

**TERCENTENARY OF THE
FIRST PERPETUAL VOWS**

in the Institute of the
Brothers of the Christian Schools
Feast of the Holy Trinity June 6th 1694
Feast of the Holy Trinity May 29th 1994

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It was only a short while ago that we were celebrated the tercentenary of the so-called "heroic" vow made by our Founder and two trusted Brothers, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, on November 21st, 1691. And now, three years later, we commemorate the tercentenary of the first perpetual vows to be made in the Institute. According to the biographers, and Blain in particular, this event took place on the feast of the Holy Trinity in 1694, which fell on June 6th that year. It took place at the end of a general retreat attended also by the twelve principal Brothers of the Institute at the request of John Baptist de La Salle.

Blain speaks here of the principal Brothers. Four of these were Directors of houses in the country. The word "house" in this context means community. We see this use of the word in the old Rule, where it says: "*They will ask them to go to the house*". In 1694, these communities could only have been those of Rethel, Guise, Laon and Reims. We do not know who these Directors were. Certain biographers have put forward some theories regarding their identity, based on the list of twelve Brothers.

In the course of the preceding four months, the Founder had made these twelve Brothers make a special retreat during which he had asked them "*to consider this subject (perpetual vows) carefully and to pray to God about it a great deal*".

Blain goes on to say: "*When the private retreats were finished...he called them all to Vaugirard*" and on Pentecost Sunday, May 30th 1694, he began another general retreat.

Had the Brothers already gone back to Vaugirard? The time we are talking about, May, 1694, was the end of a period of great famine during which the Founder had been obliged to bring back the novices and the community of Vaugirard to Paris. This was the time when the Brother who used to go to Paris for food had been robbed. The famine was very severe. Unrest among the population broke out in September 1693. Times were very hard for everybody including the Brothers. It was a time when many people died of cold and hunger: in a single year, 1,800,500 perished out of a population of 22,452,700, that is, 8% of the total population of France.

"*On October 20th, 1693, the government began to sell bread cheaply. Many people were crushed in the rush. On October 29th, the Council decreed that bread would be distributed by parish priests with the help of people who knew the poor well. On November 14th, the Council decreed that money would be distributed instead of bread by the parish priests*". This may remind us of the strained relations between De La Salle and the parish priest of St Sulpice, M. Baudrand (Blain I, pp. 333 and foll.).

Blain writes (I, p. 335): "*Once the time of misery had passed, Paris held no more attraction for De La Salle: he longed for the solitude of Vaugirard and as soon as he could,*

he made haste to return there with five or six novices or Brothers". Written forty years after the event, the description skates over the facts, for the famine lasted for a few more months. In fact, "*the years 1687-1700 together were the coldest period. This cold and damp were even worse in 1692 and 1693, and 1692 was a very cold year*" (M. Lachiver, p. 96).

According to Blain, therefore, the transfer would have been made no later than May 1694. However, according to Marcel Lachiver in his "*Les années de misère*", wheat was still very expensive in Paris in May (on May 19th, a setier - about 120 kilos - reached its peak price of 52 livres). It was only in October 1694 that the price went down to 17 livres 10 sous, which was still higher than the 1680 price of 10 livres.

"*It is certain that not everybody ate good white bread in Paris in the summer of 1694*".

What was the diet of the Brothers during this retreat?

In any case, the twelve principal Brothers went to Vaugirard. Let us hope they made the journey under better conditions than in 1691. (See biographical notes on Br Jean Henri, Blain II, p. 72). Those who came from the country must have had some difficulties because "*a decree of the Parliament of Paris issued May 26th repeated its order to the poor from the country to leave the capital...and guards were posted on the roads leading into Paris to prevent the poor from going back*".

These Brothers must have arrived in the capital just at the time when, at the request of the Parliament of Paris, processions with the relics of St Genevieve and St Marcel were being held to ask for rain. These processions took place from May 24th - 27th, and were followed by a whole week of heavy rain beginning on June 5th. This contributed to a good harvest, and triduums of thanksgiving were organized from August 14th onwards.

And so once the Brothers arrived, the Founder, Blain tells us, "*began another general retreat with them on Pentecost Sunday*" (May 30th 1694).

The Brothers had asked the Founder over and over again for permission to make perpetual vows. John Baptist de La Salle had hesitated a great deal and made them wait a long time. Finally, he had gathered the twelve senior Brothers for a private retreat. These he had chosen because he thought they were the only ones capable of making an irrevocable commitment. Here, senior Brothers did not mean old Brothers. Gabriel Drolin was 33 years of age, and with Nicolas Vuyart, was one of those who had joined in 1684 or so. All the others were under 30 years of age. During the general retreat organized at Vaugirard, the Founder wanted to study the dispositions of the Brothers, prepare them and make them receptive to God's inspiration.

He explained to them the nature and conditions of this commitment, and by discussions, he sought to discover how they themselves understood them and to what extent they were prepared to commit themselves. Following these considerations and prayer, the Brothers did not allow themselves to be carried away by their fervor. They finally decided to make perpetual vows of obedience and stability, which were added to that of association. Time proved that De La Salle had been right. "There were only six...that persevered".

According to Blain, the Founder "*wished the ceremony of pronouncing these vows to be kept secret from the rest of the Brothers, and that those who made or witnessed them should appear to have forgotten all about them and should promise never to speak of the event. So as to avoid arousing suspicion, he took the twelve to the most out of the way room in the house so as to hold the ceremony in a calm and undisturbed atmosphere*".

