

Brothers of the Christian Schools: 150 years in Great Britain

Bro. Thomas Cooney

The following report of a talk given by Br Thomas Cooney in October comes from the recent issue of the newsletter of the English Catholic History Association. It has been supplied by Chris Bull and is reproduced here with permission.

We were privileged to hear Brother Thomas Cooney who has just returned to England from Rome, where he has been Director of the Office of Statistics and Registrar for the De La Salle Brothers for nine years, speak on 150 years of De La Salle education in England.

St John Baptist de la Salle was born in 1651 and ordained in 1678. He died in 1719, was beatified in 1888 and canonized in 1900. Brother Thomas explained that as the eldest son of a wealthy family he was expected to climb the church career ladder, perhaps becoming a bishop, but life changed for him in 1680 when he was asked to help with an educational project in Rheims and he found his vocation in life.

De la Salle became a pioneer of modern education: promoting free schools for the poor, reading in the vernacular (rather than Latin); teaching in classes rather than following the monitorial method or individual teaching. He added the teaching of the arts, sciences and modern languages to the curriculum. Central to all of these subjects, however, was the religious development of each individual, both teacher and pupil. He established communities of brothers, creating a religious background to the vocation of a teacher. He opened teacher training centres and even wrote instruction manuals for teachers.

His was a life which changed the lives of many, not just those who decided to follow in his footsteps in the Order, and not just those children whom they taught but the entire educational system of France. By the early nineteenth century there was a growing awareness of his work in England: Henry Brougham in 1820, Kay-Shuttleworth in 1839 and Matthew Arnold in the late 1850's had all studied the work of the De La Salle Brothers.

The first De La Salle School in England opened in Clapham, London in 1855. Unfortunately it was short lived but its name and traditions survive as St Joseph's College, Beulah Hill and St Joseph's Academy, Blackheath. In 1866 the Brothers opened schools in Liverpool and Manchester. The industrial revolution was booming but its workers, many of immigrant origin, were very poor. The Brothers concentrated on the newly developing industrial areas where poverty was at its greatest. Later the Brothers tailored their works not only to what was needed at ground level but also to the requirements of each new Education Act: Balfour Act 1902, Fisher Act 1918 and the Butler Act 1944. They ran primary and secondary schools of all types: private, direct grant and voluntary aided. They ran a teacher training college and also Home Office Approved Schools or Reform Schools which were nothing more than a junior section of the prison service and the Brothers did much to humanise them. At their peak in this country they were involved in educational establishments from Stirling to the Isle of Wight and From Ipswich to Jersey with more than 380 Brothers working in 41 establishments.

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