

ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE'S DEBT TO THE WRITINGS OF NICOLAS ROLAND

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It was when I read the "Positio super virtutibus" concerning Nicolas Roland that I first became aware of certain similarities. In fact, when I looked through the 1711 edition of the Collection, I found under the heading: **"Means that the Brothers of the Christian Schools should take to do their actions well"**, as well as under some other sub-headings, a certain number of articles, 22 in all, containing the expressions which had first aroused my interest. In this chapter we find a preface and then the following articles: Rising, Mental Prayer, Office, and Holy Mass. At this point a method for following Holy Mass well is given. Then there follow articles on Spiritual Reading, Examination of Conscience, Meals, Recreation, Silence and Renewal. Next comes a sub-heading: **"The principal virtues the Brothers should take care to practise"**, which includes the following articles: Faith, Obedience, Regularity, Mortification of the Mind, Mortification of the Senses, Penance, followed by the **Profession of a Penitent**, Humility, Modesty, Poverty, Patience and Temperance.

In Cahier Lasallien N16 there is an analysis of the sources of the article on Modesty, but no mention is made of the sources of the other articles. It is true that they are different.

It is surprising that no one has undertaken research using the writings of Nicolas Roland as a starting point when, according to Brother Maurice Auguste in his preface to Cahier Lasallien N16, A. Rayez had said the following, speaking of the Collection:

"St. John Baptist de La Salle composed it on the basis of material he found in the writings of his favourite authors, ranging from St. Bernard to Canon Roland..."

Georges Rigault, on page 468 of Volume I of his General History of the Institute, has this to say:

"What texts reveal to us now is that, as far as the spiritual direction of his Brothers is concerned, De La Salle and Canon Roland had more in common than a few ideas or some doctrinal topics. There are, in fact, whole sentences

and whole paragraphs copied word for word or just slightly altered..."

This does not seem to imply that Roland was a source. However, page 474 of Rigault is more explicit:

"Finally, let us mention some considerable borrowings which seem to have been made from Nicolas Roland. In his «Petit traite des vertus les plus necessaires aux Soeurs de l'Enfant Jesus», Roland says..." And there follow some examples.

Rigault goes on to say:

"The copied text is identical word for word in the paragraph about meals, except that the more accurate word "damned" is used instead of "demons"."

The irony of it is that the published text of the Positio uses the word "damned". What is more, this article does not appear in the "Petit traite", but in the **"Avis donnees par le feu Monsieur Roland, Theologal de Reims, pour la conduite des personnes regulieres"**. Does this indicate a reading error? A typewritten copy kept in the Generalate archives, which seems to have been used by Rigault, has the word "demon". Two other typewritten copies have "damned". Do we have here an error made by the first transcriber?

When Gaetan Bernoville was questioned on May 19th 1947 as a witness for the cause of beatification of Nicolas Roland, he stated:

"Canon Hanneesse himself does not seem to have stressed the spiritual paternity of Roland with regard to St. John Baptist de La Salle, and yet he inspired his spirituality just as much as his vocation."

This fact seems to me all the more remarkable because St. John Baptist de La Salle's special gift was to assimilate rather than to be original. And so it is that the substance of Roland's spiritual "petits traites" has been transferred almost word for word into De La Salle's Collection of small treatises. In this connection, I am certain that the preface to Roland's spiritual counsels was written by De La Salle". (our emphasis)

This last opinion is not shared by the writer of the Positio, who attributes it to Canon Pierre Guyart. (Positio p.280).

In Chapter DOC VII of the Positio, entitled **"The writings of the servant of God"**, under the sub-heading **"2. Authenticity of the writings and value of preserved texts"**, on page 227, in paragraph b, entitled "Old copies of no longer extant handwritten texts", we read:

"These copies include various letters... Counsels for religious, quite often referred to as a Collection of counsels, because St. John Baptist de La Salle made free use of them when writing his only spiritual work printed in his lifetime for the use of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, a Small Treatise on virtues..." (Rome 1986, Mons. G. Papa, helped by Br. Yves Poutet).

