

**THE TERCENTENARY
OF THE
HEROIC VOW
OF 21 NOVEMBER, 1691**

The formula of the vow.

The formula is given in full by Blain who, no doubt, obtained it from Gabriel Drolin himself. Here it is according to his version, textual except for a simple updating of his spelling and punctuation:

«Most holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before thy infinite and adorable majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to Thee to procure with all our ability and efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools, in the manner which will seem to us most agreeable to Thee and most advantageous to the said Society.

And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest; I, Nicolas Vuyart and I, Gabriel Drolin, from now on and for ever until the last surviving one of us, or unto the complete establishment of the said Society, make the vow of association and union to bring about and maintain the said establishment, without being able to withdraw from this obligation, even if only we three remained in the said Society, and if we were obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone.

In view of which we promise to do, all together and by common accord, everything we shall think in conscience, and regardless of any human consideration, to be for the greater good of the said Society.

Done on this 21st of November, feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 1691. In testimony of which we have signed...» (5)

The style is certainly that of Monsieur de La Salle and one readily perceives the resemblances with the formula used in 1694 for the first perpetual vows of the principal Brothers. It is noticeable, however, that there is no explicit mention of the vow of obedience

nor of the other traditional religious vows. There is question here essentially of a vow of **association and of union** to ensure the permanence of the enterprise. At a moment when the undertaking seemed seriously threatened three men solemnly promise before God to remain **together** in fidelity to the maintaining of the "establishment", even if they remained the only three members and had to live on bread they had begged. It is this last clause which, no doubt, has caused this vow to be known as "heroic" (6).

Significance of the heroic vow.

La Salle was not a man to act on the spur of the moment: his whole life shows him, on the contrary, as acting only after mature reflection and consultation. It is possible that the step he took on 21st November 1691 was inspired by the example of M. Olier and two companions who withdrew briefly from their retreat at Vaugirard and betook themselves to the sanctuary at Montmartre *«to consecrate themselves to the most holy Trinity and to promise to remain united thus and to labour for the education and sanctification of the clergy...»* (7). And in the formula to be used by the future superiors we find that they were *«to unite themselves by a sacred promise never to separate nor to abandon the purpose which God had been pleased to reveal to them and even to reinforce this by various guarantees...»* (7). Here, too, the accent is placed on the association and union of persons in view of a common design.

Perhaps also we may think that the Founder, having found himself at death's door a few months before, wanted to ensure the permanence of the work, even if he should be taken from it. And this he could hope to do because of two companions who agreed to join him in this lifelong commitment.

But in this gesture was, more than anything else, an act of total self-abandonment to God. As a recent biographer has written: *«Three men cut the cables and launch out into the ocean of a new "opus Dei", without other sails or oars than the Providence of God».* (8) Their future was to be concentrated on a single enterprise: to keep the Society of the Christian Schools in existence, and that at any cost to themselves. From now on, *«they would remain bound by a special vow, staking their whole well-being, eating the bread of alms, in order to achieve the great objective. And if they should*

fail in this, at least it would not be due to their own negligence or cowardice. Together, all three, "until the last surviving one" of them, they would share the needs and the labour.» (9)

The fruits of the heroic vow.

Even if the vow of 21st November 1691 remained unknown to the other Brothers, it was not without effect for the future of the Institute. In the three participants themselves it certainly produced a renewed fervour and mutual trust; they found new confidence in the future of the enterprise and each could labour for its consolidation and development with a fresh sense of freedom.

It is a fact that, for the Founder himself, the subsequent years were particularly fruitful. In 1692 a real novitiate was established at Vaugirard, the first in the history of the Institute, and «it rapidly filled up with promising subjects». (10) The Paris Brothers continued to visit Vaugirard on Thursdays and Sundays, to reinvigorate themselves both physically and spiritually. According to Blain, they used to make their way there the evening before the free days and spend the night there. The Brothers of the Reims area met there each year in September for the annual retreat and, in between, they exchanged regular correspondence with Monsieur de La Salle who was thus able to guide them and strengthen them in their vocation.

Pentecost 1694 saw the first General Chapter at Vaugirard, where the twelve principal Brothers assembled with the purpose of ratifying the Rules. They concluded the Chapter by pronouncing, for the first time, perpetual vows, using a formula resembling that of 21st November 1691.

And throughout these years, whenever his direction of the novices or the Brothers and his frequent periods of prayer left him free, the Founder was composing, in addition to the *Rules*, the *Collection*, the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, the *Rule for formators of the new Masters* and the *Memoir on the Beginnings*, not to mention the first pedagogical works which he had printed: the *Syllabary* and the *Exercices of Piety for Schools*.

No doubt life at Vaugirard was austere, the food more than frugal, and the cold often piercing, but this was the second "cradle" of the Institute. No new foundation took place during this period (11) but the enterprise grew strong from within, and when it became necessary to leave Vaugirard it was because the house had become too small. It was then, in April 1698, that La Salle made the transfer to the Grand'Maison in Paris –specifically in the road which has the name of Vaugirard since it led to that village– and in doing so, he opened up a new era of expansion for the Institute. The heroic vow of 1691 had borne fruit.

F. Hervé Daniélou

(5) Blain, I, 313.

(6) It is worthy of note that the phrase, «obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone» was to remain in the vows formula until, at least, 1705.

(7) M. Faillon, "Vie de M. Olier", Part 1, p. 348.

(8) S. Gallego, T. 1, pp. 246-247

(9) Rigault, T. 1, p. 201

(10) Maillefer (MC 56 and MR 84)

(11) The first new opening was to be on the Rue Saint-Placide in Paris, and this took place in September 1698.