

## AT PARIS, 31 MAY 1686

Soon, it will be exactly three hundred years ago that a Minim religious of great reputation, Father Nicholas Barré, reached the age of 65.

Ever since, his name has without fail continued to figure into the biographies of Saint John Baptist De La Salle. Truly, he was for our saint a trusted counselor, even though their personal contacts were not very numerous. The austerity of the Minim religious was not at all displeasing to the canon from Rheims. His initiatives in favor of the education of poor children further recommended him to the one whom God was leading to create in his home town the community which would become the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

### 1. Some particularly significant dates

On December 17, 1621, at Saint-Germain d'Amiens, Nicholas was baptized, the son of Louis Barré.

On January 31, 1642, in the convent of Nigeon (Paris), Nicholas Barré made his religious profession in the order of the Clerics Regular Minims of Saint Francis of Paul.

In 1643, at Place Royale in Paris, the young professed cleric began a stay which would continue on until his departure for Rouen in 1659. He had hardly been ordained in 1645 or 1646, when he was named preacher and confessor.

Here, as later in Rouen, he merited the confidence of his superiors and of his confreres in religion, under various titles as librarian, professor of philosophy, then of theology, local superior, provincial, etc..

Besides that, he would be appreciated above all as a confessor and spiritual guide.

In 1659, Father Barré was in Rouen, and he would remain there for a dozen years. It was there above all that he would become interested in the work of the schools and the training of women teachers for the various types of teaching which he advocated: elementary, trade, and Sunday schools, catechetical schools, normal schools for the training of women teachers.

In contact with Canon Nicholas Roland, with Adrien Nyel, and Madame Maillefer, he would encourage the opening of a free primary school in Rheims before working closely with John Baptist De La Salle for at least two attempts. On December 27, 1670, Françoise Duval and Anne Le Coeur, who were working in Rouen in a school for little poor girls, arrived in Reims by the order of Father Barré so that they could take charge of the good work begun by Canon Roland and which would become the "Congregation of the Holy Child Jesus" of Rheims.

In 1675, Father Barré was to return to Place Royale, Paris. It is there that John Baptist De La Salle paid him a visit more than once and especially during the years 1681-1683.

Between 1678 and 1679, at Rouen, Madame Maillefer, another benefactress of the work of Father Barré, organized the departure of Adrien Nyel, up until that time the economer general of the poor, and sent him to Rheims to open a charity school there.

In 1679, very probably in March, Adrien Nyel met Canon John Baptist De La Salle for the first time.

In 1679, or a bit later, Father Barré took a great interest in the training of some men school teachers whom he envisioned to even form a community similar to that established for the women teachers of the girls' schools, which he had brought to such a success.

This plan is clearly affirmed in the texts. It is more difficult to find out what point of success it had reached. The teachers had, without doubt, considered themselves as followers of Father Barré. Yet, it seems that they did not really form a "community".

In 1685, the *Statutes and Regulations of the Christian and Charitable schools of the Holy Infant Jesus* were published in Paris. This draft was planned and drafted by the women teachers even if once or again explicit mention was made of men teachers to whom it would equally apply. Such a reference is already found in the complete title of the pamphlet. It is not found in another draft of the "statutes", which remained in manuscript form and which seems to have appeared in the year 1677.

In 1687, a work was published in Paris, entitled, *Meditations for the Teaching Sisters of the Charity Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus, of the Late Rev. Father Barré, Minim, Principally for the Time of their Retreat and their Spiritual Exercises, on the Principal Duties of their State; Which can Serve also for all Men and Women School Teachers to Make them Aware of the Importance and the Obligations of their Profession. By R.P.P. Giry, Exprovincial of the Minims and Director of the Same Institute.*

In 1694 the work, *An Abridgment of the History of the Institution of the Charity Schools of Father Barré... Spiritual Maxims of Reverend Father Barré* was published in Paris.

In 1697, also in Paris, appeared the work, *Spiritual Letters of Reverend Father Nicholas Barré, a Religious of the Order of Minims.*

### 2. Barré and De La Salle

The first information that we have is that of Brother Bernard when he mentions Nicholas Barré in his account of the "Admirable conduct of Divine Providence in the person of the Venerable Servant of God, John Baptist De La Salle". (Cahiers Lasalliens 4, which reproduced the manuscript of Brothers Bernard after a copy date of 1722).

Brother Bernard, who wrote in 1721, was aware of the existence of the Congregation of teaching women which Barré had been the soul of until his death thirty-five years earlier. He twice recalls that Barré dreamed not

only of the education of young girls but he wanted to join to this work men teachers whom he would train for boys' schools.

"Having happily succeeded in the schools for young girls, he wrote, those which he had established for boys in several places and above all in Saint-Gervais, where he had six teachers, were not, in fact, very successful; for the teachers were so disorganized that soon they succumbed to all kind of disorders and all of them left, one after the other (Bd. p. 37).

