

THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS—AN ORDER OF SCHOOL-MASTERS.

From a late number of Merry England.

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All these successes were, however, accompanied by so many trials and persecutions, that de la Salle resolved to retire from the active government of the Institute. After establishing a Novice House at Marseilles, he proceeded to Grenoble. There, says his biographer :

He took his place humbly in the school, going assiduously to his class like the lowliest of the Brothers, teaching the alphabet to the tiny children, reading and writing to the older ones, and the rudiments of Christian doctrine to all. Nothing could tire out his patience; his gentleness overcame the most unmanageable tempers, and his perseverance forced the duller to take in his lessons. He was, in fact, what he wanted his disciples to be, and he presented to them the most perfect model of the master of a Christian school. He would not be dispensed from any of the duties. Every morning he conducted the children, walking two and two, to church, and made them take their places; then he went up to the altar, and celebrated Mass with such piety and recollection that he came to be known in the town as "the holy priest."

In addition to these duties he devoted himself to revising his writings, a task he had but just completed when he was taken seriously ill. As soon as he was better news reached him which determined his return to Paris. It appeared that his opponents in the capital had determined to take advantage of his absence by introducing modifications into the Rule. They tried to persuade the Brothers that the government of the Community was too heavy a burthen for one person, and that the whole organisation should be altered. Now the Founder had made the following one of the fundamental rules of government.

His idea was that all the Brothers who were sent to teach in schools throughout France, and even all over the Christian world, were to form one family, who should have but one father, the Superior; one paternal home, the Novitiate; one law, the Rule. All the Brothers, being called to the same functions, were to be trained by the same method, they were to receive the same teaching, practise the same virtues, imbibe the same spirit, and reproduce, as far as possible, the same type, which was that of the Founder. In order to realize this unity, they were not only to spend at least one year in the Novitiate, and be then, as it were, cast in the mould of the Institute, but to return from time to time and go back into this mould, so that the lines which had been rubbed off by contact with the world might be renewed, and resume their primitive accuracy. Thus the direction, begun during the first year's training, was continued through life. The Brothers wrote once a month to the Superior General, he answered them, and by this means, as well as through the visitors, and his own visitations, he remained in contact with them, and was able to follow all the changes in their soul, to encourage and direct their progress, to prevent or arrest abuses. But for this he was armed with a supreme authority. Every Brother who strayed from the Rule could be called back to the Mother-house, or sent elsewhere. Every budding evil could consequently be nipped the moment it was perceived. Its constitution was simple, wise, and strong. The best proof of its excellence is its duration. It has lasted for two centuries, with merely a few changes, which are in reality developments rather than changes; and everywhere the results have been admirable.

As a substitute for this the following regulation was now proposed.

The Brothers in the various towns should have for Superior a priest foreign to their Institute. Each house should be independent, and the Brothers should each be stationary, without being able to be moved. To repair the losses made by death among them, two or three novices should be trained as they were wanted. The central Novitiate should be suppressed. The Paris Brothers should form a distinct society, under the authority of an Ecclesiastical Superior chosen outside the Society.

To which proposal de la Salle's friends opposed this judgment of the Abbot of La Trappe, given when he had been asked as to alterations in the Rule of Father Barre's foundation.

I am of opinion that regarding those works that are of God, we cannot do better than follow the intentions of the founders. It is they who have received the spirit and the mission, and we must believe that it is by their ministry that God means to declare His will. So long as the first rules were observed, things prospered and received a particular blessing. God protected the works, He supported them, He increased them. But experience has taught us that, as soon as they abandoned the views of the founders, and adopted other maxims, and struck out roads which had been unknown to these saintly men, the holiest establishments degenerated and fell away. Human wisdom did but spoil what had been done and was only to subsist by His Divine Providence.

