

# ★ *lasalliana*

21 - 3 - A - 84

## THE HEROIC VOW

or

### The daring of a man of faith and obedience

When John Baptist de La Salle suggested to two of his Brothers to join him in an irrevocable commitment «to bring about with all their ability and efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools», he was, according to Blain, in a state of great perplexity.

The word "perplexity", which is used again a few pages later in connection with M. Baudrand's refusal to authorise the opening of a novitiate at Vaugirard, is at the same time strange and revealing. Blain does not use the word confusion or despondency, much less discouragement. One has the impression of almost hearing the words of the Most Holy Virgin Mary saying to the Angel: «How will this come about?» In fact De La Salle had received a mission «to establish the Society of the Christian Schools», and everything seemed to be collapsing.

#### Through obedience John Baptist discovers his mission

He was not yet 40 years old and for 12 years now his life had taken a direction which was quite different from what he had imagined. And it was not his doing. When he looked back on his life (Mary comes to mind again: «she pondered all this in her heart») as he did in his «Memoir on the Beginnings»: «I would never have thought of it before. It was not as if anyone had ever suggested the idea to me»; or at the end of his life in his last

words: «I adore in all things the conduct of God in my regard», he was aware that it was God who had called him to establish this work. This was so much so that, when he speaks to the Lord of it, it is in terms of OPUS TUUM.

There had been in fact a whole series of unforeseen events:

1678: The death of M. Rolland and the responsibility he received from him to take care of the Sisters of the Child Jesus.

1679: The meeting with Adrien Nyel on the doorstep of the Sisters' house, and the opening of the first school.

1680: The care that he is led to take of the schoolmasters.

1681: Taking them into his own house so as to be able to follow them more closely.

1682: The move together to a house in the Rue Neuve, and the beginning of a community. They call themselves Brothers.

1683: He gives up his canonry "which leaves him".

1684: He distributes his goods to the poor after the intervention of the Brothers.

1685: The replacement of a Brother in class. By this date he has already buried at least two Brothers.

He did all this after much discernment and prayer, and consultation with spiritual counselors and directors. He never made decisions casually.

He was convinced, therefore, that this was God's will. In Meditation 57, second point, he has the following to say: «Compare what you do purely through obedience and what you do through your own impulse, and look upon the former as the work of God...»

#### Is this failure?

In the early days, in Rheims, Rethel, Laon, Guise and Paris, everything went well though not without difficulties.

And then «the seminary for countryside schoolmasters which he had begun with such great success... disappears... The seminary for the young Brothers he had called to himself in Paris» also disappears. Of the sixteen Brothers he had left in Rheims and

the surrounding region, eight had gone. «An additional source of sorrow was that for four whole years only one subject joined». What is more, Brother Henri L'Heureux had died, he himself had been seriously ill. What was happening?

### **In faith John Baptist reflects on his obedience**

And so, what was happening? He was in the same situation as he had been when he started, or almost.

Had he not done all that was necessary? And yet, he was aware that he had done all that he could or had to. What was there still to be done? «More?» as Vincent de Paul had said before him.

He does not want failure, if failure it is, to be put down to his deficiency, negligence or his weakness.

Not that he is afraid of failure in itself, if this is God's will. But he believes the work is willed by God, and so he must do everything in his power to ensure that the work succeeds.

He takes stock:

- some Brothers have left
- some Brothers are ill or tired
- some Brothers are weakening spiritually
- there are no more candidates

So these are the areas he will tackle with the means at his disposal.

There has to be a commitment: even if only three of us remain. Some means has to be found to enable the Brothers to rest and to nourish them spiritually.

A novitiate has to be set up.

These are the areas in which he can do something.

The rest:

Brothers leaving  
the death of Brother Henri L'Heureux  
the opposition he encounters  
his health problems

It all depends on God.

And so, this is what he undertakes to do and this is the enterprise in which he associates the two Brothers. It is a challenge thrown down to the Lord, if one can speak in such terms.

### **A creative obedience: «Domine, Opus tuum».**

At this point we can take up the 3rd point of Meditation 77: «Despite the irregularity of a community, God always has some faithful servants who maintain its true spirit. The Lord reserves to himself some men, as he told Elias, whose «knees have never bowed to Baal», that is to say, men who are on their guard against the spirit of the world and who observe their Rule and the practices of community as far as they can. They keep the fear of the Lord, and prevent God from destroying the community, as he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah... It is to these that Jesus Christ (says) that they must avoid the company of the others in order not to share in their irregularity, and in order not to be affected by the contagion of their bad example. They must raise their mind to God in mental prayer. Pray that God may always preserve his spirit in your community, and often repeat with David: «Do not banish me from thy presence; do not take thy holy spirit from me».

This cry is full of pathos and reveals a critical situation. When did he express himself in this way? Was it at that point? And if not, what was it in connection with, or was it simply inspired by the Gospel for the 24th Sunday?

This is not the impression given by the decisions he takes. They are all very positive: they do not hark back to the past but look forward to the future. The task ahead is to ensure that this Society is established and firmly established, because «the need for it in the Church is very great».

A fortunate crisis, when all is said and done, even if all the circumstances are not completely clear. It shows us a man of God, sure of the mission entrusted to him, and who seeks by all the means he can to respond to it effectively.

A good lesson for all of us today, who tend so much, if one can say so, to fall into despair. On this third centenary of the Heroic Vow, what remains for us is one single conviction, a conviction that was re-affirmed by the last General Chapter: «God does not abandon "his work", but "it pleases him to make it bear fruit day by day"» (Rule 141).

**Brother Joseph Le Bars**