

RHEIMS MAY 1, 1687

In the parish register of the city of Rheims on this date, the signature of Brother Henry Lheureux appears. It can be read below a certification of death which is unfortunately too laconic. We present it here, based on a recent photograph (*Cahiers Lasalliens* 37, p. 40):

"Jean Morice died on the first day of May, at the age of 17, or thereabout, a native of Chesne Le Pouilleux, and was buried in this cemetery. In faith of which, I, the pastor, have signed".

This signature, duly announced, however, is not found in that place.

Because it pertained to the register of Saint Etienne's Parish in Rheims, the said pastor would have been Simon Lhermitte, who was in charge of the parish from the year 1675 until May 30, 1695.

In the absence of the parish priest, Brother Henry Lheureux signed as witness. This signature is precious to us. It attests to the fact that on May 1, 1687, the Brother was in Rheims and was particularly qualified. He was more and better qualified, it seems, than any other member of the Lasallian community. This community was composed of three groups, sometimes mistaken by people on the outside, but clearly differentiated within the group: Brothers employed in teaching, novices in formation and the guests of the Seminary for the teachers for the rural region.

Contrary to what can be read in many other death notices, our text mentions neither the occupation nor the domicile of Jean Morice. It is most likely that he belonged to one of the three groups of the community, but which of the three?

Brother Maurice or Brother Jean Morice?

In his *Life of De La Salle*, Canon Blain mentions a young Brother Maurice who had died in Rheims at the same time and he portrays him as one of De La Salle's favorite disciples. Earlier, he gives the date of death as May 1, 1687; at another time he gives the dates as April 30, 1687. We can close our eyes on such minor discrepancies.

Yet, too quickly it seems, some people have identified the "Jean Morice" of this death notice with the "Brother Maurice" of the Founder's biography. This Brother Maurice Blain gives as being born in Rheims and dying in his twenty-second year, after a rather long illness and six months after refusing to return to his family. The doctor recommended such a move to assure his survival, if not the cure of his illness.

Doubtlessly it is known, that the parish registers of that period did not always exert great efforts at precision with regard to the age of the deceased whenever the place of birth was different from that of the death. Still, it is difficult, in the hypothesis of identifying the one deceased Brother with the other, how the register and the biography could differ on this point when they designate the place of birth in one place as in the city and in the other in

a small borough some 40 or so miles away: Le-Chesne-Le-Pouilleux (or Le-Chesne-Pouilleux, or even more simply: Le-Chesne), which is in what is now the department of the Ardennes.

We also accept the fact of not being able to reconcile such discrepancies. Yet so many things remain certain in the first years of the Rheims community, which allow us to catch a glimpse of the quality of the first disciples of De La Salle.

Some deaths prior to that of Jean Morice

Of these young, and perhaps too young, disciples, we are told that a good number of them could not withstand for very long the exhausting demands of their apostolate and of the austere practices which they, perhaps too willingly, embraced. Here, no more than elsewhere can be accept the great number given by Canon Blain. Still, the names and the facts which he quotes, he no doubt got from the mouths of the eldest among the Brothers and from one or other of those priests who shared the same lodging and perhaps the life-style of that small group of Lasallians in Rheims.

"In seven or eight years, he writes, that is to say from 1681 until 1688 when De La Salle went to establish schools in Paris, of the fifteen first Brothers who were in the Institute from its birth in Rheims, Laon, Guise, and Rethel, more than six of them died a premature death, below the age of thirty, without counting those whom failing or ruined health had obliged to seek relief outside of the house".

(Blain, I, p. 250)

From 1681 until 1688, the Institute lost more than six through premature deaths". More than six, but how many? Canon Blain presents us with only three; but he does so with a certain amount of detail and with evident care to edify us. However, his account here and there keeps a mark of truth, which makes us regret that the biographer did not take the means to let us know these other disciples of whom De La Salle would all too soon find himself deprived.

"Brother Jean-Francois was the first to blaze the way to heaven for the others". A native of Rheims, he had given up "a rather advantageous position which allowed him to live comfortably. What won him over to God and the new house was the good example of the Brothers. Touched by their piety, their fervor, and their patience, he understood that the one at their head was a great Servant of God and he conceived a holy desire to place himself under his guidance and to enter his house. He lived there only a short time, but the way in which he lived left his name in blessed memory". And when he comes to talk about the final illness of the Brothers, the Canon biographer multiplies the "I myself can say", "I would say that;" "I say these words", thus giving the impression of being an eye-witness which he certainly had not been.

Let us focus on these few lines which give precisely the year of death. "He did not have to live a long time, since he had already reached the goal which is usually reached only after a long life, namely, perfect charity. The control he had taken over his own soul made itself felt during the rude illness which in a few days led him to the tomb in 1684". (Blain, I, pp. 251-252).

"Brother Bourlette was the second in line among the martyrs of penance. It did not take long for excessive fervor to lead him to the grave. He was from Rheims, of a family which was honorable and rather comfortably situated financially. The outstanding virtues of De La Salle and his disciples brought about his vocation. The wish to walk

along the narrow path which leads to paradise was the motive which attracted him to a place which he considered as the little gate which opens to heaven. He lived there as an angel, and he died there as a saint".

