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**RHEIMS 1684.
A COMMUNITY FOUNDED
ON PROVIDENCE**

"At the end of 1682, it became apparent to M. de La Salle that Providence was calling him to take the schools in charge. And he realized that, having to arrive the first at the exercises he had initiated in his house and give good example to those for whom they were intended, he could not do that and at the same time be assiduous at the offices in choir. This his director could in no way approve for he required him to be most assiduous in his attendance".

These lines are taken from the first biography of the Founder by Brother Bernard. The third biographer, Canon Blain, repeats this more concisely.

"It was apparent to him at the end of 1682, he himself says, that God was calling him to take care of the schools and that, having to be the first at the community exercises, he could not be as assiduous at the office as his director exacted of him".

Most probably both biographers have based themselves on the "mémoire des commencements" written by John Baptist de La Salle many years after the events. Both of them begin in the same way their account of two particularly decisive years in the history of the Community of the Christian Schools: 1683 when Canon de La Salle gives up his canonicate, 1684 when he distributes his personal fortune among the poor.

It was on August 16, 1683, that Abbé Jean Faubert, a priest hitherto unknown, takes his place in the chapter of the cathedral of Rheims instead of Canon John Baptist de La Salle. Such a change did not take place without strong and lengthy opposition from his family, his colleagues, his spiritual director. The Archbishop himself did not give his consent or else resigned himself to it in spite of all he could do to prevent it.

Now that he was more closely associated with the few teachers who lived with him, the abbé De La Salle did not stop there. Very soon he decided to get rid of his personal fortune and to rely henceforth on Providence.

Referring to this the three first biographers mention the Founder's hesitation, hesitation which could have been reinforced by the counsels of his friends who were often well intentioned. If he wanted to get rid of his fortune could not the former canon use it for the benefit of the teachers? Could he not think of "founding" a community of teachers as Nicolas Roland had "founded" the community of the Daughters of the Infant Jesus?

If one has doubts about the dialogue which Blain tries to recall forty years after the events, one can but feel the truth of the prayer which Brother Bernard seems to have taken from the above mentioned memoire.

"My God, I do not know if I have to make a foundation or not. It is not up to me to establish the communities, nor to know how to establish them. It is you, my God, who know how it should be done and will do it as it pleases you. I do not dare to make a foundation because I do not know if it is your will, nor would I make any contribution to founding our houses. If you found them, they will be well founded, if you do not found them they will be without foundation. I pray you, my God, to make known to me your will as regards this".

De La Salle once again perceived the hand of God in the tragic events taking place under his very eyes. 1684 saw a very severe winter and all the historians of the time describe the famine that followed as particularly serious and even murderous. The whole year and the winter which followed saw the poor flocking to the towns from the countryside. They came in great numbers, to Rheims especially, in the hope of finding some relief.

For the second time, La Salle gave up the guardianship of his younger brothers on August 16 of that same year. He left to them the house in the Rue Ste. Marguerite and various properties and incomes that he owned personally. On the orders of his director he kept £200 in order not to tempt God and distributed the remaining cash among the poor. Dom François Hélié Maillefer writes about this as follows:

"This faithful steward was then seen to distribute in an orderly fashion and with discernment the wealth of which he regarded himself as the trustee. He examined the needs of each one in minute detail, provided for their needs, distributed bread and saw that it was distributed to the children in the schools, gathered together every day a large number of poor people whom he fed and sent away overwhelmed with his generosity after giving them sound advice according to their situation.

He did more. He went into the homes to find the poor who were ashamed to lighten their distress and through his frequent alms save them from the shame of poverty.

Those who were witnesses of his generosity were astonished at seeing a man so full of confidence in Divine Providence that he gave no thought to the morrow. Even the Brothers in the schools who helped him to distribute his alms could not refrain from showing their astonishment. He told them with his customary tranquillity that God was a good Father who never deserted those who trusted in Him, that they would never lack anything as long as they tried to please Him."

Rather than estimate the exact value of the alms he distributed in this way — about £40,000 according to Blain — we will examine the significance of this staggering gesture. In 18th century France, more so than in our days, the faithful who wished to perform some good work took care to assure the future by establishing a foundation properly so called. With respect for the memory of his director, Canon Roland, John Baptist took great care to see that the Daughters of the Child Jesus were well provided for, showing that this new community would not have to rely on the generosity of the people of Rheims.

Breaking with tradition, Father Barré in Rouen encouraged the mistresses in the charitable school to rely solely on Providence. It would seem that he induced John Baptist de La Salle to do the same. What is certain is that the priest of Rheims decided definitely and irrevocably on the second of these two attitudes.

It was in vain the archbishop, Charles Maurice Le Tellier, proposed that de La Salle should "found" his community. The former canon was all the more resolute since the all powerful prelate offered his generosity only on condition that the Community of the Christian Schools should remain within the boundaries of his archdiocese.

In 1690, when describing his Community to the ecclesiastical Superiors, De La Salle did not fail to affirm that "this Community is at present established and founded on Providence alone". His choice, taken in 1684, was therefore still valid six years later; it continued to be so during the whole life of the Founder. If he expected the parish priests and the charitable boards to finance the schools they established and asked the Brothers to run, he none the less expected the Community as such to have no other resources than those of Providence.

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Via Aurelia, 476 - ROMA