

AN UNJUSTLY FORGOTTEN

LASALLIAN BIOGRAPHY

(2/2)

Then finally, on page XLIII, we find the Preface. It is of special interest to us, for it contains the answers to numerous questions that spring to mind, given the lack of bibliographical information about the author and his work. In the space of six pages, the author tells us that his main aim is to make known the great benefactor of youth, and that he wants to «present an accurate picture of his work and virtues». He realises his work is not perfect, but he hopes it will find its way to the shelves of the most important libraries. His only wish is to edify pious and truly Christian readers. There then follows the most interesting piece of information: «What is certain, is that it was the Brothers of the Christian Schools who asked me to write a new history of the life of their Founder...», a piece of information that is confirmed on page 573: «I hope that the accurate account I have given of the principal actions of his life is such that the careful and unbiased reader will form the impression that he should of it».

Fr. Garrèau confesses also with honesty and sincerity his dependence on the Canon's biography «the first history of the life of M. de La Sale (sic), which in the present work is only revised and put in order a little».

Blain for him and for everyone else is a mine of precious but superabundant and jumbled information. Garreau, on the other hand, is pleasant, attractive and encourages one to linger without ever being bored. His beautiful, classical prose attracts the reader immediately. His clear and lofty style enchanted me from the very first page and I was immediately filled with admiration.

And so I disagree with the anonymous critic of the "*Ami de la Religion*" who baldly states that «this life was written without craft or feeling». Nothing could be further from the truth. As one of the best modern biographers (20) stated at the end of the last century, with all his authority: «This beautifully written book...»

And so I re-affirm that Garreau revised the style of Blain and put order into the chaotic mass of his interminable work, but he did not stop there: he has given us a new book which can be read now and always both easily and with interest.

The language is always clear, sentences are well-constructed and balanced, and syntax is always sure. There are many beautiful pages in the two volumes, and at the very beginning there is one that Bossuet would have been proud to call his own:

«The Servant of God whose life I am about to write was one of those extraordinary men that the Lord gives the world in his mercy for the salvation of people and the edification of his Church». (p. 1)

As one can easily see, the musical quality of the prose is linked to a Cartesian clarity of expression.

Then there is the page that describes the young John Baptist's application to his studies:

«With courage, he overcame all the difficulties of scholasticism. (21) He made himself familiar with all the subtle distinctions that error opposes to the unshakeable truth of Catholic dogma. To make himself completely hardened against its dangerous sophistry, he applied himself to careful reading as well as to frequent practice: when he debated, it was not with the vivacity and self-assurance born of pride and selfconceit, but with such as inspires zeal for truth» (p. 16).

The pages dealing with the adventurous life of Mme. de Maillefer are also very fine. Particularly good and marked by great economy of language are those that tell the story of her wild years of depravity followed by the years of grace and astonishing conversion:

«Sure of the success of her charme, which she was the first to admire; convinced that they would outshine those of any other society lady who might care to challenge her; she would make her entry and with her brazen looks challenge her rivals» (p. 42).

Often, instead of describing what happened, he would dramatise it, putting words of evangelical beauty into the mouth of the Saint:

«Men of little faith, what makes you so bold as to put limits on infinite goodness where none exist?» (p. 96).

The resignation from the canonry is told in clear and dramatic terms:

«I no longer feel attraction for the vocation of a canon; it left me before I resigned the position. This state is no longer for me; and although I entered into it in a completely legitimate fashion, it seems to me that God is inviting me today to leave it, that he is **urging me** to do so» (p. 108).

Another good example of this sober and clear style can be found in the fine portrait he gives of M. Tallon (22):

«M. Tallon was the most important man the archbishop could choose. He was highly esteemed in the diocese; and with the ability he had to speak well, he was able to create whatever effect he wanted. He gave the impression of great piety, and there was something soft and seductive about his voice» (p. 127).

Other pages marked by great liveliness and clarity tell the story of the Chevalier d'Armstadt (23), head of a famous German noble family (p. 509-516).

Pages full of drama can be found in the account of the Brothers' total refusal to accept the superior imposed upon them by the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Noailles (p. 343-369).

The account of the Clement affair (24) is very moving. The author calls it «the cruellest to have ever befallen the Servant of God», and in it the Saint was tricked by two crooked opportunists, a father and his son (p. 437-443).

Everyone knows that De La Salle was always solemn and serious, and yet on one occasion he showed he could be humorous. It was in connection with the reading, during

meal-times, of the Rules he had composed for Directors. Fr. Garreau writes:

«These Brothers found this practice too humiliating; he replied it was up to them to remove whatever might be shameful in it by fulfilling all their obligations faithfully».

And the author concludes:

«Such was the wisdom of the Servant of God, whom respectable but ill-informed people wanted to pass off as a man without ideas, without the ability to govern, and whose only quality was to be excessively stubborn» (p. 537-538).

The Jansenists are a group of people to whom the author makes very frequent reference. They were the most hardened enemies of our Saint. He, however, would never give in to any of their fallacious arguments or blandishments, but rather always proclaimed himself to be a devoted and obedient son of the Pope in Rome, and liked to sign his name as De La Salle, Roman Priest.

