

**THE POPES
AND THE INSTITUTE
OF THE BROTHERS
OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS (1/2)**

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During Saint John Baptist de La Salle's 68 years of life eight Popes occupied the throne of Peter, namely: Innocent X (1644-1655), Alexander VII (1655-1667), Clement IX (1667-1669), Clement X (1670-1676), Innocent XI (1676-1689), Alexander VIII (1689-1691), Innocent XII (1691-1700) and Clement XI (1700-1721). This last one had intervened somewhat in the growing Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Beginning with him, many other Popes have had dealings with our Congregation which can be summarized as follows.

● **CLEMENT XI (Giovanni Francesco Albani)
1700-1721**

His election was on November 23, 1700, St. Clement's day from which he took his name. He was 51 years old at that time. It was not easy for him to handle the difficulties in which he found himself. He published the Bull "Unigenitus" in 1713 in which he condemned the 101 propositions of the Oratorian Quesnel (1). This gave rise to the clergy who were in favor of the Bull as well as those who were against it.

We know De La Salle's position in this controversy. He sided with the Pope and directed the Brothers to remain faithful to His Holiness the Pope. In Brother Barthélemy's words: "Our dear Father wrote many letters in favor of our Holy Father Pope Clement XI which have done a lot of good" (2).

When La Salle sent two Brothers to Rome, he above all showed his devotion to the Pope also hoping that the Pope would recognize the Institute. He was overjoyed when in October, 1709, he wrote a letter to Brother Gabriel Drolin: "I am delighted that you now have a papal school: that is what I have been hoping for" (3).

La Salle thanked the people who helped Brother Gabriel for their support in getting that school which was located on Ferrea Street across from the Capuchins. It was occupied, according to the parish register by "D. Gabriel Drolini, a Frenchman" (4). The papal shield was on the lintel of the house. During this same period the Piarist Fathers directed several schools in Rome which were also papal schools.

The name of Clement XI also appears at the Avignon foundation in 1703. The first benefactor who helped the Brothers supported two of the five Brothers that were in the school in 1705. Money was soon lacking since three Brothers were living off of temporary funds from different city institutions. But in this same year Clement XI "took measures to offer the Brothers a life pension for the five of them" (5).

● **INNOCENT XIII (Michelangelo Conti)
1721-1724**

The negotiations for the approbation of the Institute by the Holy See were going slowly. The Brothers sought help from whomever they could to accelerate these negotiations. They wanted to be free from strong pressures and difficulties

that they were experiencing in the founding and support of schools.

Brother Timothy, Superior General, sent Pope Innocent XIII a copy of De La Salle's Last Will and Testament wherein he shows his firm adherence to the Chair of Peter (6) at a time when the controversy over the Bull Unigenitus was going strong.

● **BENEDICT XIII (Pier Francesco Orsini)
1724-1730**

He had taken the Dominican habit at 18 years of age, receiving the religious name of Vicente-María. Being a member of the noble Orsini family he was named a cardinal at 23 years of age. Later he became bishop of Manfredonia, Cesena and Benevento but when he was elected Pope he was already 75 years old since he had been born on February 2, 1649. His tomb is in the church of Saint Mary on Minerva next to the tomb of Saint Catherine of Sienna who was also a Dominican (7).

Our Institute owes its official approbation to him which he proclaimed in the Bull "*In Apostolicae Dignitatis Solio*" on January 26, 1725, scarcely seven months into his pontificate. In the Bull's 18 articles he defines the juridic stature of the Congregation within the Church. The original parchment of this document is preserved in the Archives of the Generalate (8).

Another feature relating to our Institute was the concession of an annual allowance of 36 escudos to the Brothers of Rome by the decree of January 19, 1730, and the authorization for the Institute to establish more free schools in the Eternal City (9).

● **CLEMENT XII (Lorenzo Corsini)
1730-1740**

He already had a connection to the Institute as a cardinal when the approbation was in process (10).

La Salle was at St. Yon in 1718 one year before his death when he received news of the second school at Avignon, a pontifical territory (11). In 1732 this second school was financially sponsored by Pope Clement XII and the kind gesture was continued by Benedict XIV (12).

"Recourse to Mary was a constant recommendation of the founder" says Brother Saturnino. "And fortunately the Brothers piously inherited this devotion" (13). Brother Irénée stands out as a supporter of the Marian devotion since he sought from Clement XII the approbation of the Marian Congregation which he had founded at Saint Yon similar to the ones that the Jesuits had promoted. On May 24, 1736, he received his answer from Rome, granting his request and bestowing special spiritual graces on its members.

● **BENEDICT XIV (Prospero Lambertini)
1740-1758**

In 1722 he was a member of the Roman Curia as the cardinal secretary of the congregation of the council. The paperwork concerning the approbation of the Lasallian Institute had to pass through his hands. He also had to give the approval for the documents to follow the proper procedures and then to wind up on the desk of Pope Benedict XIII.

Brother Timothy, who was in a leadership position for 20 years already, knew the pontifical bureaucracy very well. His joy was great when Cardinal Lambertini was elected Pope because he knew the Institute well. The Superior General wrote to the new Pope to congratulate him, offer him his services and ask him for a blessing for the growing Institute (14).

Also it was Brother Timothy who, on May 9, 1741, by means of another Brother, presented to His Holiness the "Life of John Baptist de La Salle", written by Blain in 1733. He attempted in some way to take advantage of the occasion

so that the Pope himself would get to know the Founder so that his cause for beatification would have an interest within Rome.

