

300 YEARS AGO DE LA SALLE**LEFT RHEIMS FOR PARIS**

It had not taken the Archbishop Maurice Le Tellier long to become interested in the Rheims “community” founded by De La Salle. He was prepared to give it his full support, even to contribute financially. But he laid down one condition: the community could not move out of the archdiocese. In this way he would be its superior and have control of it; he would draw up statutes for it, undertake to obtain letters patent from the King and so put the foundation on a legal footing.

De La Salle declined the offers of the Archbishop, preferring insecurity but also freedom of action. The community had only just been founded and De La Salle needed to give it enough time to consolidate sufficiently before even thinking of settling down permanently in Rheims or anywhere else.

As early as 1683, he had seen that there was a possibility of taking over one of the schools in the parish of St. Sulpice in Paris. In fact De La Salle had promised the parish priest, Father La Barmondière, that he would come and take over the school. In the years that followed, the Founder felt himself bound by that promise, even if looking after his schools in the dioceses of Rheims and Laon, and especially running his Institute, prevented him from fulfilling it immediately.

In 1687, stage one was completed: there were Brothers teaching in five towns of the dioceses of Rheims and Laon; on the Mother House premises there was a novitiate, a school for training village school teachers; two assemblies attended by the most important Brothers had been held there, had made their first Chapter decisions, had adopted several rules with regard to life in common, and had elected a superior.

De La Salle thought that he was now able to hand over various positions of responsibility to the Brothers, while he himself and two Brothers could go off to Paris and revive the fortunes of a school which had once been flourishing, but which now had fallen on bad days. This, however, was not the only reason for making this journey. In fact, for the Founder, this journey meant the transfer of the headquarters of the Institute. Once

in Rheims, it would now be in Paris; once in the province of Champagne, it would now be operating at a different level, that of the Kingdom of France, and in a position to make a move to Rome. And so, what was happening had everything to do with the very character of the Lasallian Institute. This is what makes De La Salle’s move to Paris 300 years ago so important for us even today.

Fortunately, the Founder’s biographers can give us an accurate chronological account of this event. De La Salle arrived in Paris, in the parish of St. Sulpice, on the vigil of the feast of St. Matthias, 1688. He was accompanied by two Brothers. As it was a leap year, the date must have been February 24th. The Parish Priest gave the three travellers a warm welcome and lodged them in the school house. A short time afterwards, the Brothers tried to settle things with those running the St. Sulpice school. This turned out to be neither easy nor pleasant. As everywhere else, De La Salle and his Brothers introduced order and discipline; they enforced a timetable and regular attendance; they insisted on hard work and silence. Their approach did not endear them to those who had once run the school and who now worked with the Brothers. The Founder asked the Brothers to be patient, convinced that, sooner or later, the progress made by their pupils would convince people of their competence and devotedness.

And that is what happened; so much so that the parish school now known as the “Brother’s school”, created for the Brothers a very good reputation not only at St. Sulpice, but in the whole city.

Let us remain with these early beginnings: February 1988 marks exactly 300 years since the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools ceased to be a diocesan institute and became de facto before becoming legally so, an international Congregation in the Church.

For the time being, however, the “Community of the Christian Schools” was an association that was merely tolerated. Official recognition would come only in 1725 when Benedict XIII gave the Lasallian Congregation the Church’s approval, making it an Institute of Pontifical Right and setting its seal on something that De La Salle had wanted as early as February 1688.

It is true that the biographers sometimes stress, perhaps a little excessively, the fact that Father John Baptist de La Salle, former Canon of Rheims, wanted to leave his native town to free himself from the influence of his relatives who held high positions in both society and in the Church. It is true also that the priest who had declined all the help available in Rheims, considered his move to Paris as a means of making his break as final as possible. There was about all this a radical approach to life that was evangelical, and it was hardly surprising in a man who had placed all his trust in God as he set about his work of founding and directing a Congregation to teach and train the humble and the poor.

This move to Paris, however heroic, was significant in quite a different way. Within the first years of his arrival in Paris, De La Salle had transferred the Institute novitiate there. It is in Paris that his work really took on its true form and scope; it is from there that Brothers left to work in 15 other dioceses; it is from there that De La Salle went so often to visit the different houses of the Institute, without ever thinking, it seems, of returning to the birthplace of his Congregation.

One cannot help feeling surprised to see De La Salle take such an important step so early on in his role as Founder. His coming to Paris meant he was leaving Brothers behind in Rheims and elsewhere who needed his presence. His Director had

been in two minds about letting him go for exactly this reason: "Your Brothers still need you", he had said to him.

And in fact, once De La Salle had left for Paris, the Brothers felt somewhat at a loss: those that the Founder thought could replace him were not up to it. There was more than one instance of floundering and it was noticed by people round about. One result was that recruitment, so good up till then, came to an end.

De La Salle must have foreseen something like that was going to happen, but perhaps he did not realise the extent of the crisis his departure would provoke. The fact that he made this move shows the great importance he attached to the re-establishment of his Congregation far from those who would only too easily give way to the temptation of taking it over for themselves.

Of course, De La Salle could not foresee all the different changes that would take place in the Institute in the centuries to come, but doubtlessly, he knew, with all the intuition of a Founder, that, especially once he had gone, the Institute would need a sphere larger than that simply of a diocese in which to exist and exert its influence.

Brother Maurice Hermans

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