

THE DUKE OF MAZARIN AND ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

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In the first foundations of the Christian Schools outside of Rheims we meet an interesting person who is involved with the Founder in various ways. This is the Duke of Mazarin, who was born in 1632 and whose name was Charles Armand de La Porte.

His father, a major-general of Meilleraye, obtained the title of deputy general of Brittany for his son in 1643 when he was only 11 years old. Later, in 1645, he obtained the title of captain of the cavalry and in 1648 that of great master of the artillery. In 1649 he became a field marshal and in 1654 a deputy general.

In 1661 he married Hortense Mancini, the favorite niece of Cardinal Mazarin who had been a minister of Louis XIII. When Mazarin died he left his title of nobility and his temporal goods to the couple and Charles Armand was declared as the sole legatee of these goods. Nevertheless, the administration of these goods was tied to several obligations for giving alms and donations that the Cardinal wanted to be distributed. This was logical since there were many injustices and misappropriations that he admitted to having committed.

Charles Armand found himself to be the proprietor of enormous wealth, some 28 million pounds at that time, in addition to the Mazarin palace and its furnishings, the management of Alsace and several fortified towns.

In addition to the will brought together, in several different ways, many other titles, such as that of the Duke of Meilleraye and Maienne, the Marquis of Montcornet and Saint-Maixent, the Prince of Château-Porcien, the Count of Rozay, Marle and La Fère, Par de France, the Governor of Port-Louis and Brest, in Brittany, etc.

Carrying out the will of Cardinal Mazarin caused him not just a few concerns although it is correct to say that he was guided by justice and honesty and that he was responsible for many charitable works. But also it was because of this will that he became involved in many judicial proceedings which throughout his life numbered more than 300.

Bernard, the Founder's first biographer, says that he was a pious man who was full of zeal for the instruction of the poor and he cites good examples for this statement. But Maillefer and Blain add other aspects that reflect a kind of strange personality or rather an eccentric one. His contemporary writers support both of these aspects. Saint-Simon, for example says this about him: "I have heard it said that he

could not be more intelligent or kind; that he was very sociable and a man of culture, magnificent, he enjoyed all of life, he was brave, gracious, affable and courteous in his dealings with others".

But others, like Voltaire, ridiculed him and mercilessly tore him to pieces while many others attributed false rumors and stories to him that spread rapidly. Some of these stories may have been partially true, especially in terms of his having a certain unpredictability in the decision-making process and a tendency to complicate government issues.

Louis XIV honored him with his friendship and appreciation in spite of the fact that the Duke of Mazarin rarely came to Court. Rather, his nobles often frequented the Court at the King's request.

In the era just mentioned in which he began to relate to De La Salle, he was already 50 years old and he was known as a man who was pious and very faithful to the Church; in spite of this he was in the process of being separated from his wife who had given him four children and who was considered to be very beautiful and in love with the things of the world. He for his part, was austere and generous and he preferred to live in isolation from worldly luxuries.

The relationship of the Duke of Mazarin with De La Salle came about through Nyel and the indirect intervention that he had with the schools in Rethel, Guisse and Château-Porcien which were financed partly by the Duke. But later there was a more direct link on the occasion of the creation of the Teachers' School for the town.

At the beginning of 1682, Father Cercelet (or Cervelet), pastor of Rethel, wrote to De La Salle asking for teachers. Nyel thought that he should respond to this request. But De La Salle was doubtful because he thought that the teachers should be better trained and have more experience before sending them far away from Rheims. Cercelet insisted, guaranteeing the support of the town councillors and later on securing the support of the Duke of Mazarin himself, in whose territory the parish was located. De La Salle agreed, the school was opened and it worked out well.

The Duke became very interested in this school and frequently visited the director, who was Nyel, and chatted with him. It is clear that Nyel, in his conversations, praised the virtues and qualities of De La Salle so much that the Duke wanted to meet him. One time he went to Rheims and wanted to attend his Mass the next day. At 6:00 AM when the Brothers went to the church, there was the Duke with his servant and since they did not know who he was and being absorbed in their recollection as was their custom, they did not pay any attention to him. Some of the Brothers sat in front of the Duke, some sat behind him and others sat next to him. The Duke was very edified, according to Bernard.

