



Bulletin of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools N. 235

## **The heroic vow, the seed of life**

# **THE FORMULA OF THE HEROIC VOW OF 1691**

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and  
adorable majesty,

**WE CONSECRATE OURSELVES ENTIRELY TO YOU**  
**to procure with all our ability and efforts**  
**the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools,**  
and in the manner which will seem most agreeable  
to you and the most advantageous to the said society.

**And, for this purpose,**  
I John Baptist de La Salle, priest,  
I Nicolas Vuyart,  
and I Gabriel Drolin,

from now on and forever until the last surviving one of us,  
or until the complete establishment  
of the said Society,

**MAKE THE VOW OF ASSOCIATION AND UNION**  
**to bring about and maintain the said establishment,**  
**without being able to withdraw from this obligation,**  
**EVEN IF ONLY WE THREE REMAINED IN THE SAID SOCIETY**  
**and even if we were obliged to beg for alms**  
**and live on bread alone.**

In view of which we promise to do,  
all together and by common accord,  
everything we shall think in conscience,  
and regardless of any human considerations,  
to be for the greater good of the said Society.

*Done on this 21st of November,*  
*Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 1691.*  
*In testimony of which we have signed...*

The blossoming of the Lasallian Institute. Drawing by Br. Marek Mika of Poland.



# THE GREAT NOVELTY OF NOVEMBER 1691

What do the events of 1691 mean for us, 300 years later? If we think a little, we will realise that the question itself contains the answer.

There have been numerous occasions in the history of the Institute when Brothers have asked themselves this question. We are still asking the same question today. The reason for this is that we probably need to do so. Well, the very fact we need to ask this question is part of the answer.

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De La Salle, Drolin and Vuyart made this commitment after devoting a certain number of years to the service of the new Society. As far as Drolin and Vuyart are concerned, we do not in fact know how much time or what portion of their lives they had given by that time to the service of the Christian Schools. We know more about De La Salle. What we do know well, and what is common to all three, is their commitment to something which just then seemed to be on the point of collapsing.

They had been in Paris for three years, trying to give meaning and an identity to the work they had undertaken. During this same period, all the work they had previously done in Rheims and in the surrounding countryside had come to nothing: a few schools continued running, but their own distinctive character was tending to become blurred in the midst of other educational undertakings for the service of the poor. Around the capital, things were no better. In a word, there did not seem much point in committing oneself to something specific, specialised, professional and involving consecration. They had not yet succeeded in finding a satisfactory formula with regard to funding, to training specialised staff, nor in their relations with existing social institutions.

However, they believed in God and in the need for the service that a Christian school can offer. They dared believe that God was calling them and was enabling them to identify the needs of the urban society growing up around them, and to respond to them. The preceding thirteen, six or three years enabled each one of them to affirm that there was meaning in all that now seemed to be collapsing.

They believed that, in one way or another, God was calling upon them to make some gesture that would affect their lives vis-a-vis society and the Church, even if, for the time being, they alone would know of its existence.

This is the reason why they performed this intimate and radical act. As had already happened in the life of the Founder and would happen again on numerous occasions, his act of faith was also an act of hope. It was essentially an act of hope. While not wishing to imitate cheap literature or indulge in empty praise, we can say that his gesture was that of a person who believes in the future. The three could not make an act of faith in what they already had, that is why their vow was not limited to believing that God was calling them. What they said rather was that God would call them and would continue to call them.

This was faith at its most profound. It would be absurd to consider them as people who were going to accept what they already had by an act which would be one of suffering resignation rather than something creative and inspired by hope. On that November 21st 1691, they could see nothing around them that could reward or compensate them for the renunciation which their consecration presupposed.

The Founder had already behaved similarly on a number of occasions, but always, it could be said, on a personal basis, making a gift of himself to others, through whose needs he perceived the Word of God. This time the case was different: it was not a single person nor three persons who proclaimed their faith out loud, it was a community that did so. It is true that something similar had taken place five years earlier, and that every year since there had been occasion to repeat it. This time, however, the silent despair that united these three persons shows us clearly that they were conscious of doing something different and something new.

What is so new about that November 1691 is that it was an act of faith expressed by a community. De La Salle, Drolin and Vuyart stated their conviction to one another that it was together that they received the call of God and the capacity to respond to it. They consecrated themselves to God, to the children of the poor...and to one another. Each of them was

the depositary of the act of faith of the others. That was even their destiny. They believed in God and therefore in the capacity of each of the three to respond to him. And so they believed that the capacity of the others was the source of their own. They shared with one another their experience, their fatigue, their gifts, their disappointments, their future. Each vowed to live for the others. They believed that this was the only way to act if the call of God to open the Christian Schools was to be acted upon in their society.

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If now, in 1991, we look back to those times and ask ourselves what it all means for us, it is because we already know the answer.

We do not need anyone to tell us why. We know and have always known why.

If we ask ourselves the question it is because we are very sure of our motives for believing in God, in our society and in ourselves.

We look at ourselves and we realise that we are richer in knowledge than in hope. Our experience and our training have prepared us on the professional plane. We are able to diagnose the needs of our society as well as decipher the twists and turns taken by institutions over the centuries. We know only too well that we are on the point of crossing the threshold of institutional sterility. We know that, instead of being serene and bearing much fruit, we are old, old and bitter.

In such a situation, there is no need for anyone to tell us why we are celebrating something that happened 300 years ago. This is because that event makes us ask ourselves if we believe in God and in ourselves as a community. It leads us to discern which of the numerous "faiths" can support us at the present time with its changes in society, its theological trends, its average age, its bitterness of the cross...and God's action in our lives.

Recalling this event which took place in 1691 makes us examine our past life, where it began, in whom we confided, to whom we turn today, where we would like to be tomorrow. And so we examine our lives and count the occasions, numerous or less so, that God appeared in our lives, and the times, numerous or less so, that we really responded to his call.

Such considerations make us realise how his presence in us and our response or our silence have always been a collective or a community response or silence. We realise also that all our deserving actions and all our failings are communal and are always shared by members who are nothing if the community does not give them an identity.

And so, in the eloquent silence of our question about this event, we know very well that in reality it is a question about our own community.

We realise that this question concerns our faith now, not in our personal lives, but in our collective identity. Our own lives show us that to remember 1691 is to examine our common hope, our faith in ourselves as instruments that God puts into place to perceive the signs of the times and to respond to them specifically through the ministry of education.

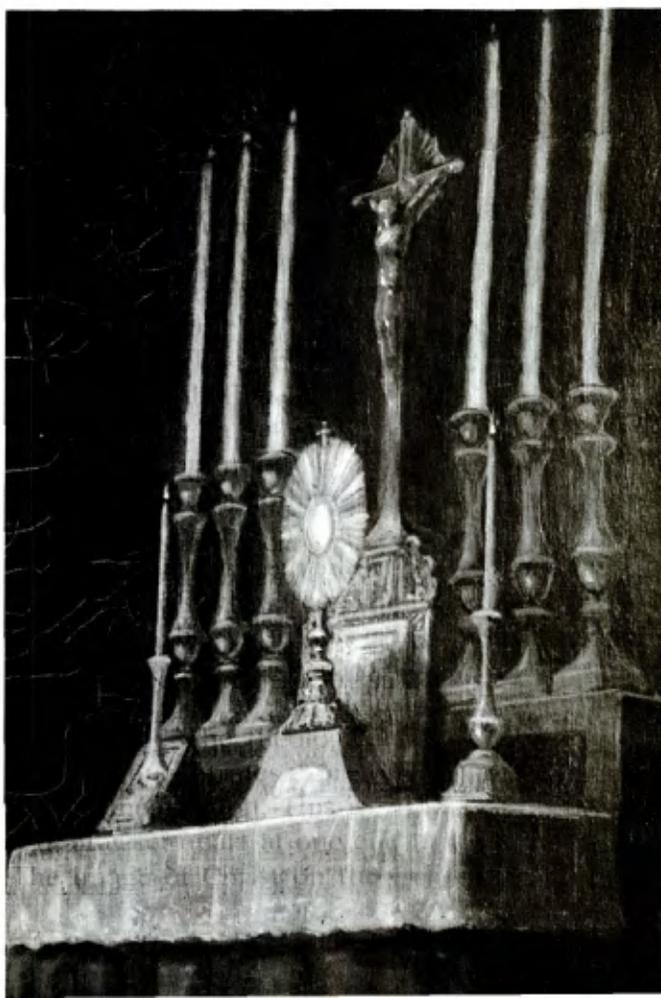
That is why no one can give us a full explanation of what happened on November 21st 1691 if he does not at the same time tell us what we are doing at present and what we are prepared to do in the future.

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There is certainly no need for us to answer this question. It contains its own answer, dwelling in our mind as an irksome presence, puzzling and speaking to us of the hope others had. There is really no reason to answer: to live with it for a whole year in community is already an act of faith.

**Br. Pedro Maria GIL**

Detail of Bonnard's painting.



# THE HEROIC VOW OF NOVEMBER 21st 1691 AS AN ACT OF FOUNDATION

1991 marks the tercentenary of the vow pronounced on November 21st 1691 by John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, "to procure the establishment" of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

This vow is often called heroic. It was certainly an heroic act, but it was not the first nor would it be the last. The principal characteristic of the vow pronounced in 1691 on the feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple is that it is essentially a vow to found the Institute in the present-day sense of the word, that is, to establish it on firm foundations "until the last surviving member" of the three associates.

The expression "heroic vow" could be misinterpreted, however, seeing that spiritual writers have accustomed us to use this expression when speaking of the vow "to do what is most perfect". To describe the vow pronounced by the Founder, Vuyart and Drolin as "a vow of foundation" would therefore be a more accurate description.

## 1. The text of the vow.

This vow, made in secret by the three Brothers in 1691, remained a secret for both the biographer Maillefer and the Brothers as a whole. We know of its existence only through a copy of the formula that Drolin had piously kept.

The text is as follows: (1)

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you *to procure* with all our ability and efforts *the Society of the Christians Schools*, and in the manner which will seem most agreeable to you and the most advantageous to the said Society.

And, for this purpose, I John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I Nicolas Vuyart, and I Gabriel Drolin, from now on and *forever until the last surviving one of us*, or until *the complete establishment* of the said Society, make the vow of association and union *to bring about and maintain* the said establishment, without being able to withdraw from this obligation, even if only we three remained in the said Society, and even if we were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone.

In view of which we promise to do, all *together*

*and by common accord*, everything we shall think in conscience, and regardless of any human considerations, to be for the greater good of the said Society.

Done on this 21st of November, Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 1691. In testimony of which we have signed.

In order to understand the significance and consequences of such a commitment we need to know the attendant circumstances which made it almost indispensable, as well as the frame of mind of its instigator, John Baptist de La Salle, and his state of health.

## 2. The pressure of external events

De La Salle did not want to establish a new religious institute. He did not want to become involved with schools. His "*Memoir on the Beginnings*" (2) states this quite clearly. It was his spirit of faith which made him see God's will in events that, in some sort, "obliged" him to do so.

The first teachers recruited by Nyel were not very community minded. Following these teachers who felt called to be educators but not religious, there came some young men with a classical education. They were attracted by the austere life, the quality of prayer, the devotedness to poor children and the service rendered to the Church which Canon De La Salle represented for them. They listened, however, to what outsiders said: there was no future for them...What would happen to the schools if De La Salle lost interest in them or disappeared? The Founder found the solution with the help of Fr. Barre: he gave up his personal wealth, his canonry, he shared the daily life of his teachers in community becoming like them, except for his priestly duties.

The die was cast, he had made his decision.

When, following the example of the Sisters of the Child Jesus, some of the more generous teachers asked De La Salle for permission to make perpetual religious vows, he explained to them that this would be inopportune. The only possibility he left open to them was that of making a vow of obedience once they had been prepared for it.

It seems clear to me that the Founder himself at that particular time was not prepared to commit himself "for all the days of his life" to live with the teachers.



Detail of stained glass window in the Generalate (see the article on P.14).

When these teachers put on a black robe, a white rabat, a tricorne hat and, during a hard winter, a mantle with hanging sleeves, De La Salle adopted the same dress. The name chosen, *Brothers of the Christian Schools*, was the final touch that defined the meaning of their life. There was a general outcry, the clergy protested. Nothing could make him change his mind however. He insisted on being one of them.

The joy of making first vows on Trinity Sunday, June 9th 1686, after a preparatory retreat begun on the feast of the Ascension, was tarnished the following year. Only eight out of the twelve were willing to renew their commitment. It was a cruel blow deeply felt by De La Salle who was counting on them to continue his work. The eight that remained clearly deserved credit; De La Salle could count on them and form a team with them. But what he was thinking of was quite different. He had not changed his mind: the Brothers had to be led by a Brother. And so he resigned. Brother Henri Lheureux was elected superior. He had all the required qualities. The Rheims clergy thought otherwise. There was no precedent, they said, for a lay person to be the superior of a priest. Finally De La Salle had to give way to the demands of his spiritual director and of the archbishop, as well as to the general pressure of the clergy. He took charge of the community once again without, however, giving up his original plan to shed this responsibility as soon as possible. He began training Brother Lheureux for the priesthood.

When he arrived in Paris on February 24th 1688 accompanied by two Brothers he was wearing the

same habit as they were. The clergy of St. Sulpice were not pleased, it would seem. More conciliatory than in Rheims, De La Salle reverted to ecclesiastical dress but remained intransigent where that of his teachers was concerned. The argument began again. The Founder dug his heels in. He wrote an important "*Memoir on the Habit*" which we still have. External pressure in fact resulted in the Brothers having to think more deeply about the importance of some distinguishing mark to indicate the nature of their religious organisation and educational work. I am convinced even that, at this juncture, De La Salle, dressed differently from the Brothers, interpreted the situation brought about by circumstances as a sign that he could never be assimilated fully into the Brothers and that his true function was not to lead them but to offer help and guidance as a priest.

At the Rue Princesse school tension arose between the protagonists. La Barmondiere intimated to De La Salle that it would be in his interest to withdraw voluntarily. After meeting De La Salle, he saw things differently and entrusted the running of the school to the Brothers and their superior. This did not prevent the Founder from considering the whole enterprise as it stood then to be in a very precarious position.

The success of the first school led M. Baudrand to open a second one in the Rue du Bac. Teachers belonging to the Confraternity of the Little Schools became angry at the loss of paying pupils. They took the case to court. The Precentor Claude Joly ruled in their favour (3). De La Salle made ready to leave Paris. The parish priest was opposed to this and told him to appeal. He gave in and agreed. He asked the Lord through the intercession of Mary to make his will known to him, that is, to tell him whether he wanted the *Brothers of the Christian Schools* to extend their work in Paris. He submitted his defence in writing and the judge was won over. And so De La Salle and the Brothers remained in Paris with some five hundred children in their care. But they knew that nothing had been settled yet. They still had no legal standing and not even a favourable agreement with those responsible for the diocesan little schools.

There were other events too that affected the situation. In particular, there was the death of several persons who had counselled and supported De La Salle. On March 31st 1686, Fr. Barre died. De La Salle who normally kept tight control of his emotions was "much afflicted by this loss" (4). On May 31st 1687, Adrien Nyel died. For the Saint his death was a severe blow (5). On October 25th 1689, it was the turn of Charles Demia to leave this world. From at least as far back as 1687 De La Salle had been asking him for considerable numbers of books. And so that was another external source of support that had disappeared. It seemed that De La Salle was now alone in his struggles.

### 3. The pressure from deaths in the Brothers' community

As early as 1684, Brother Jean Francois had fallen victim to the trying conditions of this life.

Brother Bourlette, who came from a well-off family and had joined in spite of its opposition, died on September 6th 1686.

The recruitment and training of new teachers became a priority for the Founder.

On April 30th 1687, Brother Maurice, belonging to a leading family, a model for the Rheims community, and much loved by De La Salle, died of tuberculosis.

In summer 1687, the Brother Director of the school at Guise became gravely ill. He wished to see the Founder again. The latter set out. After the death of several of the most fervent Brothers, how was he to interpret in faith the will of God? Why had he called to himself so many teachers that were needed in the schools? Was the Saint shaken in his convictions? In any case he wanted a clear answer from God. The journey became a veritable pilgrimage. The young congregation needed the dying Brother. At Guise he was welcomed with open arms. The sick Brother embraced him warmly. Almost immediately he felt better and declared even that he was cured. It had been a difficult trial. God's answer to everyone's prayers seemed clear. They had to persevere, recruits to the Institute would not be lacking, or at least they would not all die in the prime of life and hardly trained in the religious and teaching life of the Brothers (7). To this distressing series of deaths we have to add the cruel loss of Brother Henri Lheureux. De La Salle arrived two days after the funeral. In spite of his usual self-control, he wept. He was deeply affected. His sorrow was deep, and he was brought close to intellectual despair, for the priest he had been training to take his place was no longer there. Were all his efforts to resign as superior wasted? Where did God's will lie? For several moments he remained speechless, lost in thought about what had occurred. Then he came to himself, adored the mysterious designs of Providence, and announced to the Brothers that it was a sign that the Lord did not want priests in the Brothers of the Christian Schools (8). He had made his decision, but it did not solve the problem of who would succeed him. From then onwards he sought some other solution.

