

## THE SEQUENCE of the Mass proper to Saint John Baptist de La Salle

On the occasion of the Centenary of his Canonization

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The Archives in the Generalate contain an unfinished program of the Mass of St. John Baptist de La Salle, which was drawn up by Leo XIII on the day of the canonization.

There are two sheets, evidently written in haste since not all the words can be interpreted well in a single reading. They are with a letter from Dom Pothier dated November 5, 1887 written to an unknown recipient. This could have been the Postulator General, Brother Robustinien Rabatelet or perhaps Brother Exuperien Mas (1829-1903).

On page 127, number 33 of “**The Abbey of St. Wandrille de Fontanelle**” (the abbey which has preserved the archives of Dom Pothier and from which we sought information on this topic), we read: “*Brother Exuperien is thankful for the composition of the Mass and Vespers of John Baptist de La Salle*”. (October 10, 1887).

That the work done by Dom Pothier was first-rate, there can be no doubt. We also have further proof of this in a letter from the Archbishop of Paris, dated October 9, 1887, addressed to the same recipient as the previous letter. In this letter he says: “*In all respects, the office composed by Dom Pothier is beautiful and pious, especially the Mass*”.

The opinion is laudatory but it has no relevance in terms of authenticating the authorship of Dom Pothier simply because the work signed by the author has been preserved. And the text is not the definitive one, since the Introit, taken from Ecclesiastes 39:27 was later replaced by the verse from Mark 10:14.

The office for the Mass includes ten texts: **the introit, collect, gradual, tract, alleluia, Gospel** (the author points out that it is the same as the Mass for St. Joseph Calasanz), **offertory, secret, communion and post-communion verses**. The epistle, which later will be a passage from Ecclesiasticus (39:5-10), is not indicated.

Dom Pothier's letter, which accompanies his work, is interesting since it explains the motives which moved him to change the text that had already been written. They are prophetic words and they are related to the social-political situation that was already underway in France at the end of

1887. Here we are talking about the decisions of Minister Combes, which will go on to obliterate Catholic instruction in France with the expulsion of teaching religious. The attack will be fully felt by Brother Exuperien who was at that time the Assistant for France, since he had to close 801 schools and nearly 10,000 Brothers were thrown out.

Dom Pothier says: “*I've allowed myself to make some changes in the Mass. In times such as these, it seemed to me to be better to ask the Lord for the freedom to teach for his Church; the fervor we have, it is the freedom we lack because it has been taken away. But both things are necessary: *fecunda atque libera exerceant caritate*”.*

As we have seen, in the Mass texts there is no Sequence. It is missing for two reasons. The first is that, strictly speaking, it is not part of the Mass since it is for private devotion. Today there are few Sequences that have survived. A letter dated December 13, 1916 gives credence to this (ACG 881). It is from Brother Alexis-François, Procurator General. It is not likely that it was directed to the Superior General, Brother Imier de Jesus at that time. Brother Alexis writes: “*I have inquired unofficially to find out if the S.C.R. (Sacred Congregation for Religious) would approve the Sequence *Te Joannes* for our houses. There is no hope for approval, at least for now. Monsignor De Fava told me that the Sacred Congregation only approves liturgical songs*”. The request was made again 8 years later, on November 29, 1824 by Brother Allais-Charles, who stressed that the Sequence could be placed within the Mass. On December 1, 1924, Brother Alexis responded to him: “*This morning I asked P. Haegy, the Secretary for the Liturgical Commission for the Sacred Congregation for Rites again about this matter. He confirmed what I had been told previously, that the Sacred Congregation no longer allows Sequences to be included in Masses for Saints*”.

The second reason is more important. The reason is that the text for the Sequence is not Dom Pothier's who, in 1907, set a melody to a text which already existed, of J. Lyonnois. Before we spell out the details, we'll introduce the author.

