

It will soon be exactly 300 years since a well-known Minim religious, Father Nicolas Barré, passed away. He was 65 years old.

Since then, his name has had a place and still has a place in all the biographies of John Baptise de la Salle. In fact, his counsel was much appreciated by our Founder even though personal interventions were not many. His personal austerity did not put off the canon of Rheims. His initiatives for the education of poor children were all the more commendable to one whom God was calling to create in his town the community that was to become l'Institut des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes. ( De La Salle Briothers)

### 1. Some Particularly Significant Dates:

1621, 17<sup>th</sup> December, Nicolas, son of Louis Barré, was baptised in the church of Saint-Germain, Amiens.

1642, 31<sup>st</sup> January, in the Convent of Nigeon, Paris, Nicolas Barré was professed as a religious in the order of Regular Clerics Minims of Francis of Paula.

1643, The young religious goes to live in Place Royale, Paris, where he stays until his departure for Rouen in 1659,

Barely ordained, the young priest is appointed preacher and confessor. Here, as later in Rouen, he gains the confidence of his superiors as well as his confreres in his different responsibilities: librarian, professor of philosophy, then of theology, local superior, provincial superior etc. Outside his own community he is especially appreciated as confessor and spiritual director.

1659, finds Fr Barré in Rouen where he was to stay for about 12 years. It was here especially that he became interested in schools and in the training of women teachers for different types of teaching which he defined as: elementary schools, trade schools and Sunday schools, schools for catechism, a training college for the formation of school teachers.

Through his contact with Nicolas Roland, Adrien Nyal and Madame Maillefer, he encouraged the opening of the first charitable primary school in Rheims before he had at least two contacts with Jean Baptise de la Salle.

1670, on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1670, Francoise Duval and Anne Le Coeur, who were committed to teaching in a primary school for little girls in Rouen, were sent by Nicolas in order to complete the work begun by Canon Roland and which would become :”The Congregation of the Infant Jesus” of Rheims.

1675, Nicolas Barré returned to Place Royale, Paris. It was here that Jean Baptise de la Salle paid him more than one visit and especially during the years 1681 – 1683.

1678 –1679 : in Rouen, Madame Maillefer, another benefactor of Nicolas Barré’s work, arranged the departure of Adrien Nyel – till then general bursar of the Office for poor invalids – to open a charitable school in Rheims.

1679: most probably in March, the first meeting between Adrien Nyel and Jean Baptiste de La Salle.

1679 - or perhaps a little later- Nicolas Barré becomes interested in the formation of school masters with the intention of forming them into a community as he had done with the women teachers so successfully.

This plan is quite clear in the texts. It is more difficult to see just what point was reached in this project. There is no doubt that some masters claimed to have been of a Nicolas Barré’ group. There is no evidence however that they were really a “community”.

1685: Publication of *Statues and Rules of Christian and Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus*.

This text was devised and written especially for the women teachers even if at times school masters are also mentioned as if the text could be equally useful for them. One such mention is found in the complete title of the draft. It is not found in another manuscript edition of the “statutes” which remained in manuscript and which probably goes back to 1677.

1687; in Paris: the publication of a work: *Meditations for the sister mistresses of the charitable schools of the Holy Infant Jesus, of the Institute of the late R.N.Barré, Minim, particularly for times of retreat and spiritual exercises, on the principal duties of their state, which could also be useful for all the masters and mistresses of the school, so that they understand the importance and the duties of their profession.* By R.P.F. Giry, ex-provincial of the Minims and director of the same Institute.

1694: In Paris: the publication of a work : *A short history of the Institute of the Charitable Schools by Fr. Barré...Spiritual Maxims of the Reverend Father Barré.*

1697: in Paris: the publication of a work *Spiritual Letters of Reverend father Nicolas Barré, Religious of the Order of Minims.*

## 2. Barré and De La Salle.

The first dated meeting we have” Brother Bernard names Nicolas Barré in an account of *the wonderful leading of divine Providence in the person of the venerable Servant of God, Jean Baptise de La Salle.* (Salesian Notebook 4 which reproduced the manuscript of Brother Bernard according to a copy dated 1721)

Bernard who wrote in 1721 knew of the existence of the Congregation of women teachers inspired by Nicolas Barré until his death 35 years earlier. Twice he recalls that Barré hadn’t only the education of men teachers for boys’ schools in mind.

