

LIFE AND DEATH OF NICOLAS BARRE

LIFE OF FR BARRE

by Claude Raffron

Introduction

I. THE BIOGRAPHY OF N. BARRE

The biography of N. Barré presented here is the first to date. It was published eleven years after his death, in 1697, as a preface to his **Spiritual Letters**. The author was a Minim Religious, Claude Raffron, a contemporary of N. Barré.

A second edition, with some variations, was later written by the author, to be included in François Giry's great work on the Lives of the Saints. When F. Giry died, it was C. Raffron who completed his work. The edition which he had prepared and published in 1719, has an appendix which states : «... the lives of some great servants of God whose memory is venerated by the faithful». With the lives of Condren, Bérulle, Olier, Vincent de Paul, Jeanne de Chantal and others, the name of N. Barré appeared on May 31st, the date of his death.

The biography written by C. Raffron has been the basis of another Life of N. Barré, included in a book entitled «Diarum of the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters of the Order of Minims, Province of France, Paris, who died religiously between 1506 and 1700», published in 1709. This work was done by René Thuillier, Minim, also born at Amiens like N. Barré,. The thirty pages dedicated by the author to Nicolas Barré, in a book of this kind, which contains 1500 biographies; are an indication of the way he was regarded. He points out his principal source in saying that he had read the Preface to the Spiritual Letters written by C. Raffron. The original of the Life written by René Thuillier is in Latin. There are several translations in French, one of which is by Julien Loth in the 19th century.

At a later period, Henri de Grèzes, Capuchin, speaks again of C. Raffron in his biography which appeared in 1892. Thanks to the first Life of N. Barré by Raffron, de Grèzes was able to recapture his physiognomy, such as his contemporaries knew it and enrich it with detailed historical research.

2. THE AUTHOR OF THE FIRST BIOGRAPHY ON NICOLAS BARRE

Few documents quote the name of Claude Raffron. A history of the Minims from 1507 to 1907 published in 1922 by Fr. Roberti gives no indication of his entering, of his religious profession or his priestly ordination. However, the report of the General Chapter of the Minims, held at Marseilles in 1734, indicated that in the course of this assembly, the death of Claude Raffron had been announced to all the participants. This history refers to him as being the author of the biography of F. Giry, a genealogy of Saint Francis of Paola and editor of a revised edition of the Lives of the Saints by F. Giry.

A Minim of the Province of Paris, and much younger than N. Barré, he must have known him first in a master and pupil relationship, in the course of those long years when N. Barré was professor of philosophy, then several times professor of theology between 1645 and 1682. The admiration of the pupil was seen in all that was said of the qualities of his teaching and of the personality of a master in which role he is exceptionally qualified. Two important documents show that C. Raffron knew N. Barré in other ways. They were: -

- the report on the meeting of Magny
- the life of F. Giry

On the 16th of April, 1686, almost two months before the death of N. Barré, an important meeting was held at Magny-en-Vexin between the administrators of Rouen and Servien de Montigny, who came from Paris with F. Giry, accompanied by F. Raffron, as given in the report of the meeting. The presence of Claude Raffron at Magny was a proof of the trust which F. Giry had in him and in his knowledge of the works of N. Barré.

The Life of F. Giry, written by C. Raffron, showed equally how close the latter was to N. Barré. Chapter 13 presented the Founder of the Charitable Schools and his work. Before his death N. Barré wished to transfer the responsibility to F. Giry. It was then that C. Raffron had been chosen to accompany F. Giry on the trips which this new duty necessitated. Claude Raffron wrote himself that he had 'the honour of accompanying him during the space of two years, going with him to work where God was calling him†', that is to say, the organisation of the Charitable Schools and the formation of the Mistresses.

The Superior General of the Minims and the three theologians who approved of his works refer to C. Raffron as a theologian and assistant provincial. The few documents which we have shown him to be a close follower of N. Barré.

3. CLAUDE RAFFRON' S WORK

It is more than a biography in the modern sense of the word; it could be called a 'spiritual profile', as indicated by the title given to the original edition : 'Author's summary of the life in order to facilitate the reading of the letters'. He confined himself to whatever would throw light on the spiritual profile of N. Barré, in his infancy, education, vocation and choice of the Order of Minims, and above all in his mission as preacher, spiritual companion, and founder of an institute oriented towards 'instruction' of the poorest and lowliest which he preferred.

The date of the publication, only eleven years after N. Barré's death, when most of his contemporaries were still alive, explains the limited detail given by C. Raffron regarding persons, places or dates, which those familiar with other historical methods would like to find. Actually, the first edition gives only two dates: the year of his religious profession in 1642 at the age of 21, and the day of his death, 31st May 1686. Only one place is named - that of his birthplace in Amiens. Not one family name is given. A few rare concrete details, however, were added in the second edition which appeared in the Lives of the Saints 22 years later.

On the other hand, the whole text gives a strong indication that the author is writing about what he had seen and heard. The style of the time and the way of writing about the Lives of the Saints which was expected contrasted with the precise observations and facts which the author noted. Many expressions lead us on to think of N. Barré and his contemporaries: 'He said often enough...', 'He said one day to a friend', 'Those who know him will know...', 'Those who conversed with him...', 'Those who are still living can testify...', 'People saw this humble religious...'. All these expressions and concrete details could only be the result of repeated personal contact. C. Raffron's first source of information is undoubtedly his personal experience through contact with N. Barré and his surroundings.

C. Raffron's text conforms to the literary rules of his time regarding a saint's biography; its style of praise, the absence of title, the general plan followed in a work of this kind.

However, while being faithful to this procedure, the author was able to show the essential characteristics of Nicolas Barré's life.

A short outline of these could serve as a guide for the reader :

Introduction

N. Barré founder - Family, education, vocation, formation

Apostolic spirit, zeal, love of little ones, freedom and discernment

Humility, patience, submission to events, strength and confidence in difficulties

Prayer, life in the presence of God

Adoration

Disinterestedness - Faith

LIFE OF N. BARRE

by Fr. Claude Raffron

Although the name of the author of the Letters being presented to the public is well known to all people of great piety, I feel sure that those who are less familiar with his life will be happy to know more about him. Briefly, I just want to say that he founded the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus (a). These schools have now spread to all the provinces. The Sisters are working in them with great zeal, success and disinterestedness in all parts of France to which Divine Providence calls them, and are known as Sisters of Divine Providence (b).

