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AN IMAGINATIVE LIFE OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

It is difficult to deal, at one and the same time, with the early history of the lasallian family and its present day achievements. Brother Alberto Croce of the District of Argentina succeeds in doing just this in his little book of two hundred pages, entitled, "Nos Tendran Siempre." (Stella Editions, Buenos Aires)

LITERARY FORM

The book is conceived as an exchange of letters between two correspondents, both Brothers of the Christian Schools, but belonging to very different times and social backgrounds. One is Brother Alberto, himself, The other is Jean Partois, Brother Anthony, companion of the Founder and one of the twelve who made the first perpetual vows with him on 6 June, 1694.

In a very vivid manner each describes to the other his experiences of three hundred years ago and those of to-day. This exchange of letters helps to explain certain episodes in the life of the Founder and of the early Brothers while at the same time it allows the writer to present the life of a Brother of the Christian Schools to-day in a clearly defined situation, the District of Argentina - Paraguay.

It is not a book to suit all situations. You would not dream of translating it nor even of presenting it, without changes, to other regions of the Spanish speaking world. As it is, it is marvellously evocative and could help to stimulate similar efforts to make known to a wider public both the life of the Founder and the living tradition which perpetuates his work to-day.

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The historical content shows a deep knowledge of the life, work and thought of the Founder. Brother Alberto has a wide knowledge of the earliest biographers of de La Salle and a close acquaintance with his principal doctrinal writings which he quotes very appositely. He evokes vividly the life and times of the first Brothers. Brother Anthony, Jean Partois, who joined the Institute in 1686, was one of those closest to de La Salle so it is not too fanciful to connect him with most of the events mentioned in the letters.

Brother Alberto gives the impression of understanding clearly and judging correctly the concrete situations in which the Institute, the Brothers and the wider lasallian family find themselves to-day, particularly, but not exclusively, in Argentina. There is nothing banal in these pages; everything is described by a witness who is alert, well informed and impartial. Reading his book, one not only shares the anxieties but also the hopes and enthusiasm which sustain the work of to-day and inspire the plans for tomorrow.

We must not regard this correspondence as purely anecdotal. Each exchange of letters brings a corresponding exchange of ideas: he deals with the themes of vocation, schooling, gratuity, fidelity to the teaching of the Church, the lay character of the Institute, renewal, youth movements, administration and the question of lay teachers in lasallian schools.

At the end of the book the author provides an index of topics treated.

CHARMING FRESHNESS

The book has a charming freshness of approach. Neither of the two correspondents is in the least didactic; however different the conditions in which they live they recognise each other as engaged in the same kind of work and living by the same spirit. Gently and patiently each explains to the other when and why such a thing was done, why one thing was done and not another. Each time the correspondence is discontinued its resumption is an occasion to recall an event or some urgent need of the moment.

Brother Anthony, for example, expresses his joy when he learns that the General Chapter of 1966-67 decided to maintain the lay character of the Institute. Brother Alberto explains to his correspondent that he must leave him to meet two Brothers who have come to help him with a week-end retreat for some young people whom he looks after. There are even some funny episodes to give pleasure to the reader. Brother Alberto tells Anthony that, reading his letter, one would think that he was watching a film of the life of de La Salle. He suddenly realises that his correspondent does not know what a cinema is and tries to explain it to him in a few well chosen words.

I cannot recommend this book too highly to anyone who, in his own apostolate, wants to make known both the message of de La Salle and the way in which the Institute tries to interpret it to-day.

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The following extracts from the book give a little of the tone of the letters:

LETTER OF BROTHER ALBERTO TO BROTHER ANTHONY

How necessary it is for the young people of our day to meet men like de La Salle; men of real, deep prayer, not the countless false prophets who try to sell us gimmicks or "magic carpets" for reaching God, not those ridiculous people who tell us to pray in order to forget our problems.

No! Prayer is something else: It is a life lived in God, receiving and developing His message of love and bringing that message to men. It is in the heart of God that His message of love beats. It is there we must look. If the young people of our day discover this truth they will build a new world.

LETTER FROM BROTHER ANTHONY TO BROTHER ALBERTO

No doubt you have noticed that the Founder has twice called us brothers. He has never done so before. It was after he resigned his canonry that he got the idea of giving more stability to our group. For weeks he had been talking to us of a closer union amongst us. That is how the question of a name came up. At first it was "Community of the Christian Schools," then after we had begun to call ourselves "Brothers" the name became the community of "The Brothers of the Christian Schools." Our poverty was as great as our enthusiasm!

LETTER FROM BROTHER ANTHONY TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF TO-DAY

I must tell you how happy I am. I am proud of God's call to me and happy to feel close to Him and able to devote myself to the service of so many children and young people.

I know you are seeking God. He is very close to you: You can meet Him in the silence of prayer or "under the rags of the poor who attend your schools" (MDF 96,3). When you realise this you will find your own lives flooded with light and that many others will be enlightened by the light you bring to their lives.

Do not hesitate. Go forward. "God has made His light shine in their hearts."

Yours fraternally in Jesus Christ,

Brother Anthony