

ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE AND THE CENTENARY OF THE INSTITUTE IN COLOMBIA

A bishop's appeal.

The Brothers arrived in Colombia in 1890. The country was going through a difficult time. One civil war had followed another ever since independence. The consequences of this state of violence and instability were poverty, ignorance and illiteracy.

Both the government and the Church were looking for some solution to remedy these evils. They thought that providing education for the people was an ideal means to overcome social calamities and to set the nation on the path to prosperity.

But where would the teachers come from to accomplish this noble task? The young nations of Latin America have always looked upon Europe as a source of cultural influence; and it was from Europe that the teachers of our nation would come. There were already several religious teaching congregations established in our country.

Around the year 1890, the diocese of Medellin was under the jurisdiction of Mgr. Bernardo Herrera Restrepo. He had got to know the Brothers of the Christian Schools when, as a young seminarist, he had gone to study theology at the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris. The discipline and the good behaviour of the Brothers' pupils had impressed him greatly, and he wanted to see them established in Colombia. This is indeed what happened when he returned to his country and became bishop of Medellin, his native town. At this time, Brother Joseph was Superior General of the Institute.

With the support of the civil authorities and especially of Doctor Joaquin Velez, plenipotentiary representative of Colombia in Paris, he asked the Superior General to send at least six Brothers to Colombia. The time was right, as there were still plenty of vocations, and Brothers's schools were in a period of great expansion everywhere, especially in Europe, Asia and

America. The fact that the laws of the French Government obliged religious to do their military service had done nothing to stem the numerical growth of the Institute.

On completion of all necessary negotiations, a contract was signed between the Institute and the diocese of Medellin, and the Superior General gave permission for the departure of the six Brothers that had been asked for.

The first steps.

The community went to Ecuador first. There they learnt Spanish before moving on to their final destination in 1890. Brother Bernon Marie, Visitor of the District of Ecuador, accompanied them.

The group included four French Brothers, a Colombian and an Ecuadorian. When they arrived in Medellin on March 19th, they were greeted with much respect and esteem by the civic and religious authorities as well as by the population which had been waiting impatiently for the Brothers to come and open a school.

And so Colombia became the second country in South America to receive the sons of St. John Baptist de La Salle. The first country had been Ecuador where the Brothers arrived in 1863.

In April 1890, the Brothers opened the San Jose school in an old building which had housed an orphanage up till then, and which now the bishop handed over to them.

Expansion.

The community was soon reinforced by the arrival of other French Brothers, this time from the Districts of Rheims and Clermont. These were young religious who preferred to leave their own country in order to keep their vocation which was threatened by the anti-religious laws which forbade them to run schools in their native country. These providential reinforcements made it possible to open other schools in places such as Barranquilla and Bogota, capital of the Republic. They had been invited to the capital soon after their arrival in Medellin by Mgr. Bernardo Herrera Restrepo who had, in the meanwhile, become Archbishop Primate of Colombia.

Besides being professionally competent, the Brothers who founded the District were apostles and true missionaries. They had a great ability to adapt to circumstances and to get on with people, while at the same time respecting the cultural traditions of the country. All these qualities and an almost perfect mastery of the language ensured them a great influence. Their extraordinary capacity for work and their sacrifices explain the prosperity that the Institute enjoyed in Colombia.

These French Brothers owed the sanctity of their lives in a good measure to those who formed them, Brothers Exuperien and Blessed Brother Arnould. Their spiritual vitality crowned their work in Colombia: vocations were numerous and the first Colombian Brothers followed closely in the footsteps of their founders, assimilating their religious virtues, their love of work, their religious observance, self-sacrifice, piety and zeal for the apostolate. This spiritual heritage ensured the continuation of their religious influence up to the 1960's. And then that extraordinary 1966 Chapter renewed religious life in line with the edicts of Vatican II.

Abundant fruit.

Thirty-eight years after the arrival of the Brothers in Colombia, their schools were spread all over the country and this made possible the setting up of another District in 1928. From then on, the District of Medellin would include the western part of the country, while that of Bogota the eastern part. In 1960, there were 600 Brothers in Colombia, most of them natives of the country.

At that time, they ran about 50 establishments and taught some 30.000 pupils. There was talk even of founding a third District in the north of the country, but these plans came to nothing with the onset of the religious crisis following Vatican II.

As the centenary celebration come closer, San Jose school is no longer the small establishment it was in 1890: it has become a very large and attractive centre of education. Its original 173 pupils now number 3.600 and represent all social classes, without distinction of social rank, economic circumstances or religious beliefs. The San Jose complex offers education which goes from nursery classes to university level.

In their first hundred years, the Brothers have left their mark on Colombia: the Lasallian approach to education and the religious, professional and pedagogical influence of the Brothers have enabled them to play a most important part in education at a national level.

The Brothers have contributed to the formation of a society which lives according to civic and religious values. Colombians have had to cope with many problems, but the education that the Church has provided by means of its religious has enabled the country to face successfully major socio-economic and religious crises.

Difficult times.

The post-conciliar crisis that affected all levels of the Church took a heavy toll of the Brothers also. Numerous religious returned to secular life; numbers went down by 50%; houses of formation remained empty;

there were no vocations for 10 years; and the religious who had stayed grew older without hope of being replaced.

In spite of everything, the work has survived. Roots deeply imbedded in the rock of the regularity and sanctity of the founding Brothers have made possible the inspiration of new life into the century-old trunk of the Congregation, and new growths are vigorous and auger well for the future. The words of Brother Charles Henry, Superior General of happy memory, "renewal or death", have been taken to heart by the Brothers: we are resolved to survive. Our houses of formation rejoice once again at the presence of young people wishing to follow in the footsteps of St. La Salle.

Future prospects.

At the present time, our establishments include free schools, country schools, youth centres, centres in poor districts of towns and two universities: the La Salle university in Bogota and the Lasallian University Corporation in Medellin. Working closely with us are 2.000 lay teachers.

The lack of Brothers –they number 250 at present– has been compensated for in our schools by the presence of lay teachers. There is a certain amount of truth in the assertion that our schools have become teacher training colleges in which Brothers make known the principles of Lasallian pedagogy to a considerable number of lay people. The dream of the Founder, who on several occasions tried to set up training colleges for lay people, has become a reality in each one of our establishments: we have undertaken the responsibility of making known to our lay co-workers the spirituality and pedagogy of St. John Baptist de La Salle. With a view to achieving our objective, we organise study days, retreats, inter-District meetings, etc.

A short while ago, we started up an "Education Society" at university level which offers courses on the life and work of St. John Baptist de La Salle. What we are aiming at is to obtain from the Government recognition of these studies as a course in the Faculty of Educational Sciences.

Looking upon things as St. La Salle would want us to, namely, "with the eyes of faith", we have hopes for a bright and promising future.

Brother Hernán Pulgarín