

PARIS AT THE TIME OF THE FOUNDER (4/5)

The St Sulpice's area

In the area around St Sulpice to which the Brothers came, the poor lived in the same tenements as artisans and traders. But the Brothers also became aware, as they got to know the area and walked daily to their schools, of the comfort, elegance, wealth and ostentation that others enjoyed. Even if they took their weekly walk into the country, they passed by brand new "hôtel" of the rich and noble. The domes of great new royal buildings drew their attention. Unsophisticated as most of the Brothers and later novices were, they would "stand and stare"; how more appreciated and leisurely a life these people must lead, compared with theirs.

In teaching them how to adopt the life of faith and views of faith, it is not surprising that their Founder suggested to these beginners that «if we would look upon a beautiful building with the eyes of faith, we should remember that its beauty is external; that its end is only to please the senses, and that this beauty is only a passing thing of such little stability and duration, that there shall not remain a stone upon a stone, nor any idea of it.» By his upbringing, he was sensitive to beauty and the value of things, but he had to begin where his novices were; he was also aware of the adulation and imitation of royal gloryseeking that the new buildings represented and indifference to the poor.

Other southern suburbs

The suburb of Saint Jacques, south of the Latin Quarter, had developed since the beginning of the century, for many religious houses and hospices had been built there in open country, able to be surrounded by large gardens and cultivated plots.

Half a mile south of the walls of the Latin Quarter Anne of Austria had founded in 1621, along the Rue Saint-Jacques, the Benedictine monastery of Val de Grace in fulfillment of a vow when her son Louis XIV was born. The present monastic buildings rose from 1645 to 1665, with a great dome over the chapel.

They are now part of the army training hospital. Just further on, on the other side of the road, the convent of Port-Royal was transferred here to new buildings in 1625. They are now a maternity hospital; Mother Angélique Arnauld is still buried in the chapel. Such buildings attracted the artisans and buyers and sellers of all kinds, and the poor looking for a job.

Further east was the growing suburb of Saint Marcel and north of it, on the west side of the Latin Quarter, that of Saint Victor.

Half a mile southeast of Val de Grace there still is (opposite the Metro Gobelins) the "manufacture des Gobelins", the royal factory founded by Colbert to turn out tapestries, gilt furniture and the like for the Crown instead of having to depend on foreign imports. 700 highly qualified workers were employed, many of them Flemish or Italian, and the Catholics went to the church of St Hippolyte.

This was a little to the north, between the Rue des Gobelins and the present Boulevard Arago, but disappeared in 1798. The parish grew throughout the century, and we shall see La Salle sending two Brothers to run the parish school in 1698, and even opening a training-centre for village schoolmasters. The school was originally on the Rue Broca, which crosses the Rue Saint Hippolyte.

Another half mile eastwards along the present Boulevard Saint Marcel brings you to the great hospital of La Pitié-Salpêtrière, next to the Gare d'Austerlitz, and that was used, under edict from Louis XIV in 1656, to confine beggars and the homeless. In other words, it became a workhouse. Children also were confined under the Board; their policy towards the children of the poor and La Salle's were at variance.

LOUIS XIV'S MARK ON THE CAPITAL.

There had been much development in the capital, therefore, in the decades before Louis XIV's time, and that continued afterwards. But Louis also left his own mark: although he left Paris in 1682, he was interested in a capital that would reflect his greatness and maintain his prestige with the Parisians, and he had the good fortune to be served by some very great architects.

Christopher Wren who did much to rebuild London after the fire of 1666, came to Paris from 1663 to 1666; the Louvre for a time was his daily study, where (he wrote) the activities in extending it «make a school of architecture, the best probably at this day in Europe.»

The boulevards

Louis had the old walls of the capital pulled down; the ramparts or boulevards in front of them were flattened and made into long tree-lined avenues to which the name boulevard was transferred. This began for the eastern half of the northern walls in 1670, and was taken up again in 1684. The walls around the Latin quarter began to be pulled down in 1672, so that La Salle would notice this remarkable change when he returned in 1688.

But the simple bank of earth further out, no further south than the present Boulevard du Montparnasse, and that corresponded in size to the northern arc of walls, only began to be planted in 1705, and not much was completed by 1715. The Metro Duroc, in other other words, close to the present Brothers' Centre in the Rue de Sèvres, marks a southwest point on this limit; there would have been few buildings yet in the area: the hospital for incurables, now part of the Laennec Hospital (the chapel dates from 1663); further up, where the Bon Marché stores are, were the "Petites Maisons" or Little Houses, where the Poor Board catered for 500 poor old women and 300 others variously diseased, including the senile.

