Director in the Darkness

A Life of Nicolas Barre (1621-1686)

FOUNDER OF THE SISTERS OF THE INFANT JESUS

By Dr. William Makin
formerly Laming Fellow of Queens College, Oxford

"They have a hidden treasure and do not realise"

MAXIMS FOR ALL PEOPLE

CONTENTS

Abbreviations:
POSITIO = Super Introductione Causae et Super Virtutibus ex Offico Concinnata Vatican 1970.

ONE LIFE IN HISTORY

Who can tell the impact of one life on history?

Cast a stone into a pond. Follow the movement of the ripples on the surface. A scientist, knowing the laws of wave mechanics, can skilfully calculate the magnitude of each individual impact; and even a child can see the best stones make the greatest waves. It is not so in human affairs, even though a glance at the history books might persuade us otherwise. It is not merely (as certain philosophers argue) that human events are too complicated to be subjected to scientific calculus. The real problem lies in the nature of the human soul itself. The history of souls is a spiritual history, a supernatural adventure. The human soul is an amphibian: partly open to historical inspection, partly hidden from our mortal sight. A history of Nicolas, and his intimate companions, observed through the eyes of angels, would "paint of souls the inward strife; their drops of blood, their death-in-life." 1

It would be a history of the highest idealism; of prolonged disillusion; of the inflow of the Holy Spirit. Unexpected setbacks would be countered by indomitable resolve; whose crown would be unlooked for ecstasy. Compared to this (the only truly definitive history) the facts, as they come together in the pages of our textbooks, are merely dry bones.

Traditional historians tell us, with the confidence of professionals, who were the truly top people: the heads of state, generals and reforming ministers. Even their least significant actions are immortalised in footnotes to their dispatches, official papers, carefully drafted statutes or diplomatic bags. Recently the state of peoples has taken centre stage; especially in the history of seventeenth and eighteenth century France. Here the focus is on carefully constructed graphs - statistics tabulating the ebb and flow of God's plenty, climatic change, births, marriages and deaths. Rightly viewed these are no dry bones but a magic casement, opening up the lost world of the past. Yet a drawback of this form of history is its impersonality. The heroism of the individual, in the face of colossal misfortune or injustice, shrivels like a dewdrop on the heated furnace of collective humanity.

But do we ever ask ourselves, as Christians, how does the course of history appear to the risen Jesus? Or how will it be unfolded at the Last Judgement? For in the eyes of Almighty God, history is not (and cannot be) reduced to the publicly significant words and deeds of a handful of statespeople or government officials. Nor is it a wedge of anonymous masses, whose screams reach us but faintly as they ride the ghostly roller coaster of distant triumphs and disasters. Heaven does not distinguish past history and current events as we do. Perhaps that is why the sequence of the Book of Revelation appears so confusing. In heaven the individual soul stands, like Job, at the heart of the world's theatre. Such are the saints, however they are called on earth, whose positive vitality and endurance in the face of the trivia or the abyss, can strike gold from the unconsidered small change of the passing moment. To such as these, the Last Judgement is nothing remote or problematical. It is merely placing the way we live now in the perspective of the beatific vision.

Earthly ignorance robs us of so much. We have to piece together a patchwork quilt of cause, effect and circumstance. In the life of Nicolas there are many silences. Of all the letters that he must have written, in his own hand, only a handful survive. And these from the period shortly before his death. We have only one of the letters he wrote in connection with the first twenty years of his work as founder and spiritual adviser to his Institute of Charitable Teachers. Even his instructions and rules, copious though they are, were often edited and published by others. We have his published letters of spiritual advice - meteors briefly illuminating the stratosphere of the mystical path. But they are curiously silent about his great work for the education of the

---

1 Matthew Arnold Stanzas From The Grande Chartreuse

poor. In state papers, relating to the foundation in Rouen, Nicolas's name is absent; the Institute being treated almost as a secular work. 2 The insights contained in his **Maxims for Spiritual Direction and Maxims for all People** are a precious distillation. But they leave us eager to know more; for their author did not expound his unique mystical theology in any abstract treatise. We have to glean the rich harvest of his life as a whole, if we are to find the true seed-corn of his spiritual legacy. As for Nicolas's gifts as a preacher; or his discernment into the buried life of souls; or his skill as a healer of those in spiritual extremity; only the husk of that once far-famed reputation remains. The outward fabric of this great spiritual powerhouse has seemingly vanished. For what is reputation if not a bubble on the stream of history?

Yet nothing is ever written upon sand. Every detail, down to the lightest word and the most trivial act, has been entered into the great book of the universe. The recording angels do not judge as the world judges. It is said, for example, that whereas Nicolas Barre's work for girls succeeded, his work for boys failed; or that it was significant only because it directly inspired the successes of Saint John Baptist de la Salle. But our human categories of success or failure were meaningless to Nicolas. He has left us a glimpse of this in his strange parable of the penniless servant, driven to hunger to earn a living by dragging heavy buckets to fill a tank with water. Payment was by results and - cruellest touch of all - the employer had removed the plug! The parable sounds suspiciously like one of those practical classroom Maths problems about filling tanks. When she discovered the problem and tried to replace the plug, the master prevented her. Her whole life had seemingly become a dreary treadmill to nowhere. But she never gave up. Then, suddenly, someone was pressing treble wages into her hand; and she looked round to see the tank had apparently filled itself.

2 e.g. POSITIO.. p.134-41

The story tells us a lot about Nicolas's peculiar vision of this world as a masked executioner - or in this case as a sadistic taskmaster or capitalist. But this oppressive feature of history, terribly real at the time to its innocent victims, is only God's mask. In the supernatural dimension the universe is truly a divine and beneficent creation. Behind the face of failure lies a certain promise of success. This is the heart of our experience of resurrection. For Nicolas this world was a sort of Purgatory - educating us to understand that a loving father lay behind the appearance of cruelty. In an age when Jansenists and Calvinists were confounding the mask of the stern taskmaster with the reality this was an important message. Today, when we are familiar with the idea of God as a loving father, we perhaps need to remind ourselves of the first part of Nicolas's paradox. In the misunderstandings of our personal lives, as on the stage of world history, God's face is often masked by a persona that seems arbitrary and cruel. The reason for that is mysterious. We can find the answer only by sailing straight for the heart of the mystery - in the bosom of Jesus. Only a metaphor will do, because the infinite can find no other way to communicate with the finite but by means of metaphors and masks, comical or tragic.

Let us picture the history of mankind as stored in a vast and miraculously infallible computer memory; or an infinite series of video recordings. Even that will give no idea of the peculiar all-wisdom of God which embraces not merely our thoughts and actions, but the long chains of possible consequences (like the bow-wave of a ship) which each individual act of will might exert along the sea of time. An awesome contemplation! But it is a necessary consequence of our faith that we are all makers of history; the Marys and the Marthas as well as the Pilates and the Caesars. But these fine calculations of cause and effect, second nature among the Holy Trinity, are beyond mere mortals. That is why we have been forewarned: "Judge not lest you be not judged." [Matthew 7:1] Nicolas was one of those rare individuals who seem to have passed outside time and into the heart of judgement: “I inhabit, at one and the same time, heaven, purgatory and hell; it seems

to me that I see and experience everything which transpires in the abode of all these souls."

Such supernatural breadth of vision falls strangely on most modem ears. Yet we can still experience something of the joys and sufferings of our human heritage by studying the past from many different points of view. We can read the history of warfare, the history of literature, the history of science, the history of religion. Schoolchildren are encouraged to dress up and imagine a day in the life of a peasant or a textile worker. All these things can recall the colour, and even the atmosphere, of a past that did things very differently. They can point to a historical dimension beyond our present. Even so the language and values of the past can still elude us; and nowhere more so than in the field of theology. Nicolas, like most of his contemporaries, saw life as a constant warfare with the Devil - an unfashionable figure today. Modern historians no longer recognise the devil as a historical personage; although their profession often compels them to be the impartial chroniclers of his works: division among Christians, wars, persecution, folly, ignorance, bigotry; division between classes, violence, injustice, unfair taxation, extremes of want and plenty. Through becoming aware of such problems, among Church and people, we realise there was indeed no shortage of Satan's works in Nicolas's day! "By their fruits you shall know them." [Matthew 7:21] But the original sin of our own modern age is to hack off the branches of the tree of knowledge without any suspicion that its roots are in eternity.

Nicolas Barre was not a great personage in the affairs of the seventeenth century; though this was still an age in which priests could exercise enormous political power.

When he was born, in 1621, Cardinal Richelieu was on the brink of seizing power in the councils of Louis XIII. As he was completing his novitiate with the Minims, in 1642, Richelieu surrendered his power to a close adviser, Cardinal Mazarin. Both these churchmen used political power ruthlessly till their deaths - methods which historians acclaim as brilliant statesmanship. It is hard for the Christian to see how they reconciled their interminable wars; their secret police; their quintupling of taxation with a fiscal system which tapped the marrow of the poor; or even their unswerving loyalty to their Protestant allies; with their official status as Princes of the Church. The textbooks record the lists of their sieges, battles, and treaties. None of their predecessors had conquered so many towns, demolished so many castles, and dispatched so many peers to the Bastille or so many poor men to the galleys. One important historical reason for the necessity of Nicolas's work among the poor was (observers in 1662 agreed) that crime, poverty, prostitution, plague, resort to magic, ignorance of the faith and rebellion had multiplied during the previous forty years.

Which weighs more in the scales of heaven; Alsace and Lorraine - which the two Cardinals succeeded in transferring from Germany to France - or the schools for pauper children, established by Nicolas Barre and his Teaching Sisters? The tit for tat effects of the two Cardinal conquests can all too easily be traced down the centuries. It is not so easy to count the human cost. And yet, nowhere is it written that either of these priests had any doubts about their eternal salvation. Doubts such as this brought Nicolas Barre to the point of breakdown in 1655.

But how to chart the influences which flowed from the love-of-God in Nicolas? How to assess, for example, the fruits of his work as a confessor? He specialized in giving advice on prayer, and helping others to progress through realising their immediate dependence on God. He made a particular specialty of those who had fallen into grave temptations, who were assailed by thoughts of the devil, or whose faith in God was gone. The latter not quite so rare a temptation, in that `century of saints', as we might suppose. If we knew the exact number of his penitents we might be able to graph Nicolas Barre's popularity, and therefore historical influence, against other famous spiritual

directors of the age. But is this really how things are weighed on a spiritual level?

Similarly, the historical importance of his teaching sisters may be measured on maps. These are the two Institutes, the Sisters of Providence of Rouen and the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus of Paris, both sprung from his foundation. There is that long role call of new teaching centres, all over France; beginning in 1662 and continuing to grow up to the revolution. After the revolution, the Institute was resumed, though in rather different form. It has since radiated to the remotest corners of the world. But, whatever its importance as a historical measure, geographical distribution or the mere existence of congregations of religious is an all too human criterion. All too often, our mode of assessment in religious history (counting miracles for example!) is borrowed from military or diplomatic history. And though there may be something to be learned from this approach, it cannot be allowed to be an ultimate criterion. We must look for the spirit of any religious order in an inward force, which cannot be confined by bricks and mortar. In the case of the Institute - the Sisters of the Infant Jesus - we find a continual willingness to renew the struggle with the ever-changing forms assumed by principalities and powers. It was their Founder's vision of unchanging ends which endowed them with the flexibility and will to find the means. As Nicolas wrote: "they have a hidden treasure and do not know it." [M.A.P.)

Such was the power and intensity of his vision that the problems of serving humanity in practical form acquired an inward resolution, through the Holy Spirit. Many of the more `down-to-earth' religious of the day found his approach head-in-the-clouds or excessively scrupulous. For he steadfastly refused to incorporate his teaching sisters in a formal enclosed religious order (like the Ursulines for example) or even let them take formal vows. Nor would he allow them to become legal foundations, so that they could own property, accept dowries and generate their own investment income. His letters make it clear that his vision of God centred on a complete abandonment to divine providence. But this abandonment was no mere quietism, no pretext for neglecting the nitty-gritty practical problems. He did not want the sisters to be preoccupied with the management of long rent-rolls from farmers or the complexities of investment in government stocks. He was aware of the financial problems many religious houses had run into through bad management. His own order, the friars Minim, had been licensed to take over the buildings of older orders which had run into difficulties. And he was equally conscious of the problems afflicting houses which had to cope with unexpected surpluses of capital wealth. [3]

Deeply conscious of the frailty of human nature, and we might say, intoxicated with the highest spiritual ideals, he multiplied regulations for his schools. His strict regulation of the life of the teaching sisters (who had taken no vows) seems, to modem eyes, excessively paternalistic or even puritanical. But we must always beware of viewing the citizens of the past (in some ways more foreign to us now than any of our contemporaries in the global village) through modem eyes. Nicolas was all too aware that the standards in some French religious houses, even a century after the Council of Trent, remained scandalous. Often the civil power, sometimes with armed troops, had to be brought in to enforce reform on recalcitrant and laxest religious. The passage of time, and also the upheavals caused by the religious wars during the last century, had turned some cloisters into holiday camps, rather than centres of prayer or charity.

Perversion of the original rule could, in Nicolas's view, be traced to economic rather than political causes: the stranglehold of a few wealthy families whose offspring aimed only at comfort and social consequence. Almost the only worldly pleasure renounced was

---

3 By the mid-eighteenth century the Minims, with more houses than any other single order in France, had fallen victim to their own success.

marriage and legitimate offspring. Nicolas appears singularly modern in resolving a moral disorder by economic and social analysis. But we must not forget that he was no determinist. All merely material elements were opportunities presented by the Creator; who liked to provide a challenge for the servants of God through this continual warfare against Darkness. He wished his sisters to be ready to go anywhere, at a moment's notice. To accept no gifts from their pupils. To take no thought for their dress or their old age or their diet. They were to live as servants of God, seeing the Christ-child incarnate in their pupils. Like the first disciples Jesus sent among the Galilean villages their reliance on Providence was to be complete.

He saw no inconsistency between this total abandonment to Providence; both in material circumstances and in the spiritual life; and the duty to be vigilant. There is something especially relevant today in his insistence that the cleavage between enclosed contemplatives and practical persons making their way through the world was a mistake. He saw in action; whether communicating the word to others or performing the more menial services in love; the natural fulfilment of contemplation. These were the first fruits of the kingdom; the new Jerusalem descending from heaven. Nicolas was a profoundly scriptural person. He allowed the words of Jesus to penetrate his thought so deeply that he quotes them as if they were his own. By temperament he was a mystic. Yet he was able to gather up the threads of the most mundane details and establish an inner dynamism in the heart of the common life. Whether as lecturer, librarian, sacristan, confessor or founder he used that key to self-perfection which turns on serving others. Through prayer he sought an inner dynamism; balancing the material and spiritual elements. These were the warp and woof of the wedding garment by which he sought to bring those he loved into what he liked to call the bridegroom's presence. And it is in the light of that presence, invisible to the secular historian, that the impact of his life must be weighed and measured.

The stone falls into the pool. The ripples expand and then dwindle. It is not so beside that crystal sea, where all tides merge into the single shoreline of eternity. There the cosmic vibrations from even one act of heroic virtue continually multiply; never diminish.

SPIRIT OF THE AGE

Nicolas taught the necessity for self-abandonment to the presence of God. God is there in every moment, however fleeting, in every task however humdrum. And we must look for that presence, also, in the details of the historical situation however worldly they may appear.

Nicolas was born in Amiens, then a fortress on the frontier of France, in 1621. His father was a devout Catholic, a member of an old and respected Amiens family. He was a small businessman; possibly connected with cloth manufacture, which was the basis of the town's prosperity. By the next century a branch of the Barre family was to be one of the town's wealthiest families and largest employers. Something of this same spirit of enterprise seems to have informed Nicolas's determination to multiply his charitable schools. His interest in trade schools, for example, perhaps reflects the desire of a craftsman's son to equip the population for a useful employment in which they could earn their bread.

There are fashions in everything and Nicolas lived in the first great age of state regulation. Study the volumes of statutes, by which Louis XIV's chief servant Colbert (1661-83) regulated the quality and production of French textiles. We recognise in Colbert's preoccupation with "the maxim of order"; in his determination to set even the "idle" religious to commercial textile production; something of the down to earth practicality and concern for standards which marks the Regulations of Nicolas Barre's Institute.

