

THE BUILDING UP OF THE HISTORIC MEMORY OF THE INSTITUTE TODAY

Second part

My participation in the handing on of the “Historical Account” of the Institute

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INTRODUCTION

In order to understand how I was led to provide my contribution to the handing on of the “Historical Account” of the Institute by writing a series of books on its history, it could be good to know that after having studied History and Geography at the University of Besancon – in France the two subjects are linked – I taught these subjects in the Junior Novitiate of the same city. Now it happened that in the last year that I was so teaching I was asked to write a short History of the Institute for use by the novices of the Districts of France. At the Rome Second Novitiate where I had been sent in 1960-61 I undertook this work which in fact limited itself to the context of the foundation of the Institute and its “Origins”. I was able to complete this work during the holidays that followed and during the course of the year 1961-62 when I was Director at Neuchatel in Switzerland. This work was made use of for a couple of years and then it fell into oblivion.

In 1990 I was on the point of leaving my post as Director of an establishment of professional teaching at Paray le Monial when Brother Michel Sauvage, at that time director of Lasallian Studies, advised me of the wish expressed by the International Council of Lasallian Studies (CIEL) that a *Précis of the History of the Institute* should be drafted and he asked me to whether I could carry out this work when I might become available. I replied that I was prepared to undertake such a task. However I added that this would not be in the form envisaged since a “Précis” seemed to me too constrained for giving an exact idea of what really took place. I therefore proposed composing instead what I would call an *Initiation to the History of the Institute* in which two sorts of text would alternate: chapters presenting the historic thread and “studies” dealing with particular points that seemed to merit being developed. What I was proposing was accepted but it was only later that I learned that I would have to limit myself to four volumes of 200 pages each for the entire History of the Institute!

A school text that I had been using where each chapter was fleshed out by the presentation of a particular aspect of what had been dealt with in the chapter gave me the idea of introducing this distinction in the works whose composition I was envisaging. In this way for example by limiting oneself to just the chapters one could come to an initial understanding of each of the periods envisaged.

Another particularity of these works can be highlighted. The several reflections made on the matter of what has been presented are transferred to what is called “conclusion”. They often aim moreover at leading the reader to draw this conclusion himself. 22

VOLUME I – ORIGINS OF THE INSTITUTE

In September 1991 when I had some free time I began the work. My intention was to draft a first incomplete section on the “Origins of the Institute” that I would submit to an international group of Brothers in Rome likely to feel interested in such a work. This text which was examined in December 1992 had an overall favourable reception. I was then able to finalise the section already composed and to do the same for what remained to be set up. The work was published in 1994.

For the years when John Baptist de La Salle established the Institute and when at the request of the Brothers he was the Superior I certainly made use of what his first biographers had written. I also put to good use the results of the research of Brother Louis Aroz. For this motive a certain number of “studies” present the facts where certain documents allow for shedding a somewhat new light on various aspects of the formation of the Institute. Special attention was given to the vows of 1691 and 1694 which “brought about the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools”. On this topic it is clear that preference was accorded to the interpretation given by Brother Maurice Auguste in CL 2, and Brothers Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos in *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, over that developed in a “thesis” of which I was aware but which I did not follow.

The oversight of the Rome reading group led to making very clear that starting from 1717 responsibility for the Institute was assured by the Brothers. This did not prevent the Founder from continuing to participate in work in common as is attested to by the revision of the Rule carried out in 1717-18. In this regard the evidence presented in CL 25 concerning the contributions effected at the time of this revision is of a nature to complete the “study” dealing with: The writing of the Common Rules. What is said concerning the Bull of Approbation, and which is essentially based on CL 11 throws light on the pontifical text which bring one to view this in a way that differs greatly from that which was current during my young days as a religious – which in no way modifies the bearing of this text as is made evident.

VOLUME II – 18TH CENTURY

The first quarter of this century having been linked to the “Period of the Origins” of the Institute, the volume which had for title: “18th Century” was concerned then with the greater part of this century including the time of the French Revolution which corresponded to the last dozen years of the century.

