

Reflections on “Our Roots”

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The 44th General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is scheduled to start at the end of April 2007 and to last for about one month. The third of five documents preparing for the Chapter is entitled “Being Brothers Today”. In our recent Advent Lasallian Days discussion of Section 3 of this document – “Our Roots: the Passion for God and for the Poor at the Heart of the Foundational Journey” – took place. Br Alfred here offers us some reflections based on the life of the Founder.

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Some fourteen years after Nyel’s irruption into his life, the Founder wrote a memoir which is perhaps for us the greatest of his icons:

“If I had ever believed that the concern I had for the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it a duty to live with them, I should have given it up; for, as naturally I set below my manservant those I was obliged, especially in the beginning, to employ in the schools, the mere thought that I might have to live with them would have been unbearable. I experienced, in fact, a very great distress when I first brought them into my house, and it lasted two years.

It was apparently for this reason that God, who guides all things with wisdom and gentleness, and is not in the habit of forcing the inclinations of men, wishing to encourage me to take full responsibility for the schools, did so in a most imperceptible manner and over a period of time; so that one involvement led me in to another, without my having foreseen it in the beginning.”

“It was through those two occasions,” he says earlier, “namely, through meeting Monsieur Nyel and through the proposal of this lady (Madame des Croyères) made me, that I began to take care of schools for boys. I had not given it a thought before then, and it was not that no one had put the idea to me. Several of Roland’s friends had tried to give me the idea, but it had not got into my mind, and I never had any idea of putting it into execution.”

Notice that neither Roland nor Barré (both now beatified) are his icons. These he consulted when making up his mind, but that process, which took three months, was his own listening

to the Spirit and making up his own mind, as he expresses above. Nyel was one of his icons.

Until he moved to Paris in 1688, he and his Brothers are icons for us in becoming already a community acting together and by association, and coming to the conclusion therefore: *To hold invariably to the Rule not to entrust a Brother with looking after himself alone, and to refuse the most advantageous foundation if it was not the intention to place two Brothers there.”*

It is good to see the Founder’s attitude when in Paris the Brothers’ habit was challenged by the parish priest of St Sulpice, Henri Baudrand, who wanted to impose the clerical dress. De La Salle marshals all his arguments, but in the end, he says bluntly:

“The Brothers of the Christian Schools have been employed in Paris for nearly two years with this same dress, and no one during that time has spoken of it by way of complaint, except that for some time now the parish priest of Saint Sulpice has spoken fairly strongly about it. It seems that if this dress should be criticised, it should have been when the Brothers of the Christian Schools came to Paris and before they were employed in the schools. They should have been told then that they would not be allowed to keep schools with this distinctive dress and they would have to take a more customary one. They would then have to see what should be done about it.” We have a model there of standing up for what the Brothers’ life is and what they stand for

Yet soon there was a time of crisis. He falls gravely ill, Brothers are leaving in Rheims, others are exhausted, the postulancy in Paris fails. He is our model in recreating his society. With his two most reliable Brothers, he secures a house for novices and for retreats, for recent entrants, and established monthly correspondence with all his Brothers. And on November 21st, 1691, he pronounced with Brothers Drolin and Vuyart what we call the Heroic Vow.

The assembly of twelve senior Brothers at Vaugirard in 1694, our first General Chapter, and the making of final vows marks, the stabilisation of the Society. The vows to keep together and by

association gratuitous schools, and of stability and obedience are our great icon. The document "3: Our roots" says: "That Trinity Sunday will emory of all thirteen of us." Yet of those twelve Brothers, six left (Blain I,43). One of the weaknesses of that document is that it is a kind of essay on what may have been the Founder's experience and feelings or what it wants to be his feelings, but gives few facts.

Its section 3.3. on "the faces of children and young people" is entirely on faces of Brothers. Gabriel Drolin is referred to as one "whom I loved deeply for so many years." In his letter to Drolin of 23 December 1704 he writes: "unless you yourself have great eagerness for this work, which you do not show, you will not succeed." And in the next letter: "I do not know if you will ever get anything done where you are. The spirit of God and a great zeal must guide you and it seems to me that I do not see in you enough of either for your undertaking". Gabriel had to wait till he was in a strong position, i.e. that he was at last running a school, to tell the Founder he had been hard on him. Gabriel let his feelings be known in another letter, answered in February 1706, about the Founder not understanding his difficulties.

The years 1712 to 1714 are not clearly presented. Vuyart left, not at this time, but in Paris in 1705. After his first visit to the South, the Founder clearly intended to go back for quite a period, since unusually he put Brother Joseph as Visitor for fourteen northern communities, as far south as Dijon. Bartholomew may have been designated his stand-in for that period, even before events forced him to flee. The Founder had in view a southern province centred on Avignon. He was very sanguine about its future. He told Drolin three times that a house had been provided in Avignon for twenty Brothers. He was certain they would soon have the four parish schools of Marseilles; a novitiate was soon filled (only to dwindle). He had unreal hopes, expressed as early as 1706: "We must hope that as our Brothers come nearer and nearer to you, God will bless and finally increase your school." That implies he envisaged communities of Brothers gradually spreading down the Italian peninsula to Rome. (Letter 16 April 1706.) The Founder after fleeing Paris went directly to Avignon, then visited the communities in the Cevennes, and finally Marseilles where he found great support at first. It is not surprising if the failure of his expectations produced depression.

The two Brothers in Mende really went astray. The Founder's failure with one of them (Isidore)

almost brought on a breakdown, and in Marseilles the two Brothers played loose with community life. Opposition in the town, fed by Jansenism, became defamatory, while Brother Ponce, his Visitor for the south, left the Institute. It was the collapse of his hopes that may have brought on a crisis of doubts as to whether this was the work of God. Age may also have counted. He retired to a monastery for a month and then made the long and difficult journey via Marseilles to Mende, where he withdrew to an isolated lodging. Here Brother Timothy, master of novices, found him to tell him the novitiate was empty. He was reduced to tears when the Founder told him he intended to stay there and that he was incapable of being a Superior.

This period of crisis was not long. If De La Salle went to Mende at the end of June, he was back in Avignon early in August, for on August 9th he signed a contract there for reprinting his "Duties of a Christian". He had evidently previously revised it, for the printer refused his changes. He lived in Avignon as a retired member of the community, composing texts for the Brothers while discreetly finding out about the North. Sr Louise's discernment at Parménie of his situation was confirmed by the arrival of the Brothers' moving letter from Paris ordering him to return. "Our Roots" says he was deeply moved. But Maillefer (CL6 226). says he "was very surprised when this letter was brought him. Various thoughts came to him at that moment..." It was Sister Louise who said: "It is evident that the Lord wants you to go back to Paris."

For the later sections of "Our roots", 'icon' is the in-word, and the founding icon is given as in Luke 9: "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." But for the Founder, it is rather the poverty of the manger. His Meditation for Christmas Day is entirely on this; for the Epiphany, it is on faith and "recognising Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you instruct." His example for meditation on a mystery in his "Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer" is on the nativity.

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