Perhaps that is why some sections of these rules appear dated - too paternalistic for modern tastes. For example, though the sisters wore no habit, not being enclosed, every detail of the cost, design, and material of dress was laid down in advance. But at the heart of Nicolas glow a passion which was the very reverse of paternalism. Humility was the door through which he walked so easily into the hearts of all who knew him.

Born into a comfortable household he must have seen around him, in the streets of Amiens, as he threaded his way to his first-class Jesuit school, the signs of growing poverty and deprivation. In the sixteenth century the exploration of the New Worlds, Asia and Africa had opened a new prosperity for Europe. The fortunate few - merchants, courtiers, aristocrats - displayed their new wealth in buildings, carriages, banqueting, conspicuous consumption of all kinds. The boom brought with it the now familiar cycle of slumps. Soaring prosperity for the few was followed by deprivation and unemployment for the many. It was from about 1630, when Nicolas, aged nine, was already becoming noted for his spirit of ardent prayer and sensitivity to the sufferings of others, that - records show - the deterioration in the state of the poor at Amiens became a matter of public notice. Historians argue that the French population had now grown beyond its resources. Certainly a cycle of famines and epidemics began which was to continue until the great famine of 1712. Paradoxically, in the eighteenth century, the condition of the peasantry was to be much easier than in the age of Louis XIV.

To the growing pressure on natural resources was added the greed and aggression of pent-up humanity. The government "turned the screw" on the tax-collectors; who in turn multiplied official bailiffs; who seized the peasants' cattle, crops and tools to pay their fees and arrears. Landless refugees flocked into towns like Amiens, which doubled in size. In 1635 there was war with Spain (which held much of what is now Northern France and Belgium). Just across the border the hedgerows bristled with Spanish armies and fortifications. More damaging than the fighting, which lasted twenty-four years, was the collapse of the cloth trade (whose principal market was the Spanish Empire). This must have affected the Barre family business.. We are told that sacrifices were necessary to pay for Nicolas's education.

Everywhere workers were laid off. There was no new employment for the refugees flocking in the country. There were no means of providing for the poor beyond the charity of private individuals, clergy and laity. The town was a seething mass of humanity. The rooms in the poorer quarter, where it was customary to pack as many as possible into one bed, were no longer adequate. Epidemics were inevitable.

Beggars swarmed everywhere - in the public squares, in the churches, in the Cathedral. There was nowhere for them to sleep and no prospect of employment. Prostitution was now the accepted alternative to starvation for many young girls and even children. The tradition that Nicolas made a vow of chastity at the age of ten rings strangely in our modern ears. What could he have known of the physical and emotional meaning of sex? But in that age one class was not socially isolated from another. Middle class children were neither strangers to the world of the street, nor protected from `adult' subjects. It was notable during his first public mission, at Sotteville in 1662, that Nicolas was particularly concerned about the problem of child-abuse. He pioneered the idea (strange to the age) that it was safer to have one bed per person. One of the reasons behind the education of poor girls was so that they would be able to respect their own bodies and find alternative ways of earning a living.

We tend to think of the past in terms of a golden age of simple piety. But we cannot understand Nicolas unless we understand that he lived in a society in which only a few were educated. Whatever the ideals held up by the saints, street morals were very rough and ready. The beggars of that age, and even some of the peasants and artisans, appear to have had little respect for the cathedral clergy of the civic authorities. Rioting was not infrequent and beggars would interrupt the services with insolent demands for food or alms. There was no police force, city prison or mental hospital. Infestation by plague was common and was particularly severe in 1635. The epidemic was made worse by sordid wrangling between the clergy and the civic authorities about who should pay the spiralling expenses of the new hospital for the poor.

Modern war; with cannon, armies and warships all many times bigger than in the middle ages; was more destructive. It was also suddenly much more expensive. In Amiens this was the main cause of the events of 1636, when Nicolas was fifteen. He was already acquiring fame, as a precocious schoolboy, for the penetration of his essays and an apparently insatiable curiosity about everything. The official cause of the riots which convulsed Amiens in that year was a new government tax on cloth, which threatened the source of the city's prosperity. It is notable that the richer families (the big masters of the cloth industry) sided with their own workers and were openly sympathetic to the plight of the poor. Although they did not themselves take arms against the government, they withheld co-operation on various business matters. The rioting came to a head just at the moment when the unexpected victory of the Spanish army at Corbie seemed to open the way to Paris and placed the whole province of Picardy in danger. Paradoxically, if it had not been for the foreign threat, things might have taken a more serious turn. As it was, the government - with no troops to spare - hastily compromised by withdrawing the tax and the alarmed citizens rallied round the king and cardinal to repel the power of Spain.

It was three years later, in 1639 that a similar crisis overtook the neighbouring province of Normandy. Nicolas had long felt that he had a vocation to the religious life but it was now that he decided to become a Minim friar in Amiens. In 1640 he left Picardy for Paris, a journey which would take him through the province of Normandy; where, twenty-five years later, he would establish the first house of his Institute.

Normandy, unlike Picardy, had not been invaded. But in twenty years of war, with no inflation, taxes doubled three times over. The burden

fell particularly heavily because of the strange tax-system; unreformed till the revolution of 1789. Normandy was scheduled to furnish almost a quarter of the total sum paid into the French exchequer. In 1639 there was a major revolt against the royal tax collectors. They called themselves the "Barefoot" rebels. They terrorised whole neighbourhoods and paralysed the royal administration. Some of the clergy and local officials were sympathetic, as the masters of the cloth trade had been in Amiens. The people were clearly being exploited. There was a hope of royal concessions. But, unlike the situation in Amiens four years before, the Spaniards were now in retreat on all fronts. Normandy was not a strategic frontier zone and concessions were felt to be unnecessary. There were plenty of troops to spare and the regular army moved in. The rebels were crushed. In 1640 the Lord Chancellor of France, magnificent in his ermine robes and shaded by a ceremonial canopy, began trying the rebels in batches of forty. His instructions from the government were not so much to establish the facts as to "get as many oarsmen for the royal galleys as possible."

We can, perhaps, imagine our young novice, riding thoughtfully towards Paris, and encountering these chained columns, taking their human cargo from Rouen to the depot in Paris. All his life Nicolas Barre was to see the face of Jesus in the poor. And, although he could not have known it at the time, his own special mission was to begin in a poor suburb of Rouen. Apart from the fact that one of his uncles had died a Minim, there was perhaps a particular significance in his choice of order. They were, at that time, the most austere in France; following a regime of abstinence and a strict vegetarian diet that we should now call vegan. Even in good times, the French peasants of the seventeenth century never saw meat. This was reserved for the upper classes; rationed not merely by price but by draconian seigneurial restrictions on hunting rights. Unlike enclosed communities, the Minims were active in the area of poor relief. Their convent in Amiens, where Nicolas initially resided, was at the heart of the low-lying part of the city; where the poorest inhabitants were crammed into narrow, winding streets, awash with liquid sewage when the river was in flood. We may be sure Nicolas did not forget these early images of child poverty among the plague spots of Amiens. And perhaps they came to haunt him in his (relatively) privileged life in the capital; where the Minim convent at Place Royale, occupied the most aristocratic and fashionable square in the City.

Although not many Minims figure in the calendar of saints, they took the ideal of heroic sanctity very seriously. Part of their modernity was to realise this ideal by encouraging the development of the talents of individual members to the full. Rather unusually, in view of the intellectual decadence which seems to have eclipsed the orders in France, the Minims sponsored a range of outstanding publications: in science, music, technology, Biblical scholarship, history and economics. Nicolas's early brilliance (especially in Mathematics and mechanics) is well attested. So far as the creation of modern science goes, the seventeenth century has now been recognised as a critical turning point - though few were aware of it at the time. Apart from the Jesuits, the Minims are almost the only order to have actively promoted the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Perhaps Nicolas Barre's ability explains why he was transferred from Picardy so soon. The Paris houses had the best teachers, libraries and facilities. Soon he was studying philosophy (which in those days included what we now call science) and showed such flair that his astonished tutors hastened to offer him a lectureship.

The relative prestige of science and theology were almost the reverse in the seventeenth century to what they are now. It is all the more interesting that the Minim Order was particularly attractive to friars interested in science. The Minim Niceron published books on the sort of technical, mechanical problems which we know had specially interested Nicolas as a schoolboy. Marin Mersenne (1588 - 1648) who spent his life at Place Royale, was the correspondent of most of the principal scientists of the day. English Protestants - like Hobbes and the

Cavendishes - and the circle of French sceptics, like Naude, La Motte le Voyer and Gassendi, had a firm place in his friendship and were constant visitors. This press of learned men to Mersenne's cell made the convent at Place Royale, in the 1640s, one of the powerhouses of European thought. The library was a further attraction. Marin Mersenne's biographer, Hilarion de la Cote; who had written also on the importance of educated women in history; shared with Nicolas the responsibilities of librarian at Place Royale. From 1653-5 Nicolas assumed full control.

To sum up: various cross-currents had gathered to a focus by the mid-seventeenth century. The traditional order of church and state (essentially local and paternalistic) was being transformed through the soldiers and bureaucrats of absolute monarchy. Provincial towns, like Amiens and Rouen, were being drawn into a nascent world economy. The Aristotelian science of the middle ages; which the universities used as a sort of applied theology; was under attack. Slowly it yielded to the secular experimental philosophy of Galilean science. It is not surprising that movements were accompanied by a new education of both sexes. In a period of rapid change tradition and custom were no longer such certain guides to the future. Children must be better equipped, and discipline and judgement necessary to give a more flexible response to these challenges. To follow in parental footsteps, or to learn by heart, was no longer enough. It has been said, not without reason, that the childhood, and the seminal power of education, was at least as important in this period as the discovery of America; of perspective in painting; or the invention of the telescope. Ignatius Loyola was one of the pioneers and it is no accident that Nicolas was educated by the Jesuits. For it was the generation of Nicolas and St. John Baptist de la Salle who brought the magical discovery of the plasticity of childhood into the cottages of the people.

THE MINIM FRIAR

On his arrival in Paris in 1640 he was sent to the Minim Convent at Nigeon, near Vincennes. But he was soon to be transferred to the nerve-centre of the order at Place Royale. This was where the Order's most promising novices were taught. Nicolas Barre was professed in 1642 and soon found himself lecturing on philosophy. This included what would nowadays be called astronomy, physics and chemistry. However, although his earliest bent had been towards these subjects, he was happy, at the surprisingly early age of twenty-three, to become Professor of Theology instead. Fr. Raffron tells us that this decision was deliberate. Nicolas confided to him his fears that his passionate desire, to pursue all the sciences - "to know everything" - had to be curbed. Otherwise, he feared, he might fall into an uncontrolled "libertinage d'espirit." The possible significance of this phrase, meaning literally "a debauched mind" will be examined in a moment. It was soon after this, in 1644-5, that Nicolas Barre made contact with the Saint Sulpice circle, centred on J.J. Olier and Bourdoise. The latter was creating the prototype for the new breed of diocesan seminary, and was an important figure in the Oratory movement, inspired by Cardinal Berulle.

Cardinal Berulle (1575 - 1629), was a leading diplomat and statesman of the counter-reformation in France. He wished to turn the Church into a great power-house for evangelization. This idea inspired priests of the generation of Bourdoise and Olier to adopt his plans to promote the formation of parish clergy and bring a more informed approach to both lay ad clerical spirituality. Berulle was a patron of Catholic scientists, like Descartes and the Minim Marin Mersenne, a colleague of Nicholas Barre from 1614-1618. Nicolas Barre lived in an age in which the old fashioned scientific outlook, still basically that of ancient Greece, was giving way to a new science. Its key ideas were to be laws deduced from experiment and mathematical equations. Its cornerstone was

considered by some a dangerous novelty: an infinite universe in which the earth revolved, with the other planets, around one star – the sun.

Berulle realized the dangers of a religious imagery which had become rooted in Aristotelian and medieval science. His writings promoted a more Christ-centred and scriptural devotion; informed by the spirit of the new sun-centred cosmology, outlined by canon Copernicus. Had Berulle not died in 129, his influence might perhaps have moderated the Church's view of Galileo (condemned in 1633). Pope John Paul II recently reversed the verdict of 1633 and rehabilitated Galileo's view of scripture. Berulle's ideas found a ready audience in the Minim order, which was generally sympathetic to the new science and strongly committed to spreading the faith among the people. Father Mersenne was not afraid to publish Galileo's work; even after it had been officially condemned by the Pope. 4

By 1649 Nicholas had become a member of J.J. Olier's new association for promoting Catholic educators of the poor, under the patronage of St Joseph. J.J. Olier was a key figure in organizing poor relief in central Paris at this time and it is probable that Nicolas also made the acquaintance of St. Vincent de Paul, who had the education of the poor very much to heart. J.J. Olier's view, that the common people needed a saint who would also be a schoolmaster, must have sunk deep into Nicolas Barre's imagination. It must have been soon after this, in the early 1650s, that Nicolas had his first intimations of the Institute. But he spoke his thoughts to no one and ten years were to pass before Providence revealed how this seed was to bear fruit. J.J. Olier was a mystic and perhaps his influence now guided Nicolas towards the writings of St. Teresa of Avila and (much less well known at that time) St. John of the Cross. It is quite possible that Nicolas had, as a youth, already been exposed to mystical influence from the Netherlands and the Rhineland. A Kempis's masterpiece, **The Imitation of Christ**, was linked with a tradition of popular school-mastering through the Brethren of the Common Life. A nephew of the French Provincial of the Minims was studying his life and works in their great library at this time.

From its geographical position, Nicolas's native Picardy was exposed to a wide range of cross-border religious influences, sometimes viewed with suspicion by the authorities. The seventeenth century was a great age for the classification of heresies. There was Jansenism and Quietism from the neighbouring Catholic Netherlands; what was then termed a `Babylon' of mystical sects in nearby Protestant Holland; to the South, the Illuminism of the Rhineland. Cardinal Richelieu's secret police was particularly vigilant in rooting out Jansenism and Illuminism. The latter was a form of quietism, or an excess of mystical enthusiasm. Certain religious houses in Amiens became "infected" with it in the 1630s. It may well have the Minims' reputation for orthodoxy, combined with their zeal for the poor, which helped determine his Nicolas Barre's own spiritual writings, discussed in the section **Radiance**, cannot easily be pigeon-holed into any "school". Their originality was to combine key notes from a number of traditions with extreme boldness and a remarkable sureness of touch. What stands out clearly is the accuracy of Nicolas Barre's insight into "the twin abysses - the abyss of God and the abyss of man." His spirit flows, like a hidden spring, from a deep bedrock of Catholic orthodoxy.5

Nicolas did not achieve this balance through blindly following some spiritual director still less by quiet reasoning in his study. Rather it sprang from a critical life experience; a blessing hardly won, such as Jacob wrested from the departing angel. Nicolas Barre's spirituality was rooted initially in his early family life. But it acquired its depth and cutting edge through his experience of religious community. The monastic milieu holds the key to the unerring spiritual discernment which our "director in darkness" was later acknowledged on all sides to

4 J Campbell "The Living Reality of Galileo ". Clergy Review 1984 12

5 Professor Bremond POSITIO P.534-6

possess. The calmness and detachment of his maturity, was the result of a crisis; provoked, at least in part, by his too ardent pursuit of the Minim ideal. As a young man he sought to combine the purest intellectual rigour with an extreme desire for personal sanctity. Although anxious not to neglect the opportunities offered by the convent at Place Royale to employ his remarkable intellectual talents, he opted to abandon his lectureship in philosophy for one in theology. He had come early to endorse St. Teresa's view that no teacher of philosophy (however useful to theology its lessons might be) would decline the honour of a chance to teach the Queen of the sciences. Perhaps he wished to distance himself from the enthusiasm for secular learning and science shown by other Minims. Yet even the study of theology was too abstract to satisfy his thirst to enter the heart of the Christian experience.

