



03-A-14

THE KNOWN MANUSCRIPTS OF ST. J.B. DE LA SALLE (1)

A FEW STATISTICS

The number of manuscript documents written throughout and signed by John Baptist de La Salle, and known to be in existence, amounts to 65 (a total of 97 sheets of paper written on one or both sides). (A) 53 of these documents are letters, all of which except three were addressed to individual Brothers. (B) The remaining 12 are of a legal or administrative nature. In addition to the signed documents there are (C) 8 certainly written by the Founder but not signed by him. (D) 7 documents are known which were not written by De La Salle but to which he added brief marginal comments or amendments or supplementary information: five of these are also signed by him. And, finally, there are (E) 27 known manuscripts to which, in one capacity or another, he added his signature, but nothing more.

An outline survey of each of these categories now follows (in this and further issues of LASALLIANA) in the order listed, together with bibliographical references guiding the interested reader to ampler and more detailed information on the points made; the frequently occurring "CL" followed by a number refers to the relevant volume of the indispensable *Cahiers Lasalliens* series.

(A) THE LETTERS

All except two of the 53 known manuscript letters are preserved in the Archives of the Maison Générale in Rome (AMG). They are stored between sheets of glass in brass frames, and are thus able to be read without the need to handle the fragile leaves: the frames are slotted vertically into grooved shelves in fire-proof, double-locked steel cabinets.

THEIR ADDRESSEES

49 of the 51 letters in the AMG collection are addressed to ten of the Founder's disciples: 19 to Gabriel Drolin, 10 to a Br. Mathias (about whose identity there is disagreement among the experts), 6 to Br. Robert (Denis Maubert), 5 to Br. Hubert (Gilles Gerard), 3 to Br. Denis (Jean Louis Guynand), 2 to Br. Joseph (Jean Le Roux), and 1 each to Br. Anastase (Antoine Paradis), Br. Barthélemy (Joseph Truffet), Br. Paulinus and Br. Severin (the identity of both of whom is uncertain). The remaining two letters in the AMG collection were both addressed to Louis Deshayes, a priest of Rouen who had requested Brothers for a foundation which duly materialised in nearby Darnétal.

THEIR CHRONOLOGY

All of these 51 letters cover a time-span of no more than 16 years and 8 months - from 30 May 1701 to 17 January 1718 (and were written therefore after M. de La Salle had reached the age of fifty). By a curious coincidence the two known manuscript letters *not* in the AMG collection were written, respectively, two weeks earlier and six weeks later than the two dates mentioned. The so-called "Durham Letter", addressed to an unnamed Brother, and found in 1955 in the library of the English Seminary of Ushaw, near Durham, is dated 15 May 1701. It is kept in London at the Provincialate of the district of England, and the story of its serendipitous discovery during the centenary year of the Lasallian presence in England can be read in the April 1956 issue of the *Bulletin des Ecoles Chrésiennes*. The date of the other letter not in AMG is 2 March 1718 (almost exactly a year prior to its writer's death). It was addressed to the Founder's brother, Canon Jean-Louis de La Salle at Rheims. The letter was discovered in 1969 in an "Etude" of M. Claude Thiénot, a Rheims lawyer, by Br. Leon de Marie Aroz who published it, in both fac-simile and printed form and with a commentary of absorbing interest, in CL 39 (1972). By permission of M. Thiénot, this precious manuscript is on display at the Hôtel De La Salle, the Founder's birthplace in Rheims.

A lithographed fac-simile of one early letter exists and was published as long ago as 1908 in the March edition of the *Bulletin des Ecoles Chrétiennes*. This was the Founder's letter to the Mayor and Aldermen of Château-Porcien, written on 20 June 1682 (four days, therefore, before the momentous "exodus" of M. de La Salle — then aged 31 — from the family home in the rue Sainte-Marguerite to the rue Neuve). The original was discovered in January 1843 by the Archbishop of Rheims, Mgr. Gousset, and was retained in the archiepiscopal archives, but an enquiry in 1951 revealed that it was no longer there and that its whereabouts were unknown.