This may be regarded as the masterpiece of this zealous man. Clearly he appears to have been inspired by God when the idea of the project first came to him. No sooner had he spoken about it than several of his most faithful followers, who were also reputable people, came together to support him in the carrying out of such a holy and noble work (c). Willingly, they made themselves and what they possessed available in order to get the work started and sustain its development, as they do to-day, with the zeal and perseverance that would cause all people and angels to rejoice. They have cause for rejoicing not only for the conversion of one sinner but for the great number already saved, and continuing to be saved each day, from the depths of hell (d).

The author of this great work, some of whose Letters are being presented here, was born in the town of Amiens of respectable and God-fearing parents (e). They noticed something out of the ordinary about all his devotional exercises and left no stone unturned to provide him with a good education (f) and, in whatever way they could, to co-operate with God's plans for their loving child and with the way in which he had been blessed by Divine Providence.

But, not wishing to enter into the detail of the circumstances of his life, in which he always displayed a great innocence, always behaving in a very edifying way, I will only say in general that he was gifted with a very fine mind which was open, broad, penetrating, universal and suited to all the sciences which he spent many years studying and in which he made wonderful progress.

A number of his writings, which were highly commended by his teachers, were kept in the library in Amiens for a long time as a matter of interest. These writings were evidence of his genius which has since become apparent in his much greater works (g). It was quite remarkable to see his general openness and facility with the high level sciences, his understanding of the principles of the arts, both liberal and mechanical. He was very happy to discuss any of these with all kinds of people. He often said it was useful for an apostolic person to know everything, so as to make use of all to win everyone for God (h).

But God's grace, which was working secretly in him, was inviting him frequently and strongly to give up this purely human kind of knowledge, in order to form him as a greater master in the science of the saints. Hence he did not follow his natural inclination and had to modify his desire for greater knowledge of everything. He acknowledged afterwards that it was perhaps a type of free thinking from which it was difficult to turn away.

He said that he had sometimes thought of entering a congregation whose principal work was the conversion of sinners, but was put off by the fact that they did not take religious vows early enough. He felt a strong desire in the depths of himself to consecrate himself totally and forever to the service of God. He was being called very strongly (i) to the Order of Minims (j) who became witnesses of his admirable way of life, his holy and noble undertakings and his absorption with the interest of his God. He made his first vows with the Minims in 1642 at the age of 21 (k).

Having worked on himself for a long time, this apostolic man's principal and central characteristic was the rescuing of very great sinners from the depths of their waywardness and the guiding of those already close to God to greater heights of sanctity. He had such a great grace for this and the love for Jesus Christ was so active in him, that he found himself continually drawn by a divine inspiration to proclaim at all times the excellent means of drawing close to God and becoming united with Him by the practice of true virtue.

Having got to know him, it was difficult not to yield to the gentle and firm challenges of one who carried out all his undertakings with such detachment and purity of intention, who spoke with such fire in all his sermons, whose maxims reached such lofty heights and whose advice was so spiritual and comforting. One could not help noticing his piety which was so constant, regular and similar to that of the saints who had received the great gift of procuring the conversion of sinners. Thus he has been God's instrument in the astonishing conversion of many of the most impious, profane and free-thinking people, and such like (l), who had been caught up in great disorders for a long time and from which no one believed they could be rescued. There are people still alive who can testify to this, who are no longer in the darkness of obstinacy, but in the admirable light of perfect piety and who are still to be seen daily prostrated at the foot of the altars, bowing down before the divine majesty, whom they had previously rejected. They never tire of acknowledging the great grace they received from heaven through the efforts and zeal of him who learned at the foot of the cross to conquer and win the most proud and hardened hearts. It was this power which he had over the minds of the impious which gave rise to the oft repeated saying, in the case of those whose conversion seemed unlikely : 'that person should be sent to N. Barré'.

It is not surprising then to see the power that this faithful servant had over people's hearts, when one considers the supreme effort (m) he continually made in his encounter with God in prayer and in solitary places which he was adept of finding. Those who were aware of the grace and merit he possessed have observed him secretly several times and testify that the ardour of his desires in prayer made him appear like a furnace of love. Such are the terms these witnesses use.

It is worth noticing that this man of God said of himself that he never had the same feelings for people distinguished by noble birth or natural qualities as he had for others. It is with these same feelings that he avoided and refrained from getting to know or giving direction to people of too high a rank in society. He said he was afraid that it would take too much time and prevent or lessen the value of what he was doing with the simple people, with whom he was sure he gained more than with the great and learned. He was never a respecter of persons unless it meant giving preference to the poor, the lowly and the most timid of all (n).

As rumour spread about this evangelical man's remarkable virtue and the conversions he brought about, people of the highest rank wanted to speak to him. One day someone came to tell him that a very great princess (o) wanted him to go and see her so that she could talk to him.

But this humble religious, whose enemy was human glory and who understood that this request was motivated by curiosity rather than a genuine need, asked his superiors to dispense him from this interview. He knew it would serve no purpose, but he obeyed when his superiors explained that it would not be polite to upset a person of such rank who had sent transport to bring him to her palace. He made the sacrifice and was a source of great edification for all who were with this great lady. Knowing this man's zeal, they saw him waiting rather than starting the conversation, giving no evidence of anything remarkable, keeping an attitude of a most humble religious who in no way sought to satisfy the curiosity of the princess. It was a heroism which made more of an impact on the wise than if he had responded to what had been expected of him and maintained his reputation by the brilliance and loftiness of his thought and his usual ardent zeal.

He could penetrate so deeply into the most hidden folds of conscience that people were very surprised to find he could discover what could only be known by God. This ability to know and penetrate the mind of the other arose out of the special gift of discernment of spirits which he had (p). Those who talked to him will remember the fire which appeared in his eyes and his firm and penetrating look (q) when he was considering a request from someone for spiritual direction.

