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

THE ROYAL HAND ON ADMINISTRATION AND JUSTICE IN THE CAPITAL

La Salle, having a very different experience of social life, sensed more than the Brothers the false aura of adulation of the monarchy and the cult of status. But he also soon realised – and to his cost and that of the Brothers – that since his student days in Paris the hand of the monarch over every sphere of administration had become heavier, and that people could not protest without danger of immediate imprisonment. Far more than in provincial Rheims, the power of the king was strongly felt in Paris, since nearly all the judicial and administrative departments of the kingdom were concentrated in the "Palace" on the island of Notre-Dame. The present "palais" gives little idea of the original complex, due to four ruinous fires since 1618, and demolitions under the pretext of modernisation.

Royal agencies of law and order

All posts were delegations of the king's justice; all royal office-holders were magistrates, for all forms of government of the country were seen as functions of law and order, and all the royal departments were in fact courts. All the decrees came from the king: the courts merely applied these and existing royal law. There was the Great Council (which sat at the Louvre), the high court of appeal, for the greatest cases affecting the king's rights. The next most important court was the Parlement of Paris, with a jurisdiction covering the whole of northern France except Brittany. Princes of the blood and peers lay and ecclesiastical had the right to be members. This Court registered and promulgated royal acts; it controlled all those in public functions in its area and had the overall responsibility for law and order, involving Paris and its suburbs. There were five other departments or courts: they comprised between 350 and 400 magistrates and court officials who were often seen in the streets of Paris in their robes of a strict hierarchy of colours and quality.

The Châtelet

A more immediate centre of law and order for the Paris region lay north of the Palace, the other side of the Pont au Change. It was the Châtelet, a name meaning small castle or fortress, for as such it had been built in 1190. Now it was a centre of justice under a royal provost: the Châtelet came to mean the body of courts and departments which operated there. It published royal decrees for the region; it was a court of appeal; it dealt with property leases and wages; it inspected the "Halles" and other markets and hostelries. It had a crime section and a department for highway crime. It had several lieutenants, the most important being the civil lieutenant; 48 superintendants inspected the different quarters of Paris. Its criminal court dealt savagely, according to the practice of the times, with those caught red-handed. It was normal to interrogate under torture. John Evelyn describes in his diary under March 11th, 1651, how a man accused of robbery was first racked and then had two buckets of water poured down his throat through a horn. According to the crime, a person could have his ears cut off, or be sent to the galleys, or burnt alive, or have all his bones smashed before being spread-eagled round a cartwheel laid on the floor and finally being stabbed to the heart.

The lieutenant of police

In 1667 Louis XIV eased the burden of the civil lieutenant, but also brought the function under his control, by creating two new royal posts (that had to be bought): that of civil lieutenant dealing only with civil matters, and that of lieutenant of police, seeing to general policing of the capital, which meant its security and administration generally: seeing to law and order, cleansing of streets and public places, the capital's food supply and prices. He was responsible for religious, social and economic affairs and control of public behaviour; he was the judge in final appeal of beggars and people of no fixed abode. It was in fact a ministry for Paris. Kept in touch by his 48 superintendants, their sub-officers and sergeants, and by informers and spies, the lieutenant of police always knew what was going on. The post was made effective by its having two long-serving, able incumbents: La Reynie from 1667 to 1697, and d'Argenson from 1697 to 1715.

Lettres de cachet

These two often had a hard and cruel task to perform, for thieves, crooks and hired killers acted in daylight but especially at night, and hid in the suburbs. But they softened or even avoided carrying out some of the pitiless orders coming from the king, Colbert or Louvois after him. Nevertheless, when La Salle came to Paris in 1688 he found that what was hardly organised when he was there as a seminarian, was now a well-organised, well-informed police force with powers of suppression that came from being able to employ directly the royal lettres de cachet. These bore the king's name, but it was a signature imitated by a special secretary. These letters were issued for matters in Paris by the Secretary of State and ensured a more rapid executions of royal justice and hence of administration, and were very much used. When the post of lieutenant-governor of police was created in 1667, the Secretary of State delegated to him this function. Reynie in turn had the work done by a private secretary, and gradually organised an Office of Lettres de cachet. D'Argenson developed it into a ministerial department.