Nicolas Barre, perhaps under the influence of J.J. Olier; whose writings denounced the ego as a "nothingness", and the flesh as a "sewer of impurity", unworthy even of food and drink; began to pursue a path of ever-increasing self-denial..6 By the 1650s he took to depriving himself of sleep - perhaps, eventually, became unable to sleep - and spent his night in prayer in the chapel. He clad himself in the paraphernalia of self-inflicted penance: the iron studded belt; the steel tourniquet; the hair shirt. He scourged his body and mingled dust and ashes in his food. His diet (already strict) fell below the modest levels permitted. By the time the authorities intervened to check this recklessness, (a burning for personal sanctification which Nicolas Barre, at a later period, was to diagnose as one of the false goals of traditional religious orders) it was almost too late. He had consumed his body like a candle on the altar. He had become, to all appearances, physically and emotionally burnt out.

It may seem impertinent to enquire, at this distance in time, what were the reasons for these extreme austerities. Were they perhaps merely a religious fashion of the day - much as painful self-questioning about the role of the religious is now? This is not quite true. The Counter-Reformation; whilst certainly very far from liberal in any modern sense; had quietly moderated the more extreme of self-lacerating piety. Ignatius Loyola practised such austerities in his early days at Manresa, later steered his Jesuits towards a gentlemanly moderation. St Teresa, and St. John of the Cross, whilst not ruling out the use of the discipline, greatly reduced the frequency with which it had hitherto been applied. 7 The Minims were very much in this tradition; anxious to avoid excessive rigour; whilst at the same time concerned about the moral laxity which appears to have paralysed some of the more traditional religious houses in France at this time. They did not prescribe regular physical self-punishment or extremes of self-denial; being content with an extreme simplicity of life and diet. But individuals who wished to embark on especially heroic programmes of personal sanctification were left free to do so.

Nicolas's behaviour, even by the standards of his own time, seems a world away from the spirit of the humanistic gospel, promoted by St. Francis de Sales or Cardinal Berulle. During these years he adopted, with perhaps excessive literalism, St. Paul's imperative: "to make up in my own body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ". (Col 1:24) It is a measure of the force of this impulse; to mortify normal human affections, and adopt an extreme of heroic ascetism; that Nicolas refused the permission, extended by his superiors, to visit his dying mother. All this was very much in tune with an austere strand of contemporary spirituality. Such gospel precepts as the rejection of family were taken quite literally. St.Vincent, for example, who distributed millions to the poor refused on principle to give a penny piece to his own parents. The Duchess of Aiguillon would descend from her carriage to prostrate herself full length in the mud, before crucifix, in full court dress.

6 J. J. Olier La Journee Chretienne I p.54-5, II p.13-16

7 Nicolas urged his teaching sisters to avoid or mitigate the use of corporal punishment

Could it be that Nicolas Barre, having taken a somewhat impulsive vow of lifelong chastity at the age of ten, was attempting to subdue temptations of the flesh? His own statements: that he had been led to doubt his own salvation; that he had been afflicted with an acute depression lasting many years; that he had been denied the sight of heaven; seem to indicate clearly that his problems were more deep-seated and more spiritual. What little we know of Nicolas during this period suggests a soul in torture. This is reinforced by the reputation which he acquired, in later years, for counselling all those imperilled by despair, diabolical visitations, and unbelief. If he became` known for his skill and understanding in what were considered "hopeless cases" it seems likely that this was because he had trodden this strange and terrible path himself; perhaps soon after his profession. It is an illusion of the twentieth century that unbelief was not a temptation in previous ages of faith. Indeed, it seems likely that when Nicolas Barre spoke of diabolical temptations, it was often a shorthand for temptations to despair and loss of faith. He was never wholly free from these trials, even at the moment of his approaching death.

It seems to me (though this is only one interpretation) that the motive behind these austerities; which were never wholly abandoned even in his maturity; was a burning desire for that certitude which only a personal spiritual encounter with God can bring. Nicolas, in his spiritual letters, uses a telling phrase in this context: "le sentiment experimental". There is more than a hint of the primacy of this "experimental feeling" for the presence of God in his writings; a certainty, beyond anything which academic theology could bring. This use of the term "experimental" was perhaps derived from the new science, already mentioned. And yet Nicolas Barre roundly condemned profane philosophy (a form of science) for encouraging unbelief and weakening the faith. And, as we have seen, he regarded his own curiosity as a potential danger. To a twentieth century mind this might appear an unenlightened or restrictive attitude. But in fact, as librarian of Place Royale, he was well placed to know the extent to which science and scepticism were leading some great minds astray. Wrapped up in the quest for knowledge, as an end in itself, humanity all too easily neglects our relations with God: "our total environment, our natural power-house; in whom our whole being is rooted and grounded". (Spiritual letters p.86-8) Could it be that Nicolas's deeply felt need for a deeper, more interior, certainty in spiritual matters was his response to the challenge which a new and sophisticated abuse of science had brought to traditional faith?

In the 1640s and 50s there flourished in France a sort of sceptical underground, dubbed the "Deists" or "libertines of learning". The free-thinker and swashbuckling duellist, Cyrano de Bergerac, was one of the more colourful exemplars of this new paganism or libertinage. We might perhaps draw a parallel between the custom of avenging trivial insults by fighting to the death; which claimed some ten-thousand victims before its suppression; and the atmosphere of fierce adversarial debate in religion and philosophy. As lecturer in philosophy and theology, and above all as librarian, Nicolas Barre would have encountered the arguments for and against the Deist. Indeed, his own use of the term **libertinage d'esprit**, when speaking to Fr. Raffron, seems conclusive here. This phrase seems to combine two contemporary terms associated with religious doubt. **Libertinage**, literally debauchery but here 'free-thought'; and **esprit fort** literally 'strong mind' but in contemporary usage `atheist'. Without denying the faith openly, which would have brought them into serious difficulties, these **libertins** made use of subtle points of scholarship and science to sow seeds of religious doubt. A number of these free-thinkers had been friends of the Minim Fr. Mersenne, who died in 1648. With a view to converting the deist and the crypto-pagan, he had become deeply engaged in what would nowadays be called "dialogue". A number of free-thinkers - some sincerely questing for truth, others perhaps cloaked in a fashionable cynicism - frequented his cell at Place Royale.

State, or public libraries, were still in the future and it became natural for such intellectuals to draw on the rich resources of the library to verify contentious points. Under Nicolas Barre's direction the collection doubled in size to over twenty-thousand volumes and became one of the largest libraries in Europe, outside the Vatican, specialising in the most recent science. Nicolas Barre; particularly from the time that he became librarian; would therefore have been exposed to all sorts of radical and unsettling influences. The Englishman, Thomas Hobbes, with La Motte Le Vayer, and Gabriel Naude, together delighted in unsettling the most sacred matters. They were frequent visitors to the Place Royale library.[8]

Perhaps, his own initial interest in philosophy, in which he had excelled, combined with his knowledge of mechanics, led him into questions which, as teacher of theology, he felt increasingly unable to answer. The resulting challenge to his most deeply held personal beliefs may hold the key to his inner conflict: may explain the apparently groundless fear that he, who had taught others, might himself become a castaway. St. Vincent de Paul himself told Bishop Abelly that confessions made to him, when a young man, by an unbelieving priest, had plunged him into a state of black doubt which had lasted three or four years. Yet such doubts, once cleared, had been the very springboard which led him into his great labours for the Paris poor. [9] Bishop Abelly was a close friend of J.J.Olier's spiritual director in 1635-5, when Olier himself survived some sort of crisis involving demonic temptations.

Whatever the truth behind this veil of historical conjecture, it is clear that the Minim superiors regarded the problem as a product of "excessive mental speculations" rather than any physical disease. His programme of medieval austerities was abruptly suspended. He was plucked from the academic hothouse of the capital and removed from all things intellectual for several years. He was soon made sacristan at the Minim house in his home town of Amiens, a task which he carried out with pleasure. It is indeed notable with what attention to detail such mundane offices as portress or cook were to be outlined in the new rules of his Institute. It was possibly as sacristan that he first began to grasp the idea, embodied in his rule, that a sense of the presence of God could be recaptured through the most humdrum practical duties. As he slowly recovered health, this growing realisation led him on to question the traditional boundaries of the mystical and the active life. Not until four years later, in 1659, was he back teaching theology; this time at the Minim House at Rouen. By now it was clear that his recovery was almost complete. But also that, at 38, he was a changed person.

Contemporaries described this experience in purely spiritual language. Nowadays we might use the catch-all label of the "nervous breakdown". However that might be, the finger of God is not to be circumscribed by human language. Nicolas had been through a kind of ordeal or initiation; he had killed one self and risen to another. He had entered the Holy of Holies and laid himself upon the altar in the spirit of the great High Priest. His offering had eventually been accepted, if in a wholly unexpected way. He had acquired a deep spiritual wisdom, which impressed itself on all whom he encountered. Suddenly he found himself in demand as a spiritual director and confessor. It was apparently chance which brought some members of the influential **parlement** of Rouen under his spiritual direction. And chance again which led him to join the devotions of a circle of clergy, surrounding the parish priest at Saint Amand, who was keenly interested in promoting the Tridentine schemes for Christian education. But behind these hazards Providence was silently gathering the threads into a pattern - nothing less than the implementation of the old Saint Sulpice plan for an order of charitable schoolteachers.

---

8 R Pintard Libertinage Erudit I p.31-48, II p.348-9. 1942
9 L. Abelly Vie du Venerable Vincent de Paul 1664 p. 117-19

The subsequent foundation of his Institute, after stormy beginnings, followed by two decades of labour as its spiritual director, were to exact a formidable toll on his health. And in any case, visible traces of the shadow through which he had passed had never left him. Strange “tremblings” were observed to visit him during his private meditations; and in the confessional, also, at the very moment of giving absolution. To the end of his life he bore, like Jacob, these signs of a solitary wrestling with the angel. Yet he never, for a moment, spared himself or turned his hand from the plough.

Though he continued teaching theology to seminarians, and eventually resumed his old job in Paris in 1674, he had become a new man. Those "excessive mental speculations”, so alarming to his superiors were never again to ruffle the still centre of his thoughts. He was henceforth to retain this quite remarkable degree of spiritual equilibrium throughout life's darkest storms.

ROUEN

Rouen, the regional capital of Normandy, was the keystone of Nicolas Barre's apostolate until 1675. Though eighty miles inland, it was a major port with important fisheries, shipbuilding and rope-making industries. Like Amiens it was a centre of cloth manufacture, with a cluster of related industries such as bleaching, linen-making, tailoring, tanning, hat-making. Its bright red ceramics had not yet been ousted from European tables by the mania for porcelain. These mostly small-scale industries were located in a warren of narrow streets, half-timbered houses and crazy gables; broken only by a stone-built archipelago of churches and religious houses. Their Gothic pinnacles, gargoyles and statues rose like reefs out of a sea of lathe and plaster. With a population of eighty-thousand - second only to Paris - Rouen was inferior to the capital in such matters as sewage, street lighting or public order. It had many of the problems we now associate with any third world urban centre.

Those in work had to labour round the clock for modest wages; and there were armies of seasonally unemployed or destitute. In the words of a government report: "In the suburban manufacturing districts the workers have nothing to lose... The vagabonds who infest the city are a riff-raff, godless and without religion or instruction; they live like animals without distinction of kin, conceived and nourished in vice, passing their whole life in this way and proceeding naturally to all kinds of crime".[10]

One of the obvious ways to make a large improvement in the condition of ordinary people was by education. Both the Renaissance, and the new interest in industrial manufactures, had generated a widespread feeling that schools for the poor would combine spiritual uplift with moral training and an education for skills. Here was a foundation for

---

10 quoted in R Kierstead State and Society in Seventeenth Century France 1975 p.242-3

self-improvement and a way out of chronic unemployment. So far few practical proposals had been realized – lack of money and suitable personnel were among the drawbacks. As early as 1543 the city council of Rouen had ordered the education of beggar children in basic literacy and numeracy. But because of other financial priorities - the religious wars and foreign conflicts – the decree remained largely without effect.

The existing state of education was pitiful. Neither the artisans of Amiens; the more industrious sort of people that Nicolas might meet in his Father's workshop; nor the Norman peasants who joined the great barefoot rebellion, had access to even basic schooling. Such schools for the general public as existed were fee-paying and their incompetence was notorious. Flogging one boy on the back of another was the main visual aid. Children of all abilities and ages were mixed in a single room and set to learn by heart. Schoolmasters, frequently incompetent, were protected from the consequences of cruelty, drunkenness, or absenteeism by a powerful and restrictive guild. The guild, or Corporation of Master Scribes, was medieval in origin, going back to the time when all books were written by hand. It was organised, like guilds in manual trades, to protect the incomes of the craft-masters. They regarded all innovations as a threat to their income and multiplied apprentices as unpaid labour. In 1651 the oaths and secret ceremonies, often associated with reception as a “master”, were made illegal. By the 1680s Colbert’s trade regulations, and the expansion of state-funded industries, had reduced them to a shadow of their previous power.

Despite the emphasis of the Council of Trent (1545-63) on the establishment of diocesan seminars for the clergy, written catechisms and the education of the poor regions with sound elementary schools were the exception rather than the rule. Another reason for this, in France, was the suspicion with which the decrees of the Papal Council had been greeted in Gallican circles. Gallicans who were to be increasingly influential after the religious wars argued that the French Church, though Catholic, ought to be more independent of Rome. Lawyers and royal officials viewed the idea of an increase in Church influence through education with alarm. The schoolmasters insisted, largely to protect their own low standards, on the laws which prohibited a priest from teaching. It was argued that priests would use parish schools as a general purpose source of income. With the notable exception of the Ursulines (an enclosed order teaching upper class girls) and the Jesuit schools for boys (which had aroused suspicions in proportion to their success) Catholic schooling remained undistinguished. The Ursulines did organise for the education of the poor at Dole, which became part of France through the Treaty of Nymegen in 1678. It was the Protestants - called Hugenots in France - who tended to achieve a better standard of basic education. Good elementary schooling was always important to them because everyone had to read the Bible and master Calvin's catechism.

One of the few Catholic organisations in France which whole-heartedly adopted, at an early stage, the Tridentine emphasis on catechising the laity and educating the poor was the Company of the Holy Sacrament. (See Appendix I). There were, historically, a number of similarities between Fr. Barre's ideals and those of the Company. Cardinal Mazarin's official suspension of its activities in 1660, and the loss of its records in the subsequent enquiry, makes it difficult to know how far its educational programme was put into practice. But that it ran free schools for the poor, from 1650 to 1660, and that some of these survived its dissolution, is undoubted. The Company also organised catechism of adults, in order to discover the state of popular moral and religious knowledge.

The findings of these catechetical missions, like those organised by Nicolas Barre's sisters at Sotteville in 1662, paint, to modern eyes, a surprising picture. The backdrop to France's "century of saints" was an urban poor that had, apparently, not the slightest idea what Christianity was about. They were not in any sense unbelievers; but popular understanding of religion was often a muddle of superstition and

hearsay - like the lady who told the sisters at Sotteville that there were three gods. A government report, around the time when Nicolas Barre was setting up his mission, confirmed this picture. Why was this? The religious wars of 1560-98, and the civil wars of 1648-53, had bred a rootless townsfolk sunk in astrological, irreligious and demonic attitudes. There is evidence for a dramatic increase in popular resort to witchcraft, in the neighbourhood of Rouen, in the 1660s. Such was the enormity of the moral crisis addressed by Nicolas Barre. In 1669 he issued what may be regarded as his first rule. It carried the names of only thirty sisters. Yet his confidence, in the face of the sheer scale of the problems, is a witness to that undaunted faith, which is willing to move mountains.

It may surprise a modem reader to learn that the idea of educating the poor was regarded by many as subversive. Much of the hostility, and indeed persecution, faced by Nicolas Barre, came from this source. Children were regarded as the property of their parents. Aristotle, still the great authority, taught that children were the poor man's natural slaves. They remained a valued source of cheap labour through the industrial revolution. In the eighteenth century Voltaire complained that the little schools, by educating the poor, had reduced the supply of agricultural labourers (frequently female) to landowners like himself. There were many in society who would have agreed. Before the French Revolution it was seriously argued that education of the lower orders instilled a reluctance for manual labour and aroused unrealistic expectations. Or, worse still, it fulfilled them; thereby encouraging a social mobility which flouted the natural order of society.