His patience and humility were convincing proofs of his genuine virtue and of the true piety which was at the basis of all his undertakings. His Letters show the extent to which he felt a person should enter into his or her nothingness and lowliness.

It would be difficult to find a better way of understanding Christian humility and of reflecting more deeply on its roots, which are the principal basis on which every spiritual structure should be built (r).

One day as he was doing a great service of charity for someone, in the presence of some reputable men, a man suddenly became very angry with him, publicly insulting him in a number of ways, knocking him down and dragging him along the ground; he uttered several horrible threats against him which would have brought about an emotional reaction in anyone with less strength of endurance. But what effect can such external attacks have on someone who for a long time had endured interiorly the trials which God sends to anyone He wants to use as His instrument in His great designs? This humble religious was seen to kneel and, innocent though he was, say that he was guilty, ask for pardon and acknowledge his readiness to do whatever was required of him. When the angry man had gone away, N. Barré gave a beautiful talk to those present, saying that one needs to be armed with strength and faith to sustain such unexpected attacks without losing one's peace of soul. The next day, God permitted that same man to come back asking for pardon, admitting that he had been won over by Fr. Barré's humility and patience, begging him to forget the way he had insulted him and asking for his prayers. The saintly religious had no difficulty in complying with this request and even showed him some signs of goodwill.

He was totally accepting of all that came from God's Providence. He was never seen to be taken aback or surprised, as happens with most people, when extraordinary or irritating events occurred either in what concerned his state of life or any other matters. In all such cases, his principal practice was to adore (s) God's decrees with deep respect and without dispute, contenting himself with pleading, praying and trusting that God in His mercy would make all things work for our benefit and His greater glory.

His confidence in the divine goodness was so great that he used to say rather frequently, when all were against the setting up of the Institute which he founded, that everything was going very well and that it was evolving as it should (t).

It would be difficult to explain all he had to endure from people. Every effort was made to destroy his reputation and take away the credit that was due to him. He was accused before his superiors and in the presence of bishops of being immoral and evil; that he had recourse to magic (u) in order to deceive people and achieve his own ends. But he no sooner made his appearance and had in all simplicity replied to what had been said by his accusers, than his innocence was recognised and he was exhorted by his judges to continue his work. He told his friends that it was right that he should be tormented, that his calumniators should not be silenced, that it was their duty to do so and that they could not overdo it.

His prayer was a constant experience of God's presence and as soon as he could be alone, he was seen to enter into such profound recollection that it seemed as if he were in continual solitude (v). He maintained this attentiveness to God during meal time, while travelling and when speaking about things that seemed to be of a totally different nature. This was due to the fact that his heart was drawn and led by a very powerful attraction (w).

He was so drawn to continual adoration and to the exercise of humility that he spent most of his time on his knees when studying or writing. He was often found in this posture.

His disinterestedness was so great that although he was offered considerable alms and other temporal goods, he was never inclined to put the needs of his Order before those of other people who could be helped. Also, he was so detached from his parents that, having heard one day that his mother was on the point of death, he changed, for supernatural reasons, the decision that had been made for him to go and be with her during her last days, so as not to interfere with his main occupation, which was the conversion of sinners.

His faith was so alive that one would have said that he actually saw the truths and mysteries when explaining them, rather than just believing them only. This made a deep impression on those listening. Also he often said he had come from paradise, purgatory or hell (y).

He used to be so strongly moved when giving absolution in the confessional, that no matter how hard he tried to conceal it from his penitents, they became aware of it sometimes. One day some councillors of the Rouen Parliament, whom he was directing, plucked up the courage to ask for an explanation of this emotion which they witnessed. Since it was not being made public, he gave the following explanation : 'On becoming aware of my role as judge vis-à-vis this penitent at my feet and the dispenser of the blood of Jesus Christ, I imagine myself having in my hands the same Precious Blood which flowed on Calvary. I become vividly aware that it is for me to decide if it is right to pour it on the head of the sinner who is asking for pardon. I find myself overcome by a fear which takes me by surprise, as I think on the one hand of the infinite dignity of the Blood of the Saviour whose merits I am applying and on the other hand, I recall the unworthiness of the human person, whose present disposition is not easy to ascertain. This is what gives rise to the fear and trembling with which you have seen me beset. These good disciples were both satisfied and edified by this reply; which gave them fresh proof of the strong faith they had so often observed in the whole way of life of this exceptional director. They had chosen him because they saw him as a man of God. Indeed, it is fairly well known that he was one of the great masters of the spiritual life in our time.

What led him to become a master in mystical theology was the breath and universality of his knowledge, in addition to his long personal experience of enduring suffering, struggles, temptations and innumerable similar and extraordinary things at different times for several years. These struggles and sufferings were so great that he himself admitted to several of his close friends that God had led him by paths which were so rarely trodden and almost intolerable for one's natural strength, that the mere mention of them would cause him to tremble with fear and conjure up an image of the impossible.

One day he told a friend that for twenty-seven years he felt he had been in hell because of the violent struggles and inconceivable suffering branded on him by the powerful hand of God. With a heart totally devoted to his neighbour, he consecrated himself as victim to God for the salvation of souls (z).

Hence it is not surprising that so many great people and intellectuals from all walks of life made every effort to talk to him and get advice from this faithful servant of God, who had himself experienced so many times the fire and water of many tribulations.

It was clear to everyone that he had special gifts for bringing about the salvation of souls and directing those who were called to follow particular paths. On their own initiative, the superiors of his Order considered it good for the glory of God to exempt him, so that he could use his apostolic gifts in total freedom and bring the fire of divine love to all hearts with greater facility.

He spent twenty years, in different stages, as a theology professor and was appreciated by all. During that time he formed many good students in scholastic and mystical theology, who were greatly admired by doctors when defending their theses. Many of them became excellent teachers (a1) who have since been teaching the young religious of his Order.

His talks and sermons were so moving, so suitable and close to the minds of the people who invited him to preach that all his addresses contained manna for the heart. He always treated the Word of God with respect but he never took on the vain eloquence of the world, which is pleasing to the ear but does not lead to the conversion of souls (b1). In all his thoughts and expressions there was always something agreeable, subtle and firm which won the hearts and minds of those who listened to him.

