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THE PLANS OF SAINT JEAN-BAPTISTE DE LA SALLE

The upkeep of 70 poor students in Paris, their spiritual formation and their studies did not prevent Poullart des Places from accepting a promising commitment in the year after his ordination.

Jean-Baptiste de la Salle was approaching sixty. In 1679, the year of Claude's birth, he started his first school for poor children at Reims. Five years later, he founded the Institute of the Brothers of Christian Schools (known today as the De La Salle Brothers) which he was now directing from Paris. His disciples, who numbered around a hundred, were running 20 schools in Paris and the larger towns. He also wanted to train teachers for children in small towns and villages and he was looking for a community of priests who would take on the spiritual direction of his Brothers, assure the purity of their doctrinal education and hear the confessions of their students.

This packet of projects was set down in a *"Plan for the reform of schools and the religious education of children"*.¹ The Brothers were the central element of his plan. Since their foundation, they had been in charge of the training of teachers for the rural schools. Unfortunately, the seminary at Reims only lasted five or six years and another attempt in Paris lasted no longer. Jean-Baptiste had been thinking for some time of looking for a community of priests to help him. On November 17th, 1706, the Superior of the community of Saint-Sulpice wrote to one of his confreres: *"It is true that M. de la Salle, the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, has tried everything to attach his community to Saint-Sulpice, but he did not succeed and we have now dropped the idea"*.² But the failure of Reims and Paris and the refusal of the Sulpicians to collaborate with him did not deter Jean-Baptiste.

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Towards the end of 1707, Fr. Jean-Charles Clément, who wanted to train young boys for different trades, asked Jean-Baptiste de la Salle for two of his Brothers to help him with this undertaking. For the moment, he only had an allowance of 800 livres from his father but he had hopes of others who might support him. De la Salle replied that he could not take on a commitment if it was not in conformity with the aims of his own foundation and he sent Fr. Clément a copy of his *"Plan for the reform of schools"*.³ Clément proposed to add a seminary for teachers in rural schools. In October 1708, thanks to a sum of 6,000 livres given by Fr. de la Salle, he bought a house at Saint-Denis in Paris.

De la Salle also advised him to seek the collaboration of the founder of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. The biographer of de la Salle, Canon Blain, wrote: *"I have no idea why M. de la*

¹ This manuscript is no. 103 in the Archives of the De la Salle Brothers.

² *"Correspondance de M. Leschassier"*, Volume VII, p. 537.

³ Brother Emile Lett : *« Les premiers biographes de saint J-B de la Salle »*, Paris, 1955, p. 43.

Salle advised Fr. Clément to contact Fr. Desplaces (sic) who was running a community for young clerics, leading him to hope that he could provide him with suitable subjects to take care of both the seminary for rural teachers and the children he wanted to educate. Fr. Clément followed the advice and was most impressed by M. Desplaces when he went to visit him. They agreed on a plan for the education of young boys; they sent a memorandum to Cardinal de Noailles and he gave his approval. Since then, these two projects – the seminary for rural teachers and a house for bringing up young boys – were two separate elements in the plans of Fr. Clement”.¹

So the account of Canon Blain shows clearly that it was due to the influence of Poullart des Places that Fr. Clément gave priority to the seminary for rural teachers and set aside the house he had bought for this purpose.

The Memorandum mentioned above was almost certainly the work of de la Salle, but he had good reasons for not claiming the authorship; in February 1706, the Parliament of Paris forbade him to “*establish any community named ‘the seminary of teachers for junior schools’, or anything similar*”.²

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The “*Plan for the reform of schools and the religious education of children*” shows the real nature of the approach being made to Poullart des Places by Fr. Clément and the sharing out of the tasks in the running of the Seminary of Saint-Denis. Clément, who had undertaken to finance the acquisition and running costs, was the founder. The Brothers had complete charge of the professional training of the future teachers. The Spiritans were asked to hear the confessions of the Brothers and students, to be responsible for their spiritual direction and to make sure that they were only taught sound doctrine. The contribution of the Spiritans was clear: this young community would provide the third element of the overall plan for the Christian education of young people.³

The community of rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne was exactly what De La Salle was looking for. He found that they shared two of his favourite devotions: the Holy Spirit⁴ was a central element of his spirituality and his own Marian devotion was characterised by an unshakable trust in the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady.⁵ This man who had renounced his fortune and half the income of his Canonry found a kindred soul in the poverty, detachment and abandonment to Divine Providence of Poullart des Places. He could see the same outlook in

¹ “*Vie de M. Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, instituteur des Frères des Ecoles Chrésiennes*”, Canon Blain, Rouen 1733, Volume II, p. 75.

² National Archives, L 515, quoted by Guibert in “*Histoire de saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle*”, Paris, 1901, p. 414.