The rewards of being able to write and cipher were certainly more than purely spiritual. In France the demand for literacy, once confined to the Church and a small number of royal clerks (often churchmen), was now fuelled by an ever-increasing royal bureaucracy. There was, if anything, an excessive proliferation of officials, even in the humblest town-hall. Peasants who were literate were much better placed to steer through this jungle of paperwork, or understand new tax laws, than their illiterate neighbours who could only make a mark. The latter comprised some eighty percent of the population. French Catholic peasants were over twice as likely to be illiterate as Protestant peasants – a sociological fact which may explain the tendency of Protestants to colonise business and the professions. A poor Catholic girl, who had become literate and numerate, could greatly improve her marriage prospects, despite her lack of dowry.

The originality of Nicolas Barre's scheme did not lie in the idea of educating poor and underprivileged Catholic children. It was rather his peculiar genius to create institutions sensitive to popular needs yet sufficiently flexible to accommodate existing institutions. The test is that the Institute was tough enough to survive the hostility which efforts to educate the poor often provoked. It is no small achievement that the Institute took root and thrived amidst the jungle of petty jealousies which always tend to spring up around the politics of poverty. The main reason for the demise of the Company of the Holy Sacrament was that it became the victim of its own success. Its Directors were too ambitious and took on too many areas.

Pre-revolutionary government in France remains something of a labyrinth, even to the historian; a tangle of local and national institutions, as Gothic as the magnificent West Front of Rouen Cathedral. But it was the Renaissance facade of the **parlement,** or law courts, which housed Normandy's most powerful public body. There is no English equivalent for this institution, which it would be quite misleading to translate as parliament. Its members (called councillors) were usually very wealthy; for their grandparents or great grandparents had bought their office from the King. They could (in theory) be dismissed but in practice were allowed to pass them on as a bequest; along with their lands or government securities. But although many of them had come to own extensive estates, and had acquired noble rank, their ancestors were usually middle class. Their functions were

threefold. Firstly they were required to register all royal edicts, on taxation or other matters, concerning the province of Normandy. Secondly, they were a court; the supreme court for the province, in all civil and criminal and most ecclesiastical matters. This brought in a great deal of income and made the judges even richer. Thirdly the members of the parlement were directly or indirectly responsible for many purely administrative functions of the province. The growth in royal power, particularly after 1660, placed public order increasingly in the hands of Normandy's Provincial Intendant. But the members of the **parlement**, with local interest very much at heart, held the keys to many doors.

One such door was the Hospital General. (See Appendix II). Until Nicolas Barre's arrival in Rouen, there seemed to be no-one with the time or money available to do much about the education of the poor; not even, apparently, the Directors of the Hospital, on whom those duties now devolved. Indeed a certain tension existed, in the early days of the Institute, between the Hospital's desire to exert its paper authority and the closeness to their local community of Nicolas Barre's sisters. At one time the demand was being made that the sisters reside at the Hospital (though on the other side of the town from the schools). It was the influence which Nicolas came to have on the directors of the Rouen Hospital which made it possible for that distrust to be replaced by co-existence and co-operation.

Nicolas Barre began his first Norman mission at Sotteville in 1662. It was in 1666 that he made his famous invitation to the first female lay teachers "to live in community" and follow a rule. One of his suggestions, that they should eat their meals in common, has a characteristically apostolic ring. The Sotteville mission seems strikingly similar to the sort of thing the Company had sponsored. One reason it had fallen foul of the hierarchy and the parish clergy (as well as many lay people) was the practice of enquiring into the religious knowledge and morality (especially sexual morality) of each parish. The alarming picture of large-scale ignorance and domestic vice which such enquiries often uncovered scarcely redounded to the credit of existing diocesan practice; over a century after the closing session of the Council of Trent. The effect was somewhat similar to the shock ay child abuse statistics today. The mission at Sotteville seems to have had a household to household brief; enquiring into the , personal beliefs, habits and sleeping accommodation of some four hundred families. This is exactly the sort of project which had led to friction between the Company on the one hand and the parish clergy and the bishops on the other. It is no wonder, therefore, that the author of this account, Sister Lestoq, writes of fierce clerical opposition in these early days. [11] Some time before the Institute's extant registers began, in 1670, this broad-brush approach to a "family apostolate" seems to have been discontinued. The sisters' duties were, under a later rule, linked with their schools. Catechism for older people remained an important part of their work. But it was limited to volunteers who must be taught in the schoolroom, using questions from the manuals prescribed by the bishops, only on Sundays and feast-days.[12]

It is perhaps a reflection of the increased tension between Church and state (which was one result of the royal edict dissolving the Company in 1666) that in the request to the Intendant for formal royal recognition (by letters patent) of the existence of the Institute at Rouen, in 1679, Nicolas Barre was not mentioned. The two lay administrators, appointed by the Hospital, received the credit. [13] Canon Farcy writes: "We do not know the result of this application". [14] It would have brought the Institute directly to the notice of the King. We have to enter the atmosphere of the time to understand why the religious aspect of the Institute, and the priestly character of its founder, had to be played

---

11 POSITIO p.150-3
12 Statutes and Rules Chapter eight "Obligations and Special Duties of the Sister Mistresses" sections: 11, 13, 25
13 POSITIO p.133-4
14 L'Institut des Soeurs du Saint Enfant Jesus dices de la Providence de Rouen 1938 p.67

down. There was the Gallican rivalry between Church and state, in matters educational; which led, in the seventeenth century, to the temporary expulsion of the Jesuits, and continued strongly up to the first world war. Government hostility to creating new religious orders, and even suspicion of those already in existence, was particularly marked after 1660. As a Minim, one of the few orders in France to receive enthusiastic government patronage during this period, Nicolas Barre was well aware that the pastoral needs of the people could often be better served by the reed rather than by the unbending oak. But the most immediate cause was perhaps the distrust, particularly strong in Normandy, of the missionary zeal associated with the Company of the Holy Sacrament. It was the Archbishop of Rouen himself whose complaints to Cardinal Mazarin had provided the immediate excuse for the government's suspension of the Company in 1660.

How was Nicolas able to navigate these wandering rocks, and earn the support, first of the Archbishop of Rouen, then of the **parlement**, the Royal Intendant and, eventually, of Louis XIV? It is most important to realise, in the organisation of the teaching sisters, that legal control of all the finance and administration was vested in an executive, known as the Secret Council. Its lay members were: Grainville de Fumechon, councillor in the **parlemen**t; Pierre Fouvel of Touvens, also a councillor, succeeded by his son in 1689; Michael de L'Espinay, advocate in the **parlement**. The Abbe Servien de Montigny represented the clergy. Two of three laymen were on the board of the Hospital General of Rouen. 15 The intimate relations which Nicolas Barre established, perhaps as early as 1659, as spiritual director to a number of councillors in the Rouen **parlement;** and later with laity like Mme de Maillefer or the influential Duchess of Guise, was an important key to the future successes of the charitable schools, Their independence, doubtless, was secured. Yet it was an independence clearly under the aegis of the state.

15 See Appendix II

What manner of men were these members of the Secret Council? It is important to realise that secrecy, in this case, meant no more than confidential. Mazarin's suspicions of the Company came to centre on the existence of a Secret Council of laity; great noblemen who communicated by cipher and supervised every aspect of its provincial organisation. As senior judges and civil servants the administrators of the Institute had impeccable credentials. Their long legal gowns, trimmed with fur or scarlet, and special hats for "president" (like academics at degree days) were visible proof of their respectability. Because of the rising status of the law they increasingly commanded greater public respect than the short cloaks and swords of the old nobility. They were called "little gods" because swarms of litigants and suitors followed them everywhere. First and foremost royal, and therefore loyal officials, they were not without an eye for the natural interests of the Norman people. Their immediate ancestors had, after all been tally clerks, small merchants, thrifty craftsmen or shrewd peasant farmers. In the great revolt of 1639 their jurisdiction was suspended. The crown suspected (not without reason) that they secretly sympathised with the peasants' plight. Back in 1592, in the wars of religion, the **parlement** of Rouen had (with Spanish help) baffled the army of the King of France. Staunch Catholics, they rejected the then Protestant Henry IV; who (partly because of this rebuff) decided to turn Catholic the following year.

Servien de Montigny, a mixture of new legal blood and old high nobility, had at thirty-five renounced politics to become a priest. His birth might have immediately secured him a bishopric (that is how such matters were often settled then). But he had withdrawn altogether from the world and lived as a hermit. It was Nicolas Barre who persuaded him to place his formidable intellect, and legal knowledge, at the service of God's poor. In course of time he would become Nicolas Barre's alter ego in the organisation of the Institute. It was perhaps no accident, in view of the later evolution of the Institute, that Nicolas Barre was able to draw on the expertise of one who at the age of thirty

had been private secretary to the Queen and had first hand experience of courts.

But there were others of his class, who did not seek Holy Orders, or withdraw from the world, who saw justice and public administration as a form of religious calling. Some of their colleagues were corrupt, others docile tools of the government of the day. But in every age there are some who see their high office not as an opportunity to profiteer but as God's commission in the long war of light against darkness. Newly fashionable anticlericals might sneer at these devots or "holy Joes". But they genuinely fought for justice and the good of the poor. They established the modern tradition of lay Catholic social action. In such families, the younger sons already became priests or their daughters professed religious. Nicolas Barre's proclamation, "to speak through the Holy Spirit, good news to the poor", awakened their deep social conscience. Many of these magistrates were to contribute, on a covenant basis, to the establishment of Father Barre's charitable schools. The Lady Associate, nominated by the Council for the vital task of liaising between the religious superiors and the Directors, was often one of their womenfolk. Their daughters were to be among his first recruits.

Once these facts are understood the historical background foundation of the Institute becomes clearer. There were strong practical reasons for not founding a religious order on the accepted model; registered as able to accept donations of land or investments in mortmain; with the sisters bringing dowries and taking vows for life. This model, if accepted, would have had the advantage of placing the schools under the financial, spiritual and administrative control of a single superior. But it would have created difficulties for the schools, which would have been independent of royal control. How would their activities have related to the state run boards of the Hospitals General? 16 Because of the monarchical structure of old regime France, Louis XIV identified himself with every aspect of the state. He saw the regional Boards of the Hospitals General as quite as much under his personal command as a crack regiment of musketeers. Relations between Louis the Great (as he now liked to be known) and the Church were increasingly difficult. The schism between France and Rome became formal soon after Nicolas Barre's death. As it grew from a provincial into a national and church-wide institution, a full-blown teaching order might easily have fallen victim to its own success. As things were, the more the houses and schools multiplied, the greater the royal interest in, and support for the order became - particularly under the influence of Louis XIV's morganatic wife, the devout Mme de Maintenant. Sometimes the ways of the Lord seem hard to understand. But we must not forget that the hand of Providence often works unseen, through what can outwardly appear to be purely contingent historical circumstances.

At the same time we must look beyond what Nicolas Barre would call mere "political understanding", beyond "our wretched human reason", if we wish to glimpse what was in the mind of the founder. The Institute emanated from a deep spiritual vision. It was prayed over in silence, for some ten years, before being unveiled to Servien de Montigny. Nicolas conceived the Institute as the "narrow door": the image of Christ himself; beset by enemies and strengthened by persecutions, like the early church. He pictured it as a new Jerusalem, descending from heaven; for the discomfort of Satan and the ruin of ignorance. This image, to which we shall return later, may seem a little distant to modern eyes. It recalls those painted cloud-bursts, framing the heavenly hosts, and supported by pudgy cherubs, suspended from innumerable baroque domes and ceilings. But there was nothing of artifice or incongruity in Nicolas's dream. Though its realisation, to be effective, had to take root in the institutions of his own day, the vision itself transcended time and space.

---

16 See Appendix II

He wanted the spirit to stand clear as beaten-grain; all worldly attachments being stripped to the bone. Not that he thought that there was anything evil in money itself but it was the nature of our human mind to be betrayed and corrupted by all reliance on false securities. He had sought, long and hard, in his years of silent meditation, to pour the spirit of his Institute into the mould of the gospels. He wanted a truly apostolic foundation, practicing community of goods as closely as seemed practical. He wanted all those whose lives were touched by his to learn to experience his world through the heart and mind of Christ. And to do this it was necessary to prise human nature away from the comforts of this world. The whole-hearted refusal of the normal securities of religious provided the fulcrum; the rule was to be the lever, through which the Holy Spirit gradually effected the desired detachment.

To become, in his own words, Christiform: this was the ideal that he placed before himself as spiritual adviser, and before director, teacher and pupil alike. He conceived the future history of the Institute through the prism of the beatitudes. Nicolas Barre struggled all his life to distil the inward experience behind the sermon on the mount. He found it in Jesus, pierced through the heart by human history. Here lies the true key to his suspicion of endowments, his total abandonment to divine Providence, his distrust of the principle that nothing succeeds like success. He passed on, like a torch, this relentless determination to be utterly detached from all worldly supports. Otherwise it would become all too easy to gloss over the presence of the Christ-child in our own hearts; and in the eyes of the poor, the ignorant and the helpless. In an age in which the claiming of privileges; even by clergy and religious orders; was the accepted norm, he sought to create a tiny area, in the heart of his sisters, from which the idea of privilege had been evacuated completely.

Nicolas had formed definite ideas about organisation which combined the highest idealism with a deep psychological realism. He preferred to reserve for himself the spiritual direction and leave the rest to the lay boards. He had experience of the abuses which might creep in when religious exercised financial as well as spiritual control. In the document Reasons for not Accepting Endowments articles 5 and 13, Servien de Montigny implied that Nicolas Barre had reluctantly given the sisters in Rouen permission "to set up a house" and that as a result they enjoyed greater legal security as to their endowments than those in Paris. It is hard to know how to interpret this. But a special relationship between the two houses remained. Above all Nicolas Barre's principle of lay ownership, by the Directors, of all the buildings at Rouen and Paris were not covered by the decree abolishing religious orders. A separate measure, covering all educational confraternities, lay and clerical, had to be devised.

Though Nicolas Barre's work at Rouen eventually took root and became the springboard for expansion elsewhere, there was continued opposition and suspicion. The school-masters feared the competition from the sisters; especially since their gifts and background went far beyond what was usual in a teacher of the day. At one point Nicolas Barre's influence was presented by his opponents as the fruit of witchcraft. This absurd accusation was perhaps related to the witch-mania, already mentioned, which gripped Normandy around this time. The standard method in following up such accusation was torture, extravagant public exorcisms, and public executions. It is interesting that the **parlement** of Rouen advised, in 1670, that witchcraft should no longer be a matter for criminal prosecution. Instead "those who have sought to yield themselves to the Demon, should, where possible, be restored to the hands of the Church for instruction, preparatory to true penitence". This modest decree was to be a turning point in a sad history of fanaticism. The use of the word "sought" implied, for the first time, that to actually make a pact with Satan was not really possible. Historians think this decree shows the influence of the new

science, which increasingly rejected the possibility of magic and blamed confessions on torture or the delusion of clinical factors like depression.17

But notice that those handed over to the Church are to be "instructed" with a view to preparation for confession; not (as was usual) exorcised or tortured. This provision suggests that another influence had been at work here. It is interesting to see, from his letters, that Nicolas Barre seems to have argued on the lines of the **parlement** decree. Although witches might vainly imagine, through despair, that they could make a pact with the devil, God had set limits which gave Satan no such powers. Satan's kingdom is to be overthrown by winning over the heart of the would-be witch; by counselling the despair and depression, which is the real source of the problem. Then penitence will follow. In view of Nicolas's known influence on key members of the **parlemen**t, it may be that the decree reflects his expert advice. The attempt to smear him with accusation of wizardry, probably related to his natural gifts for inspiring others, combined with the resentment of the ignorant. By reclaiming would-be witches from spiritual despair Nicolas was also saving them from torture and the stake. It was common for those at all sceptical about any aspect of witchcraft to be accused of being in league with the devil.

