

THE FOUNDER'S LETTERS REVISITED

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The recently published magisterial Italian edition of our Founder's Letters by **F. Serafino Barbaglia** has caused me to ponder, not for the first time, the unique and perennial value to us of the relatively few extant examples of this area of the Saint's written work. **Unique**, because we have in them (at any rate, in the 54 known manuscripts) the "ipsissima verba" of De La Salle (a claim which cannot be made, with absolute certainty, for any other of our Founder's spiritual and pedagogical writings – unless we include the "Memoir on the Habit" in that category): **perennial**, because (as Serafino's edition forcibly reminds us) the exhortations and spiritual direction addressed to our earliest forebearers in these documents, still speak persuasively to those of us who, living in so vastly changed a world, still have ears to hear.

And so rich indeed is the doctrine the Letters contain that we need scarcely lament that so few originals have come down to us. The question of how many letters De La Salle probably penned throughout his life remains indeed an intriguing academic question, one which has been tackled by previous commentators: the estimate of "possibly 18.000" suggested by the late Dr. W.J. Battersby (Brother Clair Stanislas) may seem widely exaggerated (Felix-Paul Vandamme and Saturnino Gallego offered much more modest estimates); but not if we recall that over 20.000 letters are known of Cardinal Newman, whose life (admittedly twenty-one years longer than that of De La Salle) was no less taken up with administrative and foundational cares.

But the question recedes in importance when we take time off to study the epistolary texts that have come down to us, especially in conjunction with the scholarly commentary that we now have in the Italian edition. The publication of this edition means that the Founder's Letters, with commentary, exist in four of

the principal European languages (and how appropriate it is that the correspondence can claim this role of pioneers). Battersby's English edition was the first ever to appear (in 1951) but he was followed closely by Frere Felix-Paul Vandamme whose first edition of the Letters appeared in 1952 as an Instructive and Administrative Circular presented to the Institute by the T. H. Frere Athanase-Emile. This was followed in 1954 by Felix-Paul's "edition critique", (published posthumously, since death had carried off the pioneer commentator at the age of 39). The Spanish Region published, in 1962, an edition by Hermano Guillermo Felix and Javier Domingo which combined Felix-Paul's two editions in a single volume, thereby producing a richer and more satisfying work than either of the two French volumes individually. A further enhancement of Felix-Paul's brilliant research came in 1988 when the series of Lasallian Publications, sponsored by the USA/Toronto Region of the Institute was inaugurated with the publication of a new English translation of the Letters by an Australian **Brother Colman Molloy**, edited, with additional commentary, by **Brother Augustine Loes**, a former Visitor of the District of New York. This American edition, like its Spanish predecessor, followed Felix-Paul's critical edition closely, but the commentary was enriched by Augustine Loes' original work and by the sumptuous presentation of the volume with numerous evocative illustrations.

F. Serafino Barbaglia has benefited by the research and approach of all four of his predecessors but he, in turn, has brought his own expertise to bear and has produced an edition eminently worthy of the long tradition of Italian Lasallian scholarship represented by the still flourishing 60-year old Rivista Lasalliana. A careful perusal of the 560 pages of this handsomely presented volume leaves one wondering what further could be said by any commentator on our Founder's Letters. A seven-page "Presentazione" inaugurates the work, offering a meticulously detailed historico-bibliographical overview of De La Salle's epistolary. Then, for a general introduction to the nature of the Letters, **Serafino** has modestly passed the pen to a confrère, **Remo L. Guidi**.

Our editor wisely chose (as Loes had done before him) to present the Letters in chronological order, thereby avoiding the anomalies of the critical edition which placed the documents in the alphabetical order of the names of the recipients, resulting, for example, in Letter N° 3 (addressed to F. Barthélemy) bearing the date 1718, the year before the Founder's death! Following Felix-Paul, **Serafino** includes, in addition to the manuscripts, the letters reported by Blain and those found in the Notebook known as Manuscript 22. In addition, the translation of each letter is headed by the corresponding number of the critical edition – an invitation to readers versed in French (the great majority of our Italian confrères) to keep the original texts before them for comparison with **Serafino's** translations, but also to collate the letter's commentary with that of Felix-Paul.