He had an easy and friendly approach characteristic of those gifted with the freedom and joy that come from the Holy Spirit. Those who were unfamiliar with his special gifts, his inner depth and his thoughts, had difficulty initially in accepting his fiery approach and talks which always included parables and spiritual subtleties. But once people got to know his ways and his usual approach, all were won over by his originality and the marvellous meaning which he found in the parables he used (c1).

If corporal mortifications normally go side by side with true and perfect piety associated with the Cross of Jesus Christ, then the servant of God to whom I am referring was not deprived of the favours experienced by the followers of the Crucified. Not only did he have his own way of practising asceticism and devising thousands of ways of mortifying the senses unknown to others, but those who knew him well knew also of the extreme suffering he had to endure from illnesses which compelled him to have very painful operations from time to time. He bore all with great fortitude which greatly impressed those who treated him at such times.

He was often discovered during the secret hours of the night prostrated before the Blessed Sacrament, sometimes with arms outstretched in the form of a cross, sometimes using crude instruments of penance, at other times praying with great fervour for the salvation of sinners and always exercising great austerities, which greatly impressed those who saw him. It seems there were times when he kept almost continual vigil, taking a little rest on a chair which also served as a table (d1).

It may help to understand the Letters better if I add here that he was totally humble and naturally respectful; he was calm, easy, approachable, friendly, good and kind to everyone; at the same time, he knew when to be firm out of ardent zeal; in

the ardour of his zeal, he acted with a certain authority and used terms which were both strong and surprising, so that God's interests and glory may be procured and at the same time winning over those who sought his help. We should not be surprised to discover the same spirit in his Letters, a rather unique style and unusual expressions which could not be omitted without destroying some of the main characteristics of this great director (e1).

We must remember that he is a servant of God who is faithful to his gifts, who speaks to those who understand him and who does not want to extinguish the fire which has been set aglow in his heart from the heavens. He believes he must use the power which God has given him to lead people to Him, who would otherwise be slow, weak and unenthusiastic in reaching out for what is good (f1).

There is no need to say anything about the way he died, on the 31st May 1686, since a printed account has been circulated publicly (g1), which describes adequately what happened. I shall only add that a skilled artist who, happening to glance at the expression on the face of the servant of God after his death, was so struck by what he saw, that he decided to do a sketch on the spot (h1), without ever having known him. Later, a portrait was done from which copies were made which are now to be found in many places.

I do not wish to elaborate further, so as to be true to his first followers. They always had such high regard for this mysterious and grace-filled man that they thought one should be satisfied with his Letters, his message and the esteem held for him by so many of those who knew him well.

This short account may contribute to a better understanding of the Letters which follow. There are several hand-written volumes of Letters, all written by the same author, in response to people who would have consulted him about all sorts of different issues, and which could also be publicised (i1). For the moment, only those related to the title of this volume are being presented, in response to a request from somebody who is well known and deserves to be considered.

Undoubtedly many people, especially those who have to endure many trials in the spiritual life, will praise and thank Divine Providence to have given this century a man who had such knowledge and experience of spiritual direction; who in his Letters has left us some of his inspiration, spiritual and salutary advice, and so many beautiful signs of consolation in suffering and in struggle which could have been known only to the hidden martyrs of Jesus Christ.

Let whoever reads this keep in mind the grace, experience, perfect charity and pure intention of the author (j1).

NOTES

- a) In the course of history and according to places, several names have been attributed to the Institute founded by Nicolas Barré. The oldest manuscripts preserved until to-day, the writing signed by the First Sisters, dated 1669, open with these words : 'The spirit of the Institute of the Sisters of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus...' The Memoir of Instruction and Statutes and Rules published in 1685 bear the same name. The account of Fr. Barré's death makes mention : 'The Schools of Providence or Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus...' The name '†Sisters of the Infant Jesus' has gone through history and remains to-day the official name of the Institute.
- b) At the time of the publication of this biography in 1697, the Charitable Mistresses were not only in Rouen and Paris, but in l'Aisne and the North, in Nîmes, Montauban, Toulouse, Marseilles and in other localities surrounding these towns. See the Summary of the History of the Institute, published three years earlier, 1694; see also History of the Institute, by Henri de Grèzes, Pg 519-555.
- c) Nicolas Barré's first collaborators in the foundation of the Institute were Antoine de la Haye, Montigny, mentioned in the Summary of the History of the Institute. Also mentioned are the names of the Councillors of Parliament of Normandy : de Grainville, de Touvens and de l'Espinay whose names appear also in the Memoir of Marguerite Lestocq and in Reflections and Recommendations.
- d) The edition of the Life of Nicolas Barré by Raffron, in the Lives of the Saints, omits the first two paragraphs of the text and replaces them by a brief introduction of Nicolas Barré, apostle, cf Appendix 1.
- e) See Appendix 2, for more details on the family and infancy of Nicolas Barré.
- f) Nicolas Barré attended the College of St. Nicolas, directed by the Jesuits of Amiens from 1604. When he was enrolled in 1631, the college had about 1500 pupils. The plan of studies extended over 9 years, divided as follows : 3 years of grammar, one year of 'humanities' or literature, a year of rhetoric or eloquence, 2 years of philosophy and 2 years of theology. There were no scientific studies in the real sense of the word, but they were taught

mathematics, astronomical observation and mechanical arts in the context of the current interest in new sea routes and inventions such as the telescope.