Nicolas was certainly the last person to underestimate the supernatural, and the power of Satan, as his letters and accounts of his death made clear. But this is not the same thing as a superstitious belief in the sort of antics that witches got up to in order to harness Satanic power. Some other Minims at this time use "Satan" or "demons" as a shorthand for the temptation to despair. Nicolas seems to argue, consistently, that Satan was powerless to separate any soul from Christ, however deep the pit of sin or spiritual evil; unless the soul itself abandoned hope for good. The fact that Nicolas was in such continual demand as a confessor and therapist in "hopeless cases" may be linked with the fact that Normandy was one of the first provinces to douse its witch-fires. Nicolas Barre may well deserve some credit for this.18

The combination of lay status, with an intense devotion to the spirit of apostolic poverty, makes the Institute apparently unique - a phoenix among the religious associations of the day. Though other priests and religious gave their approval to Nicolas Barre's principle, others with the courage to follow this path were in short supply. As Nicolas Barre wrote: "The Institute is a narrow door and few are finding it". (Original reference Luke 13:24). Yet there was one precedent for the separation of spiritual direction and ministry from administration and finance. The practice of using priests, like Saint Vincent de Paul or J.J. Olier, to carry out the missionary and charitable work; with lay boards controlling the financial side; was the principle behind the organisation of the Company of the Holy Sacrament. (See Appendix I) There were naturally important differences. Apart from their promises to honour the blessed Sacrament and make more frequent communions, the members of the Company; whether lay or clerical, were not to follow a rule, practise community living or specialise in any charitable task.

Nicolas Barre was all too aware that the history of schools, originally established to serve the poor, was a sad catalogue of embourgoisement and encroaching materialism. Initial surrender to demands from a few fee-paying parents led inexorably to the gradual segregation of fee-payers from the poor within the school (or even the same class-room); followed by a retreat into social respectability and an amnesia about the school's original function. This is a pattern followed by many English grammar schools in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is one reason why Nicolas Barre was determined to avoid, at all costs, a preoccupation with what he called the "curse of security". The mistresses, like the Institute itself, were to deny themselves ownership of anything of value. Even the modest gifts of

17 R Mandrou Magistrats et Sorciers au XVIIe slecle 1968 p. 456

18 N. Barre Lettres Spiritelles p.191-9

grateful parents or relatives were forbidden by the rule. It was on the cornerstone of personal acceptance of their common purpose, and not in any material endowment, that membership was to be grounded.

RADIANCE

Nicolas Barre's whole life radiated a deep inner spiritual power, as is attested by many witnesses. Many who listened to his sermons, or heard him in the confessional, tasted an elusive "hidden manna" behind his simplest expressions. Fr Thuillier, in his biography, claims that: "Nicolas Barre had no second among his contemporaries. He took the science of mysticism to its ultimate limits". 19 This is an amazing claim. Can it be justified?

Nicolas Barre's mind is mirrored chiefly in the selection of his spiritual letters, edited by Fr. Raffron; in the collection of his maxims; and in the numerous spiritual asides in his rule. The manuscript original for most of his letters went astray at some time in the eighteenth century. The editor's omission of all that could identify either the time of writing or the identity of the recipient is understandable; in view of the highly confidential nature of many of the problems treated. But it is frustrating for the historian. The Maxims are clearly imbued with the same spirit as the letters, with a more didactic and moralistic edge. This is because their purpose was quite different. They were intended to supply ammunition for the spiritual warfare of embattled communities. At a deeper level, they present the individual with the image of Jesus Christ, as if glimpsed through a succession of reflecting mirrors. The sudden changes of angle are intended to challenge our understanding of the Christocentric relationship: to show that vertical dimension as central to the horizontal of our daily lives. The reflections in the letters are, in the nature of things, pastoral. The context is specific and practical. In one sense this faithfully reflects the man; for whom prayer was the nuts on the bolts of daily living. For him spiritual welfare and daily life were intertwined. Like Thomas a Kempis, he appears to have distrusted abstractions and did not believe that wisdom came through book-learning.

---

19 POSITIO p.365 Vita Servi Dei, R. Thuillier, Minim X:23

It has indeed been wisely said that saints never make mistakes but only gain experience. He had realised, from his own experience, the dangers of an obsessive preoccupation with academic theology and spiritual self-perfection. His starting point was always the individual (a sound maxim for any teacher); because he believed that Christ is in the heart of where we are at present. This is one reason why Nicolas Barre's approach to prayer seems particularly relevant in the present day. He encouraged his penitents to experience to the full the rich texture of human thought. They were to work through their own problems, not to shut themselves up in some spiritual cupboard and hope life would go away. He seems to have viewed the process of "sinking to our own level"; of losing our own self esteem and the good opinion of human society; as being the natural spring board which launches our humanity into the divine.

Several of the letters express an almost brusque reluctance to clarify his teaching. He wished to discourage those who sought a particular experience rather than truth itself. He was scornful of those aristocrats, whom he stigmatised as latter-day Herods, seeking wonders or motivated by simple curiosity. In the seventeenth century, as now, there was a ready market for mystical experience which was "mind expanding" rather than spiritual in nature. He did not dismiss any spiritual impulse out of hand. Instead he tried to make those who craved a contemplative “high” realise their true distance from God. Instead of giving long and erudite counselling, he preferred his subjects to learn to walk towards the presence of God on their own two feet. This care to discern the needs of each individual is doubtless one explanation for the reputation he acquired for an almost supernatural insight into souls.

The fact that he did not leave us any systematic exposition of a theology; or any methodological treatise on prayer has to be seen in context. Are the greatest spiritual masters any more effective because their ideas have been classified, and neatly labelled, in some many-volumed history? The spiritual life, as Nicolas Barre explains, grows like a tree. It grows simultaneously, in breadth and height. Great spiritual writers are a bit like trees. We can all benefit from their shade, without needing to know too much botany. But Nicolas did not really want people to sit in the shade. He expected them to go off and plant their own trees. So what we must look for is not a system but a spirit; or perhaps - to be precise - the seed of Nicolas Barre’s teaching. It may be helpful, for the sake of simplicity, to summarise three principle facets: abandonment to Divine Providence; a constant awareness of the Presence of God; the discovery of a renewal experience at the heart of human sin and suffering.

Divine Providence was the great sphere in which all his spiritual action turned. The incapacity and littleness of ego stood at the centre of our purely human life. All the chances and disasters of this life, spiritual as well as material, were a necessary purgation to lead us to the realisation that God is Creator. It might be said that for Nicolas Barre, we are all children; and this life a rather Dickensian Academy in which we are prepared for our real destiny. In a characteristic metaphor he compared the world to an artist's studio in which God discovers beautiful forms in shapeless blocks, by means of hard knocks with a hammer and chisel. He was a shrewd practical psychologist. He saw our nature, rather clinically, as a chaos of raw materials: rage, fury, hatred of God and aversion for goodness. But he also saw what God would make of it; if he were only allowed to hammer it out again from the ground up. He saw creation as a continuous process. Even what is apparently static; the continued preservation of you and I, and the vast milieu of the whole universe, at any given moment; is really dynamic. Our existence is impossible without a continued renewal of God's creative impulse. Dynamically, the cosmos is like a smithy, a surgical table or an alchemical laboratory in which our human nature is being skilfully refashioned.

Certainly Nicolas Barre's perspective, was steeped in the mystical writing then available. Things which were commonplace then are sometimes difficult to put into the language of today. The effort is however, well worth making. For the apparently spontaneous and at times, lyrical, style of these letters should not deceive. They are written with a rare degree of care and precision. The more we try to tease out the precise meaning, the more deeply the sharpness of his insight strikes home.

His view of the world was, at times, apocalyptic; a landscape out of the prophets or Revelations, inhabited by the dead and dying. The visible world was a mask; its everydayness a mere delusion. The senses perceive a mask, where the eye of faith sees God's executioner. Not that the material world, created by God was evil; no. But that to understand its goodness is properly beyond us. For that we need the humility of the Christ child. Not that we should dodge this effort to understand the divine nature. On the contrary. It is our failure to understand, our inability to achieve the good, which "executes" or kills our limited perspectives. All “human and political" thinking about God and the world is false. It centres on a set of values and judgements based on love of self. The true perspective, which recognises God himself as the turning-point of our existence, leads us to see the world in an entirely new way. This is not to be the fruit of any sudden conversion. Nicolas Barre himself did not claim to be anything more than a pilgrim towards the central height. Providence (through daily experience) presents us with "lesson after lesson”. It is the Holy Spirit, training us through experience, which destroys our false self and roots out its false perspectives. And so, from the apocalyptic vision of the “masked executioner" we are returned to the humdrum visible world of everyday routine. But our perspective on that world is being gradually transformed. A regular habit of prayer and spiritual reading now becomes essential. We are not to live with head in the clouds or wholly in the world of routine; the soul is shuttled constantly from the visible, to the invisible and back again.

We need to study the art of abstracting ourselves from created things so that we are master of our thoughts. Slowly we come to see in Nature, and its laws, a copy shadow of the Source. This moves us to seek out the grace and truth of the divine original. In other words, for Nicolas Barre, the spiritual life is itself an experience as gradual as education; with Christ as schoolmaster of the soul. Nicolas Barre, who had lectured in philosophy, was influenced by the Renaissance tradition of Christian Platonism. He saw nature as a dark cave, in which the most perfect spiritual truths were hidden from souls held prisoner by chains of sin. Like Plato, he realised the importance of laws, both moral and scientific, through which the Creator guides our development. We see these concerns mirrored, in more concrete form, in the rule. The importance of observing the rule, even in little things, is not merely for "edification". It is justified by the fact that the rule is leading the sisters to acquire a package of habits. These will gradually draw them out of the darkness of sin and into the knowledge of Christian perfection. His fondness for metaphor reflects his sense of the inadequacy of language. But, there is an implication, also, that even the humblest things can acquire spiritual significance, when measured against our experience of the Presence of God.

The roots of this Platonism were not mere philosophical abstractions. Nicolas Barre's own experience of radical collapse, in 1655, had evidently been for him a sort of turning point. Not a moment of total truth, but a moment when he came to realise what the search for truth really entailed. Thereafter he came to see any acute period of inward turmoil, darkness, uncertainty "nothingness"; even to the point of questioning the self and the nature of God; as a key point in the development of souls. He compared life to a dark dungeon, in which - like Job - we are enclosed for no certain period and for no comprehensible reason. He compared us to a beggar, to whom no-one will give bread, to a pilgrim falling from a precipice into a bog without having anyone at hand to extend a friendly rope; to a wanderer denied a candle to guide him through a black and unfamiliar place full of twists

and turns and uneven ground. We should see ourselves as born into this life as if it were a Purgatory in which we are to atone for the sins of a previous existence. Not of course that he believed this to be the case. The “as if” makes this clear. But that if we really make the imaginative effort to enter this state of mind, we can understand the extent of the rearrangement which Christ requires in our existing mental furniture.

The affinity with the "dark night of the soul" of the Spanish mystics is apparent. But it seems clear that these metaphors were not mere borrowings. The writings of St.Teresa and St John merely helped him to clarify personal experience. He wanted those who felt "lost" to profit from it, rather than sink deeper into despair. His plan was to destroy each soul to its very foundations, in order to learn it could rely on nothing but God alone. Then it could be rebuilt on the foundation of Jesus. This method clearly would not be suitable for everyone. And Nicolas Barre regarded it as a path for elite souls only. The stupid and the blind would remain content to see things with the eyes of this world. This is a profoundly scriptural view, rooted in St. Paul and the prophets. It sprang from a deep understanding of the crucifixion experience and the love of Christ for the lost. But it is one, which in the nature of things, will never make headlines in the popular press.

Such a work of demolition was only a beginning. It was clearing a space for the rebuilding of the Temple of the Holy Spirit in our own bodies: a Sion where "We may see the God of Gods himself". [20] Central to Nicolas Barre's spirituality is the nearness and the remoteness of God. He drew a distinction here between our capacity to experience God's closeness and our failure to understand his nature and ends. He quotes the familiar mystical image of God's nature, the "I am who am", spoken to Moses. For Nicolas Barre God is pure being. Everything else is uncertain and perhaps unnecessary. This rather austere idea may seem odd in view of his encouragement of the new and highly visual devotions to Saint Joseph, to the Sacred Heart and to the Infant Jesus then springing up in different parts of France. But it was precisely because of this remoteness of the divine being; beyond even the most abstract theology; that these aids were necessary. Such images are accommodated to our own littleness.

Although we can never know God completely we must search unceasingly. More than that (extending St. Paul's metaphor) "we must chase after God even if he runs faster than we do". And Nicolas Barre saw such popular images as a necessary part of that chase. It is a special characteristic of his thinking that seeking for God (rather than self-perfection) ought to be the mainspring of the spiritual life. One of the chief instruments in this seeking is contemplation. Nicolas Barre seems to have used a variety of techniques for this, including the prayerful repetition of the names of God and Jesus, "losing everything else in them". Another method was to be constantly aware of the presence of God (as in the contemporary work by the Carmelite lay brother, Lawrence) which could be practised in the midst of trials or in the work-place. Nicolas Barre's aim was to use contemplation as a tool to reorientate the individual and the senses to the true nature of God's world.

Once the soul becomes aware of God's deep attraction for those who seek him tirelessly, then the assurance of this love becomes more real than the most familiar objects of touch and vision. There is a paradise within a paradise reserved for those who know this truth. The startling modernity of this method is that its beginnings are almost agnostic. It does not bring to contemplation specific events from scripture or some well-defined theological truth. It is rooted in our own psychological desire to discover God; and our necessary ignorance of what that Holy Name implies. Perhaps the choice of this method reflects his early spiritual encounter, in the great Minim library, with the criticism of Biblical stories and attacks on bookish theology fashionable among the sceptics of the day. For example to one priest he writes: "It will seem as if all heaven, all that is divine, supernatural all-powerful has become a

---

20 Maximes Spiriluelles 5. Psalm 84. He is rendering Elohim literally as God (El) of Gods (ohim)

dream and a nothingness; and what is even harder to bear, you will apparently lose the power to pray, to cry out or moan: remaining as dry as a stone, as hard as marble, as indifferent as an atheist to the most authentic truths of religion... As well as that there are, by the permission of God and the licence of hell, demons... whose temptations strike at the understanding, destroy faith and replace it with a universal incredulity". Notice the precision with which the state of mind is gauged; it is not that his penitent actually ceases to believe in God, but that he becomes "as indifferent as (if he were) an atheist".

For Nicolas Barre this state was not something to be afraid of but rather the first stage in the soul's reorientation. Its realisation that it has at last reached the starting point of its journey towards God. Providence itself cast the spark of temptation, which set these combustible materials ablaze, in order to try us in the fire. That is why we must be abandoned completely to the Providence of God. This is certainly a view of sin very different from that presented by the rival Jesuit and Jansenist theologians of the day. No wonder that he became proverbial in such seemingly hopeless cases: "Send this one to Nicolas Barre". Of special interest is that he associated the language of hell and demons with temptations to the extremity of despair and unbelief.

There is no doubt that Nicolas Barre must have known experiences out of the common. His lyric praises, "Oh Jesus, Love, Oh my God, my All, Oh Centre and Abyss", point to his familiarity with the sort of ecstasy described at length by the Spanish mystics. His use of the exclamation of the cherubim before the presence: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts, Heaven and Earth are Full of the Glory", was for him the epitome of all spiritual life. The focus on praise and proclamation, in this extract from Isaiah and Revelations, tells us much about his spiritual life. It indicates, also, the deep scriptural grounding of his mystical experience. His emphasis on God as the unique centre of the most clouded soul, points to his awareness that the work of destruction, the "stripping down to perfect nakedness", was ultimately a voyage of self-discovery. It may seem a paradox that to find the Creator we have to demolish our idea of the world we thought God had created. Or that to find our self we must demolish ourself. But a little reflection will show that the paradox is only apparent. It is this false self which must be toppled by the director's severity - the “masked executioner”. Just as Moses had to strike the rock to summon water from the desert.

If Nicolas Barre himself had not been so wholly committed to the active life his injunctions for resisting sin might seem to verge on quietism. He urges the contemplative simply to think on God: rather than trying to snare him in nets, as if by magic; or by making vows and promises; or even struggling to surrender one's own will consciously. His view was that God's Providence is like a sphere, a second skin or milieu enveloping each soul so completely, that to raise the thought to this awareness is enough. Human words, being inadequate, get in the way of this process. This is an unusual view of prayer. But there is no doubt of its impeccable orthodoxy. Nicolas Barre means that with such a confidence in God's transcendent presence, sown inside the soul, the will to action is liberated. Action ultimately becomes detached from any purely personal motive. Ever practical, he placed the greatest emphasis on combining the search for God with discharge of all one's usual exercises and obligations, extraordinary works of charity, outward amiability and service to the whole world.

