

Historical Perspective on the Heroic Vow

To begin with, considering everything that has been said and written about the “Heroic Vow” during the last eight months or so, someone might ask if it is possible or even necessary to say more about this event. When requested to give this presentation, I did ask this question. And I am not sure I answered to it to my satisfaction. Nor am I certain that now I will answer it to the satisfaction of those Brothers present who have also asked it. But I will try to do so, while also suggesting how this incident in the life of the Founder and the early history of our Institute might have some special meaning to Brothers in the Philippines today.

I might start by mentioning two things which it seems important to keep in mind when reading about and pondering historical events. We should never forget that many things which we know and take for granted have not always existed. Not only that, some of them came into being only quite recently. And at the same time, some can disappear quite rapidly, even right before our eyes. Likewise we should remember that things which have been around for sometime have most likely changed over the years, even quite drastically. Probably some such changes have been made voluntarily, while others have been imposed on them by outside forces and against their will.

Also, while considering this topic, there is another point which it might be extremely important to keep in mind. Too often when we look into the life and work of John Baptist de La Salle, we see him only as a Saint of the Catholic Church. Certainly the Founder was a Saint who should be studied as a holy and saintly person. At the same time, though, there is another facet to this man which is equally important but which has been overlooked on occasion. Humanly speaking, De La Salle was at once a very complex and an interesting person. So in order to understand more fully his life, his work, his influence, and his enduring fame, for he has achieved lasting fame, we have to keep in mind the human side of this man who became a Saint as well as an educational pioneer. I believe there is still a vast amount of work which needs to be done on this topic. And I recommend this to any would-be Lasallian scholar as a possible field of activity.

One human trait of the Founder which seems to be important when discussing the “Heroic Vow” is that De La Salle was a very perceptive person. At times all of us have seen people who really did not know what was going on, even if they were in the middle of the events. They were individuals who simply did not know what was happening. De La Salle was far from being that sort of person. Rather, he was very much aware of what was happening around him. He had the big picture in mind. But a second and closely related human trait of the Founder is more important still. Not only did he know what was taking place, he looked for and saw the meaning of the events. Both of these traits, as well as a number of his other valuable and desirable human characteristics, are quite evident in his writings. Among others, The Conduct of the Schools, Christian Civility, and the Letters show him quite clearly to have been this sort of person.

Now, how do all these things relate to the topic of this presentation? To answer this question, an incident in the early history of the Jesuits might be mentioned. The story is that when two of the first members of the Society were asked to be the papal theologians at the Council of Trent and to speak for the Pope at this gathering, Ignatius allowed them to accept this position. But before going to the Council, they were assigned to teach catechism to some street children of their area. This suggests that one of the early apostolates assumed by the Society was teaching on the elementary level. By 1691, however, this was no longer one of the works of this religious order.

As one of the Founder’s letters to Gabriel Drolin shows, he was very interested in the Fathers of the Pious Schools, an order founded by St. Joseph Calasanctius, who died three years before De La Salle was born. By the time De La Salle made this inquiry, the order was not that large and was having trouble continuing to do the specific work which it had been founded to do. Again, as in the earlier case of the Jesuits, a religious order was finding itself changing over the years, even in spite of itself and its intentions.

When discussing religious orders of men, frequently it is mentioned that slightly less than 25% of those founded prior to 1500 have survived to this day. De La Salle was living in an age close enough to the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century, one of the main causes of the demise of so many orders founded prior to 1500. Perhaps in Rheims,

Paris, or elsewhere, he had seen some former establishments of these groups, now abandoned or devoted to other purposes. Very forcefully these structures conveyed the message that not only could a religious order be significantly changed -- even against its collective will -- but that in time it could disappear completely.

Probably De La Salle was quite aware of things like this when he saw himself becoming involved in the birth of a new religious order dedicated to a very specific purpose -- conducting elementary schools for the children of the working class and the poor. Was it possible not only to ensure its survival, but to ensure it would continue as a religious order devoted to the apostolate for which it has been founded? Or might it survive, but only under some different form? Then, since it had changed -- and so drastically, might people ask why did it exist, why was it continuing, since it was not doing the work for which it had been established, and not doing anything different from what was being done by numerous other orders of men.

This was the situation in which John Baptist De La Salle found himself in 1691. And for this reason, as well as others, 1691 was for him a year of crisis. All of his biographers mention this fact, Battersby very briefly in his work written in 1957, but Georges Rigault, Yves Poutet, and Luke Salm, to mention but a few others, at greater length and in more detail. And all of them mention a number of reasons for this situation.

