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A meditation written in 1717?

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There is reason to think that Meditation 63, for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, was possibly a spontaneous reaction on the part of the Founder to the failure by some Brothers to accept a humiliation.

Blain gives us the background of the event in question in volume 4 of his life of De La Salle (pp. 469-470). His account is clearly based on first-hand evidence.

The account begins as follows: «In the year 1716, during the summer, the Brothers working in the schools of Rouen went as usual to attend the 6 o'clock Mass in the church of St Nicaise, their parish church...» Blain gives us all the circumstances.

These Brothers were assaulted by two young hooligans who were drunk, and one of the Brothers was severely beaten. The Brothers went to their neighbour, the Chief of Police, to lodge a complaint.

News of the affair reached De La Salle who was at St Yon at the time. «He was very upset by it»...not because of the ill-treatment they had received, but because the Brothers had lodged a complaint, «It was an inexcusable fault». The Brothers tried to exonerate themselves, but he replied by quoting the Acts of the Apostles: «And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honour of suffering for the sake of the name (of Jesus)» (Ac. 5,41). «He quoted this passage...with zeal that seemed to devour him...The holy priest quoted these words in Latin, which was unusual for him, and something he did only when he felt very deeply about some subject...during meetings when he wished to inspire the Brothers with the spirit of Jesus crucified...He would be caught up by a holy enthusiasm, speaking like a person who has lost all self-awareness, and who is moved and animated by the Spirit of God» (II Blain, pp. 469-470).

I am tempted to think that Meditation 63 reflects somehow the atmosphere conjured up by Blain's account.

In 1716, the 10th Sunday after Pentecost fell on August 9th, in the middle of summer, therefore. Is it too much to believe that this meditation was composed on this occasion?

The Founder seems to have been very busy in 1716. And yet, in a letter to Gabriel Drolin, dated December 5th of that year (we have the original), he writes: «For nearly ten months now, I have been ill in this house (St Yon), where I have been living for a year» (Letter 32, C.Molloy). What he says here seems to show that the dates of other events said to have occurred during this period are incorrect.

An example of incorrect dating can be found in connection with the life of Brother Louis (II Blain, Short Life of the Brothers..., p. 84): «He came from Rethel to St Yon in 1716 for the election of Brother Barthélemy».

It was pointed out to me recently by Brother Alain Houry that Brother J.M. Valladolid, in his Chronology, establishes, on the basis of documentation, that the event we referred to earlier, and reported by Blain as occurring in the summer of 1716, took place, in fact, in July 1717. Both the complaint lodged and the punishment imposed were recorded in court documents, and these indicate that the event occurred on July 20th 1717. These documents tell us that the culprits were two drunk soldiers by the name of Leuret and Thiérard, whose punishment was to apologise to the Brothers in writing. It tells us also that the one who lodged the complaint was a certain Brother Basile/Bazile?, (Théopiste Chéreau) (Generalate archives BJ 506-2). This Brother Basile, born in the parish of St Martin de Vendosme on June 22nd 1677, entered the Society in 1704. The register tells us that he was dismissed (CL 3,40). He was 40 years old when the event took place. It is clear, therefore, that it occurred on July 20th 1717.

In 1717, the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, for which meditation 63 was written, fell on July 25th. While this does not prove conclusively that the meditation was written at this time, it does make the hypothesis more plausible.

Moreover, there are certain expressions that Blain uses in his account which find an echo in the meditation.

«He considered these events fortunate for the Disciples of the Crucified».

«*You ought, both exteriorly and interiorly, to practise self-abasement and take pleasure therein*».

«It was was an inexcusable fault».

«*What subject of self-esteem can we find in a life which is one continued infidelity?*»

«In vain they tried to justify it...»

«*To hear you speak...*»

«during meetings when he wished to inspire the Brothers with the spirit of Jesus crucified»

«*You who have crucified Jesus Christ by your sins, conform yourselves to him...*»

These are not perhaps absolutely convincing proofs, but perhaps they will be corroborated one day. They are, all the same, an explanation for the composition of this meditation, which is so different from those that precede and follow, as well as an illustration of the way in which the Founder adapted his meditations to local circumstances.

It might be useful also to note that Brother Barthélemy was elected Superior General on May 18th 1717, shortly before the date we attribute to the composition of meditation 63.

The use the Founder made of this incident, occurring in the month of July, could have subsequently struck the Brothers and reminded them, that he had «undertaken this work (the writing of the meditations) in the last years of his life, and had devoted much time to the task». (Foreword to the Meditations for all the Sundays of the Year).

This reminds us of what Blain said in his Short Lives of the Brothers, p. 70, regarding the death of Brother Henry: «What the pious dying man had just said seemed so precious and so worthy to be remembered by the Brothers, that M. de La Salle, in order to impress it on their minds, made it the subject of the mental prayer that followed, saying that none other was needed». The event recorded here occurred on July 1st 1699. •