

1687: THE ELECTION OF THE FIRST BROTHER SUPERIOR

Truthfully speaking, a slight doubt is possible with regard to the date. The first biographer, Brother Bernard, at first hesitated, then he retracts once, before finally adopting the year 1687. After him, Maillefer also accepts the year 1687. But Blain is less precise: He sets the happening after a spiritual retreat which the Founder conducted in a hermitage of the Carmelite Fathers in the year 1686. The three biographers are well agreed, however, on one important point: the event was subsequent, more or less, to Trinity Sunday of 1686 in which the Founder and some Brothers bound themselves by the vow of obedience for three years.

1. The persons in question.

Many of the Brothers who had pronounced the vow of 1686, perhaps others also, met at Rheims, Rue Neuve, together with De La Salle. They made the spiritual exercises of a retreat. Several of those who had made the vow of obedience were disposed to renew it. Just as in the previous year, this retreat seems to have taken place between the Pentecostal feasts and the days following.

It seems that they were taken by surprise when De La Salle proposed that they should take advantage of this reunion to choose by way of an election one among themselves who would become their superior and would be in charge of the internal government of the community. From reading the biographers, it can be noted that the Founder had a difficult time convincing the Brothers of this, which is easily understandable. However, more out of respect than conviction, they agreed to the election and their votes went to Brother Henri Lheureux.

This was a choice that surprised nobody except the one elected. It was a choice which De La Salle had foreseen, and perhaps had himself suggested.

The biographers tell us about Brother Henri Lheureux's qualities and virtues. That is almost all we know about him. Was he a native of Rheims, or at least of Champagne? Probably. He was one of the first, if not the very first to enter the community at the Rue Neuve, maybe even the house of De La Salle. A perhaps not too clear passage from Canon Blain leads us to believe that in 1686 Brother Henri was 24 years of age.

From this distant period in history, the registers containing the names of those who entered the community are no longer extant. The oldest ones we have been able to compile are from 1714 or perhaps a bit later, and these deliberately omit the names of those who previously had died or had left the community. No trace, therefore, of Brother Henri Lheureux exists in this register. This Brother certainly died in Paris, in the parish of Saint-Sulpice, almost certainly in 1690: the parish records of this period were just as poorly kept as were those of the

Brothers' communities. At any rate, the signature of Brother Henri Lheureux can be read at the bottom of the death notice of a certain Jean Morice, "died the first day of May (1687) at about 17 years of age".

This death notice is found in the parish register of Saint-Etienne in Rheims, for the years 1686-1700. This Jean Morice has been identified with the Brother Maurice to whom Canon Blain makes many references and who died either at the end of April or at the beginning of May, 1687, "at the age of twenty-two". Going especially by the date and the signature in the parish register, May 1, 1687, we can conclude that Brother Henri Lheureux was at Rheims and that he presented himself to the parish priest, Simon Lhermite, in the parish of Saint-Etienne, as the Brother most qualified to attest to the death of one who seems to have been his young confrere.

2. De La Salle's motives in deciding that the Brothers should proceed to elect one among themselves as Superior of the community.

The first biographers do not hesitate to tell us that De La Salle himself justified his reasons before the assembled Brothers. Being the only priest in a community, created by himself, and constituted exclusively of lay people, the Founder considered it most suitable if not necessary, that the superior of this community should himself be non-clerical.

"In an exhortation which he gave the Brothers, he presented very valid reasons for the necessity of having a Brother as the Superior of the community. (Bernard, p. 74).

He argued that, once their numbers had increased, then several among their number could be found very capable of governing the body, and that it was very important and even necessary that they choose one among themselves into whose hands he could hand over the government. (Maillefer, ms. Carbon, p. 42; ms. Rheims, p. 64).

These two themes presented by the first biographers would be amply developed much later by Canon Blain. It is regrettable that, in doing so, the third biographer insisted so much on another reason attributed to De La Salle, namely, that his wish to live out his vow of obedience in a state of subjection was incompatible with his exercise of the role of superior. Without doubt, once Brother Henri Lheureux was elected, the Founder multiplied signs of deference towards him. Equally without doubt, he demonstrated that he was particularly pleased with being able to live in that state of obedience and humility which he had deliberately chosen. Still, the wish to "lower himself" cannot be given as the only or even principal reason which had led the priest, John Baptist De La Salle, to have one of the Brothers elected as Superior of the Community.

3. The election of Brother Lheureux is nullified by the diocesan authorities.

Brother Bernard was the first one, albeit only after the death of the Founder, that means thirty years after the events at the Rue Neuve, to gather some testimonies from one or other of the Brothers who had lived under the superiority of Brother Henri Lheureux. It is beyond doubt that the Abbé De La Salle, the former Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, pushed his duty of obedience to the new Superior to its ultimate consequences. This had those out

side of the community talking. Among the ecclesiastics, and especially among those who had the easiest access to the ear of the Grand Vicar, this was talked about quite bluntly and even severely condemned. It was inconceivable for these gentlemen of the higher clergy that a priest, and what was more, a former Canon, could so lower himself as to obey a simple Brother, a lay person without the slightest clerical dignity.