Among other things, 1691 was a year of individual deaths as well as year in which the collective death of the society itself seemed quite possible. There was the close brush with death of De La Salle himself, from which only the skill of the famous Dr. Helvitiu saved him. This raises questions such as, would the work have survived if he had died in 1691? There is little reason to think that it would.

Likewise, there was the near death of the Brother Director of Guise, who recovered only when the Saint came to visit him. But more important still was the death of Henri L'Heureux, chosen by the Founder to study for the priesthood and then to replace him as the superior of the emerging religious institute. This was a personal setback for the Founder as well as a real loss to the work in which he was involved. De La Salle found a message from God in this event. But in spite of his strong faith he must also have felt a great

disappointment.

Added to these events was death of another type which could have been more painful still. A few years before, some of his disciples had asked to be allowed to make solemn and perpetual religious vows as a sign of their dedication and commitment to the work in which they were engaged. The holy priest had to tell them they were not yet ready for such a step. Instead they were allowed to make only a simple vow of obedience for one year. And of those who made this vow, within a few years only eight of the twelve remained in the Institute. When he went to Paris to begin his work there, sixteen Brothers -- with or without vows -- were staffing the schools in Rheims. By 1691, only eight were left. Some of the men he depended on most and had left in positions of responsibility there helped create this situation because they were not equal to the tasks they had been given to do. As a result, the teacher training school, one of his most important works, had failed. At the same time, the novitiate no longer functioned because of a lack of candidates seeking admission. Taken together, all of these things could have led him to ask whether the new religious family was just going to wither away, disappear in front of his eyes, even before it had an opportunity to become solidly established.

At the same time, an element of the bigger picture might have influenced both his thinking and his feelings on this matter. In 1691, the War of the League of Augsburg, the third war of Louis XIV and his first unsuccessful war, had been going on for some two years. Before it ended in 1697, Louis XIV was able to fight a good part of the rest of Europe to a standstill. The alliance created by William III was unable to defeat him, but he in turn was unable to win a clear-cut victory. More important, however, this conflict undermined much of the prosperity enjoyed in France due to the work of Louis's great minister, Colbert. France was entering a period when business conditions would not be good, a time of recession or depression -- to use the modern terminology. As is well known, De La Salle and his first Brothers were already poor. Along with numerous other poor people they would suffer the most during a time such as this. But the rich also would not have as much money as they had before. And it should never be forgotten that many of the first Christian schools were supported by gifts or donations and legacies from the

wealthy. By reducing these sources of financial support, how would current economic conditions affect a work, which as De La Salle said, was founded on Providence alone? What implications did these political and economic events have for this new work already beset with so many other problems?

On the other hand and at the same time, though, there were positive signs of which De La Salle must have been equally aware. The most important facet of this situation was that, generally speaking, the schools were doing well. For a variety of reasons De La Salle had been forced to close what a number of historians of education call the first normal school, but the various elementary schools were continuing and doing well, enhancing the growing reputation of the new group of school masters. In So Favored By Grace: Education in the Time of John Baptist De La Salle, the volume edited by Brother Lawrence Colhocker of the Baltimore District, the opening article by Brother Dominic Everett gives some interesting insights on this point. Schools such as those initiated by De La Salle and staffed by the early Brothers had been ardently desired for some time. Perhaps M. Vincent best expressed this wish shared by so many others. By far the Founder was not the first one to attempt to meet what was a serious and pressing need. But he and his early disciples seemed to have found a way to do what others had not been able to do. So the early Christian schools were very popular with people who ardently desired such institutions and in which they willingly enrolled their sons.

What was the nature of the crisis, then, if the basic and primary apostolate of the new religious family was doing so well? As indicated above, possibly the schools would fail because of a lack of a sufficient number of Brothers to staff them and to maintain the quality of their educational work. The deaths of key Brothers, the loss of a number of other Brothers either through their early and untimely deaths or their defections from the Institute, could all contribute to the closing of schools and finally lead to the disappearance of the work. For at the same time that the schools might have been said to be prospering, what could be called the infrastructure of the new society was not doing well at all. There was no novitiate to provide replacements for those who died or left, or to make additional personnel available for the opening of new schools. Men who had appeared to be promising leaders

and were put in charge of schools or individual houses of the Brothers had not performed well in these positions. Often these individuals created or at least contributed to the difficulties by causing other Brothers to leave their vocations.

