

AN EDUCATIONAL CENTENARY

The De La Salle Brothers in England

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At long last the educational work of the religious Orders in the modern world is coming into focus. The days are gone when, for example, one still had to depend, for the educational pioneering of St Augustine, upon contemporary and sub-contemporary Lives. With the rise of research-schools in Education in our modern Universities the 'field-work' on original documents is being done, for Order after Order. Some of these dissertations, notably that of Dr Mary O'Leary on the Society of the Sacred Heart, have been published. Others, such as the monographs by Mother Mary Philip on Mary Ward, Fr Patrick Walsh on the Society of African Missions, or Mother M. Dominic on the schools of the Assumptionist Nuns, are to be seen only in the libraries of the Orders or of the Universities for which they were written. As time goes on and the field-studies multiply, a coherent picture of modern Catholic education will at last emerge. It is very much to be hoped that the present Lasallian celebrations will stimulate in other fields the trained research students without whom the full picture will never be possible.

It is remarkable that, until only a few years ago, the work of so outstanding a pioneer as St John Baptist De La Salle himself, which is being commemorated in London this month, on the occasion of the centenary of his Institute's arrival in England, was known only through such tributes as the standard historians of education had been able to cull from the pious but indiscriminating early biographies. The life of De La Salle by Blain was for generations *the* source. Not until Georges Rigault launched his massive history of the Institute were any canons of strict historical scholarship brought to bear on this saintly career, which had revolutionized popular education and teacher-training in eighteenth-century France and far beyond. And not until Dr W. J. Battersby's four volumes on the Founder began to appear, almost the other day, together with his studies of Brother Potamian and Brother Abban, and of the Lasallian schools in England since 1855, did the impact of these Brothers

upon the English-speaking world command its true place in future histories of education.¹

The Founder himself, St John Baptist De La Salle, was already nearly thirty years old by the time he had any inkling of his great vocation. He had been a canon of Rheims since the age of sixteen and during his education at the Sorbonne; he had settled the affairs of his family on the death of his father in 1672; and he had actually had a short experience of 'poor schools' as executor under the will of Nicholas Roland. The turning-point of his career was his chance meeting with the whirlwind personality of Adrian Nyel, upon the doorstep of a Rheims convent in 1679. For from this arose the boys' school at Rouen, and from that school arose, by force of circumstances, all the innovations that now give him his unique place as an educational pioneer: the immediate and urgent need to train his teachers, the 'juniorate' that followed, the 'Simultaneous Method' he invented under pressure of large classes, the vernacular basis for teaching, the three Colleges (1687 and after) for the training of 'country schoolmasters' sent him by parish priests from all over France, the 'Practising School', the Technical School of 1698, the Boarding School of St Yon in 1705, and the Reformatory.

In some respects there are parallels with other pioneers: with César de Bus, and with the Piarist Schools of San José de Calasanz (who died in 1648, three years before De La Salle's birth), or with 'technical education' for the poor as sponsored by John Locke and others. But the parallels break down to the extent that De La Salle's posterity did hold fast, consistently, to their original aims, and that the unity and continuity of their work would have been impossible except on the precise basis he gave it in 1648—that of a lay Institute, bound by vows and dedicated to teaching *gratis*. It was as an earnest of this that he had given away his own considerable fortune (to the chagrin of those who foresaw how costly would be the litigation from the writing-masters and other vested interests that would resent the Brothers' entry into public education). The transcendental unity of the system he established

¹ Cf. Georges Rigault, *Histoire Générale de l'Institut des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes*, Paris (Plon), 8 vols., 1936-48; W. J. Battersby, *De La Salle, Pioneer of Modern Education; Saint and Spiritual Writer; Letters and Documents; Meditations*; London (Longmans), 1949-53; *Brother Potamian*, London (Burns, Oates), 1953; *Brother Abban*, Rome (Lasallian Publications), 1950; *The De La Salle Brothers in Great Britain*, London (Burns, Oates), 1954. The best monograph from the American side is that of E. A. Fitzpatrick, *La Salle, Patron of All Teachers*, Milwaukee (Bruce), 1951.

shows itself best in the *Rules* of the Institute (first promulgated a year before his death in 1719), and in his manual *The Conduct of Schools*.²

The Brothers of the Christian Schools were dedicated to the service of the poor. For that are they known pre-eminently today, throughout the world (numerically the largest of the teaching Orders of men in the Church), despite their distinguished record in secondary education also. When the Founder died there were just a hundred Brothers, in twenty-two communities with one House in Rome. At the onset of the French Revolution they numbered 1,000. By 1950 there were 18,000, with 26 training colleges, of which our own Hopwood is the most recent. The same year, on 15 May, St John Baptist De La Salle was made the patron saint of everybody engaged in teaching of any sort throughout the Church.