It is really worth reading the marvellous pages describing the Saint's discussions with them in Marseille, especially page 461, one of the most dramatic:

«A man like himself would be such an important victory that it was worth the trouble to make more than one attempt. And so they came back to the charge more than once. They brought the conversation round to the Pope and the bishops and spoke of them with the utmost contempt.

The Saint shook and avenged the Lord's anointed who were being treated with such disrespect. He no longer had any doubts about the real feelings of these so-called friends of his Institute. He saw the trap they had wanted to set for him, and he broke off relations forever with these rebellious souls».

Page 553 reveals a quite unexpected characteristic of the Saint: his gentleness and love for the adolescents he met every day in the corridors and property of St. Yon.

«The young boarders were a delight for the saintly man. He gave them advice; he went to see them from time to time; he organised their little games; and then, adapting his manner to his audience, would tell them edifying stories».

There are other things I could say, but I think I have sufficiently illustrated the talent of our biographer. Having spoken of him it remains only to introduce his religious family, for the Jesuits were always the good friends of St. La Salle and his Brothers, as they are to this day.

Fr. Garreau often speaks of them and their Founder. The Founder of the Brothers owes a lot to him, and here and there, especially in the Rules and Meditations, one comes across his teachings. Young John Baptist did not have the good fortune to go to the famous Jesuit College in his native town, but instead went to an equally famous Rheims school, that of the Bons Enfants. St. La Salle was on very good terms with several Jesuits Fathers right up to the time of his death. His last confessors were two Jesuits. There was Fr. Pierre Louis Froger, a great preacher of the Exercises, "charity itself", as Fr. Rayez calls him. On the manuscript page, yellowed with age, of the *Elogia Mortuorum* that I was able to consult in the Jesuit archives on the Borgo Santo Spirito, it says that he was much given to "sacra contemplatio". He was the Saint's favourite confessor. When the latter died in 1717, St. La Salle turned to Fr. Paul Bodin, (dec. 1725), a 3rd

year lecturer. He was a person noted for his piety and wisdom, and had a lot of experience as a spiritual adviser. It was he who was advising the Founder when he was writing the definitive version of the Rules (Blain II, 143-144).

But there were many Jesuits who appeared in the life of the Saint. Not only were they generous with their good advice, but they also helped the Institute to develop in France.

For example, there were «the Gentlemen from the Congregation of the Jesuits in Rouen who, among other good works, maintained a teacher at the school in Darnetal...»

There was Fr. Beauchamp from Alais who in 1707 sang the praises of the Brothers before the Vicar General of the diocese.

There was also the anonymous Jesuit who "gave a sermon" for the purpose of recommending «this charitable undertaking», that is, the opening of one of the first schools in Paris. And one could go on for a long time.

The Jesuit Fathers deserve our undying gratitude for the help they gave our Saint and the newly-born Institute.

To this gratitude which the Institute of the Brothers has always felt towards them, I must add my own: to Fr. Giandomenico Mucci, who was good enough to introduce my Italian translation of the Meditations; and to all the religious of the Civiltà Cattolica, who have always made me welcome in their midst and have always shown me kindness.

And my final wish? It is to see this fine biography by Garreau reprinted. It would be a further source of glorification for our Founder, for it is a glorious example of good clear French writing.

(20) This was Jean Guibert, whom Rayez does not hesitate to call «the most conscientious biographer of the century which is coming to an end». In the same year as the canonisation, he published a monumental *History of St. John Baptist de La Salle*. Guibert was also himself a Sulpician, and venerated the Saint as one of the most famous students of the Grand Seminaire. The following year, 1901, the second edition appeared, and it is from this edition that quotations are normally taken.

(21) In the second edition this noun has been replaced by "theology".

(22) M. Tallon was one of the Vicar Generals of the Archbishop of Rheims. Mgr. Le Tellier, and Superior of the Seminary. He was sent to the Brothers to try and convince De La Salle to pass on the position of canon to his own brother, Louis, rather than to his own choice, M. Faubert. The latter was in fact appointed canon to replace him.

(23) The Chevalier d'Armstadt fought under the imperial colours at Denain in 1717. With great difficulty he recovered from his many wounds, and went to France with the intention of becoming a Catholic (he was a Lutheran). On October 8th 1714, he took lodgings with the Brothers in Paris, and asked La Salle to be his spiritual adviser. One day, however, his wounds reopened. He had a vision that lasted four hours. In it he saw a great many demons, in a variety of terrifying forms, who threatened to kill him if he did not immediately leave the house where he was staying. And so, he was forced to leave and thus gave up his vocation.

(24) Garreau does not give the name of the two "delinquents" but subsequent biographers tell us it was a certain M. Clement "a beneficiary", aged about 22, and his father. The young ecclesiastic came to the Founder of the Brothers suggesting he should open a seminary to train country teachers. He, the ecclesiastic, would pay – which he never did. De La Salle thought it was a praiseworthy scheme. But it was a most unfortunate affair with all the characteristics of a typical Italian imbroglio. When the young ecclesiastic found he was short of money, he disappeared, leaving the Saint in a very awkward position. At that point, the father appeared on the scene to defend the honour (?) of his son, thus adding his own wickedness to that of his son.

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