In addition, the death of someone like Henri L'Heureux, in whom De La Salle had placed such high hopes, complicated matters and raised other very basic questions. The most important might have been, what future -- if any -- will this work have when Father De La Salle is no longer present to lead his disciples and help solve some problems that disturb them now and can only become still more serious in his absence. During the seventeenth century this was a much bigger problem than it might appear to have been to people living today. The article by Brother Bill Mann, also found in So Favored By Grace, discusses some of the work of St. Peter Fourier, who among other things founded an order of teaching sisters to do for poor girls what De La Salle wanted to do for poor boys. During his life and more so after his death, bishops and pastors tried to take control of the sisters and their schools in their respective dioceses or parishes, thus doing more to disrupt than to further the work of the schools and the religious life of the sisters. And with reason the early Brothers feared this might happen to De La Salle's and their work once the Founder was no longer present to lead and support them. Preparing Henri L'Heureux for the priesthood had been seen as a means of preventing this problem from arising. Now that the Founder accepted God's indication regarding the membership of the new society, what effect would the absence of any clerical leadership in the Institute have on its future?

A situation in which on the positive side the schools were doing well, while on the negative side serious problems existed in the infrastructure, might be somewhat similar to the present crisis of the District of the Philippines which Brother Ray Suplido, Visitor, mentioned in an earlier presentation. If so, the Founder's response to his situation might have additional and special meaning for us.

For the Founder did take action -- some might say dramatic as well as effective action. But before going any further, it might be necessary to consider a couple of questions. Why did De La Salle take this action at this time? Why hadn't he taken it sooner? Why didn't he delay longer before acting? Perhaps the answer can be found in certain

passages from his writings which are mentioned frequently so that all of us are at least vaguely familiar with their main ideas. Some years later he wrote:

For my part, I own to you that I God had shown me the labors and crosses that were to accompany any good I was to do in founding the Institute, my courage would have failed; and, far from undertaking it, I would not have dared to put my hand to the work.

... I had never really thought about such a project before, not that no one had previously suggested the idea to me. Several friends of M. Roland had tried to inspire me with the intention of following through on such a work but it never seriously entered my mind... Apparently, it was for this reason that God, who always acts with wisdom and tenderness and who is not accustomed to forcing man's will, but who at the same time wanted me to take complete charge of the schools, acted in a very imperceptible manner and over a long period of time. Little by little, one commitment led me progressively into another, without my being able to foresee it from the beginning.

What these words suggest is that in 1691, in addition to the crisis related to the work, there might have been another crisis. However reluctant he might have been, at this time De La Salle was facing and resolving another more personal crisis by accepting his vocation as "Founder." God wants this work done. Many people have said so, M. Vincent being only the most famous and the best remembered. Some people had tried to do it but hadn't succeeded. The success of his early schools, however, was making two things apparent to De La Salle. First, God wants this work done, and second, he wants me to do it. And while still saying that he was not that enthusiastic about doing this work, he was accepting the fact that it was the Will of God for him. So therefore eh would set about doing it. And he did.

Returning once again to the human side of the Saint, we find that Brother Yves Poutet says some interesting things about the man who took this action. De La Salle, he says, was not a person who could be pressured into doing something he did not want to do,

or -- more important -- something which he did not think was the will of God in his regard. When they tried to pressure him in a matter such as this, people might find him to be strong willed, obstinate, or stubborn, at least as far as they were concerned, while he would have said this is the only way I can respond in this situation. However, as was stated earlier, he was also a man who could perceive a situation and see its meaning. Then, Yves Poutet asserts, he would take action appropriate to the situation and the circumstances. In 1691, this is what he did.

And when he decided to do something, some might describe what he did as special, others might even term it drastic. But before saying more about his action, another historical note might be in order. There was a time when we Brothers believed that the school practices initiated by De La Salle as well as the ideas set down in his writings were new and completely original, things which literally he had “pulled out of the thin air.” More recent Lasallian research tells us something quite different. His catechism, Duties of a Christian, was borrowed en masse from an earlier work by a French bishop, Claude Joly, while his Christian Civility was borrowed from numerous sources, something common enough in his time, and lastly, the Conduct of Schools seems closely related to the The Parish School of Father Jacques de Bathencourt, published three years after his birth. But what do these things have to do with the “Heroic Vow?”

