

## THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE

In a previous article of mine I promised that I would discuss the mystery of a vocation, which under the influence of Providence was constantly redirecting itself. I shall try to uncover the underlying causes which made these redirections possible and which resulted in a sense of wellbeing, peace, health and honour in a man who was already born to honour, peace and wellbeing.

### What was John Baptist like as a child?

Let us first take a moment to consider with Blain the portrait he gives us of the child John Baptist. This child apparently used to leave family parties and read the lives of the saints. He was also apparently captivated by church ceremonies, and would recite the divine office with his grandfather.

Brother Leon Aroz in number 41 of the Cahiers Lasalliens writes a very fine passage about the childhood of John Baptist de la Salle, which we reproduce here, since it is still relevant:

"A child remains a child even if one day he will be a saint. His games, play-time, the development of his personality should not escape our attention. The family home was a gathering place for the well-to-do of Rheims. They had concerts there singing and dancing. Maria de la Salle, in her youth was appreciated as a musician and violinist, and earned much applause... Is it necessary to think, as his biographers would have us think, that John Baptist's sainthood was foreshadowed by his sad looks and introversion, whilst the rest of his family lived a life of ease, paying and receiving visits? John Baptist met all these visitors, spoke to them, perhaps a little shyly, but openly enough. He would listen to them, ask them things, and answer their questions frankly and freely. Since he was only a child, he was interested in anything going, and as he was an intelligent child, his answers contained unexpected insights.

### A short outline of a vocation.

This child of more or less twelve years old suddenly said he wanted to be a priest. His father, Louis de la Salle, thought that there might be something of a castle in the air in this idea of his eldest son, however, God took first place in his household, so the family showed no objection. He felt somehow that the idea came from the Holy Spirit, and he simply answered "yes". He went ahead with that vocation with intelligence and persistence. As time went on he went to Paris, to the Sorbonne and Saint Sulpice, and the influence of these two establishments made of him a learned and holy priest.

So now he was a priest. His journey had reached the goal he had dreamed of. Everything seemed finalised. His family, the divine office, and study occupied him until Providence once more had plans for him, and these he would find out through his friendship with Roland, founder of an order of nuns to

educate poor girls. Next Nyel appeared on the scene, and De la Salle helped him to start his first little school, simply to avoid disappointing his cousin Ms de Ruan. He helped in the rather hopeless task of running that first school and then two others. The teachers were not up to their job, and Nyel was too often elsewhere. De la Salle increased his visits to the schools to help them out. He bought a house right next to his own, so that the teachers could live together. He invited them to meals in his own house, so that they could discuss how the teaching was going, and finally, he decided to give them rooms in his own house, without feeling that he was committing himself to anything permanent. He just wanted to help; but gradually other outlines in this picture begin to appear.

He bought a very ordinary kind of house for these teachers and went to live there with them himself. There is another enlightening point to follow. He attempts to start to live the Christian life, a life committed to working with children, with them, and in 1681 they follow the whole of the Holy Week ceremonies together. It was then that he began to realise, much to his surprise, that Our Lord seemed to be calling him to take over these schools completely. Another series of events next occurred, including his resignation from the canonry in 1683 and the giving away of all his property in the famous famine of 1684. From that moment he became fully available.

### The spiritual Journey of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

I now want to concentrate on the spiritual aspect of John Baptist's journey, which he followed during the early years of the foundation of our congregation. I should like to summarize the four points which stand out in this connection.

#### 1. Piety.

John Baptist's soul was completely dedicated to God. It was always so. When, as child, he went hand in hand with his grandfather to church, and spent hours at the ceremonies, it was not merely because he was good and wellbehaved. It was because something seemed to be working in his soul; God was gradually taking possession of that soul. It was not long, agree all his biographers, before he had made for himself a small cassock and cotta, because he did not want just to assist, he wanted to take part. As he got older, he would sit next to the big church window with his grandfather, and recite the office with all the seriousness of a little monk. His canonry filled a big need: a chance to praise God. He had no other thought than the praise of God, when, at the age of fifteen, he accepted that canonry. Normally the idea of his becoming a priest would not have crossed the minds of his parents, for he was the eldest boy, and should have carried on the family name and traditions. Nevertheless, from childhood, he was being urged by God, and since in that household God counted for something, he was able to follow, without opposition that important vocation. Having become a seminarist, just at the decisive moment, he chose Saint Sulpice to complete his training. So he left his family, because he knew that the seminary of Saint Sulpice was a place for priests who wanted complete union with God and to base their vocation entirely on the call of the Spirit. John Baptist did not find himself out of place there, and soon mastered the "rules" of the spiritual life taught in that demanding seminary. He kept his eyes on a spiritual goal, and was a good example to everybody there, according to information that was still available in Saint Sulpice when he had to leave it on the death of his parents.

We know what happened from then on, but I would like to point out that Holy Scripture must have been read, reflected and meditated on and learnt by heart, for in his writings, and especially in his meditations, one constantly feels the force of the Word of God. So much so that in certain cases the

"points" of the meditations are simply logical groupings of Scripture texts. It is not surprising therefore that God became the centre of his life and God's glory and service should be his great wish. His mission as a founder demanded it, but God, Our Lord and Our Lady were nothing new to him: they were the objects of his deep spirituality and of his love, all enlightened by an unhesitating Faith, which is all the more surprising when one considers the deep divisions that existed in those days in the church in France. So God knew that He could count on that Friend of his and he did count on him, nor did His friend let him down.

