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

Brother Gabriel Drolin, the last survivor

It has to be Brother Gabriel Drolin who made the vow of November 21st 1691 a part of history. After 1719, he was the only survivor of the three who pronounced it.

From 1702 onwards he was in Rome and alone after the return of his travelling companion to France. He remained alone till 1727.

He must have heard of the desertion of Nicolas Vuyart, because De La Salle wrote to him on April 27th 1705: "*I know you are far from doing what Brother Nicolas did, and that is why I have put so much trust in you*" (Letter 17, 12).

Blain shows Brother Gabriel as the exact opposite of Vuyart: "faithful to his promise, fixed in his vocation, inseparably united to his virtuous Superior, nothing in the world could tear him away from his holy state" (I, 313).

"*This good Brother, older than everybody else and their doyen, now almost 72 years' old and back from Rome where he has been sent and spent 26 years on the orders of De La Salle, is now living in Avignon*" (I, 314).

The vows according to the Bull of Approbation

In 1728, Brother Timothee, Superior General since 1720, began a "register of vows" in which the formulas of vows of the Brothers of the southern province were written down. On page 90, dated September 21st 1728, the formula is signed "*Brother Gabriel, in the world Gabriel Drolin*". Like his fellow Brothers at St. Yon in 1725, he pronounced his vows "*in conformity to the Bull of Approbation of our Institute given by our Holy*

Father Pope Benedict XIII" (Riguault II, 115 and 184).

Brother Gabriel finished his days in Auxonne, where he died on January 11th 1733, just at the time when the printing of Blain's book was beginning (the agreement with the printer is dated the 17th).

Among his papers there was discovered the precious collection of 19 letters which the Founder had written to him during his stay in Rome. "*Blain knew of their existence, since he speaks of a letter which the doyen of the Institute kept in his pocket, but he could not have used them because several of the things he says about Brother Gabriel are contradicted by these autographed letters of the Saint*" (Circ. 335, 183).

Only then did the Brothers know

Unlike the Letters, Blain did have the 1691 formula of vows signed by Gabriel Drolin. This was the original and not a copy, otherwise the original would be in the Archives. A copy could not have been made as it was not foreseen that all the documents made available to Blain would vanish completely.

It is not unreasonable to think that when Brother Gabriel met Brother Timothee in 1728 he informed him about the existence of the Heroic Vow and gave him **the text he always kept in his possession**. Doubtlessly, with the promulgation of the Bull of Approbation, there had come about "*the total completion of the establishment*" of the Institute, an expression which for him always went together with "till the last survivor" of the three who pronounced the vow in 1691. The secret that had been kept for so long now came into the possession of another Brother who happened to be the Superior General.

It is from him that Blain was able to hear about this text and reproduce it in his biography of the Founder (Blain says "*Institutor*") of the Brothers. Only then did the Brothers know that at a critical moment at the beginning of their Institute, De La Salle and two Brothers chosen by him committed themselves irrevocably and in the greatest secrecy "*to do unanimously and with common consent all that (they believe) in conscience and without any human considerations to be for the greater good of the said Society*".

This pact is one of association, of a union recognised before God as a sacred obligation: "we vow

association and union to procure and maintain the said establishment without being able to leave it, even if there remained only the three of us in the said Society, and we were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone".

The heroic aspect of this commitment is the expression of a mystical dialogue with God who wills that all children be evangelised by the ministry of the Christian Schools: "*We consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure with all our power and all our efforts the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools in the way which will seem TO US to be the most agreeable TO YOU and be of the greatest advantage to the said Society*" (Blain I, 313).

The reason for silence

It is easy to understand the reason for silence in 1691. To broadcast publicly such a decision would have shown everybody how critical the situation was. Not only had half the Brothers just left the Institute, but by choosing two Brothers, the Founder seemed to lack confidence in the others. This could have shaken the less solid ones and worried the others.

Human prudence? Not only. To commit oneself irrevocably like this, when De La Salle had refused up till then to allow the Brothers to make final vows, was not simply to realise very clearly the indispensable role of the Christian Schools for the salvation of children and of the Society of the Brothers in order to give stability to the teachers. It was also to have discovered that one is called oneself to play a key role in the establishment of this Society.

There are various personal charisms: it was necessary to discern who were called to be the "*solid pillars*" of the Institute. A few years earlier, the choice of the Founder and of the assembled Brothers had fallen on Brother Henri L'Heureux. Here it is no longer the case of the providential person suited to become the Superior of the Community, but the embryo of a "Community of Government" formed of persons with complementary qualities.

In 1694, when twelve Brothers (including Vuyart and Drolin) were preparing to make perpetual vows, Blain notes: "*perpetual vows are being introduced into the Brothers*" (I, 341). No allusion to the 1691 precedent. It was not for De La Salle to speak of it since he was considering giving up his position as Superior. To make known the special situation of two of the twelve would have been dangerous for the coming election. Perhaps also, neither of the two had the charism for such government.

And so, once this chance to speak about the 1691 vow had passed, it became impossible for the Founder to speak of it later. In 1705 it would have meant crushing Brother Nicolas. In 1717, it would have been attracting attention to himself at a time when he was managing to get Brother Barthelemy elected as the first Superior General. There was nothing left to do but to leave this secret with God.

Our thanks are due to Brother Gabriel for taking us into his confidence in his twilight years and revealing to us the existence of the Heroic Vow.

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