The biographer treats at length of the attempts which his parents repeatedly made to make the Brother return to his family home. Having been changed twice by De La Salle to a different place to avoid the determination of his Father, Brother Bourlette soon found himself alone in a small community, because his companion had fallen ill. He did wonders in taking care of everything, "having his right foot in one class, the left foot in another, his spirit with the sick Brother and his heart in heaven". The sick Brother recovered, but "a persistent and violent fever carried Brother Bourlette off in a few days, in the year 1686". (Blain, I, pp. 252-255).

"Brother Maurice, a native of Rheims, was the third of De La Salle's children who went to take his place in heaven". (What is given here is what has already been said above, and the account can be completed by reading Blain, I, pp. 255-257).

Can some useful rechecking be done on the accounts of the biographer through the citations taken from the parish registers? A careful reading of these registers have already provided us with some rather significant indications. (cf. Cahiers Lasalliens 37, pp. 27-28; 39-40).

Signed by the Pastor of the Saint-Symphorien parish, here is a notice of death and burial which could surprise us a bit.

"In this parish, in the year 1682, the 14th day of the month of May, Christopher, a teacher of De La Salle's school in Rheims, died after having been strengthened by the sacraments of the Church and the next day his body was buried in the cemetery of the said Saint-Symphorien Parish. In faith of which, I have signed: H. Gonet" (after a photo, Cahiers Lasalliens 37, p. 37).

It is in fact surprising that we cannot read here any other precise information concerning the place of birth, the presumed age of the deceased, not even a definite presentation of his name and surname, for Christopher could as well be his Christian name as his family name. Another surprise is that a death took place in De La Salle's own house during the year between June 24, 1681 and June 24 1682, that would be during the only year when the Saint lodged the teachers in his home before leaving the family home with them to take up new lodgings in the Rue Neuve in an apartment which would become the first community house of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Our Christopher would have therefore died barely a month before this decisive transfer. Evidently we have no way of knowing whether or not he had already chosen to follow Monsieur De La Salle and the small group of his companions to begin the first Lasallian community with them.

The registers of the years 1684 and 1685 contain two attestations countersigned by De La Salle himself. Here these are presented as they can be read from photographs: (Cahiers lasalliens 37, p. 39).

"The 24th of this month (March, 1684) Cosme Boiserin, died at the age of 29, the son of (blanc), a native of Mans and he was buried the next day in the ce-

metery here where we brought him with the usual ceremony. In faith of which I, the parish priest, have signed: (s) S. Lhermitte; (s) De La Salle".

"The twenty-sixth of this month (June, 1685) Jean Lozart, died at the age of 28, a native of Paris, the son of Lozart and of (blanc) and he was buried in the cemetery here. In faith of which I, the parish priest, have signed: (s) Rogier; (s) De La Salle".

In what capacity had De La Salle countersigned such testimonies? The accounts of the biographers (Blain and Bernard are the principal sources here) leave no doubt in the matter: in these two years, Father De La Salle was exercising in fact, if not by right, the position of superior of the little community of teachers, the teachers who already two or three years ago had started their lives as "Brothers of the Christian Schools". Yet, this was a community which had not yet any legal status in the city, nor in the diocese of Rheims.

Could Cosme Boiserin and Jean Lozart very well be considered as members of the entire community and could they be considered in the group of "more than six" young Brothers who had died before the Founder's departure for Paris in February, 1688? Let us say, in any case, that these two young men "under the age of thirty" appear as associates in one way or another of the person of the Founder and very probably also of the work for the poor children of Champagne.

One might want to go further and recognize in Cosme Boiserin the person of Brother Jean-François, which would be clearly impossible if confidence is placed in Blain who sets the birth of the Brother in Rheims and not in Sarthe, as the testimony of the parish register which sets it precisely in Mans.

We wish we could know much more about all of this: about those who succumbed to premature deaths, as well as of the initial years of the Rheims community, of those who were able to survive, and about the others who came to fill the gap around the Founder. Only some of these are known, these workers of the first hour: a Brother Henry Lheureux, whose exceptional role has already been mentioned; a Brother Gabriel Drolin, who entered in 1684 or there about (according to a Registry of Entries compiled much later); a Brother Jean Partois, called Brother Antoine, who came in 1686; a Brother Paris, called Brother Joseph, and a Brother Jean-Henry, of whom Canon Blain has kept a more precise memory and who came to join Father De La Salle in 1683 or a bit later (Blain II, pp. 69-76).

Both those who made only a fleeting appearance and also those who served the cause of De La Salle for a long time, were the pioneers who supported De La Salle, allowing him to take charge of the schools of Champagne and to build up the good reputation of these very schools in Rheims, Château Porcien, Reims, Guise, and Laon. Often enough, they worked under difficult conditions; sometimes they added to his voluntary austerities which Blain is a bit too pleased to present as being the cause of several premature deaths.

Rome, 17 October 1986.

Brother Maurice Hermans
Rome