He was the first to pronounce his vows. He did so with such fervor in his words and attitude, and with such devotion, that the Brothers wept.

The text of the vow, which was the same for everyone, was signed in his own hand...All the other Brothers followed his example and made the same vows one after another".

This secrecy seems astonishing. Br Maurice Auguste thought it was unlikely. There is doubtlessly some confusion with the vow of 1691.

This, therefore was the context of this profession. Let us now turn to the formulas used. The original texts are kept in the Rome archives.

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It is worth spending some time studying the text of the formula of vows. It resembles quite closely the one in use at the present time. However, let us compare it with the text of the 1691 vow (in the text in bold italics) which is the earliest text we have. The biographers tell us that the vow of obedience was made earlier, doubtlessly in 1686.

The formula begins in the same way:

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty...

The adjective "profound" is qualified only by the adverb "most". Without further information, it is difficult to see any significance in this.

The expression "*prostrate with the most profound respect*" deserves consideration.

In the days of John Baptist de La Salle, ceremonies at the royal court and those of the Church were fairly similar from an external point of view. The word "prostrate" was accompanied by a physical gesture and attitude. The dictionary defines it as follows: "*To bow down very low in an attitude of adoration...*" In our own days we no longer have these same exterior ways of showing respect. It is perhaps worth asking what kind of exterior attitude would demonstrate this respect nowadays. Perhaps the word "prostrate" should be changed to "filled"?

Some of us still remember how the ceremony of the vows or their renewal used to take place in a lavishly decorated chapel. After morning mass, often a sung one, there would be exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, the Veni Creator would be sung, the Athanasian Creed recited, and the vows would be pronounced by the Brother kneeling in front of the altar and holding a lighted candle. This would be followed by the singing of the Te Deum, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and the ceremony would close with the singing of the Ecce Quam Bonum. This kind of ceremony took place mostly in houses with large communities and especially in scholasticates.

The procedure followed in other houses was probably closer to what was indicated in the first Rule of 1705: "*After thanksgiving (the Brothers having attended mass in the parish church and received communion), the Brothers, on returning to the house, will renew their vows in the usual way...*" (p. 102, art. 8). In those days, few houses had chapels. At most they had a simple oratory.

The formula continues:

"I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure..."

The formula of 1691 had a plural subject: "*we consecrate ourselves entirely to you*". It was, therefore, a collective commitment.

It is easy to imagine the Brothers reading their formula together.

In 1694, the commitment is personal and individual.

It states: "*to procure your glory as far as it will be possible for me and as you will require of me*". In the first formula, however, we read: "*to procure with all our strength and with all our efforts the establishment of the society of the Christian Schools in the way which will seem to be most pleasing to you and of the greatest benefit to the said society*".

What, one may ask, do people today understand by the expression "to procure your glory"?

"*And for this purpose...*" The same expression is followed

by the name or names of those making the vows.

We then come to the purpose of the commitment which is totally different here.

In the formula of 1691, what was involved was to make a *vow of association and union to procure and maintain the said establishment (of the society)*.

In that of 1694, the purpose was to "*unite myself and to live in society with the Brothers...to hold together and by association gratuitous schools wherever...*"

By now the society had been established and consolidated to a certain degree. Although it was not yet recognized or protected legally, its existence was no longer threatened by the same problems as before.

One may wonder even what it was that gave the Founder such assurance only three years after the events of 1691. Was it, perhaps, the result of the four measures he had implemented:

- * to form a team with two other Brothers
- * to look for a suitable house close to Paris
- * to gather the Brothers there during the holidays
- * to set up a novitiate ?

In any case, such measures showed the confidence the Founder had in the Brothers.

Even if the immediate purpose is different, the means to achieve it remains the same: **association and union**.

"Even if only the three of us remained in the said society and we were obliged to beg and live on bread alone".

"Or to do whatever in the said society at which I shall be employed, whether by the body of the society, or by the superiors who will have the direction thereof".

The determination also is the same. It cannot be said, especially in 1694, that the condition "*to beg and live on bread alone*" was something theoretical. This is exactly what the Brothers had been obliged to do on several occasions during the course of the year. One has only to read Blain I (pp. 333 and foll). Some of the Brothers had had to endure a famine in 1683-1684; another one had just ended, and there would be yet another one, even more severe, in 1709. And in between these periods of famine life was not a comfortable one. In Meditation 31, the Founder refers to the situation when he says: "*because we happen to live in a poor community, and that we have to live sparingly*". In Meditation 153, 3, he says: "*you are vowed...to live on bread alone*".

"In view of which we promise with one mind and common consent to do all that we believe in our conscience and without any human consideration to be for the greater good of the said society".

"And for this reason I promise and vow obedience as well as to the body of this society as to the superiors"

This is the recently adopted vow of obedience which at this point is added to the two others which have already been pronounced. These latter are repeated in different words in the final summary:

"which vows of association, of stability in the said society and of obedience I promise to keep inviolably for all my lifetime".

The circumstances, therefore, are different. In the first formula the intention is to do everything and at all costs to bring about the establishment of the society. In the second, the intention is to join others in a society to fulfill an apostolic ministry.

In the first formula, everything is in the plural: "*we consecrate ourselves...we promise*". In the second, everything is in the singular: "*I promise and vow...*"

This represents the personal contribution made by the individual Brother: the intention is not to seek refuge:

"I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory...and to do whatever...as far as it will be possible for me...and as you will require of me..." ●