

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENTS

Very few of Nicolas Barré's writings have survived and these are often quite dense especially the MAXIMS. How can we best understand them and their relevance for today ? Sadly, it is not possible to say precisely in what situation and circumstances they were written since we only have a bare outline of the life of the Minim.

At least, it ought to be possible to throw some light on certain passages by comparing them with the writings of his contemporaries who were faced with the same questions and discussed them in the same language.

The following remarks do not pretend to be a synthesis. They simply examine some points that were of particular interest to a spiritual master such as Nicolas Barré.

APOSTOLIC LIFE

“To make Jesus known to those who are poor, to proclaim Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the Kingdom of God is near and that He is on the side of those who are poor, oh, how wonderful that is! But, that we should be called to be associates and participants in the designs of the Son of God baffles our understanding!” [Conference ...]

In these words Vincent de Paul described his amazement at the beauty of the apostolic vocation.

We can see how his admiration develops. It comes primarily from his love for those who are poor: bringing them the Good News is joy indeed. And this joy blossoms into an even deeper happiness when it echoes the love of Christ. By the apostolate we participate in that work which was central to Jesus' life on earth and still remains so in heaven. So the apostolate needs no other justification. It need not be compared to any other way of life, especially not with religious life as it was then commonly understood.

Nicolas Barré had similar views. The aim he proposed to the “charitable mistresses”, is not primarily their own perfection, but the apostolate: The charitable mistresses “have as their sole aim to establish the reign of Jesus Christ in all hearts ...” [MI 1]. It is this task which is of primary importance, and it is this which demands that they strive for perfection: “we cannot enflame our neighbour if we are not on fire ourselves.” [RR 10].

Nicolas Barré is aware of the novelty of this perspective, in an era when religious life is presented as a way of personal perfection. He justifies this call to a wider vision, that is, the salvation of one's neighbour, in terms which sound quite modern: “Unfortunately we, in our minds, make a distinction between our own salvation and that of our neighbour.” [MAP 212] “If I really loved my neighbour, sadness at seeing another perish, would lessen my own joy at finding myself on the way to eternal salvation.” [MAP 216]

Though this concept was new, it can be understood in a context where religious life was being questioned. Many others were looking for a way of life, open to women, which was neither religious life as understood at the time, nor a purely worldly life.

The first attempts began by adding new aspects to the cloistered and contemplative models. Already the congregations of Notre Dame and the Ursulines devoted themselves to teaching, while preserving the cloister. Francis de Sales had envisaged that the Visitation Sisters, as their name suggests, would visit those in need. But he had to give up his idea and conform to the principle of the cloistered life.

In 1634, when Vincent de Paul gave a rule to the Daughters of Charity, he warned them not to allow themselves to be called “religious” since they would run the risk of being cloistered. They would not wear a religious habit. Vincent de Paul proposed this way of life because it answered the needs of the apostolate. In the same way the Daughters of the Cross, whom Nicolas Barré undoubtedly knew in Picardie and in Paris, were dedicated to the service of the poor, without taking vows. Nicolas Barré may also have known the Daughters of St. Genevieve, teachers and nurses, who likewise did not make vows.

Others tried to review the concept of religious life from the theological angle. Since Luther’s criticism of them, Catholics were asking themselves about the nature of religious vows. Pierre de Bérulle recalled, nostalgically, the days of the early Church: “Then, there was no religion [in the sense of religious congregations] and every Christian was a religious; now, there are quantities of religions but few who are religious.”

He emphasised the greatness of the baptismal vocation which is “the solemn profession of the Christian”. John Eudes developed this teaching by recalling the continuity between baptism, the sacrament of new life, and the three vows of religion, which are the living out of the ideal which baptism signifies.

Jansenists, idealising the practices of the Early Christians, took advantage of these arguments and envisaged a return to them. In the Early Church there were neither religious orders nor laws sanctioning the vows, but Christians strove to respond to the call to perfection received in Baptism. In the seventeenth century the hermits of Port Royale led a solitary life but were still known as lay people.

Less dogmatic Catholics distinguished between the interior gift of oneself to God, made through the vow, and the juridic consequences sanctioned by the law of the Church at the time. These they saw as limiting one’s freedom to answer other calls coming from God. Without making this distinction, Vincent de Paul, not wishing the Daughters of Charity to become religious, insisted that they make annual rather than perpetual vows.

Nicolas Barré was radical: The charitable mistresses would not make vows [SR1, 5; SA 4]. He did not enter into the distinctions previously made. His only argument: they should never be cloistered because of their apostolate but, more importantly, the spirit of their Institute itself forbade it.

Baptismal spirituality, which closely links the charitable mistresses with the laity, expresses itself also in their involvement in parish life. This was of vital importance in the seventeenth century among both anti-Jansenists and Jansenists alike. Involvement in parish life was what we would call today “life in the world”, because the parish still is, without doubt the primary community and the undisputed gathering place. Only religious communities are exempt from the authority of the local parish priest. Even if there is not open conflict there is often a hidden rivalry between diocesan clergy, including parish priests, and priests who are religious. The diocesan priests are conscious of being part of the only hierarchy instituted by Christ: “the order of St. Peter”. Many new feminine congregations identified with this Church structure: being subject to the authority of the parish priest and having as their chapel, the parish Church.

To illustrate just such a baptismal spirituality, without vows, here is an extract from the Constitutions of the Daughters of the Holy Child, approved in 1662. The congregation in question was “apostolic” and, contrary to the custom of religious or cloistered communities, welcomed postulants without a dowry.

“The houses will have no superiors other than those the Church has given to all Christians. This dependence is natural, being founded on our baptism, which led us into the sheepfold of Christ, placing us at the same time under the care of its shepherds. This dependence is so holy that it cannot fail to bring a blessing. It is so all-embracing that we must never try to isolate ourselves from it in an effort to be more independent. The sisters will then be under the authority of the bishop as are all members of the diocese, and under that of the parish priest as are all parishioners. They will never seek to be exempt from the authority of the local ordinary. They will always be dependent as are all the laity. They differ from these only in being more faithful to the Gospel counsels. Their institute exists only to provide young women, who do not want to marry and do not want to be cloistered, the freedom that they could not have in their parents’ home. This allows them to devote themselves to the exercises of piety and Christian works of charity, which all the faithful ought to add to their employment so far as they are able.”

In Nicolas Barré’s eyes, the life of the sisters resembles that of lay people or more exactly, other lay people, in that they have to work and work hard to earn their living. The priest of Rancé, one of those identified as a correspondent of Nicolas Barré’s, invited the Cistercians to do likewise, as did Saint-Cyran his disciples. It is not because one is a priest, the latter used to say, that one should despise humble work, especially manual labour: the timetable of religious communities includes hard manual work. Nicolas Barré also gave priority to the sisters’ work in school over their spiritual exercises. As for their future, he wanted them to share the insecurity of the poor, who do not have a guaranteed income. He was absolutely opposed to endowments on their behalf.

Was it the ideal he would have liked for the Minims themselves? Or was it in his eyes necessary for the apostolic life he wanted the sisters to lead? We cannot say. In any case, we can only admire the lucidity with which he saw what was truly evangelical and opportune, in keeping with the questioning of his own time.

