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THE PROTO-CHAPTER OF THE BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS, SPRINGTIME 1986

At least three times, at Rheims, Vaugirard, and then at Saint-Yon, St. De La Salle called a number of Brothers together, to form a deliberative assembly to study the current situation and to make several major decisions. Without perhaps being designated as such, these assemblies were in fact «General Chapters».

The last two are known, not only from the accounts given by De Maillefer and by Blain, but also from the register of vows and even from the first capitular register which we possess even until today. The first assembly, that of Rheims, is known to us only from the accounts of Brother Bernard, and of two other biographers.

1. A Slight Doubt: 1686?

The four accounts of the first biographers, Bernard, Maillefer 1723, Blain, Maillefer 1740, are unanimous in fixing this first assembly around the feast of Pentecost. Still, they are less in agreement when it comes to fixing the exact date. Bernard seems to waver between 1686 and 1687, the two Maillefer accounts adhere to 1686, and Blain mentions 1684 twice. Yet, Blain does not hesitate to contradict himself, not only in the matter of chronology, but even when he brings up the deliberations and decisions of this same assembly.

Explicitly, for example, he sets this first assembly as following the return of Adrien Nyel to Rouen. This departure obliged De La Salle to take over the schools of Guise and Laon. Because he was already in charge of the teachers in Rheims, Rethel and Château-Porcien, in the future he would also be seen as the head of a little congregation, to use the very words of the biographer. It is precisely because of this new fact, that De La Salle takes the initiative of calling the Brothers of the different communities together to meet with them on a certain number of points concerning community practices. It is, therefore useless to fix this assembly to the date 1684 or even before the Autumn of 1685, since Monsieur Nyel, at the time, was still running the schools in the Diocese of Laon.

There are other contradictions: Blain contradicts himself in affirming that the Brothers assembled there made only the vow of obedience, since this biographer elsewhere claims that since 1684, the Brothers had taken the vows of obedience, stability in the society, and teaching gratuitously. All this anticipates by ten years the pronouncement of vows at Vaugirard in 1694, in such a way that there would be no need to further delay such a formula of profession.

If we discard the date 1684, the year 1686 seems to offer the safest guarantees, which explains why it is generally accepted as the actual time of the first assembly convoked by De La Salle.

2. An attempt at a calendar.

Neither here are the biographers perfectly in agreement. Yet all of them assert that the assembly from the outset was a common retreat. Certainly deliberations were carried on, but only in the climate of a spiritual retreat. And this would remain a constant factor of all General Chapters of the Institute: the chapter always opens with a retreat, which is often extended beyond one week.

According to the biographies, the assemblies of 1686 and 1694 were essentially times of spiritual retreat. There were not two separate times, first a retreat, and then the chapter; the deliberations were rather included within the retreat program as another spiritual exercise. It is true that these deliberations had to deal with questions which were vital to the community: the rules (in 1694) and the vows (in 1686).

Two of our accounts set the beginning of this assembly-retreat on the Feast of Pentecost; two others have it begin on the vigil of the Ascension. For these latter two, it was supposed to close on Pentecost Sunday, but it was extended another week to Trinity Sunday, the closing day then being unanimously fixed for this same Sunday, the first after Pentecost, and the Feast of the Blessed Trinity. This would give us for the year 1686, successively, May 22, as the Vigil of Ascension, June 2, as Pentecost Sunday, and June 9 as Trinity Sunday.

3. The Participants.

Twice we read, «The Principal Brothers»; and even «The twelve principal Brothers» according to Blain, which again seems to be an anticipation. In 1694, The Brothers Capitulars would truly be twelve in number. But in 1686 how could there be twelve principal Brothers when the total number of Brothers hardly passed that figure by two or three?

The two accounts of De Maillefer try to be more precise: the superiors of Laon, Rethel and Guise, with those of the house of Rheims made up the complete assembly, he wrote in 1723. «The principal Brothers were distributed among the three cities where they had schools», he wrote in 1740 to which we have to add, without any doubt, some Brothers or maybe even all the Brothers of the house in Rheims.

