

**SPIRITUAL WRITINGS  
OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
(SCRITTI SPIRITUALI)**

**The new volume of the Italian Region's  
Project, Opera Omnia Lasalliana**

**by Brother Serafino Barbaglia**

**Br. Alain Houry**

Wishing to offer the readers some general impressions about this new volume of the Complete Works of the Founder in Italian, it seemed appropriate to reproduce the Preface to the work by Brother Alain Houry, Director of Lasallian Studies.

Two years ago F. Serafino Barbaglia gave the Italian public *Lettere di Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, the first volume by date of publication, the sixth numerically, of the projected complete Italian version of the writings of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

The indefatigable translator has asked me to present this new volume. Number 1 of the prestigious series.

I am happy to respond to his request, knowing as I do the importance of this edition both for the Brothers and their collaborators in Lasallian schools and for all who have an interest in the history of Christian education and of the religious life.

I should like to stress in the first place that F. Serafino has provided a completely fresh translation and that his fully documented notes greatly help us to be aware of the rich spiritual and educational currents to which the written work of Monsieur de La Salle belongs.

Doctor of Theology of the University of Reims, De La Salle nevertheless wrote for a restricted and particularly modest readership of his time: a hundred or so Brothers, a few thousand pupils of working-class background, and through them, the parents of those boys.

The allusions, implicit and explicit, which the Founder makes to Scripture and to the Fathers, as well as to more general contemporary writings make it sometimes difficult to appreciate the originality and boldness of his thinking. The humility which prompts a writer to conceal himself behind the words of someone else does not prevent him from successfully adapting a text to the precise needs of his own audience. The same applies to a translator.

John Baptist de La Salle, writing for a public of little culture, judged by the standards of the time, uses a restricted vocabulary and does not hesitate to repeat his concepts. His translator must resist the temptation to improve the style and alter the constructions.

A close scrutiny of a Lasallian text leaves us surprised by the rigour of the thought propounded in a structure reminiscent of Latin construction.

Thus the questionnaire proposed for the Reddition of Conduct, as found in the *Collection*, reveals the writer's concern to spur the Brother to discover his true self by journeying in the truth of Christ. For example, instead of asking simply, "Do you do this?" which could easily be answered by a simple Yes or No, the question asks, "How do you do this?", thereby obliging the Brother mentally to confront the concrete reality of his procedures.

The writings in the present volume are frequently referred to as *spiritual writings* and such they are to an eminent degree. *Collection of Various Short Treatises for the use of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, The Common Rules of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Personal Writings* (these last are translated here for the first time ever in Italian) are works written for the guidance of the Brothers in their consecrated life placed at the service of the Christian education of youth. There is no reason for surprise that they treat of the work of teaching as well as of prayer and penance.

The questionnaires just mentioned leave room for self-examination on one's professional duties, while four chapters (7 to 10) of the *Common Rules* treat explicitly of *the manner of conducting oneself in school*.

The one spirit of faith fulfilling itself in the zeal, is the unifying element in the life of the Brothers.

Ministers of Jesus Christ in their dealing with their pupils, the Brothers are likewise the intercessors with God on behalf of their pupils.

Certain aspects of the Brothers' life are grafted on the most authentic traditions of the religious life and at the same time they find incarnate expression in the education of youth – a concept which the founders of monasticism certainly did not have in mind.

But written texts were not the starting point from which John Baptist de La Salle elaborated his spiritual synthesis: the "exodus" which he lived in order to place himself at the level of his first Brothers was at once an evangelical journey and a social severance from the ambience of his personal origins.

The texts of the Christian traditions made it possible for him to give a meaning to his new way of life: they provided a solid base for his radical commitment to service of the Christian education of *"the children of artisans and the poor"*.

It is not possible to isolate a series of writings from the life of the person who produced them, when, as in the present case, the object envisaged was the guidance and accompanying of those who committed themselves with that person to making known to young people the love of a God who loves them, to revealing to them the place they could occupy in human society thanks to the culture they had imbibed.

The Kingdom of God and the secular City of the Founder's time, beckoned to each other even though they remained radically distinct.

For us who live in a quite different context, the *Collection* and the *Common Rules* may well seem closed books. Many potential readers today are not Brothers and may feel less than involved at first sight. Even the Brothers, enjoined by the Council to re-write their Rule now naturally feel

estranged from the anthropology and teleology of another period.

