

SHOULD ONE READ MORY?

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ABSTRACT

Author offers a review of Christophe Mory's book entitled in French: "*Jean-Baptiste de La Salle: Rêver l'Éducation?*" (*John Baptist de La Salle: Dreaming about education?*), Pygmalion Publishers, February 2010. Brother Philippe de Montety writes a reflection based on his vision as a Brother of the Christian Schools.

INTRODUCTION

I read Mory as soon as it appeared: Christophe Mory, *Jean-Baptiste de La Salle: Rêver l'éducation? [Dreaming about Education?]*, Ed. Pygmalion. February 2010. There are many misprints and mistakes in the text. It is customary to impute these to the proof-readers and not to the author. However, to present Canon Blain as a Brother of the Christian Schools, or to say that De La Salle was accused of «suborning» minors, does seem to me to go beyond the bounds of what can be decently offered to a reader.

What can one expect from a biography who comes after so many others? Some previously unpublished documents, an original presentation, a lively style? That has already been done, and we moved away from Blain's hagiography a long time ago in an attempt to situate JBDLS and his work in its historical, social and economic setting. M. Mory lectures in *Civilisation française*; so one might think he would offer us a still broader, more balanced vision. In that case, he could be read by a public interested in the history of popular education, informing them that it all began two centuries before Jules Ferry.

SOCIETY

M. Mory is aware of this expectation and of his own ability to satisfy it. He possesses tools of analysis which his precursors did not have, along with a certain disdain for "hagiographers". He has not written the "life of a saint", but the life of an educational founder. "Indeed [...] one can read his life with the eyes of faith. One can also, without self-contradiction, view it as a remarkable life which did not escape from its times" (p. 15).

M. Mory has a vast knowledge of the "period", that is to say the contemporary society of JBDLS, and of the writers of memoirs and the historians who can help us to understand the movements involved. He leads us through the economic, social and political motivations by which the actors in that society made their decisions.

M. Mory gives us some powerful pages on contemporary figures such as Fénelon, Saint-Simon, Abbé de Choisy and Mme Guyon. He cautions against some established authorities such as Voltaire, Michelet, Renan and others. He also quotes a large number of modern specialists. No-one could doubt the quality of his documentation from the best sources on the “period” which is the backdrop for his subject. But does he know the subject himself? The complete absence of any references to the *Cahiers Lasalliens* gives reason to doubt the seriousness of his research.

Mory does offer something new, insofar as the hagiographers did not wish, and the other biographers did not know how to discern the influence of social and economic factors. For him, JBDLS is the tool of forces which go beyond him. “He follows the force of this religious movement without measuring the breadth of its political dimension.” It was a period when the religious and the political were closely intermingled, and modern research has thrown light on the ambiguity of the alliances between the great families and the Church of the time. Mory does not exempt the family of De La Salle from this.

PSYCHOLOGY

A modern biographer attempts at times to enter into the mind of his subject, to explore the depths of his/her psychology, the individual’s motivations and character development from birth to death. That is not without its risks, and one needs to be very sure of the facts before venturing to make pronouncements on the psychological states of mind behind them. Mory sets off along this road without much caution. We shall see later on the pitfalls into which he rushes headlong.

In the meantime, we can appreciate his psychological observations. He calls a spade a spade.

Should JBDLS have “gone into reverse” when the first teachers started to leave? “That might have been possible, if it were not for De La Salle’s pride”. (A U-turn would have meant a victory for his family.)

“JBDLS listens. He never replies on the spur of the moment. Is this prudence, or is it a sign of someone given to delayed reactions? The two traits can result in the same action”.

JBDLS writes to Gabriel Drolin: “I do not know if you will ever achieve anything where you are». Mory reads into this «the expression of a despairing authority. JBDLS does not know how to delegate”.

With regard to the instructions contained in the *Conduite des Écoles*, Mory takes a retrospective look at the life of his subject. “It was not simply that his solitary nature allowed him to stay independent of others [...] He lacked natural authority at key moments in his life”.

Mory admires the visionary who, for the sake of devotion to children, was able gather together quite gifted men into a society which would last for centuries. He even admires « the priest officiating over his own self-perfection, a monstrosity shining with all his humility». The pages about Parménie are moving. “Sister Louise prays with him. What they say to one another is done in few words, accustomed as they are to express only the essential”. This is Mory at his best, and it no doubt indicates the heartfelt impression which marked the beginning of this biography.

A NOBLE FAMILY (!)

