

THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS—AN ORDER OF SCHOOL-MASTERS.

From a late number of Merry England.

II.

IN 1592 Venerable Cæsar de Bus founded at Cavaillon, in the Diocese of Avignon, the Congregation of the Christian Doctrine, composed of priests and laymen united by a vow to teach the Catechism. This Congregation was approved by Clement VIII., and when the Founder died in 1607, his disciples opened free schools that flourished in the south of France until the Revolution. But they also were eventually transformed into Colleges.

All these attempts were made by means of Communities of ecclesiastics, who were beset by the temptation to change the character of their schools by gradually introducing Latin and other studies unfitted for the poorer classes; and, as a result, they did not long fulfil the designs of their originators. Still the idea of founding lay Congregations occurred to several others before Blessed de la Salle. Blessed Peter Fourrier of Mattancourt, founder of the Congregation of Our Lady for the education of girls, and a man keenly alive to the wants of his age, formed a Community of men for the education of the poor boys of the towns and country places. He was, however, not able to get it confirmed at Rome, and the young men whom he had gathered together grew tired of the work and went back into the world.

Peter Tranchot, a barrister, founded a primary school at Orleans, in 1652, and taught the children himself, assisted by one of his nephews; but this generous effort perished for want of imitators. In 1660 Francis Perdouls founded schools at Blois and Tours, but the work did not spread. The same thing happened at Autun, where, in 1687, three priests devoted themselves to the instruction of the children of the poorest classes; while at Paris, in 1678, Father Barre, founder of the Congregation of the Ladies of St. Maur, tried to establish seminaries for schoolmasters. The young men, however, thought more of themselves than of their vocation looking upon it rather as a calling useful for their establishment in life; so at the end of a short time they dispersed, and their schools were closed.

Monsignor de Buzenval, Bishop of Beauvais, also tried to found a seminary for training schoolmasters, but he could not command the necessary funds; while M. de Chennevieres and M. Nyel were equally unsuccessful.

Another attempt was made by means of lay teachers, by M. Demia, a priest of Bourg, Archpriest of Bresse and Visitor Extraordinary of the Diocese of Lyons, who had been struck by the depravity of the youth of Lyons. Feeling the need of a remedy for this evil, he, in 1661, addressed a complaint to the Provost and Aldermen of that city. Though these magistrates paid no heed, some charitable persons were moved to open a school in the district of St. George. In a short time it was decided to vote an annual sum of 200 fcs. to found a school where children should be taught Christian doctrine, reading, and writing. Others were established soon afterwards, and in 1672 there were five free schools, of which M. Demia was appointed Director-General. He at once drew out minute rules for the schools in every one of which the children were classed according to their knowledge. M. Demia had the instinct of mutual education; he appealed to the goodwill of the children, and created monitors amongst them, who seconded the masters. Certain methods of teaching were borrowed from the Venerable Cæsar de Bus. On certain days the children held debates in public, on questions from the Catechism, on politeness, and other subjects. Those who most distinguished themselves received useful rewards of clothing.

But, to direct these schools, masters were wanted. Abbe Demia began by inviting to his house, every three months, a certain number of priests and laymen who took an interest in the schools, when he gave them rules and advice; these masters placed themselves under the protection of the Blessed Virgin. Abbe Demia next turned his attention to the secular masters, and succeeded in obtaining a decree, dated May 7th, 1674, forbidding any person to keep a primary school without having obtained the Archbishop's permission, and having promised to observe the rules. Former masters and mistresses were required to present themselves within six months before the Abbe Demia, in order to legalise their position. In April, 1675, he assembled the masters and mistresses, acquainted them with the rules he had drawn up for them, and thenceforth kept strict watch over them. All the pastors in the diocese had orders to give him an account of the schoolmasters and mistresses in their parishes, and he sent visitors from time to time to inspect them.