There were lettres de cachet coming directly from the king, or made out by the police; but they were also asked for, especially as a request to protect family honour: to check a loose-living member of a noble family; to prevent a marriage between a good girl but of no social standing with a man

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higher up the social scale; even a joiner, a small stationer, might petition against disobedient daughters too free in their socialising. Important families would have their plea considered by the king in Council, but even the poor would be heard by the Secretary of State. D'Argenson, however, speeded things up by having the enquiry made by himself, drawing up the letter and having it countersigned by the Secretary of State.

Detention

The use of lettres de cachet meant that the matter did not have to go through the public courts and become common knowledge. The accused was put away for as long as the petitioner wished, with a regime, mild or severe, as he indicated. People were detained in the Bastille or in the fortress of Vincennes, a mile or so outside modern Paris. Some were sent to convents or monasteries. There were also boarding-houses for the purpose, run privately. The system interests us because of an innovation in the matter by La Salle and the Brothers later in Rouen.

For the general range of infractions, not involving lettres de cachet, there were many prisons, and they were always full. Usually you were tried next day, but a lettre de cachet required another one for the person to be set free – and he could be forgotten. Debtors had to stay till they paid up, which might mean for good. The condition of prisoners was dreadful: they were hardly fed; the jailers were often brutal, and had to be paid for every thing. But the most ominous symbol of royal despotism was the Bastille: you could be sent there by decision of the king by himself, or because you were accused of being in some way "seditious" to the royal mind. La Salle and the Brothers at one moment were close to being sent there.

The Bastille

The Bastille was the only one remaining of a number of square forts (called "bastilles") built into Philip Augustus's wall. It was seen in 17th century as the state prison that gave meaning to the lettre de cachet. Many Jansenists were kept there and many Protestants, especially between 1685 and 1700. Many preferred to die there rather than win freedom by accepting Communion from a Catholic priest.

Spies were kept there; so were noble courtiers, like the two who quarrelled in the king's drawing-room and were confined for a few days "for having lacked respect for my apartments."! Such persons could be given a spacious, heated room, good meals with two bottles of wine, and be received back at court with good grace.

Anybody who might be considered seditious or who simply spoke against the royal power could be incarcerated: taverners, women of the people, peddlars and especially gazetteers or publishers of gazettes, for journalists were considered especially dangerous. (A gazette was a news sheet or a pamphet: many could be scurrilous or satirical.) Many printers and booksellers were sent to the Bastille for publishing lampoons revealing too great an independence of mind with regard to the royal power. Anything to do with religion could be treated as dangerous: in 1681 several priests were sent to the Bastille for the clandestine publication of an attack on the character of the archbishop of Paris. A bishop found applying for a lettre de cachet a very convenient way of exiling or imprisoning a priests or a confessor who had his own way of interpreting matters for his penitents.

Blain corroborates this by telling us this story, but without any date: «One day someone came on behalf of a priest imprisoned for several years between four walls, where somehow he had heard of the great virtue of M. de La Salle, asking him to come and hear his confession.» La Salle went and found him in a deplorable condition «dressed in a cassock that was falling apart, and wearing a shirt that was torn, black, filthy and crawling with vermin.» After hearing his confession, La Salle proposed they should swap clothes, which the other priest accepted, and La Salle returned to the community "decorated", as Blain has to put it, «with the spoils of the victory over himself.» The priest died a few days later, he was told. It is surprising that Blain got away with this description, for everything was kept secret about the Bastille: those who were released had to sign an agreement not to say anything about prison life. So imagination could run riot.

One of the most important prisoners in La Salle's day was the Man in the Iron Mask who was brought there from the isolated fortress of Pignerol in Savoy in September 1698 and died there on November 19th 1703.

For La Salle and the Brothers, the threat of the Bastille from the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris was still far away. There were more immediate problems that February 1688...

Brother Alfred Calcutt

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The above account is not a Lasallian guide to Paris, but some idea of Paris as La Salle and his Brothers found it. The last two Guides mentioned above are two excellent short guides to follow the Founder's footsteps in Paris. There is also the detailed compilations of Brother Nicholas Hutchinson, District of Great Britain.

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