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Nevertheless, even in the area of *Civilisation française*, M. Mory can disappoint us. I recall the words of Brother L. M. Aroz: “Can anybody still maintain that JBDLS came from a noble family of Rheims?” Alas, dear Brother, one can if one’s name is Christophe Mory. For he does maintain it; and he hammers us with affirmations of it, without any documentation or proof. He repeats it, starting on page 13, “this son of a noble family of Rheims” and going right up until page 151 “this nobleman of Rheims”.

M. Mory does not offer any justification for this claim to nobility, as though it were self-evident for him. Is it because of the noble particle “de” before the name La Salle? But this particle is not necessarily one of nobility, and at the most it may indicate simply a notable person, as Mory himself remarks in connection with Brother Jean-Louis de Marcheville “whose name with the particle shows that the Brothers who were recruited did not all come from underprivileged backgrounds”.

The De La Salle family was an example of the merchant middle class rising to the level of the upper middle class of magistrates, with many alliances with the nobility. Some members of the family were ennobled in the service of the king, e.g. Louis (1636-1698) and Louis (1654-1701). “Nicole Moët was noble by birth, but Louis de La Salle (1625-1672) was not. When she married, the bride lost her title of nobility”. As for Jean-Baptiste and his brothers and sisters, “As children of a father who was not noble and a mother who was noble, they were considered not to be noble”.

However, this assertion does not tell the reader anything. The things that would enable us to understand the childhood and education of JBDLS, the things that might have held him back and been obstacles to his commitment, none of these are linked to a status of nobility, and M. Mory knows what they are. He analyses them in detail *passim* and even lists them on occasion: e.g. page 66, career, blood line, name, wealth, family, hierarchy.

The assertion of nobility is not unmotivated, but serves one of the author’s purposes. If the reader is taken in by it, it would lead him to accept the line of argument which it is meant to reinforce. Is there any reason why a child, especially a noble child, would have a precocious orientation towards the clerical state, when any idea of a transcendent vocation is eliminated? (p. 24). By dint of searching for such a reason, the author finds one. And it goes as follows.

THE SENSATIONAL DISCOVERY

For M. Mory has made the kind of discovery that every biographer dreams of, and thanks to which the world of Lasallian biographies will be divided into the time before Mory and the time after Mory. He has found the secret mainspring governing the start and finish of his character’s life, the force which explains his commitment to the priesthood, his excessive penances, his constrained spirituality, «his sometimes morbid austerity (*sic*) » (p.124). Jean-Baptiste de La Salle was “a child of sin”.

The affirmation is stated directly and repeated indefinitely, because it goes side by side with the description of the behaviour it is supposed to explain. It does not let up, from the heading on page 23 “The Child of Sin” until the one on page 310 “The old Demons of *the Child of Sin*”.

A Line of Argument

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For M. Mory, it is an open and shut case. JBDLS was born seven months after the marriage of his parents, and was therefore conceived out of wedlock.

Does it enter the mind of M. Mory that such an affirmation has to be backed up? No danger! He enumerates his arguments (p. 24). Let us listen to them:

Apart from the young ages of the couple, three things point to a conception outside of marriage. 1. (Otherwise) the pregnancy would have lasted only seven months. In a period of high infant mortality, premature babies did not survive. 2. Louis and Nicolle took up residence in the Hôtel de la Cloche because they were not financially independent. 3. As the first-born, Jean-Baptiste should have followed the career of his father. However, at a very early age he was directed towards the clerical state. He was tonsured at the age of eleven, which was contrary to the custom in families of the nobility. Was it necessary to give this young life over to the Church? That would have been done if the child were weak and sickly, but that was not the case (Moury, 2010, p. 24).

Some questions and my answers

For people like us, who are not content just to affirm things, we shall make a list of questions.

- 1) Have all the people who marry young conceived before the wedding?
- 2) Were Louis and Nicolle young at the time when they married?
- 3) Were Louis and Nicolle financially independent?
- 4) What were the chances of survival for a premature baby of seven months, or eight months at the most?
- 5) Was JBDLS weak and sickly at birth or in childhood?
- 6) Was the custom that the eldest son should take up the career of his father a universal one in noble families?
- 7) In the family and *entourage* of JBDLS, was it rare for the eldest son to become a priest?
- 8) In the family and *entourage* of JBDLS was it rare to be tonsured when only eleven

The first question is a legitimate one which can be developed along the lines of Mory's reasoning. There may well be statistics in favour, but they need to be properly backed up. The rest is a matter of bedroom privacy. By saying "apart from their young ages", he is putting their age in first place among the "proofs" of a conception outside of marriage. Really, that seems to me to be a bit bold.