### 4. Pressure from defections and failures

To the severe trial of a succession of deaths there was added the departure of four of the twelve Brothers who had pronounced vows on Trinity Sunday in 1686.

In 1690 the Rheims community was greatly reduced. Of the 16 Brothers who had been there after the Paris community was opened in 1688 there were now only eight. No one new had joined. In 1691, the seminary for country schoolmasters closed. It had been temporary by nature, had successively opened and closed, and for some time had been in decline.

In Rheims also the postulancy for "young boys aged from 14 to 15 years old", which was transferred to Rue Princesse, Paris, in 1690, was thrown into confusion by the demands of the priest sacristan. A number gave up their teaching vocation. This was another severe blow for the Founder.

In 1691, unlike the schools which were running very satisfactorily, the structures set up to provide for the future of the undertaking had all collapsed. Everything had to be started all over again.

A novitiate was needed that would be independent of the parish but close by to where he lived. He had to find some way to remedy the situation caused by the death of Brother Henri Lheureux without training another Brother for the priesthood.

A means was found to remedy the poor health or the exhaustion of the Brothers by renting some "run-down" buildings on the Paris Issy road where it entered the village of Vaugirard.

In September 1691, De La Salle gathered there all the Brothers "who had been (in the Institute) for three or four years" and obtained their agreement to prolong their spiritual formation. And so it was that on October 8th there began a sort of novitiate, and

The Heroic Vow: A drawing by Br. Richard Buccina of Bishop High School, Cumberland, Maryland, USA.



the trainee teachers who were available in the Rheims seminary replaced them in class. How long did this novitiate last? We do not know. However, I have no difficulty in imagining that it was at the conclusion of this novitiate that De La Salle approached Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin and suggested to them to make the heroic commitment to support the Institute, now regaining its strength, till such time as it was fully “established”.

## 5. At death's door

Although born with a delicate constitution (9), De La Salle was in robust health at the age of 36 when he left Rheims for Paris (10). In 1690, however, a serious illness “left him little hope of surviving” (11). The problem was a blockage in the urinary tract. Helvetius pronounced him at death's door. The viaticum was brought and the Sacrament of the Sick administered. The parish priest, Fr. Baudrand, tried to console the Saint who saw all his hopes collapsing of ever completing the establishment of his Institute. He promised him as well as the Brothers that he would be as a father to the community (12). With Brother Lheureux training for the priesthood, this ecclesiastical protection was sufficient to reassure everyone: a priest associated with the Brothers would be accepted without difficulty by the ecclesiastical world. But this link with a single priest who was a member of the ecclesiastical society of St. Sulpice was perhaps also a little worrying.

De La Salle recovered his health but needed to convalesce. He refused to do so, and instead begged the Brothers to allow him to go to the public hospital for the poor. Perhaps, deep down in his heart, he thought this would be a good means of enabling his followers to take their future into their own hands and accept, in practical terms, Brother Lheureux as deputy superior.

Hardly had he recovered from this illness which had lasted for two months than he fell ill again in Rheims. Just as he was beginning to feel better he heard that Brother Lheureux was ill. He returned to Paris and was overcome with grief on learning of his death, a death that was more crucifying for him than any other (13).

## 6. The tendencies of his own temperament

There exist several enlightening character studies which concur with the evidence of De La Salle's contemporaries. Some of these throw light on the exceptional vow of November 21st 1691. The Dutch Professor Slikboer points to a natural tendency to think for a long time before coming to a decision and to “never to go back on a decision that has been taken”. He prefers to “put his work first”. His great



Detail of Bonnard's painting.

sensitivity makes him “very vulnerable” and “liable to become discouraged”. This is balanced by a prompt intellectualisation of events, supported by a will of iron. He is able to resist “external pressure” but they cause him distressing irritation. He has an “irresistible influence” on those who, like him, are “enthralled by their vocation”. Around 1700 “this vocation does not seem to me to be fully integrated in his personality”. This would not be the case in 1715.

This analysis is confirmed by Dr Marcel Viard of Paris. “Not always as self-confident as he appears”, “obstinate, unremitting will”, “faith enables him to act without ever losing sight of the sacred character of his mission”, “able to act against his deepest feelings”.

Professor Moretti's work, *Copie non conforme*, corroborates some of what has been said above: “steadfastness which enables him to overcome all obstacles”, “fear of not doing his duty”, “in periods of extreme difficulty...tends to become discouraged”, “fervent prayer restores his strength”.

We cannot rely on John Baptist de La Salle to tell us more. However, his *Memoir on the Beginnings* (14) describes clearly how his thinking evolved:

“I had imagined that the management...would be *only external management...*”

“*God wishing to make me to take complete charge of the schools did so in an imperceptible manner and over a long period of time*”.

His thinking is the same when he draws up for himself some personal rules, known to us under the title of *Rules that I have imposed upon myself*. (15)

“I shall always look upon the work of my salvation and that of the *establishment and conduct* of our Community as the work of God...I shall entrust it all to his care so as to do all that concerns me in it only by his orders. I shall consult him frequently with regard to all I shall have to do, either with regard to the one (my salvation), or the other (the establishment of the Institute)”.

The expression “all that concerns me in it” shows clearly that, at the time of writing his resolutions, De La Salle considered himself external to “the establishment and conduct” of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

The resolution which binds him “to renew” daily “the consecration” of himself “to the Most Holy Trinity” implies that these rules were drawn up after the vow pronounced on Trinity Sunday 1686.

## 7. Events leading up to the vow of foundation

Between 1688 and the death of Lheureux in 1690 or the beginning of 1691, there were no changes in the Founder’s intentions. This death, however, interpreted as a sign from God, led to a change in his thinking: the superior of the Brothers would be a Brother. So, what should he do? What was needed was the agreement at the same time of the Brothers as a body and of the ecclesiastical world. The example of what some of the persons well known to him had done could help him to find a solution.

There were several of these. There was especially that of Jean Jacques Olier with whom he had become acquainted during his stay in the Seminary of St. Sulpice. Early in December 1641, the founder of the Sulpicians had been inspired to think that God was relying on him to organise a group of priests who would devote themselves to the training of the clergy. During a pilgrimage to Montmartre, he and his two companions made the commitment “not to leave one another ever” in order “to work together” for the sanctification of the clergy.

On September 6th 1645, at a time when the community was beginning to grow, Olier and two companions, different from the first two, signed in the presence of a lawyer a document “of association” for the glory of God and the honour of the Church. They promised to form a community “according to the statutes and rules they and those that joined them would agree upon”. Olier was then charged to obtain a bull of approbation from the Pope and letters patent from the King.

In 1691, De La Salle did not follow suite exactly. He made a “vow”. But the intention to found was identical. With Vuyart and Drolin, De La Salle formed a human and interdependent trinity which made a commitment to work for the complete establishment of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. It made a commitment to work together and by association to build a new institute without specifying whether it ought to obtain letters patent, whether it should be satisfied with diocesan approval or whether it ought to obtain full recognition from the Pope in the manner of exempt religious orders.

## 8. The nature and consequences of the vow of November 21st 1691

In Paris on November 20th, De La Salle signed a document giving powers of attorney to Jean Maillefer, the husband of his sister Mary. He empowered him to sign all relevant documents relating to the will of his maternal grandmother, Perette Lespagnol, who had died on October 7th, and of which he was one of the beneficiaries.

The following day, Wednesday November 21st, feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple and a school holiday (16), the Saint made a secret pact with Brothers Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin to steer the barque of the Institute together and by common consent, and even to make of it a lasting “establishment”. His innate timidity made the situation a difficult one. All the persons from whom he used to be able to seek support when he found it difficult to make a decision alone were dead. Vuyart and Drolin who were just 27 years of age were the eldest of the Brothers who would make perpetual vows in 1694 (17). Secrecy was necessary so as not to set them apart as being superior to the other Brothers. It was necessary also because the commitment they had made together with the Founder had not been submitted to the community for approval. Public discussion might have had the effect of forcing De La Salle to take up once again and by himself the reins of the religious and pastoral undertaking he had set in motion, as had happened before in connection with the election of Brother Lheureux. Ever since 1686, the three associates had been bound by vows like the other Brothers. They renewed this commitment in 1687, 88, 89, 90 and even again on Trinity Sunday 1691. But the number of Brothers renewing their vows in this way seems to have decreased gradually in spite of a few new recruits coming in to fill some of the gaps. The commitment made by De La Salle, Vuyart and Drolin, and by them alone, was of

The two Brothers: detail from Bonnard's painting.



a different sort. They made this vow at Vaugirard, either in the novitiate and rest house oratory used by the community for their daily prayers, or in a nearby chapel so as to preserve the secrecy of the occasion more easily. The formula begins with the words used in the renovation of Trinity Sunday 1691: "Most Holy Trinity ...prostrate with the [most] profound respect". But it continues with "we" to indicate clearly the solidarity of the three contracting parties. Then it returns to "I" to show that each one, even if he were the only one left, was making an irreversible commitment. It is of some interest to know whether the formula Gabriel Drolin kept so piously to the end of his life was pronounced by the three "one after the other" as Blain says (18), or simultaneously, as some commentators infer from the occasional use of "we". I would simply say that the traditional usage when renewing vows is to recite the formula collectively, with each one pronouncing his own name singly. De La Salle, doubtlessly wanting his two associates to make a more personal commitment, asked them to recite the complete formula singly as Blain, informed by Drolin, is at pains to point out. It was an important occasion. It would not be repeated in the lifetime of the three contracting parties.

Vuyart, Drolin and De La Salle took upon themselves the responsibility of completing *the establishment* of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and of *directing* it in the absence of a superior elected by the body of the Institute. To be "agreeable" to God and "advantageous" to the Lasallian Society were their two inseparable aims. "To be obliged to live on bread alone" and to beg were doubtlessly more demanding obligations than that of obeying, which they vowed on Trinity Sunday 1691 as ordinary members of the Institute. In 1694, the ten other Brothers bound themselves by this vow for the rest of their lives. There is a difference between the two vows, however, and it is one of objective: to "establish" a "Society" is not the same at all as committing

oneself for life to a regularly constituted community.

While the exact details of what the three associates intended to do were not stated, the general outline was clear. It was no longer question "of obeying" and of "stability" in a school establishment, as was vowed by the community on Trinity Sunday in 1686 and again in 1694. For them it was a question of positive action. The three promised "to procure" and "to do" whatever their conscience told them was "for the greater good" of the young "society". However the individual conscience could not provide adequate criteria for action. All important decisions would have to be the result of common agreement. There can be no doubt that De La Salle was faithful to his commitment to consult his two companions to the extent this was possible, but up to which date?

He remained titular superior till the 1717 General Chapter. At that point the *Common Rules* were completed and Brother Barthelemy was elected as the "first" official superior of the Institute. Could this be justifiably seen as "the complete establishment of the Society" of the Brothers? There is room for hesitation.

When this 1717 Chapter was called, De La Salle expressed quite clearly his unwillingness to do anything without the agreement of Brother Drolin, although for many years the latter had been far away in Rome running a "papal school". He asked for "his agreement with whatever was decided in the (general) assembly" of the Brothers. This wish was clearly reflected in a letter from Brother Barthelemy to Brother Drolin: "Our dear Father...thought it *necessary for the good of our Institute* that our Brothers take over its general direction while he was still alive and that he should be there to offer his help". In other words, he would be a counsellor without the responsibility of a superior and would give them only "external service". The letter continued by giving Brother Drolin news about the Institute, which was "doing very well". All this was very much in line with the vow made on November 21st 1691 promising to act together. But this was not all. Brother Barthelemy assured him that an annual grant "from the Prince" and some other circumstances could "contribute greatly to our *solid establishment* in France (19).

Hence all the obligations of the November 1691 vow were not yet thought to have been completely fulfilled, and so De La Salle remained as "counsellor" to his congregation: he accepted to improve on the style of the *Rule*; he advised Brother Barthelemy against starting up a community in Canada. Not only is the Roman apostolate of Brother Drolin not considered to have ended, but in the same letter dated February 18th 1718, Brother Barthelemy takes into account a very definite wish on the part of the Founder: "He has instructed me...to ask you to let us know if you want us to send you another Brother

Detail of the stained glass window in the Generalate.





The Founder in school: detail from a stained glass window in the Generalate chapel based on a drawing by Erolí.

during the coming holidays to assist you. We will try to choose for you a good, competent man to help you and continue your work after you". After the death of St. John Baptist de La Salle, followed five months later by that of Nicolas Vuyart, who had not been counted as a Brother since 1704 or 1705, Brother Drolin remained as the sole survivor of the November 1691 trio. Was he still obliged by his vow? Was his role still to prepare the way for papal approval and for canonical status for the Institute? If we are to believe two sentences in the vow of foundation, the answer is "yes". The "last surviving one of us" is included and unable to shed his obligation even if there remained in the Institute only the three associates of November 1691. The Institute is prospering and has more than a hundred members. Are we to conclude therefore that Brother Drolin's mission was to undertake personally measures that would culminate in the granting of the papal bull in 1725, approving the *Rules* and the Institute?

This would have to be the subject of a further study on the consequences and limitations of the vow of foundation. In the same way, it would be useful also to examine how St. John Baptist de La Salle himself practised his vow between 1691 and 1719, because the complete establishment of the Institute can hardly be fixed before the letters patent of 1724 and the papal bull of 1725, completed by the first edition of the canonically approved *Rules* (Rouen 1726). This study would have to include the part played by Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin as well as an examination of the Founder's *Meditations* most likely to reveal the reactions of the Saint on reading the basic texts of the Church and of the principal religious orders.

In the meantime let it suffice to conclude by pointing out the importance of the day chosen to pronounce the exceptional vow of 1691: the feast of the Presentation of Our Lady. The holy priest had already "taken the first Brothers of the Society on pilgrimage to Our Lady of Liesse...in order to choose her as superior of the Institute (20). Biographers prior to 1740 have deduced from this single refer-

ence to this event that this took place at the time when the first vows were pronounced that brought the Brothers together in a "society" in 1686. And it has even been pointed out that it happened the day following Trinity Sunday. Be that as it may, the fact is that the Founder never stopped having recourse to Mary to obtain the success of his undertaking. In 1690 during the court case brought against him by the teachers of the little schools, he made a pilgrimage with the Paris Brothers to Our Lady of Virtues at Aubervilliers. When he pronounced his vow of foundation with Brothers Vuyart and Drolin, more than the day chosen, it was the concluding words that strikingly revealed the depth of his devotion to Mary. He wrote: "Done...on this...feast of the *Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin* 1691. The capital letters are to be found in Blain (p. 313). The expression "Most Blessed Virgin" is particularly significant: it is a way of associating Mary with the three Brothers for, as the opening words express so clearly, a vow can be addressed only to God, and the Christian God is the triune God, the perfect model of all human association.

During this tercentenary year of the vow of foundation of St. John Baptist de La Salle, we should be encouraged to try to understand better the fundamental objectives of the *Brothers of the Christian Schools*: to procure the glory of the triune God, through community action, by means of "Christian Schools" which, by their preferential service of the poor, are worthy of the gift of one's "whole" life, every moment of which is lived under the gaze and in imitation of the Most Blessed Virgin.

Brother Yves Poutet

## REFERENCES

- (1) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 313. *Note*: "very" is omitted before "profound".
- (2) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 167.
- (3) CL 42, p. 254.
- (4) BERNARD: CL 4, p. 70.
- (5) BERNARD: p. 69.
- (6) Y. POUTET: T. I, p. 711.
- (7) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 256.
- (8) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 308.
- (9) CL 24, p. 200.
- (10) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 277.
- (11) BLAIN II: CL 8, p. 390.
- (12) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 306.
- (13) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 308.
- (14) BERNARD: CL 4, p. 22.
- (15) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 318; *Lasalliana*, n° 20, (20.3A.78).
- (16) CL 25, p. 46.
- (17) CL 3, pp. 8 & 32.
- (18) BLAIN I: CL 7, p. 313.
- (19) LETTERS pp. 121-122.
- (20) BLAIN II: CL 8, p. 489.