Someone who significantly influenced John Baptist De La Salle’s life as well as his thinking on a number of matters, Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice, might also have inspired the Founder’s action in this matter. Not too long after 1640 he had encountered a somewhat similar situation. He felt he was doing a good work in and for the Church, one that was both necessary and approved by many people. But the survival of the work was also in doubt. To overcome this last difficulty, he and two other priests associated with him in the work made a very strong commitment to their apostolate. As is well known, the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice survived to provide De La Salle with a portion of his training for the priesthood, and the Sulpician order has survived to this day. Did this incident influence De La Salle’s thinking when he set out to do something quite similar?

An interesting facet of his action at this time is that it was done in secret. Someone might ask why? Certainly the crisis which elicited this response was at least as apparent to most of the early Brothers as it was to the Founder himself. Still, the response was not a group action but rather confined to only three of its members. If others had been aware of this selectivity, how might they have reacted in view of the circumstances existing at that time? Would there have been questions such as, why am I not included here, are some of us better than others, do you doubt my commitment and my intention to remain faithful to our work, or – even -- am I being told I am not trusted? Simply raising such questions could have had devastating effects at this time. So this action had to be done in secret.

One result of this decision is that we lack answers to a number of interesting questions and most probably will continue to do so. Beyond any doubt we know that the vow was made on 21 November 1691. But where exactly did the ceremony take place? At what time of the day did it happen? Did each of the three recite the vow formula separately, or did they pronounce it together? To these and similar questions we have no answers.

Of course, at the same time, if the vow was made in secret, how do we know about this event? It might be noted that the surviving fragment of Brother Bernard's life of the Founder, dating from 1721, as well as the complete version of Maillefer's work, written in 1723, do not mention this important event. However, Blain's longer biography, first published in 1733, does tell us about the Heroic Vow. In 1721/1723 De La Salle, of course, was dead, and Vuyart had long abandoned the Institute, while Drolin was in Rome from which he did not return to France until 1728. Thus he was available to inform Blain, but not Bernard or Maillefer, about this event. So most likely he is the source of our information about the heroic vow.

Rigault makes another interesting point regarding this event. Prior to 1691, when looking for human agents who might ensure the continuation of what he was coming to see as the work of God, the Founder had chosen a single individual whom he considered an outstanding and talented person, one who in some ways stood out among his confreres. Such had been Henri L'Heureux. On this occasion, however, he did not pick one person but two, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin. What kind of men were they?

To begin with Vuyart, at best he has an unsavory reputation even among Brothers today. However, if we reflect on the Founder's willingness to receive him back in the Institute, even after his infamous defection, perhaps our history has been less than fair to him. Drolin, on the other hand, has become a symbol of faithfulness in the Institute. Some reflection on Rigault's chapter describing his experiences in Rome, the surviving letters among those addressed to him by the Founder, and F. Felix-Paul's excellent discussion of this correspondence, might suggest Drolin deserves this good reputation and more. But these two men should also be seen from another point of view.

Rigault describes Vuyart and Drolin as two men who had joined the Founder at an early date, and who had done well in the work. Today they might be described as two ordinary but solid citizens. They were people you felt you could rely on. Neither of them, however, was of the caliber of Henri L'Heureux. They were not outstanding, extraordinary, or way above their confreres. Some might summarize all this by saying they were good ordinary people. When hearing something like this we might recall a famous passage of Paul, quoted, and probably misquoted, quite frequently. One version reads, "Not many of you were wise..., not many were powerful, not many wellborn; ..." (I Cor 1:26) At times we might feel that this applies to ourselves. And in this instance we might also feel that De La Salle chose two men fitting this description and, in this time of serious crisis, decided to build the future of the work God had entrusted to him on them.

In recent months we Brothers have become quite familiar with the wording of the Vow and its intent. In effect the three promised to remain with the work no matter what, in spite of anything that might happen or anything any other members of their society might do. Essentially their purpose was the foundation of a new religious order dedicated to a specific apostolate in and for the Church. Only when this was accomplished would their Vow be fulfilled.

Because of these things, Yves Poutet suggests we have made a big mistake and have established a tradition that will not go away by calling this engagement the "Heroic Vow." Rather he suggests we should call it a "Vow of Foundation." Just like Olier's early vow was a vow of foundation, he asserts, so was the vow made by De La Salle and his

two disciples. We might ponder this idea, particularly in view of some things that follow.

