

12-O-21

**BROTHER ARNOLD
DIRECTOR OF NOVICES
AND ANIMATOR
OF SPIRITUAL RETREATS**

“An Institute in a storm”

In 1880 during a conference to retreatants Brother Arnold asks:

“Who gives us saints? Not simply those holy men who are good hearted and pleasant to deal with, but true saints, united to God, dead to themselves and who are the great resource of the Institute during the storm».

A violent storm was indeed stirring up the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the entire Church at the same time in the native land of St. John Baptist De La Salle for the past several years. And the waves, far from calming down, washed away all the prospering apostolates to the point of expulsion in 1904 until it arrived at the separation of Church and State in 1905. What would become of these men battered about by the turbulence, especially the youngest among them?

Brother Arnold, who had been named Director of Novices in 1877, two years later added to his duties those of animator of the spiritual retreats held during the summer school vacation. To these retreats came not only aspirants to perpetual profession to invigorate their soul, but also already professed Brothers in need of spiritual revitalization. Both novices and retreatants were all in the same boat and were asking the same question: “What does tomorrow hold for us?” To this anxiety, Brother Arnold had only one reply: “Be saints and you will have both the light and the strength to make the necessary decisions”. This answer was understood by the majority. Some left France to go “on the Missions”.

Others stayed where they were; changing the robe for a business suit, at great personal sacrifice, they maintained the works, which without their dynamism would have disappeared in the storm. Some others, of course — could they have done otherwise? — returned to their family.

**“A Guide as sure and energetic
as he was discreet”**

Nevertheless, at Thillois from 1877 to 1885, and for the next five years at Courlancy, the captain of the crew did not panic nor did his passengers. The firmness of his faith shone through a spiritual direction which steered towards the essential. All those who sought his advice, his former pupils, novices and retreatants, the Brothers who helped him in the novitiate of the Jesuit Fathers who preached the retreats, all recognized in him “a guide as sure and energetic as he was discreet».

His reputation was such that the Brothers in charge of religious formation had recourse to his direction or at least to his occasional advice, and priests consulted him on cases of conscience or they would simply come to spend some days or hours in contact with the strength and serenity of his interior life.

His theological knowledge and his spiritual experience aided by a pedagogical sense to which I have already referred at length, worked marvels in an otherwise delicate area, it is true, as the teaching of mathematics and the natural sciences! Young novices and the more experienced professed Brothers could tell all their problems to this elder brother who was so humble and so clear that he seemed to understand the maladies of the soul as well as those of the body and could treat them with tender and firm charity.

One recognized in him such concern for wanting to direct all towards the one Master that one felt confident in making whatever effort he exacted. If someone gave up on trying to reach the proposed height, still he remained no less attached to this guide whom he lacked the courage to follow. It also happened that a person following his directions, changed the pathway yet all the while aiming for the

same summit: thus some of his generous novices became diocesan priests in France or in America.

“A perfect copy of the Holy Founder”

In 1888, John Baptist De La Salle is proclaimed “Blessed”! Brother Arnold had not waited until the Founder of his Institute was officially proposed by the Church as an example and object of veneration of the faithful to pray to him and to make him his model. Now the time had come to offer him as a model to his disciples. He had not waited until he was named Novice Director and retreat animator to study the life and writings of De La Salle, or to permeate himself with the Founder’s spirit and to live according to it. It was simply that this wonderful news revealed openly what his approach led one to surmise.

Henceforth, he felt himself obliged — and with what filial joy! — to share with his disciples what he called “our homemade bread», which he had saved up until this time and which he now presented to them for them to savor. How interesting it is to find in those conferences and letters of direction written by his pen what he knew and thought about such a biographical trait or of such or such a writing of the Founder!

In particular, his practice of the Method of Mental Prayer impressed the young people whom he initiated into prayer. They felt — in a strong sense of the term — how much he

understood prayer intellectually, no doubt, but how much more because he lived it.

What can we say about the humility, poverty, obedience and devotedness of our Brother Arnold if not that these virtues which he had practiced in his youth took on a Lasallian hue from the day on which he discovered De La Salle? Perhaps this imitation seems to us to be too realistic after the same manner of certain French painters, his contemporaries. Would it be fair not to take into account the spiritual atmosphere of the 19th century to which Brother Arnold himself belonged?

In this regard, looking more closely, how could we not ascertain that the Lasallian dynamism of Brother Arnold is the spirit of the Founder? In a few phrases — we could certainly quote others — Brother Arnold writes:

“We cannot renounce certain positions, nor even practice certain acts of virtue which he practiced, either because of a lack of circumstances or because of a lack of moral perfection, but we can and should take upon ourselves his spirit. We are Brothers of the Christian Schools to the extent that our Blessed Founder’s spirit is in us”.

Brother Charles LAPIERRE

P.S. The book of Brother Charles Lapierre: *Si le grain de blé...»* — Frère Arnould (1838-1890) published by Desclée de Brouwer, can be purchased in bookstores, especially Catholic bookstores. You can also order the book directly from:

**Oeuvre du Frère Arnould
71, Rue Claude Bernard
57070 METZ-BORNY (France)**