

Jesuit Review "RELIGIOUS STUDIES", article appeared in May 1900 on the occasion of the canonisation of John Baptist de La Salle. Collection No. 83, pp. 543-547. Over the signature of Fr Joseph BRUCKER, S.J

Translation into English: Brother Julian Watson, FSC, ANZPNG District, November 2007.

SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE. SOME NOTES BY A CONTEMPORARY

On the 24th of this month¹, one of France's noblest sons and one to whom she is most indebted, for the services which he rendered her and which his disciples have continued to render her to the present day will receive for the first time the honours reserved by the Church for the most glorious servants of God. In the near future, we hope, our readers will find here a detailed and original study on the new saint. In the meantime, not to let the great day of his glorification pass, without being associated with it in some way, we are publishing these notes by some contemporaries. We believe them to be unpublished, and, on this score at least, worthy of finding a place, as a humble little candle, among the splendours illuminating the saintly image of the great educator of the people.

These notes are part of the papers of Father Leonard of Saint Catherine of Sienna, a discaled Augustinian², well known by frequenters of the Library and the National Archives, at least by those whose research bears on the epoch of Louis XIV. Father Leonard was one of the most ardent 'newsmen' of that time, making his cell – without prejudice, it seems, to his religious life – like a great information office. He was served by numerous connections in Paris and by correspondence with all parts of France and even with foreign countries. All the doings of the day, but preferably religious and literary matters, would end up there, to be firstly recorded, then sent in all directions. The very court of Versailles paid tribute to him and undoubtedly valued his news; so much so, that on the death of the chronicler the royal government had his papers sealed. However, there was nothing in them resembling the malicious gossip of a Saint-Simon. To his great advantage the worthy Augustinian differed from many *reporters* of his time and ours, by his love for the accurate fact rather than for the sensational one. His Memoirs in which his notes of all sorts were methodically classified but without any literary revision everywhere bear the marks of scrupulous assessment of the repeated revisions to which he subjected the pieces of information that came to him. Generally, his information is accompanied by the name of the persons from whom he received it; unfortunately with these names, his writing, so difficult to decipher, is moreover often further complicated by abbreviations that only an Oedipus could resolve. This is the case with the extracts we are going to reproduce; but, it will be seen, the names of the informants are unimportant.

The first account you are going to read would appear to have come to the attention of the latest historian of the life of John Baptist de La Salle³. The life that the Founder and his first disciples were leading in the novitiate in Vaugirard, about 1693, is there artlessly described, at least in its externals. Its novelty somewhat misled the edified witnesses.

¹ May 1900

² He spent, it seems, most of his life in Paris in the convent popularly called "of the Petits Pères", of which only the church remains, dedicated to Our Lady Of Victories, and famous in our own days. He was prior of this house in January 1707 and died there in 1711. See the notice M. de Boislesle dedicated to him, in his first volume of the Memoires of Saint-Simon; Introduction p.XLVI..

³ See Blessed John Baptist de La Salle, by Armand Ravelet; 4th edition, p.p. 147-148.

M. DE LA SALLE. 1693⁴

Something very strange is happening in our neighbourhood in Vaugirard. A very short time ago⁵, a community of twenty men came together there. They wear poor-quality robes which come almost halfway down the leg. They leave their house only in the morning, when they go two by two with admirable modesty to a small church. When they reach the door, they remain ranged in two rows until their superior passing between them goes in and gives them a sign to enter, by a kind of whistling. To put on priestly vestments, he takes off two robes and keeps on a third one. During the mass, they remain as if in ecstasy, some with their eyes cast down, the others raised to heaven. They have neither Breviaries, Rosaries nor lip movements. They go back to their house in the same order. No one ever sees them speak. In the evenings they come out of their rooms into their yard, and they have a kind of procession with several stops. After this, they go two by two, bow deeply before their Master, who has a scourge⁶ in his hand, with which he strikes some so hard around the head and shoulders, on the hands etc., that they bear the marks.