*A glance at some of those who have depicted the event*

## “THIS VOW WHICH THEY PRONOUNCED KNEELING ONE AFTER THE OTHER”

For a century, artists depicting John Baptist de La Salle limited themselves to portraits, either in the form of holy pictures given as rewards to pupils, or of paintings to adorn the walls of classrooms or of the community house (1). This changed in 1838 when Brother Anaclet, Superior General, arranged for the publication of “The true friend of children” (2), a booklet intended to popularise the founder of the Christian Schools and containing six illustrations. These first illustrations were followed by others, some anonymous some signed, some fairly crude others more refined. What they all had in common was that they were meant for an unsophisticated public: the children of the free schools and for Christian homes. The most frequently depicted subjects were: De La Salle distributing his wealth to the poor, teaching or celebrating mass surrounded by children, speaking with the first Brothers, visiting prisons, writing the Rule, and finally on his deathbed (3).

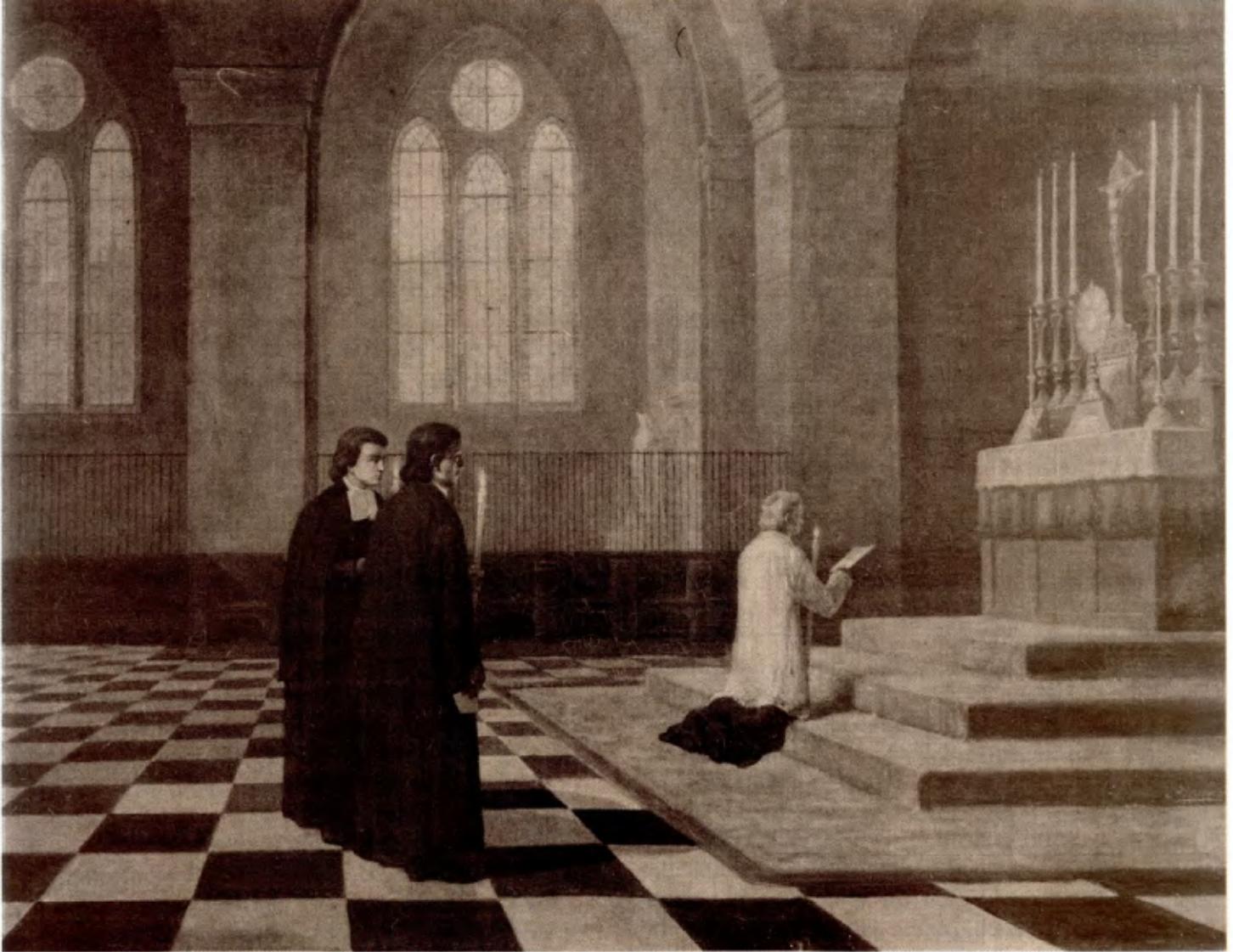
This situation remained unchanged for more than forty years. And then some new subjects appeared as the result of the publication of a biography (4), and on the initiative of the “regime”, since it was produced by the Procure Generale located at the Brothers’ Generalate at Rue Oudinot in Paris.

At least four artists were involved in this work. None of them was well-known, none had a signature that would bring fame to De La Salle (5). What their work revealed however was that, by asking them to illustrate the history of its foundation in a different way, the Institute saw itself somewhat differently in 1883. It was shortly after the second centenary of the Brothers of the Christian Schools which had been an occasion for celebrations and for some self-examination by the Institute. There was a fierce debate about schools going on in French society at the time, which had been started by political forces hostile to teaching congregations. The position of the Brothers in this had been clearly stated in a circular from the Superior General, Brother Irlide, dated January 6th 1881. The French State wished to remove all

traces of Christianity from primary schools. Brother Irlide deplored this and reminded anyone who could have possibly doubted it, that he was committed “above all to the profoundly Christian education given and which will always be given, whatever happens, to the pupils of the Christian Schools” (6).

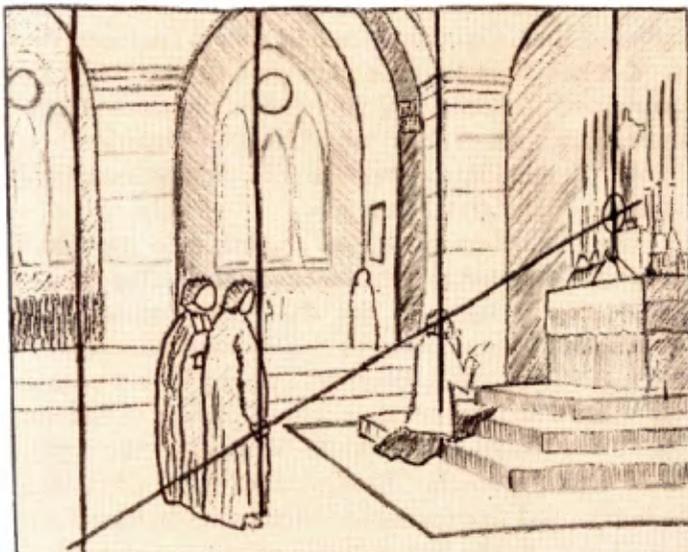
The illustrations published two years after this circular show in their own way how the Brothers of the Christian Schools had changed their emphasis and now centred their attention on the special vocation of their founder as a man totally dedicated to God and who was not only a pious philanthropist and “friend of children”. There is “The Venerable (Brother) lost in the snow” to illustrate the idea of self-abandonment to Providence; then “The meeting with M. Nyel” and “The distribution of bread” which illustrate the radical break in the life of the rich canon of Rheims. “The pilgrimage to Aubervilliers” shows the Brothers’ community at prayer and no longer in discussion. Finally “The heroic vow” illustrates an aspect of the life of the Venerable De La Salle and of certain of his followers which had never been historically recorded: their commitment to God by perpetual vows.

The painting which we reproduce here is by Benoit Noel Bonnard. It was done in Paris in 1883 or a little before (7). It has inspired a number of pictures. The first and the most faithful was used to illustrate Abel Gaveau’s book: “The life of the Venerable De La Salle” (8). The setting is not that of a warm community chapel but the austere and dark interior of a gothic church. There is no large assembly of people in this bare place. On the contrary, the artist highlights the isolation of the three persons whose commitment is shown as a break with the world and even with the vocation of the ordinary Christian. Devotion to Mary is discreetly recalled by the inclusion of a statue in a side chapel. The theological thinking behind the picture concentrates more on transcendence than on the Incarnation. This is symbolised by the raised altar set apart at one end of the composition. The image of Christ on the cross attracts our at-

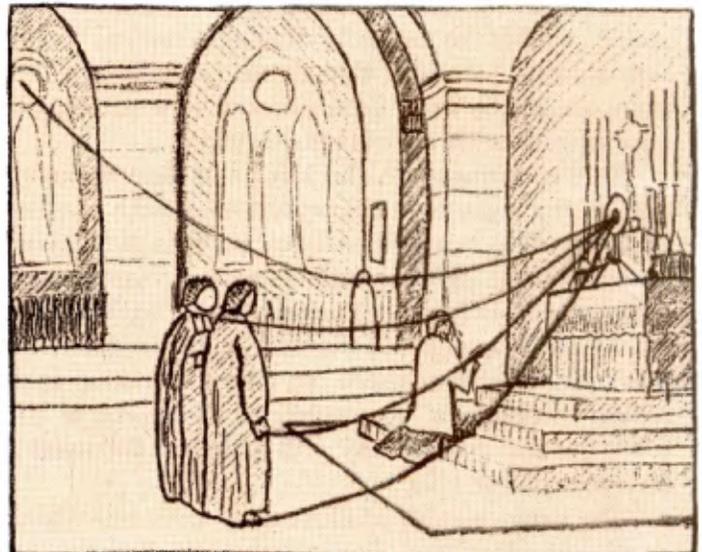


The Heroic Vow by Noel Bonnard. By its unreal lighting and its romantic setting, this picture expresses rather the drama of the time at which it was painted than the act of adoration and hope made in 1691. And yet the artist, by centring his work on the Blessed Sacrament exposed, has the merit of illustrating the devotion to the Eucharist of St. John Baptist de La Salle and his disciples.

A first examination of Noel Bonnard's Heroic Vow reveals two groups of figures, facing the altar and framed by it, and with their backs turned on the empty space. The composition is linked by an oblique line leading to Christ in the Eucharist.



Centred like the previous graphic analysis on the monstrance, this one concentrates on curved lines and the contrast between the dark lower part, indicated by the bottom line, and the highlights linked by the other three curved lines.



tention less than the white cloth and the monstrance which catch the light.

The picture represents De La Salle pronouncing the common vow first. In this the artist is faithful to the biographer Jean Baptiste Blain who speaks of "this vow which they pronounced kneeling, one after the other" (9). But by showing him alone at the foot of the altar, half-way between the Blessed Sacrament exposed and his two companions, he makes De La Salle a sort of mediator between Heaven and the Institute which, however small, exists already, but which here occupies a secondary position. This view is to be found repeated in the works of 19th century biographers who, by comparison with Blain, their principal source, tend to minimise the deliberative role of the first community of Brothers in order to emphasise the decisions and choices of the venerable founder.

There is reason to think that Bonnard composed his work around an oblique line which passes through the right hand of the first Brother, the one nearer the altar, the head of John Baptist de La Salle and the monstrance. The composition develops vertically from these three points by including a window, a pillar and the candlesticks. But if the composition is limited in this way it does not occupy the centre of the canvas. If we extend the oblique line downwards to form a vertical segment equal to each of the other two, then the vertical line passes through the second window and the whole picture becomes squared. And now one can understand how the artist has made us feel that there was something unusual about the emptiness of the church. The three segments containing the altar, De La Salle and the two Brothers need to be completed by a fourth element, but all that we see are bare flagstones. Where a baroque artist would have put curtains, a lectern or a superfluous figure, Bonnard, by leaving an empty space, makes us actually feel the radical break represented for John Baptist de La Salle and his companions by their commitment to a still fragile community with an uncertain future.

This emptiness on the left-hand side is balanced on the right by a decorated altar with candles burning. The symbolism is clear: it is the divine presence that gives meaning to the commitment of the three Brothers. Turning their backs on the world, they consecrate themselves to the one who has called and sent them "to give a Christian education to children" according to the terms of the rule that the community will draw up for itself a few years later (10).

The great wealth of illustrative material which appeared after the canonisation of Saint John

Baptist de La Salle did not include the "heroic vow" of 1691. This had given way to the first public pronouncement of perpetual vows by the Founder and twelve companions three years later. The subject returned, however, in 1936 when the Institute commissioned some stained glass windows for the apse of the new Generalate chapel in Rome (11) from the Giuliani workshops. The artist took advantage of the tall and narrow frame he had to work within (it measured 2.85 m by 1 m) to place his figures in tiers. The two Brothers are kneeling, while John Baptist de La Salle is standing and, with his gold halo, is readily identifiable. The window is located at the back of the apse but is visible the whole length of the nave, a distance equal to 15 times its height. The artist has made the most of the constraints imposed upon his work. Seen from close up, his work reveals other qualities: there is a lightness of touch not to be found in Bonnard's work, and De La Salle seems to be having a silent but intense conversation with Jesus Christ. His eyes are fixed on a monstrance. One could be forgiven for thinking it was a small lamp, but it is the way the Blessed Sacrament was publicly exposed before the advent of the monstrance in the form of the sun.

Much could be said about contemporary art work. First of all, one has to mention the appearance of a new form of expression whose future seems assured: the strip cartoon. Ever since Bob de Moor came on the scene there has been a captive Lasallian clientele. We reproduce here a frame taken from an album published in Milan in 1980 and signed Francesco Pescador (12). The frame shows a small chapel. The three figures make their commitment kneeling, their attitude of self-offering quite expressive. Although not wearing priestly vestments, De La Salle is easily distinguished from his companions because he is kneeling on a higher step. The composition gains in clarity and this is an advantage in a strip cartoon: the reader has to assimilate very quickly the message contained in some 200 successive pictures. However, as an illustration of what was historically a "vow of association and union" its hierarchical structure is regrettable.

On the other hand, as regards the liturgical setting, Pescador has moved away from his predecessors who used to set the scene during the course of a Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, during which each Brother making vows would come forward to the altar with a candle in his left hand and his signed formula of vows in the right. This was how the Brothers of the Christian Schools used to pronounce their vows before Vatican II and, in the last century, members of confraternity

ternities would make their promises. In 1980 Pescador broke with this tradition but kept the setting of the divine presence in the Eucharist. De La Salle is shown in profile, facing the tabernacle. He seems to be speaking to the divine Guest and saying: "Mai et poi mai, Signore, abbandoneremo le nostre scuole!:" Never, Lord, never will we abandon our schools!" We see here another characteristic of the historical strip cartoon. It has to summarise in a few succinct sentences what a biographer can express at greater length, and a painter, while not using words, can convey through a variety of artistic nuances.

And so each creative artist has to make the most of the means at his disposal, according to his inspiration, his perception of events and the nature of his clientele. If our generation is interested in what happened in the little village of Vaugirard on November 21st 1691, then we have reason to believe that artists will continue to portray its significance for us. At least, if we ask them to.

Br. Bernard SIMON, FSC

## REFERENCES

(1) See J. Cornet and E. Rousset: *Iconographie de St. Jean Baptiste de La Salle des origines a la beatification, 1666-1888*, Rome, Cahiers Lasalliens, N° 9, 1989. Well researched documentation, prudent in its conclusions, abundantly illustrated. This is an invaluable reference work to which we can add nothing except what regards the modern period which lies beyond its scope.

(2) Anonymous. "The true friend of children or a summary of the life and virtues of John Baptist de La Salle": Paris, 1838 (and not 1848 nor 1938, as has been mistakenly stated in J. Cornet and E. Rousset, op. cit. pp. 242 & 347).

(3) See J. Cornet and E. Rousset op.cit. pp. 231 & 256. For the period 1838-1849 alone, the authors have listed 37 pieces of work. It would seem that subsequently the work of dissemination slowed down till 1883.

(4) A. Gaveau: "Life of the Venerable De La Salle", Paris, 1883. The work includes 20 illustrations: 5 are of a documentary nature, 15 show scenes from the life of John Baptist de La Salle. Among these latter are 10 on subjects not depicted up till then. J. Cornet and E. Rousset, op. cit. pp. 288-302 reproduce them and give an analysis.

(5) The artists are: the painter B.N. Bonnard, the lithographer Gerlier, the engravers L. Rousseau and Farlet.

(6) Irlide (Brother): *Instructive and administrative circulars*, N° 1, Paris, January 6th 1881.