What is commemorated this month is the legacy of four of these Brothers who arrived in England a hundred years ago and, with four boys, opened St Joseph's College in Clapham (the Beulah Hill College of today). St Joseph's Academy at Blackheath followed five years later. The 250 Brothers in Great Britain today are ministering to over 7,000 boys in a dozen Grammar Schools, two Secondary Modern Schools, and (the contribution that has most redounded to their credit with Government Departments) ten Home Office Schools. It is an impressive record.

Its keynote, true to the example of its Founder, has been one of adaptation to new environments. The France of the Founder had needed above all schools for the poor. Mid-Victorian England and Scotland lacked rather schools for the Catholic middle-classes and for the problem-child and the delinquent. The Brothers came, to meet a local and contemporary need. The Irish Christian Brothers of Edmund Ignatius Rice, whose Constitution of 1803 shows Lasallian influences (which its own historians are not prompt in recognizing), were here already, and had laboured unremittingly for the poor of London and the Catholic North. If the De La Salle Grammar Schools today seem disproportionately many, there is ample justification within the framework of their original apostolate nevertheless.

² There is an English edition of *The Conduct of Schools*, ed. F. de la Fontainerie, New York (McGraw Hill Book Co.), 1935.

Ironically enough, too, they have had their full meed, in Britain, of the setbacks that have slowed their advance elsewhere in Europe. New to the English scene, they were long in securing all the Treasury grants they might have had. Nor did they find universal encouragement in Catholic circles—though Cardinal Manning honoured them for the alacrity with which they filled up gaps in the existing educational provision, according to that broad Catholic tradition of psychological insight which had long ago led Jesuit missionaries to begin by mastering the deep philosophies they had gone out to baptize, and today is preserving a maximum of native cults and crafts. But it still remains true that the bias of Lasallian education in this country has been in the 'secondary' sphere. What was dimly discerned by Brothers Théotique and Barthélemy in 1855 had become a crystal clear problem of middle-class higher education by 1870, when Brother Potamian (Michael O'Reilly) arrived from the United States in the very year of the Gladstone Act.

The Brothers' efforts, hazardous after the failure of the Denominational Schools to secure rate-aid in 1870, leapt forward when the Balfour Act in 1902 put the Denominations 'on the rates' and enabled a new co-ordination of elementary and secondary schools to be laboriously worked out till its ultimate consolidation along Hadow-Spens-Butler lines, with the tripartite division of secondary education that has become the country's pattern since 1944. The Brothers have had a continuing place in all this, together with their own great preserve—the remedial schools for delinquents—in which their record has proved how profoundly the secret of 'results' is the example of dedicated teachers, and that good citizenship is the by-product of virtues that lie very much deeper.

As is the teacher, so will be the fruit of his labours. The daily life of the Brothers—the framework of their formation—is well described in a ten-page survey in Dr Battersby's first volume. There is nothing in it spectacularly different from other Catholic *horaires*. Where the formation itself appears most vividly, for one studying the Institute from outside, through its history, is rather in the *Letters*, in what the Founder is writing day after day about the personal difficulties of his individual correspondents. Here the colossal supports are twin pillars: mental prayer and obedience. They are the dominant theme of all he wrote. Throughout the

volume of his *Meditations* the inwardness of obedience is dominant: that he who leads must be led, and led by the response of a full and voluntary committal, for lack of which everything will be futile. There is perhaps no finer set of meditations available for a Catholic teacher than those in which, at the beginning, De La Salle extols the teacher's vocation as that of a veritable coadjutor with Christ in the forming of human persons. 'Do you bear in mind that what you do now, in their behalf, will become the foundation upon which all the good, which they will hereafter practise, must be built? . . . It is Christ himself who wishes that your pupils should look upon you as taking his place, that they should receive your instructions as coming from him, and that they should be persuaded that it is the truth of Christ that speaks through your lips. . . . Thus you are given to understand that whatever good you do in favour of those for whom you are responsible, will be true and effective only in so far as Jesus Christ will give it his blessing, and only in so far as you yourself remain united to him. . . . Thank God therefore, for the grace he has given you in allowing you to share in the ministry of the Apostles. . . .'³

³ *Meditations*, ed. Battersby, *Meditations for the Vacation Retreat*, pp. 3-45.

CATECHISM FOR ADULTS:

V. 'And Suffered'

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THE fourth article of the creed, 'Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried', summarizes the events in our Lord's Passion. It is important in considering this article to remember the general interpretation given in the Scriptures to these events. It is this interpretation that directs the awareness in faith of the significance of the events. The dramatic force of the story is so great on its human level that it can sweep us away into a jungle of feeling and emotion which has little