

THE 1691 VOW: A WELL-KEPT SECRET (1/2)

"After much thought about how to prop up a building which was threatening to collapse as it was being built, (De La Salle) was inspired to associate himself with the two Brothers whom he considered most suited to support the growing community, and to bind himself with them by an irrevocable commitment to pursue its achievement" (Blain I, 312).

A sole witness

Canon Blain's book, published in 1733, is our only source of information with regard to the vow pronounced on November 21st 1691 which we call "heroic", but whose primary characteristic could really be its secrecy.

Brothers sometimes write to the Archives of the Generalate, asking for a photocopy of the heroic vow for an exhibition.

The Archives jealously guard the *book in which are written the thirteen first perpetual vows of the Brothers of the Institute pronounced with De La Salle on the feast of the Holy Trinity in 1694*. In the iconography published by Br. Rousset ten years ago, the 1694 formula of vows, written in the hand of the Founder, is prominently displayed.

There is nothing similar in the case of the 1691 vow: there is no document, no reference even except to Blain's text.

Maillefer's silence

The biography written by Maillefer in 1723 about his uncle is completely silent with regard to this vow.

"All that De La Salle had done up till then to establish his free schools was good only for a limited time. Thought had to be given as to how to ensure their survival" (54). The measures that he takes in 1691-1692 - novitiate, house at Vaugirard, annual retreat - are those described by Blain, with the exception of the heroic vow.

If he had known about this vow, Maillefer would not have hesitated to speak about it. To be convinced of this it is sufficient to read the preface of his book: *"He is a holy priest whom God has led along paths that are simple but hard for nature. As he formed him in virtue, he revealed to him the true nature of good and gave him the necessary experience in order to practise it. It is in the light of this idea that I see him establishing a Christian society which owes its existence solely to his great trust in God" (1).*

When he returned to his work in 1740, Maillefer did not dare include a mention of the 1691 vow in his text: this would have been to acknowledge a debt to Blain whom he had accused of copying certain passages of his work word for word without any reference to him (V).

The Memoir on the Beginnings

Between 1721 and 1723, Brother Bernard had composed the "Admirable Conduct of Divine Providence in the person of the Venerable Servant of God John Baptist de La Salle". His complete manuscript was submitted to the brother of the Founder, Jean Louis de La Salle, who never returned it to him. This text is doubtlessly Maillefer's principal source.

All we have is a copy of a draft Bernard made in 1721 and which stopped in 1688. Among the memoirs that had been passed on to him to do this work there was one "written in the hand of the Servant of God" and which we call the "Memoir on the Beginnings". Bernard tells us that "It is from this manuscript that we will draw all that we will say up to the fourteenth year of his institution, because he did not go beyond this point in his account. We will add only what his humility made him omit" (22,23).

What point marks the beginning of the Institute of the Christian Schools? 1679, the opening of the first school by A. Nyel? 1682, when the Founder went to live with his teachers? Whichever it is, the

14 years covered by this Memoir bring us to 1693 or 1696.

If therefore Bernard *did not mention* the 1691 Heroic Vow, it was because the humility of the Founder made him keep silent about this important commitment when he wrote his Memoir on the Beginnings, and because no other memoirs mentioned it.

The Brothers were ignorant of the existence of this vow

It is clear that the Brothers were unaware of the very existence of the vow pronounced on November 21st 1691: John Baptist de La Salle jealously guarded the secret of the commitment he made that day with his two companions.

Blain expected the Brothers to be astonished on discovering in the book certain events which had taken place possibly during their lifetime. *"The Brothers themselves are warned not to be astonished at seeing here several things of which they were unaware. Only those were aware who had a closer relationship with the holy Founder and in whom he had the greatest confidence or who were involved with him in dealing with certain affairs"* (I,115).

And so Blain could have received the text of the Heroic Vow only from one of the two Brothers who pronounced it with the Founder.

The pillars of the Institute

"The commitment of these two Brothers whom De La Salle considered as the two pillars of his Institute was the only resource on which he founded his hopes at that time. In case death came before he could consolidate it, he entrusted the task of completing what he had started to the zeal of his two principal disciples.

"He was mistaken in his choice, because one of them subsequently became a Judas, as people called him. Forgetting the vow he had made and the Father to whom he owed obedience, he broke off from the Society and abandoned it" (Blain I, 312).

A few chapters later, the biographer describes the beginnings of the Seminary for Country Teachers which lasted five or six years in the parish of Saint Hippolyte in Paris. Without naming him, he points to Nicolas Vuyart (or Wiart) as the Director of the establishment who, at the time of the trial instigated by the writing masters in 1704, broke away from De La Salle and the other Brothers and then appropriated for himself the house the parish priest of St. Hippolyte had bequeathed to him.

"This Brother was one of the two that the pious Founder considered to be his two arms and whom he had chosen to be the solid pillars of his Community. This Brother with De La Salle and Brother Gabriel Drolin composed the Triumvirate which had obliged itself by vow never to leave the Institute and to procure its progress till the death of all his strength, as we have seen above" (Blain I,336).

Nicolas Vuyart's move brought about the ruin of the establishment that had been entrusted to him. Brother Gervais, who had consented in court to the withdrawal of the Seminary from the establishments under the control of De La Salle, did not follow Vuyart in his schism.

The latter remained alone in the parish of St. Hippolyte and earned his living for about twenty years by running a primary school the Brothers had had to leave. *"For some time after, he sought to rejoin the body he had so shamefully left. De la Salle, always full of charity, welcomed him with open arms, but was dissuaded from accepting him back by the advice of wise and prudent persons"* (Maillefer 1723,101).

And Blain, who also mentions this vain attempt, tells of the sad death of Vuyart, five months after that of De La Salle. He did not obtain the formula of the 1691 vow from the Judas, because he would have made the most of such a discovery to make the circumstances appear in an even worse light.

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