

THE EARLIEST LASALLIANS

Brother Edwin Bannon

The Institute is already deeply indebted to Brother Augustine Loes, of the District of New York, for having, as founding member of the USA Lasallian Publications Board, and as author and translator, made an immense contribution to making St. John Baptist de la Salle and his work ever more widely known to English-speaking readers. He has now had the brilliant idea of acquainting us with the very earliest Brothers of the Christian Schools, those who knew the Founder personally and were sufficiently captivated by his vision and personality to throw in their lot with him - for surely no other motive can have persuaded them to adopt the austere and humanly unrewarding way of life he offered them. Not all, indeed, who took the first heroic step, proved able to continue the ever-challenging journey to the end of their days. But Augustine Loes has perceived that it was the fidelity of those who did so persevere that gave our Institute sufficient stability and permanence for it to be in existence in the 20th century, and so able to offer present-day Brothers, and indeed the entire Lasallian family, the possibility and privilege of sharing and fostering the vision of the 16th century saint and educator. Such pioneers, opined Brother Augustine (and his Publications Board), deserve to be better known to their successors who are also their debtors. And the result of that happy inspiration has now appeared in the form of a 280-page book, just published under the title of *The First De La Salle Brothers 1681-1719*. The dates included in the title are significant. The historically recognised date of the founding of the Institute is 1680 and the Founder's death occurred in 1719. The book, we are to understand, is truly, and exclusively, concerned with the Brothers who really knew the Founder, those men for whom he was "Monsieur de La Salle" or, as we anglophones would say, "Father de La Salle".

Needless to say, our American scholar was aware, before embarking on his task, that there is no lack of source-material for such a study as he has given us. He knew that the Generalate archives in Rome

preserves a small (11.5x17.5 cm) bound collection (inscribed *Livret des Premiers Voeux*) of sixty-six handwritten, signed vows formulae, beginning with the thirteen signed by De La Salle and the Twelve (to borrow Mark's chosen term for Christ's apostles); he knew that there is lodged in the Paris *Bibliothèque Nationale* a parchment-bound 220-page manuscript (numbered 11,220 of the Library's manuscript department) entitled "*Catalogue des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes*" de Melun (1686-1776). *XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* and made available (by the late F. Maurice-Auguste Hermans) for public readership as *Cahier Lasallien No. 3*; he was aware that Canon Blain had appended to the second volume of his biography of the Founder brief lives of six of the earliest Brothers, and was critically familiar with what Blain had said about them; he knew, from another treasured manuscript preserved in the Institute's archives from the beginnings, the names and whereabouts of all the Brothers (101 apart from Novices) alive in the Institute a year and a few months before the Founder's death; finally, as editor of the fine volume which inaugurated the USA/Toronto Region's series of Lasallian Publications, *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, Augustine Loes was more than familiar with the homely, and sometimes colourful, details of the activities and personalities discernible from the Founder's correspondence.

Expertly drawing on his close research of these and other sources (especially, of course, the three earliest biographies of the Founder, those by F. Bernard Dauge, Dom Elie Maillefer and Jean-Baptiste Blain), Brother Augustine has produced a book which is not only an invaluable contribution to the history of our Institute but is also (by the nature of its subject) more entertaining to read than an academic work has any right to be. The material is organised and presented chronologically. After an introductory chapter providing a general description of the religious congregation which developed around De La Salle (rather than which he set out to found), the nature of which had no precedent in the history of the Church, our author presents a portrait gallery of a few of the very earliest pioneers whose names are known only from the pages of the source-biographies, Jean-François, Nicolas Bourlette, Maurice, Henri l'Heureux, whose stories read like extracts from the *Fioretti*. The portraits continue with pioneers named in one or more of the above-mentioned manuscript sources: Nicolas Vuyart, Jacques Compain, Michel-Barthélemy Jacquinot, each of whom won the confidence of the Founder for one or other services.

In the following chapter, headed "Giants Among the Earliest Brothers", we are introduced to three men whose contribution during the early difficult years provided the assurance De la Salle needed that his Institute was a work willed by God. Antoine Partois, a born "personal assistant", cool-headed and organised, gifted with secretarial skills, a man who, says Loes, for fifty-seven years "gave De la Salle consistent and

enlightened support during all the struggles for the founding of the Institute”. Jean Jacquot, a product of the Junior Novitiate established by the Founder at the rue Neuve, whose multifarious administrative services throughout a long lifetime (he was the first Assistant to be elected in the history of the Institute) are chronicled in documented detail by our author. And the third of this chosen trio, Gabriel Drolin, the saga of whose rock-like fidelity is generally known to all of us in broad outline, but not in the ever-revealing detail accorded to it here.

As the list unfolds chronologically, with anecdotes of entrants to the Institute from 1690 up to the year 1705, “the Second Generation”, as they are called here, we become aware that the “giants” previously singled out were far from isolated cases of men of exceptional quality opting for an obscure, unsalaried, celibate but non-sacerdotal existence, living as poorly as the youngsters they worked among, and ready to obey whatever orders they received, either directly from Father de La Salle, or indirectly from his appointed directors. One of them, Joseph (Jean) Le Roux made Lasallian history by being the first named Visitor, as is known from an extant ‘obedience ‘ in the founder’s handwriting, dated 1708 (when Joseph was just 30).

A particular trial for the Founder, among the many that he had to bear to give the Institute enduring existence, was that a few, among the most able of the men he admitted to the Institute, and on whom he came to rely, proved to be vessels of clay. One of the earliest, Nicolas Vuyart, who ranked, in De La Salle’s esteem, with Gabriel Drolin, probably the most gifted schoolman among the early Brothers, left the Institute in circumstances which, despite an effort of some modern commentators to rationalise his defection, seem hardly defensible. Another such, Ponce Thisieux, another exceptionally able teacher and administrator,

gave the Founder no end of problems until finally abandoning him. Others, who did remain loyal to him to the end, sometimes caused him pain by their procedures. Thomas (Charles) Frappet, the first general bursar of the Institute, was the archetype of these. A down-to-earth business man, he was often impatient with his saintly Superior’s tendency to await the guidance of Providence and reacted accordingly, and sometimes offensively. Yet his worldlywise know-how became indispensable to the young Institute’s continued existence. And it seems that when Father de La Chétardye, recognising these qualities, proposed that Thomas should take over the superiorship of the Brothers at work in the Saint-Sulpice parish as a break away group, the good pastor received a very dusty answer.

Brother Augustine appropriately reserves his final chapter for a portrayal and discussion of two early Lasallians who stand out from the rest as the first successors of De La Salle as Superiors of the Institute. Barthélemy (Joseph) Truffet, elected in 1717, almost two years therefore before the death of the Founder, was well known to Canon Blain, whose life of him, appended to Volume II of the biography of the Founder, portrays a man of God cast rather in the mould of the Founder himself. Barthélemy’s successor, Timothée (Guillaume) Samson-Bazin, a Parisian, knew the Founder personally for 19 years, having joined the Institute in 1700. He was elected Superior in 1720, at the age of 38, and resigned in 1751. The chronicle of the achievements of his 31 years in office, has led more than one commentator to refer to him as the “second founder” of the Institute. Augustine Loes’ own assessment of Timothée forms the closing sentence of this richly informative and highly readable book: “It is doubtful if any other Brother had more influence on the history and development of the Institute than this great man”. •