Many people, therefore, recognised or recognise Roland as one of the sources of the 1711 Collection. In 1906, a certain Br. Abel of Rheims wrote to Br. Paul Joseph. In answer to one of the latter's letters, he wrote:

"St. John Baptist de La Salle must surely have been inspired by the Maxims of Roland when he wrote his Collection of small treatises. I enclose a most convincing proof of this in the form of parallel copies of certain chapters."

There then follow extracts from Roland's text: Humility, p.170, Mental Prayer, p.78. Side by side with these are reproduced at least the beginning of St. La Salle's texts in his Collection: Humility, p.170, and Mental Prayer, p.123. Br. Abel concludes:

"I imagine you are convinced and that the two quotations are sufficient. I have chosen the two chapters that are most alike. The others have more changes. If you will bear with me, I would like to give my overall opinion on these two works, to the extent that I am able to make judgments in a matter of this nature and importance:

- 1. St. John Baptist de La Salle was certainly inspired by Roland's manuscript when he wrote his Collection. You have the proof.*
- 2. Roland goes into minute details, while St. La Salle shortens and sometimes completely transforms certain chapters, the subject and title of which are furnished by Roland.*
- 3. Roland's maxims are in the form of a continuous text, while in our Collection the text is divided into short paragraphs.*
- 4. Finally, our Founder's text is much richer in scriptural quotations. One has the impression that Roland wrote for women and De La Salle for men, giving them doctrine that was more solid and substantial..."*

This letter is in the Generalate archives in the section devoted to the Collection (File AA113, Dossier 5). Unfortunately, there are no indications regarding the sources consulted by Br. Abel. The fact that the letter was written in Rheims, and the nature of the other topics he treated, lead one to think he consulted the Sisters...

Dossier 5 includes also 19 typewritten sheets entitled: **CONCORDANCE of the COUNSELS given by Mr. ROLAND to the DAUGHTERS of the INFANT JESUS: Counsels entitled: "For the conduct of religious persons"**

At the bottom of page one, we read: *Extract from a note written by Br. Donat, archivist at the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Rome.*

The first page begins with the words:

"The person who gathered all these counsels together to form a Collection that would be easy to consult, seems, on reading the preface which serves as an introduction, to be St. John Baptist de La Salle. The same person is of the opinion that it was all written by Roland. All he did was to

arrange the articles in a way that suited the needs of the Sisters..."

These lines written by Br. Donat fit in with Gaetan Bernoville's views. The writer of the Positio, however, does not share them.

The article continues:

"In 1711, St. John Baptist de La Salle published his main work after the Rules. It was called "Collection of various little treatises". The Brothers have always considered it as their most valuable heritage."

"In this book, in the chapter entitled "Means that the Brothers of the Christian Schools should take to perform their actions well", all the subjects, apart from the method of following Holy Mass, are taken almost exclusively from Roland's Counsels for religious persons."

There follow 18 pages numbered 2, 2a etc up to 9a. The pages are arranged in pairs so that one page has Roland's text and the other De La Salle's, whenever this exists. The texts compared in this fashion are those that deal with Rising, Mental Prayer, Holy Mass, Silence, Renewal, Spiritual Reading, Meals, Humility. In all, therefore, 8 out of the 11 articles in the section "Means that..." are compared in this way. To say that "all the subjects" were taken from Roland, as is said above, is a slight exaggeration. A comparison is made also using 1 article out of the 12 in the section entitled:

"The Principal Virtues that the Brothers should take care to practise".

We do not know to whom, why or when these notes were sent.

All this goes to show that the link between Nicolas Roland and John Baptist de La Salle has been known about for some time. What is the explanation, therefore, for the lack of interest in research into these sources?

Basically, the reasons why this subject has not been studied before are not important. Nor am I trying to discover whether Nicolas Roland wrote these texts himself or whether he found them somewhere. I think it is interesting simply to compare Roland's text with that of De La Salle. In my opinion, it has to be admitted that Roland's text is the source. It is very interesting to see how the original text has been used, cut and changed. If we remember the number of articles that have been used in this way - 8 in "The Means that Brothers of the Christian Schools should take to perform their actions well" and 3 in "The Principal Virtues the Brothers should take care to practise" - we realise that they amount to half of the 22 "little treatises". Other subjects are to be found in both Roland's and De La Salle's text, but there are fewer similarities.

However, research will doubtlessly continue.

(See LASALLIANA 25-3-A-105)