

**In memory of the  
Brothers of the Christian Schools  
who were victims  
of the French Revolution**

**A RECENTLY  
DISCOVERED LETTER OF  
BLESSED BROTHER SALOMON  
(2/2)**

**Brother Bernard-Jean Simon**

**Commentary:**

At the age of 43 years, **Brother Salomon** is living in the motherhouse of his congregation in Melun, where for nearly two years he has been the secretary of the superior general. At the beginning of February 1789, his epistolary activity directed to his family's address is intense, because of a known external circumstance: the fact that one of his confreres is travelling from Melun to Boulogne. The traveller is Brother Lothaire who, as part of his function as assistant, is sent to visit the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the latter city. (4) Leaving Melun on February 14th 1789, he carries at least seven letters (5) of Salomon, of which four have come down to us:

- February 2nd 1789, to Rosalie Leclercq, his sister,
- February 4th 1789, to Robertine Ricart, his niece,
- February 5th 1789, to Thérèse Leclercq, his niece,
- February 9th 1789, to Rosalie Leclercq, his sister.

The second of these pieces concerns us here. It is presented in the form of a page covered, front and back, with a regular, tightly composed script, including a postscript in the left margin on the front side. Robertine Ricart, the addressee, is named in the salutation. Daughter of Gabriel Ricart and Marie-Barbe Leclercq and a few days less than 17 years old, she is the eldest of eight children. This is the first time, it seems, that her uncle has written to her personally.

The text takes up a certain number of topics, without repeating or turning back, according to the following outline: (7)

1. New Year's greetings.  
First paragraph: "You didn't write..."
2. The sacrament of penance.  
Second paragraph: "Now, the principal effect..."
3. The sacrament of the Eucharist.  
Third paragraph: "The sacrament of the Eucharist..."
4. Flight from the world.  
Fourth paragraph: "When you have religion..."
5. Spiritual consolations.  
First half of the fifth paragraph: "For the rest..."
6. The moral problem of leisure.  
Second half of the fifth paragraph: "All recreation..."
7. Final exhortation.  
Sixth paragraph: "By behaving..."
8. Closing formula and signature.  
Seventh paragraph: "It is in the love..."
9. Invitation to reply.  
Postscript: "I truly hope..."

A rigorous study of the document would require knowledge of the sources of the author's thoughts, then an analysis of each theme developed. In default of this, let us try to discern the most characteristic features.

**Symmetry of the first and last paragraphs.** The author begins by remarking that his correspondent has not written to him for the new year. He ends by wishing that she do so now. The invitation is precise, yet it is not mixed with an element of reproach.

**The author's silence about himself.** He says nothing about the details of his life, his work, his worries, his joys. The "I" employed several times introduces no confidences other than the phrase, "Every day I pray the Lord to lavish you with his grace". This almost total silence about himself is habitual in the correspondence of **Brother Salomon**. The evolution of a sensibility towards romanticism which was occurring in society at that time seems not to have affected him. He prefers to transmit universal values by arguing and exhorting, rather than to speak about his personal experience.

**Predominance of moral and spiritual themes.** Except for the reference to the young girl's birthday and the postscript, the letter is comprised of a series of exhortations to moral progress or to sacramental practise. God is named six times; Jesus Christ, five, without counting his recourse to words such as religion, Christian, Christianity. The entire text is exhortative, with verbs such as reflect, behave, apply; with nouns such as obligation, instruction, virtue, respect, prayer, horror of sin... When the author speaks to his correspondent about happiness, it is a matter of receiving the

blessings of God, of the certitude over pardoning of sins, or of the "marvelous effects" of the Eucharist.

Nevertheless, one notices the lack of any negative theme, such as fear of hell or of the immanent justice that authors of the time attributed to God. The tone is always positive and the last ends are evoked only by the words heaven and resurrection. Salomon formulates a spirituality that is both demanding and optimistic.

True, this doesn't do full justice to the Christian message. The death and resurrection of Christ, the gift of salvation, the sending of the Holy Spirit are not mentioned. The author's theology does not have the same emphasis as our own. But we ought not to judge him on the basis of just one letter.

