

AN UNJUSTLY FORGOTTEN

LASALLIAN BIOGRAPHY

(1/2)

*To Fr. Giandomenico Mucci, S. J.,
spiritual adviser, with gratitude.*

The biography of St. John Baptist De La Salle (1) that I mean is the one written with love and veneration by Fr. Jean Claude Garreau (1715–?) of the Company of Jesus.

In the most recent Lasallian bibliography (2) it is listed second among the works printed about the Founder and is preceded only by that of Canon Blain (3). The other two early biographies are that of Br. Bernard d'Auge (4), which was written in 1721 and remained in manuscript form till it was finally printed in 1965; and that of Fr. François Elie Maillefer (5) O.S.B. This latter work also remained in manuscript form and in two versions, and was printed only in 1966 and in 1980.

The reason why these biographers wrote is easily explained: Blain was the confessor of the Brothers of St. Yon, and it was here that De La Salle died in 1719; Br. Bernard was a faithful disciple of the Founder and worked closely with him; Maillefer was his nephew (6).

But what reason did Fr. Garreau have to write the biography of St. La Salle with such great haste? He tells us himself in the preface to the biography (7): to simplify the text of the first biographer, which was very long and muddled in places; and to make the virtues (8) of the holy Founder of the Brothers better known. And it was the Brothers themselves who asked him to do this work, as they had Blain. Garreau did not restrict himself to shortening Blain's text: he made his own contribution. It strikes me that – *si licet parva componere magnis*, of course – his style is very reminiscent of that of Caesar's Commentary: concise, precise and yet very clear. Perhaps I can illustrate this by comparing extracts from the two works:

«A deputation was sent to Caesar about this. He ordered that the weapons should be surrendered to him and the chiefs of the cities be brought to him. He set up his seat at the ditch in front of his camp. They bring the chiefs to him there; they deliver Vercingetorix to him, and throw his weapons down at his feet» (9).

Fr. Garreau's text reads as follows:

«Brother Timothy (10) decided to send the Brother himself (11) to plead the cause of the Institute. He was a venerable old man. He arrived at Fontainebleau where the Court was (12); he presented himself. His pale face and weak appearance made an impression on all who saw him» (13) (p. 506).

Before we go any further, we should perhaps say a few words about the author concerned.

Who was this Jesuit Fr. Garreau who took such an interest in our Founder only barely 40 years after his death?

We have not been able to find a lot of information about him. He is mentioned in two bio-bibliographical dictionaries published by French-speaking Jesuits in France:

1. *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus* by Augustin de Backer S. J., Liege-Paris 1890.
2. *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus* by Carlos Somervogel, a Jesuit from Strasbourg, Brussels-Paris 1892.

The two works give more or less the same information. They say that Fr. Jean Claude Garreau was born at St. Pourçain (Allier), entered the Jesuit novitiate on September 27th 1733, and taught philosophy at La Flèche (14), and theology at Tours. Information about him ends by saying he lived in Arras in 1672. Information from elsewhere says he was parish priest at Molesme, chaplain at St. Martin de Langres, and finally parish priest at Charmont. Neither the date nor the place of his death is given. The archives of the Jesuit Generalate in the Borgo Santo Spirito in Rome do not have his "elogium mortuorum" as in the case of other Jesuits. The archivist I consulted suggested that possibly he died outside the Company.

He wrote the following works: *Manuel ecclésiastique des Mémoires du Clergé* (15) (Paris 1778); *Traité du débit et de l'action oratoire*; several *Sermons*; a large volume in quarto, entitled *Institutiones philosophicae*; and two biographies: the first, *La Vie de Madame la Duchesse de Montmorency, supérieure de la Visitation Sainte Marie de Moulins* (Clermont Ferrand, 1769); and the second, which is of interest to us, *La Vie de Monsieur (16) de La Salle, Prêtre, Docteur en Théologie, ancien Chanoine de l'Église Métropolitaine de Rheims et Instituteur des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes* (Rouen, Laurent Dumesnil publishers, in duodecimo, LX–606 pages) in two volumes. It was re-edited in 1825, a summary of the history of the Institute was added by persons unknown, and it was published in Paris (17).

In 1829 it was translated into Italian, and in 1843 into English (18).

My analysis is based on the **first edition** (19) of 1760. The Life proper is preceded by several pages of introduction. This fine book, bound in maroon coloured leather with ornamentation in pure gold, opens with a *Dedicatory Epistle to the Holy Child Jesus*, at whose feet the author places his work which belongs to Jesus, because it is «dear Jesus who took into his hands the interests of the Lasallian undertaking».