³ « *From his plan for the reform of Christian schools, we can get a good idea of the ambitious proposal drawn up by the Founder prior to 1708, covering not just the large towns but also the smaller ones and the villages. The schools in these places would greatly benefit from the teachers emerging from the seminaries; the internal government would be in the hands of the of the Brothers while the external organisation, mainly direction, would be the responsibility of the priests. Even though they belonged to a community outside the Institute, they would be formed in the same spirit as the Brothers*”. Brother Emile Lett, op. cit., pp. 42-43.

⁴ Brother Clément-Marcel : « *La dévotion au Saint-Esprit dans les écrits de Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle* », Paris, 1952, p. IX.

⁵ « *L’Institut Lasallien et l’Immaculé Conception de la très Sainte Vierge* » in the « *Bulletin de l’Institut des Frères des Ecoles Chrésiennes* », January 1954, p. 3.

the Spiritans that was behind his own foundation of the Brothers. These also were committed to the evangelisation of the poorest people, ready *“not only to accept but to prefer the humblest and most demanding undertakings”*. Finally, he recognised that these young priests, students of the Jesuits at Louis-le-Grand and therefore immunised against the evils of Jansenism, would only teach that *“safe doctrine”* to his Brothers and their disciples that so much concerned him. The determination of the Spiritans to seek only those posts which the Church had difficulty in filling would attract them towards the ministry of the confession of children. As Jean-Baptiste himself said: *“Most priests considered hearing the confessions of the young as beneath them!”*

Jean-Baptiste saw the youth of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and its founder as a distinct advantage. It would facilitate the adjustments necessary to arrive at a perfect harmony of spirit between the two communities. But he was determined to avoid any precipitous agreement. He was well known for his prudence, as can be seen from his *“Plan for the reform of the Schools”*: *“Before founding this Society of priests, perhaps it would be wise to have a trial period during which it could be moulded. In that way, one could be assured of its utility and relevant measures could be adopted regarding its guidance and support. For how can an establishment for the salvation of souls be strongly built if it does not have firm spiritual foundations?”*.

In fact, there was nothing to fear regarding the spiritual foundations of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, but so far, it only had a few priests. Before coming to a definitive agreement which could not reach its completion until several years later, would it not be better to have a trial arrangement by confiding the Brothers and students of the Seminary of Saint-Denis to the zeal and enthusiasm of the first Spiritans? It was Fr. Clément, the ‘official’ founder of the establishment, who presented himself to rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne, but he was really no more than an intermediary; by agreeing to unite with him, Poullart des Places realised that it was, in fact, the forerunner of a very close collaboration between his disciples and those of de la Salle and that quite soon, he could be invited to extend that collaboration to the whole of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Once the house in Saint-Denis had been bought, Fr. Clément *“was unable to rest until he saw the Brothers moving in”*. They did that at Easter the following year, 1709. A little later, they admitted three young boys who would train to be village teachers. Fr. Clément started looking for twenty scholarships. The establishment would be run by three Brothers, one of whom would be a teacher of plain chant.

But it was not to be; the great freeze-up of 1709 and the ensuing rocketing of food prices made it impossible to keep the students for the time being. They would be re-admitted when things returned to normal.¹

But meanwhile, in early November, 1709, Fr. Clément was appointed to the Abbey of Saint-Calais which had an income of more than 16,000 livres and this event proved to be the downfall of the whole scheme. The abbatial residence was falling into ruins; to pay for the reconstruction, Clément reneged on the debts he had incurred in founding the Seminary of Saint-Denis and acquired a court order against Jean-Baptiste de la Salle which obliged the latter to withdraw his Brothers from the property.

¹ Blain, p. 75. Regarding the Seminary of Saint-Denis, cf. *« Poullart des Places et Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle : l’amorce d’une collaboration »*. Yves Poutet, Spiritus, February 1961, pp. 49-67.

Poullart des Place had kept all the agreements he had entered into with Fr. Clément. Canon Blain says nothing whatsoever on this subject in his letter, because his concern was not focused on the short-lived seminary of Saint-Denis but rather on the terrible sufferings that Jean-Baptiste de la Salle underwent as a result of the law suit taken out against him.

The thwarted plan of Jean-Baptiste to confide the spiritual direction of his religious to the disciples of Poullart des Places was not quite finished. Before eventually joining the de Montfort Fathers in 1715, Adrien Vatel, one of the first Spiritan priests, became confessor to the Brothers' novitiate. Nevertheless, the proposed eventual 'twinning' of the two societies never saw the light of day.

It is unfortunate that Blain was so discrete in writing about his onetime fellow-student at Rennes. But without him, we would never have known the degree to which Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle admired the founder of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, or of the trust he put in him and his disciples to bring his great educational project to fruition.