- g) Fr. Raffron is referring to the teaching of philosophy and theology, so soon confided to Nicolas Barré, to his ministry of preaching and of spiritual direction, to the foundation of the Charitable Schools.
- h) See Appendix 3, on the studies of Nicolas Barré at the Jesuit College.
- i) Heb. 4 : 12; Rom 11 : 29
- j) The town of Amiens had 20 religious Orders (masculine) at the time. It is possible that Nicolas Barré might have thought of joining the Jesuits who had been his teachers; however, his choice was directed to the Order renowned as the poorest and the most austere of all - the Order of Minims. Their Founder, St. Francis of Paola, had for motto the word 'CARITAS' (Charity). Although they were originally hermits, their houses were near public places : churches, markets, shops... so as to be more accessible to the people when preaching the Word of God.
- k) See Appendix 4, on the vocation and the religious formation of Nicolas Barré.
- l) These words point to a rationalist current, sometimes atheistic, based on individualism, free interpretation of the Bible, free morals, already pointing towards the 18th century; a new social and religious climate begins to manifest itself by contempt of traditions and social and religious constraints which are either thrown out or ridiculed.
- m) Gn. 32 : 25; MAP 59, 91
- n) S.R. 1 : 17; MAP 47, 156, 157
- o) Most probably it refers to Marie de Lorraine, Duchess of Guise. She had known N. Barré in Paris, and had supported the opening of the first schools of Saint-Jean-en Grève and Saint Gervais, near the Manor of Clisson where she lived. In 1680, she was responsible for the sending of the Charitable Mistresses to Guise, which was thus the first foundation after that of Rouen and Paris.
- p) The reading of the Letters reveals the gift of discernment which everyone saw in Nicolas Barré. c.f. L. 17, L. 18, L. 27
- q) The keen penetration of his eyes is one of the traits underlined by his contemporaries and which all the painters of Nicolas Barré made an effort to express. The portrait of that epoch kept by the Brothers of the Christian Schools at Béziers testifies to it.
- r) See L. 22, L. 32, L. 36
- s) To "adore" and "adoration" are words frequently used by N. Barré. He sees adoration as a fundamental attitude of the creature before God, the starting point and aim of the spiritual journey.
- t) In the foundation of the Institute, N. Barré met many difficulties, not only from the clergy and administrators (lay), but also from his own confreres - the Minims, from the Provincial, F. Giry himself. Few understood the kind of life he proposed for the Charitable Mistresses. He was judged imprudent to entrust women with Christian education of which they were believed to be incapable. His refusal of financial security based on the system of 'endowments' seemed unreasonable to them and he was up against strong opposition on this point until the last days of his life. cf. FM 3, 12, 13; PM 27
- u) The end of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th saw a strong revival of sorcery, magic, Satanism. The accusation of magic often resulted in being condemned to death. Despite the terrible expulsion of sorcerers such things continued to increase. cf. L. 38
- v) The word 'solitude' emphasises here the vocation proper to Minims, who were called to a life of solitude - that of a hermit - alone with God.
- w) Like St. Augustine, Nicolas Barré, sees this attraction as the way God draws a person to Himself, which is personal for each one. As spiritual director he insists on the necessity of discerning this attraction and of following it faithfully if one desires to make spiritual progress. MD 23, 25, 39, 40, 41
- x) See Appendix 5
- y) See RR 1, on the 'state of hell'
- z) See Appendix 6
- a1) Nicolas Barré began to teach theology at the age of 26, in 1647, at the Minim Monastery in Place Royale, in Paris. F. Giry who entered the Order in 1652, was certainly among his students. Later, he became Provincial, and at the death of N. Barré, took the responsibility of the Institute of Charitable Mistresses.
- b1) See R.C. 4
- c1) All the writings of N. Barré are sprinkled with images and parables. Some of them are borrowed from the Bible : the pearl, the vine, the grain. Others reflect the rural life of his time : the fruit trees, the rain, the sun, the storm, the animals. Sometimes it is a real theatrical scene, such as are found in Letters 49 and 50.
- d1) See Appendix 7, on the Foundation of the Charitable Schools, the introduction of the following paragraph : 'I must not... that it,' which refers to the publication of the Letters, has been omitted in the 'Lives of the Saints'.
- e1) See L. 1; L.2; L.19; L.21
- f1) All this paragraph has been omitted in the 'Lives of the Saints'.
- g1) This testimony on the death of N. Barré (A.D.), has been written by Fr. René Thuillier, in the form of a letter. The text is entitled 'Letter to a gentleman' and is really addressed to the administrators of Rouen. A copy of it is kept in the Mazarine Library in Paris.
- h1) This painter is Joseph Vivien (1657-1734), born in Lyons. He came to Paris where he concentrated mainly on portraits, under the influence of Charles Le Brun. The portrait representing N. Barré is kept in the National Library.
- i1) It was Servien de Montigny who had this volume of Letters but all trace of them has been lost with time.
- j1) In the 'Lives of the Saints', the two last paragraphs are replaced by the titles of other writings on N. Barré; cf. Appendix 8

A SECOND EDITION OF THE LIFE OF N. BARRE

by C. Raffron

included in the 'Lives of the Saints' (Appendix)

1. Introduction

Regarding N. Barré, Minim and Founder of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus : the great zeal which N. Barré had shown during the course of his life for the salvation of souls, especially of great sinners, and the blessings which it had pleased God to grant him, invite us to make known the merits of this apostolic man.

2. Further information on his family and childhood

He was born on the 21st of October 1621, in the town of Amiens, capital of Picardy. His father's name was Louis Barré and his mother's Antoinette Pellé. Both were from very good families and lived always in the fear of God. They had several children to whom they tried to pass on their integrity and their wisdom; but they could not help having special care and love for the one of whom we are going to speak. From his earliest years, they noticed his inclination and affection for piety which led them to believe that he would bring a special blessing on the family, and be a good servant of God in the Church. They were surprised to see that the young Nicolas loved solitude and had a taste for prayer, at a time when other children hardly began to have the use of reason. He would try to hide from his parents in order to go to Church for the Divine Office of which he never grew tired. If he had to stay at home, he retired to a little oratory which he made for himself, to practice there in secret the little exercises of piety which he had prescribed for himself. It was in this sanctuary that the young Nicolas went to prostrate himself before God, to ask Him in his simplicity and with total trust, to restore to health one of his sisters who was dying and for whom the doctors had no hope. God in his goodness listened favourably to the prayer of this innocent child, and let him know that He had answered his prayer. He ran to the bed of his sick sister where his parents were and exclaimed that his sister would not die and that he was sure of it. It turned out just as he said. This little girl was always grateful to her little benefactor. She told everyone she met that it was to her brother that she owed the life that had been restored to her. She followed all his advice as he was older than her, imitating his piety and his good example. She became a religious of the Order of St. Francis of Paola also, in the monastery of the Minim Sisters of Abbeville, where she led an exemplary life of piety and governed the community with much wisdom and gentleness. She was deeply regretted by all her sisters when she died.

