

**NICOLAS ROLAND AND  
JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE**

**Br Joseph Le Bars**

The writings of John Baptist de La Salle include numerous passages which can be found almost word for word in the writings of Nicolas Roland.

It would be interesting to examine how the Founder took inspiration from his spiritual director when he wrote such or such an article.

In this connection, the article in the Collection entitled "Of Poverty" is worth looking at.

In the "Positio" for the cause of canonisation of Nicolas Roland there are at least four articles on this topic. Two of these, which can be found in the chapter headed "*The Director and Legislator of the Sisters of the Child Jesus of Rheims*" p. 199, are taken from "Counsels given orally", sections 1 and 2, under the title "On Poverty". The third, which is included in the chapter headed "*Writings of the Servant of God*" p. 288, has the title "Of Poverty", which is the title also of the article in the Collection. The fourth is an article entitled "Of Poverty" which can be found in the chapter of the Positio which speaks of the "Small Treatise on the virtues most necessary for the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, which was found written by the hand of M. Roland, in which he expresses his thoughts on community" p. 302.

The original version of the article in the Collection can be found on pages 179 and 180 of the so-called 1711 edition (CL 15).

It is set out in five paragraphs, the first of which begins as follows: "*Cherish poverty as Jesus loved it, and as the most suitable means you can take in order to advance in perfection*".

Two sentences from text N 15 of Nicolas Roland may have inspired these words:

(a) "*Cherish holy poverty as a virtue much loved by this Divine Saviour*"

(b) "*Cherish it as Jesus Christ cherished it, and as a means which leads you to perfection*"

A glance at the words underlined shows that De La Salle's text is a combination of these words plus a few variations.

(1) The adjective "holy" in "holy poverty" is omitted. This is somewhat strange as in the "Duties of a Christian" this word is often added to material drawn from other sources.

(2) "Jesus Christ" is shortened to "Jesus". This also is strange since the De La Salle uses "Jesus Christ" much more frequently than "Jesus" (in the Collection: Jesus Christ: 43. Jesus: 3).

(3) "cherished it" is replaced by "loved it". Is this an improvement?

It is worth noting that the Tenth Commandment of the Institut (Collection p. 5) reads as follows: "**Poverty you will cherish**".

(4) "and as a means" is replaced by "the most suitable means". This new expression stresses the importance of the virtue of poverty in the eyes of the Founder, and reflects many instances of his conduct and of his process of conversion. As far as he is concerned, everything began with it.

(5) "which leads you" is replaced by "that you can take in order to advance in perfection". This turn of phrase stresses the need a Brother has to make a positive effort. Perfection is not achieved automatically nor all at once: it is a laborious process. The Founder often stresses this point.

The second paragraph does not correspond to anything in Roland's text. It does recall, however, the formula of vows used in 1691 and later.

*"Be always prepared to beg, if this is what Providence wishes, and to die in the most abject misery"*.

"Even if we were obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone".

The words used are different but the ideas are the same. Here, however, he is not speaking of a commitment, as he does in Meditation 153, 3: "You are vowed...to live on bread alone".

In the Collection, p. 3, in the chapter "The obligations of the vows", we read:

"to be resolved rather to beg for alms and to live on bread alone"

Was the Collection written before the vows?

It is worth noting that this use of the word "to beg" is the only instance recorded in the whole of the Lasallian Vocabulary. This leads us to the conclusion that this expression may have been borrowed from some other author. Could this have been Nicolas Roland?

The word "beggar" appears 3 times in the Lasallian Vocabulary.

Next, we have the third paragraph, the longest:

*"Possess nothing, and give nothing away, not even yourself. In a word, always try to be destitute and to own nothing, so as to become like Jesus Christ who lacked everything during his life for love of us. This also was the practice of all the great saints who withdrew from the world and devoted themselves to the salvation of souls, like the Apostles and others. Imitate them by despising temporal goods since you are in a state and an employment which is related to theirs"*.

There is a connection between the first sentence and the 1705 Rule in the chapter on poverty, article 1: "*The Brothers will have nothing of their own...*" In the last article we read: "*They will not give anything away without an order...*" What we read here seems more tightly phrased and probably more recent.

The rest of the paragraph owes a lot to Nicolas Roland's first text.

The similarity in thought and expression is easy to pick out: "so that you may be in some way similar to the Holy Child Jesus who lacked everything for the love of you, having only a borrowed stable for his birth". And then we read:

"To despise temporal goods was the practice of all the great saints, especially of the Apostles who worked for the salvation of souls. Imitate them in their destitution, because you profess to do the same work as they".

The Founder does not keep the example of the Child Jesus, nor the word "stable", and does not even refer to them. Strange as it may seem, De La Salle does not speak all that much of the infancy of Our Lord outside of a few texts, in which he refers to the life history of Jesus: in Med. for Sundays (3 times); Med. for Feasts (4 times); Duties I (1 time); Duties II (14 times). Of the 39 times the words "Child Jesus" are used, 22 are preceded by "Holy", and of these 14 are found in the

expression "Litanies of the Holy Child Jesus". The word "Holy" is used especially in the Common Rules (used 11 times out of 11), and in the Conduct (3 times out of 4). The 8 other occasions when the adjective is used are as follows: Expl. of the Method of Mental Prayer (2 times out of 2); Med. for Feasts (1 time out of 4); Conduct (once in addition to the Litanies); Duties II (4 times out of 14).