## 2. Availability.

He was completely available. This was not because it came easily, nor because it seemed the usual thing. We have already seen that God's plans were very different from what he himself had envisaged. However, when God suggested something and when John Baptist had understood His message, then God could trust him. John Baptist would answer that gentle call, which became audible in a multitude of events seeming at first to have little to do with him. His vocation as priest was followed with tenacity, as we have seen, and this was unexpected and, humanly speaking, inadvisable, especially after the death of his parents, when he had to become the head of the family and its legal representative.

His friend Canon Roland was full of enthusiasm, and suggested that he could change his canonry for a poor parish. He agreed, but the plan, having survived a short time, was rejected by the Archbishop; nevertheless, it showed how available John was. Then came Nyel with his ideas inspired by God, yet leaving him with the question of how to look after his family and perform his duty as a priest. But the signs of God's will were gradually conquering him, and he was surrendering bit by bit to the movements of grace. Provided he knew that something was God's will, he would go to any lengths to achieve it. Such attitudes made him look a fool in the eyes of certain dignified members of the Cathedral hierarchy of Rheims. I think that this availability of John Baptist resulted from his constant concentration on God's presence, from his loyal and generous search for the Divine Will and from that great desire of his to follow, like those great men of the Bible, the orders of God. He learnt it through a careful study of Holy Scripture, just as those readings of his grandfather had taught him the enthusiasm and determination of the martyrs of Christ.

## 3. Radicalism.

His radicalism was well camouflaged behind the aristocratic exterior of this man of God. He did not look, or ever would, on God's will half-heartedly. If at times he hesitated, it was to make sure whether it was really God suggesting these ideas, but once he was sure, John Baptist would go as far as God wanted, without waiting, wondering or worrying. Would you like some examples? When his parents died, he was unsure what he should do next, so he went to his spiritual director Canon Roland, who assured him that God wanted him to be a priest. And so it came about, for two months later he became a subdeacon and he cast aside any doubt. When he realised that God wanted him to help the poor teachers, he did not hesitate either: he rented a house near his own for them; and when he thought that was not enough, he invited them to lodge in his own home, much to the disgust of family and neighbours alike. At a family gathering called to see what they should do with this madman who was a disgrace to the whole clan, John Baptist sat there, with his arms folded and his eyes lowered, just listening in silence, like a rock in the middle of the ocean: that was how his first biographer, Bernard, describes the scene. When he felt that God was urging him to give up his canonry, which meant giving up his

"social security", he never flinched, even after the refusal of the Archbishop, the contrary advice of the other canons, his family and public opinion. An even greater surprise was that he did not hand over the canonry to his brother, as everyone was advising him, including the Archbishop, but to a poor parish priest, who was well known for his holiness. There was agitation in the chapter, but the radically-minded John Baptist had made his decision.

And in God's good time John Baptist heard God saying to him: "The foxes have holes and the birds have their nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head". Then it was that he decided to give everything away, and the sign to do it came in the terrible famine of 1684. He in fact gave everything away, as though it were the normal thing to do; he made that extraordinary move as though it was just the logical consequence of following the Gospel. Then came a series of personal hand-overs, in which he surely showed himself a record-breaker. In the poor community of La Rue Neuve he was always the poorest of the lot. He slept in an attic which was not big enough to stand up in properly or lie full length. He ate what there was, and you know how they got that: a Brother would go out every morning with a sack on his back, through the streets of Rheims and later of Paris and collect the left-overs from well-supplied religious houses. The Brother would come back, with his sack more or less full, they would prepare it as best they could, then those heroes, my first Brothers, would dine.

## 4. Faithfulness.

This was the most remarkable characteristic of John Baptist. He was faithful to God and he was faithful to the children in whom he saw Our Lord. They were the ones who made him change direction, and for that John Baptist loved them for ever. "For ever" is a strong expression, but in his case it was well deserved. Forty years of hard work contrary to the habits of centuries, and contrary to the advice of men of his time, who in every respect were worth listening to. Listen to John Baptist's own words, as he explains what he had to put up with to two friends who visited him in Saint Yon, a few months before his death: "I have had to suffer constant opposition and even actual persecution from many people. Clergymen, from whom I could have expected support, let me down; my own sons in some instances rebelled against me. Those external crosses have been aggravated by interior ones which were even worse." Those words might sound rather pessimistic, but they end with a calm and serene statement, which shows how he recognised in all those sufferings the hand of God, in whom he had entire confidence: "If God had not supported with his own hand this 'edifice' for everyone to see, it would have been buried under its own ruins long ago."

This explains everything. In a letter to Brother Gabriel Drolin he writes: "Personally, I don't like going ahead of Providence, and in the Roman matter, I shall not go ahead either. I want Providence to decide things first, then I am very happy to follow." John Baptist saw the directions that God left on his route to show him the way, and this strengthened his Faith and at the same time explains his faithfulness. How can one refuse to follow, if it is God who leads and calls one? A final picture at the very moment of his death. When Brother Barthelemy, the Superior, asked him whether he had any final advice, John Baptist answered in a calm and peaceful voice, slowly to give himself the chance to weigh every word: "I adore completely the will of God towards me". Those were the triumphant words to end a life of fidelity. He believed in God, hoped in Him and loved Him "with all his heart, with his whole soul, with all his mind and all his strength"... always. Just as Christ did.

Brother Manuel Olivé.