He was particularly keen on a regular prayer life, fortified by spiritual reading. But what the devil most disliked was vigorous action. In typically extreme language, he urged one religious, afflicted with spiritual darkness, to make herself the "female donkey" of the monastery. A lay person was urged to see herself as "a work-horse"; a sheep ready for shearing and the slaughter-house"; “as silent as a carp"; and "as small as a mouse that is devoured by the devil". He could be equally brusque in his injunctions to the teaching sisters. Doubtless he

recalled the benefits wrought in his troubled soul by his own period as sacristan with the Minims of Amiens.

It is rare for spiritual counselling to balance the inward and the outward movements of the soul with such a nicety. One thinks of St. Francois de Sales as the great exponent of an outward going mysticism. But the comparison does, no justice to the remarkable force (or rudeness, as it was justly termed) of Nicolas Barre's stroke. Whereas St. Francois de Sales handles the world, the flesh and the devil with a rapier, like an elegant duellist, Nicolas Barre teaches his pupils to wield the bludgeon or the leaden mace. He saw self-love almost as a physical poison, deep in the marrow of our bones. The crushing of the self, to the point of being buried with Christ and making his death our own, was the crisis point towards which each soul was led. The very pattern of disease, unregulated by modern drugs: sickness, fever, acute crisis, followed by death or recovery suggests itself. It is worth noting that Nicolas Barre's own work was continually handicapped by his poor health; which does not appear to have fully recovered from his austerities in the 1650s. He is careful to point out that physical illness should suspend all efforts towards the search for God, save interior restoration and a realisation of the personal character of his love. It is also interesting to note that the plague was a constant visitor to Normandy during his lifetime, and that as a small boy he was said to have worked a miracle by praying for his sister in the crisis of her illness.

Sin he saw with a physician's eye. It was a disease of the soul, a fever. It must take its natural course. The patient should learn to relax. Guilt and anguish served no useful purpose. Like a doctor God may give us a nasty dose; or like a surgeon amputate certain members; but for those who trust the cure is certain. Death was much closer in those times, and especially in the urban districts inhabited by the poor, who were the most constant visitors to his confessional. No doubt the visible presences of death, the crosses on the doors of the afflicted, the role of the death carts, coloured his vision - scriptural though it is - of a God who tears down the self to make room for his Spirit. If we, in our relatively painless modem culture, were suddenly transported back into life in the seventeenth century, we might well imagine ourselves in a terrestrial purgatory. Yet Nicolas Barre, "Director and Destroyer", is nothing if not an optimist. The severity of God, terrible as he appeared to most believers in that age, is a mere surgical instrument. We are in the hands of the most loving of operators. The lover and the destroyer work together. The gradual draining away of the poison of self-love prepares the physical body for its celestial transfiguration.

At the same time he is always ready with a douche of psychological realism. Such is the nature of this mortal life that even the most ardent seekers after perfection must resign themselves to the protean and ineradicable character of their own self-deception. Even though God will never cease to diminish the inner poisons of those who continually keep their face to him, a complete cure, in this life, is impossible. This is why the search for pure spiritual perfection can in itself be a danger - leading to Illuminism, Quietism and other mystical heresies. It is above all through imperfection that God perfects us. Our natural state of self-deception is not due to any wickedness or crime on our part but reflects profound ignorance of the divine nature. It is the extent of God's love which surpasses all our comprehension. He loves us more than we can ever believe. We do not realise the extent of our hidden treasure.

Like many contemplatives, he was always urging his "seekers" to distrust apparent spiritual consolations; and to persist with regular prayers and duties, even if they seem empty and meaningless. His extra dimension is to place the soul on a mysterious journey to nowhere; to self-extinction. A goal which is obtained not by conscious striving (though we should always be holding ourselves out to God) but through God's gradual exhalation of His Holy Spirit into the marrow of our bones. He shows some impatience with those who demand explanations or details, or help with concrete problems. Nicolas Barre was no "agony Aunt". On the other hand he firmly promised that "after

this secret introduction to Paradise, in the bosom of Jesus, you will see everything". Although the mystical experience is notoriously difficult to put into words, Nicolas Barre's fondness for metaphor suggests a preference for obscurity rather than clarification. He writes of the breath of the spirit carrying the soul to God more deftly than a feather drifting downward in the wind. Or of a chemical operation in which, following the operation of intense heat, one substance is transformed or interpenetrated by another. Words like diviniser or deiforme for becoming like God, or Christiforme, for being patterned in Christ, pithily express the outcome of this process. Yet they reveal next to nothing about how it can be achieved. We have simply to go forward with God and learn by doing. The spirit is not dissimilar to that "self-abandonment to divine Providence" promoted in the eighteenth century by the Jesuit Father de Caussade.

He had something of the fondness for communicating through imagery and enigma found in contemporary alchemists. He uses the image of a spiritual ladder, as a gloss on Luke’s theme that the humble will be asked to “go up higher”. This seems conventional enough. But he could not resist developing it in an unusual way. His first rung is the abyss of damnation and despair; from which we ascend through secret groanings. The second step is to become a slave in the royal household. Nicolas Barre often wrote of this voluntary slavery, particularly in the light of going out to forget our own troubles in the service of our neighbour. The third step is to become a paid servant of Jesus. Here we must bear in mind (as the plays of the day make clear) that servants at this time often had a very familiar and intimate position with their masters. Nicolas Barre refers to the Pope's title as servant of the servants of Christ. This rung is one in which the Church, above all; should become the chief vehicle of service. The fourth step, to become a child of God, properly implies the perfection of heaven; though it should also remind us of the humility of Jesus as infant. But here Nicolas Barre brings a characteristically original touch to the highly traditional image of the ladder. Spiritual ascent, he tells us, is not so much a thing of linear additions, like a ladder. It is an organic growth. As in the human body, or in plants, "present growth always renews and makes up for what was lacking in the earlier stages". So the whole ladder grows, like a tree. Next it is transformed into a musical scale, to illustrate that each rung remains with us. We are never truly separated from the deep organ notes, vibrating with our initial cosmic despair; but they are softened by the lighter music of our willingness to serve. Life is a tune, in which all these notes are recapitulated, and made new, in love's more perfect symphony.

The fifth rung is love; the entering of the Christian into the adult sonship of Christ. Here we learn that God is father. And now another unexpected twist. The ladder metaphor is abandoned and we are no longer ascending but rather plunged into space. Abandoned completely to God we fall through the void, confident that we are returning to our true centre and origin. Like the seed, falling into the earth, like the child returning to the womb, we must abandon ourselves completely to this motion if we are to be born again. And this new form of unity is to be mirrored not by a ladder but by the vine. This alternation between an allegory of ladder, a musical scale, images of falling and of organic growth shows just how complex Nicolas Barre's use of mystical imagery can be. One seems closer to the stuff of dreams rather than to contemporary theological argument. No wonder one of his favourite Old Testament passages was where Jacob falls asleep and sees the angels ascending and descending a ladder into heaven.

An image drawn from ballistics is used to explain his peculiar sense of the simultaneous closeness and remoteness of God. He portrays our whole life as a projectile, whose trajectory takes us nearer and nearer to an unknown center; infinitely more noble, infinitely deeper than ourselves. Although we can never quite reach that innermost center in this life, we are somehow, already – here and now - lodged in the secret heart of the Most High. This analogy reverts to Nicolas's earlier scientific interests. The trajectory of a body falling into an (imaginary)

hollow earth, approaching - yet never quite reaching – its centre was much debated by physicists and mathematicians between 1640 and 1680. It is interesting to note that Newton hit upon the inverse square law of gravitation by meditating on this very problem in 1679-80. Nicolas liked to follow St. Teresa's advice to take metaphors, useful for the spiritual life, from the works of the philosophers.

One explanation of the paradox is that God, like the father in the prodigal son, reaches out to us even though we are still a great way off. Another is that the promise that our perseverance will carry us to perfection in the next life becomes a sort of banker's draft on which we can draw. We rather get the impression that the explanations were only slightly less baffling than the original metaphors. Even when, as in the Meditation on the Spiritual Clock, he gives apparently detailed instructions, for meditative prayer at each hour of the day, the directions given are extremely sparse, not to say austere. He was well aware that it is impossible for a practical person to remember God's presence all the time. And the real meaning of the clock metaphor is very simple: whatever we are doing, every moment of our lives is lived in spiritual time. "It is often necessary to lose ourselves in the needs of our neighbour. But this makes no division from the Spirit of God, since it is his work we do". The need to love and serve our neighbour, and to grow continually in the spirit, clearly mattered more to Nicolas Barre than the development of a novel mystical theology. In the rule both the Directors and the sister-catechists are warned to avoid over-subtlety and high-flown theological discourses or debates.

Though Nicolas Barre went back to lecturing in theology he described it in one of his letters as a "slavery". It is clear that the Bible (especially the psalms and the gospel of John which he always quotes in Latin) was his preferred source. It is striking how rarely the letters touch on theological problems. Although he was reputed to know the Summa almost by heart, his discussion of ten types of presence in God, contains almost his only reference to St. Thomas Aquinas. We may fittingly conclude this account of Nicolas's mysticism by a brief summary of the background to this problem; followed by a sketch of his solution.

He was attempting to clarify the classic theological paradox of the omnipresence of God: if he is everywhere, why should he be present in some places more than others? Quietists argued because God was everywhere, he was no more present in Churches, the Holy Sacrament, relics, or consecrated objects than anywhere else. To Jansenists, God was conspicuous by his absence from created things: "a hidden God". Illuminists, who found God as present in their soul as in heaven, believed they had a private hot line to his omniscience. There was a cosmological problem of how an all-present God can be understood to reign in heaven. (The idea of a moving earth made it harder to picture heaven as something geographical, above the sphere of fixed stars). All these problems seem to arise because God's presence is seen as a quantitative variable, like density or temperature. Yet each person of the Trinity is regarded as equal, though reflecting a different form of the divine relationship. Why should the Trinity not be equally present throughout creation, but acting through various different forms?

Nicolas only touches on some of these points though they all relate to the "model" he constructs. He identifies, within God’s omnipresence, ten centres in which that Presence assumes particular forms. The first three, which correspond to the Trinity and the uncreated world, are: universal being (Fatherhood); universal law, both moral and scientific (the Word through whom all was made); and God’s all-knowledge (the Holy Spirit); pictured as the all-seeing "eye", familiar from seventeenth century prints. The next seven centres of the presence, flowing from the Son, establish our visible universe as an extension (or emanation, as Nicolas expresses it) of the divine being. There is evidently a difference between the form of God's presence in created matter (objective); and his presence in human souls (loving). There are long chains of cause and effect uniting everything in the cosmos, including material things

and human souls. There is a form of the Presence which regulates cause and effect; and interacts equally with the two first created centres. At the same time, there can be no cause or effect not ultimately derived from the Word, or law. It should now be clear that these centres form a dynamic, rather than a static system. All ten forms of the Presence, acting and interacting on each other, are like parts of a living organism or the gears of a machine. The first three created the visible universe; in a "downward" movement. The next three form God's hidden Presence, under the mask of matter. The last four, as we shall see, constitute God's Presence in the soul. Their direction is "upwards"; towards a reunification of Creation with its original divine source.

Perhaps these conceptions were hammered out partly to answer those sceptics and Deists with whom Nicolas had debated in the 1650s. They had wanted, in a surprisingly 'modern' way, to make the Cosmos a machine and to squeeze God out into its margins; to divorce the world of the spirit from the objective physical universe of law and matter. Nicolas's response was to abolish the boundary between creation and the world of experience. For if creation is continuous, then God's Presence is crucial at every point of its development. He wanted to establish the tabernacle of the Presence not only in the heart of matter but in every possible state of affairs. He avoided the pitfall of pantheism; yet reasserted the primacy and authenticity of our private religious experience; which the sceptics devalued in the name of science.

The next three forms of the Presence all relate to this inward spiritual life: the pain, which accompanies the union with God, when he breaks our dependence on created things; the pleasure, which flows from the soul's more complete union with God in love. Higher than these forms of union is the penultimate centre: perfect indifference to even spiritual pain or pleasure. St. John of the Cross, and other mystics, treat this as the highest form of spiritual life. Nicolas displays his originality by adding a tenth centre, called (expressive) Presence: proclaiming the kingdom of God to others in speech or writing. This final term in the series of ascending presences may be seen as a sort of summation, or abridgement, of the purpose of Creation. Nicolas's idea of the Institute, to lead people to God by teaching and example: "to establish the reign of Jesus Christ in all hearts", would come under this expressive form. Perhaps this helps to explain why Nicolas compared the Institute to the bride of the lamb in Revelations; the New Jerusalem. For this is to be no more than the ceaseless proclaiming of God's holiness on earth.

THE RULE

During the period from their foundation to the French Revolution, the teaching sisters did not constitute a religious order according to the laws of France or of the Church. It was very important to the Founder that they make no lifelong vows. On the other hand they did agree to follow a common rule with (all the evidence suggests) quite as much seriousness as if they had actually made solemn religious profession of lifelong poverty, chastity and obedience. According to the Oxford dictionary a religious order is "a religious society, or fraternity living under a rule". Whatever the exact legal status of their sisterhood may have been there is no doubt that the rule was intended to safeguard a manner of life in imitation of the community of the first Christians. Since this has supplied the model for the religious rules of orders down the ages it is, perhaps, understandable that the **Dictionnaire de Biographie Francaise** misleadingly describes Nicolas Barre as a "founder of orders".

It seems likely that the idea of a common rule had been part of the. Founder's intention from the beginning. Marguerite Lestoq asserted that the first decision to live as a community was made after Nicolas Barre's suggestion that groups of his schoolmistresses in Rouen should dine with one another. She made no mention of any written rule; but it seems likely that certain forms and times of prayer were agreed on at this early stage. Such rules may have been memorised rather than written; at least no copies have survived. There is no reason to doubt her claim that for many years the sisters lived in a spirit of perfect union and no difficulties arose between them. But then, quite suddenly, serious disagreements arose. Although she is, to say the least, unclear about the nature of these problems, or even their date, it seems likely that Nicolas Barre - like Moses - felt the need for a more detailed written constitution only after these internal disagreements had arisen. We have a very important document of 1669, signed by some thirty sisters, who reaffirm the unique nature of the foundation. The keynote of this first-written affirmation is that they were to be neither paid wages nor offered lifelong security. Since the central commitment was to remain this apostolic life-style, abandoned to Divine Providence, there is reason to regard this document as the first attempt to set down in writing what had been the original common undertaking. The fact that so many sisters signed it show it was probably intended to resolve the earlier disputes about the original foundation to which Sister Lestoq refers.

It is possible that other rules relating to their common life were written down at this time, but not preserved. Or that other rules were agreed together and never disputed; so that Nicolas did not feel any need to put them into writing. At any rate, it is not until 1677, when the Institute in Paris had been established, that we see the central core elaborated into written rules for the first time. The document has corrections, and a dated postscript, in the founder's own hand. The new need for a detailed rule doubtless reflects the expansion, in numbers and geographical scope, of the previous decade. It was to be 1685, the year before the founder's death; before this rule was given its final form. It was further elaborated by other rules and maxims, issued after Nicolas Barre's death by the Abbe Servien de Montigny, in the general spirit of the founder's teachings. The influence of the Jesuits on their ex-pupil; especially their universality and their blend of spiritual vision with practical details, is writ large in the original rule. Another possible model was the Ursulines, a flourishing teaching order for girls, already active in the first half of the seventeenth century. Perhaps its involvement in public scandals; with some girl pupils allegedly possessed by demons; made Father Barre distrustful both of the Ursulines social exclusiveness and their rigid enclosure. A more immediate model was St. Francois de Sales' constitution for the Sisters of the Cross. This was a combined teaching and charitable association, which flourished under the auspices of St. Vincent de Paul and was associated with figures prominent in the Company. (See Appendix I). It was later under the protection of Bishop Abelly and the Duchess of

Guise; a special patron of Nicolas Barre's Institute. Nicolas Barre's personal links with these individuals makes this constitution a likely influence on his.

