

THE SOURCES OF THE COLLECTION

**John Baptist de La Salle,
the disciple of Nicolas Roland**

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A number of researchers and biographers have stressed the fact that the writings of John Baptist de La Salle and especially the Collection were inspired by Nicolas Roland.

To see what they mean, it is sufficient to compare St. La Salle's article on "Meals" in his "Collection of various small treatises" (Cf. CL.15 pp.76-77) with Nicolas Roland's own (Cf. Positio super virtutibus, Nicolai Roland, p.286, N.10).

The texts are so similar that we can reproduce Nicolas Roland's text, simply marking the passages kept by De La Salle in heavy print and leaving the parts he did not keep without emphasis. The Founder's additions are underlined.

(1) Consider yourself always as a poor beggar to whom food is given as an alms and who must never complain about what is given him however badly it is prepared. (2) Consider also that there is no comparison between the insipid taste of food and what the damned are fed on in Hell. You would be of their number if God's mercy had not saved you from it. (In La Salle's text, this last sentence comes after the following one). Always be content with what you are given, do not desire anything special, follow conform in all with the Community. Never forget to mortify yourself in with something but in secret so as not to appear singular. (3) Remember the heavenly banquet which will last, in which you take part eternally to which you will be admitted if you have willingly deprived yourself of something for the love of God. Go down also in your imagination sometimes often to Hell to see how sensual souls are treated there. (4) Keep also very strict silence during meals. Be attentive to what is read at table in order to distract your mind and your taste from the food, look upon eating as a necessity which puts us you on the same level as animals. The Saints sigh when they see themselves obliged to perform this animal action while the blessed angels praise God in Heaven.

Differences in spelling between the two texts are not significant.

Roland's text is written in one block, while De La Salle's is divided into 4 paragraphs, as numbered in the above text.

It is immediately clear that the two texts are very similar. Some spelling changes have been made (in the French text) to adapt the text to male readers, since Roland's text was intended for his Sisters. It can be seen that the adverbs "always" and "never" have not been kept in the first sentence. Does De La Salle mean that, since the question of frequency was self-evident ("we are poor Brothers", he writes in one of his Meditations) it was not worth insisting on the fact? Or does the verb in the present tense seem to him to be adequate to indicate the habitual nature of such an attitude?

Perhaps also "always" has disappeared because Nicolas Roland's third sentence has become the second in De La Salle's text which already has the adverb "always"? It could be therefore a correction to avoid repetition.

Then there is the change in sequence of Roland's sentences 2 and 3. It could be that the justification for the change is that the Founder identifies this attitude "Be content" with that of the beggar and that all the members of the Community should consider themselves as such. Moreover, "be content" follows quite naturally "never complain".

Perhaps also Roland's reference to taste makes for a better transition to mortification. We remember what difficulty the Founder had in getting used to the food eaten by the Brothers, and the means he took to make this possible.

The use of the verb "conform" is stronger and implies more positive action than "following". It is a word used by the Founder only 20 times, and it is used in particular with reference to relations with Jesus Christ.

The replacement of "which will last" and "to which you will be admitted" by "in which you will take part" gives an idea of immediacy, as if the simple fact of having deprived oneself for the love of God brought about this reward. Roland's expression seem to suggest an entrance examination. At the same time "in which you will take part" is more concrete, more visual: "we're going to have a feast" rather than "we're going to meet someone". In those times, people were invited to watch the King have supper, but very few people were invited to eat with him.

The use of the word "often" after "Go down" instead of "sometimes" is a little surprising. It is as if the Founder wanted at all costs to make changes in the sentence. It is even more surprising if one bears in mind the suppression of the two adverbs "always" and "never" which Roland uses in his first sentence.

Perhaps by using the word "often", the Founder wanted to insist on the need of doing this every day. Perhaps the diet of the Brothers, as described by Blain, justified the frequency of these comparisons.

The expression "in your imagination" has disappeared. Did De La Salle consider the word superfluous? And it is quite often used in such expressions.

It is not surprising that the word "souls" should have disappeared in connection with "sensual". What is a "sensual soul"? The senses belong to the body. And does not the Founder say on numerous occasions that we should behave as if we did not have bodies, as for example in the Meditation for the second Sunday in Advent:

"For like these spirits you ought to be entirely detached from the pleasures of the body and from sensual delights, so that there be nothing left in you but your soul..." (Med. 2. 1).

