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DE LA SALLE AND THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES

We shall deal here only with the original reaction of John Baptist de La Salle with regard to the civil authorities.

We begin with the cities, municipalities and parishes.

1) Distrust of the cities:

Legally, because the 17th century considers the school as "educative" and not merely a dispenser of "knowledge", the scholastic institutions are the moral responsibility of the clergy, although civil authority had its rights in their regard.

La Salle is engaged in a school adventure because of the last will and testament of Nicolas Roland which makes him the executor. He is twenty-seven years old. He cannot set aside the wishes of the deceased. He therefore follows his wishes literally. With the approbation of the Archbishop, he vigorously intervenes before the municipal authorities so that an inquiry "de commodo et incommodo" be undertaken and that the local approbation lead to the granting of the Royal Lettres Patentes. He opposes the town authorities in the administration of the office of the poor and of the General Hospital in order to obtain for the Sisters of the Infant Jesus a greater pedagogical and pastoral independence; In 1679, the Sisters thus obtain the Lettres Patentes which recognizes no other valid superior for them except the Archbishop or his designate. Their schools are at the same time "officially" municipal and diocesan "Christian-Catholic" to use a favourite expression of St. John Baptist de La Salle in his *Duties of a Christian*. So, it is the Archbishop who exercises authority over them and not the municipality. However, the latter may at times underwrite certain expenses for services rendered to the people.

Accordingly, when Adrien Nyel arrives in Rouen from Rheims, he does not go to the town council nor to the General Hospital but to John Baptist de La Salle, as to a parish priest in need of a good school teacher. This is a course quite different from that set by Nicolas Roland. The masters for the boys' school will not be part-time hospital aids as were the Sisters of Roland who ran an orphanage. They will not be subjected to the pressures of the city official nor of those in charge of the hospital. The latter like the former would just impede these homeless children and at little expense at that, without being too concerned that they be properly educated, provided that the "public order" is respected.

2) Liaison with parish authorities

La Salle operates therefore with the parish priest and the parish authorities. This "Framework", that is, this team in charge of the administration of the parish assets is the true democratically organized authority for the management of the assets of the clergy. The parish priest receives from them his financing and it is to them that he renders an account. It is vital to be aware that the French Government today, characterized by its "separation of Church and State" was entirely unknown in the seventeenth century. In that period the term "Parish" was used not in a "religious" context but of a temporal jurisdiction having at its head the parish priest and having an economic administrative assistant responsible for all non-religious affairs. The important citizens were grouped by "parishes". The land claims by the Esates-General in 1789 will be done "by parishes" and will be matter-of-fact when not anti-religious.

So it is through the parishes that appeals are made to La Salle. In other words, the people are bound by

two types of authority: the parish priest to represent the Church and the layman to determine the families' temporal needs.

At Rheims it is the pastor of Saint-Maurice who requests a teacher and who receives Adrien Nyel accompanied by his 14 year old assistant. They are responsible to the pastor and not to the town nor to the hospital in charge of the poor and their education. In case of a disagreement, Nyel is free to leave, the same as the parish priest can dismiss him without any formal process. There is complete liberty on the side of both parties concerned.

It is the same in the three gratuitous schools in Rheims run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools established at the request of the pastor. The lay authority in particular and at times even those of the municipality cover the expenses but no one is constrained to continue indefinitely in this collaboration. A good school will survive... an inept school will fold up... This is the law of progress, of pedagogical innovation, of devotedness which is always considered for the well-being of children.

The second stage: the Archbishop of Rheims wants to keep La Salle solely in his own diocese. La Salle hesitates. He consults the Minim religious priest, Father Barré, a man of great virtue (Rome has just proclaimed the heroicity of his virtues). The answer is clear: leave your homeland like Abraham, spread out throughout France, and begin by going to Paris and seeking authorization of the Archbishop there. La Salle knows from other sources, the importance that Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Sulpiciens, attributed to gratuitous Christian Schools. He therefore establishes a school in the parish of St. Sulpice, where he and his Brothers replace the teachers there, who are dedicated, but whose educational competence is limited. He takes charge of other schools. Finally, every part of this parish of 50,000 inhabitants has its Christian gratuitous and public school. No permission is ever requested from the civil authorities of the city, nor of the ecclesiastical authorities of the school of Paris. It is only the parish priest who, in favour of the needs of his parishioners, that is of the children and their families, gets involved in this new organisation. Subsequently, when a disagreement arises between the pastor and La Salle, the latter leaves Paris for Rouen: their mutual liberty permits this separation without juridical or financial complications. Upon the insistent demands of the parents and when the pastor returns to a more amicable disposition, La Salle does not hesitate to return and to furnish him with Brothers.

3) More complex relations

In Rouen, it is less simple. Archbishop Colbert open his doors. The city authorities are not asked because it is the Office of the Poor, in which Nyel was formerly in charge of the schools, which is responsible for gratuitous school service. But the Office is composed of the President of the Parliament, the Archbishop and various representatives of the city council. La Salle is requested to let the Brothers stay at the hospital and there take care of the orphanage as well as of the dormitory of the young apprentices. Having been chased out of Paris, La Salle accepts. Very soon the Brothers are overwhelmed by the excessive work and begin to fall ill. La Salle negotiates a revision of the contract. The hospital work is given up for the greater good of the schools formerly established in every part of the city by Adrien Nyel. The city will soon contribute to the financing of the school in cooperation with the General Hospital and various benefactors, but this will not give them any right to interfere with the educational methods of the Brothers or in the recruitment of their pupils. In case of a disagreement, their only recourse will be the threat of removing their financial support. The choice of teachers remains exclusively reserved to De La Salle and to his successors as the head of the Institute.

For the most part events in the other cities developed in an analogous fashion: the municipal administration are in a consultative role but they do not actively participate in the success of the founding of the schools, nor do they have any decisive grip on the Lasallian institution. These schools ever retain full liberty to evolve, develop, and to educate in a Christian manner and in following the teaching of the programme elaborated by the Brothers themselves in answering the real needs of the gratuitous pupils. The civil authorities can only suggest changes, raise or lower their financial support in order to exercise some pressure, but they do not have the power to interfere in the internal running of the school.

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