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FIRST TAKING OF THE HABIT: RHEIMS (Winter of 1684-85)

"This habit has been worn for the past five years in five different towns in the dioceses of Rheims and Laon".

These lines are taken from a memoir written by M. de La Salle during the winter of 1689-1690. It is the text which for some years past we call the "Memoir on the Habit". Written entirely by the Founder himself, it is possible to date it from the following lines:

"For almost two years now the Brothers of the Christian Schools working in Paris have worn this habit and nobody during this time has made any complaint except Monsieur le Curé de Saint-Sulpice who has recently objected in rather strong terms".

So, the habit that the Brothers wear in Paris is no longer to the taste of the parish priest who employs them in the schools of his parish, the famous parish of Saint-Sulpice.

Several other passages in the memoir show clearly that the parish priest wanted the Brothers to dress as priests. At the very least he wanted them to wear the long clerical cloak. That is what M. de La Salle believed he could not accept.

He, therefore, wrote this memoir to justify his decision in the eyes of his ecclesiastical Superiors. In his opinion it was not a question of some detail of clothing, of adopting one kind of cloak rather than another. What was at stake for the Founder was the very identity of his Community which was misunderstood and, perhaps, threatened.

To read his plea — it really was a case for the defence — gives us some very interesting information concerning the early years of the "Community" and especially the circumstances and motives which led the "Community" to adopt a distinctive habit.

In the early days, the schoolmasters gathered around M. de La Salle, wore a waisted coat like other laymen and were distinguished from them only by the white rabat. In winter time they were unprotected from the cold, whether in their houses, their unheated schools or in the streets. To protect themselves from the cold the schoolmasters adopted the cloak which was then common in the Champagne region.

"What serves as a mantle", the memoir continues, "is a cloak without collar or buttons on the front, fastened at the top by a large hook on the inside... Such cloaks were then in use and were considered very suitable, useful and comfortable for the schoolmasters, especially those who had to teach outside the house or in parts of the city at some distance from the house in order to convenience the children. The schoolmasters use this cloak as a mantle in the streets and as a house coat in winter in the classrooms and in the house".

If we can believe Canon Blain, the advice to adopt this cloak was given to the Founder by the Mayor of the city of Rheims. What is beyond doubt is that the choice made by M. de La Salle and the schoolmasters was dictated by practical considerations.

With cloak and coat the outward appearance remained that of a "secular". However, for the past two years the Community of schoolmasters had gradually distanced itself from the "world". In the Rue Neuve they really lived the "life of religious". This led the masters to exchange the coat for a kind of "short soutane".

"The habit of this community is a kind of soutane which comes down to mid-calf. It is without buttons and fastened on the inside with hooks from the top to mid-way down the front. From there down it is sewn. The sleeves come down to the wrists and are fastened with hooks which do not show".

It is perhaps astonishing to see the insistence with which the Founder dwells on certain details: "without buttons", "A large hook on the inside", "hooks which do not show". Such insistence is, however, significant. Ecclesiastical as well as civilian fashion required a lot of buttons down the front of soutanes and coats, on the sleeves and on the facings. The buttons had to be of quality and were often ostentatiously luxurious: precious metals, mother of pearl or, at least, silk. External hooks could also serve as a pretext for sophisticated ornamentation.

On the other hand, monks, mendicant friars and other regulars insisted on the fact that their habits were fastened by cords or other means and without ornaments. If he could not present the dress of the Brothers as a "regular habit" — today we would say a religious habit — M. de La Salle insisted on letting the ecclesiastical authorities of Paris understand that the Brothers lived as religious and considered that they should dress in a manner befitting their state as "persons withdrawn from the world".

That first taking of the habit in the winter of 1684-85 was meant, precisely, to witness to this fact. Before their pupils, before the parishoners of Rheims, Rethel and elsewhere the Brothers, wearing this habit, "professed" their membership of a Community which was not to be confused with any other. Neither ecclesiastic, secular nor regular — in the sense in which the Church understood these terms — the disciples of M. de La Salle insisted on their identity as Brothers of the Christian Schools.

"Since (the adoption of) this habit", states the memoir, "a person has no other idea when he asks for admission but to join a Community and remain there for the rest of his life. He does not know what it is to ask for wages and considers himself happy to be accepted. It is the habit alone which produces these effects".

The "Memoir on the Habit" is preserved in the Archives of the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. For over a century several biographers or historians of the Institute have reproduced longer or shorter extracts from it. The complete text, in modern spelling, can be found in "Cahiers Lasalliens" 11, pages 349 to 354.

Brother Maurice HERMANS
ROME