This period showed itself to be of particular interest for what concerns the Institute. In effect the Institute experienced regular growth and constant consolidation. Its works spread out across a large part of France contributing in this way to the progress of enrolment in schools in those social environments in which this had been refused by “enlightened minds” of the time. At the same time the Brothers participated in the progress of religious renewal within the Christian populace. The Revolution itself while it was destroying what has just been recalled brought out in a large number of Brothers fidelity to the Catholic faith which inspired them, and an attachment to their educational mission which they resumed as soon as possible.

Following what thus emerges overall from the web of history the “studies” deal with matters which merit attention. Several indeed tackle topics which had not been dealt with or scarcely so by those who wrote about the History of the Institute. For example the Letters Patent in spite of their rather off-putting character concern legal questions which the Brothers of the period had to confront. The question concerning the presence of Brothers in the Public Hospitals had caught the attention of Georges Rigault but it merited being raised again even though it concerned only a few Brothers because it indicated a certain broadening of the field of activity of the Brothers. For what concerns the life of the Institute itself the study on Novitiates and Brothers’ perseverance had never been undertaken. It was all the more important to undertake it given that the entrance registers for the Novitiates of Saint Yon and of Avignon had been preserved. On this same subject attention merits being drawn to Brother Paschal’s paper. Outside of the participants in the SIEL session where it was studied it remains largely unknown in the Institute.

With regard to the educational mission of the Brothers the contents of the study on the evolution of the educational and pedagogical ideas of the 19th century might appear off the topic. This is not so certain if one takes into account the “special classes” that the Brothers opened in certain of their schools and likewise the courses given in the boarding schools – in one case as in the other this was being done in order to prepare the students to practise their future trade. This in fact was what certain 18th century theoreticians of pedagogy were proposing. As for the study entitled “The Brothers’ students in the 18th century” this had been made possible by the results of previous research conducted in the different cities where – the Brothers having been present in the 18th century – lists of students, in general drawn up at the demand of the Writing Masters, were able to be found.

As to the “Revolutionary Period” the historical framework is certainly too “school-centred” and based on notions of history proper to France. This was a way of setting up reference points within such a complex period. As to the “studies” they too are deserving of special attention. The one “The Institute in 1790” allows for making the point about the Institute at this key moment in its history. However this “study” offers at the same time the interest of having been based on texts circulated by Brother Superior Agathon. What is said on “The Brothers and the Constitutional Oath” is based on the minute research work that had been done by Georges Rigault. What has been attempted for its completion and refining is not of the same quality and – after all is said and done – scarcely modifies the result already achieved namely that amongst the Brothers called on to take the oath the great majority refused to swear or alternatively took it with reservations that annulled it. What refers to “Martyrs” makes clear the fact that apart from one of them their death was brought about by their refusal to take the “constitutional oath” which thus became a witness of fidelity to the Catholic Church.

VOLUME III – 19TH CENTURY

The volume bearing this title concerns in reality only the first three quarters of this century. This demands an explanation. It had at first been foreseen that this volume would encompass the totality of the century for what concerns the history of the Institute. It was at a rather late stage that it was suggested to me by Brother Lucien Frings, archivist of the District of South Belgium whom I went to consult at Ciney, to limit this volume to the first three parts that I had foreseen highlighting. It appeared in fact that these three parts formed a fairly homogenous whole while the fourth was clearly quite different. This allowed moreover keeping to the two hundred pages foreseen!

The framework of history formed by the chapters makes clear the emergence first of all of how the Institute reconstituted itself after the French Revolution. On the one hand this happened thanks to the

Brothers who having come through this period had reassembled around the Superiors chosen from among them. On the other it was due to the entry into the Institute of young men coming from families who remained attached to their faith during the testing times they had known. In a second period going from 1830 to 1850 we see how under the leadership of two Superiors belonging to the new generations of Brothers the Institute made progress in France and in Italy as also in other countries where it became established during this time, whether close by as in Belgium, Switzerland and Germany or further off as in Canada, Reunion Is, Turkey, the United States and Egypt. After that during the almost twenty-five years when the Institute continued to have as Superior Brother Philippe (Mathieu Bransiet) what is evident is the rapid growth that the Institute experienced and its expansion to new countries in Europe, South East Asia and Latin America. It is also noted that at the same time the Brothers' works were diversified while the number of schools confided to them whether public or private increased even if it has to be recognised that this was done in a far too unplanned way.