The second question is a question of fact, which means to say that the answer can be found in the documents. At 25 and 17, Louis and Nicolle were in no way "young" for people of their time and social *milieu*. On their wedding day, many of the guests who attended would have been married at the same

age or even younger, not to mention their grandparents who were married at the ages of thirty and fourteen and a half respectively. But M. Mory seems to have no knowledge of these well attested facts.

The third question is a financial one and would require the consultation of documents that perhaps we do not have sight of. Did Mory consult these documents without telling us? What answer can be given to his categorical affirmation? When Louis de La Salle was 22, he was in fact a “young” lawyer in the Parliament, and on 5 July 1647 he needed dispensation from the age requirement for admission to the position of councilor. At the time of his marriage, therefore, he had been active in his profession for three years. Did the fact that the young newly married couple lived with his parents mean that they lacked resources? I have not been able to study the customs of similar young married couples. But does it “prove” pre-marital sex? That sounds more like popular magazine journalism than the research to be expected from a biographer.

The fourth question about the chances of survival of premature infants in the 17th century would require extensive documentation which probably does not exist anywhere. M. Mory’s position may seem clever enough to poke fun at an alleged pregnancy of seven months, but it does not stand up so well to the idea of a pregnancy of eight months, or more precisely of eight months and six days.

The fifth question really is a question, although M. Mory is happy to present it as an assertion: “if the child were weak and sickly, but that was not the case”. In which biography did he read that it ‘was not the case’? JBDLS led a life that was very active, even in physical terms. He undertook journeys that command our admiration, but that refers to his adult life and could have been the result of his unfailing energy. But is there any evidence regarding JBDLS as a child, one way or the other? In his *Portrait* Maillefer affirms that he had “a constitution which was very delicate to begin with but which grew stronger with age”. According to Blain, “His constitution at first seemed very delicate, but his body was trained by work and austerities and gradually strengthened with age”. And again: “Delicate from birth and by upbringing, his nature was strengthened by austerities”. Mory mentions without precise reference a text of the “hagiographer” (namely Blain) which says that the premature infant only survived through the power of the Almighty, but he clearly does not believe it. As far as he is concerned, the family and friends simply told lies. In this way, he either passes over or contradicts the only contemporary witnesses that we have.

The sixth question appeals to general public knowledge that the custom for the eldest son to follow in his father’s line of business was and is universal in time, space and social structures, including the nobility great or small, the middle classes upper or lower, merchants, artisans, land-owning peasants. All families had always followed this practice. For him to talk here about “family custom” is a bit of a trick, since he says it is universal, but here we have precisely a family that does not follow it. Anyone who says “it was contrary to the custom in families” is revealing what he wants to hide, namely the fact that he has no precise knowledge of the customs of this particular family and is ignorant of his sources.

The seventh question is purely a matter of documentation. The reasons could be religious or not, but the documents are there. A good number of the eldest sons in families of the time turned towards the priesthood. CL 19 lists 18 of them in close proximity to JBDLS. Not only is Mory totally ignorant of these documents, he also projects his ignorance into the psychology of JBDLS: “He felt he was really an exception”. However, in the midst of so many uncles and nephews who were eldest sons and priests, he was by no means an exception, so he could not “feel” he was one. The amount he claims to be able to read into the mind of JBDLS is enough to discredit Mory. Self-deception to that degree is no longer a question of dreaming; it is pure delirium.

The eighth question would require very thorough research. The only other example available to us of tonsure at the age of eleven was also well known to M. Mory, and he does not try to make a child of sin out of him, namely Nicolas Roland, a distant cousin of JBDLS. So what can the author mean by “contrary to family customs”?

Not one of these arguments holds water. Mory is ignorant of the whole factual and statistical basis of the subjects he is writing about.

He asserts what he should prove, because he wants to use it as evidence for something else. Let the reader be the judge.

A little Arithmetic

Let us conclude with the arithmetic of the calendar. How long is it between the 25 August and the following 30 April? Aroz, understates it and counts it as “eight months later”. As for M. Mory, he allows himself a little irony and says, “It suffices to count it on your fingers (as our grandmothers did) to realise that the pregnancy lasted only seven months”. So I shall answer in the same tone: Go back and visit your grandmother again and let her teach you to count on your fingers. 248 days are 35 weeks and 3 days, or 8 months and 6 days.

CONCLUSION

Was Jean-Baptiste de La Salle a child of sin or a premature baby of eight months and six days? I do not know if it will ever be granted to us to be sure, but M. Mory will not have helped us very much.

So, should one read Mory? Frankly one can do without it. A pity.