



02-A-09

A MEETING OF THE FIRST BROTHERS WITH M. DE LA SALLE. THE 1686 ASSEMBLY

1st PARAGRAPH: Introduction

In 1686 John Baptist de La Salle summoned the 12 principal Brothers to an assembly which started on the eve of the Ascension as a retreat and continued to Trinity Sunday.

This procedure of the Founder reveals his pedagogy which is worth while studying. It is revealing not only because of his methods of procedure but also because his attitude and the atmosphere of prayer throughout the day were so many lessons.

This assembly put some fundamental decisions to the Brothers and they can be summed up as follows.

— Regulations cannot become Rules properly so called till they have been tried out for a number of years.

— Henceforth they would no longer be known as "masters" but as Brothers.

— Their dress would distinguish them not only from the clerics but also from lay people.

— Their food and life style would conform to that of the poor families whose children they had in class.

— Finally, the Brothers who made the request would be allowed to pronounce the vow of obedience for three years by consecrating their life to God in the service of the poor in school.

It was not by chance that such gestures consolidated the Society. De La Salle went into detail, planned rigorously, prayed, reflected, took council and finally obtained the agreement, participation and commitment of the Brothers. What was his method? How did he propose to accomplish it? We shall try to find out in the following extract from Blain (1).

"In order to transform the Assembly of Masters into a community, they must be given a habit, constitutions and everything established with a perfect uniformity suitable to their vocation. They must all be inspired with the same spirit, the same sentiments, the same dispositions, the same outlook and make but one body and one soul just as the first Christians forming the primitive Church presented the model of a perfect community for the years which followed. But in order to do this, he did not think that he should contribute anything from what he thought personally.

The humble institutor convoked his principal disciples to the number of 12 and they assembled together to discuss the means of giving them shape, of getting them settled and assuring their stability...

It started on the eve of the Ascension of the year 1684 (*) and finished on the feast of Pentecost; but it was extended to that of the Blessed Trinity. Monsieur de La Salle opened the meeting with a very touching speech. He made them see that the order which reigned in the house should lead them to think of the means of maintaining it; that regularity which is the soul of a community needs wise rules and that thought should be given to practicing them before drawing them up... You will perceive your own work in the book which will be written and the laws it contains will appear agreeable because you yourselves have been the legislators...

He concluded that on this point as on all others he left them entirely free to speak their mind, and even greater freedom to follow it; that all that he would do would be to listen to them and to decide according to the greatest number of votes; and finally that what he recommended most particularly was to pray well and to prepare themselves by a fervent retreat to know the will of God.

(1) BLAIN. Blain was, with Dom Elie Maillefer, his nephew, and Brother Bernard, one of the 3 contemporaneous biographers of the Founder. In 1733 he published in 2 volumes "La vie de Monsieur Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Instituteur des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes." They can be consulted in Cahiers Lasalliens Nos. 7 & 8.

(*) Recent studies lead us to prefer 1686 as the date.

During this long period of prayer and meditation they had time to invoke the Holy Spirit and to prepare their hearts for his inspirations. In silence and recollection, as each one was free to pay attention to his voice and to listen to his inspirations, each one also had the right to communicate his thoughts and feelings to the others. Without forewarning, without suggesting his views or inspiring them with his ideas, Monsieur de La Salle left them free to think and say what they wished. Doubtlessly the shortest way and the easiest for them would have been to get him to speak first and allow themselves to be led like docile children by the light of their father. A man of God such as he, was the mouth piece of the Holy Spirit and pronounced his oracles for them. Perhaps they did this; perhaps they told him they were his children, and asked him to govern them like a father and give them rules without their advice and without deferring to their feelings. But what means could they take to overcome his humility on this point which gave him the right only to listen to them, take their advice and decide on a majority of votes? Not that he did not help them with his own inspirations or put them right when their ideas were not sensible nor correct. But he did it in such a way that he did not find therein his self esteem and that it did not hinder their liberty to make their own suggestions and justify them in any way. The only right he reserved to himself was to speak a lot with God and ask Him to speak Himself to this college of his 12 disciples, and to make known His holy will through them so clearly that that there was nothing further to do but to endorse these thoughts dictated by the Spirit of God..."

THIRD PART: General Objective

"...inspire all with the same spirit, the same sentiments, the same dispositions, the same outlook and make of them but one soul like the first Christians" (1).

Specific Aims

- 1) "...consult together on the means to give shape to the establishment, to get them settled and to give them stability" (2).
- 2) "...transform the Assembly of Masters into a regular community..." (3).
- 3) "...give them a habit..." (4).
- 4) ...rules and constitutions.
- 5) "...establish perfect unity in all things suitable for their vocation" (6).

Method Followed

- 1) Motivate the Brothers: "opened it with a touching speech" (7).
- 2) Start from what has actually been practiced: "...the order already reigning in the house..." (8).
- 3) Faith in the group and in its aptitudes: "...he did not think he should put in anything of his own..." (9); "he left them perfectly free on this point as on all the rest..." (10).
- 4) Number of representatives (12 Brothers).
- 5) Freedom of discussion on ideas and feelings: "...give their opinions..." (10).
- 6) Sufficiently long meeting (18 days).
- 7) Expressing what they live, they reaffirm their identity: you will find therein your own work..."

Attitudes

- 1) Complete freedom (107).
- 2) Listening to the Spirit (11).
- 3) An Assembly of prayer (12).
- 4) Respect for the Brothers (13).
- 5) Listening attentively to the Brothers (14).
- 6) Accepting the majority view (15).
- 7) Judicious and discreet direction (16).

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