When the young Nicolas reached his 10th year, he felt such a strong desire to consecrate himself totally to God, that at that time he made a vow of virginity for life. In the course of time, he became more aware that the virtue of purity was a great gift of God and prayed fervently for it.

3) His education with the Jesuits in Amiens

His parents did not neglect to send him to school so that he could learn what was appropriate to his age. When he was at the Jesuit College, his Masters were not long in discovering his abilities. He had a very lively and penetrating mind. There were few authors he did not know or hear about, and he read with such ease that all those who were around marvelled at him. For a long time, in the family and in the first libraries of the town, they had kept several works of literature, geography, mathematics and such like as proofs of the capacity of his keen mind. Apart from the speculative sciences he showed a great interest in probing into the principles of the mechanical arts. What would have been very serious study for others was very pleasant relaxation and recreation for him.

4) His vocation and religious formation

It was in order to focus only on the Science of the Saints and to avoid the snares he found in the world, that he decided to enter the cloister. With this in mind he chose the Order of Minims. He was received and after the year of his noviciate, he pronounced his vows in the Convent of Chaillot, January 31st 1642.

He had excellent masters for his study of philosophy and theology; they saw the penetrating mind and the ability of this excellent student. Although he had a great aptitude for the sciences, he never omitted the two or three hours of prayer that he had set for himself daily. He was only a deacon when he was asked to take care of several young religious, to train them in the study and exercise of virtue. He was always moderate in his drinking and eating, and not satisfied with the penitential life of Lent, nor the fast which was observed during more than the half of the year in his Order, he added still more. He tried to have only what was left over from the others; his penances as well as long vigils and the exercise of continual prayer, finally reduced his body to that of a real victim, which he offered to God in a spirit of total abandonment. Having received the sacred mark of priesthood and destined for the ministry of the confessional, he began to work on the conversion of sinners, which had always attracted him greatly.

5) Prayer and God's presence

He was so closely united to God at all times that it was difficult for him to be distracted or to speak of anything other than this great subject. A religious, who was the procurator of the house of which N. Barré was superior, came one day to speak to him about a temporal matter. At the time N. Barré was totally engrossed in God while taking a walk in the garden. This religious, who is still living, said that N. Barré was so closely united to God that it took about a quarter of an hour before he was able to give his attention to the temporal matter which he came to talk to him about.

6) Spiritual experience

His mainstay during difficult and trying time was to pray almost continuously, to conform to the will of God and abandon himself totally to Him, whom he invoked as a good Father.

7) Founding the Institute

It was only after he had practised all these austerities and been involved in evangelical works over a long period of time that he was inspired to establish the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus and for this purpose to form Mistresses who would offer free instruction to poor girls who had need of it. This work was started in the town of Rouen through the generosity, alms and advice of Mr de Touvens, de Fumechon, de Grainville, and Mr. d'Espinay, the king's secretary. They were all highly commendable because of their illustrious family and moral integrity, having inherited the piety and zeal of their noble ancestors. They still continue to support this great work by their care and devotedness, finding the necessary finance for the maintenance of the Sisters being trained in a seminary and from where they go out to other provinces, making admirable progress. This is still done in the famous seminary near Saint Germain, in Paris, where a great number of teachers are also instructed and trained in the same spirit by people of the highest merit. These people who are responsible for them, will later send them, as they judge best, to different areas of the city of Paris or to provinces where they are in great demand. There is no need to say any more about this Institute, which has already been spoken of elsewhere, especially in the Journal (Diarium) of R. Thuillier referred to at the end of this text.

8) Other contemporary biographies

Those who wish to know more about the life of this venerable religious can refer to Fr. René Thuillier's lengthy eulogy on the 31st May, in Latin, in his book entitled 'Diarium', printed in 1709. It is also spoken of it in the Life of Fr. Giry, printed in 1691. But we will get to know the spirit of this apostolic man better through his Spiritual Letters, which were given to the public in 1697, which also have a summary of his life in the Preface.

ACCOUNT OF NICOLAS BARRE'S DEATH (A.D.)

INTRODUCTION

N. Barré died on the 31st May, 1686 in the Minim Monastery at the Place Royale, Paris. His colleagues and friends wanted to have the details of his last illness and death.

This account was put together in the form of a circular Letter by an unknown writer. We do not know to whom the Letter would have been sent, we can only guess. Perhaps it was written partly in response to a request from the Abbot of La Trappe (de Rancé) who, writing to Montigny on the 26th June, 1686, said : 'I would be much obliged if you could send me some details of his death as you already promised...' We can assume therefore that the letter was sent to colleagues, friends and the Sisters.

In the 17th century the account of the death of a holy person was regarded as something edifying that would serve as a reminder to Christians of their last end and of the need for conversion. Death was regarded as the epitome of one's life, and one's last agony as the final struggle against the forces of evil. Death manifested the holy person's struggle, trust and faith, and God's final triumph over evil. All of the above is exemplified in this account (A.D.).

We can glean from the text that the writer must have been a religious because of the references made to F. Giry, who was the Minim Provincial. The writer might have been R. Thuillier, as we find some expressions used here recurring in a short life of N. Barré which he wrote in 1709.

The original of this account has not been found, but there is a hand-written copy in the archives of the Sisters of Providence in Rouen. Many editions exist,; one of which appeared at the end of the 17th century. There is also a copy in the Mazarine Library in Paris.

The existing texts were not divided into articles. It has been done here for the sake of clarity and to facilitate reference.

ACCOUNT OF NICOLAS BARRE'S DEATH (A.D.)

Gentlemen,

1. In reply to your request, I am sending you a short account of N. Barré's personal piety, as it was apparent to me between 27th May, the day his illness seemed to take a dangerous turn, and 31st of the same month, the last day of his life.