FROM THE APOSTOLATE TO PRAYER

The charitable mistresses were to teach the truths of salvation, the directors to guide souls. Teaching or guiding is not just one-way communication. Nicolas Barré was aware of what we call “reciprocity”. To teach or to guide, we must know how to welcome, how to listen, sometimes carrying out the role of a teacher, sometimes that of a servant [MD 42, 53]. “The mistresses must consider themselves to be servants in a house completely taken up with the care of their master’s children” [PM 10].

God does not attract people by one road only. As the radii of a circle begin from an infinite number of points on the circumference and converge at the centre, so an infinite number of roads “each different in their starting points lead to God” [MD 23]. The mistress must adapt herself to each child “bringing each one up according to its uniqueness” [PM 21]. The director must be “all things to all people” [MD 53] and “dedicate himself to the salvation of one soul as if the conquest of the whole world were involved” [MD 37]. Having discerned the particular way in which God is leading each one, the director may offer some enlightenment but can never convert another, or make them grow [MD 2].

God alone attracts people and draws each one in a unique way (MD 39, 41).

This diversity becomes a learning ground for the director who receives new insights from each of the directees. “The director focuses more on listening than on speaking, in order to take advantage of the insights God gives through each of the directees” [MD 22].

Listening more than speaking, using one's authority with prudence and reserve, preferring gentleness to force. "The director seeks to win souls by gentleness and simplicity, entering into their hearts, listening with patience, sympathising with them in their troubles, sustaining them and helping them to benefit from these difficulties and even, should God lead them there, to advance along this road of suffering"

[MD 24].

"The Holy Spirit attracts and takes possession of souls more often through the sweetness and gentleness of grace than through the force of law. Similarly, the director will insist strongly on the will of God; emphasising attraction, love and industry rather than the force or authority of law" [MD 25]. So, it is a question of listening to the one confided to you and to the Holy Spirit who, through the directee, can instruct you. This leads to a new way of understanding the relationship between contemplation and action.

Generally, in Nicolas Barré's time, the contemplative life was considered to be superior to action. Thus the Dominicans laid down that no one should preach what they had not already contemplated. While Nicolas Barré agreed with this principle [MD 9] he also saw another way. Experience had shown him that "the mistresses may receive more grace during class time than during prayer time. During the exercise of their mission they often experience the presence of God and interior consolation" [PM 33].

This observation greatly influenced Nicolas Barré's thinking. For him it meant that action carried out for God could unite one to God Himself, because it unites one in a special way to the Will of God. This Will of God is God Himself.

While it is true that we can discover the general Will of God from revelation, i.e. this over-all general design, we can only know His particular Will, i.e. his Will for each of us through the situation in which we find ourselves. In fact nothing can happen which is against the Will of God; we cannot attribute to the Almighty and Omniscient God, either ignorance or weakness. In a sense, everything that happens is willed by Him ... Pascal once invited us to "welcome each event as a manifestation of the Will of God". Nicolas Barré often uses almost the same words when he asks us to trust in Providence. This attitude of faith towards events, whatever they happen to be, is of the highest importance for the spirituality of those who are called to be sanctified by apostolic action.

While contemplative prayer embraces the Will of God globally as revealed in Scripture, the active life has to accept from God new situations, the unexpected, and continuously changing events which can be sometimes frustrating, sometimes happy. Thus we can remain united to God while in action. Although commonplace today this idea was new in the seventeenth century.

At that time the contemplative life was often given priority over the active life. It was considered necessary that some, e.g. the Marthas, take over the material tasks to allow the others, the Marys, freedom for contemplation. Since one could not be continuously in contemplation, activity provided balance and prepared one for contemplation once again. Such attitudes reduce action to the service of contemplation. Teresa of Avila, for example, suggested that though not all were called to follow the same way, the contemplative life was best.

Nicolas Barré, on the other hand, made no such comparison. He even discouraged women already committed as charitable mistresses from leaving the active life to enter the contemplative life [PM 1-5]. This would be an opting out, because the apostolic life is also a life of union with God and we ought not to leave the way on which God has set us. Nicolas Barré knew how to restrict the length of the spiritual exercises even inviting the sisters to omit some, such as confession, whenever necessary, so as not to detract from their apostolic work.

Nevertheless, he remained prudent and put us on our guard against what we call “activism”, an activity that is uninterrupted and so intense that it engenders tension and makes prayer impossible [MAP 12]. Therefore, while Nicolas Barré refused to equate perfection with contemplation, he insisted that the charitable mistresses gave time for personal prayer even if this prayer seemed empty.

Why pray then? To justify prayer, people today hold that it prepares one for apostolic action; that it is necessary to renew one's apostolic energy, making one more clear sighted and generous in one's task. Nicolas Barré does not rely on this argument though there is truth in it.

Quite simply, in his eyes, prayer goes without saying. Without it there is no seeking for perfection. We pray quite simply out of love of God as a child thinks of his/her father [MAP 103]. God alone makes our happiness complete, he says, since the soul is made for God. Could we define perfection in any other way? He points out that this looking towards God, which prayer is, is worth more than what the prayer itself asks for. This is why God does not always answer our prayer immediately. He likes to see us praying!

So, Nicolas Barré proposes an active, balanced spirituality, where prayer and the apostolate support each other mutually. The same depth and the same psychological realism is characteristic of his teaching on the relationship between our love for God and our love for our neighbour. He knows that our love for God grows through service of others. Whereas today, some modern thinkers reduce the love of God to love of neighbour, he upholds the specificity of the love of God. To those who say that strictly speaking, we are not asked to love God, we are asked only to believe in His love for us and to love our neighbour, Nicolas Barré would say that not only do we have to believe in God's love for us, we also have to love Him in return. This is what justifies prayer which is an expression of this love for God.

How then, does this interpenetration of love of God and love of neighbour operate? On this point, Nicolas Barré respects the mystery of grace. He knows that the love of neighbour is a gift of God, and that He promises to increase this love in those who, out of love for their Lord, are faithful to prayer. On the other hand, he is on his guard against oversimplification, which refuses to recognise the diversity of spiritualities and wants to reduce the spiritual life to a single way.

Some people try to force themselves to see Christ in their neighbour, remembering His words “Whatever you do for the least of mine, you do to me” (Mt.25:40). In practice it could be quite difficult to identify a child, a poor person, or a discouraged woman with Jesus Christ. We cannot forget that He is Other, that He is without imperfection. Must we allow the face in front of us to be blocked out in order to see only the face of Jesus, forgetting the ignorance of the child, the conniving of some one looking for assistance, the vice into which the person may have sunk? Will we pretend to love that person by loving only Jesus? A person treated in this way has a right to protest. The apostle Paul did not try to see Jesus in the other; in his eyes every person is the one for whom Jesus died.