**View of society.** A young girl of 17 years ought to have other than religious centres of interest. The author understands this and he speaks to his niece about what he calls "innocent diversions", which he defines clearly, in specific terms that are easy to understand. One is convinced, nevertheless, that this conception was not unanimous in his time, because of his enumeration of the warnings against everything that is opposite: "distractions of the world", "apparent joy", "worldly pleasures", "brilliant feasts", etc. He almost reaches the point of denouncing the "company of sinners", a commonplace in the sermons of his time but perhaps a puzzle to readers of the Gospel (Mat 11: 19). **Brother Salomon's** ideal, from the evidence, is a Christian society in which the profane is tightly controlled by the religious.

The vital setting that assures protection and moral formation for Robertine Ricart is clearly stated. It is the family, the legitimate locale for "recreation". It would be interesting to compare these lines with what we know about the leisure-time customs in use in the Lasallian boarding schools of that era, which were tailored for the young of the opposite sex but of the same social milieu as the author's niece.

Other aspects of the document could be considered, but these few examples suffice, we hope, to highlight this interesting letter. Historians of the 18th century will also be interested in the complete publication "some day or other" of the correspondence of **Salomon Leclercq**.

A final remark can be made about his iconography. The beatification in 1926 caused the commissioning of two portraits: one, by ..., is preserved in the Generalate, the other, by Jean Lojwerse, is housed at Desvres, near Boulogne-sur-Mer. (8) The creator of the first painting respects the indications furnished by the written sources of the time: tall, bald in front, stout. The second work depicts the face in conformity with a

"beatific" point of view. We understand why the artist departed from the facts: to translate onto canvas another reality, the demanding spirituality of his model. ●

## NOTES

(1) Cf. **Georges Rigault**, *General History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, volume III, Paris, Plon, 1940, p. 259 and following.

(2) This exhibit was held at the town hall of the 6th *arrondissement* in Paris from September 11th to October 4th 1992 and included the publication of a catalogue: *1792; The September Massacres*, Association in Remembrance of the Martyrs, 70 rue de Vaugirard, 75006 Paris.

Centred on the martyrs who died in Paris in 1792 and who have been beatified, the exhibit expanded knowledge of the events and reached a numerous and significant public. The catalogue is also interesting, in spite of some material errors: p. 23, last paragraph, should read "Nicolas Leclercq, acting as secretary..." (and not François Leclercq), and p. 161, where the first names of Blessed Salomon, in order as shown on the baptismal certificate, should be William Nicolas Louis (and not William Louis Nicolas).

(3) The archives of the FSC Generalate contain more than half of these documents, as well as copies of a number of others.

The item not included is a letter from Nicolas François Lecoeur, formerly Brother Amaranthe, to Rosalie Leclercq, dated August 22nd 1792, known by an old copy.

(4) Brother Lothaire was named in the letter of February 9th 1789 as the carrier of this multiple correspondence.

To learn about the works of the Brothers in Boulogne, see **Rigault**, volume II, p. 497.

(5) We deduce this number from the first sentence of the letter dated February 9th, but it could also be understood to refer to a larger number of letters. The three letters (at least) which have been lost would have been addressed to Marie-Barbe Leclercq, Ricart's widow, and to two of Augustin Leclercq's sons, respectively the sister and the nephews of the letter writer.

(6) Marie Barbe Françoise Robertine Ricart, born and baptised on February 27th 1772 in Boulogne-sur-Mer, Saint Nicolas parish. She was known as Robertine.

(7) Following modern usage, we have divided the text into paragraphs, even though the author most frequently wrote in a continuous stream. Therefore it is with the sequence of topics, rather than with the arrangement of punctuation, that the reader might legitimately disagree.

(8) The first of these works is reproduced as the frontispiece in **George Rigault**, *A disciple of Saint John Baptist de La Salle; Blessed Salomon*, Paris, 1926.

The second, painted in 1939, is featured in the book by Marcel Guilhem: *Nicolas Leclercq; Brother Salomon; Martyr of the French Revolution*, Médiaspaul, Paris, 1990.