(7) Born in Lyons on November 24th 1821 (unrelated to Pierre Bonnard, 1867-1947), Benoit Noel Bonnard is known for his paintings of animals, countrysides and still life. Between 1872 and 1883, the Brothers of the Christian Schools commissioned six works from him, four of which are today in the Generalate in Rome. The two others, known only from reproductions, are the subject of research. The paintings we have are oil on canvas, measuring 810 by 1,000 mm, monochrome black and white, which leads us to think that initially those who commissioned the works intended them to be reproduced solely by engraving and photography.

(8) The engraving, unsigned, is on p. 183 of the first edition. The frame of the engraving is larger than that of Bonnard's painting, so the engraver has added to the window on the left and the right, and given greater depth to the altar.



Certain lives of St. John Baptist de La Salle in strip cartoon form omit the episode of the heroic vow, or simply refer to it without illustration. Francesco Pescador, on the other hand, devotes two frames to it. The faces are not particularly attractive, but the artist has enhanced the traditional setting by the evocative gesture of open hands.

(9) J.B. Blain: "La Vie de M. Jean Baptiste de La Salle...": issued in 1961, Rome, Cahiers Lasalliens N° , p. 313.

(10) Probably three years later in 1694. Text in Cahiers Lasalliens N° 5, p. 16.

(11) The large stained glass windows in the apse were made by the workshop of Giulio Cesare Giuliani in Rome on the basis of drawings signed S.P. Erolì. This is the name of a Roman workshop specialising in decorative work founded by Erulo Erolì († 1915), which was being run at the time by his sons Silvio and Pio. As far as the inspiration of the work is concerned, this Heroic Vow is related to the stained glass window made by Pierre Gustave Dagrand (1839-1915) for the Pensionnat St. Genes in Bordeaux. This shows De La Salle and twelve Brothers pronouncing their perpetual vows. However, the differences in format and the number of figures limit the possibility of making comparisons. The work of Dagrand is reproduced in A. Ravelet: *Saint Jean Baptiste de La Salle*, 3rd edition, Paris, 1933, p. 130-131.

(12) G. Signori and F. Pescador: *Giovanni Battista De La Salle*, Milan, Centroeditizioni, Albi Nuovi N° 8, March 1981.

# A BELATED COUNTERPOINT TO THE HEROIC VOW FUGUE

## 1. Introduction

During this tercentenary year of the heroic vow, much is being said and written about the irrevocable commitment of John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin to procure and maintain the establishment of the society of the Christian Schools. It is being referred to also as a model which can, at a time of crisis, help us to face the future openly and honestly and to ask ourselves: What will happen to us if we do not succeed in reversing the present trend...?

In the case of Nicolas Vuyart, the challenge of the heroic vow takes on a special aspect. It is almost embarrassing to speak about it, but it is a part of history: one of the two Brothers who made their vow with De La Salle was unfaithful to it and reneged on his commitment. This was a very painful moment for De La Salle, and the Brothers of the time reacted with a minimum of understanding. Blain concurs when he writes:

“...after five months of great suffering, he appeared before his Judge to render an account of the enormous injustice he had done to the Church, of the insult he had offered his Superior, of the scandalous desertion which had tarnished the honour of his community, and of the complete ruin of the establishment of a seminary for country schoolmasters which he had caused” (Blain I, 367d).

## 2. Making the heroic vow

Everything had begun quite differently. For a long time, De La Salle had considered how to establish and organise his community, even if, at the very moment of its creation, it was already threatened with destruction. Under such circumstances he needed to take some decisive and unusual steps. He felt inspired “to associate with himself two Brothers whom he considered the most suitable to support the young community, and to bind them with himself by an irrevocable commitment to pursue its establishment” (Blain I, 312e). He needed zealous and brave men who would be faithful to their vocation. He needed men who

could commit themselves without equivocation to the Plan and who would be totally prepared to use the means to bring it to fruition. This involved a personal commitment to the Brothers’ community. It was not simply a question of making a vow and promising some ordinary thing to be cherished and guarded personally. Rather, it was a commitment to a life plan which had to be pursued daily. What was involved here was a firm and definitive decision which, despite the human weaknesses which are our common experience, was based on the fidelity of God himself.

## 3. Nicolas Vuyart

We do not know as yet the date and the place of birth of Nicolas Vuyart. He must have joined about 1681 since in 1682 it seems he was sent to Rethel to conduct the school there. Certain biographers think that he was put in charge of the seminary for teachers in Rheims when the Founder left for Paris. He was in charge of the school in the Rue du Bac from the time of its opening in 1690, and one can suppose that he was appointed Director of the community at Rue Princesse on the death of Brother Henri Lheureux at the beginning of 1691. When De La Salle agreed in 1699 to the request of the parish priest of St. Hippolyte to start up again the seminary for country schoolmasters, he put Brother Nicolas in charge of the establishment, thus showing his continued trust in his great qualities as an educator. Things turned out badly for both the establishment and Nicolas Vuyart.

After the death of Fr. Lebreton, Vuyart became entangled in a legal wrangle with regard to the bequest left by the parish priest and refused to obey the Founder. This spelled the end of the seminary for country schoolmasters. Vuyart left the Institute and as a layman continued to run the parish school.

After a certain time, he asked to be readmitted to the Institute, but the Brothers rejected his request. Vuyart survived the Founder by only a few months: he died in September 1719, possibly in Paris.

#### 4. Nicolas Vuyart as portrayed by Blain and Rigault...

For Rigault, Vuyart is a complex case: "We have here a man in the prime of life who, in 1684, 1691 and 1694, was a party to most important decisions and most secret deliberations, and who having weighed up his responsibilities made an irrevocable commitment. He was doubtlessly not a man of very high ideals. Perhaps he remained involved too long in the world of material things and was too impressed by external appearances. All the same, he was intelligent and had a noble heart free of evil".

Blain, however, calls him "a second Judas": "Forgetting the vow he had made and the Father to whom he owed obedience, he created a schism in the Society and abandoned it" (Blain I, p. 313).

And so the name of Nicolas Vuyart leaves, as it were, a bitter taste in the mouth on account of the various circumstances of his life. And yet the parish priest Fr. Lebreton did not doubt the honesty of Vuyart when he made him the beneficiary of his will. Was he not one of the two pillars on which the Founder had founded his hopes? He had sworn never to leave the Institute and to work with all his strength for the rest of his life to establish and maintain it.

De La Salle had so much confidence in this Brother that he put him in charge of this training centre for country schoolmasters. It would seem, therefore, that the parish priest could not have made a better choice with regard to his will. It would have been difficult to foresee that this man would betray his intentions and put to his own use the money intended for the seminary for country schoolmasters.

When De La Salle learned of the death of the parish priest of St. Hippolyte and of the terms of his will, he went to the parish to discuss the question with the Brother heir. It must have been a considerable shock for him to discover that one of his most important disciples rejected him, and was now saying haughtily that he no longer recognised him as superior, that he was not welcome and that he did not want to have any more dealings with him. He understood that the will had been made with Vuyart as the beneficiary and that he was proclaiming himself to be the owner of the bequest.

As Rigault says, the other patron of the seminary refused to join forces with Vuyart and withdrew his support. As a consequence, the establishment was now deprived of an annual income of 800 livres and could not keep going for very long.

Along with the withdrawal of financial support there was also a loss of sympathy. No new trainee teachers were entrusted to a man who was suspect and had broken with his past. And this man persisted with his revolt, as happens to people who, suddenly realising the extent of their error, the reality of their sin, and with all illusions destroyed and unwilling to change their mind, hang on to their pride as a last resort, declaring they have no need for forgiveness...As a layman, he continued to run the St. Hippolyte school for the children of the parish... It was here that Fr. Lebreton's bequest must have finally been put to work. (cf. Rigault I, p. 237)

Rigault's account of Vuyart's last years follows that of Blain.

#### 5. A belated counterpoint to the heroic vow fugue

There is a counterpoint, a belated one, to the "fugue" composed by the young Institute. The main theme of this counterpoint is that of the heroic vow. One can say that it is a counterpoint which is not well directed and which goes its own way as the fugue develops. The music is not all harmonious: it grates on the ear and is made up of enormous tensions. One could compare it to the conclusion of a fugue with its stretto, during

The Founder reads the formula of the Heroic Vow: detail from Bonnard's painting.



which the theme comes to the surface, passing from one voice to another, but never achieving unison.

There is no doubt that, on reading the judgments pronounced on Vuyart, one is given a harsh impression, leaving one sad and thoughtful... From a certain point of view, Vuyart appears as a somewhat tragic person. Reading between the lines, one can perceive the sympathy that De La Salle must have had for him in spite of the circumstances. One can feel also the effect on the Founder of the Brothers' opposition to the re-admission of Vuyart to the Institute.

Of course, there remain questions without answers. To what extent and with what ease can a person renege on commitments made in the depths of his being and become guilty of infidelity towards himself and the community? How difficult is it to return should one want to? As a support against isolation, a community can be a corrective and critical factor which can help us avoid attitudes which are so unilateral that they can lead to catastrophe.

Rigault himself is of the opinion that Vuyart was certainly morally culpable. He had misunderstood the purpose of the bequest and had betrayed his superiors to whom he had promised obedience. Subsequently, he had tried to hide his fault and then, following his disgrace, had had to live with the consequences.

It is only with great difficulty that people today understand the attitude of the Brothers who objected to taking Vuyart back although the Founder was prepared to welcome him back gladly to the Institute, as Blain tells us. They feared it would be a source of bad example and would have an effect on the young Brothers. Moreover, wise and prudent people had advised the Founder not to take Vuyart back. From the viewpoint of that historical period and in eyes of the Brothers who had remained faithful in difficult circumstances, perhaps it was understandable. Although one cannot help being convinced, there still remains an uncomfortable feeling...

After 300 years, do we not feel the need to become more conciliatory? The attitude of the 17th century can help us discover a weak point in our own attitudes as Brothers today. It can encourage us to think. For example, how do we react to men who have spent a part of their lives with us but have not been able to remain faithful to their commitment to the very end? In his own day, the Founder was ready to have a reconciliation: he would have gladly taken Nicolas Vuyart back in the same way as the father welcomed back his

repentant prodigal son. But hurt on one side and pride on the other had prevented the reconciliation and the wounds never healed. Perhaps there are still unknown areas for us, some as yet undiscovered territories, some new ways of working together for the Kingdom of God through the Christian education of youth...a present-day form of reconciliation the need for which has been felt for a long time.

Pronouncing vows means responding to a call from God who is faithful. It is a loving call in a fragile world in whose fragility we share. This means also that God welcomes us with our freedom and our weaknesses. Human freedom, life itself and divine fidelity help us to understand better the tragic side of Nicolas Vuyart's situation, as well as possibly that of fellow Brothers who have to struggle with similar problems.

They do not need our judgments, but our understanding and our sympathy, and the attitude of the good father who awaits his son in order to embrace him lovingly.

Contemporary music has accepted harsh and strained sounds as constructive elements in musical works. In the same way, if we want the commemoration of the heroic vow to be a source of renewal and enthusiasm at a time of crisis and decision, then the story of Nicolas Vuyart can teach us something. Tension and dissonance are not restricted to our lives; they create history, they form reality and reality is not always harmonious and consonant.

Our human decisions are very fragile; we need to entrust ourselves to a faithful God.

We are all in need of pardon. We must never refuse to give it, for we must expect it from others...

So this is the message for us today contained in Nicolas Vuyart's "counterpoint" as it glides over the triumphal theme of the heroic vow "fugue".

**Erhard TIETZE, Austria**

This text was written originally in German. The point of view taken by the author in this unusual treatment of the case of Nicolas Vuyart is not intended to detract from the exemplary fidelity of Gabriel Drolin, rather the contrary.

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# 1803: THE REVIVAL OF THE INSTITUTE AFTER THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Victims of the same persecution that struck all religious institutes in France at the time of the Revolution, the Brothers of the Christian Schools were forced to abandon their schools and urged to subscribe to principles diametrically opposed to their loyalty to the Church, to God and the Institute. As the historian of the Toulouse District wrote: "To several, God gave the grace to witness to their faith before revolutionary tribunals, in prison and on the prison hulks of Rochefort; and to a smaller number, to pay with their blood for their fidelity to their convictions and their attachment to the Holy Catholic Church".

Others had to face the situation by means of a sort of secret resistance which, once the revolutionary storm had passed, would make the gradual revival of the Institute possible at various rallying points. A case in point was that of Brother Bernardin (Pierre Blanc) who was headmaster for a time of the large Pensionnat Charlemagne in Carcassonne.

Rather like John Baptist de La Salle who suggested to some of his more committed disciples to make the heroic vow, Brother Bernardin too, when the time was right, gathered together a handful of Brothers who would bring about the "re-establishment" of the Institute in the south of France. It was in the town of Castres that this revival movement took shape.

Brother Bernardin had arrived there secretly some time before Thermidor 9th. He took advantage of the relaxed situation following the fall of Robespierre to take up his apostolic work again. Among the churches the revolutionaries had desecrated and put to non-religious use, he found one, that of Our Lady, which seemed to have been overlooked. First of all, he gathered children there and taught them catechism. The parents wanted more, and prevailed upon him to lead morning and evening prayers each day from the pulpit. On Sundays, the congregation grew larger; religious persecution had made the people hungry for the Word of God. Bernardin would read the prayers of the mass out loud and give a homily. Hymns were sung...the Magnificat. The Brother would go to visit the sick, and bring a priest with him whenever possible. He dreamed of starting up the schools again as soon as possible. This finally became possible in January 1797, and with three

former fellow Brothers who worked with him, he began teaching again in Castres. Faced with a great influx of pupils, he opened a boarding school, but even so he had to turn many away.

As a teacher and educator of the highest quality, he did marvellous work among the pupils. Circumstances, however, changed for the worse: persecution broke out anew in 1798 and he was forced to close the school in Castres. Five years later, with more or less the same team as before but with the addition of two others, he took charge of the school at Toulouse in the Brothers' former house, seemingly called by Providence to infuse new life into the Institute.

It was at this point in his life that that marvellous event took place: the little core-group of "re-founders" signed an act of association. In some ways this event matches in greatness that of the 1691 heroic vow. The 1691 commitment predisposed the Brothers to accept the difficulties that might occur as they worked "to procure and maintain the establishment of the society of the Christian Schools".

But the Brothers we are speaking about had, by 1803, already faced innumerable difficulties and despite them had remained faithful to their ideal. However, like their predecessors, they felt the need, as they set out on their new adventure, to make a written commitment to stand firm in the face of all odds. That is why on February 20th 1803, before leaving Castres for Toulouse, they signed a firm commit-

Detail from Bonnard's painting.



ment which runs as follows:

"We the undersigned, promise herewith citizen Pierre Blanc (or Brother Bernardin) to UNITE ourselves, to REMAIN, to live and to conduct schools with him in the same way as we did before the Revolution, in the Society or Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, with the changes that he JOINTLY WITH US will consider to have been made necessary by the present state of things, TO PROCURE THE GLORY OF GOD in the town of Toulouse. And as we wish to live AMONG OURSELVES according to the Rule which we used to follow, we appoint the aforesaid Pierre Blanc as our Superior and Director for three years, beginning on the eve of the opening of the aforesaid schools. But as he would not be able to undertake to conduct them if help were not guaranteed, we promise to begin TO OBEY HIM as from this moment.

In testimony of which we have signed, at Castres, this 20th February 1803. (signed) Br. Cezarie, Francois Marcel, Pierre Sazerac, Joseph Durand. Seen and approved by us, Pierre Blanc.

The similarities between this text and that of the heroic vow are obvious: "to procure the glory of God", and above all the idea of "all together and by common accord" which is expressed here as "jointly with us". The authors of both documents are convinced of the urgent need for Christian education. Be-

tween the lines one can glimpse the same courageous resolve to commit their lives to it and to persevere in it "until the last surviving one of us".

As in the days of De La Salle, when the Institute continued thanks to the generosity, even if temporary, of a small number of especially brave persons, so from 1803 onwards the Institute was given a fresh impulse thanks to the total gift of self of the five pioneers of Castres.

Brother MARCEL served the Institute for another twenty-three years and died in Toulouse on January 1st 1826. Brother SAZERAC (F. Diogene), unable to cope with problems of obedience, had to leave the Institute three or four years after signing the commitment. Brother DURAND gave up as early as April 1804. Brother CEZARIE, a non-teaching Brother, died at Castres on May 13th 1812 at the age of 85. He had been able to support a number of postulants materially by means of the private donations he received. Brother BERNARDIN, born in 1738, died on August 29th 1808, at a time when the house at Toulouse, and hence this small part of the Institute which was being refounded, seemed to rest on solid foundations and faced a bright future.