His statutes had to balance three somewhat conflicting factors. Firstly there was the need to regulate the life of a number of sisters, living in community, in big houses like Rouen or Paris. There was the need to be seen to model their prayer-life as closely on the normative principles of the enclosed religious as possible. There were regulations concerning a chapel, a portress, a refectory. There were set periods of silence; sacred readings during communal meals; early rising for prayer; as much of the normal schedule of the offices - the communal recitation of psalms - as a busy teaching life could reasonable accommodate. To balance all this, was the obvious limitation that the whole point of the scheme was to have sisters who were flexible enough to follow the needs of the parishes where their potential pupils were. In a rural school perhaps two sisters would be managing on their own. And in the nature of the communications available in that age, on winter roads, perhaps a relatively slight distance would effectively emancipate them from immediate control by a superior. This meant that there had to be scope for relaxation of the community-based rule; and at the same time a much greater premium on self-discipline in observing personal prayers, and private virtues (the emphasis on daily self-examination for example) than was normal in a community.

Thirdly, there was the fact that although the vile necessarily has a formal appearance, the main thrust of the Institute was not static but dynamic. The first and most important aim was to welcome in each abandoned child another Christ. The same applied to every adult seeking instruction in literacy. And the sisters were required, despite their own relative lack of theological training, to make that inner likeness explicit; to form Christ anew in others. And through this work they must come to be able to find their way around what Nicolas Barre called "the dark house" of their own being. Their own spiritual formation was to be through combining prayer and action. According to Nicolas Barre experience showed the sisters were more likely to experience God's presence through their teaching experience than in their formal prayers. Here is a deep insight into "the Founder's profoundest instincts. For although he was endowing his sisters with many of the attributes associated with enclosed religious, he personally regarded the life of pure contemplation as sterile. What he sought to achieve was a balance - a balance sprung from a marriage of opposites. His sisters must not be tempted to resign their activity in favour of a mere passive observance of the rule. Nor must the self-effacement of the religious under a rule have any tinge of gloom or melancholy about it. Love and cheerfulness were the essentials. Though neither of these qualities - as Nicolas Barre knew well - works to rule.

The rule has nothing to say about the secular pedagogical side of school activities. Presumably, as Spiritual Director, Nicolas Barre was expected to leave such matters to the three lay directors established for each school, and their lady adviser. The new thrust of the Council of Trent had been to bring the catechism - and therefore lay literacy - into the centre of the stage. Efforts were continually being made to improve the literacy and influence of parish priests. But the chief motor of change was to be the diocese; and on the character of the local bishop the success of Trent depended. Much of this is reflected in the rule. There is a clear emphasis on the need to accept the authority of the bishops and the importance of the sisters not placing themselves on the wrong side of the parish priests. This admirable caution perhaps resulted from Nicolas Barre's own early experiences; or from the disasters which overtook the Company through overenthusiastic mission work in other people's parishes. There is an emphasis on catechising, in ensuring by question and answer that the pupils recall the base from which the next lesson should proceed. There is an awareness of the need for charts and visual aids in presenting moral truths. Nicolas Barre realised that complicated theologies, like that of sin, are not accommodated to the level of children. These things seem

elementary to us but were new and important then. The stress on simplifying doctrine, and on what is appropriate to the child's feelings and relevant to daily conduct may also - perhaps - reflect Nicolas Barre's horror of the knots into which contemporary theologians tied their readers on the subject of mortal sin, venial sin and sufficient grace.

There is a continual emphasis on humility which recurs in these regulations. Patience, modesty, gentleness, interior submission to superiors are to be the key note of each life. And because they have taken no special vows, love must be the pure foundation of this new character. They are to consider themselves as menial servants, or more generously, as mothers, to those in their charge. But all this is to have a missionary purpose. The sisters were not to be slaves. Sensitivity, according to the rule, was the means the Holy Spirit has chosen to win hearts. Authority, and the rigour of the law, do not secure new life in Christ; being the weapons of this world. And perhaps there is a certain tactical importance in this humility; in the overcoming of obstacles which local bureaucracies, secular and spiritual, or particular vested interests, might oppose to the expansion of the schools.

Central to all this was the absolute spiritual value of detachment, extolled in the Founder's letters. Abandonment of self, especially of personal property, the expectation of personal gifts or rewards, intimate friendships, is the key to personal perfection. But Nicolas Barre continually oscillates between the large abstract precept and his practical sense of the problems the seventeenth century sense of wealth and blood posed in any religious community. Rich sisters are allowed to wear their own clothes for six-months; then they must decide to withdraw altogether or don the regulation black. Precedence, an endless source of quarrelling and violence in that age - even in churches, convents and religious processions - is to be regulated not by rank but by dates of reception. These are to be carefully recorded to avoid all disputes.

In one metaphor, the sister was to become a quill-pen in the hands of Providence - a simile perhaps recalling that an improved standard of handwriting was one achievement of the Little Schools. Another implication of this metaphor might be that the good religious does not merely apply the rules, but also re-creates them inwardly, on her own behalf. This seems to be the meaning of those passages in the Spiritual Letters where the founder emphasises that the soul must be as abandoned to the impulse of the Holy Spirit as a feather, drifting in the wind. The rule itself strikes the stem, practical note that a good quill must be pared down to the point and often re-cut if it is always to form sound characters.

Every institution needs to keep channels of communication open between those at the apex of the pyramid and those at its base.

But there was no desire to encourage an atmosphere of tittle-tattle and rumour, as is clear from Statutes and Rules (9:21) which states that Superiors should "try to lessen and get rid of this spirit (of telling tales to her) and beware of those who are that way inclined". Superiors were not, in fact allowed to be judge and jury. Rules for Directors, section 22, makes clear that four sisters from each house were to be selected by the Directors, on an annual basis. They were to bring information of any unusual problem to the Directors alone - not to the Superior. This was because their brief was to report any neglect of the rules by the Community as a whole "not excluding the Superior herself". The sad truth is that the scourge of many religious houses was the corruption which spread from the Superior downwards. It was all but irreversible. For this reason, Superiors in the communities of the Institute had only a shadow of the power which was concentrated, for good or ill, in the hands of an abbess in a regular order; freely disposing of her own endowments and expenditure. The Directors kept a sharp eye on all accounts, and did not allow funds allocated to one project to be switched to another, or held in reserve, without their consent. Again, it has to be kept in mind that in the seventeenth century standards of

probity were low, even among some senior clergy. There was very little sense, in business or in government, of the distinction between one's own money and money passing temporarily through one's hands; even when, theoretically, accountable for it to others.

Observance of the rule was only one factor out of the four determining the individual sister's final salvation. Living knowledge of the truth, love of neighbour and detachment of heart (being always ready to go where one is sent) made up the other three. There is no doubt that a preoccupation with the perpetual possibility of damnation was part of the spirit of the age; as accounts of Nicolas Barre's own death make clear. No doubt the purpose of this fourfold guarantee was to reassure sensitive souls, troubled by the sort of scruples about the divine mercy that Jansenism raised. Minor breaches of the rule were not to be seen as hell-fire matters. Breaches of the rule by ordinary sisters could lead to suspension from Holy Communion or even expulsion from the order; though Nicolas was otherwise keen to promote frequent communion. I have not found any instance where expulsion actually happened, though some sisters obviously profited from the absence of vows to go elsewhere. But it is interesting that all those who had been seconded to Saint Cyr; though offered places in Mme de Maintenon's new enclosed teaching foundation; preferred to return to the Institute (See section 7, Paris).

Although we have little record of how the ordinary teachers felt, we know that at the core of the Founder's own interior life; as revealed in his letters; is the emphasis on the living knowledge of truth. True education strikes a well-spring of living water from the heart rather than drains into a stagnant pool of excessive book-learning. It is interesting that so many of his writings were left, in manuscript, for others to publish. Perhaps, at heart, Nicolas Barre rather distrusted the way in which the human spirit could be smudged by printer's ink.

PARIS

Nicolas Barre's determination to rely on providence, to avoid institutionalising his work, was no obstacle to its expansion. On the contrary, it was the key to its flexibility. Once he had been moved from Rouen, back to Paris in 1675 a new house was established there in the Rue Saint Maur. A series of parish schools soon radiated around some of the poorest quarters of the city. It was a city in many ways very different from the old medieval Paris, swarming with beggars, rioters, prostitutes and criminals, which Nicolas Barre had left in 1655. Louis XIV whatever his faults, was far more deeply concerned for the welfare of his ordinary subjects than the two great Cardinals. Under his personal rule Paris had been equipped with paving, lighting, street-cleaning, water supply, hospitals, an efficient constabulary. There was a new sense of order; duellists and highwaymen had been by degrees driven from the city. There were magnificent new churches and public buildings. The 1670s seemed to herald the dawn of a new age of civic enlightenment. Even the doubting spirit of libertinage had been quenched by the intellectual power of a new generation of writers and preachers of the calibre of Pascal, Bossuet, Fenelon, Mabillon. The spirit of Saint Sulpice waxed stronger. J.J. Olier's old dreams of making Christian education into a public service were suddenly in tune with the times.

The biggest question mark seemed to hang over the throne; a monarch whose fidelity to Saint Peter was balanced by an ardent admiration for the pagan Roman Emperors. He had a stern sense of public duty; offset by a private life abandoned, from an early age, to no laws other than pleasure. But all this was about to change, as the King came gradually under the lasting influence of his deeply devout and highly accomplished mistress, Mme de Maintenant. (Eventually, in secret, his morganatic spouse). The Institute was already well established in Paris when the success of its teachers caught her interest. Attracted by the sisters' reputation for organisation, and modern teaching methods, she

invited them to staff her new school at Saint Cyr. This had been lavishly endowed, with no expense spared, for the benefit of girls of good family who, for whatever reason, were in need of free education. Mme de Maintenant was herself an orphan of a distinguished noble family, which had been stripped of land and social consequence. The widow of a penniless journalist, she was fortunate to find her "Prince Charming" in Louis .XIV. It is significant that the "Cinderella" story; about the problems of an old noble family driven to marry money; assumed its modern literary form just as Saint Cyr was launched.

The sisters at Saint Cyr set up the school and remained from 1686 to 93, winning, almost by chance, an imperishable place in literary history. The playwright Racine, then at the height of his fame, wrote two purely Biblical religious dramas, Esther and Athaliah, especially for the pupils to act and for the sisters to produce. Athaliah is acknowledged by critics to be perhaps the finest thing Racine ever wrote. It is about a child of unknown parentage who turns out to be Israel's rightful King. The personal motives prompting the devout Racine to entrust its premiere to the orphans of Saint Cyr; rather than to some professional company; must remain an enigma of history. For those in search of a heavenly crown, however, mere literary immortality may prove a distraction. We are told that these plays introduced a spirit of worldliness into the school; whilst others (according to the flamboyant court-preacher Bossuet) became infected by the extreme unworldliness of quietism. Bossuet used these allegations to insist that Mme de Maintenant set up an enclosed convent school instead. But the problems cannot have been so very grave, since in 1693 all twelve teaching sisters were given the option of remaining at Saint Cyr, on condition they took formal religious vows. They all preferred to return to their "little schools".

This was a brief episode, but we must not forget the importance of Madame de Maintenant's interest in the Institute during what might have been a very difficult period, following Nicolas Barre's death in 1686; when the Minim Order seems to have shown little interest in schools. Louis XIV was so impressed with their work that he lodged a handsome donation, following their departure, towards the expenses of the Paris branch of the Institute. So far as the history of girls' education goes, Saint Cyr was paradoxically a more conspicuous landmark than their regular work for the poor. Historian Philip Aries merely echoes the verdict of contemporaries when he says that the standards and methods established by the sisters set the tone for the education of young ladies during the next century. Particularly influential was the careful grading, according to age, and the efforts to adapt the methods of presenting the curriculum to personal levels of development.

"Saint Cyr (as it was from 1687-93) would provide the model institution for a modern type of girl, entering between the age of seven and twelve and leaving at about twenty" 21

Nevertheless, there may be some who would, regard the experiment at Saint Cyr (which Nicolas Barre approved) as a lapse from the original bias towards the poor. It is all too easy, perhaps because of literary and film portrayals of the French Revolution, to regard the distress of gentlefolk with equanimity; or even satisfaction. But this is to lose sight of the complexity of the crisis affecting French society at this time. As traditional hierarchical society broke down; partly under the strain of a new commercialism; it is important to grasp that nobility as well as peasants could be victims. It was surprisingly easy for a noble family, at this period, to borrow beyond their means; perhaps through improvidence, or through expense incurred in the royal service. If the head of the family died suddenly, a victim of wars or duelling, the mortgage of the family lands might soon be followed by their sale to the creditors. The children of such nobles were, without money, ill-placed to make use of their hereditary rank and privileges. In fact only a small fraction of the nobility were really rich. A number lost their

21 Centuries of Childhood P. Aries p.332-3

nobility altogether, after enquiries at this time by arbitrary government commissions.

We also tend to assume that noble girls, whether orphans or not, would have been automatically educated to the highest standards. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Reformers of the day continually complained that the sons of noblemen, in the provinces at least, were unfit for public office; being barely literate and often innumerate. Louis XIV made a point of employing nobles only in the army. As for their womenfolk, education was considered an optional accomplishment. Even those girls from the higher nobility, who were packed off to convents for a spell, generally acquired "polish" not knowledge. As the plays of Moliere show, the tiny minority of educated women were objects of derision in the 1660s and 70s, even among Parisian audiences. The success of Saint Cyr was one factor in ensuring that a very different climate would prevail in the next century.

Madame de Maintenant was, in the past, accused of plotting against the Huguenots. A convert herself, she prayed ardently for their conversion; historians now acquit her of any more direct role in promoting the persecution of the Huguenots; or advising Louis to repeal the Edict of Nantes in 1685. In that year Louis XIV commanded the forcible conversion of French Protestants by the military. The rest were driven abroad. This would naturally have meant the abolition of their extensive school-system. Although disliking the extreme methods used to secure the closure of Protestant schools and churches, Mme de Maintenant realised that Nicolas Barre's Institute was well-equipped to bridge the gap. As a result Catholic education for the poor, to an equivalent standard, was soon available in former Protestant regions like Languedoc. We see, with hindsight, that the Revocation of the Edict, and the use of undue force, violated modem Catholic teaching on human rights and religious freedom. But it would be unhistorical to make judgements, in these terms, about either Catholics or Protestants in the seventeenth century.

One area in which Nicolas Barre's aims were clearly frustrated, during this period in Paris, was the plan to bring associations of teachers, for both boys and girls, under the direction of the Institute. Despite his high personal regard for St. John Baptist de la Salle, Nicolas Barre (who was his most trusted adviser) never quite abandoned the idea of separate boys' schools of his own. It is generally argued (though the evidence is unclear) that these boys' schools simply failed to get off the ground. The efforts to stimulate the teaching of boys, through M. Nyell, never took root in the way that the teaching sisters did. Both M. Nyell and Mme de Maillefer provided the nucleus for launching the De La Salle schools in the 1680s. The Rule of 1686 is careful to refer to both sexes, so I think there must still have been some boys' schools at that time. One problem was the failure to match the successful recruiting of teaching sisters with schoolmasters of equal numbers and quality. The reason may have lain in the social basis of Nicolas Barre's support.

It was certainly a great personal sacrifice for the daughters of senior judges to abandon their personal security in order to become teaching sisters, resigning all to providence, and willing, if need be, "to die in a ditch". But, for a woman, the idea had a certain heroism. One feels that Corneille, the playwright - son of a local official from Rouen - might have created a heroine, in the spirit of the classical drama, to grace this situation. Indeed a Mlle Corneille was among Nicolas Barre's first recruits. Very different was the position of sons of councillors, even younger sons, who would have considered it intolerable slavery even to be private tutors. Vincent de Paul, for example was for many years a private tutor. But he was the son of a poor shepherd! A tutor was far more elevated in status than a schoolmaster. But for the sons of gentlemen to become schoolmasters, granted the abysmal reputation of schoolmasters at that time, would have been quite unthinkable.