Dom Joseph Pothier, abbot of St. Wandrille, near Rouen, was born in Bouzémont (Vosges) on December 7, 1835. He was a Benedictine monk in Solesmes, the prior of Ligugé, the prior of St. Wandrille in 1895 and later he served as abbot of the same abbey from 1898 until 1923, the year he died. He is considered to be the restorer of Gregorian chant, which had been in full decline. It was Dom Guéranger who had guided him along this path, in addition to entrusting him with teaching theology. Dom Pothier carried out this delicate undertaking in the field of Gregorian chant in collaboration with Dom Jeaussions. In 1860 he was relieved from Theology teaching and was able to devote himself entirely to Gregorian chant. The fruit of his efforts were soon seen with the important publications of “*Gregorian melodies according to tradition*”, 1880; and the “*Graduale Romanum*”, completed in 1868 which was the basis for the “*Liber Gradualis*” of 1883.

In 1890 he went to Rome, along with Dom Cabral, since Rome was the seat of the chant that took its name from the monk who would become Pope St. Gregory. The two were welcomed by Dom de Santi, who had been “converted” to Gregorian chant, specifically because of the chants of Dom Pothier.

The workplace for the two Benedictines was the French Seminary and the Church of St. Clare near the Pantheon. There they founded a school for singing that gradually performed the pieces composed by them (see the Laetare and Reminiscere Masses...). St. Clare, the church where the faithful would attend increasingly in greater numbers, came

to be the “Conservatory of ancient Gregorian chant”.

On May 5, 1891, on the occasion of the impending centenary of St. Gregory the Great, the Vatican Seminary offered a concert of sacred music to Leo XIII. The concert was held at St. Martha’s and it was presided by Cardinal Rampolla del Tindaro. A lecture about “St. Gregory, Leo XIII and liturgical chant” was given by Dom de Santi who, in full oratorical emphasis, came to compare Dom Pothier to the prophet Ezekiel: “The Gregorian notes are like the dry bones that Ezekiel saw and to which he gave life: ‘I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live’ (Ezekiel 37:5). This new Ezekiel is Dom Pothier of the Solesmes abbey” (cf. P. Combe, *Histoire de la restauration du chant grégorien d’après des documents inédits*. Solesmes 1969, p. 162).

Let’s return now to the Sequence “Te, Joannes, triumphantem...”. We have already noted that this Sequence is the wonderful work of Dom Pothier since we have established the autograph of the famous composer (St. Wandrille Archives 1 W 70).

For a long time it was thought that he was the author of the Latin verses as well as the Gregorian melody. The music is indeed his, there is no doubt about that. But the verses are the work of Joseph Lyonnois. Reaching this conclusion has not been an easy task; nonetheless the proof was found in the St. Wandrille archives.

After repeated requests, which fell on deaf ears, I thought that the quickest and surest way would be to deal with the archivist of the beautiful Norman abbey in which Dom Pothier had spent time, as abbot during his final years. In all likelihood his writings and musical compositions would be preserved there.

My request of last January 25 was met with a high degree of friendliness by the archivist, Hugues Leroy, who resolved my questions when he sent me two exceptional documents. One reproduces the original of a “Hymn to St. John Baptist de La Salle, for the canonization, by P. Joseph V. Lyonnois, with the approval and felicitation of His Eminence Cardinal Perraud, bishop of Autun and His Eminence Archbishop Dubourg, bishop of Moulins”.

This is a long poem of 25 strophes plus a refrain. To the right is indicated: “The music is by a Benedictine from Solesmes”. However, this author is not Dom Pothier since the melody is not a well-known one of the famous Benedictine.

The second document sent by Father Leroy is even more precious than the first and it clears up the real authorship of the Sequence since it is autographed by Dom Pothier with his signature and the date: “Dongelberg, September 19, 1907, +F.J.P., abbot of S.W.”.

He himself indicates the verses which are not his, as he wrote in the upper right portion: “Verses 1-10 by P. Lyonnois”. These ten strophes as well as two others used as doxologies, are highlighted in the text we mentioned. They were the ones Dom Pothier used for the beautiful melody which, since that time in 1907, has been sung in our churches.

