

**Was there a Beatrice
in J.B. De La Salle's life?**

By Brother Alberto Pettinari

In the life of J.B. De La Salle, those who determined his second vocation - that of founder - there were several women, such as Maillefer and Leclerc. But there was a third one, considered less important and often not mentioned by the biographers and Lasallian researchers in general. An exception to this were Leon de Marie Louis (Aroz) and Yves Poutet, who lifted the veil a little on this person.. The stimulus for speaking about her came to me from a fine article in issue 44 of *Lasalliana*, entitled "The women of proven virtue in De La Salle", by Br. Carlos J. Láinez (Centroamérica).

Let us together see who she is together.

"Mr Nyel, having arrived in Rheims, was still ringing at the door of the new community of schoolmistresses, when De La Salle arrived. They saw one another for the first time, without saying a word...Nyel, having called the Superior, explained to her the object of his visit...What could she say in answer? ...The person who could solve all the problems was in the house. The Superior begged him to do so, having called him first and asked him to come" (1).

And elsewhere:

"And so M. Nyel came to Rheims...aware of the intentions of Madame de Maillefer, and carrying the letters she had written to the Superior of the Sisters of the Child Jesus. She wrote to her in preference to anybody else, believing she was better informed about what M. Roland had planned while he was alive. She (the Superior) spoke of this to M. De La Salle, and asked him to say what he thought about this plan" (2).

Is not the Superior the chief character in both extracts? We shall speak about her - Françoise Duval - as the piece that Providence (let us keep this word) moved to the greatest effect on the chess board of 17th century French charity schools. An exaggeration? A pioneer with Barré, an innovator with Roland, she knew the dynamic Nyel and Maillefer. A zealous woman, overshadowed by illustrious founders, who would deserve an excellent biography.

"She was born at Honfleur (less than 50 km from Rouen, on the south shore of the Le Havre bay, which today has fewer than 10,000 inhabitants), the daughter of Nicolas Duval, who had the rank of burgher. She was among the first to come to Fr Barré (a Minim of St Francis de Paul), and was the first to respond to the call to found schools for the poor. Fr Barré chose her for an experimental venture in Sotteville (4 km from Rouen) ...which was the first attempt in that area to provide regular free teaching to those who could not pay to go to school". And of these charitable schools, Barré was "the first founder in France" (3), but "for

girls who, by episcopal decree, could not be mixed in with boys" (4).

It was 1662, and Françoise was only just 18 years old. What had she been doing until then?

Since she belonged to a family of the bourgeoisie, it is not difficult to imagine her education, which taught her "decorum and civility" (la bienséance et la civilité), of which the France of Louis XIV was so proud. In Françoise it found fertile ground. Unfortunately, we know nothing about this period of her life.

Let us continue to follow the account of Marguerite Lestocq, her companion: "Our reverend Father Barré told us that he had a persistent idea and an inspiration to start up a community. This is how he suggested it. «Go», he said, «for breakfast to your fellow Sisters who teach near the Carmelites, and ask them to have supper with you in your school of the Penitents (both schools were in Rouen), and see if it is possible to live together...It has to be said, that this caused no problems for the Sisters (5). And so in 1666, there was born a congregation which subsequently was called by a variety of very different names: Sisters or Mistresses of Providence, Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, Sisters Daughters of the Christian Schools of the Child Jesus, the Ladies of St Maur, the Barré Sisters, the Black Ladies, the Minimettes, etc.

Françoise became the first Superior and "governed with all the wisdom" of her 22 years! But she was to extend her influence, because she was sent - an incredibly charitable gesture on the part of Barré - to Rheims, where Roland wished to repeat the Rouen experiment. It was 1670. This virtuous young woman, formed by the Minim, brought to the new venture a preparation and quality which would make it prosper. "She is rich in experience; above all, she embodies the spirit of her founder. Françoise Duval must have possessed it in the highest degree, in order to work with a man of the calibre of a theological canon of Rheims" (6). And so, with a companion, she took up residence in the house on rue du Barbâtre, ready to confront the first serious difficulties of guiding the development of a new institute (the Sisters of the Child Jesus of Rheims). "Repeating at Rheims what she had done at Rouen, under the inspiration of Fr Barré, Sisters Françoise Duval, Anne Le Coeur and the companions they had formed, attracted girls to themselves...and women...whom they instructed patiently" (7). And after 8 years, Françoise became the worthy successor of Roland, who had died heroically, (the victim of typhus, transmitted by infected lice), at the bedside of sick Sisters. Unlike Barré, who would not hear of "letters patent" for his foundation, trusting only in Providence (He used to say, «If you found, you will founder"), Roland had taken steps to obtain them, but death overtook him before he could (he was not yet 36 when he died).

At that point, J.B. De La Salle came onto the scene, and had great success in 1679, in close collaboration with Françoise, 7 years his senior, and with a fund of experience accumulated in the footsteps of two saintly founders: Roland was beatified in 1994, and Barré on March 7th 1999.

Where and when did they become acquainted?

Françoise arrived in Rheims when John Baptist was 19 years old, still involved in his studies, and already, in 1672, an orphan, with the responsibility of looking after his 4 brothers and 2 sisters. It could be deduced that they began their acquaintanceship at least that year, when John Baptist chose Nicolas Roland as his spiritual director, strengthening gradually their friendship especially after the death of Roland who had entrusted the institution to him.