PUBLICATIONS OF THE LETTERS

The AMG manuscript letters have been photographed twice: first in 1948 when the set was made available to districts of the Institute subscribing for one; and secondly, with advanced photographic technique, by Br. Georges Ley of the district of North Belgium.

The contents of the collection may be read in each of the three languages currently in use for the Institute's official publications. They first appeared in French, under the date 26 January 1952, as No. 335 of the Institute's series of *Instructive and Administrative Circulars*. The circular was issued by the Superior General, Br. Athanase Emile, with an Introduction by him, but the edition of the letters it contained was the work of Br. Felix-Paul Vandamme. The latter was at this time already engaged on the preparation of a critical edition of the letters, and was putting the finishing touches to this when death overtook him at the early age of 39. His work, not as definitive as he would have wished to make it, but an invaluable critical edition all the same, especially if consulted in conjunction with his Circular 335 edition, was published by Ligel in 1954, with a characteristically graceful and informative foreword by the Institute's historian, Georges Rigault.

In 1952 Brother Clair Battersby added *De La Salle: Letters and Documents* to his three previous books on the Founder, thus completing a Lasallian tetralogy in English, elegantly produced in uniform format by a leading London publisher, Longmans Green.

And in 1962 the Pontifical Institute of St. Pius X in Salamanca published, as No. 4 in its distinguished "Sinite" series, a Spanish translation of the French critical edition, but adapted and edited in order to take account of new information subsequent to Felix-Paul's production.

THE QUANTITY OF MANUSCRIPT LETTERS

The 53 known manuscript letters represent, it need hardly be said, a mere fraction of the total the Saint must have written. Battersby's suggested figure of 18,000 may, at first sight, seem grossly exaggerated, but he argues it principally on the basis of the known statistics of the Society's personnel in the Founder's lifetime related to the article in the earliest known version of the Brothers' Common Rules (CL 25) requiring them to write individually to the Superior "at the beginning of each month" (and we have the assurance of his biographer and contemporary, Canon Blain (CL 7), that the Founder "was exact in replying to each". But even if we prefer the much more conservative estimate of "two to three thousand" suggested by Felix-Paul, the extant remnant looks pitiful and leaves us wondering what happened to the rest. It is true, of course, that we know of the existence and contents (complete or partial) of other letters of the Founder from his biographer Blain and from other copies preserved in AMG. Felix-Paul included all 35 quotations known from Blain only and 19 known from Blain and other sources. But, as Br. Maurice-Auguste Hermans, General Editor of the *Cahiers Lasalliens*, assures us (CL 10), none of Blain's quotations comes from the manuscript letters known to us — a tantalising fact which leaves us without a point of reference whereby to test the degree of confidence we may feel as to the verbal exactness of his quotations.

THE LOST LETTERS

Can we hope that more of the many lost originals will come to light? From Circular 335 we learn that 34 autograph letters were available for despatch to Rome in December 1845 when the Founder's cause of beatification was approaching the stage of the study of his writings. Since that date, therefore (bearing in mind the loss of the Château-Porcien letter), 20 more have been discovered — an average of approximately one every seven years, which would make the next discovery overdue by eight years! However, the first of the new discoveries accounted for a single batch of 10 letters (those addressed to Mathias) found in a loft of the presbytery of Pernes (Vaucluse) at some unspecified date between 1850 and 1856. Following that, single finds were made or notified successively in 1860, 1871, post-1871, pre-1888, about 1900, ditto, 1915, about 1920, 1955 and 1969. The usual gap between the discoveries has therefore been about a dozen years but since there has been one gap of 35 years, perhaps our next discovery is not overdue after all. What chance is there of finding a treasure-trove of several letters together? The late Fr. André Rayez S.J., in a celebrated article entitled "Etudes Lasalliennes" in the January-March 1952 issue of the *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, did not exclude the possibility: "I remain convinced," he wrote, "that there are texts still to be gathered together or discovered, as, for example, the letters... It would be a rare stroke of good fortune to find some packets of these..." And the Institute's leading discoverer of Lasallian documents, Léon Aroz, is likewise hopeful. Commenting on the 1955 and 1969 finds, he adds: "Others, no doubt, await the lucky touch of some researcher." (CL 40,1)

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