His masters were soon in great request. Many Bishops asked for them, and young men were sent to him to be trained. He would have preferred to employ none but priests; and with this object he devoted his own fortune to founding a seminary at Lyons, where he purposed to train schoolmasters and curates for country parishes. This seminary, called "The Community of St. Charles," was opened in 1679, approved by the Archbishop, and recognised by letters patent in the following year. The founder did not reside there, but directed it by means of a School Board, composed partly of priests and partly of seculars. Abbe Demia died in October, 1689, and despite his ef-

forts, his work did not survive him. The Community of the Sisters of St. Charles, which he founded for the education of girls and the care of the sick, still flourishes; but the seminary became an ordinary seminary, like any other. So in all cases the result was the same. For the lay teachers were without the training necessary, nor was there any institution to impart it; and those who developed abilities as teachers were induced to employ their talents to more remunerative purposes than the education of poor children. Yet it is possible that the man to whom we remotely owe primary education was, after all, a friend of St. Vincent de Paul, M. Bourdoise, who only prayed. He wrote as follows to M. Olier:

"I wish we could have a school filled with the supernatural spirit, where children might learn to read and write, and also be trained into good parishioners. For to see money spent on teaching them merely to read and write, without making them better Christians, is really a pity, and yet this is generally the case. Nowadays all classes of children go to school, but to schools where nature is everything. We must not, therefore, be surprised if afterwards they do not lead Christian lives; for in order to have a school useful to Christianity, one must have masters who will labour there like perfect Christians, and not like hirelings regarding the office as a miserable trade, taken up to earn their bread. For my part, I declare from my heart, that I would willingly beg from door to door, to procure the means of living for a real schoolmaster; and like St. Francis Xavier, I would implore all the Universities for men, not to go off to Japan and the Indies to convert the infidel, but to begin this excellent work. It is easy enough to find amongst the clergy men ready to take a curacy or a parish; but to find anyone with piety and the other qualities necessary to keep a school, having also the means of living, and being yet willing to work under the authority of the pastor, this is very rare indeed. Whence I conclude that to devote oneself to forming such masters is a work more useful to the Church, and more meritorious, than to preach all one's life in the pulpits of the largest towns of the kingdom. I believe that a priest who had the science of the Saints would be a schoolmaster, and would be canonised for it. The best masters, the greatest, the most esteemed—the Doctors of the Sorbonne—would not be too good for the office. Because the parish schools are poor, and taught by poor men, people imagine they are nothing. And yet it is the only means of destroying vice and instilling virtue; and I defy all men united to find a better one. I believe that if St. Paul and St. Denis were to come to France now, they would undertake the work of schoolmasters in preference to any other. For fifty-seven years I have been familiar with the work of a field-labourer; and during all that time I have seen no work more futile than that of sowing in ground that had not previously been well manured and ploughed. Now, it is by means of Christian schools that hearts are prepared to receive the Word of God from preachers. The school is the Novitiate of Christianity. It is the seminary of seminaries."

On March 15th, 1649, he founded an association of intercession, whose members were all bound to prayer that God would grant to France Christian teachers for the children of the poor. Its numbers speedily became very great; and, two years after it was instituted, on April 30th, 1651, was born at Rheims Jean Baptiste de la Salle.

His parents were of noble lineage, and their piety, doubtless, contributed to foster in him the ecclesiastical spirit which he displayed from very early years. At eleven he received the tonsure; at sixteen, by one of the crying abuses of the age, he became a Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims. An old relative resigned his canonry in the youth's favour. Young de la Salle pursued his studies, however, with exemplary fidelity; and in one sense his canonry was well for him, since his parents died when he was twenty, leaving to him the charge of his younger brothers—a charge which would have been incompatible with the duties of a parish priest. He distinguished himself in his theological studies, and finally took his degree of D.D. with honour. He exhibited no attraction towards what was to be his life-work, and his first attention was called to school affairs by his friend, Canon Roland, who was connected with an orphanage to which were attached free schools for girls. Dying, he left the care of the Institution and the Community of Religious women in charge of them to de la Salle. But after conscientiously discharging the duties which were thus devolved on him, de la Salle resumed his former retired life.

It was an accident which inveigled rather than led him into the work for which he was destined. A certain lady of Rouen, who from a worldly life had been suddenly converted to a life of penance and charity, had assisted the Community confided by Canon Roland to de la Salle. She was anxious to provide some institution of the kind for boys in Rheims, where she had been born. She chose for this purpose a devout and enterprising layman named Nyel, who had all his life been devoted to the cause of the instruction of the poor, and besought him to found a school in Rheims. For this purpose she made him a yearly allowance, and gave him a letter of introduction to de la Salle, who happened to be her relative. De la Salle received him, befriended him, and the school was started in the parish of St. Maurice. The result was that a lady in the parish of St. James conceived a wish to found a similar school for her own parish, and de la Salle was reluctantly drawn in to befriending it as he had done the first. There were five masters attached to the two schools, and M.