The sentence: "Keep also often very strict silence during meals" is typical of the Founder. He is really very insistent on this question of silence, so much so that it makes one think that the Brothers tended to be talkative. In the Lasallian Vocabulary, there are 107 instances of the word "silence" being used. Of these, 28 come from the Conduct of Schools, which is hardly surprising. The word occurs 19 times in the Common Rules, 13 in the Meditations for Feastdays, 12 in the Collection and 7 in the letters. In all, this comes to 47.64% in the last 4 works. One could say it was a recurring topic with him, including when he spoke about class. There must have been a need for it.

On the other hand, it would seem that the expression "also often" in the same sentence is a printing error, a repetition of the sentence above. There is in fact a sort of contradiction between the use of "often", which implies there could be exceptions, and the expression "very strict silence". "Also keep very strict silence" would seem to be the correct version. This is the version used in the 1902 edition.

Another surprising thing is the use of "you" in "a need which puts you on the level of the animals" instead of "us" as Roland says. This is all the more surprising because De La Salle often uses "us" (this is particularly noticeable in the Meditations for Sundays) when it is a question of himself or of people in general. The reference to the Saints indicates clearly that this should be the usual attitude among those pursuing holiness. Perhaps a study of the frequency of use of the pronoun "us" in the Collection would reveal a different tendency.

Finally, the Founder uses "Blessed" instead of "Angels". Angels are spirits and they do not eat. For them, praising God is a kind of food. As for men... The Blessed, on the other hand, have left their terrestrial condition behind and have no more need for it. This leads us to wonder about the nature of this eternal banquet mentioned earlier, and about "what the damned are fed on in Hell".

With regard to Hell, Roland writes this word in both cases in the singular and with a capital letter. De La Salle, on the other hand, does not use a capital letter and writes it in singular the first time, and in the plural the second. In both cases it is the same place that is being referred to since those concerned are the "damned" and the "sensual". Are these differences significant?

AN INTERESTING OBSERVATION

On page 474 of volume I of the General History of the Institute, Georges Rigault says with reference to the Collection:

"Let us point out finally the considerable borrowings that have been made from Roland and from the 'Counsels given by the late M. Roland with regard to the conduct of religious persons'"

Speaking about the teachings of Roland, he writes on page 120:

"Is not St. John Baptist de La Salle the person, so much loved by Nicolas Roland, who read, classified, edited and completed the works of the Canon from Rheims after the death of this friend and brother? This would explain the striking similarities which exist between certain texts of of Roland and the Collection of various little treatises published by the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1711. From these similarities one cannot deduce that De La Salle expressed his own thoughts using the name of his master...What we should recognise here is the influence of the elder person on the soul of the younger person".

On page 475 he writes as follows, giving some examples of this inspiration:

"Paragraphs concerning meals are copied word for word. The sole exception is the replacement of "demons" by the more exact "damned".

Strangely enough, the word "demon" does not appear in Roland's text. The text quoted here is that of the "Positio" on the virtues of Nicolas Roland, a work that has been compiled with a view to his beatification. The documents, therefore, are well attested.

There are in the archives at the Generalate (Ref. AA 113) two typewritten documents. There is a second copy of one of them in which the word "demon" is used, while "damned" is used in the other. How can we explain this difference?

On page 108 of volume I of the General History, Rigault writes:

"The author had at his disposal and used diligently...Memoirs...based on the notes and personal testimonies of Canon Roland's contemporaries, drawn up 15 years after his death, in 1693. This manuscript contains, finally, an even more precious source of knowledge about the man and his work, and of information about the sources of St. John Baptist de La Salle. I refer to a collection of counsels, maxims and letters.

We borrow texts directly from this document, a genuine copy of which has been entrusted to us"

At which point did the copyist error occur?

The comparison we have just made of the two texts is useful if we wish to study the way in which John Baptist de La Salle used his sources. As was common in his days, authors were rarely acknowledged and speech marks were rarely used.

This text is in a way exemplary in the sense that there are only 30 differences in all, and these include those arising from changing from the feminine to the masculine, and changes in prepositions due to certain changes in syntax.