The new northern boulevards provided splendid walks for all classes of the town, being only a quarter of an hour's walk from its centre. In 1670 also Louis had the open space beyond the Tuileries made into a wide tree-lined avenue that has become the Champs-Élysées.

The "Invalides"

For the retired and wounded veterans of his armies he built the great Hôtel des Invalides, west of the suburb of St Germain. It was, in reality, an enforced residence in a building exalting Louis's military victories, for wounded and sick veterans to keep them off the streets. The officers, except the highest, were three or four to a room, the private soldiers to a far greater number. The hospital wards were tended by Sisters of Charity. Everything was run on monastic lines. The great gilt dome was not begun till the turn of the century.

Louis had the small circular Place des Victoires northeast of the gardens of the Palais Royal, laid out in 1685, and that year the Pont Royal, linking the Louvre to the south bank, was begun.

Because of the Pont Royal and the Hôtel des Invalides, Saint Germain came into favour, and the aristocracy moved there from Le Marais. Things were changing in this district; more people were coming in, there were more jobs of all kinds – the poor still remaining poor.

Changing character of the capital

Paris at the end of the century within its new boulevards, already planted or still projected, together with the suburb of Saint Antoine on the eastern side, and new suburbs beginning to push out from the north, was a city of perhaps half a million inhabitants; it had moved from being a medieval walled town at the beginning of the century to having the first appearance of a modern sprawling metropolis. Even though much slower than in our day, it was a time of change.

The atmosphere of public life had also changed. When La Salle took two Brothers with him to Paris in 1688, Louis XIV's period of direct rule had lasted nearly thirty years, during which he had created a system of unchanging absolute government. While his domination of western Europe was coming to an end, nothing changed in his cultivation of his personal glory and its radiation over society. The emblem of the Sun King was on the doors of his palace at Versailles, and he instituted a punctilious etiquette from his rising to his retiring that created an atmosphere of worship in which the great nobles fawned on him, and being kept at court were rendered harmless and useless.

His improvements to the royal palaces and his creation of new squares in his honour were met with adulation. When the statue to him in the Place des Victoires was erected, representing Renown placing a laurel wreath on his brow, one of his greatest flatterers went round the statue three times at the head of a regiment of guards. «He had the ridiculous idea of establishing perpetual lamps to light up the statue day and night.» (Abbé de Choisy.)

Court life

Louis loved magnificence and obliged the nobles continually to impoverish themselves buying magnificent costumes for themselves and their wives. Saint-Simon says that on one occasion it cost him 20,000 livres. Court life was artificial, boring and idle as the great nobles waited around hoping for pensions, posts and other royal favours. Yet it enchanted and dazzled contemporaries. It created a totally false atmosphere and led the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie to build in Paris and elsewhere palaces or town houses in keeping with their rank and wealth. The present Carnavalet Museum in Le Marais, in one of the palaces Mme de Sevigné lived in, gives an idea, through its paintings and furniture, of the status-conscious style of costume and living of the "yuppies" of the late seventeenth century, for whom, however, place in society mattered more than wealth.

The great thing was what rank of people you associated with, what salons you attended, whose notice and patronage you might get. The wage-earning poor had no part in this. New jobs would be created, paid wretchedly; manual work was despised, and so was this rabble. Yet they would envy those above them. La Salle saw his work both as lifting the poor out of their inhuman, unjust situation and yet leading them to live by Christian values, including evangelical poverty. And in a culture where status mattered and where the hard work of teaching the poor was despised, the Founder had to lead his Brothers to live by the light of faith.

In his last recommendations to them he wrote: «If you wish to persevere and die in your state of life, never have any dealings with society people; for little by little you will acquire a taste for their ways of doing, and you will be drawn into their conversation to such an extent that you will not be able, through policy to refrain from applauding what they say, very harmful though it may be. This will cause you to fall into unfaithfulness, and being no longer faithful in observing your Rules, you will lose taste for your condition and finally you will abandon it.» He had seen it happen; somehow Brothers got into conversation with people whose dress, style of life, knowledge, and experience of the world was so much better than theirs; who could often only express their regret that the Brothers were not using their talents elsewhere than in classrooms crowded with ragammuffins; who regretted their hard life or their fidelity to the Pope or their rejection of Jansenist ideas. These well-placed, well-spoken people could unsettle the Brothers. As their education improved, – a result in time of the widening educational opportunities the Brothers themselves pioneered and developed – they would be able to place in better perspective what society believed in and answer it. But they would derive most support from their faith that their work was a ministry of basic importance to the Church and to society.

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