By the order of the office of the Archbishop, the election of Brother Henri was declared unacceptable, which re-instated De La Salle in his role as Superior. It is impossible to be specific about the level of those intervening. The election of Brother Henri Lheureux evidently had never been ratified by the ecclesiastical authorities. It was valid strictly within the community, and the intervention of the Ordinary was perfectly in order since it was a question of re-establishing the presence of a cleric within the heart of an association of the faithful which did not possess any other canonical status.

Such an intervention did not require any official act by the chancellery. So, this does not exclude the possibility that it was simply an oral notification to the persons concerned, hence, principally to De La Salle himself. This is the impression gathered from a reading of the biographers.

Many people complained to the ecclesiastical superiors about De La Salle's conduct, wrote Brother Bernard, believing that De La Salle had done injury to his character and had in some way debased himself. That is why, to his great disappointment, he had to once again assume the superiorship which he had given up so joyfully. (Bernard, p. 78).

They (the ecclesiastical superiors) found it wrong that a priest, a doctor and former Canon of the cathedral should unreservedly submit himself to a simple Brother not invested in any kind of distinction. The many drawbacks of such a situation were presented to him and he was obliged to re-assume the superiorship which he had given up. (Maillefer, ms. Carbon, p. 44; ms. Rheims, p. 66).

They (the ecclesiastical superiors) came to the new house to re-install De La Salle, to his great regret, in the place of Superior, and to make Brother Lheureux step down, according to their wishes. (Blain, I, p. 267).

And two pages later the same biographer writes: De La Salle was obliged by the Grand Vicars to re-assume the first place, which he previously had held, much to his own disappointment. (Id. p. 270).

This last affirmation allows us perhaps to be precisely sure that the term "they" refers to "the ecclesiastical superiors", Still, all the same, we would hesitate to claim that the Grand Vicars themselves came to the Brothers' community.

4. The consequences of the diocesan intervention.

Without delay, there was a pure and simple return to the previous condition: the Brothers were governed by De La Salle, who had been confirmed in his position as Superior by the ecclesiastical authorities.

Still, when dreaming of the future, the Founder stuck to his idea that the Superior ought to be one of the members of the community as a whole. He did not want any Superior other than a Brother. He was apprehensive lest his own nomination should set a precedent, and that after him, another intervention by the Ordinary should bring in some ecclesiastic from the outside to become superior, a total stranger, who could in no way continue the spirit and traditions of the community.

His reflection and prayer convinced him finally, albeit reluctantly, to resort to a compromise solution. Brother Henri Lheureux had shown himself to be a good superior. Being one of the most senior members of the community, he could easily lead, if the agreement of the ecclesiastical superiors were not wanting. Such an agreement, without doubt, could be obtained if he were vested with priestly authority. De La Salle hence asked the Brother to prepare himself for Holy Orders. He himself taught Brother Henri Latin, and the Brother then followed courses in Philosophy and Theology, first in Rheims and then in Paris. De La Salle would then present him for ordination.

This initiative of the Founder could rightly surprise us. Everything that we know about him shows him to be a person of great discretion and prudence. His letters show that he was an extremely reserved man and that he highly respected the freedom of those whom he directed each time that they had recourse to him with a decision involving their conscience. Yet, here we have a case where apparently it is he who is deciding the priestly vocation of Brother Lheureux. Certainly, he must have followed proper procedures. Still, he seems to have substituted himself in the place of the interested party in a decision which directed Brother Henri towards a way of life different from that which he had chosen when he joined the Brothers' community.

It would be only natural that the Founder would have had some reservations concerning the sound basis of his decision from the very moment he thus made use of the docility of Brother Lheureux. We are less surprised at the suddenness with which he understood the sign given him shortly afterwards at the almost sudden death of the Brother right at the time when he was about to complete his preparations for the Priesthood.

He (De La Salle) was so touched by this loss that he could not hold back his tears and he felt constrained to give some time to the sorrow it caused him. After that, reproaching his weakness, he told the Brothers around him that, by this precipitous death, God had made known that He did not want any priests in his Institute. (Maillefer, ms. Carbon, p. 59; ms. Rheims, p. 88).

The event resulted in dispelling the doubt which had been harboured in the soul of the Founder. He thus reverted — definitely this time — to be led by his original idea, that which had led him in 1687 to propose the election of a Brother as Superior from among the Brothers' Community.

Rome, 24 June 1986.

Brother Maurice HERMANS
Rome