

## **AN UNFORGETTABLE CENTENARY: the beatification of Venerable John Baptist de La Salle, February 19, 1888**

### **1. A long wait.**

John Baptist de La Salle died on Good Friday, April 7, 1719 and was buried the next day in the church of Saint-Sever in Rouen. It was Holy Saturday and consequently the funeral ceremonies were without solemnity. But still, those who knew him did not hesitate to venerate him as a saint. The first transfer of his mortal remains, which took place a few years later, attracted a large crowd as the clergy and faithful of Rouen hastened to render him the homage of their veneration and gratitude.

We can very justifiably be astonished to see the Church wait nearly two centuries before authorizing his cult by proclaiming him Blessed. Without doubt, between 1700 and 1900 beatifications and canonizations were rather rare. Those who were proclaimed as Saints or Blessed waited a long time for their glorification. They waited as long as De La Salle and some even longer than he.

In the *Bulletin* of October, 1950, Brother Felix Paul († 1952) took up this subject with a bit of humor in his "a Palm of Paradise", where he placed, according to the duration of their wait for glorification, the servants of God canonized or beatified over the past three centuries. Beginning with Sister Therese of the Infant Jesus to the Founders of the Servites, the waiting period stretches from 28 to 488 years. All this locates John Baptist de La Salle in a rather good place, being exactly 23rd out of a total of 42.

### **2. A baseless suspicion**

Still in Rome and elsewhere, some have thought that this long delay was to be attributed to a certain negligence on the part of the Brothers who were not solicitous enough about promoting the introduction of the process of beatification of the Founder. Brother Felix Paul, already referred to, rectifies this assertion. From the very year of the Founder's death, Brother Barthelemy, Superior General, set about gathering testimonies from the clergy and faithful who knew the deceased. Two years later, the first biography appeared. It was the work of Brother Bernard, who submitted it to the De La Salle family. Brother Bernard did not hesitate to speak of the "sanctity" of his hero, but in so

doing, he was careful to in no way preempt the judgment of the Church to which alone belongs the task of recognizing and proclaiming the sanctity of an individual in two forms.

It seems that it was foreseen that Brother's manuscript would have a second edition. It would be the first part of a gathering of documentation in view of the beatification.

In the next few years, we see the Brothers of Saint Yon carefully publishing the greater part of the Founder's works which up to that time had been in manuscript form. They are very careful about keeping all the objects which belonged to him. They entrust Canon Blain with writing a new Life of De La Salle, and they urge him to complete this "life" with a fourth part designed specifically to extol the virtues of the Servant of God. The presentation of this fourth part leads one to consider it as the kind of *positio super virtutibus* which is required by the Roman Curia during the canonization process.

### **3. Initial Probing**

As soon as the two large volumes of Blain are published, two parcels of the entire work make their way to Rome where the Brothers in charge see to it they reach the hands of several officers of the Pope and also of the King of France who eventually might be requested to intercede with the Congregation of Rites which is specifically charged with causes for beatification. On his part, Brother Timothy, Superior General, has attestations of several favours, particularly some cures and the multiplication of bread, attributed to the Founder's intercession, properly documented.

It would not be superfluous to recall here the interpretation of certain texts regarding the beatification process. Since Urban VIII (1623-1644) canon law forbade the recognition of the heroicity of a Servant of God until at least 50 years after his death. Consequently, some considered it obligatory to delay until the expiration of this period any presentation to the Curia. John Baptist de La Salle had died in 1719, therefore the earliest that any presentation could be initiated would be in 1769. Was this interpretation given to the law by Brother Timothy and the Brothers of the first generations? That is not unlikely. Later, however, during the generalship of Brother Florence (1767-1777), we still do not see the Brothers initiating the introductory process which they judged should be deferred.

Others have interpreted this regulation about the delay of fifty years, as pertaining not to a required delay before the introduction of the cause but rather for the conclusion of the Roman process regarding the Servant of God's reputation of sanctity and virtue. Following this opinion, one could introduce the cause prior to a half-century's delay. Meanwhile, the Brothers of the eighteenth century, personally and on behalf of the Institute, missed no opportunity of presenting to the goodwill of the Roman Pontiffs pertinent texts but without any mention of a request for the intro-

duction of the cause for the beatification of the Founder.

