

**ANOTHER MAJOR WORK
OF LASALLIAN SCHOLARSHIP
FROM THE REGION OF ITALY**

Brother Edwin Bannon

The literary monument which the Lasallian Region of Italy is in process of erecting to the honour of St. John Baptist de La Salle has just moved nearer to completion with the publication of a further massive contribution by F. Serafino Barbaglia, of the District of Rome - the third such contribution to emanate from the inexhaustible research and fluent writing style of that dedicated scholar and devotee of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. In October 1999 came forth from the Rome publishing house of *Città Nuova* a volume containing, with Introductions and Commentaries, a new Italian translation of the three works of spirituality which together constitute the zenith of the ascetical writings of the Lasallian Founder. Facsimile first editions of the three works have been published as *Cahiers Lasalliens*: CL12 *Méditations pour les dimanches et les principales fêtes de l'année* (MD, MF), CL13 *Méditations pour le temps de la retraite...*(MR) and CL14 *Explication de la méthode d'oraison* (EM). The work under review (a hard-back volume of 1194 beautifully printed pages) completes the Barbaglia trilogy of De La Salle's specifically spiritual writings of which the first volume, *Le Lettere*, initiated the envisaged six-volume enterprise, being published in 1993. The second volume of the trilogy, published in 1996, entitled *Scritti Spirituali/1*, comprised new translations, with introductions and notes, of: the *Recueil de différents petits traités...* of which the first known edition (published in facsimile as CL14) is dated 1711, eight years therefore before the Founder's death; *Les Règles des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes* (CL25), first published in 1726, posthumously therefore, but of which three manuscript versions (each unique) exist, all dated within the founder's lifetime, 1705, 1713 and 1718 respectively; and a collection of what the translator calls the *Scritti personali* (including,

e.g., the indispensable *Mémoire sur l'habit*)

For all three volumes of this trilogy (three other volumes, comprising the more directly educational writings of the Founder, are in preparation by other Italian scholars) The Institute at large (not just Italianophone researchers into the spiritual heritage of J.B. de La Salle) will be indebted to Serafino Barbaglia for as long as our religious family exists.. This is because, along with the impeccably faithful translation (of benefit, of course, principally to Italian readers) the range of information and new insights provided in the Introductions and Notes constitutes a quite astonishing enrichment of the ever-expanding mass of Lasallian scholarship that has been so much in evidence these last few decades.

It is hardly necessary to say that F. Serafino has taken full advantage of the said scholarship; all previous commentators (Lasallian and others) on the three works of M. de La Salle which particularly relate to the theory and practice of meditation, are acknowledged in the present volume. Thus, for example, for the commentary on the *Explication...* the seminal work of FF. Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos (published as CL50) is frequently referred to (and indeed Serafino has adopted the linear presentation of the text, invented by his two predecessors "to render a difficult work more readable"). The commentary on MF manifests a ready and grateful (if sometimes questioning) familiarity with the ground-breaking study of the sources completed by the late F. Jean-Guy Rodrigue in 1988 and published as CL47.

But those are only two examples of this awareness and assimilation of the findings of his forebears shown (as must be shown by all true scholarship in any field) by Serafino Barbaglia. Apart from the very many extra-Institute authorities, the following Lasallians are duly consulted and called in aid at appropriate junctures: Aroz, Battersby, Bédel, Brisebois, Gallego, Hermans, Houry, Le Bars, Lett, Loes, Martinais, Poutet, Pungier and Valladolid... Not the least of the services rendered to the Lasallian Family by this new Barbaglia volume (and its predecessors) is to make devotees of St. J.B. de La Salle aware of the existence and accessibility of such horizon-stretching information and interpretation of his personality and work. But it is especially the enrichment to the treasure brought by Serafino himself that will deserve the grateful

attention of all such devotees when made available, at least partially, in other languages.

Serafino's notes may be called - to risk what has already become a cliché - a commentary for the millennium. By which I mean that he has understood that in the socially advanced global village the world has become, cultured awareness is no longer the exclusive possession of the privileged few. He has also understood (as it seems to me) that the media, especially television with its relentless, round-the-clock presentation of images, has diminished the capacity for sustained reading of abstract, especially transcendental, ideas and argument. Hence Serafino has given his well-stocked mind a degree of free rein as parallel associations strike him when commenting on one or other of the teeming ideas he finds in the contemplative words of his master, M. de La Salle.

One would not normally expect to find such names as Dante Alighieri (admittedly the least surprising), Racine, Corneille, Boileau, Wilde, Molière, Manzoni, Cicero, Ovid, Horace, Virgil, Bach, Beethoven, Liszt, Strauss R., Mendelssohn, Bellini G., Van Dyke, Rubens and other such, in a commentary on the ascetical writing of St. John Baptist de La Salle. But they are all comfortably there in Serafino's notes, each making the bridge between sacred and profane culture and enabling the attentive reader to understand a little better the mind and purpose of the 16th century Saint. A critical reader may perhaps object that on occasion Serafino allows his allusions *too* free a rein and that an occasional divagation is just that - a wandering from the point. But such a reproach would itself (it seems to me) miss the point. All true art - literature, music, painting, sculpture - has enriched the world by gift of the divine Creator (as Vatican II has reminded us) and can be enlisted in the search for, and love of, God - which is the object of all the writings of John Baptist de

La Salle. If, to take one example out of many, our commentator, in his notes on the meditation for the feast of the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, chooses to convey the decadence of the Herodian court by referring us to the words of Oscar Wilde, set to the brooding and sensuous music of Richard Strauss in the opera *Salome*, we can surely be grateful to him not only for an enhancement of our 'composition of place' but also for a moment of *détente* from the austere lessons drawn by the Founder.

Readers who are acquainted with the two preceding volumes of the Barbaglia trilogy will not be surprised to learn that an excellent system of cross-consultation is a conspicuous feature of this new work, as it was of its predecessors. Separate Introductions are provided for the meditations themselves (MD, MF, MR,) and for the *Explanation*, each a lucid presentation of absorbing, detailed information. The commentary is presented in the form of footnotes which appear where, by definition, they *ought* to appear, that is, on the same page as the text they elucidate. The bibliography covers 85 pages and includes not only an extensive general list of relevant works but also an individual list for each of the MF texts. As well as a thematic index, making it easy to trace the ascetical topic treated in one or more of the meditations, there is an index of all the proper names appearing in the 1000+ pages of the volume.

Bro. Serafino is to be congratulated and thanked for having given us a work of erudition worthy to take its place (along with its two predecessors) among the best of the Lasallian studies which have so admirably graced our Institute during the years since the end of World War II. Worthy also of the intellectual tradition manifested for even more years than that by our Italian confrères in the pages of their *Rivista Lasalliana*. •