Nicolas Roland seems to have had a greater devotion to the infancy of the Child Jesus. Moreover, he founded the Congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus.

De La Salle speaks rather of Jesus Christ; this is the name he uses most often (2,031 times). There are a further 395 instances when he uses the name preceded or followed by "Our Lord". The name "Jesus" on its own is used only 352 times. This use of names deserves further study. The phrase "during his life" offers a partial explanation of this use of words: whenever De La Salle speaks of the Son of God made man, he seems to use the name "Jesus Christ" to indicate this.

Worth noting also is the expression "for the love of you" which in De La Salle's writings becomes "for the love of us". This can be said about all his writings, for whenever he is involved in a particular line of conduct he is writing about, he uses "us" rather than "you", even if this means altering a quotation.

The following sentence ("This was...") is taken almost as it stands from Roland. The replacement of "the" by "also" is doubtlessly also significant. The addition of the words "who withdrew from the world" is interesting because they are found also in the Collection: in the chapter entitled "The things Brothers speak about during recreations"; and in N VII : "Of several maxims and spiritual practices used by saints, and especially by those who withdrew from the world". They are found also in Med. 146, 3: "You received great graces from God when *he called you from the world to a ministry where you are concerned solely with the salvation of souls*".

In the Founder's text (in French) we have "sujet" (subject) instead of "salut" (salvation). This has to be a printing error, and is in fact corrected subsequently. It would be interesting to know what the first text originally looked like in the manuscript form which may have served as a source, for in the printed edition of the Positio, the word "Sujet" can be found 2 lines below the word "Salut", both beginning with a capital letter. Possibly the copyist mistook a line when reading.

"Temporal things". This is not an expression typical of De La Salle: it figures only 4 times in the Lasallian Vocabulary: in this text; in Med. for Sundays, 50, 1,2: in Duties I, 403, 1.10, and 403, 1.20. In the Med. 50, it occurs in a commentary on the Gospel story in which the guests give their excuses (Lk 14, 16), and which speaks of the preference people of the world have for temporal things rather than for the Eucharist. Duties I, in a commentary on the Our Father, adds that, according to St Augustine, only necessary things should be asked for, and even that "the most proper thing to do is never to ask for temporal things when praying".

The attitude we are asked to adopt here is of the same order, and reflects the example of the Apostles and others; for we have a state and employment similar to theirs: *"Imitate them by despising temporal things..."*

This expression looks like a straightforward case of borrowing.

Paragraph four: *"Have nothing of your own, and look upon what you have as belonging also to all your Brothers: give it, let go of it and leave it gladly"*.

This paragraph, like the preceding one, has a passage that corresponds to it, but in a more direct way, in the chapter of Rule on poverty, article 1: *"The Brothers will have nothing of their own..."*. This expression is found also, however, in Roland's 2nd article *"On poverty"*. The Rule then goes on to say: *"everything will be in common"*. The corresponding article in the Collection does not seem to make this an obligation, but considers it rather as a counsel: *"consider everything you have as being in common..."*. It looks, therefore, as if we have here once again a text which was written before the 1705 Rule.

This seems to be the case also for the last part of the sentence, because the precision of the Rule *"They will not give anything away without an order..."* seems to contradict the words *"give it, let go of it, and leave it"* although the word "gladly" could imply that obedience is involved. In general, however, the Founder is more explicit.

Paragraph five makes use of both article 1 "On Poverty" and article 15 "Of Poverty". *"Deprive yourself as much as you can of not only what is superfluous, but also of things that are useful and necessary. Be happy when you lack something through no fault of your own"*.

The whole of this text gives the impression that it is an invitation from the Founder to the Brothers: there are none of those imperative expressions nor verbs expressing obligation that are found elsewhere. Even the imperative "Deprive" does not give the impression of being so, accompanied as it is by "as much as you can". One would think that this text was composed before such references to obedience appeared as are found, for example, in the Rule (Cf. the example above: "They will not give anything away without an order"). This is all the more surprising as Nicolas Roland speaks of dependence: "not using them except with dependence"; of permission: "when you are allowed to choose", "you must not possess anything superfluous even with permission"; of orders: "prepared to change it or leave it when the superior orders it", "they will not be able to give one another anything nor change anything without permission", "without complaining if they are not given what they ask for". It is true that the Sisters had made a vow of poverty early on. "Do not be content simply to be called poor and to have made a vow: practise it on all occasions". This was not the case of the Brothers. However, some of the expressions in article 4 can be found in the Rule in the form of an obligation: "they will not give anything away without an order from Brother Director, and they will not give anything to one another" (article 9). It would seem that, at a certain point later on, the Founder found it necessary to insist on obedience. Do the biographers say anything that might permit us to think that, at some moment in the history of the Institute, the need was felt to stress this virtue? If this were true, it would explain the still somewhat puzzling series of meditations on obedience.

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And so, as we have shown, this small article in the Collection can tell us something about the way the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools made use of Nicolas Roland's writings. More work needs to be done. It seems that enough significant parallels have already been drawn by some writers for it to be possible to draw some conclusions. Also, it might be possible at the same time to throw a little more light on the period in which De La Salle wrote these articles, and thus also on the way in which he evolved personally. •