In this volume in a way different from that on the 18th century the "studies" are far less destined to reveal a little known aspect of Institute History. This is however the case for the one which illustrates "Efforts envisaging the reintegration of former Brothers" which aims at showing that the return to the Institute of its former members experienced many obstacles, was very progressive, and in the end concerned only a small number of those who were Brothers, for example in 1791 when a list had been drawn up by Brother Solomon, Secretary to Brother Superior Agathon. Among the other "studies" some like those on "The Brothers and Mutual Teaching", "The New Congregations of Teaching Brothers" and "The Conquest of Freedom of Teaching" deal with subjects in connection with the Institute but not directly affecting it.

The five studies inserted after the final chapters of the book allow us to look into topics concerning various aspects of the life of the Institute. Sometimes these studies round out the chapter preceding them. This is the case for the one entitled "Internal aspects of the Institute" which permit a review of the organisation of the Institute at the time indicated. The same goes for what is said about "Diversification of the Brothers' Activities" which follows the chapter on "Progress in the Brothers' works". Otherwise the last topics treated are not linked to a particular chapter. Such is the case for what is presented under the heading "Work of Brother Philippe". The essay undertaken does not draw greatly on the books written about him since these appear too lavish in praise. All the same it is less "critical" than the remarks made on the same subject in the first part of the current text. It was not possible to evade "The Gratuity Question". On this matter the Institute found itself at a key moment, one which only a complete study of the question would permit full understanding. What is said about "The Brothers' Works in the third quarter of the 19th century" facilitates grasping this topic when making clear the relation that became established between Pope Pius IX and Brother Philippe.

VOLUME IV – 19th AND 20th CENTURIES

This title was given to what is a composite text. It includes a first section concerning the last quarter of the 19th century which had at first been foreseen as integrated into the book on that century. The shifting of this text to the beginning of a new work entailed the addition of the years going as far as 1904 which can be considered a hinge-date for the Institute. This permitted especially the demonstration in a first chapter of how the Brothers in France after having been progressively excluded from "public education" between 1878 and 1891 witnessed their exclusion from the right of exercising all forms of teaching as being members of a "Congregation". This was in virtue of a law voted in 7th July 1904 which envisaged in addition that their establishments would be closed, their "Congregation" dissolved and the goods of same confiscated within the space of 10 years.

The historic framework of this first part then sets out to show what happened in the course of the same period in the rest of the Institute. More particularly it appeared indispensable to focus on the missionary work of the Brothers.

A second part of the book corresponding with the years 1904 to 1928 brings out in the first place what consequences the law of 1904 entailed for the Brothers when they had to undergo its effects. Later it can be seen how the application of the law which had at first been strict became much less so because of the war of 1914-1918 and then after this war. The other chapters of this second part concern the rest of the Institute up to 1928.

The manner of thus centring the book on the date 1904 can appear to exaggerate its importance – what happened concerned France alone in fact. It cannot be forgotten however that 2/3 of the members of the Institute were at that time in this country. Above all however the event was far from concerning France alone. As to the consequences of the event they certainly have not all been evaluated. An idea can be formed by referring for example to what Brother Pedro Gil wrote in EL 4, (p.251, 252 French editions) and more broadly in the paragraph having as sub-title: The events of 1904.

The same remark can be made on the subject of the “study” on “The Institute in France” which follows the 1st chapter of the book or those on Secularisation or Expatriation in the second part. These topics clearly find their justification in the perspective of what has been said above.

As for the other “Studies” it is evident that those on “The Institute in France” or those dealing with “Secularisation” or “Expatriation” are directly linked to what has been presented above. Among the following “Studies” it is abundantly clear that certain ones serve to complete the chapter preceding. This is the case with the one entitled “Orientations given to the Institute” which serves to set out details on various aspects of the life of the Institute in the period linking the 19th and 20th centuries. It is certainly evident for the one concerning “The missionary Work of the Brothers” on which it was worthwhile dwelling so as to underline its impact and bring out its features. In this regard it is a matter for regret that the research envisaging a doctoral thesis conducted on the presence and activities of the Brothers in the Near East did not achieve the result envisaged.

