

**THE COMPLETE WORKS OF
ST JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
IN A SINGLE VOLUME (1/2)**

Br Alain Houry

By a happy coincidence, the first copies of the Complete Works of the Brothers' Founder arrived at the Generalate on January 26th 1994. It was a happy coincidence because January 26th is the anniversary of the granting of the Bull of Approbation (1725), the Translation of the relics of St John Baptist de La Salle (1937), and the approbation of the Rule (1987). It is the first time in the history of the Institute that these writings are brought together in one volume (1,600 pages).

This achievement is due in large part to the Districts of Belgium, French-speaking Canada and France, which funded the computerisation of the Founder's writings. At the beginning of the volume, Br Michel Sauvage speaks of the significance of such an undertaking ("Fidélité lasallienne et informatique"). This article is intended to help readers of Lasalliana to find their way around this new work.

Before looking at specific sections of this work, we should like to begin with a few general remarks.

1. The works

The texts brought together here under the title "Complete Works" are arranged, not by date of publication, but according to their literary form and their intended readers.

It should be noted that these texts were composed in a variety of situations, and for a variety of purposes and persons. As a consequence, they belong to a variety of literary forms. These need to be recognised, if we are to understand the works correctly and seek inspiration in them for our own times.

Although this work can hardly be compared with the Bible, it would be useful to recall what Vatican II said about the literary forms in the Scriptures:

"The truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express, and actually expressed, in particular circumstances, as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking and narrating, which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the customs men normally followed at that period, in their everyday dealings with one another." (Divine Revelation, 12).

On the other hand, as we noted above, it would be difficult to arrange these writings solely according to chronological order. We cannot do for the works of St La Salle as a whole, what Althusser did for those of Marx, noting the exact moment when the author freed himself from the influences that had formed him and began to be really himself.

There are, however, certain lines of development that can be perceived, and a number of periods that can be established. For a study of these, we refer the reader to Br Miguel Campos's work (CL 45), and to the talks given to SIEL by Br Pedro Maria Gil.

Our intention here is simply to introduce readers, who are not familiar with the Founder's various writings, to the volume of his complete works.

The introduction to the volume (page XVII) indicates the order in which the writings of John Baptist de La Salle are set out: 1. The Rules; 2. Spiritual writings intended for the Brothers; 3. The Letters: handwritten, copied, printed; 4. Pedagogical writings; 6. Catechetical writings.

This classification is convenient. It does not preclude, however, some overlapping. For example, Chapter 7 of the common Rules is entitled: "Of the manner in which Brothers should behave towards their pupils in school"; the Conduct of Christian Schools, a pedagogical text, speaks at great length of the manner of teaching catechism and saying prayers. The same spirit inspires all the works, and this gives them a unity which is not confined to literary forms. This makes it possible to shed light on one or other of the writings by referring either to an event in the life of the Founder of the Brothers, or to another piece of writing.

2. In French

The written language of the 18th century is both familiar and foreign to us. Br Raymond Brisebois, a French Canadian, explains some of the difficulties it poses for modern readers:

"Most of the words used by St John Baptist de La Salle are still currently used. At the time of his birth, the French language was, by and large, taking on a fixed form. At this stage of its development it is even called "classical French". However, we need to take a closer look. The words look familiar, but what is their hidden meaning? Some of them are even more misleading than those that have gone out of use. What is true of any work of this period is especially true of the writings of the Founder. As his works were mostly written at the beginning of the 18th century, his language is normally modern. This is just one more reason why special care should be taken over certain words, otherwise there is a risk the Founder's thinking will be misinterpreted (cf. a study of the vocabulary in *Vocabulaire lasallien* 3).

One can be "étonné" (= struck by lightning) by the terms used referring to the Brothers in the Memoir on the Habit (coarse, low-minded, without studies (= without classical Latin studies [MH 0,036]); or in certain Meditations (abject = rejected, MF 86, 2,2). A glossary like the one in CL 47 (pp.559-563) is of great help when reading the Meditations for Feastdays.

The language referring to institutions has changed also: a priest was normally addressed as "Monsieur", and a cleric was someone who had studied, or had a tonsure, (which did not necessarily imply preparing for the priesthood), and who was eligible to receive benefices (= fixed income from a parish or an abbey).

In some cases, grammar has changed: the same Cahier Lasallien refers to some of these changes on page 565. The most obvious one is the agreement of the verb or adjective with the nearest antecedent, as in the Rules of "bienséance" and "civilité chrétienne", where it is clear that the adjective "chrétienne" refers to both "bienséance" and "civilité". Often, where a verb has several subjects it agrees with the nearest - an example of syllepsis.