The reason for the presence of this Epistle here is that the Holy Child of Bethlehem is by right the personal protector of the children who go to our schools. Also the Founder himself and his first disciples had a tender devotion to him, and this devotion can still be found in most parts of the Institute of the Brothers. There is nothing surprising about this Epistle if we remember that the spread of the true devotion to the Child Jesus in modern times began with our Institute. It was Bérulle (whom the Founder considered to be his spiritual master) who, at the beginning of the 17th century, drew attention, with some insistence, to the mystery of the childhood of Jesus. And then there was a Carmelite from Beaume, Marguerite du Saint Sacrement (dec. 1648), who was given the mission of spreading devotion to the Divine Child in France and elsewhere, and of basing a spirituality on it.

Many people went to Beaume to hear her speak. These included the Oratorian Amelote, her first historian, de Renty and Olier (another acquaintance of De La Salle) who imagined seeing the Child Jesus all aflame leaving the tabernacle and entering his heart.

De La Salle, then, drank at the very source of this devotion and with it slaked the thirst of his spiritual sons. The devotion is mentioned in the first point of the Bull of Benedict XIIIth, where it says: «Founded under the protection of the Most Holy Child Jesus and the patronage of St. Joseph, the Brothers should above all devote themselves to teaching children...»

This dedication is followed by a history-cum-apologia of the Institute of the Brothers, divided into five chapters. The author wishes to show the importance of this Institute and of that of the Sisters of the Christian Schools; the service they give to the public; the need for the two Institutes, because of the necessity to teach boys and girls separately; the esteem that the Monarchy and the Church have always had for these two Institutes. The author ends by kindly offering to answer the objections that are normally made to new Institutes.

(1) **La Vie de Monsieur de La Salle, Prêtre, Docteur en Théologie, ancien Chanoine de l'Église Métropolitaine de Rheims et Instituteur des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes** by Fr. J. C. Garreau, S. J., in two volumes. LX + 606 pages in duodecimo. Published by Laurent Duménil. Printer and Bookseller, rue de l'Écureil, Rouen. M.DCC.LX. With permission and approbation.

(2) **Bibliographia Internationalis Lasalliana 1733-1988** by Secondino Scaglione. Rivista Lasalliana 1988. 1.

(3) **La Vie de Monsieur Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Instituteur des Écoles Chrétiennes**. In two volumes, by Mr.*** (Jean-Baptiste Blain). Published by Jean-Baptiste Machuel, rue Damiette. Rouen. M.DCC.XXXIII. With approbation and by Royal Privilege.

(4) Br. Bernard FSC. **Conduite admirable de la Divine Providence en la personne du vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Prêtre, Docteur en Théologie, ancien Chanoine de l'Église Cathédrale de Reims et Instituteur des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes**, in four parts. M.DCC.XXI.

This Brother Bernard (Jean d'Auge) was of Swiss origin. He was born in Fribourg on June 24th 1667. He joined the Institute of the Brothers at the age of 16. In 1717, he met Brother Barthelemy in Grenoble. He made his final vows in 1726. From his manuscript we know that he was in Paris from 1721 to 1723 when he was transferred to Rheims. After that no more is heard of him. The FSC Catalogue mentions him as having left, without offering any explanations for this. (Cf. Letters of the Founder p. 27).

(5) F. E. Maillefer. **La Vie de M. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, Prêtre, Docteur en Théologie, ancien Chanoine de la Cathédrale de Reims, et Instituteur des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes**. This edition compares the texts of 1723 and 1740.

(6) Dom François Elie Maillefer O.S.B. was the son of John Maillefer and Marie de La Salle, younger sister of Jean Baptiste. At the age of 18, he joined the Benedictines (Congregation of St. Maur) at the Abbey of St. Faron at Meaux. He received his monastic habit on July 8th 1702 and was professed the following year. He was ordained in 1711. He lived successively in the monasteries of St. Basle, St. Jean de Laon and St. Nicaise. From 1723 to 1761, the year of his death, he lived in the Abbey of St. Remi in Rheims.

(7) The opinion that the first Brothers had of Blain's biography is still held today. He is still appreciated for the mass of information he gives but it is recognised he lacks precision and clearness.

(8) The consideration of the virtues of Fr. De La Salle take up more than 300 pages in Blain's Life, the whole of Book 4, which has for title: **His spirit, his sentiments and his virtues**.

(9) Julius Caesar. **The Gallic War VII, 89**.