They did not communicate with anyone. What I am saying about what happened inside was seen from the window of a neighbouring loft which overlooks their house. It is said that they eat only soup for which one of them comes to Paris each day to beg. That is what common rumour repeats about this community.

Since I wrote that, I have learned that the Superior is a citizen of Rheims named M. de La Salle who was always busy giving missions⁷. There are only four of these persons who wear frockcoats, still mostly patched and sewn with thread which is almost white. The rest are peasants whom he is trying to train to make village schoolmasters of them.

⁴ This title with the date is in the writing of Father Leonard. But the whole of the first paragraph which follows is in a different hand.

⁵ According to Ravelet (Blessed J-B de La Salle, p.143) the holy founder opened his novitiate in Vaugirard on the 8 October 1691. The house was used, at the same time, for the spiritual retreats in which the Brothers, summoned for this purpose from their ordinary houses, came to steep themselves again in the spirit of their vocation, under the direction of the saint.

⁶ Scourge: a whip consisting of several short lengths of cord or strips of leather.

⁷ A mistake. The author of that story will have mistaken John Baptist de La Salle for another zealous priest named John de La Salle, from Honfleur, who used to give internal missions with Father Tirel de la Pinsonnière, about 1669.

Following this little story, without doubt sent to him by a correspondent, Father Leonard adds details received from various informers at different times between 1693 and 1704. We are likewise transcribing them, although they do not bring to light anything new about the life of the holy founder; they have at least the interest of being contemporary witnesses⁸

M. de La Salle⁹ who was a canon of Rheims, resigned his benefices without drawing any reward from them. He did not know the one to whom the resignation¹⁰ was made except on the score of uprightness. He was the son of a judge of the Court of Appeals in Rheims. The principal occupation of this virtuous ecclesiastic was training school teachers. Formally, he lived in the suburb of Saint-Germain, but now in Vaugirard. It is not true that he was a Jesuit¹¹.

He wanted to become established in Rome –All in all he seems very calm.

1697. – He retired to the suburb of Saint-Germain where he established a charity school. He rented a house in Vaugirard, where he educated young people to become school masters. He taught them to read and write and to teach catechism. He trained them the hard way. They drank only water. They recited the office of the Blessed Virgin together, and made meditation. They kept their eyes cast down and maintained continual silence. Even the porter spoke very little. They never went out.”

A.D. 1700. – In Saint-Germain suburb, he set up two or three charity schools in which were crowds of children. The two or three teachers in these schools were dressed in black with a robe of the same colour with pendant sleeves. Every day they take the pupils, in silence, to mass in Saint Sulpice. The timetable is so arranged that they are all at the same mass.

About the end of July 1704, the Writing Masters in Paris having complained to M. d’Argenson, lieutenant of the Paris police, about the establishment of the said, M. de La Salle, secured a judgement against him. Two Writing Masters working in the Paris area appeared; but M. de La Salle did not. He was fined one hundred pounds, which he did not pay. He let the benches in his schools be sold to the highest bidder. Then, a few days later, he began again. So it was for two or three years. It was said that this was how he usually acted.

Nevertheless, a new sentence was passed against him regarding the Christian schools, at the beginning of September 1704 – it was from the 19 August, - by which he was fined 100 pounds, and, in the event of a second offence, to 300 pounds.

Here end the notes of Father Leonard on our saint, at least the ones we have found in his *Memoirs to be used in the stories of several persons renowned for their piety and virtue*¹²

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⁸ And compensate somewhat for the lack of reference to sources in the published biographies, to which we return, however, for the commentary on what is read here.

⁹ The following is written in the hand of Father Leonard.

¹⁰ Understand “of his canonry”.

¹¹ Father Leonard corrects an assertion that can still be read, although crossed out, in the first note we have cited from his collection.

¹² Title of the hand-written collection from which we have drawn these extracts, and which is No. 23968 of the French collection of the national library.