De La Salle, then, did not call all of the Brothers, but he reserved to himself the choice of some Brothers in preference to others. He must have done the same thing for the assemblies of 1694 and 1717. Following suit, the first general chapters convened by the successors of De La Salle, also seem to have been made up of Brothers designated by the authority of their superiors. The Bull of Approbation of 1725 limited itself to merely fixing the number of capitulants, without specifying how they should be chosen.

What can be understood by the «principal» among the Brothers of 1686? The «superiors» of whom Maillefer speaks? The word «directors» would have been more in line with Institute language. Could it refer to still other Brothers who, by their age or by their seniority in the community, were designated as those who could speak in the name of all? How many would this be? The figure of twelve, proffered by Blain, and repeated more than once in his account, could be a maximum one, and there are strong reasons for considering this an exaggeration. One thing appears to be certain, and that is that each of the five or six houses which made up the Community was represented by one Brother or another.

4. The Object of the deliberations.

The Community of the Brothers had already been given a name and religious habit; the details of the exercises of the house and of the school had already been set down in a fixed schedule. With regard to the rules proper to the Community, De La Salle considered that it was still too early to propose the first codification of these. It was necessary first to follow the experience of the first years, to at first loyally live this life of laymen consecrated to the ministry of education, before dreaming about formulating concrete needs and their guiding principles.

Still, it was necessary that this Community be given an ever stronger coherence, to affirm its identity, to call it Brothers of the Christian Schools, to wear a habit which was a way of professing that it was a religious community, in fact if not by law, and that the members of this family were already bound together. Yet, in 1686, nobody, not even De La Salle himself ever dreamed that the community had to be guaranteed by a new title or by several formal observances. Therefore, written into the agenda of the assembly was the following reservation: should it be proposed to the Brothers that they bind themselves by vows? If this should be answered affirmatively, then by which vows? Should they at once be perpetual vows, or should they only be temporary? What should be the object of these vows?

Such an agenda came to the knowledge of the biographers almost in this form. But how were they informed of this since they wrote about thirty years after the event itself, and for two of them, nearly forty years after. They wrote at a time when the Brothers were not familiar with this period of beginnings and had not taken part in the assembly of 1686.

5. The interventions of De La Salle.

The biographers themselves present an opening address: Bernard and Maillefer are rather concise, Canon Blain is prolific, as usual. We can very legitimately refuse to accept his account when he pretends to reconstruct the propositions of De La Salle, word for word, and even and especially when he puts them within quotation marks, which for him never had the precise meaning that we are accustomed to giving them today.

But then, should we deny all credibility to the account given by this canon biographer? That would be excessive and pitiful. Still, looking at other passages by the same author could help in determining a just assessment of things. In 1717, for example, at Saint-Yon, Canon Blain is in the house itself where the assembly of the Brothers takes place. He is in the house but not in the chapter room. This in no way prevents him from extensively reproducing the speech which he attributes to the Founder. Very fortunately for us, he further adds: «With these or similar words, the Servant of God put his disciples into the disposition which he desired for them». (Blain, II, p. 135).

It does not then seem offensive to the memory of Canon Blain to evaluate such an avowal each time we gather from under his pen the words he himself puts into the mouth of De La Salle: «these words or others similar to these»!

All the same, it is in May-June of 1686 that De La Salle and the Brothers grapple with the question of the vows. Immediately, it seems, the Brothers present wish to bind themselves by the three vows common to religious orders: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Such a proposal on their part should come as no surprise. For the past two years at least, the Brothers' community had taken on the aspects of a religious house. The Brothers were certainly not the last to notice this ever stricter affinity which was absorbing them into the religious life. Not only were they aware of it, but they accepted it whole heartedly, and they wanted it to become ever more perfect. From this frame of mind came their proposal to bind themselves by the three traditional vows.

It would take the authority of De La Salle to convince them not to press so soon for the realization of their desires. This intervention of the Founder seems to have been decisive and for the next forty years, the Brothers would not pronounce the vows of poverty and chastity. With regard to the vow of obedience, it was binding for a limited but extensive time: three years, with the possibility of renewing it each year for another three-year period.

De La Salle himself, bound himself by vow, and he took his obligations to obedience very seriously! This time he was vowing obedience not to his ecclesiastical superiors, but to the superiors who were within this little community, and then soon to Brother Henry L'Heureux whom the Brothers would elect to replace him. This took place the following year, in 1687.

Brother Maurice HERMANS
ROME