve. 3.000 (livres) spread out over the year will be provided.

Everything had been arranged, but, as Brother Maximin says, "unfortunately John Baptist de la Salle was too far ahead of his times". (9) The project was not accepted by those whose influence was brought to bear on the Archbishop and when De La Salle and the Duke of Mazarin went to him to seek approbation they were answered with a caustic: "You are both crazy". In all humility, De La Salle replied: "Forgive me, Your Grace, there is only one," referring to himself as the author of the proposal. (10)

Consequently, the contract was nullified. However, on the same day, September 22, 1685, they signed a similar agreement to make the establishment in La Fere in the diocese of Laon. This contract is less generous in the matter of personnel (3) and finances (600 livres) and stipulated that locating a house and opening the program must take place by October 1, 1686, at which time the funds would be made available. We cannot be certain that this school actually opened, but Rigault is of the opinion that an ephemeral and undocumented foundation did exist in La Fere.

Perhaps it was for this reason that, convinced as he was of the need for these "seminaries", that he opened the one in Rheims at his own expense and under his own responsibility because it began with three candidates for teacher training from the duchy and for the duchy, according to S. Gallego.

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(1) Blain, C. L. 7, p. 364.

(2) Blain, C. L. 8, p. 56.

(3) Bro. Maximin, L. *Les Écoles Normales de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*. Procure des Frères, Bruxelles-Namur, 1922, p. 19.

(4) Gallego, S. *San Juan Bautista de La Salle. II. Escritos*, p. 716. Cf. C. L. 11, p. 349.

(5) Brother Maximin, L. *Ibid.*, p. 20. Cf. "Anales de l'Institut des Frères". Vol. I, p. 21. and Rivista Lasalliana, 1934, p. 194.

(6) Gallego, S. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

(7) Blain, C. L. 7, p. 278.

(8) *Memorial sur l'Habit*. C. L. 11, p. 349; 4, 5 and 6.

(9) Bro. Maximin L. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

(10) Blain, C. L. 7, p. 221.