This approach leads to a feeling of solidarity with one's neighbour. It is no longer a question of looking down on this person as a misfit, a sinner, or an outcast. One identifies with the person, recognising one's own lack of faith, seeing oneself as a sinner and impoverished. “Our neighbour is another self, for whom we cry as we would for ourselves, believing that this person's sin is our own.” [RR 10, 24] “Has anyone ever had the experience of one part of the body rejoicing while another part is in pain? Alas, even a painful injection can suddenly bring to an end the pleasure the rest of the body was enjoying ... the distress of one member is communicated to all the others and the heart feels pain for all.” [MAP 214]

Even though Nicolas Barré carried his neighbour in his heart, he was also familiar with forms of prayer where only the Transcendence of God held his attention. We will speak of this but first we must examine what Nicolas had to say about God.

GOD

Nicolas Barré's way of speaking about God could come as a surprise to twentieth-century readers. Modern authors invite us to come to God with confidence and simplicity; by contrast, Nicolas Barré stressed the need for awe and was distrustful of an excessive familiarity.

Can we attribute this difference of approach to his time, when the sense of hierarchy was widespread and the majesty of royalty was deeply felt? The King would be acting beneath his dignity if he were over familiar; those in "high places" had to keep their place. Nicolas Barré borrows from the society, as well as from the liturgy of his day, the title "Majesty" which he freely gives to God, to express the respect due to His Transcendence.

But it would be wrong to see his language only as a reflection of his milieu, it is much more. Like all spiritual people, of every age, he wants to express that God is infinitely above us - "God lives in light inaccessible" (1 Tim.6:16) says St. Paul, and Nicolas Barré echoes his sentiments. God is Inaccessible, Unapproachable, or rather He is only accessible in Christ:

"God of all depth and mystery, Who dwells in the darkness of light inaccessible ." (SC 3)

This difference between God and the human being must be recognised; it is a difference which exists both naturally and in the order of grace. By nature, the human being is a creature, God is the Creator; that is, there is no common measure that can be used when comparing God with his human creature. In this sense it is true to say "God is All, His creature is nothing." [RR 3,2] Less succinctly, Nicolas Barré admits "I have always had great respect for these words of the Apostle Thomas: 'My Lord and my God'. Nothing is more brief and yet nothing is more agreeable to God or more capable of consoling human being. Nothing is more agreeable to God because He is always delighted when His creature both publicly acknowledges the Sovereignty of His Being and recognises his or her own nothingness."

The term "nothingness" has a hard, sinister or humiliating ring to it today, but the religious language of the seventeenth century juggled happily with it; it was not a question of debasing humankind, but of glorifying God. A human being is truly a marvel, but nothing when compared with the One Who is infinitely more wonderful, the Creator.

"Lord, how great is your Name ... What are human beings that you should think of them?" (Ps 8)

The human being who has sinned is infinitely more distanced from the Divine Holiness. Pierre de Bérulle had said that "Sin is a second nothingness worse than the first, nothingness of grace, nothingness opposed to God, nothingness resisting God, and hell is its consummation and the final state of this miserable nothingness."

The vigour of Nicolas Barré's expression on this point could surprise us: "Notice that this state of hell really means that of our unworthiness [...] We ought freely to tend towards this state, go down there often and, if we come up out of it, always return there [...]" [RR 1]

Pierre de Bérulle used to use the same language: Our humiliation ought to go as far as hell. That is our place, and we have no right to look for any other place except that which we have deserved by our own fault. To go down there, more easily, we ought to remember that we have nothing of ourselves except sin and nothingness, and that nothing is ours by right except hell. Since hell is our place, we ought gladly to descend there and there wait for the mercy of God.

Bérulle makes it clear that in this “hell” one can expect the mercy of God and so it is not the state of eternal damnation, hate and despair. Nicolas Barré explains: “By this hell you are not to understand the place into which one may be precipitated on dying, but the destruction of self-love by the efforts one tries to make in order to conquer self and enter Heaven ...” [RR 1]. He also adds “The soul finds all its delight in God [...]” [RR 1] If this “hell” does not prevent us from finding all our delight in God it is because in essence it is an awareness of the holiness of God.

For N Barré, this “hell” is also a means to union with Jesus: “Jesus descended into hell [...]” [RR 1]. For some, “hell” is the place where the souls of the just waited for The Redeemer; for others, it describes the depth of human misery in its most acute humiliation and pain. Certain spiritual writers of the seventeenth century, in order to emphasise the extent to which Jesus was in solidarity with us sinners, present Him as “contrite” for their sins, that is to say, in the root meaning of the word, “crushed”, because we cannot ascribe to Jesus the feelings of repentance. Nicolas Barré says “weighed down all His life by our iniquities [...] His constant interior sufferings came from our sins” [RR 1].

Passing through this “hell” involves personal humiliation, union with Christ before God, and in Christ, solidarity with all human misery. This union between a sense of God - one could even say the experience of God - and the voluntary sharing of human misery is extraordinary.

Finally, this hell means “distance from” rather than “familiarity with” God. It means that one does not come before God to chat, as with one’s neighbour, on an equal footing. We realise that this is displaced familiarity whereas Nicolas Barré prefers the “terror” that the thought of hell, in the usual sense, can indeed provoke in us.

Nevertheless, “love casts out fear” (1 Jn.4:18). The traditional teaching of the Church clarifies for us that only one “fear” is justified: not that of God, but that of the sinner towards Him. Such “fear” is, in fact, a misnomer. One ought to speak more of mistrust of oneself. This is what Nicolas Barré wants to express: not that we should fear God, but that we ought not to present ourselves before Him full of our own importance and sure of our rights; rather we ought to stay in our place, as the invited guest who does not presume to take the front seat.

The word “terror” says more than “fear” or “fitting reserve”. Does Nicolas Barré mean to suggest a sentiment akin to that of the amazement felt by those who witnessed the miracles of Jesus? This terror before the unknown which is also outside of our control, if not actually diabolical, shakes all our securities. It is the opposite and the antidote of an undue familiarity. But awe cannot be contrived; it cannot be brought on at will, and Nicolas Barré had no need to insist on it. Instead, he underlines, what the faithful can and ought to do: adore humbly in recognition of the Divine Transcendence.

This adoration is an expression of truth. Others had stressed adoration particularly Pierre de Bérulle, from whom Nicolas Barré sometimes draws his inspiration. But on this point, however, they differ. According to Bérulle, adoration and love do not constitute two successive moments: adoration is but the purity and tenderness of love, or if we prefer, love in truth. For Nicolas Barré, adoration is distinguished, if not altogether separated, from love. Adoration comes first, love only comes later, as a gift of God. [MAP 226, 231]

We easily repeat “God is Love”. In the seventeenth century people said “God is Truth”, echoing St. John who said “God is Light”. The one who lives by the truth comes into the light: the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, Who will lead us into all truth. The effort to be truthful, the openness to recognise the truth even when it humiliates, brings us close to God. Nicolas Barré, being of his own generation, recognised this, as did Malebranche who gave the title “On the Search for Truth” to his own journey, which was at once both philosophical and religious. But this passion for truth led Christians into polemics which were lacking in charity: Nicolas Barré avoids them, though he shared with his own era the love of truth, accepting that it puts us in our place even when this place is “nothingness” or “hell”.