2. During his last illness, N. Barré continued to say Mass almost daily or to receive communion, as he had done in previous illnesses. He lost none of the zeal that had always animated him in working for the salvation of his neighbour, whether by means of the ministry of confession or spiritual direction, or by the frequent letters needed to support and guide the establishment of the Schools of Providence, as they were called, or the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus, which were considered to be his masterpiece.

3. On 24th May, at about eleven o'clock in the morning, he suffered several attacks of vomiting and almost continual convulsions. On the same morning at seven o'clock, he had said the Mass that was to be his last, because the vomiting, which did not cease from that day until his death, made it impossible for him to continue receiving the adorable Body and

blood of his Saviour. Thus he was deprived of the consolation which he always seemed to experience during this holy exercise. But he took care to make up for this deprivation several times a day by frequent spiritual communions.

4. On 25th May, as the same discomfort weakened him very much, Father Corrector (1) noticed that he was exhausted by the confessions he was still hearing in his room and the attention he was giving to the direction of some men religious who were on retreat in preparation for the feast of Pentecost. He judged it necessary to ask all those who normally came to N. Barré to allow him to rest.

5. On 26th and 27th May, he again wrote, although with difficulty, several business letters in connection with the Schools of Providence. He intended to write others about three o'clock on the same day, 27th May, but he was too weak to do so. As evening approached, he indicated to me that he wanted to write one more. I told him that the superiors did not wish him to continue writing and had even ordered that the writing-desk be removed from his room. He humbly accepted this thoughtful and wise decision, saying : 'I am well aware of what that means.' As he always liked me to speak frankly and openly with him, I availed of this opportunity to tell him that people believed these fits of vomiting and convulsions were like the star that appeared at the Saviour's birth to advise the Magi to go and meet Jesus Christ. I said : 'This is the sign of the great King calling you.' 'Let us not forget what happened next', he said, 'but join with the Magi in saying : 'Let us go and offer him our gifts. Let us go and present our hearts as an offering to him' (2).

6. On the morning of 28th May he felt somewhat better, and several of his friends expressed their joy. I came in as they were talking but I did not refer to this apparent improvement. Having chatted with him for a while, I told him that he should be greatly consoled by the fact that the Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus - his great work - were highly thought of and approved by His Majesty (3), and also by the fact that the Mistresses of these schools, whom he had sent throughout France and even outside the country (4), were winning extraordinary credit for the Church by their good example and perseverance in giving instructions. I told him that in his present condition he could apply to himself the words which Jesus Christ addressed to His Father before leaving the world : 'Father... I have made your name known to them... I have finished the work which you gave me to do... Now I am coming to you' (5). 'I am well aware', he said, 'of what you are trying to convey to me by those last words : 'Now I am coming to you'. I see that you have a better understanding of what the outcome of this illness will be than those who give me hope of recovery'.

7. The same afternoon, I found him in a state of extreme drowsiness and it was feared he would fall into the kind of lethargy that had afflicted him for several days, two years previously. So I thought I would rouse him by asking what, in his opinion, was the shortest phrase or the most suitable expression in Holy Scripture that could be used as an ejaculatory prayer for a sick person in his state of exhaustion. He replied : 'I have always had the greatest regard for those words of the apostle, St. Thomas : 'My Lord and my God.' (6a. There is nothing shorter or more pleasing to God, nothing more certain to comfort a person. There is nothing more pleasing to God, because He is always delighted to see the one He created proclaiming the sovereignty of the Creator and at the same time his / her own nothingness. That is the meaning of these two words : 'My Lord'. Neither is there anything that can give more comfort to a person, because, if our hopes are raised by the consolation of God's goodness, the words : 'My God' show Him to be its source, since it is the nature of God to be good. Hence we should continually have these words on our lips and in our hearts, in health and in illness, and, for myself, I would particularly like to have those words recalled to me in my agony.'

On another occasion he repeated the same thought when he said that in his last agony his sole desire would be to acknowledge God as his only Sovereign for all eternity and that those around him would repeat words similar to those already quoted : 'You alone are the Holy one, you alone are Lord, you alone are the most high, Jesus Christ.' (7).

Between seven and eight o'clock that evening, I went to his room to offer him my services during the night. I found him very low, and, since it was evident from his great restlessness that he was suffering some mental anguish, I took the liberty of asking him if anything had happened. He frankly admitted that for the past hour he had been tormented by such horrible images of abysses and precipices, suggested to him by the devil, that his endurance was tested to the limit. He said he expected more attacks of this kind, but, knowing the power of holy water against evil spirits, he begged that it be sprinkled unceasingly on him and on his bed until he died. It is significant that in the midst of all his temptations, he could often be heard uttering the words : 'I believe, I hope, I want to love always.' (8).

9. On 29th May, at about nine o'clock in the morning, when Father de Montigny asked how he was, he replied in the words of Jesus Christ to his apostles, when preparing them to endure patiently the suffering His departure from the world would cause them : 'It is for your own good I am going.' (9). He was asked some time later whether he would be there to receive the Holy Spirit with the community at Pentecost. 'I do not think so', he said, 'but I will go to meet Him.' When they urged him to tell them what favours he would ask for the school mistresses whom he had always held in such high esteem, he replied : 'The Institute is a little cell in the Church. I shall tell the Holy Spirit that He must always be its source of life. It is a school. I shall tell Him he must always be its master. It is a small army which I am lining up against his enemies. I shall tell Him that He must always be at its head to lead it'.

10. On 30th May, two religious priests who had been among his best-loved disciples when he was teaching theology, begged him to give them his blessing. In his humility he refused, since they shared the same priesthood as himself. He would only make the sign of the cross, saying : 'I join in all your intentions and I beg God's blessing on them.' He did not have the same reservations but consented willingly when the provincial superior, whom he had chosen long before as confessor to the school mistresses in his absence and had appointed to give them informal talks, requested a blessing on their behalf. That afternoon about two o'clock, the same priest told him he was getting ready to give them a spiritual talk and begged him to suggest a topic. 'My dear Father,' he said, 'the Pentecost season which is now approaching is a time to be possessed by the Holy Spirit, so show them how the Holy Spirit must take possession of them and how they must take possession of the Holy Spirit ' (10)

11. At 3.00 p.m. he asked for the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, having prepared for it by the Sacrament of Penance which he had received daily since 23rd May. Before receiving the Sacrament, not only did he humbly ask pardon of the whole community assembled for the ceremony, but he added that he had special reasons for asking forgiveness of all the Minims in the Province, since, due to his continual illnesses, he had not always given the edification which might have been expected of him.