Such a process of collation soon reveals that the Italian editor, while scrupulously respecting the research and scholarship of his predecessor, has not been content to offer a mere transcription of the French commentary but, time and again, has added new specialized information and personal reflections which manifest an impressive empathetic insight into the mind and heart of the Founder. Examples of the new information provided by our Italian author occur in, to take a random example, the letter of 27 April 1705, addressed to Gabriel Drolin. In the course of this letter the Founder tells Gabriel: "*You were wise to set yourself up in a place far removed from the Pious Schools*" (tr. Molloy). Felix-Paul is content to remark on this that the Campo Marzio quarter of the city was indeed "fairly distant" from the three establishments directed by the Scolopi Fathers, at Trastevere, Parione and Borgo. **Serafino**, with the familiarity with the topography of Rome gained from many years of teaching in the capital, has a 250-word note, demonstrating that, in fact, Gabriel's school could not have been "very far" from the Scolopi and supports his opinion with a dazzling plethora of place-names.

Another example of **Serafino's** "aggiornamento" of the critical edition occurs in his commentary on the same letter, specifically the poignant assurance to Gabriel, "*I am quite sure that you have no intention of following the example of Brother Nicolas...*" (tr. Molloy). **Serafino** takes over, more or less verbatim, Felix-Paul's biographical information about Nicolas Vuyart (whilst, even so, neatly slipping in a quotation from Piave's libretto to Verdi's opera *La Traviata*) but, having done so, he draws his readers' attention to the fact that later commentators on the Vuyart case have tended to take a more sympathetic view of the "deserter", mentioning, with chapter and verse references, Yves Poutet and Saturnino Gallego.

Yet another example from the same letter concerns De La Salle's counsel to his distant disciple: "*With regard to what you say about the position of papal school teacher, follow Father Divers' advice...*" (tr. Molloy). This is only one of about ten allusions to the Vincentian Procurator General, René Divers, occurring *passim* throughout the Drolin letters. Divers befriended Drolin and his protection of the solitary Lasallian had the approval and confidence of De La Salle, as the above quotation (as well as others) shows. Yet his personality has remained shadowy, despite Felix-Paul's endeavour to give due attention to an important figure in the story of Drolin's lonely pilgrimage. **F. Serafino**, having consulted the Vincentian archivist in Rome, has been able to add new details which bring

the "buon samaritano" to life.

Those are just three examples from a single letter (and others could be given from the commentary on the same letter – did anyone hitherto know that the place where Gabriel reprehensibly accepted the clerical tonsure was what is now the "Auletta" of the Italian Parliament at Montecitorio, a hall "frequently seen on television"? – or that an earlier resident in the street (Via Otto Cantoni) where Gabriel opened his school, was the great Italian master, Caravaggio?). Similar enrichments could be shown for almost all the other Letters discussed by Serafino, but there are other features of the work which make this the definitive edition of the Founder's correspondence.

Thus, each Letter is accompanied by an exhaustive list of the AMG classification, the locations of previous publications of the document, and bibliographical details of works in which the Letter has been quoted – an average of fifteen such precise references for every Letter, making a total of such references throughout the book of more than 1,500. In reading the book I have had the curiosity to check the accuracy of many of these references, and in no case have I found an error – a sufficient indication in itself of the rigorous dependability of all the other aspects of this Italian edition.

Other features are a 30-page Bibliography, three Appendices, one giving the text (newly translated, of course, into Italian) of the Directory according to which each Brother was to render to the Superior the account of his conduct – an important aid to our understanding of the nature of the majority of the Saint's letters; a second Appendix translates the full text of the Founder's Testament, together with a discussion of its historical circumstances; and thirdly, an Appendix presents, with commentary, the (hitherto scarcely known) letter written by De La Salle's successor F. Barthelémy Truffet, defending himself against an accusation of Jansenistic tendencies.

Next comes a synoptic schema of the complete epistolary of the Saint (a quite new, and extremely valuable, tool for consultation). Finally forty-three pages of detailed indices of (1) Names of Persons, (2) Names of Places and Subjects treated in the Letters.

Truly this beautifully produced (by the Citta Nuova publishing house) edition of the Letters of Saint John Baptist de La Salle is a work of meticulous erudition and editorial flair of which not only the Lasallians of Italy, but those of the whole Institute, may be justly proud. ●