For him, the experience of “the deep abyss of one’s sins, one’s poverty, one’s infidelities”, is the first step towards God, and the foundation of all others. Those who accept it and cry out to God from the midst of their distress are “the true children of God [...] the true brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. His humanity experienced this state pre-eminently and in all its fulness, in order to share with those determined to be like Him by their obedience, dependence, poverty, temptations, sufferings, etc. Conformed to the likeness of His Son, those to whom the Spirit of God gives life, are indeed children of God”. [L 14, 34; Rom 8:14,29]

CHRIST

Recognition of the transcendence of God, is at the heart of Nicolas Barré’s prayer. Whatever his attraction towards abstract mysticism which leads us to this kind of prayer, he does not propose it in its totality. Like St. Teresa of Avila, he points, first of all, to Jesus ... “When the Eternal Father draws someone, it is not usually directly to Himself, but to Jesus”. “The Divinity is inaccessible and unapproachable to a human being [...] We must pass through Jesus, the God-Man. ‘Nobody comes to the Father, except through Me,’ He says of Himself, and also ‘I am the Way’.”

To be united with Christ, means taking up one’s cross to follow Him. The high ways, which belong to God: greatness, power, strength, light ... do not belong to human beings on earth. Those who want to walk this high road, fall prey to illusion and lose their way. But the ways of Jesus suit us here below. Hence, littleness, lowliness, being unnoticed, gentleness, patience, suffering, these are the lot of the brothers and sisters of Jesus, those who have been predestined [MAP 161]. We must then, go along the ways of Jesus, suffer and die like Him, with Him and for Him, the One “who is the first-born of a multitude of brothers and sisters”. This is how the eternal Father will recognise us “conformed to the image of His Son”. That is all! [MAP 163; Rom 8:29]

The harshness of the tone could surprise us. Does it come from the fact that the Minims, as their name implies, cultivated, in a special way, humility and penance? Actually this emphasis was common in the spiritual literature of the time. It is quite simply an echo of the Gospel. Jesus warns the crowds: “The one who does not take up one’s cross to come after me, cannot be my disciple” [Lk 14:27].

In the second half of the seventeenth century in France, “victim spirituality” was widespread. It consisted in offering oneself for sacrifice. So, Jean-Jacques Olier made a vow of “living sacrifice”. A few decades later, St. Margaret Mary lived out at a personal level this offering of oneself as a “victim”. However, this word could lead to a kind of self-satisfaction and a hidden pride: one looked at oneself suffering, and attributed the title of “victim” to oneself as a compensation for personal failures. One could protest in this way against so-called injustices, instead of recognising them humbly as the consequences of one’s faults.

To avoid such a travesty Epiphane Louis explains that the best way to be immolated is to forget oneself completely, instead of returning continually to one’s trials. Nicolas Barré also invites a similar self-forgetfulness and with unusual

insistence. He gives, as a model, Christ Himself and he imagines, in a curious way, that Christ interrogates the disciples on the way to Emmaus about His Passion, as if He did not know about it. He thinks so little about Himself that he had forgotten it! [RR 8]

It is in this way that “annihilation” of self comes about. This term appears often in Nicolas Barré’s writings and it takes the modern reader by surprise. In the seventeenth century this term was much more usual and could be seen as a translation of that passage in the letter to the Philippians where Christ is said not to have clung to His equality with God but to have “annihilated” Himself, made Himself “nothing”.

However, this contemplation of the Cross is not the only way to gaze on Christ. Nicolas Barré also wants to contemplate Jesus, still an Infant. And the schools he founded were very quickly to be known as “The Charitable Schools of the Infant Jesus”.

On this point, at least, he is of his time, and shares its mentality, a mentality that is no longer ours. In France, today, most families are small, and except for a few cases, children who are born are wanted children. The child is king, has all it needs, makes the adults dream of a childhood paradise. In the seventeenth century, children were much more numerous, which does not mean they were less loved. However, there was much more severity in dealing with their short-comings and their limits. Painters show them as mini-adults. Society saw them as adults incapable of understanding or behaving themselves correctly. It follows, that for the Son of God, to pass through the stage of infancy and to accept to be treated as a child was an inconceivable humiliation. Theologians of the time attributed to the Child Jesus, from before his Birth, the intelligence of an adult and omniscience. They are amazed then that the Word of God submits Himself to the condition of a child who cannot yet talk.

That is how Nicolas Barré sees the Child Jesus. For him, it is the Child, still in His Mother’s womb, who leads His Mother to Elizabeth’s home. It is the eight day old Child who wills that the first drops of His Blood be spilled for children [SR 1,2].

The children whom the Infant Jesus sisters were to educate in the Charitable Schools were very different from the Child Jesus who had nothing to learn! This explains perhaps why Nicolas Barré rarely asks them to see the Child Jesus in these children. Rather than inviting them to see Jesus in the child, he seems to have been drawn to share in the Child Jesus’ own way of seeing the other children, or the adult Jesus’ way of seeing the little ones. This is the Jesus he invites us to imitate.

Sometimes, it is not as “child” but as “Father” that Jesus is presented, every child being His child. This is a strange way of seeing things, since Jesus Himself tells us to reserve the name “Father” for God, His Father. In the seventeenth century, it was less surprising. In Spain, Luis de Le_n devoted an entire chapter of his book, “The Divine Names”, to justifying the title “Father” given to Jesus, asserting that in the prophet Isaiah the Christ is proclaimed as “Father of the world to come”(Is.9:5). In France, Pierre de Bérulle had also commented on this expression and found in it an echo of St. Paul when he says we were “created in Christ” (Eph.2:10). If it is legitimate to call Mary our Mother, could we not even more appropriately call Jesus our Father, since we owe Him our life and we receive it from Him? Vincent de Paul speaks of “Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is our Father, our Mother, our All”.

Nicolas Barré expresses very forcibly this vital dependence on Jesus, and even on Jesus still a child, when he calls Him “our Adorable Father, the child Jesus, in the stable ...” [TS 18].

Nicolas Barré brings one constantly into the Presence of Jesus, be it of Jesus Crucified, or Jesus the Child. The presence of Jesus is even more intimate. St. Paul confides to the Galatians: “It is no longer I who live but Christ Who

lives in me" (Gal.2:20). The Minim aspires to such a union, where he will be so annihilated and forgetful of himself that he only has the mind of Christ. Is not this what the Eucharist brings about? "We must take Jesus as food in the Sacrament of the Eucharist until, finally, He consumes us, so to speak, i.e. until He has so taken possession of us and made us His own that He has passed over into us, destroying us and putting Himself in our place by the total destruction of our egoism and self-importance and by the Incarnation of Himself in us." [RR 9] Literally speaking, the expression "incarnation in us" is inconceivable because we are not, and cannot be, the Human Body born of the Virgin Mary. We are "the Body of Christ" in a different sense as St. Paul explains; the Mystical Body, according to the theologians with whom Nicolas Barré agrees. But how can we describe what this union with Jesus is except by comparisons which always fall short of the reality?

