

THE FIRST NOVITIATE AND TRAINING SCHOOL FOR COUNTRY TEACHERS

At Rheims Three Hundred Years Ago:

1. Continual Formation as well as, and in addition to, initial formation

When he deals with the history of the initial years of De La Salle's Community, Brother Bernard observes that as yet there was no novitiate. And he adds a few words which we could find quite humorous:

"It was enough for an applicant (later on called, 'postulant') to have been about a fortnight with this holy man to be prepared to be sent out teaching, such were the examples of virtue that he gave them; he and his Brothers were such an inspirations". (BD 79)

When these two weeks, which, let us say, were spent in an optimum manner, were over, the young Brother continued to live quite close to De La Salle; in contact with him, the young man's formation continued for many years.

Here is how Brother Bernard explains the opening of the first novitiate:

"Since he was a man of faith, he looked for the hand of God in everything that happened to him, and this is what could be noticed in what we are about to relate. A young man, fifteen years of age, who had presented himself for reception into the Institute, was sent to the Servant of God while he was still in Rheims. He was accepted even though it was not customary to receive candidates so young. After a short time, three more like him came. Then, the Servant of God, recognizing in the acceptance of these young men that God was offering an occasion favourable to the Institute, decided to establish a community with these four plus any others like them who would subsequently come. It so happened that God so blessed this enterprise that in two months this little community was composed of twelve young men, for whom a rule was provided and an older Brother was assigned to live with them in order to win them over to Christ, according to the example of the Apostle". (BD 84)

Maillefer and Blain also speak about the opening of this "little community".

"This little seminary, 'writes blain' served as a preparation and as a novitiate for the Institute... The schedule there was somewhat like that followed today in the novitiate". (I.280)

"The exercises followed there", adds Maillefer, "were a bit like those in practice at present in the novitiate of the Institute". (Ms Re, 68)

These clear affirmations made no impression on those in the nineteenth century who would be the creators of what was then called the "Junior Novitiate", presented as the restoration, after 150 years, of the institution created in Rheims in 1686 or 1687. This often led to treating these "little novices" as if they were equal to novices and to giving them a schedule of rules and practices which could very well have the validity of the canonical year of formation.

2. A certain lack of precision: 1686 or 1687?

The first three biographers, Bernard, Maillefer, and Blain, place the opening of this novitiate before the departure of De La Salle for Paris. That, then, would be before 1688. Their accounts lead us to believe, that this was not a last-minute operation: The Founder certainly would have valued following the initial steps of these three in the novitiate above any advantage he might gain in Paris.

On the other hand, our oldest register of admissions contains, for the year 1686, the admission in October of that year of a youth named Jean Jacot (or Jacquot), the future Assistant of Brothers Barthélemy and Timothy, who was then only 14 years old. He was probably one of the first novices, if not the very first. No other name of a 14 or 15 year old boy appears in the register for that year. Still, we have to be prudent because we do not have the actual register of that distant year in its original form, rather we have merely a compilation dating back to 1714 which does not contain the names of all of the Brothers then living in the Institute.

Until we are better informed, let us leave the choice between the year 1686 and the year following.

In 1689 or 1690, when he would write the Treatise on the Holy Habit, the Founder would present the novitiate at Rheims as an institution in full operation:

"Also in this community, youths of good disposition and piety are trained, and when they are judged to be, and reckon themselves to be, prepared, they then enter one of the teaching communities.

They are accepted into the formation community at the age of fourteen or older".

"They are trained in mental prayer and in other exercises of piety. They are instructed in all the catechetical materials and they are taught to read and write perfectly". (MH, 7)

3. A Seminary for Country Teachers. A Training School for Country Teachers

The Brothers of De La Salle would go only to the towns; only there could they lead a community life which was for them so indispensable. Still, very soon, the Founder demonstrated his concern for the needs of the rural population. It was said that he was available to take charge of the training of young candidates who intended to become teachers in rural areas. Thus, since April 2 1683, in a statement made by the above mentioned, Canon Remi Favart declared:

"He did not wish to retain any right over the said house (acquired by him) which would be used by the venerable and discreet person, John Baptist De La Salle, priest, doctor of theology, canon of the said church, for lodging there gratuitous schools begun in the said place in Rechtel, and to lodge the teachers who apply, even to establish there, if he can, a training school for country teachers for the said diocese of Rheims". (Cf. BEC 161, April 1960).

It was not until 1685 that De La Salle formally committed himself, and this twice, to furnish "Brothers" for the training of school teachers for rural areas: the first time was for the diocese of Rheims, the second time for the diocese of Laon, but each time it was for the land of the Duke de Mazarin. The first contract would not be valid without the agreement of the Archbishop of Rheims; when the Archbishop met the Duke and De La Salle, he unceremoniously showed them the door: "Both of you are fools", he told them. Now, the second contract for a foundation outside the diocese of Rheims, appears to have never even gotten started.

Yet, in 1686 or 1687, things changed: it was no longer the Duke, a *persona non grata* with the archbishop, but it was the priests of the diocese of Rheims who asked De La Salle to train auxiliaries for their parishes who would also be at the same time school teachers. This time the Saint could no longer escape.

For Bernard, the opening of this training school

for country teachers followed that of the Novitiate (Bd 85) but remained prior to the departure of De La Salle for Paris. Maillefer holds on to the year 1687 (Ms Re, 68). For Blain, the novitiate and the training school were opened "about the same time". (I 279)

In his "Treatise on the Habit", the holy Founder presents the "Seminary" with a certain detail:

"Here (in this community) efforts were made to train teachers for country schools in a house which was separate from the community and which was called a seminary.

Those who were trained there, lived there only for a few years until they were entirely trained in piety as well as in the work.

The only habit they wore was that worn ordinarily by people of the world, except that it was black or at least very dark brown, and they were distinguished from other lay people by a rabat and by wearing their hair shorter.

There they were taught to sing, read, and write perfectly. Without any charge, they were given room, board, and laundry. After that they were placed in some town or village where they acted as clerks; once assigned there, they no longer had any contact with the community except for some friendly social one. However, they were accepted there to make their retreat". (MH 4, 5, 6).

Thus it was that three hundred years ago, that would be from the very first years of its existence, the Lasallian work appeared happily diversified: the Brothers themselves took charge of the children in the city parishes; by their training of clerk-teachers, they assured the education of the children in the rural parishes, which perhaps had been more neglected. Upon their entry into the "Community", the postulants were trained under the eyes of the Founder in a novitiate where it was desirable that their preparation be well adapted for what they would do next.

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Brother Maurice HERMANS