Now, what was the aftermath of this action? De La Salle, as is well known, was faithful until death. Part of his legacy is a religious Institute of teaching Brothers which, in spite of other serious crises it has experienced, is successfully doing an important work for the people of God. As is equally well known, Nicolas Vuyart was not faithful but died outside the Institute, which he significantly harmed by his defection and the circumstances in which it took place. Among other things, this might show that no matter how hard one tries to make the right decisions, even when one is a Saint like John Baptist De La Salle, mistakes can and will be made. Yet the work survives and prospers in spite of such human errors.

In some ways, the career of Gabriel Drolin after 1691 is extremely interesting. The story of his experience in Rome from 1702 to 1728 is too well known to need repetition here. Entrusted by the Founder with an important as well as a delicate mission, he did accomplish the task entrusted to him. Thus once again he was a key man in the Institute. But at no time was he ever seen as a potential successor to the Founder. Toward the beginning of the Institute De La Salle chose Hneri L'Heureux as its potential Superior, and at the end of his life he was very influential in the choice of Brother Barthelemy as his immediate successor. As regards the important evens of 1717-1719, Drolin was kept well informed by the Founder and then by Brother Barthelémy. But in no way was it implied that this Brother in Rome had to approve of what was done or that he had some sort of veto in these matters. At the same time, though, as F. Felix-Paul brings out in his detailed study of the letters of the Founder to Drolin, between the two there was a special human relationship quite different from that which De La Salle seems to have had with other of the early Brothers. Was this because the two remained faithful to their special commitment made on 21 November 1691?

After considering all these points, one more question might seem to be in order. What effect, if any, did this action have on an emerging religious family whose very survival seemed to be in doubt at this time? Interestingly enough, very soon after this event things did seem to improve as far as the Founder and his disciples were concerned. Was

this because of the vow, or did these events have no relation at all to the vow? Among these encouraging things, first and foremost, a new novitiate was opened, the famous one at Vaugirard. New recruits could be trained to continue and to develop the work. At the same time, this house became a center for “continuing formation,” providing De La Salle with a means of strengthening the veteran Brothers in their vocation. Also, because of its location and its garden, Vaugirard was a place where these Brothers could rest and regain their physical strength so that they could continue to work in the schools. Taken together, all these things made the survival of the Institute and its work at least a bit more likely, if they did not at this time ensure its long-term survival.

However, some people might say that the “foundation of the Institute,” the ultimate goal which De La Salle, Drolin and Vuyart had in view in 1691, was not achieved until 1725, when the new religious order received its Bull of Approbation from Benedict XIII and the Letters Patent from Louis XV. Be that as it may, the “Heroic Vow” or “Vow of Foundation” of 21 November 1691 was an important step toward what might be termed the “final foundation” of the Institute. For we can speculate endlessly if the events of 1725 would have been possible without those of 1691.

Now what does all this mean or say to us today? Over the past eight months or so all kind of meanings have been found in these events, without exhausting the subject. But two “lessons” might be particularly appropriate to Brothers in the District of the Philippines today. First, De La Salle admitted the existence of a crisis and faced up to it. Basically this is why he made the “Heroic Vow” and asked two others to join him in this act. Like the Founder we have to be ready to perceive and face up to any crisis, no matter how unpleasant it and its implications might be. Second, in facing up to this not very encouraging situation, the Founder leaned on two “weak reeds,” Drolin and more so Vuyart. Still, the latter had done good work in the schools before his defection. And the former did persevere in spite of very difficult circumstances, remaining faithful until death. Careful reading of De La Salle’s letters to other early Brothers suggests that not just Drolin and Vuyart were such “weak reeds.” Many others showed themselves thus on numerous occasions, Brother Barthélemy being no exception. Yet it was these men who contributed --

each in his own way -- to ensure the survival of our Institute in this time of crisis. And the Founder could not have done without their help. So then it was a group of ordinary people, such as those described by Paul, who made it all possible. Willingly or not, we might recognize ourselves to be such people. Yet if individuals such as these first Brothers did solve or at least help solve a crisis, we can do the same. Therefore, this incident in the life of the Founder teaches us that if we quite ordinary people are ready to face up to any crisis, we too can solve it. Perhaps this is what the "Heroic Vow" calls on us to do today while inspiring us with the confidence we need in our situation.