It was perhaps as a reward for their generous action that the Lord sent the Toulouse "pioneers" postulants to replace those fallen by the wayside.

Br. Gilles Beaudet, Rome

Bonnard's painting.



# 1904 - RATHER EXILE THAN DESERTION

At the beginning of the 20th century, some hundred years after the upheaval of the French Revolution, another serious crisis shook the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools to its foundations in France. This crisis which had been building up for twenty years finally exploded in 1904 and teaching congregations were expelled from their schools.

One of the consequences was to give rise to a great deal of perplexity among superiors and their charges. Almost a century later, we can say that they had three options open to them: (1) leave the congregation; (2) accept "laicisation" as far as all external appearances were concerned and stay put waiting for things to improve; (3) leave a country hostile to religious and go abroad to countries where the vocation and ministry of a teaching religious were welcome.

The immediate reaction of a great number of Brothers was to think that if they stayed put their vocation would be in danger. The solution was therefore to make a great sacrifice and leave their country, their family, their way of life. Hundreds and even thousands of French Brothers preferred to go into exile rather than risk losing their vocation.

This was very much in line with what the Superior General, Brother Gabriel Marie, said to the scholastics in Paris on December 15th 1904:

"God is faithful, he will never fail a person prepared to sacrifice all to follow him. Precisely because of these iniquitous laws, many young Brothers will bind themselves HEROICALLY to God and will serve him loyally. Where? How? I do not know. But if they really want to, even if they have to go to the ends of the earth, THEY WILL REMAIN RELIGIOUS". (Life of Br. Bernard Camille, p. 54)

This was very much in the tradition of the heroic vow. Of course, I know of no text published in 1904 or so that establishes a direct link between the choice of exile and the commitment of the trio in 1691, but it is not difficult to see that that this choice is based on the same desire for total self-sacrifice for the sake of a higher cause. As John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin said:

"We, from now on and forever, until the last surviving one of us...make the vow...to bring about and maintain the said establishment, without being able to withdraw from this obligation...".

And so the Brothers left France to ensure they did not lose their vocation and thus "maintain the

aforesaid establishment of the society of the Christian Schools". They seemed to have thought mostly in terms of community: they rejected the kind of consecrated life lived by certain laicised religious outside community. The intention was more to preserve an identity that was both collective and individual than a wish to move off as a group.

Be that as it may, this adventure called for courage. It is estimated that about 4,000 took part in it. They set out, prepared to face the unknown with all its dangers. They were certain of one thing: they remained faithful to the call of the Lord and faithful to their commitment.

What were the thoughts and feelings of those who made this sacrifice? Relatively few of them put anything in writing. Fortunately, of the few that did, Brother Bernard Camille (Pierre Bernard), gives us an insight, by a legitimate process of extrapolation, into the spiritual attitude of most of these generous Brothers.

Brother Bernard notes in his diary: "I must attach myself only to Jesus Christ. He is my end, he created me, he redeemed me, he gives himself to me. He alone can make me happy. I must pray to him to give me the grace TO REMAIN ALWAYS FAITHFUL TO HIM".

"If I am persecuted for the sake of justice, I should consider myself fortunate for it is a proof that the good Lord loves me and that Satan hates my vocation".

"What a misfortune it would be if, once the persecution was over, I had not benefitted from it. I must be equal to the situation. Let my conduct be therefore suited to the greatness of the sacrifice I wish to make".

There was no hesitation about Brother Bernard Camille. The most important thing for him was to remain a Brother of the Christian Schools. He feared neither painful separation, nor difficulties, nor the sufferings involved in leaving his country, as his biographer tells us.

The father objected to his nineteen year old son's plans, but the latter, nothing daunted, wrote to him: "I would prefer to spend the rest of my life breaking stones on the road RATHER THAN GIVE UP MY VOCATION". He finally obtained his father's permission and went home to say goodbye to his family. Then he left for Canada with fifteen or so others from Paris, Le Puy, and Caen.

Brother Camille Bernard and the other Brothers all have the same overall attitude: a spirit of self-sacrifice which accepts separation in order to be faithful to their commitment. The pain of separation does not appear to be very great either for Bernard nor for another young Brother, Ramir Adrien, from the District of Besancon, who writes in his diary: "The day of departure arrived at last. At 4.15 we began morning prayer, and for the last time on the soil of France, we received the Well-Beloved in our hearts. Strengthened by help from Heaven we prepared to leave". The previous day in Paris he had written: "We receive into our hearts the one whom the Elect also possess in Heaven and, for my own part, I promise him to follow him everywhere. I recommend to him all those I love, and ask for them and for myself the only thing necessary, namely, to love and serve him". No regrets, no complaints, only hope, daring and faith.

Even when a departing Brother expresses some regret it is accompanied by sentiments of generosity. In 1907, 22 young Brothers left for Brazil. One of them wrote: "I felt all the bitterness of separation in the depths of my soul and restored my courage only by renewing my sacrifice to God". (*Les Temps de la Secularisation*, vol. 2, p. 99)

Brother Florence Thomas, for his part, recalls the words which moved him in the consecration he made before his departure in 1911: "For your glory, my God, I sacrifice what I hold most dear in this world". And he makes the comment: "For a long time and for a far distant country, I leave this beautiful house which was the cradle of my religious life and where certainly I spent the happiest years of my life". But nostalgia does not predominate; most of his diary is concerned with observations about his surroundings and incidents on board ship during the voyage. When he arrived at his destination, Brother Florence Thomas made only one reference, among many concrete observations, to his own state of mind: "With God's help I shall do my best to contribute to the success of this establishment". (op. cit. p. 123)

Let us return to Brother Bernard Camille. In December 1905, he wrote to his former Director: "Just as you told us once, Jesus has indeed answered our prayers for one another. He has made sure that those who really wanted to keep their vocation have remained religious".

The fate of this young Brother was quite remarkable. His apostolic work consisted mainly in preparing children for their first communion and teaching them the rudiments. He fell victim to an epidemic which broke out in Quebec in 1918 and died at the age of 32, after what was clearly an exceptionally virtuous life.

For many years, his tomb in the cemetery of Varennes was always decorated with flowers and visited by many people. With the death of those who knew him his memory faded. However, in his simplicity, he left personal notes which reveal his innermost thoughts and feelings. While he lives in God's light, his example remains with us.

Now that Lasallian Studies has dealt with the effects of secularisation on the Institute in France, perhaps it could make a detailed study — rather than a general history in the style of Rigault — based on the personal accounts of the Brothers who chose to go abroad. There is sure to be much in all their lives that can re-awaken our blunted courage.

Before ending this article on fidelity in the tradition of the heroic vow, I should like say that our attention could have been drawn with profit to our Spanish martyrs (beatified or not) as well as to our martyrs (known and unknown) from numerous countries where there have been religious persecutions, executions and torture.

It has often been said that the virtue of Lasallians consists in teaching selflessly, persevering in doing humble and repetitive work, in a word, sowing while leaving others to gather the harvest God has made to grow.

And yet De La Salle's whole life is punctuated by actions that are charismatic, daring and sometimes "heroic" like the vow of 1691 which is traditionally so called.

In the same way, Lasallian history is marked by choices, sometimes individual but more often collective, nourished by the same faith and in the service of the same mission of evangelisation.

Br. Gilles Beaudet

The Founder sends two Brothers to Rome: detail from a stained glass window in the Generalate chapel based on a drawing by Erolli.



# IN ROMANIA

## A LONG NIGHT THAT LASTED 42 YEARS

My way of the cross began on August 2nd 1948. It was the last day of our annual retreat.

The Directors of the three Catholic schools run by the Brothers in Bucarest were summoned to appear by the Romanian communist authorities who were in power. They were informed that the communist government intended to nationalise private (free) schools. The Brothers were told to hand over the keys of the schools immediately. Within an hour we found ourselves thrown out into the street. We had been allowed to take only our personal effects like linen, shoes, etc. All the rest — library books, beds, cupboards, etc. — had to be left in the school.

We were told also that we could not live as a community and that we would be employed as teachers. If this did not materialise we would have to survive as best we might.

The authorities decreed we had to live in a small flat on the second floor of the Roman Catholic bishop's house.

This decree applied only to religious who worked in schools. The Jesuits and Franciscans, who were priests, were not included, but they had to abandon their religious habit and they went into the parishes.

Only the Brothers of the Christian Schools were affected by this decree. The two Brothers' communities merged into one under the leadership of the Director and auxiliary Visitor, Brother Bonifazius Sattmann. There were about 20 of us. Each of us had to indicate his agreement or disagreement in writing. At 24, I was one of the youngest. I had taught for only three years at St. Joseph's school. I did not hesitate a moment as to what I should do. I realised that my place had to be among the Brothers and with them. Also I was convinced that the situation would not last a long time. There were two Brothers younger than myself. Unfortunately, both left later for various reasons. Subsequently they regretted their decision, even though our life was not easy.

By applying pressure and making promises, the

communist authorities tried to make us abandon religious life. They failed.

Brother Boniface (Bonifazius) was bursar and superior at a difficult time. His trust in Providence impressed us all and gave us courage. None of us was either faint-hearted or cowed, even if this was not always easy. He was the father, the leader and everybody's friend despite his deafness. He prayed a lot precisely because he was deaf. After the grace of God, it was to him that we owed our community life. He was the superior that Providence had prepared for us and given us for those troubled times.

It was not long before the first difficulties arose. Our meager resources were exhausted. To survive, the Brothers had to give private lessons. The parents wanted this. This was my work for 5 years. It was a new form of apostolate. Through these private lessons we continued to exercise a religious influence. It was more important than ever.

Soon we began to teach catechism in the parishes. For two years we encountered no problems. It was the calm before the storm.

The first storm broke out in 1950. Five Brothers were arrested. Two of them who had worked in the Nunciature were tried in court and sent to prison for 16 years. The two others were condemned without a proper trial to two years' hard labour.

For safety's sake, some of the Brothers were lodged with former students. There followed a period of calm: the great Moloch was sated with his offerings...

After the Helsinki Conference, it looked as if the clouds would clear up. The Brothers returned to their flat and restarted their catechism classes in 5 parishes where every Sunday some 300 Catholics would gather. This was not to the liking of the communist authorities. They would say to their colleagues: "You can't manage to organise communist youth meetings, and yet this handful of religious teachers fills its hall every Sunday". Former students

and friends warned the Brothers that trouble was brewing. Brother Boniface remained calm and continued to inspire his Brothers to be faithful and trust in God.

For two years we had taught religion surrounded by spies. We knew who they were and they knew who we were. They were waiting for orders to act. The orders arrived on August 21st 1958: four Brothers were arrested and with them three former students who had recruited other students. After three months of investigation, painful interrogation and even torture, the sentences were handed down on December 17th 1958: 90 years in prison. The two older Brothers were each given 20 years, the three others 15 years each, and the two youngest each got 10 years.

And their crime? They had taught religion to young people. This is the reason given in the text of sentence M 1252-58. I enclose a copy in French and in Italian.

What was their justification for sentencing people to 10, 15 or 20 years in prison? They say they belong to supposedly the most humane form of society in the world. How can anybody in his right mind understand their behaviour? And these communists, who condemned people for such "crimes" to the harshest prisons that existed, were not ashamed to put it all down in writing. What is your reaction, you westerners, to such a travesty of justice? And you, communists of the western world, what do you think of your universal brotherhood and justice now? The eastern block alliance!

And so our troubles began again. There were 110 of us in a room measuring 11 metres by 10. There was one window, but it was boarded up with planks nailed down on the outside to prevent the prisoners

from looking out. In one corner, to attract the rats, there were four buckets (there was no lavatory). The buckets were free once or twice a day. No one could stay close to the windows: it was absolutely forbidden. We slept on the bare concrete floor, not that we could lie on our backs since there was not enough room; we had to lie on our sides, pressed together like sardines. Often and most of the time, the most recent arrivals in the room would have to sleep sitting on the buckets that served as lavatories.

Soon, our bodies were one big sore. There was no water. Each person was allowed half a litre of water per day. There was no soap. Here and there some little scraps of soap. No toilet paper. Half an hour exercise in a yard about 30 metres square, wide spaces between persons, so you could not speak to neighbours, or even see them really. No one was allowed to speak. A warder (a policeman) supervised. During the daytime no one was allowed to have a rest in bed, except those who were sick and had the doctor's permission. You were not allowed to give talks, nor listen to them; you could not study foreign languages nor teach them. We did not have the means to write; there was no paper, no pencils, not even a needle. Everything was strictly forbidden. Anyone caught infringing these laws was put into solitary confinement for 3 to 5 days. In the solitary confinement cell, it was forbidden to sit between 5.0 am and 10.0 pm. You were fed only twice a day and you were given only 100 grams of bread and half a litre of salty water.

At this point the reader will perhaps say I am mistaken, or I am exaggerating. Not all, there is no mistake. I recommend he reads Solzhenitsin's book "Gulag Archipelago".

He does not deceive. He does not exaggerate. In his book you will find a complete catalogue of the unimaginable inhuman cruelties inflicted by these people.

After a year of such treatment prisoners were asked if they wanted to work. Of course, all those that were able to move replied in the affirmative. And so, in August 1959, we were loaded into cattle wagons, each having the same lavatory arrangements already mentioned. After two days and a night we set off for an unknown destination. As the wagons were open we were able to see that we were being taken to the region called Grosseinsel du Danube, in the vicinity of Braila. There we had to build an embankment 17 metres high and 35 kilometres long as a barrier against the turbulent waters of the Danube. We were lodged in two huts. There were about 800 of us. Conditions were worse than primitive. The greatest problem was the water. A litre of water to mix with

St. John Baptist de La Salle with his heroic mentor, Fr. Barre. Drawing by Francesco Pescador.



a sort of coffee, half water half mud, and you had to wait as long as up to 3.0 am to get it.

The consequences were not long in making themselves felt. From the tenth day onwards, August 17th, we suffered from dysentery. It was very dangerous. There was no doctor. I had only ten Talasol tablets. For seven days I could not eat or drink anything. Really nothing. I was dying. I had suffered from it in prison and now I had it for the second time.

It is perhaps difficult to believe that I am saying nothing but the truth. In the space of two weeks I had become a skeleton. It was also the first time that I saw a man die. It made a great impression on me. His condition had not seemed any worse than mine. I, however, had not lost all hope. It was very difficult at the beginning and it continued to be so for a long time. I had to return to work but I was so weak that I could hardly walk. Many people died at this time.

In the month of November I had to return to work on the embankment. We had to build it with picks and shovels. It was very difficult. Often we thought of the Egyptians building the pyramids. Was it as exhausting as this? Let's not exaggerate, some will think...

After two years we were sent out to work in the fields. It was less exhausting. During the course of 1961, we were sent to Luciu Giurgen. To drink, we fetched water from the Danube and boiled it. This did not last long. Once again we fell ill. This time it was typhus (typhoid fever). In November I fell ill too. I was singled out to be examined by a commission of civilian doctors. I was in danger of dying and so they moved me to a hospital in Constanta. It was the second time I found myself at death's door. Here we were well cared for. After three weeks, the danger had passed and we were able to return to the camp and take up some other form of work. This was something almost unheard of. On my way back I spent a never-to-be-forgotten Christmas night in a hovel in company with other vermin like myself and hundreds or thousands of mice, all curious to know what I was looking for and why I had come there to disturb their peace and quiet. It was impossible to sleep under such circumstances.

In autumn 1962, I was taken back to the well-known prison at Gherla. Because of my illness, I had now been a germ carrier for 15 years and was considered to be a source of danger for the civilian inhabitants of this island. No one was concerned about the prisoners even when they fell ill.

At Gherla I worked for two years in a furniture factory, making tables. I was better off materially. Those who fulfilled their "norms" were given a post-



Another of St. John Baptist de La Salle's heroic mentors, Fr. Roland. Drawing by Pescador.

card and were able to write home asking for a parcel weighing no more than 5 kilos and containing food and 400 cigarettes. I wrote only once, although I became a good maker of tables.

In spring 1964 we were allowed for the first time in five and a half years to read a book. We were permitted also to read the party newspaper which told of the successes of the people under the leadership of the Romanian communist party. They wanted to prepare us slowly for our liberation which was approaching. I think it was April when they told us we would be freed but not all at the same time. This was the first time they kept their word: the first prisoners were released in April and I had to wait for my turn till August 1st 1964.