Already, in Rouen, the schools had attracted the patronage of Marie of Lorraine, Duchess of Guise, the last scion of an illustrious house, She had introduced the sisters to her estates, which were extensive in

Northern and Eastern France. The Duchess had a palace in Paris (within walking distance of both the Minim Convent and the Institute). Nicolas Barre's move there must have increased her influence on the Institute; which she presented with a large bequest in her will - contested by her relatives. Despite his distrust of aristocratic patronage, Nicolas Barre did not suffer from inverted snobbery. After initial reluctance he had agreed to become her spiritual director. It must be said that the Guise had a long history of devout Catholicism, claiming direct descent from Geoffrey of Bouillon, the first crusading king of Jerusalem. After the reigning Bourbons, they were in line for the throne of France itself. Marie's immediate ancestors had led the Catholic League during the wars of religion. Her brother had been King of Naples. It was no mere hyperbole which led contemporaries to compare the first visit of the Princess to Nicolas Barre as the Queen of Sheba appealing to Solomon. The Duchess of Guise had also been one of that group of aristocratic women who had financed the charitable work of Saint Vincent de Paul. (See Appendix I)

But royal patronage, whether by reigning or former dynasties, did not alter the essential financing and administrative direction of the schools. They continued with their original task of unstinting service to the disadvantaged. Administration remained within the "secret council" of the Monsieurs de Rouen; direction was established on a similar model, for the house in Paris, under Servien de Montigny. Perhaps because of his personality, and previous close relationship with the Founder, the Paris house seemed to inherit the original dynamism. It was to establish far more new schools than the mother branch at Rouen. There was, if anything, a higher degree of integration with diocesan control at Rouen which, combined with the influence of the Hospital Boards, encouraged a certain decentralisation. Capital invested by the members of the **parlement**, or their friends and relatives, gave the Institute a steady income; whilst the principal (which generally funded an annual pension paid by the Institute) remained a life property of the investors. It is interesting to note that the Institute's finances rested on what is now familiar to us as a building society principle rather than on the traditional income from feudal rights, land or properties. [22] This practice gave considerable flexibility. The schools in Paris, for example, initiated in the mid-70s, were long to continue in financial dependence on Monsieurs de Rouen. Rouen, on the other hand, continued to receive Nicolas Barre's spiritual direction, after his permanent removal - by his Minim superiors - to Paris. Largely through the later initiative of Servien de Montigny the Paris house wished to be financially independent of Rouen. And Rouen, in turn, then opted to choose its own spiritual director.

It is interesting for the historian to note that Servien de Montigny's nephew, the Duke of Beauvilliers, appears to have been deeply influenced by the ideals of the Institute. The only nobleman sufficiently trusted by Louis XIV to be one of his council of ministers, he was regarded (even by the cynical Voltaire) as a man of the deepest piety and integrity. The Duke was the only minister bold enough to be tireless in counselling peace rather than war. He even told the most absolute of European monarchs that he should transfer some of his power to representative assemblies, and govern France according to a constitution. Though Louis XIV, predictably, took no notice of these eccentricities, he was sufficiently impressed by the Duke's educational ideas to put him in sole charge of training the royal Princes. In the preface to his play Athaliah, Racine commented on the remarkable princes which this unusual educational programme, based on inculcating principles of justice and peace, had produced. The French Revolution might have been avoided if these children had not all predeceased the King; the Duke of Brittany in 1705; the Dauphin in 1711; his successor as Dauphin, the most promising of all in 1712; closely followed by the new Duke of Brittany. Perhaps a million other Frenchmen also died in the great famine of that year. Bishop Fenelon, the most famous of the tutors appointed by the Duke, composed in vain

22 POSITIO p.156-64. Canon Farcy op cit 1938 pp.49-50

his famous appeal to Louis XIV to save France by adopting the Duke's reform programme. It began: "All France is now one vast hospital..."

There is no doubt that Nicolas Barre's original vision was of a unitary Institute of schoolmistresses and masters, with a single spiritual director, living out a common rule of prayer, teaching and self-abandonment. Yet although everything was left to Providence nothing was left to chance. Even such matters as the use of candles by the portress, or the proper training of the sisters who were to read at mealtimes did not escape notice. This is the paradox of Nicolas's character. Though the sisters and brothers were to be obedient, chaste and poor they were not to take vows. They had no job security or pension rights and might be dismissed, at the discretion of the authorities, for persistent breaches of the regulations laid down in the rule. Even retired teachers, who remained in the house, were to do whatever they could to serve the community. They had, on paper at least, no absolute right to board and bread. Such precepts, however relaxed in their interpretation, seem harsh today. But we must remember the main thrust of the founder's aim: not to make the religious life a refuge from the harshness of the world outside; but rather to persuade each sister to accept, in her heart, the evangelical teaching that "here we have no abiding city". The "rudeness" of this approach certainly deterred the numerous wealthy or aristocratic novices in search of a cosy corner. It was doubtless a positive attraction to the more single-minded. This was an heroic age, in which extremes, whether of good or evil, had their own appeal.

There is a perennial problem, which has to be faced anew in every age: how best to realise the truth of the incarnation, through the inevitable involvement of the religious in the mundane problems of getting and spending. Nicolas Barre, by seeking to recover gospel values of the missionary life, hit on a method eminently practical. The original sin of the religious life is that the institution, and its minutest regulations, insensibly becomes an end in itself; a substitute for the new Jerusalem, rather than a telescope trained expectantly heavenwards. Over the generations, in any Order, the original "service" function, as perceived by the founder, tends to become secondary. The organisation is perceived as an end in itself and in the fine-tuning of its needs - both material and spiritual - the function is gradually forgotten altogether. Nicolas Barre wished the service function to remain primary. The various checks and balances within his foundation; strange though they may at first seem to the historian; were designed to prevent this creeping institutionalisation. His sisters, like the Infant Jesus to whom each house was dedicated, had been given joint citizenship of this world and the next. An essential part of this was to realise their unavoidable dependence on others; even for their board and lodging. A disadvantage, from the purely temporal standpoint, was that the teaching sisters had neither the independence of the wage-earner nor the lifelong security of a religious taking vows. But, at least from. 1669, Nicolas Barre was careful to make the extreme implications of this possibility of "dying in a ditch" clear at the outset.

It is clear that Nicolas Barre, as spiritual director of the Institute, had not reserved for himself the powers normally bestowed on founders. What is, perhaps, his last letter shows that he was in no position to name his own successor (another matter for Monsieurs de Rouen to determine). He was still very much a member of the Minim order, and continued to teach in their Paris house.

In that last letter, the sisters addressed were evidently keen to be admitted to the Institute of St. Francis of Paola (the tertiary Institute of Minims). That saint, founder of the Minims, was especially venerated by the sisters who evidently gained a certain corporate solidarity through membership of its tertiary Institute. But the Minim authorities were very reluctant to accept that this privilege gave them any umbrella responsibility for the charitable schools. It remained a purely personal enterprise of Nicolas Barre, who was not without critics in the order, even in the 1670s, to accuse him of neglecting his official duties. After

the death of Nicolas Barre's successor, who was a Minim also, the connection ceased.

These ambiguities are reflected in the problem of the name of the Institute. In the beginning we hear of "The Schools of Jesus the Humiliated". In his last letter Nicolas Barre referred to "your Institute, or rather of the Holy Infant Jesus". This suggests that "Institute of the. Holy Infant Jesus" was the name favoured by the founder. We find also "les dames de Saint Maur" gaining currency for the Institute in Paris, from the mere name of the street. And what of the mother house at Rouen, which eventually went its separate way as another Institute under the name of "Institute of the Sisters of Providence"? There seems good evidence that earlier on, during his time in Rouen, Nicolas Barre had thought this a fitting name for sisters who were to depend on providence entirely. And he had referred to Paris as the fortress and Rouen as the bastion; indicating that though he wished each to support the other he acknowledged a certain separation, even in his lifetime. There is evidence that wherever the sisters went they were known indifferently as “the charitable schools” , “the little schools”, known indifferently as "the charitable schools", or "the teaching sisters" and their house might assume whatever name was locally adopted. All this reflects the varying strands in their unique genealogy: as an educational arm of the local Hospital General; as communities following a rule, under one spiritual director; as obedient servants of a self-funding lay council; as an integral part of local diocesan machinery.

The peculiar importance of Abbe Edmund Montigny de Servien, as Nicolas Barre's principle assistant, became most evident in the period following the founder's death. But it must not be forgotten that he was perhaps the first to whom Nicolas confided the details of his original blueprint. A close relative of Abel Servien (one of the most outstanding ministers for war and able ministers of finance of the period) he had resigned a brilliant career at court to devote himself to solitary prayer. Under the influence of Nicolas Barre he had returned to the world and brought his many talents into the service of the poor. His role in placing the schools on a sound financial footing, within the terms of the Founder's principles, was crucial. After Nicolas Barre's death he was the chief means of making Nicolas's thought better known, through publication of selections of his work. From 1693, until his death, he was the dominant figure in the Paris house, whose schools now dotted the map of France. He was the first to see the potential of the schools to the world-wide missions.

Servien de Montigny had such veneration for Nicolas - though they were almost the same age - that even in his lifetime he placed him on a lofty pedestal. Servien's growing importance after his death, as a senior administrator, Nicolas's literary executor and spiritual director in Paris, means that perhaps we have come to see Nicolas through his eyes. It must not be forgotten that the Abbe Servien was trained as a lawyer and that the business of lawyers is to marshal a dossier which presents one half of the facts. Does the image of Nicolas, which emerges from the panegyric biographies of the day, show too much preoccupation with the superhuman qualities, considered appropriate to a Founder? The modern reader is left with a silhouette, sharp enough in its profile, but which leaves us, all too often, in the dark about the more human qualities of our Director. This is partly conceded by the biographers themselves, who are content to refer us to the **Spiritual Letters** for the true mind of their subject.

So far as the present study goes, my main fear is lest the web of historical circumstances hide from the reader what ought to be its human centre. For, in the course of this writing, I have caught glimpses of what I like to imagine as the real Nicolas Barre: the child who, above all else, wanted his sister to live; the precocious schoolboy, who wanted to know everything; the man who described the spiritual life as a state of total ignorance, a wandering through the darkness over treacherous and uneven ground.

How shall we sum him up? The sceptic, who was not afraid to out-stare the demonic suggestions of his own subconscious? The passionate lover, who somehow incorporated the perspectives of eternity into his daily experience? The gifted pupil, turned educator, who would not neglect the smallest details? His unique contribution was to picture the mystery of creation as no more than a gradual education of the creature into a timeless awareness of its Creator. Viewed from this standpoint the lofty purpose of the Institute: "To submit all hearts to the empire of the Christ, King of Kings, and to destroy the reign of sin and demons upon earth", seems thoroughly comprehensible. For who can tell the impact of one life on history?

APPENDIX I

THE COMPANY OF THE HOLY SACRAMENT

Founded in 1630 by the Duke of Ventadour and other Catholic noblemen, it was primarily a missionary and philanthropic organisation. Its founding coincided with the long French war with Spain and much of its charity became, for accidental reasons, concentrated on relieving the hardships associated with war. St. Vincent de Paul is perhaps the greatest name associated with its work. But the direction and finances of the company were in the hands of the laity; notably certain noblewomen such as Louise de Marillac, the Duchess of Aiguillon and the Duchess of Guise. The Company was in many ways a remarkable example of Catholic social action (the first to use the printing press to alert Christians to the starvation in the war zones and to inform the charitable public also how its money was being spent). The Company had the wholehearted approval of successive Popes but remained independent of the French state and of the French bishops.

Its ultramontane (pro-papal principles); its secret council of directors; and above all the fact that much of its support came from the old aristocracy, brought it increasingly under the suspicion of the state. When St. Vincent and the Company began to set up Hospitals General, in Paris and other principal towns, the government became increasingly suspicious that the Company was setting up "a state within a state". Also St. Vincent de Paul had dared to question Cardinal Mazarin's policy of total war. Anne of Austria, the Queen Mother, at first protected the company from its critics. (Servien de Montigny was her private secretary till he resigned in 1655). But she notoriously lacked the will to deny Mazarin anything. In 1660 the Company was suspended in response to specific complaints from the chaplain of the Archbishop of Rouen to Cardinal Mazarin that: "Its interfering enquiries into the morals of families and the internal discipline of

religious houses might be suffered in Spain but not in France, which knows no Inquisition". These complaints were upheld by a five year long official enquiry; and a royal edict of abolition followed. For the next twenty years "enthusiastic" Catholicism was almost as unfashionable at the French court as Puritanism in the court of Charles II. Although the Papacy made no public protest, for diplomatic reasons, the episode put a frost on church-state relations. These deteriorated steadily until Louis's XIV's death in 1715.

There are a number of similarities between the spirit of the Institute and the Company, whose activities were more wide-ranging. Apart from their focus on catechising the laity, on "little schools" for the poor, and on improving the status of women, there is the question of organisation. Both the Company and the Institute were run by a Secret Council of laity who had oversight of finance and administration. Priests, like St. Vincent and J.J. Olier, gave advice about overall strategy, but had otherwise a mainly spiritual and pastoral role. The constitutions of the Company strictly forbade endowment. It did not even own any buildings for members' meetings or storage of food and clothing. This hostility to testimonial bequests recalls the later spirit of the Institute. The language of the Company's prohibition: "If the source is troubled or tainted the fountain cannot run clear", recalls Nicolas Barre's explanation for his Reasons for Not Accepting Endowments for the Charitable Schools or Even Owning a House: "lest the source of all these graces be dried up". One link between Nicolas Barre and the Company was J.J. Olier. He had been a key figure in many of its activities. Nicolas had been a member of J.J. Olier's Confraternity of St. Joseph which, in 1657, provided the staff for the "little schools" started by the Company in Marseilles. The Duchess of Guise, who had been a strong supporter of Company projects, especially schools, was to be a generous patron of the Institute. Bishop Abelly, the biographer of St. Vincent, had been very active in the Company. He was to remain a friend and admirer of Nicolas Barre until his death.

APPENDIX II

HOSPITALS GENERAL

The idea came from St. Vincent de Paul and the Company of the Holy Sacrament, in the mid 1650s, following the success of their Hospital and Mission to the galley slaves. The original plan was to create a haven for all refugees, misfits and victims of disease, war, taxation and unemployment. The idea was to supply industrial retraining, medical care, spiritual renewal and even education for the children. But there is always a great gulf fixed between the perfect institution, as perceived by the eye of a saint, and what society has the patience, time and money to deliver. Although endowed by the Company, the Hospitals were at the outset subject to interference from the state; and the suspension of the Company made complete take-over possible. The government now controlled the Hospital system, and massively extended it. But they wished to finance it, as far as possible, through private endowments. Under French law, after 1660, all private loans and donations to Hospitals General, and their accrued investment income, were free of **amortissement**; a recent tax which was a great burden to all civil communities and religious houses registered by letters patent.

The Boards superintended all paupers, cripples, lunatics, unemployed and any plans for charitable relief. They had responsibility for industrial workshops and pauper education. Far from being centres of renewal, to re-equip people for life in the community, the Hospitals, at worst, were a sort of absolutism over the disadvantaged. At best they were a cut-price holding operation against a rising tide of poverty and disease. Rouen, for example, designed to hold eight hundred, often contained many times that number. There is perhaps a parallel to be drawn with the evolution of the high-minded Victorian "model" reformatory into the overcrowded prisons of today.

With hindsight it seems a pity that government bureaucracy, combined with ministerial suspicion of the aristocratic directors of the Company, should have truncated the original scheme. But the movement to institutionalise the poor, the insane, the disabled and the vulnerable was not wholly wicked. Dark though the picture seems, especially in the writings of some recent historians, we need to see the historical perspective. There was an effective collapse, by 1650, of France's ancient feudal, provincial society. Charity in towns like Paris, Amiens or Rouen could no longer be rooted in a form of community care which was paternalistic and self-regulating. Many of the smaller communities were, literally, bankrupt, and close to moral collapse. Historians have written, in this context, of a mid-century crisis. The Hospitals General, whatever their shortcomings on a human scale, served an important function. French society in 1650 was on the brink of mass starvation, epidemics, mass-hysteria and widespread popular disorder. There is no doubt that the Hospitals, whose population was a tiny fraction of the total population, acted as a safety-valve; if only by relieving the burdens on the rest of the community. 23

From its inception to the French Revolution, the Institute - whilst functioning as an independent agent - remained under the financial and administrative aegis of the Hospitals General. And the success of this arrangement, in itself, is evidence that Vincent's original vision of the Hospitals - as centres for raising the level of the community as a whole - never faded away completely.

23 M. Foucault Histotre de la Fohe 1961 and P. Christophe Les Pauvres et La Pauvrete du XVIe siecle a nos Jours