The twentieth century speaks of a "spirituality of the Incarnation" to stress the value of presence in the world. It is said that Christianity must not only "adapt" itself to, but even "incarnate" itself in new cultures. However true this observation may be, however justifiable the desire to integrate into one's milieu, it is not accurate to speak of "incarnation" because we are already flesh, hence we do not become flesh. Strictly speaking, only the Word incarnates, the One Who before coming into the world, "is" from all eternity. Certainly, we are to imitate Him but His incarnation is inimitable. It is by being "sent" that we imitate the Word. On this point, Nicolas Barré's vocabulary is that of Vincent de Paul and that of the Gospel. With the Gospel, he brings together the sending of the Word by the Father and the missioning of apostolic workers by the Church.

If this phrase "spirituality of the Incarnation" means a desire "to be incarnated", it must be understood as a metaphor. It is an expression of our faith, it will enable us to know God better, to know ourselves better and carry out our mission in the world. So let us be proud to profess it.

PRAYER OF EMPTINESS

John of the Cross reminds us that God said everything in His Word, Who is Christ. Yet, he describes a state where the spirit is like a cave: the intelligence is empty of all understanding; it is in the absolute obscurity of faith that one continues to believe. One can imagine nothing whatsoever, neither can one remember; only hope lives on without being able to imagine what is hoped for. The heart is empty of all affection for what is not God, and at the same time empty of all delight in Him. It is God Who reduces the spirit to such a state, and empties it, in order to fill it with His Presence.

In seventeenth century France, mentioning this spiritual void awoke mistrust. A report of a parish priest of Saint Leu vehemently attacks those "who teach this emptying of spirit and will of every kind of good thought and affection towards God." Probably Nicolas Barré was aware of these criticisms; they were aimed primarily against the "Guérinettes" of the Picardie. These were pious uneducated women whom the parish priest had initiated into ways of personal prayer. Theologians suspected them of suffering from illusions and believing themselves to be elevated to the highest summits of the mystical life, precisely at the period when the young Nicolas Barré was studying in Amiens.

Without doubt, his surprising reserve with regard to women praying in such a way came from this: "Women and girls are readily given to it and stay in it easily, because of their slow and weak temperament. They imagine that they are doing a great deal, and they convince themselves that they are in a state in which they certainly are not. Having thus been misled, instead of being filled as one ought in prayer, they empty themselves and dry up." [MAP 52] In these lines, is Nicolas Barré drawing from his experience as a spiritual director or is he, rather, echoing a common conviction? Whether he is aiming at the Guérinettes or not, Nicolas Barré is obviously very aware of the risks involved in defending the prayer of pure emptiness; he mistrusts the laziness that can use it as an excuse; besides he insists that one must prepare

prayer: long-term preparation by the continual practice of the presence of God, and proximate preparation in the choice of a theme which anchors the meditation.

Even if one has had experience of this prayer of pure emptiness, when it is no longer given one must be ready humbly to return to one's former preparations for prayer. Because we must not confuse "two kinds of inactivity; one is the voluntary cessation of all action, the other is when God takes the place of the powers of the soul, and acts in it Himself." [MAP 78] The void which God Himself brings about is very different from that which one seeks to bring about by chasing away all unwanted thought.

While insisting on necessary prudence Nicolas Barré nevertheless believes that this prayer of pure emptiness is "more perfect". He describes this in his "Spiritual Canticle" where, speaking of the soul, he writes:

"Likewise she is stripped within,
Naked, as it were, incapable of love or understanding,
Of taste, of insight or of sight;
No more transports of delight; she cannot hear or taste or see.
Her former self, as if enthralled, no longer has the power to act;
But opens passively before the advances of pure love." (SC 9)

The soul is passive. It is not acting by itself, it is moved only by God; it receives, from God, His action. He goes on to remark that then she is:

"As if inert, deprived of sight; with all desires, emotions fled.." [S.C. 18]

It is easy to understand that in an age when the prayer of pure emptiness was suspect, one hesitated to publish this "Spiritual Canticle".

And yet, all his life, Nicolas Barré had no qualms about using many other expressions in which the critics of mystical theology saw only an abuse of language and meaningless fine phrases. Here are a few such expressions: "to lose oneself in God" ... "to be transformed into Him" [MAP 33]. He calls this transformation "deification" [RR 9]. Strictly speaking, such expressions are ambiguous; because the believer is not "lost" but saved; does not become God but remains a creature. Even so, how else can one express the depth of the transformation and all the infinitude it conveys? This is the language of the mystics.

ABSTRACT MYSTICISM

The prayer of pure emptiness is a particular form of what the theologians call "abstract mysticism". Since the soul is without eyes, the imagination plays no part in it, here one no longer relies on interior images. This is precisely what is meant by the word "abstract" which Nicolas Barré uses so often in his "Spiritual Canticle". The kind of language being used is indicated to the reader by the very abundance of such terms as "essence", "mystery", etc. Verse 7 gives quite clearly the definition of abstract mysticism:

"No longer opaque images
of hearing, feeling or of sight
Can exercise their hold upon this soul."

Taking up more than one expression of John of the Cross, the Minim sings of the happiness of delighting God and being united to Him by "essence", i.e. no longer trying to be united to Him by the conventional ways - by exchange of a look, by

intention - but being united to Him by all that one is. Then, the soul, without seeing or hearing, is satiated by the greatness of God, Who Himself remains totally inconceivable. (SC 10)

“Abstract prayer” is not always prayer of “emptiness”. It can, on the contrary, lead to meditation on the divine attributes such as Supreme Love, All Power, etc. Then, the soul is filled with wonder, the heart is deeply moved and pours itself out in thanksgiving.

Even these much wider forms of abstract mysticism still awaken the mistrust of the spiritual masters by not giving place expressly to Christ. None of the forty-six verses of Nicolas Barré’s “Canticle” names Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Teresa of Avila, while recognising that this kind of prayer can sometimes be imposed on the soul by God Himself, recommends meditation on the Life of Christ and counsels us to use not only interior images but also those that we can keep before our eyes. John of the Cross is much more reserved when it comes to using images. He holds that Jesus is the whole Word of God. Even so, the “night” of the spirit, is linked with abstract prayer.

Fearing lest Christ no longer have the place He ought to have in prayer, many treatises on the spiritual life in the seventeenth century came to a compromise: there is no need to meditate on the different scenes from Jesus’ life if the Holy Spirit does not attract us to do so. But we ought, nevertheless, to keep constantly in our heart an image of the Passion, of the Crucified. Besides, is not that what St. Paul did, if one can judge from his letters? Does he not speak there of Jesus? Is he not forever reminding us of His Passion and Resurrection?

In his “Spiritual Canticle”, Nicolas Barré never once refers to Jesus; but he speaks at length in other texts, of the “Ways of Jesus”: “In sharing in the ways of Jesus, we make ourselves poor, despised, unnoticed, worthless in the eyes of the world, ... and so, we climb towards God on sure paths ... whoever wishes to go astray will choose another route.” [MAP 159; 170]

By the use of this language of the mystics, Nicolas Barré is trying to describe the indescribable: an experience which encompasses not only his prayer life but much more than that, the total experience of his living relationship with God.

GRACE

All through the seventeenth century, “grace” was a hotly debated topic among theologians. Many tried desperately to draw precise limits between what could be described as natural and what was strictly speaking spiritual, that which surpasses the strengths and demands of nature. The Augustinians, with whom Nicolas Barré sided in this respect, much preferred to speak of spiritual experience rather than engage in these often abstract debates: the grace of God is glimpsed in the “dependence” in which we find ourselves vis-à-vis our God.