12. Early in the night, the temptations suggested by the devil caused him unbelievable mental suffering. Yet knowing that such trials can be overcome by a deep spirit of humility, he requested that the following prayer be addressed to God on his behalf :

'In a spirit of humility and with a contrite heart may we be received by you, o Lord, and may our sacrifice be so offered in your sight this day that it may please you, o Lord God' (11).

'My desire, Lord, is that when it pleases you to call me to yourself, you may find in me a perfectly humbled spirit and a truly contrite heart. It is in the practice of these two beautiful virtues that I would wish to complete my sacrifice.'

13. On 31st May, the day of his death, from five o'clock in the morning he gave several people the impression that he realised his end was near, and that the devil would renew his violent attacks against him in the awesome moment of his death. Although at the time he seemed to be better than on the preceding day, he asked them to have holy water ready

so that it could be sprinkled on him and around the room during the final hours of his struggle. The priest, of whom he asked this favour, pointed out to him that there was already some holy water at the head of his bed and that there was plenty in other parts of the monastery which would be available if needed. Still he implored the priest to do as he asked and give him the consolation of blessing more (12) , which was done at 6.30 a.m.

14. Between nine and ten o'clock, he lapsed into a state of extreme weakness and his agony began. While it lasted, the prayers he had asked for earlier were repeated again and again.

'My Lord and my God. You alone are the Holy one. You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ'.

Or

'In a spirit of humility and with a contrite heart, may I be received by you, Lord...'

Or again :

'I believe, I hope, I love.'

and frequently the holy names of *Jesus and Mary* were invoked.

15. No doubt all these words found an echo in his heart, as did others which were used to encourage and support him to the end. Yet he remained silent almost the whole time from ten o'clock until midday when he breathed his last. From the agitation he showed at 10.30 a.m. and considerable tossing of his head, it looked as if the devil was making a last attempt to overcome him, so I took the blessed candle and bringing it near his hand, I said : 'You know, Father, what the Church wishes you to learn from this lighted candle? By this light it reminds you that the light of faith, which it symbolises, has the power to banish all the darkness and all the illusions with which the devil may now be assailing you. Take it in your hand and say within yourself :

'I believe' or 'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?' (13)

After a moment, I went on : 'this light also stands for the light of glory through which you hope to see God for all eternity. Keep up your courage then, so that you may deserve to have Him forever. Finally, this lighted candle is a sign to you that, like the wise virgins, you must always have your lamp alight, if you desire to enter the wedding banquet-hall with Jesus Christ the spouse of your soul.'

Then as I urged him to tell me if he had heard what I was saying, he answered : 'Yes, I heard everything, and I also understand what this candle signifies'. So having pondered on the wise virgins' lighted lamps about which I had been speaking to him, he took the candle eagerly into his hands, raised his eyes to heaven and exclaimed :

'What a joy it is to enter heaven with them in this way;'

Then he pronounced the holy names of *Jesus and Mary* three times and these were the last words that crossed his lips.

16. At eleven o'clock he raised his head from his pillow, opened his eyes and stared into space as if he saw some terrible sight. Then with a look of indignation on his face, he cried aloud in words that could not be understood, because he was no longer capable of producing distinct sounds. However, judging by his reactions and what I had been talking about, we presumed he would have prayed in the following words :

'Let God arise, let His foes be scattered. Let those who hate him flee before him' (14).

'Come my God, come to my help so that your enemies may suffer the shame of being overcome by a weak creature. Lord, grant that those who have hated you in time and will hate you in eternity, may flee from your presence'.

Or he may have wanted to use the words of Saint Michael in his victory over the rebellious angels in heaven : « *Who can be compared to God?* »

17. The first prayer : 'let God arise' came to mind because I had quoted it immediately beforehand as being very effective in resisting the devil's temptations which were clearly torturing him and he understood what we were saying. The second prayer came to mind because I had been talking to him of the protection which the glorious archangel Michael gives at this very crucial moment of one's Christian life, a time which is also fraught with risk and danger. He still had sufficient strength and lucidity to apply all this to himself. From that moment until his last breath at midday, he remained so peaceful and serene that it looked as though God wanted to show that He had already begun to reward the fidelity which was so evident in all his struggles. Thus his death, which was so acceptable to God, was in perfect harmony with the outstanding sanctity of his life (15). I have spoken of the virtues he practised before his final illness because I hope that with the grace of Jesus Christ, they will all soon be made known to the public. Such is the ardent desire of those who have had the privilege of knowing him.

NOTES

1. 'Father Corrector' was the title given to the superior of a community in some religious houses of the time, including the Minims.
2. Mt. 2 : 1-12
3. Louis XIV
4. This seems to indicate that during N. Barré's life time, Sisters had already been sent on mission outside France. Research has not led to anything conclusive. In a book published in 1691, C. Raffron mentions the departure of Sisters for America. In 1687 the Sisters wanted to go to Siam (Thailand) but the King of France did not agree.
5. Jn. 17 : 4, 6, 13
6. Jn. 20 : 28
7. Words taken from the Gloria of the Mass
8. The account of a person's death was often presented as the last struggle against the forces of evil. This idea emerges more than once in the account.
9. Jn. 16 : 7
10. Rom. 8 : 23
'take possession of' : in Picardy there was a special ceremony to mark the taking possession of a heritage. This included going into a church, kneeling down, kissing the altar, ringing the bell. The solicitor pronounced the act of taking possession.
11. This was part of a text of the offertory of the Mass (Pius V) and is also found in the Bible : Dan. 3 : 39-40
12. It was customary to have water blessed every Sunday. This holy water would be used in the liturgy in a cleansing rite to ward off the attacks of the evil one. The 31st May was the eve of Pentecost Sunday when more water was due to be blessed.
13. Ps 26 : 1
14. Ps 67 : 2
15. It was believed that the last moments of a person's life determined whether they were saved or damned.