Of course, soon would come the troubled times at the end of this century, then the upheavals of the great revolution! The Institute would survive all of this, thanks to the benevolence of the Popes, but neither they nor the Brothers could even dream about bringing up the introduction of the long process of a cause of beatification.

#### 4. The long procedure

This matter was not taken up until the generalship of Brother Anaclet (1830-1838). What was particularly decisive here was the trip to Rome of Brother Abdon, the third Assistant. Contacts were established with the officers of the Curia. Then precise directives were sent to Paris. These led the Superior General to seek the initiation of the first process in the four dioceses where the Servant of God had lived for a long time, namely, Rheims, Paris, Rouen, and Marseille. If the fourth of these processes was soon abandoned, the other three continued on until 1838, with the hearing of the long testimonies of witnesses concerning the veracity of what they had read or had heard about the virtuous life of John Baptist de La Salle.

As a conclusion to all of this, on May 8, 1840, Pope Gregory XVI signed the decree of introduction to the court of Rome for the cause of beatification for one who from then on would be referred to as Venerable John Baptist De La Salle. Then, according to the requirements of Rome during this time, the bishops concerned drew up documentation which would seek to satisfactorily answer any objections which might be raised. It was during these years of investigation and study that the General Secretariat of the Institute had to produce some very detailed work, which was quite difficult to do during that period. The great revolution had either destroyed or dispersed too many documents, and while the items in the archives were being reorganized little by little, the Brothers were far from possessing the keys which were so indispensable to the investigation and research. So, we are not overly surprised then that it took some thirty years, years so replete with wars and revolutions, for the ecclesiastical judges to obtain the proofs of John Baptist de La Salle's sanctity. In 1873, Rome was in a position to affirm that the Venerable De La Salle had practiced the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and the moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance to a heroic degree.

#### 5. The sanction of miracles

The Church had made its pronouncement, but awaited from God the confirmation of its judgment by the performance of several miracles attributable to the intercession of the Servant of God. In the case of John Baptist de La Salle, no eye witness to the holiness of his

life being available, the rules of procedure required the presentation of four recognized miracles. Pope Leo XIII decided, however, that it would suffice to present only three. The three which were accepted were the instant and complete cure of Brother Adelmanien, of the Christian Schools, of a progressive locomotor ataxy; of young Etienne de Suzanne, of a terminal capillary bronchitis; and of Marie-Madeleine-Victoire Ferry of an incurable chronic hydropericardiac, complicated by other very serious illnesses.

#### 6. The solemnity of the beatification

The ceremony followed during that time was quite different from that which we are familiar with after Vatican II. The ceremony took place, not in the basilica itself, but rather in the so-called Beatification Hall on the upper floor above the door of the basilica. It was there that on February 19, 1888, a number of Brothers, including Brother Miguel Febres Cordero, were able to be present for the reading of the brief of beatification and then to join in the celebration of Holy Mass. The Mass celebrant was a Belgian prelate, Archbishop Felix-Marie de Neckere, who was chosen probably because of the functions which he fulfilled as secretary-economist of the maintenance of the church of Saint Peter in the Vatican.

#### 7. The Festivities which followed

The awaiting of this first glorification of the Founder had lasted a long time. It was a waiting period accompanied by prayer and also by research and study. During the previous two centuries, within the Institute, the Brothers who could not yet publicly venerate John Baptist de La Salle, compensated for this by solemnizing the feast of his holy precursor and patron of his baptism on June 24.

The beatification opened the way for the future public and external cult and immediately triduum of thanksgiving were organized everywhere even before the celebration of the liturgical feast which was designated for May. In the houses of the Institute as well as in the parishes and dioceses, the priestly orators lauded the person and works of the Blessed De La Salle. The more remarkable of these eloquent homilies have been gathered into seven thick volumes in octavo. In song, on canvas, and in marble, artists memorialized and praised the Priest, Founder, Apostle of the lowly, Educator of little ones, and Formator of teachers. One hymn perhaps more than all others preserves for us even until today the memories of February 19, 1888. This is the hymn *Honneur a Toi*, "Honor to you, o Blessed De La Salle", where it is believed that the word "Blessed" was replaced by "Glorious" following the canonization of May 24, 1900.

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**Brother Maurice AUGUSTE**