The Minim takes up an image used by Gaston de Renty and Jean-Jacques Olier, making it still more tangible: “Let us imagine a huge opening in the earth, through which we can see the devils, the damned, eternal fire and all of hell. Let us imagine someone right in the middle of the mouth of this huge gulf suspended in mid-air, holding nothing and with nothing to hold on to. Jesus alone is above him sustaining him by one hair of his head, ready to let him drop when it pleases Him. What terror we would feel even on seeing such a spectacle! That is the state in which our own souls are habitually.” [MAP 190]

This passage is a key to understanding in what sense “hell” is our place. Nicolas Barré wants to say, on the one hand, that our sins would drag us irresistibly towards it, without the help of Jesus, and on the other hand that Jesus does not

have to intervene; it is love that leads Him to it. It pleases Him to do so.

So, the precariousness of the human condition and the weakness of faith makes the work of grace more tangible; it is what enables us to persevere. Then, the discovery that “hell is our place” leads to thanksgiving and to the joy of the salvation given to us by God.

It is thanksgiving too which breathes through these lines to a correspondent: “You ask me if you will be saved and what I feel about your predestination. My feeling is that you are destined for heaven. Nothing is lacking to you except perseverance.” Why such an unhesitating reply? Because this correspondent had made known that she had received the “great grace ... that of wanting to belong to Jesus, as God willed”. [L 10] So, in a certain sense, grace is confirmed. This assurance does not, all the same, determine her final perseverance.

The use of the word “predestination” might surprise some readers. It does not mean that everything has been decided in advance and that “free will” is only a pretence. Neither is it an especially Calvinistic term. It is quite simply an echo of Sacred Scripture. It is St. Paul who speaks of “predestination” when he writes to the Ephesians: “Blessed is God Who has predestined us to be His adopted children.” [1:5] St. Paul here has in mind a collective predestination whereas the seventeenth century debate was more precisely about individual salvation which raises a different question: by what signs can one know oneself to be saved? It is a question of hope, not of affirming salvation as if one were no longer free. Salvation is offered and attainable on condition that one perseveres. Nicolas Barré could not evade the questions put to him by his correspondents who were obviously tormented by all of this. He calms them. He invites them to be grateful, while not denying the effort required.

We have a right to say: “grace has saved me, has withdrawn me from hell” - in the same sense that one who has escaped from a concentration camp could say “I have come out of hell” - or say: “grace has preserved me from hell, and I see in that a sign of God’s predestination which invites me now to thanksgiving and later to the happiness of heaven.” But no one can ever say: “I gave in because I did not have sufficient grace; that is a sign that I am not predestined” since all are called through grace.

The questions put to Nicolas Barré led him to consider individual cases. But, like St. Paul, he prefers to dwell on hope for all. He becomes “all things to all people” so that the world may be saved.

Because Nicolas Barré desires with all his strength the salvation of all, he is immune to the virus which threatens the thinking of the Jansenists; the temptation to restrict salvation to a narrow elite. Though influenced by Augustine, he uses the same vocabulary as the Jansenists (in particular speaking of the heart as they do), there is absolutely no danger that he will ever forget that Christ died for all.

ATTRACTION

The grace of God sometimes manifests itself in a tangible manner. Nicolas Barré tries to describe it more precisely and accurately and uses a word which was well understood by his contemporaries: grace manifests itself by “attraction”.

This word simply picks up on an old word found in mystical theology, i.e. “draw”, as one would speak of “draught horses”. Christ said “No one can come to Me unless My Father draw him”. [Jn.6:44] In his Mystical Theology, Henri Herp explains how the Holy Spirit “draws” the soul, how Christ also “draws” it, and finally how the Father “draws” it. Nicolas Barré refers to Jean de Bernières, a saintly man whom he could have met in Normandy. This man had written pages of great depth

on the subject of prayer which often take the form of personal testimony. He shares what “draws” him. Similarly, Nicolas Barré writes that “all progress of the soul must be founded on the attraction of God” [MD 39]. “It is important to help each one to put their efforts into following the attraction of God.” [MD 40].

This attraction is essential for the spiritual life. We must “run after Him when He seems to flee, when He withdraws and when His presence diminishes. One can awaken Him by one’s fervour, call Him back by one’s groanings, and prevent His help from diminishing by careful fidelity.”

Attraction does not necessarily mean the easy way or following one’s personal taste; it is not in the order of the senses at all. For Nicolas Barré it consists in being “drawn” by God as a heavy chariot is “drawn” by a pair of horses. One is led to think of God, even if it means making an effort and “obeying God”, in order “to follow this powerful attraction” [MAP 173]. This term in no way implies following one’s whims or attaching oneself only to what is appealing. While being pulled in one direction by self-love, one is attracted more powerfully still by the One who enables us to see the stupidity of selfishness and to prefer the truth of His Presence.

THE ORIGINAL WOUND

How is it that the attraction of God has to hurl itself against such a weight? Human beings are torn between the seduction of sin and the desire for God. Pierre de Bérulle had already emphasised this orientation towards God in what he called “the capacity for God” (in the sense in which we still speak of a “measure of capacity”, the human person is made to be inhabited by God, filled with God). Human beings have a life which is unique to them and makes them different from plants and animals. It raises them above all that is sensory and created. It compels them to long for uncreated being and makes it possible for them to relate to God, Whose likeness and image they bear in many ways.

The more they distance themselves from this movement and relationship to God, the more they distance themselves from what is truly human. Human beings, said Pascal, are at once unworthy of God and capable of relating to God by their very nature. “In spite of the long list of miseries that beset us, that choke us, we have an instinct which we cannot suppress and which elevates us.”

These misfortunes are not only of a spiritual nature. We can recall the illnesses (the plague was still raging in Nicolas Barré’s time), the wars, the condition of the women who worked without rest, or died in childbirth or whose many children died as infants. These thoughts give rise to the dilemma: either God is cruel or human beings are guilty. The Augustinians and those influenced by them like Bérulle, Pascal and Nicolas Barré, chose the second position as the only way to save the Honour of God. The idea of a vengeful God was close to blasphemy for them. God is compassion. They draw attention to the gravity of sin in order to highlight the divine mercy.

A great deal of all that afflicts humanity, especially the fear of death and the difficulty of remembering God, could be attributed to the limits of our human nature and not to original sin and the sins which follow it. The Augustinians regard such an explanation as speculation about our human nature. Instead of philosophy they chose Holy Scripture which tells us of the goodness of creation in the beginning and warns of the heavy consequences of infidelity to God.

Those who attribute the sufferings of humanity to our human nature see them as inevitable and incurable. Where then does Christ fit in? Christians, recognising that their unhappiness comes from sin, can turn to Christ as their Saviour. It is He Who frees them from sin and death. “It is good”, said Pascal, “to be worn out and tired from the useless search for true good, in order to stretch out one’s arms to the Liberator.”