As I had had no news of the Brothers for six years I was taken first to my family. They lived relatively close, some 110 kilometres away and 50 kilometres from Bucarest. I had no money and I wanted to know if my mother was still alive, because she was 77 years old and had had a heart attack in spring 1958, and in the autumn of that year I had been sent to prison.

For a long time I had thought she was dead. I was very attached to my mother as she had been largely responsible for my vocation to the Brothers.

My meeting with her was very moving both for her and for me. I cannot bring myself to describe that moment. Even after so many years it would still be difficult. For a long time she wept in my arms, repeating over and over again "my dear child, my dear child". And I wept with her. Everyone in the house did as we did. We all wept...for joy.

I remained four days at my mother's house. I very much wanted to go back to the Brothers in Bucarest. I was the last one to arrive, all the others were already there. It was a joyful but rather short meeting. We could not remain in Bucarest. We

could not form a community. In the eyes of the communists we were dangerous people. We had to leave Bucarest without delay. Three Brothers were able to stay in Bucarest because they had relatives there; the others had to return to the place of their origin.

And so the second stage of our sentence began. This was a much longer period to endure even if its difficulties did not match those of prison, which were very harsh and which I shall never forget. It was a period that lasted 25 years. The communists always thought of us as lepers and a danger to the State. The people, however, thought differently about us. They loved and respected us.

One day, an officer of the Securitate said to me: "What is dangerous for us is simply your name of Brothers of the Christian Schools".

I had to keep alive somehow and so I went to the authorities to ask for work. They replied: "For someone like you the only work we've got is down the mines." I then had recourse to my friends. There were some understanding people among them. After four months I found work as a librarian. The salary was small but was enough to keep body and soul together. I was lucky also to be helped by some relatives who lived locally. They gave me the means to survive. They had no money. I received a lot of help from five Hungarian Brothers from Satu Mare. They had had the good fortune to be able to remain together. They lived a long way from Bucarest, some 700 kilometres away, on the border with Hungary. They were all old. Every two months I would visit them to soak up a little community spirit. They always showed great friendship and kindness to me. Although they are all dead now, I wish to say to them how grateful I am for all the brotherly love they showed me.

Accommodation posed a great problem. I could

Love for the poor and the conviction that the Christian school was a great gift of God led St. John Baptist de La Salle and his two companions to make the Heroic Vow. Drawing by Pescador.



not find any. Finally one of my relatives took pity on me. He had a new house but only one room was in a fit state to live in. The other rooms had neither windows nor doors. There were four young children. And so for three months I had to share this single room with them. I had to make the best of it; there was no alternative. Every morning, the master of the house with greet us with "Live Jesus in our hearts!", for he had been a junior novice with us for two years. Since then he has become a priest of the Greek Catholic rite. In February I was able to sleep alone. During the day, I spent most of my time with the children, because there was not enough wood to heat two rooms. I helped the children to fetch wood. I remained for three and a half years with this family, and then in 1968 I found a room in a concrete bunker measuring 4½ metres by 2½ metres.

At the beginning, I was always under close supervision. They always knew where I was. I was not yet able to establish contact with the Brothers who had lived with me in Bucarest. This became possible only two years later when supervision was relaxed.

In autumn 1965 Brother Liebhard from Vienna came to see me. He knew all the Romanian Brothers because he had been a teacher in Romania before 1948. He did not come empty-handed. The same thing had happened in May 1964, but I was still in prison at the time. The visit of the Brothers from Austria was a great source of encouragement for us. We felt that we were not forgotten or abandoned. We were made to feel that the great Lasallian family was a reality.

The Brother Visitor invited us to come and live in Vienna. At that time we were relatively young, between 40 and 54 years old, and we knew some German. Moreover we could be given help there. He obtained all the documents needed for us foreigners. Austria gave us an entry via, but the Romanian authorities refused to let us leave. And so we remained in Romania. At least once a year, the Brother Visitor would come from Vienna to visit us. Later, other superiors also came. The Assistant, Br. Richard, came twice; and the Brother Vicar himself, Br. John Johnston (now Superior General) came to see us.

These visits were for us an opportunity to meet fellow Brothers. We were often called in for questioning. They wanted to know who our guests were and what they wanted. They were frightened we were getting ourselves organised. They did not allow us to live in community. From time to time, here and there, they would ask us when we were going to get married. That would have been a proof for them that we had abandoned our vocation. Thank God, we have all persevered up to now.

With time, our links were strengthened. We met more often, either to celebrate a birthday or mark a feast. In 1970 a little miracle occurred — it was certainly one for me: Brother Tarcisius, who had been in prison for 14 years, obtained a passport (the first one of us to do so), and was able to visit Vienna, Rome and Paris. It was an occasion to remember! The second time he applied he was refused.

The days of anguish were over. Even the supervision became discreet. But we could not teach religion. We could go to church as often and for as long as we wanted. We had daily mass. No one forbade it. It was impossible to take up community life again and wear the religious habit.

The number of Brothers diminished slowly. The Hungarian Brothers of Satu Mare all died at an advanced age. All were over 80. The last one died in 1983.

Brother Tarcisius died suddenly of a heart attack on November 25th 1977. On November 9th he had celebrated his 60th birthday. His death affected us deeply. He had consistently and tirelessly fought communism. Even in prison he had always protested vigorously when prisoners were mistreated.

In 1983, my turn arrived to obtain a passport. It was almost incredible. That same year another Brother also obtained a passport. And so I spent a month with the Brothers in Vienna. In 1987, I was allowed to go abroad again. This time it was much easier as I was a retired person. I went to Rome and was able to be present at the beatification of Brother Arnould. It had always been my dream to see Rome and the Generalate. That dream became a reality a second time in 1989, when I spent six weeks at the International Lasallian Centre in Rome.

The end of 1989 brought us new hope. At Christmas, we were able to hear Christmas carols again and, with permission, watch mass on television. The long night of 42 years of oppression was beginning to fade. The communist system (the government) was overthrown. We could breathe again. And we could sing a *Te Deum* in our hearts.

We did not dare believe it was all true.

Unfortunately, one year later, we see that the new authorities do not seem to take religious freedom all that seriously. Religious communities are still not recognised, and convents and property have not yet been handed back.

We Brothers, despite our age and our small number, have finally left the night behind.

One Brother teaches in the seminary of Alba Julia, another at that of Iasi. He is following up an aspirant who wants to become a Brother of the Christian Schools.



The first vows of the Brothers at Liesse. Drawing by Barberis.

On the feast of Christ the King, a small community was set up at Oradea, 15 kilometres from the Hungarian border.

Above all, we have been invited to take up our work again in the places where we worked before.

Although we are few in number — six Brothers, two of them ill, and between 67 and 81 years of age — we are optimistic and put our trust in Providence. The 14 canonised and beatified Brothers will help us. The work of St. John Baptist de La Salle in Romania cannot and must not die.

We turn to all the Brothers in the world, and ask them not to forget us and to remember us in their prayers. We will win, but not because of what we do. Our holy Brothers and the 150,000 Brothers of the Christian Schools who over the centuries have worn our habit will be with us. They will help us. We are convinced that God is helping us and when God “is for us, who will be against us?”.

Brother Tiberiu

# BECOMING A BROTHER IN THE POLAND OF 1953

*(Interview with Br. Dominik Targalski, January 26th 1991)*

— *What does the vow of 1691 mean for you?*

I think that John Baptist de La Salle understood the situation of the Institute very well in 1690-1691: its future depended on a small and strong group that was “irrevocably committed” to ensuring its stability.

It was a question of giving a solid foundation to the Institute which was once again “on the verge of ruin”. A comparison that springs to mind is that of Jesus choosing Simon Peter as the foundation stone of his Church.

What was involved was fidelity to his vocation: without a total and irrevocable consecration to God, John Baptist de La Salle could not remain faithful to his vocation of founder. And he was not alone in this: other Brothers too committed themselves irrevocably with him to ensure the Institute remained faithful to its vocation.

— *And when you entered the novitiate in Poland in 1953, was the future uncertain then?*

It was the most difficult period of the persecution of the Church in Poland: there was no hope in sight. Cardinal Wyszynski was in prison and would remain there till about 1955. The bishop of Lodz was in charge in his place, given that communication with Rome was impossible.

At that time, the Institute in Poland numbered 6 Brothers and 2 Oblates. There was no District of Poland: we depended on that of Czechoslovakia, but the closed frontiers prevented all communication. The novitiate had been closed by the superiors and our only remaining house, the one in Czestochowa, was in the hands of the communists.

No one had joined the novitiate in Poland since 1937.

— *What was the significance then of your entry into the novitiate in 1953?*

I can still remember going to the novitiate on that occasion almost 38 years ago. I doubt whether I would have the courage to do the same thing today.

There were two of us: Brother Grzesik and I. Brother Grzesik had been a long time with the Brothers, rather like a junior novice. Seeing that no one could offer him anything, he was thinking of leaving to look for something else. My arrival, I

think, caused him to remain with the Brothers. Our entry was something very important for the Brothers in Poland: it gave a new impetus to the Institute and hope to the Brothers.

— *You were welcomed as saviours?*

Not at all! Brother Alphonsus, the Delegate (there was no Visitor yet), hesitated a lot before accepting me. He went so far as to advise me not to join the Brothers: there was no novitiate and not even a house in which to make it!

However, we stood by our request to make the novitiate. Permission was asked from the bishop of Lodz and he gave it. Much later — we already had the habit — we received the approval of Brother Denis, Vicar General, who gave us his blessing.

And so, on December 6th 1953, the novitiate began. We received the habit in the loft of our house in Czestochowa: the communists who occupied it tolerated our use of the loft.

— *How did you get to know the Brothers?*

One could say by chance, but also because I was looking for some way to consecrate my life to God.

I had been at the junior seminary in Lodz where I had studied for the “junior baccalaureate” (1949-1951). I felt, however, that I was not called to lead the life of a priest. I returned home and spent a year searching. It was then that I read an article about the Brothers in “The Messenger of the Sacred Heart”. The article had been written before the war in 1935, the year I was born.

I wrote to the address that was given. Everything had changed, the street, the number, but the letter reached its destination and I got an answer.

That is how I made contact with the Brothers. As there was no novitiate, in 1952, I was sent to the junior seminary in Czestochowa where 3 Brothers were teaching. Finally, on December 6th 1953, Brother Grzesik and I began the novitiate.

— *And then, you made your commitment to the Institute?*

Yes, as far as I was concerned. I looked upon my first vows as an irrevocable commitment. Things did not work out as smoothly as that, however.

After my novitiate, I was sent to teach at the junior seminary in Lublin. Bedtime was at 11.0 pm and

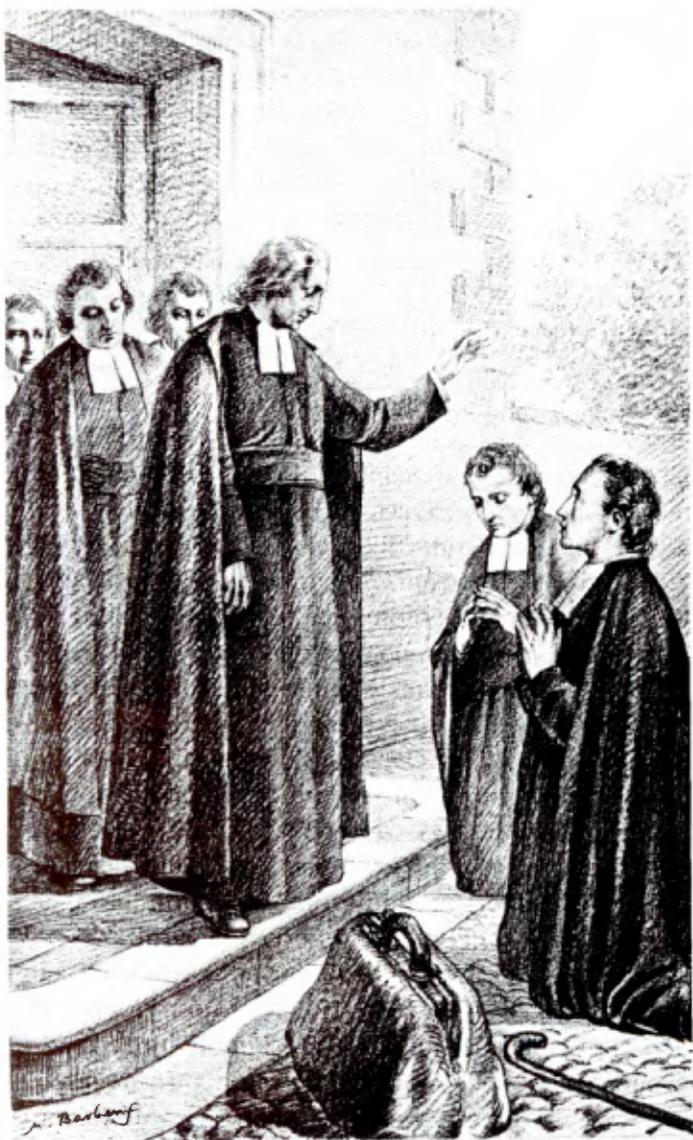
we got up at 5.0 am. I was just about two years older than my students. One of them in fact was the same age as myself. There were about 70 youngsters. Some had lessons in the morning, others in the afternoon, so I always had a group to take. It was hard, because I was always on duty, all day long and at night. There was no way of continuing my training and not enough sleep to recover strength.

And so I asked for less demanding work, like sweeping, for example. When it did not seem possible to find other work, I thought of going elsewhere; perhaps I would be better off in a monastery. The Brothers got to hear of this and concluded I did not have the vocation of a Brother of the Christian Schools.

As a consequence, they refused to allow me to make perpetual profession.

Cardinal Wyszynski, who had now been released

The Founder sends two Brothers to Rome: one of them is Gabriel Drolin. Drawing by Barberis.



The Founder distributes his wealth to the poor. Drawing by Barberis.

from prison, gave me permission to join the Franciscans. I made the novitiate and for more than three years (August 15th 1960 to March 1964) I wore the brown habit. I still remained very much attached to the Brothers, and I felt there was something missing in my life as a Franciscan.

A Brother from Czestochowa suggested to me I should return to the Brothers, but how could I? As my appeal had been rejected by the Institute, I would have to go through the Sacred Congregation for Religious. How would the Franciscans react if they heard of what I was doing? There was the danger I would find myself out in the street without being certain of being allowed to join the Brothers.

“If it is God’s will, you will be given the answer”, my confessor said to me. Things were set in motion discreetly and the Congregation of Religious gave its approval, as did the Institute. The Superior, the Assistant and the Delegate, who three years previously had refused me my vows, now accepted me. And so I made.. my third novitiate. Perhaps that is why, in 1972, I was made master of novices.

# THE REPERCUSSIONS OF THE HEROIC VOW

(Br. Alain Houry)

The Brothers following SIEL (International session for Lasallian studies in Rome) were invited to contribute to this issue of the Bulletin by giving a brief answer to the following two questions relating to the vow of 1691:

- What does it mean for you?
- What kind of life does it invite you to live?

The 19 answers submitted were between 20 lines and three pages in length. The ages of the contributors range from 33 to 70 years of age. Of these, 4 were born after 1954 and 3 before 1930. Eight of the eleven Regions of the Institute are represented in this sample of views.

The article that follows is based on these answers and attempts to present some of the ideas inspired by the heroic vow both for today and the future. In its own modest way, it hopes to contribute to the thinking we have been asked to do on the occasion of this tercentenary.

## Is the word “heroic” appropriate?

While it is usual to apply the word “heroic” to the joint commitment made in the presence of God by De La Salle, Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart, one can still wonder with *Brother Emanuele* whether this adjective is the most appropriate one we can use in our days.

“In our modern way of thinking, the word ‘hero’ is used and abused to speak of film stars or sportsmen. When all is said and done, to look on the spectacular side of things is rather suspect and out of place”.

This vow could not have been more discreet: It seems that the Brothers came to know about it only through Blain’s book published a few days after the death of the last of the three involved, Brother Gabriel Drolin.

John Baptist de La Salle and his two companions “made their commitment using language that reflected their intentions more accurately: *a vow of association and union*”. If we wish to highlight the meaning of what they did, we should speak of total abandonment to God, of fidelity to the Institute as being God’s work and as an act of hope with all the risks that this involves.

*Brother Michael* adds: “The prospect of living on bread alone does not confront most of the Brothers today”, while *to beg and live on bread alone* was a

real risk that the 1691 vow envisaged. Perhaps our Institute would discover a greater source of vitality in situations of extreme privation. But “while there is a certain romantic allure to ‘perhaps’, *I doubt that such romanticism can illuminate our present situation* nor disclose productive paths for the future”.