Brother Bartholomew, who had been left in charge in Paris did not approve any innovations, and even the Archbishop of Paris refused to permit them. It was quite manifest, however, that M. de la

Salle's return to Paris was of urgent necessity. Finding persuasion useless, the Brothers of Paris, Versailles, and St. Denis hit upon the expedient of commanding his return, and for this purpose wrote to him as follows :

Our dear Father, we, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having at heart the glory of God, the good of the Church and of our Institute, consider that it is of the utmost importance that you should resume the care and general guidance of the holy work of God, which is also your work, since it has pleased God to make use of you to establish it and manage it so long. Everyone is convinced that God has given you the grace and the ability necessary for governing the new Institute which is so useful in the Church; and it is only justice that we should testify that you have always governed it with great success and edification. This is why we humbly pray you, and further command you, in the name and on behalf of the Community to which you promised obedience, immediately to resume the general government of our Society. We remain, with profound respect, our dear Father, your very humble and very obedient inferiors. In faith of which we sign. Given at Paris, April 1st, 1714.

M. de la Salle left Grenoble and arrived in Paris in August, 1714. Meanwhile M. de la Chetardie had died, and his successor was entirely friendly to the Brothers.

In 1715, finding the means of living too expensive in Paris, Blessed de la Salle again reinstated the Novitiate at St. Yon, where he was visited by M. Gense the founder of the Calais schools, to whom he related the history of his struggles, concluding with these words.

For my part, I own to you that if God had shown me the labours and crosses that were to accompany the good I was to do in founding the Institute, my courage would have failed; and far from undertaking it, I should not have dared to put my hand to the work. A prey to contradiction, I have been persecuted by several Prelates, even by those from whom I had a right to expect help. My own children, those whom I begot in Jesus Christ, and cherished with the utmost tenderness, whom I trained with the greatest care, and from whom I looked for great services, rose up against me, and added to external trials those interior ones which are so much more acute. In a word, if God had not held out his hand, and visibly sustained the edifice, it would long ago have been buried under its own ruins. The magistrates joined with our enemies, and lent them the weight of their authority to overthrow us. As our office offends the schoolmasters, we have in every one of these a declared and inveterate enemy, and all in a body they have often armed the powers of the world to destroy us. Yet, notwithstanding all, the edifice is standing, although it so often trembled on the brink of ruin. This is what leads me to hope that it will endure, and will render to the Church the services she has a right to expect from it.

On his return to Rouen from a visitation of the houses in 1716, M. de la Salle decided on his final resignation, and on taking measures for the election of a new Superior-General, so as to avoid all confusion at his death. After much opposition Brother Bartholomew made arrangements for a General Assembly of the Directors of the Institute, for which the Founder laid down the following rules :

Purify your intentions and desires if you want to be the organs of the Holy Ghost in naming him who is destined to govern you. Set aside all human considerations, do not listen to the voice of Nature, reject false lights and the prejudices of the human spirit. Act without any interested feeling, without sympathy or antipathy, without passion or inclination, without natural attraction or repulsion. Keep your hearts in a state of complete indifference, and incline them only towards him who will be set before you by the majority of votes. As it is not you who are to elect, but God in you and by you, lift up your hearts to Him, and weary not in addressing to Him that prayer of the Apostles. "Show us him whom thou hast chosen." If you wish to know that chosen one, give your vote to whomsoever your conscience names, to him who is pointed out by merit, to him who at the hour of your death you would wish to have chosen, to him who is best fitted to govern the Institute, who most possesses its spirit, who is best capable of maintaining order, of keeping alive fervour, and sanctifying you all. Name him who is known to you as the most enlightened, the wisest, the most virtuous, the firmest. Give your vote to him who possesses those six qualities so necessary for governing the family of God—prudence, gentleness, vigilance, firmness, piety, zeal, and charity, to him who presents in the highest degree that rare combination of virtues—zeal with prudence, light with charity, firmness with gentleness, kindness with strictness; to him who is gentle without softness, vigilant without over-anxiety, firm without inflexibility, zealous without bitterness, good without weakness, prudent without cunning. Give your vote to him who is the holiest, or wishes to become it, who is worthy of being your model in all things; to him who will be the humblest in the first place, who will have the heart of a father towards you, who makes his authority lovable. Look neither to talents nor to birth in making this choice, nor to age nor length of years in the Institute, nor to face, nor to figure. Look not at the man, but see God in him. You will choose him whom God Himself has chosen if you seek a man according to His heart, and not according to your own, a man of grace in whom grace acts, and not a man according to your taste and natural inclination.

To be continued