Nicolas Barré recognises only two possibilities for the human being: either friendship with God, or “corruption”, that is a complete breaking away from God. He does not regard human nature as totally responsible for this sorry state: essentially human nature is nothing else but pure capacity and potential. The same must be said of each of one's faculties. This human nature is ordered and drawn by grace to God and His Perfection as our true and legitimate fulfilment and at the same time has the power to refuse this fulness and prevent fulfilment by God, Who alone is capable of bringing one to perfection.

In this way we are already filled with another fulness, that of sinfulness, curses, sin and disorder, instead of justice, blessings, holiness and wisdom. And this is what we have to put up with, this is the wicked foundation of sin and this unhappy self which has usurped the place of God.

Far from thinking that our limited human nature remained good, Nicolas Barré emphasises its corruption - “Our human nature is corrupt” [MAP 128]. Nature is the enemy of Jesus ... “Not only do our corrupt nature, our depraved senses, our wicked inclination and affections deceive us ... furthermore, our reason blinds us, leads us astray and forces us to live a life according to our own taste ... which we have no wish to leave because it pleases our nature ... and our reason deceives us into thinking it is good. People of greater intelligence are the more deceived and deceive others who know no better ... [RR 7]

It is important to notice the word “better”. It prevents us from describing such a vision as pessimistic. Nicolas Barré does not despise what others admire in our nature but he has a far higher ambition for it. It is in comparison with this “better” state, made possible for us by the Redemption, that human nature seems to him to be degraded. His severity comes from a very high ambition for the human person, an ambition that we could more correctly call optimistic because it calls for “perfection”: “a soul in this state is attacked on all sides ... by human beings - because they are opposed to all who aim at perfection - and not only by the wicked but by many good people too”. [RR 8]

When speaking of prayer, it is this “being attacked” that justifies the use of a word which today sounds strange: “groaning”. It reminds us of Saint-Cyran for whom “tears and groanings accompanied by love and the Holy Spirit” are the essence of prayer; “prayer being essentially in the desire to serve God better than one does, and in the groanings that one does not serve Him as one ought”. It is possible that Nicolas Barré remembered this, when he saw the first signs of predestination in those “who find themselves in a state of loving God wholeheartedly and unreservedly, and who groan gently inwardly, at not being able ever to serve Him well enough” [L.33]. He declares “the most excellent prayer is that of groaning” [MAP 117]. These groans are not from pessimism; they betray a humble and very deep desire for union with God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, who acts in us “with indescribable groanings” (Romans 8:26).

It has been said that one needs a rare spiritual maturity to understand and taste the doctrine of original sin. Often, it is the saints who saw themselves as the greatest sinners. Nicolas Barré was lacking neither in maturity nor in the consciousness of sin. He revealed to a friend that he had “for twenty-seven years ... been as in hell” [LB 31]. To take up Pascal's expression, it was there that he learned to stretch out his arms to The Liberator.

Nicolas Barré's severity towards human behaviour, deviant and blind because of original sin, led him to be critical of “the world” and the way in which we live in it. He is not slow to denounce its faults. He declares that the charitable mistresses have to defend themselves from “the world and the devil” [PM 16]. This is terse but clear. Praising their way of life he says: “even more despised in the world ... than the religious” [PM 1]. In other words, he takes an entirely unfashionable view of the world. His language is precisely that of many passages in the fourth Gospel where “the world” is seen as the stronghold of Satan “who is its prince” (John 12:31).

In the seventeenth century, France was officially Christian. This does not mean its values were those of the Gospel. The “libertines”, those who take liberties with the Gospel, were many. Those who had doubts about the truths of the faith were fewer; nevertheless, in 1623, Father Mersenne, a Minim, estimated fifty-thousand such in the town of Paris alone. Perhaps he exaggerated. But their influence was certainly growing until the end of the century. Anticlerical manifestations disturbed the clergy and unfortunately found plenty of fuel in the mediocrity and poor example given by priests, although the situation improved remarkably towards the second half of the century. There is nothing worse than anticlericalism coupled with lack of faith.

We read in the “Spiritual Maxims” of Nicolas Barré: “often the greatest saints were attacked or tormented by temptations against the faith” [MAP 20]. Is it really he who pens these lines or could it be his editor, Abbé Servien de Montigny who expresses himself in this way, so adding Nicolas Barré to the number of great saints assaulted by temptation? In one of his letters Nicolas Barré portrays such a struggle. It is likely that in order not to see such temptations as signs of eternal damnation, he tried to reassure himself noticing that even the greatest saints went through such an experience.

In this same letter he confides to a friend his interior struggles and the suffering of not seeing his prayers answered: “we often send letter after letter to heaven, by prayer, by groans and shouts, by sighs and anguish, and agony that seem to push us to despair, to discouragement, to blasphemy, to atheism, to abandonment by God and all His heaven” [L 5, 40].

We can see in this, something far more than a passing discouragement, a hesitation out of weakness, or a lack of confidence. It is a radical questioning of faith which is the foundation of hope. It is a temptation to atheism like that which Thérèse of the Child Jesus describes with horror, but lasting longer. Worse still this atheism might express itself in blasphemy.

Rene Thuillier, Minim and biographer of Nicolas Barré, praises his faith in saying that he seemed to “see” the truths of the faith rather than believe in them. This hagiographic style is obviously conventional. It is the language of a man of the seventeenth century who never experienced the precipice of doubt. In reality, Nicolas Barré’s faith was exactly the opposite of “seeing”. It is consent to the truth in spite of darkness. Before Thérèse of The Child Jesus, he believed because he wished to believe. His faith is a struggle and a willing acceptance in the night.

In this way, it goes beyond reason: “Unhappy human reason that spoils everything!” [RE 10]. Let us not conclude that Nicolas Barré was a “voluntarist”, willing simply to submit reason to the will. What he wanted was submission of sensibility and especially feminine sensibility towards which, in some cases, he seems very severe. He wants to prove to “unhappy reason” that it is wrong. In other words, he does not want reason to be compelled to reflect but rather to be led by the intelligence. We have seen how adamant he is that prayer be fed by knowledge and serious reflection, even if it happens to become a “prayer of pure emptiness”.

We must not then deny the role of reason but admit that it has its limits. All one can say or think of God still falls short of the reality. Even in the case of graces of illumination given by God, he does not want us to cling to them, any more that we would to our fantasies. On this point Nicolas Barré is a faithful echo of John of the Cross and he writes, “All graces, lights, understanding, peace, sweetness, sensible touches, are to be treated as simply imaginary or, at best, as things of God, which He distributes or refuses, which He gives and takes away, as He pleases” [MAP. 198].

What is left then if not “naked faith” [L 16] which is fidelity and abandonment to God in radical poverty of spirit? Or,

according to a powerful expression of Nicolas Barré: “faith, without faith, so to speak ...” by which, nevertheless, “we remain constant in carrying out our apostolic activity and in the faithful practice of the duties of our state” [L 46].

DISINTERESTEDNESS

In order to understand the importance of the word “disinterestedness” in the writings of Nicolas Barré, it is good to keep in mind the sensitive echoes that this word had in the second half of the seventeenth century. In his time, theology was preoccupied with the question: ought a Christian to act out of hope for eternal reward or, in a spirit of disinterestedness, act solely out of love?