*“Having succeeded so wonderfully with the girls’ schools, he wrote, those which he set up for boys in several places especially in Saint- Gervais, where there were six masters, did not end so happily. The masters were disorderly and brought about such disorder and went away one by one.”*(Br p 37)

Bernard was not a professional historian but he took pains to consult certain memoirs of events which he himself had not witnessed. Sometimes he expresses himself awkwardly but perhaps this is after all the best proof of the respect with which he treated his few sources. Since, of course, we cannot ask him how much precisely Jean Baptiste’s initiative was owed to his predecessor, we cannot but appreciate the truth with which he records the two occasions on which Father Barré intervened in the life of the Canon of Rheims.

When the cause for the beatification and canonisation of Father Nicolas Barré was introduced (to the Roman congregation for the canonisation of saints) a large volume of xcxi – 618 pp of large format were necessary in order to include all that could be said to justify the introduction of the cause of this saint. The desire to be exhaustive is clear throughout the 700 pages of this “Positio”. However all the ‘proofs’ offered are not of equal value, so one can approach them with a healthy critical sense especially in what concerns the supposed continuity between these few Parisian men teachers who claim to be disciples of Nicolas Barré and of Jean Baptise de La Salle.

Without doubt, Jean Baptise de La Salle knew personally and through intermediaries of the educative work founded by Nicolas Barré. Without doubt, also, one can make some tentative connections between the writings of the two founders. Even more remarkable perhaps is the noticeable similarity between their maxims. And what can we conclude from the spirituality of abandonment to providence which so marked the spirituality of both their lives including their initiatives and their apostolic enterprises?

But we must try to place all that in a much larger context before we draw conclusions about the connections between their two works which could have benefited from many more influences than those mentioned by ‘Positio’.

### 3. Two Decisive Moments in the life of de La Salle.

Luckily, however, some precisions given by Bernard, confirm the role played by Father Barré in the beginnings of the La Sallians. At that time, Jean Baptiste was wondering about the extent of the renouncements God was asking of him.

“Seeing”, Bernard writes, “that he had only rented this house for the teachers for a year and a half,, i.e. until the feast of St. John the Baptist 1681, six months before the end of his agreement, he hesitated whether he would continue to rent this house or to invite the teachers to come and live in his own house, so as to have closer supervision over their conduct and to help them live a more regular life. While in this state of perplexity God provided him with an occasion to travel to Paris on business. While he was there he took the time to pay a visit to Reverend Father Barré who lived then in the Minim Fathers’ Convent in Place Royale. He told him about what was happening with the teachers in Rheims. This worthy child of St. Francis of Paula, full of experience, did not hesitate in the least in this question and advised Mr de La Salle to begin by inviting the teachers to live in his own house. (Bd pp.36-37)

The Canon hesitated no longer. At the end of his lease, on the following 24<sup>th</sup> June, he welcomed the young men under his own roof. It was the beginning of life in common which was to lead him to share more and more with these few young men who had been, nevertheless, chosen in haste to run the three schools. A modern commentator observes: the fact of living among these first companions must have been a deciding factor in the birth of a true community. The fact that he was a secular priest enabled him to do what Barré, being a religious, could not envisage himself. Obligated to live apart from the teachers he wasn’t able to offer them the support of a presence and a formation that had been essential for them.

But Canon de La Salle had property. Should he use it to “found” his schools or especially his teachers? Many of his friends advised him but, continues Bernard: “he was advised against this by the Very Reverend Father Barré whom he met quite often when coming from Rheims to Paris, and who used to say to him that he must not ‘found’ the schools because when Jesus said in the gospel: the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head, we are to understand that the foxes are the people of the world who are attached to the goods of this earth, the birds of the air, the religious who have at home a little cell but those who were decided to dedicate themselves to setting up schools should share the lot of the Son of Man. (Bd p 48)

One could legitimately reject this interpretation of the gospel text but the advice was clear and de La Salle decided to follow it: soon he gave up his title of canon and his personal fortune. Once more, then, Father Barré drew de La Salle into the narrow way. With the first Brothers, then, he chose not only to share their daily life but also their poverty or at least the insecurity which would henceforth be their common lot.

“This community”. de La Salle was to write shortly afterwards, “is founded on nothing except Providence”. (Memoire on the Habit)

And this conviction was to influence Jean Baptiste de La Salle the whole of his life. Important as these directives may have been during the first years, we can conclude that Father Barré was actually the Canon of Rheims’ spiritual director. Bernard and other biographers are quite explicit in this regard when they speak of those that advised him, and with what authority, when Monsieur de La Salle wanted to resign from being a canon.

Even if simply a counsellor, if you like, Father Barré was all the same one of those who, to a greater or lesser degree, helped Jean Baptiste de La Salle to recognise God’s guidance in his life, guidance which as he lay dying, our holy founder said he wanted to adore in all things.