

DE LA SALLE AND MARTYRDOM

A reflection on the beatification of the Brother Martyrs of Rochefort

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In his meditations, our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle, seems to be prophetic when he encourages the Brothers to endure the sufferings that might come as a result of proclaiming the Gospel. There are many reflections that he makes for the Brothers as to how they should accept the troubles that will arise due to their apostolate and he exhorts them to not only accept them but even to desire them.

And so on the feast of St. John the Evangelist (Meditation 124.2), alluding to St. Cyprian, he tells us: "The feasts of the martyrs, says St. Cyprian, are exhortations to martyrdom. When we celebrate St. John's martyrdom, it should spur us on to suffer, after his example, gladly and for the love of God".

In Meditation 182.2 he repeats: "If you carry out your ministry faithfully, and if you work effectively and successfully for the salvation of the souls entrusted to you, persecution from the devil or from the world will always be your portion".

In all, De La Salle advises the Brothers in more than 17 meditations concerning the martyr saints which the Church celebrates throughout the year and which he has left us as a topic for our prayer.

De La Salle's Brothers have kept the Founder's suggestions very much in mind as we have seen in our Blessed Brother martyrs of Turón and Almería (Spain) and as we also see today in our Brothers of the Rochefort Hulks in France.

The Founder urges us: "Consider yourselves very fortunate and well rewarded to be overwhelmed with insult and to suffer all sorts of outrage for the love of Jesus Christ". (Meditation 145.3). And with even greater urgency he insists: "The only thanks you should expect for instructing children, especially the poor, is injury, insult, calumny, persecution, and even death". (Meditation 155.3).

This is the way that Brother Solomon, director of novices, Secretary of the Superior General and fervent

advocate of the poor, became the Institute proto martyr on September 2, 1792, by remaining faithful to the Pope and to the Church for not swearing allegiance to the civil constitution that was contrary to his faith. He was beatified by Pope Pius XI on October 17, 1926.

This reflection is not meant to be pessimistic but De La Salle praised the grace of martyrdom and the Church celebrates in a special way when witnesses to the faith are raised up on the altars because they offered up their very lives in faithfulness to the Father as they faithfully followed Jesus.

Facing persecution as our Martyrs did is not only an assessment of our Institute but also a testimony to the virtue of those who compose it and of the seriousness with which the Gospel is proclaimed and that "The entire life of the Brothers is transformed by the presence of the Lord who calls, consecrates, sends, and saves" (Rule 21).

Since October 1, 1995 we have three more Blessed martyrs who have given their lives notable by their evangelization of the poor and by faithfulness to the Lord as they served His Church within the Lasallian Institute.

Four saints: the Founder who paved the way, canonized by Leo XIII on May 24, 1900; St. Benilde, canonized by Paul VI on October 29, 1967 as "Teacher of the children of the working class which is the most noble and demanding of all vocations" (Canonization panegyric); Saint Miguel Febres Cordero, canonized by John Paul II on October 21, 1984, for his proven virtue in the education of youth, preparation of children for first communion, love for his vocation and for being an educator who dedicated his life to writing scholarly books. Saint Mutien Marie canonized on December 10, 1989 by John Paul II for his profound faith, fervent prayer (known as "the Brother who prayed always") and for his example of humility.

The present twentieth century has offered the opportunity to celebrate the goodness of our Constitutions along with the sanctity manifested in our saints and in our blessed martyrs. This has been the century of canonizations and beatifications. Our Founder St. John Baptist de La Salle began the century as an example and he was followed by 25 Brothers who were raised to the altars and who remain a glory for God, the Church and the Institute.

We should add the following to the four saints already mentioned:

Brother Solomon, beatified by Pius XI on October 17, 1926; Brother Arnold, beatified by John Paul II on November 1, 1987; Brother Scubilion (Jean Baptiste Rousseau) beatified by John Paul II on May 2, 1989; Brother Jaime Hilario, and eight other Brothers of the Lasallian community of Turón (Martyrs of the 1934 Revolution of Asturias, in Spain), beatified by John Paul II on April 29, 1990; seven Lasallian Brothers from the Almería, Spain community who were martyred during the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War and

who were beatified by John Paul II on October 10, 1993; and finally the three Lasallian Brother Martyrs who formed part of the group headed by the priest John Baptiste Souzy, the Vicar of La Rochelle, along with a total of 64 priests and other religious who were martyred for their faith in God and adherence to the Church and who died between April 11, 1794 and February 7, 1795, beatified on October 1, 1995.

And so that brings the current twentieth century to a close with some 26 intercessors in heaven who have been raised up on the Church's altar, not to mention the thousands of Lasallian Brothers who have made the earth a better place to live during the three and one half centuries of the existence of our Institute and the present 800,000 students who today unite together in joy for these Lasallian festivities in 83 different countries where the Brothers fulfil their mission of evangelization: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

TO YOUNG PEOPLE

This is precisely what the Lasallian vocation offers: struggles, work and sacrifices for peace, harmony and happiness. Our saints and blessed have shown us the way. Some found their sanctification in the demands of the Rule that Pius XI called the "terrible daily grind";

others, as martyrs, surrendered their very lives as a proof of their great fidelity to God, with continual dedication to the proclamation of the Gospel and an unshakable support for the Church.

I invite young people to work for salvation in the broad field of educating the young where so many Brothers have worked and continue to do so together with the entire Lasallian family which each day becomes larger and more effective and extends itself more and more throughout the world.

May the group of 64 martyrs that the Church raised to the altars on October 1, 1995 be for us an example of generosity in the work of God and proof of the words of Tertullian "That the blood of martyrs be a seed for new Christians". And with reference to our three new De La Salle Brother martyrs, permit me to add: May the sufferings and the blood of Blessed Brother Pierre Sulpice Christophe Favergé (Brother Roger), Blessed Brother Jean Mopinot (Brother Leon) and Blessed Brother Jean Baptiste Guillaume (Brother Uldaric) be a seed for new and saintly Lasallian vocations in France, in my District of Medellín and in our entire Institute.

Take courage: There are many examples of Lasallian Brothers who have preceded us in the work of God and there are many examples and invitations that those of us who work in God's vineyard are making today. May the Spirit of God and of Saint De La Salle enlighten your heart and strengthen your will to follow in the footsteps of the best and other Saintly Lasallian Brothers who today exercise the ministry of education throughout the world. •