If the “study” developing at some length “The Latin Question in the United States” certainly merits a place following the chapter dealing with the Institute on the American continent, it is less evident that the one entitled “Relationship and Diversity among the Brothers’ Establishments in Europe and America” is a way of presenting the educational work of the Brothers in the last part of the 19th century. The same goes for the study consecrated to “Developments in the Work of the Brothers” at the beginning of the 20th century.

What is said about “Changes effected in the Institute by the events of 1904” is not linked with the chapter that precedes it – this is of no importance regarding the impact of the different aspects of the topic that are dealt with.

VOLUME V – 20th CENTURY

This book is effectively a complement to that dealing with the years 1875 to 1928. There was no evident reason in fact to bring to a close at the second of these dates the series of works covered in this *Introduction to the History of the Institute* that I had undertaken. For things to be well done it would

have needed continuing up to the year 1966 when major changes were introduced into the Institute by a General Chapter held that year and continuing to 1967. Effectively however it seemed to the International Council of Lasallian Studies that it would be good to reach the date of 1946 which seemed sufficiently significant for what concerned the History of the Institute.

The time covered by the volume in question is short. However for the wider world it possessed special importance. In 1929 an economic crisis broke out which spread to numerous countries. While it was not possible to be aware of it at the time this crisis not only preceded but precipitated the Second World War which lasted from 1939 to 1945.

The Institute could not fail to undergo the consequences of this state of the world. The book's framework makes this abundantly clear in the first chapter for the dozen years preceding the war and certainly in the 4th chapter consecrated to this event. The other two chapters deal more directly with the Institute itself whether as to its organisation or its development and expansion during the years 1929 to 1939. The statistics concerning these years have been given in the first part of the present text. There is no occasion to repeat them here.

As to the "studies" presented in this book the first is consecrated to "Brothers subjected to persecution". This topic was looked into at some length in the first part of the current text. Two others complete the chapters about the Institute itself. In the one entitled "Interior Life of the Institute" an attempt has been made to not only present a report on directions given by the Superiors but to perceive what might have been the Brothers' way of reacting. Another "study" sets out to present three "Aspects of the Brothers' apostolic mission" which were highlighted in the Institute of the period. An allusion made in the first part of this text suggests that a fourth aspect could have been added, that of the missionary apostolate.

The last "study" concerns the 1946 General Chapter. The unfolding of this Chapter is presented with a fair amount of detail. This permits seeing how a General Chapter of the Institute ordinarily functioned. In the first part of this text mention has already been made of two things which need to be taken into consideration with regard to this Chapter. On the one hand there is the matter of the directives given by the Holy See. On the other there is the role played by the Brother Superior General in the unfolding of the Chapter. Here can be noted the gap that developed between the expectations that had come into existence – at least among a certain number of Brothers – the transformation brought about by the war and what resulted from the Chapter deliberations. What might have been the opportunity to give a fresh impetus to the Institute was transformed into a reestablishment of what had been done before. It is the realisation of this state of affairs that might explain the rather negative presentation that I made of the 1946 General Chapter because at the moment that it took place I was a young Brother and I scarcely heard it mentioned.

The volumes taken together

With regard to the directives given to me it can be said that the first three volumes follow these fairly closely. The chapters and the studies are treated relatively briefly. Each of the volumes keeps pretty close to the 200 pages foreseen. The period dealt with each time is about three quarters of a century. However by this measure the whole of the history of the Institute could not have been contained in four volumes. On the other hand with the fourth volume the framework has changed. Chapters and studies are dealt with at greater length and the number is somewhat augmented with the period envisaged remaining at just over a half-century only. The development occurring in the Institute in numbers and

extent as also the acuity of the problems encountered were more difficult to contend with. The volume in question does not for this reason respect the norms that had been set at the commencement. The volume that follows serves in some way as catch-up so as to attain a date that while what is written conforms well to reality was not all the same particularly significant for the Institute. 27

This is to say that I am not claiming to have produced a definitive work - the beginning of the general title moreover indicates this. It is a question of an *Introduction* so what has been written can be modified, completed, in accordance with what new elements bring to light. This also means that the whole thing is far from being exhaustive – how could it be moreover in such a restricted framework? Let's say that it offers a global view of the History of the Institute and as such whatever serves to fill this out fits this context.