On the other hand, is fear of hell salutary? Is it sufficient to renounce one’s evil ways for fear of hell in order to repent and be forgiven? Or should one return to God out of love for Him?

More humanely, the Jesuits took into account the fact that our motivations are complex. Since Christians are usually neither saints nor heroes, they gladly bribed them with promised rewards and threatened them with punishments. They excelled at making people fear hell and invited people to meditate on this subject.

On the contrary, others emphasised that love is the essential commandment. The purer love is, the more it counsels us to act disinterestedly. St. John says that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Therefore, they present a spirituality where there is no room for fear. Jansenism did this as well. (It is not right to present Jansenism as a religion of fear.) People such as Fenelon, opposed to Jansenism, also held this view.

It is, then, in this context that we can appreciate Nicolas Barré’s thoughts, and admire the freedom with which he took up his position instead of locking himself into one camp or the other. Thus, he sometimes brings to our mind the judgment of God, or pictures for us the idea of hell in a terrifying fashion [PM 190]. But he also remarks while “it is good to fear hell, ... usually one grows far more, when one acts out of our love and gratitude for the gifts received from God” [MAP 7].

He is more precise: “... out of pure love ...” [FS 2]. This expression, in our day, is so hackneyed, that it does not reflect any particular spirituality. For him, it is much more than a cliché; it goes straight to the heart of disinterestedness on which he insists so much. This disinterestedness affects many areas of our life. To begin in a completely concrete way with regard to money. The sisters must renounce all salaries, and even the security for the future which belonging to a congregation could offer. They were to teach “in an apostolic way, and in the disinterested way which inspired the apostles ...” [FS]. “No teaching sister will ever ask the apprentices to work for her. Because all shadow of self interest must be exterminated from the Home of the Holy Infant Jesus and that of the First Lady of His Court - Charity” [TS 13]. “Those who work for the perfection of souls must act with complete disinterestedness” [MD 1].

In a more general way, disinterestedness signifies the absence of all motives except love. Thus it goes hand in hand with the absence of vows: “To instruct the children out of love rather than to fulfill an obligation due to a vow” [SR I. 5].

More widely still, disinterestedness is contrary to preoccupation with self and goes to the root of the tendency to keep turning back to self: “let us mistrust all that could give egoism an entry into the search for one’s own perfection” [SA 4, PM 4]. This is why the love of God must be purified. “We must serve God for God and not for ourselves” [MAP 75].

The superior “will love the Christian way which looks only to God ... relying on it ... and will start and finish everything solely out of pure love of God” [SR 9, 14].

ABANDONMENT

Did Nicolas Barré choose his path and the direction of his life in order to fulfil some preconceived plan? It does not really look like it. If education had previously preoccupied him, would he have entered the Minims? He was led by Providence in a totally unexpected way from Amiens to Paris, from Paris to Rouen. Therefore, he could speak from his own experience of “abandonment to all that God wishes” [L. 24:3] and invite to “a total abandonment of oneself into God’s hands, for time and for eternity” [MD 50].

Things that last awhile we call “temporal goods”. These are not assured to the houses of the Institute of charitable mistresses, because these houses have not been endowed, i.e. financial resources have not been assured. On the contrary, the Institute is “founded solely on abandonment and total detachment” [FM 4]. “Abandonment” does not mean a passive attitude but putting oneself at the disposal of God, to be used at His discretion and, as Nicolas Barré says, it implies confidence in God.

This detachment is not opposed to the commitment emphasised today. It means freedom with regard to material goods. The Infant Jesus Sisters would be enabled to live this detachment through obedience: “... ready to change from place to place, without resistance, to go with equal indifference anywhere” [M.I. 6]. “These young women, with tranquillity of spirit, wear themselves out and exhaust themselves, solely for the salvation of souls, without worrying in the least about what would one day become of them” [MI 7].

For those in positions of responsibility it is more difficult to be precise about this detachment. St. Vincent de Paul knew very well how to wed confidence in Providence to a rigorous management which avoids debts and does not take on financial commitments without the assurance of being able to sustain them. We are less informed about Nicolas Barré but the “Statutes and Rules” of 1685 suffice to show that he had his feet on the ground. The abandonment he asks for encourages neither negligence nor inaction. He confides to his lay “directors” the care of the “temporal”, i.e. all the administrative duties, in order to free the charitable mistresses for the tasks which are more specifically theirs. From these directors he requires the same evangelical detachment [SR 14].

Nevertheless, Nicolas Barré’s insistence on abandonment is more daunting in regard to spiritual goods and even those of eternity. Essentially, we must abandon our will to God. This does not mean that we stop desiring. It means that we must want what God wants. Abandonment is, in no way, simply inertia. We must “act” but act “in God” who attracts us to this total abandonment: “That you be happy to fall into my hands, to be abandoned to my leading, to feel in yourself my holy and divine government, to act no longer except through me, in confidence, love, obedience, abandonment putting away all anxiety .[L 13].

It is the abandonment of a child into the hands of her Father; to live as a child, to be no longer a slave but free (Gal. 4:7). In order to be truly free, we must abandon our will totally to God.

Is the will the full human being? Beyond what one wishes for, is there not that for which we dare not wish, that for which we are not able to wish; this “unattainable something” for which one longs in the depths and core of one’s being? It is salvation and one cannot reach it except by grace. As we have seen, Nicolas Barré invites us to the furthest limits of disinterestedness, not of course to the acceptance of damnation, as St. Paul seems to be saying (Rom. 9:3) but at least as far as letting God have His way with us for ever: “let the loss of your own spirit as well as your salvation instill itself

powerfully in the deepest intimacy of your soul” [L 8]. “And that without losing confidence in God, we leave ourselves to His discretion for time and for eternity” [L 56].

Such an abandonment expresses itself through the worst of trials: “up to now, for the most part, God has led you in the daylight, sometimes more, sometimes less, always holding you by the hand, but now that He has led you into a region of darkness, it seems as if He has taken His hand away ... but it must not be you who changes your way, it must be God” [L 8]. This abandonment is indeed faith, i.e. that fidelity and confidence which persist when all light has disappeared, and reasons and arguments are useless. Faith is then, so to speak, abdication before God so that His Spirit takes the place of ours such that: “The All devours the nothing, and the Creator destroys the being of His creature to make room for His Own” [L 80]. This is an expression of surprising force. St. Francis de Sales says more humanely, but equally radically: “the real science, is to know how to let God act or not act both in oneself and in all things”.

CONCLUSION

These few themes are enough to give us a glimpse of Nicolas Barré’s great learning and his freedom of thought.

Nicolas Barré was greatly influenced by the Jesuits who were his first teachers. We recognise this in the importance he gives to the “discernment” a director ought to practise. Even so, he was open to other currents of opinion. The proof is that for himself he preferred the Minims to the Jesuits. At the same time he knew how to welcome the new insights of his own century with regard to the apostolic way of life and the consecrated life in the world. In an age when mysticism was violently under attack he was not afraid to echo Teresa of Avila, John of Avila and John of the Cross.

For Nicolas Barré this breadth of vision has nothing to do with a facile eclecticism or bookish knowledge.

What he is offering is something to be lived.

Michel Dupuy