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NEW WORLD
De La Salle resigns his canonry. 1683

Brother John Deeney

ST. REMI.

The early light of a summer morning gradually softened the shadows inside the abbey church of St. Remi. The rounded columns along one side of the nave glowed warm as they picked up, the primrose tint of the dawn sky. Behind the high altar, the sculpted figures on the tomb of St. Remi seemed to stir and rise as their shadows brought them into greater relief. The sole living figure inside that great church remained perfectly still. He was kneeling, head bowed, wrapped in a dark cloak. It would have been difficult to tell if he were asleep or deep in prayer such was his stillness. After some while, however, he raised his head and adjusted his eyes to the light. He focused on the cross behind the high altar and spoke a few words to the figure of Jesus. He stood, moving stiffly at first, genuflected slowly, then stepped thoughtfully under the vaulting of the side-aisle and paced down the length of the worn flagstones toned with light filtered through stained glass windows. He was tired but his mind was clear about what God wanted of him and his purpose still firm.

The grind and crack of a lock turning echoed under the arches and disturbed his peace. Light flooded in as the sacristan pushed open the heavy door. He greeted M. de La Salle in a low voice as the priest left the abbey and turned his steps towards the centre of Rheims.

THE PALAIS DU TAU.

Even lunch had not improved the Archbishop's mood overmuch. The fuss of organising his imminent return to Paris and disposing of outstanding business before he left had made him impatient and unsettled, and had had a pronounced effect on those around him. The work was dense and the summer's heat was heavy. «Enough!» He dropped a sheaf of papers onto his desk and wiped his forehead with a white cloth without succeeding in wiping away the frown that overhung his somewhat fleshy face. He pushed his chair back and stood up, tucking his linen collar back into place and rearranging his episcopal attire. He stood by the open window to catch the warm breeze that wafted in from the square. He half-turned suddenly, clicked his fingers and beckoned his secretary over to the window.

«Who is that man there, the one just turning the corner of the cathedral? Do you know?»

«Ah, yes, your Lordship, I see him. It is, I think, Canon Monsieur de La Salle, is it not?»

«I thought so,» muttered LeTellier. «What is he still doing here at this time? I had them turn him away this morning when he wanted to see me.» They both watched the dark figure start to move across the cobbled space towards the Archbishop's palace.

«Surely not again!» Le Tellier shook his head. «The man is like a spring breeze. Never rough. He just nudges and tugs and swirls around and catches you when and where you least expect him till he wears you down with whatever it is he wants.»

«Just what we could do with, a spring breeze,» ventured the secretary. Le Tellier's sharp, dark eyes studied his companion's unexpressive face for a moment. «Have him admitted if he asks for me. I don't want him following me to Paris again.»

De La Salle's presence, oddly enough, had somewhat refreshed the Archbishop. It wasn't the usual petty complaints. He had spoken persuasively and cogently of all the factors which were calling him to resign his canonry and commit himself to the work of the teachers and the schools for the poor. The message had been put across with a subtle power that halfmesmerised him, but it had all the strangeness of a communication from some newly discovered world, a world he found difficult to fathom. That a man should want to leave a secure, well-endowed post that he could hold for life was baffling enough, but that the man wanted to live and work with the poor and survive on a pittance was ... well, it was madness! But Le Tellier knew his value and was too intelligent to believe that the man was mad. There was a peace about him but a fire in his eyes and a sense of purpose and coiled energy as well -like a loaded crossbow, he thought to himself, stillness just waiting for the right touch.

«Disquieting,» he said, continuing his brief reverie out loud; a comment that was none too clear to the other three persons in the room, not surprisingly since it mostly described the effect that the discussions had had on the Archbishop himself.

«So, Canon Philbert, this resignation has your carefully considered support, does it?»

«I have given my opinion, my Lord, and you know that Monsieur de La Salle does have a brother to whom he could pass on the canonry.» Le Tellier's jewelled finger tapped the carved arm of his chair and the cushions sighed slightly as he leaned back. Suddenly his own energy and a touch of the day's impatience returned. He leaned forward decisively;

«Well, if that's what you both think, I wash my hands of the affair. He can resign his canonry and give it to whomever. The business is settled. Tomorrow I shall be away to Paris and you will have to deal with the consequences.» The relief in the room was palpable, like a physical tension released or a touch of evening freshness.

THE RUE NEUVE.'

The weariness caused by the long night, the hot day, the hours of daylight prayer in the cathedral and the ordeal with the Archbishop dropped from de La Salle like a laden sack. He left the cathedral and palace behind him and set off towards the rue Neuve. The heat of the day was beginning to fade and the street was alive with movement and gossip. Grubby children chased each other in between adults and down alleys; people seated at their open windows called down to friends; the taverns swallowed their clientele. De La Salle noticed none of the detail: he hardly felt the cobbles under his feet. His heart was singing songs of thanksgiving. After months of negotiation and struggle the right catch had been released and he was now freed and speeding in the direction in which God had been calling him. And as for his Brothers, how this would strengthen them now that his attachments and privilege were gone and he was going to be united with them in their reliance on God's providence! The familiar tall, timbered house rose up above him and he paused on the step to bang the dust and debris off his shoes and compose himself somewhat for his entrance.

Nicolas, Jean-François, Jean-Maurice and the others crowded round to hear his story. Theirs was a stunned delight. The full implications were difficult to absorb but it was de La Salle's own almost ecstatic joy which caught their hearts and drowned their thoughts. Their smiles and words could not adequately release the emotions of the moment and it was de La Salle who led them into the small, simply-furnished chapel to sing the Te Deum, that soaring hymn of praise and thanks to God for his goodness and greatness;

Te Deum laudamus, te Dominum confitemur.

We praise you, O God:
we acclaim you as the Lord....

Everlasting Father,
All the world bows down before you.
All the angels sing your praise ...

In you, Lord, we put our trust:
we shall not be put to shame.

FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION.

* When he encountered problems in his life or work, De La Salle spent greater amounts of time in prayer. He took literally the words in the gospel:

Ask, and it will be given to you;
search and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened to you.

We can examine our own ways of acting when we encounter difficulties. Do we try and solve them by ourselves or do we seek the Lord's help? We also need to be persistent in prayer if we are really serious in what we are asking.

The answers we get to our prayers do not always give us what we want or expect. What reaction do we have when an answer doesn't please us? Are we able to accept God's choice for us and even thank him for it?

* De La Salle found great joy in the life and work of the early community. The obstacles he encountered never prevented him from seeing the blessings which they were given and thanking God for them.

We could draw up a list of some of the blessings in our life and make a prayer of thanks for them. We have such major items such as family, friends, education, our gifts or our health or faith. We also have many lesser things which we enjoy and which we often take for granted.

* In the Acts of the Apostles it is recorded that people said of the early Christians: 'See how they love one another.' In one of his meditations, De La Salle says: «This union (between Brothers) should be so close as to resemble that which exists between the three Divine Persons...»

We can usefully reflect on those different areas of community to which we belong, such as family, work, church, and see what attitude and contribution we bring to each.

* When he thought of leaving his canonry, De La Salle wrote: 'though I entered through the right door it seems now that God is opening it so that I should leave.' Do you see any situation, even a positive one, where God is calling you to move on to something else?

* Find a psalm or prayer of thanksgiving that appeals to you. You might consider using this several times in order to find its deepest meaning.

* A prayer of John Baptist de La Salle:

Accept, I pray you, O my God,
the thought and the affection that I have for you,
as my thanks for the grace which you are giving me
of thinking of you at this moment
since this is something I can offer you
which is most pleasing to you.

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