Bernard was not a historian by profession; but he was able to discover and present a certain number of "memoires" concerning events which he himself had not known personally. Sometimes he expresses himself rather awkwardly; but his unpretentious style is perhaps the best guarantee of the respect with which he treated some sources. If we indeed cannot ask him to give here a perception of all the initiatives which De La Salle may owe to those of his predecessors, we cannot help but appreciate the veracity with which the Brother biographer recounts the two interventions of Father Barré in close association with the Canon of Rheims.

The cause of beatification and canonization of Father Nicholas Barré being at the threshold of the Roman Congregation for Sainly Causes, a thick volume of XC-618 pages contains the efforts to gather together all that might serve to justify the introduction of this cause. The wish to be thorough is seen all throughout the 700 pages of this "Positio". But it falls short of having all the "proofs" given being of equal value. They would have to be approached with a sound critical spirit, especially perhaps in what concerns a claimed continuity between some Parisian school teachers pertaining to Barré and the disciples of De La Salle.

There is no doubt, that directly and through intermediaries, John Baptist De La Salle got wind of the educational work founded by Nicholas Barré. Also, without doubt, at one time or another, some thin connection could be made between certain passages in the writings of the two founders. Perhaps the most remarkable note of the apparent connection could be found in some of the spiritual maxims of one and the other. And it could be said that this spirituality of abandonment to Divine Providence which so deeply marked the existence of these two men was of their initiative and their apostolic endeavours!

But all this must be re-set within a much larger context before trying to establish a connection between two works which could have benefitted each other by helps other than those held on to by the authors of the "Positio".

### 3. Two decisive moments in the life of De La Salle

A few precise points given by Bernard fortunately confirm the role played more than once by Father Barré in the beginning of De La Salle's work. De La Salle was examining himself then on the meaning of the renouncement which God seemed to be asking of him.

"Seeing, says Bernard, that he had rented the house for the teachers for only a year and a half, that is, until the feast of Saint John the Baptist of the year 1681, six months before the end of the lease, he hesitated about continuing to rent a house for them or to lodge them in his own house so that he could look after their conduct more closely and have them lead a more regulated life... In this perplexity, God furnished him with an opportunity of making a trip to Paris for certain affairs. He took advantage of this to go to visit Reverend Father Barré who at that time was at the convent of the Reverend Fathers Minims at the Place Royale. He related to him all that had transpired in Rheims with regard to the school masters. This worthy son of Saint Francis of Paul, full of experience, did not hesitate in a similar predicament and at once advised De La Salle to let the school masters live with him in his own house". (Bd pp. 36-37).

The Canon hesitated no longer. When the lease expired, the following June 24, he received the teachers under his own roof. This was the beginning of a common life which would lead him ever more strictly to share the conditions of some young men who had been recruited, however too quickly, to run the three schools in Rheims. And a modern commentator has remarked: The fact that De La Salle lived among his first companions had to be the determining factor in the birth of a true community. His position as a secular priest allowed him to do what Father Barré, a religious minim, could not have envisioned for himself. Obligated to live apart from the teachers, he would not be able to assure them of the support of his presence and of a type of formation which was indispensable for them.

But De La Salle had the means. Should he use it for "founding" schools and above all his community of teachers? Many of his friends advised him to do so. But, Bernard continues,

"He was dissuaded from this by Reverend Father Barré whom he often saw when going from time to time from Rheims to Paris, and who told him that he should not fund the schools, because, when Our Lord Jesus Christ said in the Gospels: the foxes have their dens and the birds of the air have their nests but the Son of man has not where to lay his head, he meant by the foxes the people of the world who are attached to the goods of this earth, by the birds of the air, the religious who have their own little cells, but those who set out to establish schools should have the same lot as the Son of man". (Bd p. 48).

This paraphrasing of this text of the Gospel could very easily be rejected, but the council was clear, and De La Salle resolved to follow it, he would sacrifice his canonry and personal fortune. Again, Father Barré led De La Salle down the narrow path. He shared not only the daily existence of the first Brothers, but voluntarily, he chose the poverty or at least the insecurity which would in the future be their common lot:

"This community, De La Salle would later write, is at present founded on nothing else but Providence". (Treatise on the Habit).

And this "at present" would last for the entire lifetime of De La Salle. No matter how decisive they may have been during these early years, these directives of Father Barré do not warrant making of the religious Minim a true "spiritual director" of the canon of Rheims. Bernard and other biographers furthermore are quite explicit in this regard when they make, and with what authority, this director intervene in the transactions of La Salle in renouncing his canonry.

A simple counselor, if you will, Father Barré is not less than one of those who helped John Baptist De La Salle the most and best in recognizing what was "the will of God in his regard" this will which, on his death bed, our holy Founder would adore in all things.