(10) Brother Timothy Bransiet (1682-1752). A Parisian by birth, he made his novitiate under the direction of the Founder. In 1720 he was elected Superior General. He obtained Letters Patent from Louis XV which officially recognised the Institute of the Brothers throughout the Kingdom

of France. The following year, he and the Brothers had the great joy of seeing the Institute recognised by the Church in Benedict XIII's Bull "In apostolicae dignitatis solio". The one who pulled all the strings was just an ordinary Brother. Neither Garreau nor Blain gives his name, and it was left to Rigault to tell us that it was Brother Onore (Nicolas du Moutier) who pleaded this cause before Cardinal de Rohan. In about 1707, before entering religion, this good Brother had been a servant in the household of Prince de Soubise, the father of Armand Gaston, the future Cardinal de Rohan. And so he went to visit his Eminence, accompanied by Brother Barthelemy. The Cardinal recognised him and showed a great deal of kindness to him and the Superior General. He promised he would deal with their business as soon as he got to Rome (he was going to Rome as King Louis XV's special ambassador to the Holy See). When he reached Rome, however, he found that Pope Clement XI had died. He remained there to help with the Conclave which elected Innocent XII. This latter was not able to do anything as he too died shortly after. Rohan waited, and finally the new Pontiff, Benedict XIII, promulgated **perlibenter** the Bull of Approbation. This happened in late January and the first snow was falling in Rome.

(11) Garreau does not give the name of the Brother mentioned here who was sent to Fontainebleau to plead the case for the purchase of the Manor of St. Yon. We know, however, that it was Brother Thomas Frappet, the "legal owner" of St. Yon. But Rigault (II. 66) who gives us this information also expresses some doubts, because this Brother who was born at the end of 1670 was barely 50 years old at the time of the journey to Fontainebleau. The age hardly fits the description given by our biographer. It is quite clear that either Blain or Garreau has mixed things up. The Court was at Fontainebleau at the time and the venerable old Brother went there.

(12) You can imagine the surprise of the courtiers when they saw this old man in his black robe and white rabat walking through the vast halls of the chateau. He was received by His Royal Highness the Duke of Orleans, Regent of the Kingdom during the minority of Louis XV. On that day, this good old Brother provided a spectacle, for at Fontainebleau as at Versailles, everything was a spectacle. On this occasion, however, it proved to be a moving one, and made a great impression on the illustrious onlookers.

(13) I should like to remind readers that all the quotations from Fr. Garreau come from the first edition and are given in the spelling of the time (French text).

(14) La Flèche, chief town in the Arrondissement of Sarthe in Anjou. In the 16th century, the Bourbon-Vendomes inherited property here and built a chateau which, renovated by Henry IV, was given to the Jesuits who turned it into a school which subsequently became famous. Its pupils included Marseenne, Descartes, Prince Eugène of Savoy and... Fr. Garreau.

(15) This Ecclesiastical Manual dealt with everything that concerned the discipline and regulations of the Church in France.

(16) In the second edition, the editor has changed Monsieur into Messire, an ancient noble title.

(17) By the publisher Mequignon Junior, bookseller to the Faculty of Theology at 9 rue des Grands Augustins, in the middle of the Latin Quarter.

(18) The frontispiece of the Italian edition reads as follows: **Vita di D. Gio. Battista della Salle, tratta dal francese, opera del Padre Giovanni Claudio Garreau**. Roma, 1829. 362 p. The incomplete nature of this biographical reference caused me some doubts. I contacted Brother Secondino, who said he had come across it in a work by Fr. Dante. I consulted Fr. Dante. I received his answer on June 7th 1990. He wrote: «I didn't know it had been translated into Italian». And so I began a long trek around libraries in Rome – the National, the Gregorian, the Civiltà Cattolica, the History Institute of the Company of Jesus, the archives and library of our Generalate and those of the Jesuits – and nothing: none of them had the Italian translation. Finally I consulted the two encyclopedias (Sommervogel and Baker) about the Jesuit writers, who devote a whole column to Fr. Garreau. The two French editions are mentioned and so is the English translation, but not a word about the Italian translation.

That of the English Edition reads: **The Life of the Ven. J. B. De La Salle, founder of the Christian Schools, with an historical sketch of the Institute to the present time, translated from the French of Pere Garreau, S. J., and also an account of the rise and progress of the Society in Ireland**. By the Christian Brothers. As can be seen on this frontispiece, the translation was made by the Irish Christian Brothers and was published in Dublin by William Powell, 68 Thomas Street, in 1843. The Christian Brothers of Ireland were founded in 1802 by Edmund Ignatius Rice, and they had opened a house in Dublin by 1818. They have close links with our Institute and St. La Salle, whose Rules inspired them.

(19) Although the approbation was given in 1753, the book was published only in 1760.

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