Later, between 1682 and 1688, the Duke and De La Salle met on different occasions. But the most important times were those that had as their focus the creation of the Seminary for Teachers.

This undertaking had two basic phases. The first resulted in a contract signed by the Duke and De La Salle on August 20, 1685, in the Mazarin palace, in front of the notaries Jean Pauffin and Ponce Dubus, by which it was planned to open a Seminary for 17 young people that would prepare them to be teachers. They would then be sent to the schools in the Duke's territories. This was supposed to begin on October 1, 1686, in Retel and the Duke was to supply the furnishings.

When everything seemed to be in place, there was a problem due to the Archbishop of Rheims, Le Tellier, who was upset with the Duke for other matters that had nothing to do with the matter at hand and he opposed the opening of the Seminary.

When both Mazarin and De La Salle together presented their project to Le Tellier, he did not hide his feelings telling them that they "were both crazy". De La Salle, humble as he was, replied: "Excuse me, Bishop, but there is only one crazy person", making clear reference to himself.

The Archbishop's reaction obliged them to undo the August 20 accord and to sign a different one, that of September 22, in Ranwez, near Mezières, where Mazarin is located and where De La Salle covered the 80 kilometers on foot, as was his custom. This new agreement planned for the school to be in La Fère (diocese of Laon) or in another site and there were to be only 3 students. Mazarin would pay an annual pension of 600 pounds which amounted to 150 per person counting the three students and one director/formator.

Brother Yves Poutet (I, 688-689) sums up the process for the Seminary for Teachers in six points:

1. Around March-April of 1683 De La Salle accepted the idea along with the canon Favart of entrusting his teachers in Rethel with the formation of student teachers for the villages.

2. On August 20, 1685, De La Salle and Mazarin signed an agreement so that the Rethel community, which was dependent on the Rheims community, would accept 17 teachers at a time in the Rethel house in order to form them and send them to the villages of the Duke's territories.

3. Due to the opposition of Le Tellier, the Archbishop of Rheims, the agreement was annulled and another was signed on September 22, 1685. Mazarin would pay for three young teachers and a director/formator in his area of the diocese of Laon.

4. During the 1686-1687 school year De La Salle opened the Seminary for Teachers but this took place in Rheims, in order to form teachers for the Duke and this fulfilled the commitment.

5. De La Salle also welcomed student teachers who were not financed by Mazarin with the intention of tending to the needs of the villages of the diocese of Rheims.

6. The Seminary for Teachers in Rheims was in operation until 1691 or perhaps 1692.

The Seminary for Teachers was under the direction of Nicholas Vuyart, one of De La Salle's first disciples and who had some natural gifts for teaching.

It is fair to say that the Duke of Mazarin manifested great concern for the people in his territories.

Specifically in terms of education not only did he finance many schools for girls as well as for boys, but he also made provisions for the education of infants in his territories.

In 1683 he dictated these instructions for the governors of the territories of his dukedom:

"In all places there should be a schoolteacher chosen by the pastor and paid by the community for twelve months per year a minimum salary of three sols and six deniers and a maximum of five sols; the teacher should not punish the children except with the ferule or the rod; he should teach them catechism and Christian practices and customs; and he should also instruct them in reading and writing, leaving the instruction of the girls to the female teacher.

He should not permit the children to play in the orchards, farms or stables but only in public places; the children from age 7 to 14 should not be made to watch over the cattle; they should be in the church in pairs so that they remain attentive to the holy sacrifice that will be explained to them".

This zeal for the education of children is, without a doubt, one of the very positive traits of the Duke of Mazarin.

We have no reference to any later relationship between the Duke and De La Salle. But of course the benefits resulting from the Seminary for Teachers were several; in the first place, because some of the young people in formation carried out their employment for many years and with very good results; also because other young teachers joined themselves to De La Salle's disciples; finally, because the idea of the Seminary was introduced two more times and even though it was not long-lived because of tragic circumstances that surrounded it, many witnessed the good formation that was given to the young teachers and the wonderful results of the methods that De La Salle had taught them. •

For further information about this topic:

Le Duc de Mazarin et Saint Jean-Baptist de La Salle. Bulletin of the Christian Schools, 1908, pp. 108-119.

Yves Poutet. *Le XVII siècle et les origines lasalliennes*, volume I, 653ff; 688ff.