And so “from April 27th 1678, it was J.B. De La Salle ...who administered the temporal needs of the Sisters, working together with Sister Françoise Duval”. By this fact “Through his work of administration, M. De La Salle remained in permanent contact with the Daughters of M. Roland . An uninterrupted tradition since the origins of the Congregation has it that, for a number of years, he would go to say Mass in the chapel of the Holy Child Jesus, and would wear the priestly vestments of the theological canon” (8). Given that it was a secular religious community without vows (Roland had followed Barré exactly in establishing it), simple relationships came more easily than would have been the case, had they been cloistered nuns, and contacts with the outside would have been barely tolerated if not prohibited. “From time to time, he would go to see her (the Superior), and she sought his advice willingly” (9). Obviously De La Salle benefitted from these visits also, because, for reasons already explained, he was able to learn much from her experience in schools. “If we compare the Book of Practices of the Community of the Holy Child Jesus with the Conduct of Schools...we will be struck by the similarity not only of the work as a whole, but of many of the details. We realise how close M. Roland and De La Salle were in their thinking” (10). It is impossible to think that Françoise had not made a valuable contribution to this work, because she was the most experienced of the three in the practical running of the “little schools”. Their relations were helped by the fact that had been brought up in the same comfortable both family circumstances.

At the end of 1683, the bishop, Mgr Le Tellier instituted the taking of vows, and his delegate “fixed a day to receive the vows of those who wished to make the commitment, leaving the others free to put it off” and Françoise was one of these latter. And so, on February 8th 1684, 15 Sisters pronounced their vows for the first time in the presence of their ecclesiastical superior. “In the same year...12 of the first Brothers of De La Salle pronounced the vow of obedience for 3 years” (11).

Françoise returned to Rouen, but left again immediately for Lisieux (Calvados) with a companion, at the request of a bishop interested in “a sure pedagogical method” to help with the establishment of a new teaching community together with J. F. Jaouën, who would be considered the Founder of the Providence of Lisieux, a name based on the principles of Barré inspired by Françoise.(12). She remained there from 1684 to 1686, and it was said of her that she was “a woman of rare virtue who had been granted many extraordinary graces by God. She observed perpetual abstinence ...and practised continual mortification...We must keep her virtue in very high esteem” (13). Finally, she returned to Sotteville to teach in the “little schools”.

It was here “in her native land, faithful to the end, to her teaching vocation in the school she had founded and directed until her transfer to Rheims, that Françoise Duval breathed her last”. It was September 9th 1686, and Françoise, “the itinerant founder”, as Poutet calls her, 100 days after Barré, died at the age of 42, 100 days after Barré.

“Homesickness, misunderstandings with M. Roland’s successor - it was said «she was in a delicate situation vis-a-vis her community» - premature exhaustion brought about by the exercise of authority? Whatever the cause of her departure, Rheims and her congregation owed her too much not to miss her and, where necessary, to forgive her. The Manual for the use of the Sisters quite rightly indicates her as the first Superior General, with a mandate running from 1670 to 1684” (14).

In a recent inventory of the Circulars of the Superiors in the central archives of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, are found some circulars referring to the persons of interest to us. That of May 1686, notes the death of Barré and calls for prayers; that of June 1687, announces the death of Adrien Nyel; that of August 1693, mentions the death of Mme de Maillefer (15). Françoise also died at about that time in 1686, unfortunately once again in the shadows been the case. And yet, death succeeds often in making amends for the ingratitude of forgetfulness in life. In fact there are four congregations today which are proud to have had her presence at their birth (16).

Is that not enough to show the greatness of a woman? Is she not like like Beatrice of the Terrestrial Paradise who, after the Mountain of purgatory, led Dante upwards? Françoise did the same thing, surely (without having anyone to immortalise her in verse), when she encouraged De La Salle slowly and successfully to launch his work. Without the decisive intervention of his friend, a marvellous link in the mysterious thread of God’s miraculous weaving which bound together Barré, Roland, Mme de Maillefer and Nyel, I believe that our Founder would not achieved what he did. He himself, years later, recalling two events (the meeting in the parlour, and the apostolic stimulus of Catherine Leclerc), admitted that, in this moment he began to care for children; he had been asked previously but had not been disposed to do so (17).

Goodbye, Françoise, silent friend of John Baptist de La Salle, who, I hope, never forgot you.

In conclusion, I recall the words of John Paul II, who recommended us to reflect “with special care on the subject of the “genius of woman” (18). •

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Abbreviations: CL: Cahiers lasalliens, Rome.

Notes

1. Life of De La Salle, Blain I, ch.VIII in CL 7.
2. Life of De La Salle, Maillefer, CL 6, p.33
3. G.Papasogli, “N. Barré, educatore di anime”, p.133 and 217.
- Tentative beginnings: “All that is involved, is to go Sotteville each day, to teach poor children and, if needs be, go and fetch them from home” (Cordonnier: Le R.P.Barré)
4. B. Flourez, “Marcheur dans la Nuit”, 1992.
5. Papasogli, op.cit., p.152
6. CL 38, p.72, text and note 1.
7. Hanneke, “Vie de Nicolas Roland”, p.193
8. CL 38, op.cit, p.114, note quoting Poutet; p.193.
9. “The Bl. JBS”, A.Ravelet, p.136
10. Hanneke, op.cit., p.325
11. Id., p.328, incorrect: the vow was annual.
12. Cf. G.Rocca, “Dizionario Istituti di Perfezione”, under “Provvidenza di Lisieux”.
13. CL 38, op.cit., p.131, note 3.
14. Ibid.
15. Lasalliana n°5, 1998-1999; Blain op.cit., p.283: the death of Barré is given as May 13th, whereas trustworthy sources give the 31st, a more correct date, since some of his last letters are dated May 25th and ff.
16. To summarise: Sisters of Roland, of Jaouën, of Barré who, after Barré’s death split into two branches, one diocesan (the Providence of Rouen), and the second pontifical (St Maur of Paris). For three centuries they were two distinct institutes, and then, in 1970, the Holy See constituted them as a federation.
17. Blain op.cit., p.169
18. Apostolic Letter “Mulieris dignitatem”, 1988.