The difference between the two compositions can be noticed immediately. Whereas the first one - from the anonymous author - is almost a song, rather monotonous, with strophes and refrain which is repeated in the 25 italicized portions, that of Dom Pothier is a true sacred composition in which the music reflects to a high degree an autonomous lyrical line.

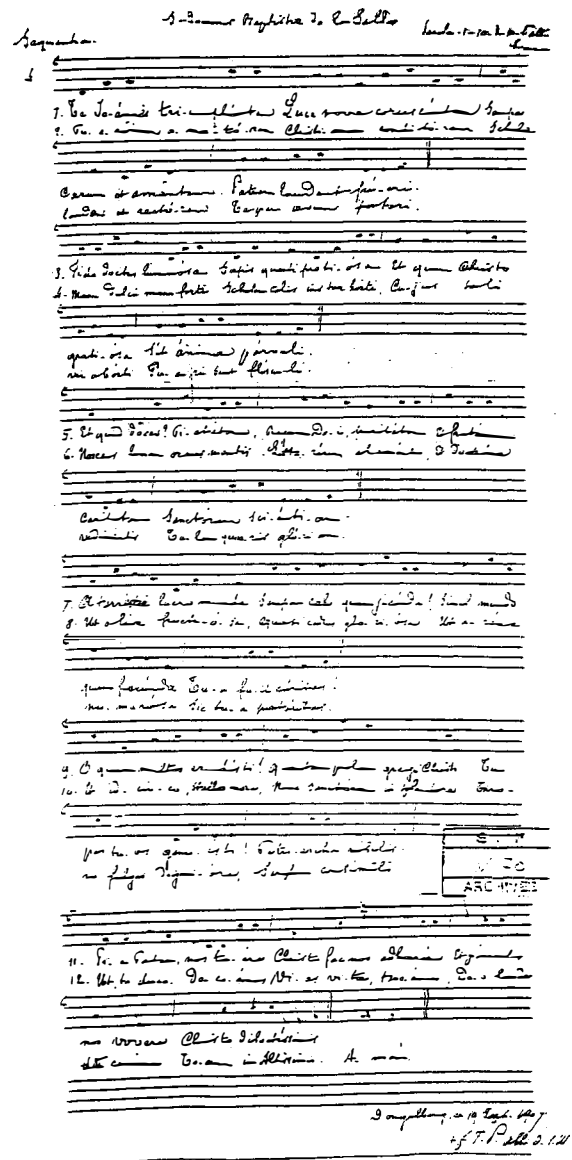
How did the relationship between the Brothers and Dom Pothier come about and how were the Brothers able to obtain his compositions in honor of the Founder? This is a matter of history which needs to be delved into and clarified. For now we are content with the kind explanation of the

archivist in his letter of January 26, 2000: “Dom Pothier began to collaborate with the Brothers of the Christian Schools, specifically with some from Quimper (or so it seems, he adds) when he was a monk in Solesmes.

In addition he was a friend since childhood of a Brother Alberton who died around 1902. Both were from Bouzemont in the county of Vosgos. Nicolas-Jules Baudin (Brother Alberton) was born in 1834 and Joseph Pothier was born in 1835. Together they attended the school in the small town which today has 497 inhabitants.”

Our Archives has preserved documents of letters written between Dom Pothier and other Brothers. In total there are 49 documents, which attest to his close relationship with the Brothers: Elfège-Marie, Exupère (Exuperien?), Idelpe, Macédone and Archange (1W246)”.

The memory and gratitude of the Brothers of the Christian Schools towards Dom Pothier, both for his cordiality with the Brothers and for the beautiful melodies that sprang forth from his heart in honor of the holy Founder will last forever, *extento aevo*. •



Original composition of Dom Pothier. Actual dimensions of the script are 26,5 x 12 cm.