On October 1, 1754, a new school opened in Avignon called Saint Mary Magdalene. The foundation of this school goes back to the Holy See. On the façade of the entrance is inscribed "To Benedict XIV" accompanied by the shields of the city as well as those of the Supreme Pontiff (15).

● PIUS VI (Giovanni Angelo Braschi) 1775-1799

These were the years that produced the French Revolution, fruit of the doctrines and teachings of the so called Philosophers.

In our story the mandates of Pius VI and Brother Agathon run parallel. He was elected Superior General two years after Pius VI began his Pontificate and he died one year before the Pope in 1798. Both had to confront with firmness some difficult moments of the era.

As the revolutionary storm approached and in order to prepare for the future, Brother Agathon asked the Pope, in 1789, to dispense everyone from vows. Pius VI agreed and delegated the Archbishop of Paris with the necessary power to do just that.

In Italy the winds of change were not the same. On November 5, 1793, Pius VI created founded a new school in Rome which was located in the square known as San Salvatore in Lauro. Money came from papal funds to finance the institution.

Scarcely two years later, on February 16, 1795, the same Pontiff founded the school in Orvieto. This city is famous for its cathedral and for having been a pontifical residence for a time. In 1796 the Institute opened a Novitiate in this building (16).

In the middle of the revolutionary storm in France the Pope name Brother Frumence Vicar General of the Institute since the Pontiff did not know the whereabouts of Brother Agathon. Brother Frumence was the director of San Salvatore in Lauro.

● PIUS VII (Barnaba Chiaramonti) 1800-1823

It is known that the Institute had been suppressed in France. Now that the storm was over, it was time for the restoration to begin. Of the 125 communities that existed before the Revolution, there were now only 8; of the 800 Brothers, there were scarcely 30; of the 36,000 students, there were now only 1,600.

On the government side, Napoleon Bonaparte and later Louis XVIII and Charles X were in favor of the restoration. In the Institute Brother Frumence, the Vicar and later Brother Gerbaud, Superior General, were in charge. Cardinal Fesch, uncle of the Emperor, was a wonderful support for the new birth of the Institute.

On November 19, 1804, Brother Frumence left Rome and was part of the papal cortege that was going to France for Napoleon's coronation. On his way back, Pius VII stopped in Lyon and blessed the new residence of the Brothers, leaving a beautiful white marble statue of the Immaculate Conception with Brother Vicar. The statue is preserved today in the Hotel de La Salle, in Rheims.

The Brothers' house in Lyon was located in the neighborhood known as St. Bartholomew and not very far from the Marian shrine of Our Lady of Fourvières. "Because of Mary's support, the Lasallian Institute is going to be reborn (17). At the end of Pius VII's pontificate the Institute had 210 communities, 950 Brothers and 60,000 students. The

Institute had seen the light at the end of the tunnel and returned to the way it was before the Revolution.

● LEON XII (Annibale della Genga) 1823-1829

He was elected Pope on September 28, 1823, and just two days later he visited the Brothers at San Salvatore in Lauro. One could just imagine the community's joy over this visit. On this occasion a curious anecdote occurred. The oldest Brother in the community (80 years old) approached the Pope to greet him, knelt down before him but then was unable to stand up. The Pope saw what was happening, stooped down and gave the Brother a fraternal embrace.

It was Leon XII who opened the Trinità dei Monti school in Rome and the school in Espoleto which is not far from Assisi. Here the Pope offered his own palace to the Brothers for a school and community residence. St. Gabriel de la Dolorosa, Francisco Possenti, a Passionist, was a student in this school. The school was supported with a pontifical subsidy.

● GREGORY XVI (Mauro Cappellari) 1831-1846

On May 8, 1839, Gregory XVI signed the introduction for the cause of canonization for John Baptist de La Salle. After that it was proper to refer to him as Venerable.

In 1835 the Brothers took over an orphanage near the Diocletian baths and this orphanage was sponsored by the Holy See and was under the administration of the diocesan clergy. The orphanage was undergoing special difficulties (18).

Also during the time of Gregory XVI, in 1841, a popular school was opened in Castelgandolfo where the summer Papal residence was located. The school was opened in the so called Cybo palace and the Duke of Torlonia generously donated furnishings and materials (19). Gregory XVI was very generous in his kindness to this school as was his successor Pius IX.

The Novitiate for the District of Rome was later established in Castelgandolfo on beautiful property jutting out into lake Albano.

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(1) Saturnino Gallego. Vida y pensamiento de san Juan Bautista de La Salle. BAC. Madrid, 1986. I, 505.

(2) Letters 65 and 115. Meditations 5.1, 19.3; Collection, 246. G. Rigault, Histoire de l'Institut des F. É.C. I, 431.

(3) Sínite, n. 4. 174ff.

(4) Rigault, op. cit., I, 335.

(5) Rigault, op. cit., I, 346.

(6) Rigault, op. cit., II, 76-77.

(7) Rigault, op. cit., II, 88.

(8) S. Gallego, op. cit., 477, 594.

(9) Rigault, op. cit., II, 181.

(10) Rigault, op. cit., 89, 96, 99.

(11) S. Gallego, op. cit., 563-564.

(12) Rigault, op. cit., I, 347.

(13) S. Gallego, op. cit., 558.

(14) Rigault, op. cit., II, 181.

(15) Rigault, op. cit., II, 382.

(16) Rigault, op. cit., III, 337-338.

(17) Rigault, op. cit., III, 491.

(18) Rigault, op. cit., V, 71, 80, 188.

(19) Rigault, op. cit., VI, 35.