## A Backward Somersault

“To go from 1691 to 1991”, explains *Brother Fernando* in picturesque terms, “the 6 has to be turned upside down and made into a 9: a somersault”, a real reversal.

If we wish to understand today the thinking behind the vow of 1691, we need to make “a backward somersault”.

Yes, “this vow is a challenge today for the Institute, for each Brother and in particular for me”.

“The Founder was generous with regard to God. God, who does not allow himself to be outdone in generosity, showed him the way: start up a novitiate for the vocations he would send him”.

“I believe that our Institute, which is at present going through a crisis, also has to do a *backward somersault* and make a 180 degree turn”.

“The Institute has to make this turn with regard to returning to the poor and the life of poverty. It has to succeed in interpreting in a new way suited to our present age what we read in the formula of the heroic vow: *even if we were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone*”.

“For me it is an invitation to live according to this formula from the past *by confidently taking risks*, especially in areas where the Institute is dying”.

He goes on to give examples from his personal experience, speaking of “these immigrants flooding into our country whose needs we have not met according to our charism”; and further, he speaks of “the countries of the Eastern Block where the Institute appeared to be dead but where now there is hope of new life”.

“The challenge facing me is *to go to where the poor are*”. Brother Fernando concludes: “Now I am confident: God will give new life to the Institute”.

## As the beginning

*Brother Alfred* was particularly struck by the way *Gabriel Drolin* practised the 1691 vow *during all*

*those long years in Rome.*

“He practised this vow of association and union till the establishment of the Christian Schools by correspondence: he always kept the Founder informed of what he was doing and of changes in his situation. He remained faithful to his mission till the very end. He is a wonderful example of fidelity in the midst of the difficulties of isolation, in a foreign country, in a completely different set of circumstances”.

“What would the modern equivalent be of this heroic vow? To remain faithful to the spirit and mission of the Institute, not by a return to the past, but by being open to the present and the future, *even without knowing whether the Institute will survive*”.

“To share our mission and spirit fully with other teachers. To abandon many of our present-day institutions and *start again on a small scale, like at the beginning, concentrating on the needs of the poorest members of society*, so as to procure for them both human and Christian freedom”.

### The new lasallian “deal”

Many texts refer to one of the characteristics of our present age: sharing our ministry among young people and especially among those who are in difficulty with a growing number of lay people. Brothers who speak of this are aware that from now on the Lasallian spirit is not restricted to Brothers only — it would be marvellous if all possessed it fully! — but that “the spiritual gifts which the Church has received in St. John Baptist de La Salle go far beyond the confines of the Institute which he founded” (Rule 146).

Brother Johan writes: “For me, the 1691 vow is a yardstick against which to measure the calls which come from my community, from its educational work and from my District to ensure that all runs smoothly and that the takeover by competent Lasallian lay people takes place without equivocation”.

De La Salle himself was prepared to call upon lay people at a time *when it was urgent to give new vigour to the Brothers* by means of a long retreat at Vaugirard: he temporarily replaced the Brothers in the classroom by teachers from the seminary for country schoolmasters which he had opened in Rheims a few years earlier.

There are no conclusions to be drawn from this, except that *the heroic vow concerns the Brothers and Lasallian lay people differently*. “John Baptist de La Salle made the Brothers realise that they had to return to the sources of religious life, rediscover their motivation, renew their spiritual fervour and bear witness by leading a more authentic life”.

### A crucial time

Brother Emanuele writes: The Institute has reached a crucial point in its history: like De La Salle, it is *greatly perplexed*:

— the number of Brothers has diminished by half in 20 years;

— Brothers are discouraged and lack motivation;

— we have too many establishments: we cannot meet all our commitments;

— concern for efficiency leads to the neglect of spiritual life;

— while we succeed in giving our pupils a good secular education, the Gospel message often fails to inspire: to what extent are we responsible for this?

— we associate lay people with us in our work, but we mostly lack the courage and the inventiveness to share with them the Christian message and our Lasallian spirituality”.

*This rather harsh view does not lead its author to pessimism, but rather to understanding and love: The message of the 1691 vow increases my involvement in the Institute. It makes me feel that this family is ever increasingly mine: more and more, I become aware of its limitations, its failings, but at the same time I recognise in it signs of great vitality, examples of generosity, and enormous strength in the face of the challenges of the modern world”.*

“One can belong to this family in many different ways. I think that De La Salle is inviting me today to take a great step forward as regards the quality of my life, and to rediscover what is truly valid and what justifies our choice in our own eyes and in that of the world: God”.

“For God and for the poor among whom he manifests himself, we are called to a lifestyle that is simpler, more brotherly and more interdependent”.

St. John Baptist de La Salle, master and model of devotedness. Drawing by Pescador.





The Founder looks after the poor. Drawing by Pescador.

For “this commitment calls for *creative fidelity*, without pointless regrets for the past, a commitment which is assumed not in isolation but as part of a community”. This is not to say it should be gregarious: “If you wait for the others to be converted, or if you think that everyone will commit himself, you will never start! With patience and humility, you have to start with *a small group which will be the leaven* and will help the others to look upon reality with the eyes of faith.

### A warning signal

For *Brother Jaume*, “the heroic vow of 1691 played a providential role at the beginning of the Institute by consolidating it and ensuring its continuation”.

“In the situations which are typical of our present-day society, this vow challenges us all in a particular way. As in the time of the Founder, we are not in a situation which calls for nothing but *fidelity to continuity*, but in one that demands rather a *creative and innovative fidelity*, according to the Spirit of God, who may call for a succession of *radical changes*”. Consequently, this tercentenary is a warning signal telling us that the charism must permeate the Institute for which it was founded”.

“For me personally, the commemoration of the heroic vow serves to urge me to be generous in my vocation. We are not just ordinary employees with specific professional skills, but, according to Lassaillian thinking, we are *servants of the Gospel*, a responsibility which requires us to be available to serve the needs of society with a view to its salvation”.

### A rallying point

Without wishing to rehabilitate Vuyart, *Brother Michael*, thinks we should not omit to mention his

positive contributions to the young Society: “Three men made the vow of association for the sake of establishing the Society in 1691; each man lived out that vow in his own way, *as far as he was able*, in response to the circumstances with which life confronted him”.

“I believe that those lives testify to the variety of “*heroic*” responses to the need for Christian education that constitutes the Institute today and has done so from our earliest days”.

The vow can be seen, then, “as a rallying point around which the Brothers can confront or even reverse their numerical decline. The more fruitful course, I believe, would be to continue to associate around diverse personal commitments in faith, hope and love to the work of Christian education, the very work which evoked the heroism of the vow of 1691”.

### A crack of the whip

“As we go through this period of crisis — crisis of vocations, crisis of ageing, and hence *a crisis involving the future of the Institute* — this heroic vow, in view of the circumstances in which it was made and which resemble our own at the present time, cannot but offer us a challenge that is profound and vitally important”.

“*Our circumstances are such that it is very easy to give way to discouragement*, to abandon ship, or to simply let ourselves die. But this vow, this step taken by the Founder, is like a crack of the whip, urging us to take courage again, to rediscover and rekindle our hope, and *to do what the Founder did*, that is, to make a new and total commitment of ourselves, staking all on God and his Providence, with-

In order to found the Christian Schools and ensure their continued existence, the Founder suffered many trials and difficulties. In these he was sustained by prayer and faith. Drawing by Pescador.



out any second thoughts, putting all our trust and all our hopes in him, and placing our future and that of our Institute in his hands”.

“He alone is our hope, he alone is our future, he alone is our life, he alone is our light despite the gloomy horizon of the future that we see with our human eyes” (A Brother from SIEL).

### Total abandonment to God

For the Founder and his two companions, as *Brother Orlando* writes, “it was a day of abandonment to God: they broke the chains of discouragement and of frustration, and went to face the children, the Brothers, the poorest schools of Paris, Rheims, Rouen and, by successive stages, those of the whole world.

“It was a radical step which should make us think, meditate, judge and act in line with the Lasallian charism”.

“For me”, says *Brother Adelardo*, “it was a step that saved the Institute at a critical point in the process of its foundation. It invites me to *renew my faith in God’s Providence*, which was active then as it is now; it invites me, in association with my Brothers, to commit and consecrate my life to the revitalisation of the Institute in this time of crisis which we are now experiencing”.

### A sign of the times

*Brother Jean Marie* writes: “Obviously, the Institute is not at present in the same situation” as it was in the time of the Founder. “One could even say it is at a *turning point in its history*, and that more than ever it needs committed and resolute people with the faith of Abraham and De La Salle”.

“One needs to have the faith of De La Salle to be able to see in present-day situations *signs of the times*, a message from God that has to be deciphered, God’s language. One has to have the *religious sensitivity of God’s elect* in the Bible in order to believe in *visions*, to understand them and to act upon them by an act of faith and love. Does God change the way he speaks? *Does God have to speak to me clearly?* Where would my faith be then? Am I called? Chosen? I tremble as I write these words! If my answer is yes, they commit me, they involve me, they consecrate me, they dedicate me by vow. This vow is an act of faith, it is the intimate and personal YES to the call of an eternally faithful God, pronounced by a privileged participator in the divine process of the history of salvation. *There is a very great need for this Institute*”.

### On what do we base our hope?

Something that *Brother Leon* finds thought-provoking is the step taken by John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers recognising the *Society of the Christian Schools* as the work of God. “It is up to us to repeat their act of consecration to procure and maintain the young community. This we have to do now at the present time when some Brothers are *perplexed* about the future of what we call *our works* in France and elsewhere. But we must listen to the questions put to us by our predecessors:

— *What is our faith like in the Institute of today?*

We are the Institute from now and forever till the last surviving one of us.

— *What are we prepared to risk in order to maintain the aforesaid establishment? What would it mean for us today to beg for alms and live on bread alone?*

— *The work of God is his salvation which has to be constantly made present and shared so that the Good News may reach those who are furthest away from it. On what do we base our hope?*

● On the power of the Spirit who directs us as a group?

● On God’s fidelity to his work over a period of 300 years?

● On other human considerations?

### Constantly beginning again

*Brother Dominique* sees in the decisions recently taken in France the ability “to have hope at a time of crisis”.

“For me, it shows *the power of God who comes to make all things new*. He does not abandon his work. This event is really exceptional. It is a manifestation of God’s fidelity. The vow pronounced on November 21st 1691 invites me to live in the Institute with much hope”.

“The decisions taken by the Brothers’ Assembly in France are inspired by this same hope. All the work that has been done over the last year is a sign of the unity which exists in the Region. The opening of the novitiate in Parmenie with four novices is a sign of great hope for all the Brothers, as well as for all the Lasallians who are discovering more and more the spirit of De La Salle”.

“The Lord invites us to *choose* and hope. It is a new call to to live *together and by association* with even more joy and hope. It is a call from the Lord to live like the Founder, *Constantly beginning again*. It is an invitation to launch out into the deep water and

let down the nets. He has gone ahead to Galilee...

Yes, Lasallians, the adventure goes on!"

### **Faith, hope and association**

For *Brother Roger*, the heroic vow is an act of faith, hope and association.

*An act of faith:* "Prostrate with the most profound respect" De La Salle and his two companions believe in this God who "conducts and directs everything in an admirable manner and with great wisdom, who is so good that he provides for all the needs of his creatures...and who is so powerful that he can do all that he sees fit" (Duties I, p. 16).

*An act of hope:* Humanly speaking, the situation was grim: Brother Henri Lheureux had died, several Brothers had left, others were ill or exhausted, the novitiate was empty...! To convince his two companions, at a time when the future was so uncertain, to consecrate themselves to procure "the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools" and to commit themselves "forever till the last surviving one" of them was, without doubt, "to put their trust in God". This is the expression used by De La Salle to define the virtue of hope (cf. Preface of the Duties I).

*An act of association:* "We vow...we have signed...Was De La Salle convinced in 1691 that "there was a very great need for this Institute, as the 1718 Rule later said? The words "we promise...by common consent" foreshadow "together and by association".

"I consider what was done on November 21st 1691 to be *vital* in the sense that it was *life* and gave *life*. For each one of those involved as individuals and for the three of them as a community it was an act of faith and hope. It invites me too to make my community life a visible witness to *together and by association* through a presence that serves and loves".

### **Faith, hope, brotherhood, zeal**

*Brother Guillermo* asks: "What does this vow mean for me?".

*An act of faith:* believing that it is God who calls me; that it is God's work and that it is in his name and through his power that it exists; and that it continues because of him.

*An act of hope:* hoping in God who wants this work; hoping he will show himself and act through this work; trusting that one is an instrument in God's hand.

*An act of brotherhood:* one is not alone; God wants community, and commitment must be together and by association.

*An act of zeal:* love of God and of children does not allow us to give up or to do nothing; we must strive to go forward even if the chance of success is not great.

For me, this is an invitation to live:

— *With the spirit of faith:* faith must be the *raison d'être* of my consecration and my fidelity.

— *With hope:* as far as vocations are concerned, the Institute is poor...but God will provide. If God wants the work, it will continue.

— *With brotherhood:* together and by association, as one man; our consecration must be fulfilled in community; God works in the Church, in the community, to build his Kingdom.

— *With the spirit of zeal:* loving those entrusted to us by God with tender and firm love; striving to lead them to God in spite of all obstacles, confident that it is the work of God".

### **A challenge in my life**

*Brother Brendan* writes: "While aware from the novitiate of the event, only in the last ten years have I personally used the heroic vow as a challenge in my life. It has come to symbolise for me people who set a priority and expressed a willingness to pursue it no matter what it cost".

"When I am making too much of something or find my priorities askew, this event helps me to get myself back on the right path".

### **Wherever it will be necessary**

"When we complain today about the lack of Brothers," writes *Brother Virgilio*, "I think of the *three men* who were able to make a very special consecration before God, committing themselves to be fully associated together as an Institute, in spite of all the difficulties they were experiencing and the obstacles they might encounter".

"I believe that if we saw and felt that the Brothers today put *all their trust* in God and made themselves and what they had *totally available* to him for the better service of the Gospel, wherever this was necessary and to help the most deprived, then the influence of the Institute and its service in the Church would be greater and would become a source of vocations".

### **Calls to be discerned**

*Brother Johan* has mentioned elsewhere the calls that the 1691 vow enables us to discern. "These calls are also those coming from basic education, from

pastoral care in our schools by means of little magazines published for use by teachers, teachers of religion and headmasters”.

“These calls come also from Lasallian research and studies, the training of Brothers and lay people in the Lasallian spirit”.

“For what counts above all is not me but *us*”.

*Brother Odon* writes: “This tercentenary year reinforces even more the role of the 1691 vow in my life, giving more meaning to the spiritual, intellectual and moral heritage bequeathed by the holy Founder. He invites me to be ever more available in the face of

the challenges of present-day society”.

### The Heroic Vow medal

*Brother Larry Schatz* writes: “I don’t recall the first time I heard about the heroic vow, but a few years ago our Brothers professing first vows received the heroic vow medal. That impressed me as an appropriate and inspiring symbol to be given as a gift and reminder of first profession. And I’ve heard the names of Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart many ti-



A symbolic drawing by Br. Marek Mika of Poland.

mes. But it's only been since I've been here at SIEL that I have really understood the significance of the vow of 1691.

"For me, it is for De La Salle at least, the moment of truth. It is the moment of profound commitment and resolution; and I believe it gave De La Salle the courage and serenity to accept and survive the many challenges that ensued. The heroic vow represents faith and hope, the definitive "yes", the seed planted in good soil.

"I find inspiration in the vow of 1691, and the somewhat disconcerting fact that Nicolas Vuyart chose to leave the Institute is a reminder that God's call to us continues to unfold during our lifetime. Vuyart was called elsewhere, and Drolin spent many lonely years in far-off Rome. But the vow was made, the path was taken and the seed germinated and flourished. I believe the word "heroic" is most appropriate. For me, it represents one of the finest hours of our beginnings, mainly because it is such a sign of hope in the midst of darkness".

#### **Yes, lord, we are willing!** (Brother Paulo)

"We are willing, Lord, to accept today the challenges you give us *to evangelise this society which is far from you*. As the third millenium approaches, it adores so many false gods. Often it rejects and even persecutes us, as it did our Father and Founder, as it did you when you took flesh in this world in order to save us".

'He was in the world that had its being through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him.' (Jn 1, 10-11)

"Truly, Lord, you overcame many difficulties in order to accomplish the will of the Father and fulfil your mission. *You were rejected, opposed, persecuted and calumniated*".

