

11-O-19

DO YOU HAPPEN TO KNOW BROTHER ARNOLD?...

The topic of Brother Scubilion appeared in *Lasalliana* N. 6. In four successive leaflets, Brother André Fermet aroused our interest in the knowledge of this remarkable "missionary" about whom he had just written an interesting biography.

Because I have just finished relating the life of another Brother of the Christian Schools who was also called "to be elevated to the honor of the altar", Brother Lauraire had asked me to invite the readers of *Lasalliana* to discover or to get to know Brother Arnold, my hero, better.¹

In 1956, Mr. Georges Rigault had written a biography of this devoted disciple of Saint De La Salle under the title of *A Lasallian Ascetic*. The adjective was becoming popular and the noun was still in style. I must acknowledge — the author must be turning over in his grave that I afforded little attention to this work however conscientious and well written. Neither the austere title, nor what I in my youth had heard about Brother Arnold from a jupiterian superior who had known him, succeeded in inflaming my enthusiasm.

Also, when in the Autumn of 1982, the Brother Regional of France proposed that I write a new biography of the Servant of God, I asked him to give me some time to think about it. A more serene reading of Mr. Georges Rigault, made me decide to try my hand at it although without arousing in me any enthusiasm. However, when I had read through the four huge volumes of testimonies coming from the family of Brother Arnold, from his former confreres, students, and friends, his numerous correspondence, the resumes of his conferences, some personal notes taken from his unfortunate *autos-de-fe*, when I visited Landroff, the Lorraine village of his childhood, not in the winter as did Mr. Rigault of old, but on a radiant after-

noon in the Spring, I began to weave more sympathetic threads binding me to this confrere who was 150 years my senior. We could understand each other all the better being that we both were unconditional admirers of De La Salle and that we had the formidable honor of working in the formation of candidates for the religious life at different epochs, it is true, but just as passionately! What human tenderness there was in this rough native of Lorraine, so austere towards himself, but so tender toward others!

And under a humility which was ever on guard, what richness of intelligence lived within this solid rustic! What serene patience, what courage in work! Within the "Lasallian" spirit, what attention to live in the present an ever new ideal!

Well, *Lasalliana* readers, follow the guide! I propose to you an itinerary in four stages:

- 1 - From 1838 to 1890.
- 2 - Brother Arnold, teacher, educator, catechist.
- 3 - Brother Arnold, director of novices and animator of spiritual retreats.
- 4 - Brother Arnold "in the shade of the Spirit".

From 1838 to 1890

Brother Arnold lived till the age of 52. He was born 10 September 1838 about 40 kilometres southeast of Metz. This same year, Brother Philippe was elected Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and would remain as such for 36 years.

Brother Arnold died 23 October 1890 in Rheims, at a time when the Brothers were establishing themselves in Columbia, when Branly was discovering the principle of the wireless, Adler was inventing the steam powered airplane, and Renan was writing *The Future of Science*.

During the interval in France, the Revolution of 1848 had brought Louis-Napoleon to power and he would become Emperor of the French four years later. The 1870 war with Prussia touched Arnold closer to home because it led to the partition of Lorraine which Germanized the village of his birth. The first Vatican Council (1869-70) does not

seem to have had much bearing on his religious life, not more than the apparitions at Lourdes in 1858, the death of the Curé of Ars the following year, the death of Pius IX and the election of Leon XIII in 1878. On the contrary, he followed the progress of anti-clericalism which, in 1880 led to the laicization of the public schools of the homeland of John Baptist De La Salle, beatified in 1888 and whose disciples realized at the end of the 19th century an astonishing flourish of missionary activity.

The life of Jules Reche — that was the secular name of Brother Arnold — was quite commonplace and even strange. Until the age of 24, all his experiences were rather matter-of-fact. The son of the shoemaker of the village, Jules was the eldest of five brothers and three sisters. He attended the school in Landroff but had to quit at the age of ten in order to work on a farm. He had to help his father feed the brood in the family nest which the depressed mother often abandoned to wander around the countryside. As a farmhand until the age of 20, he engaged in the agricultural activities which changed according to the season. Life was hard at that time in the villages which lacked all comforts, where everything was done with human strength helped by the harnessed horses and oxen: plowing, planting, harvesting of crops and picking of grapes, and cutting and hauling wood. Jules Reche, nevertheless, loved this work on the good Lorraine soil in contact with nature: he would remain conditioned by it for the rest of his days.

If he quit in 1858 to become a coachman for a middle-class family, it was only to earn more money to better support the needs of his poor family. For a few months he was a daily worker to avoid unemployment. He found work as the driver of a cart hauling materials during the reconstruction of the church of Charleville. He treated his four horses as friends and divided his free time among prayer, preparing young chimney sweepers for their first Holy Communion,

and taking evening courses in the Brothers' school.

After a long time he believed that he heard the call of God to enter His service'. The example of the disciples of John Baptist De La Salle clarified this matter for him and on November 13, 1862 he entered the Noviciate at Thionville.

A year later, Brother Arnold began the second period of his existence: that of religious teacher. This period had two phases: 14 years as teacher in the boarding school of Saint Joseph in Rheims and 12 years in exercising the delicate mission of formator of future religious.

Contrary to all expectations, this man who had quit school at the age of 10 in order to become a farmhand, coachman, daily laborer, and cart driver and who entered the Noviciate without any other intellectual baggage beyond the good but distant primary education and some night courses, this lumbering country boy was going to become one of the best professors of a flourishing scholastic institution. In 1868 he successfully passed the test for the Elementary Teachers Diploma and in 1873 the Superior Teachers Certificate. He prepared candidates for the School of Arts and Trades of Châlons-sur-Marne and they passed successfully. As professor of agriculture, he maintained this section on the same high level as that established by his predecessor. His former students and his confreres unanimously recognized in him "great knowledge and total dedication. An "Incomparable catechist" also.

Then when in 1877 Brother Arnold was named Director of the Noviciate of Thillois, this choice sanctioned an authentic sanctity put at the service of the young with an astonishing pedagogical sense.

Brother Charles LAPIERRE

¹ "If the grain of wheat..." Brother ARNOULD (1838-1890), by Charles Lapierre - DDB Editor - 1986 - 372 pages.