Is it worth quitting our times in order to discover the actuality of our Founder? Is it possible to avoid creating problems about our origins which were not problems at all at the time?

A translator risks doing just that inadvertently, as he is likewise tempted to facilitate a text for his readers by injudiciously modernising the vocabulary. If in translation the Brothers are presented as "religious" the risk is there of attributing to Monsieur de La Salle a category to which the Brothers felt themselves in good faith admitted by the Bull of Approbation of 1725 but which the Sorbonne, the final judge in the matter, always denied although often consulted.

Absolute criteria do not exist *a priori* for interpreting the Lasallian texts.

Certainly the Institute founded by St. John Baptist de La Salle is the guarantor of the Lasallian character of the various groups which derive their origin from it.

But this does not mean that some readers, even if from a quite different extraction, may not one day harvest new fruits for the service of the Church's mission: every act of recognition is, *a posteriori*, a discernment of the action of the Holy Spirit.

To wish jealously to guard the Founder's thought exclusively for the Brothers would risk dooming it to sterility.

It is needful that a large public should have immediate and accurate access to the writings of our Founder.

It must not be ignored that the French of the *Grand Siecle* is certainly not familiar to francophones of today.

Without translations our texts are inaccessible to the majority of our contemporaries.

I rejoice therefore that in various sectors of the Institute a project is in process for a systematic translation of all the works of John Baptist de La Salle, whether in the form of improving existing translations or producing completely new versions.

Thanks to the 1993 publication in French of the *complete works* in a single volume together with a series of electronic diskettes, as well as an increasing number of studies consecrated to one or other of the Lasallian writings, various instruments are now available for work of sound scientific quality.

Exchanges also between various groups of translators make it possible to examine diverse hypotheses.

For a translation, like any reading, is an adaptation made in view of an appropriation.

The very complexity of a French text can be rendered more accessible in confrontation with other situations and other cultures.

Thanks are due therefore to the Italian Brothers for having embarked, now five years ago, on the project of an Italian

translation of all the writings of John Baptist de La Salle; thanks above all to the present team of translators, gifted diversely and complementarily. Brother Aldo Sabatini for the *Rules of Christian Politeness*, the *Hymns*, and the *Prayers for Holy Mass*; Brother Gabriele di Giovanni for the catechetical works (*The Duties of a Christian*); Brothers Giampiero Fornareccio and Rodolfo Meoli for the *Conduct of Schools*, and especially Brother Serafino Barbaglia who has already given us the *Letters* and now the *Collection*, the *Common Rules* and the *Opuscula*, and is at work on the *Method of mental Prayer* and the *Meditations* (his 1989 edition of which he proposes to revise in the light of the experience acquired from the work done since them).

Having seen Brother Serafino at work I am able to indicate in a few words the quality of the present publication. Totally unassuming, he submitted his manuscript for my scrutiny and together we discussed, here the substance of one of his notes, there a passage of his translation.

Brother Serafino is an editor prepared to move heaven and earth to trace a precise reference, to be able to cite the first western testimony of a concept or an institution.

I do not know Italian well enough to be able to appreciate the full beauty of his use of the language but I have to say that I know few French people who can match his knowledge of the language of Racine and of Proust.

It is a fact that French culture is the great passion of his life. Already at the age of 15 or 16 he was devouring the plays of Corneille, Racine and Moliere. His studies made it possible for him to read all of Proust (whereas most French readers limit themselves to *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, if that!)

In order to penetrate more fully into the spiritual climate which his Founder knew, Brother Serafino devoted a whole year to the study of the themes of the French School of spirituality, keeping abreast of recent studies of the subject, but especially reading the writers of the school. He has put this profound competence to the service of readers who wish both to understand fully and to remain totally faithful to the written work of M. de La Salle.

I have found that when an ancient construction or a characteristically French expression has proved difficult to render in present day Italian, Brother Serafino has sought my opinion, concerned to render faithfully the text. And I have to admit that, as a result of this contact with him, I myself have been led to re-read more closely the original texts of John Baptist de La Salle and have come to understand better the manner of his writing. •

Brother Alain Houry,  
Director of Lasallian Studies