'Some stood up and submitted this false evidence against him' (Mk 14, 57)

"Finally you conquered the world, this world which is so complex, so complicated and in crisis. You send us into it in our turn, us in particular, into *the difficult situation of Latin America, of Brazil*, where the people cry out for justice. You send us armed with these words that make us strong:

'In the world you will have trouble, but be brave:

I have conquered the world' (jn 16, 33)".

"So that we may take up this daily challenge to live out our consecration, to be witnesses to evangelical values by living in community in a world dominated by the desire to have more, by the values of a consumer society, by the negative values of domination, exploitation and injustice, *increase our faith, Lord; give us, Lord, confidence in your divine Providence, which directed De La Salle throughout his life and led him to make the heroic vow with his two companions just when everything seemed on the point of collapse. Give us this confidence in you, which made De La Salle hope against hope and which led two other Brothers to associate themselves with him in order to serve you better*".

"May we, Lord, by the way we are, by our faith, our actions, our attitudes, our way of living our consecrated lives, our total gift of self to you, be *seeds of new life and witnesses to such communion* with you that, with you living in us, many people will discover you thanks to us, will love you and want to follow you, becoming filled with your life and your plans for a new world.

A new world where your brilliance shines, where life triumphs over death, where here and there, eternity can take root and grow".

"Yes, Lord, we wish to imitate you in your total gift of self for the salvation of mankind, through obedience to your Father. Yes, we accept the challenge that your servant De La Salle once accepted and faced; we accept *to put ourselves once again unconditionally into your hands* in order to procure today and always, your glory and the salvation of mankind through the Christian education of children and young people".

**Brothers:** ADELARDO Alvarez Perez (Madrid), ALFRED Calcutt (Great Britain), BRENDAN Fitzgerald (New York), DOMINIQUE Rustuel (France), EMANUELE Costa (Turin), FERNANDO Barrio Barrio (Valladolid), GUILLERMO Gonzalez Villanueva (North Mexico), JAUME Pujol i Bardolet (Catalonia), JEAN MARIE Gueben (Zaire), JOHAN Van Pottelberge (North Belgium), LARRY Schatz (St. Paul-Minn.), LEON Curie (France), Luis ORLANDO Patiño Ledezma (Bolivia), MICHAEL McGinniss (Baltimore), ODON Razafindrakoto (Antanarivo), PAULO Petry (Sao Paulo), ROGER Petit (Reunion), VIRGILIO Rojo Moreno (Andalusia).

# AN ACT OF HOPE

*(A Prayer Service to Celebrate the Tercentenary of the Heroic Vow of November 21, 1691)*

This prayer service may be used in its entirety or adapted to particular situations. Many of these elements could be included in a eucharistic liturgy as well. In terms of environment, it is recommended to include a copy of the signatures of De La Salle, Vuyart, and Drolin (ICONOGRAPHIE, Emile Rousset, FSC, no. 41), and three candles to signify these three men.

Suggested songs include:

- Be Not Afraid (8)
- Only In God (128)
- Take, Lord, Receive (53)
- Though the Mountains May Fall (55)

*(Glory and Praise, vols. 1 & 2)*

- He Has Anointed Me (292)
- The Love of the Lord (295)
- We Have Been Told (296)
- Anthem (298)
- We Are Called (301)
- My Soul Is Still (303)

*(Gather, GIA Publications)*

See elsewhere in this issue of *The Bulletin* for other ideas and thoughts on the Heroic Vow. Also, see the Pastoral Letter of the Superior General of 1 January 1991, "Irrevocably Committed' to Follow Christ Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow", especially pp. 7-12.

## — Opening Song

## — Introduction

The year is 1691. After 13 years, the enterprise of the Christian Schools to which St. John Baptist De La Salle had devoted so much energy seemed in dire straits. Much of what he had accomplished in Rheims, including a training college for rural teachers, had collapsed while he was trying to get established in Paris. Of the sixteen Brothers he had left behind in Rheims, half remained, and only one new candidate had entered in three years.

Canon John Baptist Blain, one of De La Salle's biographers, describes the situation in these words:

"Such was the disconcerting prospect facing the

Founder at the end of 1690. After so many sacrifices, so much labor and trouble, after so many crosses and persecutions, after so much apparent success, he was back where he had been ten years earlier, with only a handful of Brothers. His undertaking had not made much progress and he could fear that it would eventually die out".

And so, De La Salle chose two Brothers in whom he had much confidence — Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart — and the three of them agreed to make a private vow together as "an act of hope in the God who is faithful" (2). On the feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary — November 21, 1691 — the three gathered in the chapel of the recently acquired center at Vaugirard near Paris. And there they spoke the following words:

(it is recommended that three Brothers read together the vow, and individually the underlined section, as a re-enactment of the event)

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure with all our ability and efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools, and in the manner which will seem most agreeable to you and most advantageous to the said society.

And, for that purpose, *I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I, Nicolas Vuyart, and I, Gabriel Drolin*, from now on and forever until the last surviving one of us, or until the complete establishment of the said Society, make the vow of association and union to bring about, and maintain the said establishment, without being able to withdraw from this obligation, even if only we three remained in the said Society, and even if we were obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone.

In view of which we promise to do, all together and by common accord, everything we shall think in conscience, and regardless of any human consideration, to be for the greater good of the said Society.

Done on this 21st of November, Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 1691. In testimony of which we have signed... (3).

(the three candles could be lit at this time)

— **Reflection and Response**

PSALM 62 - GOD, THE ROCK OF STRENGTH

For God alone my soul waits. My help comes from God, who alone is my rock, my stronghold, my fortress: I stand firm.

How long will you all attack me to break me down as though I were a tottering wall or a sagging fence? Their plan is only to destroy. They take pleasure in lies. With their mouths they utter blessing, but in their hearts they curse.

For God alone my soul waits; for my hope comes from God, who alone is my rock, my stronghold, my fortress. I stand firm. In God is my salvation and glory, the rock of my strength.

All you people, take refuge in God. Trusting at all times, pour out your hearts before God, our Refuge. Common folk are only a breath; those of rank, an illusion. Placed in the scales they rise; they weigh less than a breath.

Do not put your trust in oppression nor in vain hopes or plunder. Do not set your heart on riches even when they abound. For God has declared only one thing; only two do I know:

that to you alone belongs power, and that you, Yahweh, are steadfast love. Surely you repay all according to their deeds.

(Psalms Anew, Nancy Schreck, OSF, and Maureen Leach, OSF, Saint Mary's Press)

— **Scripture Reading**

(recommended texts)

— Isaiah 40:28-31

— John 15:1-7

— I Corinthians 1:26-31

— Hebrews 3:1-6

— **Renewal of Vows**

All professed Brothers present could at this time recite the current vow formula together and/or all Christians present could renew their baptismal vows.

— **Prayer of Petition**

Group Response: GRANT US HOPE, O LORD  
In the midst of difficulties and discouragement,

and in the face of frustration and disappointment, we pray...

In coping with situations that seem hopeless, and in helping others deal with desperation and despair, we pray...

As we move forward without all the clarity and assurance we would prefer, and inspired by the example of De La Salle, Drolin, and Vuyart, we pray...

That we can be the Good News for others, and a source of consolation and inspiration, we pray...

For a world that wages peace instead of war, and for a just solution to the conflicts that plague our planet, we pray...

For the intentions in our hearts at this moment (pause), we pray...

Let us say together the prayer given to us by Jesus. (Our Father...)

— **Closing Prayer**

O Creator God, we give you thanks on this day for the courage and hope expressed 300 years ago by Brothers Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, and our founder, St. John Baptist De La Salle. This act of hope in the face of much discouragement was confirmed by the steady growth of the young Institute in the ensuing years. Here we are today, O God, the followers of De La Salle and believers in his vision, and we ask your blessing upon us that we too can be people of courage and hope, for you are with us always and you call us into an uncertain but promising future. Let us be open to your call and respond to it with faith and zeal. In thanksgiving and hope, we ask this through Jesus, our teacher, our brother, and our Lord, who lives and reigns with you forever. Amen.

— **Closing Song**

**SOURCES**

(1) Canon John Baptist Blain, *The Life of St. John Baptist De La Salle*, Lasallian Publications, vol. I, Book 2, p. 100.

(2) Brothers Michel Sauvage, FSC, and Miguel Campos, FSC, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, p. 145.

(3) Brother Luke Salm, FSC, *The Work Is Yours: The Life of St. John Baptist De La Salle*, Christian Brothers Publications, pp. 75 & 76.

# THE TERCENTENARY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

An event derives all its meaning from the context in which it takes place and in which it is rooted. And so the reasons for the heroic vow, its meaning and its implications are to be found in the context of the years 1689-1691 and the events that the Founder lived through at the time.

And now, three hundred years later, we are commemorating this event. We do so with the feeling we are dealing with something which, while remaining an historical event, is likewise very much contemporary. We do so also in the context of a society that is seeking meaning, of a Church that has thrown down the challenge of the new evangelisation, and of our Institute which is preparing for the first General Chapter since the definitive approbation of our Rule.

As we look at life today, we cannot help thinking that the statement made in the introduction to *Redemptoris Missio* is symptomatic: "*the involvement of the laity in evangelisation is changing ecclesial life*" (1). A simple and somewhat laconic statement which will certainly lead to some lively comments.

The same idea has surfaced at the various "Religious Life Weeks" that have been held in recent times in most parts of the world and in most cultures. The increasing involvement of lay people in the non-sacramental ministries is a call to religious life *to find its place in the Church* of today.

The same process is taking place in its own special way in our own Institute. We speak of shared mission, of the Lasallian Family. We try to help those of our collaborators who are more aware of the nature of the Lasallian charism and are sensitive to its practice, to discover the value of the ministry that their educational work represents. This increasing involvement of lay people with our spirituality and our ministry is a call to us *to rediscover our place as lay religious* in the Church of today. It is in this context of Church and Congregation that we celebrate the tercentenary of what we have become used to calling the heroic vow.

\* \* \*

Throughout the creative process of foundation, the holy Founder went through various suc-

cessive stages with an admirable concern for fidelity to the mission to which he felt himself called. The circumstances in which he found himself had reached a historically critical point and the response he made to the situation we now describe as heroic. It would be useful at this point to remind ourselves of the main causes of the crisis that had come about in Rheims and in Paris (2):

- In the space of three years there had been only one candidate (3).
- Brothers were continuing to leave (4).
- Brothers Louis, Henri Lheureux, Nicolas and others whose names we do not know had died.
- The losses were made up for by postulants who were quickly trained. The postulancy lasted only a few months and those who entered were too young.

De La Salle kept calm and his criteria remained clearly fixed in his mind. The situation in the community did not make him panic (5): he prayed, and during the retreat he sought to discover the will of God (6).

In spite of all the care the Founder had taken to look after the community, he could draw only one conclusion on observing the situation: there had to be internal growth and a specific identity had to be acquired. This conviction led him to make a certain number of decisions.

- So long as he did not have well-trained Brothers he would not open any schools. He implemented this decision. There were no new foundations till 1697 even though candidates joined during this period.

- He revised his methods of formation and, for the first time in the Institute, he established an novitiate in a separate community with a well-defined formation plan.

- With a group of Brothers who had been in the Institute only three or four years, he made a long retreat at Vaugirard, lasting from the first days of October to Christmas. "All this was done according to his wishes" (7).

- He organised continuing formation and a judicious type of personal accompaniment:

— The Brothers in Paris went to Vaugirard every weekend;

as not, had he died, the whole community would have been buried with him in the same tomb” (8).

\* \* \*

To restrict ourselves to commemorating the vow would be to concentrate the wrong kind of attention on an event which is very much richer than that, and which deserves really all the honour we can give it by celebrating it on a much deeper level and in our lives.

Did the Founder allow himself to be carried along by the excitement of the mission that had been entrusted to him? Was it necessary for him to go through this stage of “inexperience” in order to be able to present to us a few years later, in the 1694 Rule, a mature synthesis of our identity, and to propose a more profound one in that of 1717?

Now is not the time to make a detailed analysis of the situation we are living through at present in the Institute, and in the midst of which we are celebrating this event. Allowing for differences in situation and place, we can make the following observations, however:

- In the last “X” years only “X” number of candidates have joined;
- “X” number of Brothers have left.
- “X” number of Brothers have died.
- Some gaps are sometimes filled...
- The mission remains exciting, and the need never-ending.
- To celebrate the heroic vow is *to make the same act of faith again* as the holy Founder:
- It was God who, through his Providence, established the Christian Schools.
- God is so good that he wants everyone to come to the knowledge of the truth.
- The schools are the “work of God”.
- We must begin once again to believe in man, in the Brother, in the strength of community, in its capacity for conversion and fidelity.

To celebrate the heroic vow is to rediscover our place in the ministry we share with our Lassaillian lay people with all the *impact* that religious life possesses *as a sign and as a parable* in the Church and society today.

For a small community of Brothers to come to a school with all the strength of its efficiency and its ability to direct and organise is not enough. Is this where our main task lies? We have now a unique opportunity to become the daily humble miracle which, with all its prophetic strength does



— They wrote individually to him each month;

— Each year the Founder visited every community.

- He made the heroic vow with Brothers Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart.

This is the true historical context of the heroic vow. What we are celebrating really is the refoundation of the Institute. Blain understood this to be the case when he wrote about the Founder’s illness (which he placed between the end of 1690 and the beginning of 1691). He wrote: “As likely

not seek so much to "increase the size" of the Church and the Institute as to make "the presence of the Kingdom stronger" among men.

The Founder was able to produce a real *change*. The initial formation he provided for the new candidates, and the continuing formation which, based on the rediscovery of their roots, he undertook with the handful of Brothers that remained, brought about the rebirth of the Institute.

To commemorate the heroic vow is to opt for rebirth once again. It was not by chance that the last General Chapter chose as its motto: "You need the plenitude of the Spirit". This same General Chapter produced two fundamental texts for us: the Rule which, with the Gospel, is our source of continuing formation, and the Guide for Formation which sets out the basic principles and guidelines on which the initial formation of new generations of Brothers is to be based.

To commemorate the heroic vow is *to opt for formation on all levels*. The Founder understood very well that no formation is possible without depth (roots) and that there is no depth without a desert. Like him and his small group of Brothers, we too must go out. We must put aside the Byzantine questions of the Temple...We must come out of the Synagogue...We must begin to build the Church...which will be born in the midst of difficulties.

We must go out...and look...and buy our Vaugirard...somewhere in the outskirts...outside the town...where we can meet each other frequently, in community, like Brothers, summoned.

I think that there are areas in the Institute where, by reason of present circumstances, the celebration of this tercentenary should take on a particular significance. I mean those places where the Institute is being established and in others where the ageing of the Brothers has reached a critical point. To establish or re-establish the Institute is the work of the Holy Spirit, but it requires men who are prepared to be his mediators, prepared to go out, to seek, to create a whole history of fidelity lived shoulder to shoulder.

There is a need also for some of us to make our heroic vow, today's vow. Heroicity has never been the characteristic of the majority. Will this responsibility fall on those who govern us, on those involved in formation? In fact, the Institute, the communities, the Brothers, all need to be summoned.

We need such men, God's gift to us, who have interior vision and are united in their commit-

ment, so that they can summon us *to become together once again what we are*. Such men as these will take us to "Vaugirard", so that together and by association we can run schools for the service of the poor. Our small communities need this small daily miracle; communities which, inspired by the radical vision of the Gospel and strong with the strength of brotherhood, share the same unique mission with Lasallian lay people.

Perhaps now we understand better how the apostolic commitment of the laity is changing the life of the Church, and how, *by the fact that they find their place* in the Church, they in their turn *contribute in helping religious life to find its own*. What a providential occurrence this tercentenary of the heroic vow is! It continues to be a source of inspiration for us as we turn our eyes towards the future!

Br. Bernardo Villar

#### NOTES

- (1) Redemptoris Missio: 2.1
- (2) GALLEGO, S: "San Juan Bautista de La Salle" (BAC, 477, Madrid 1986) pp. 285-251
- (3) BLAIN, I, p. 312
- (4) BLAIN, I, p. 301-302
- (5) BLAIN, I, p. 307
- (6) BLAIN, I, p. 315
- (7) BLAIN, I, p. 303

**Back covers:** stained glass window by S.P. Erolì. This work is somewhat conventional in character and is meant to be seen from a distance. However, a lightness of touch endows it with serenity. Made for the Brothers' Generalate in Rome, this window expresses the Roman view of the subject, in the sense that since the baroque era at least, the Eternal City has understood that the tragic and the joyful have to be united and not opposed. The presence of God in history gives rise to hope.

