

1734 - RHEIMS  
ECOLE SAINT JACQUES  
A row over some New Testaments

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Some readers of *Lasalliana* may remember reading some time or other about the "*Certificat*" published in 1728 and written to vouch for the truth of a "miraculous" cure attributed to the intercession of Canon Gérard Rousse who died a Jansenist at Avenay, in the diocese of Rheims.

The document in question was written by no less a person than **Brother Bernard**, the author of the first biography of De La Salle, and was signed "Sub-Director of the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Rheims and First Master of the free schools in the parish of St Jacques" (1).

Such an official document must have caused a stir in a town which was still in some turmoil over the controversy with the Jansenists. A few years later, at the beginning of 1734, these same Lasallian schools were at the centre of a well-publicised row caused by something that could hardly have been foreseen - some copies of the *New Testament*.

"I have not come to bring peace but the sword". And it so happened that these "maxims of the Holy Gospel", "these fine passages" of Holy Scripture, dear to the disciples of De La Salle who, in accordance with their Rule, habitually carried around with them a New Testament, became a cause of public conflict.

For a description of what happened we can let the "*Ecclesiastical News*" speak for itself. This publication giving news of events in Rheims was distributed throughout France at the time. The relevant copy appeared on May 24th 1734, and the article occupied two densely printed columns of this weekly Jansenist publication.

Everything started in the parish of St Jacques with the free distribution "in the little schools...of *New Testaments* in French printed with approbation and privilege". The writer goes on to say that "the children, without any disturbance of the routine of the school, learned by heart, during the course of the week, the Gospel for the following Sunday, and recited part of it on their free day, and a part on Sunday after the Office" (2).

In general the parents were happy about this useful way of occupying their children, but not so some ecclesiastics in Rheims. One of them, on Sunday January 31st, even though he was a simple cleric, went so far "as to chase out of the school the children who, as usual were assembled there to recite the Gospel, saying that the minds and hearts of these innocent children were being corrupted in this way".

Such a scene, as one might expect, provoked an immediate reaction, and the "*News*" wrote that "the same day, M. Langlois, the Vicar General, sent for the *Superior of these schools* in order to obtain from him an account of what had happened. He was given an accurate account and he did not dare show displeasure at it".

The indiscreet behaviour of the young cleric might not have had any consequences, but less than a week later there was a new development: on Saturday February 6th, two priests from the parish of St Jacques "went to the schools, launched into a diatribe, as improper as it was lacking in solidity, against the *New Testaments* that were distributed, and tore a number of copies out of the hands of the children...a work in a translation that has been duly approved".

They did not leave it at that, and M. *La Planche*, one of the two priests, wrote in the margin of one of the copies he had seized: "The Preface of this book tends to justify propositions 79, 80, 81, condemned in *Quesnel* (3).

"Its style is fine but seductive. The translation of the text is not accurate in a number of places and is not Catholic in others.

"Heretics are used to offering poison in golden cups".

While the priest in question, satisfied with what he had done, went to inform the Jesuits at the College of this new attack on the little schools, a canon of the cathedral went to complain to the archbishop about this unacceptable new interference. He was received by the same Vicar General *Langlois*, who disapproved of the behaviour of the priest, going so far as to call him "muddle-headed", and stating that "it would be justified to refuse him entry to these schools which were no concern of his".

However, no clear decision was taken by the diocesan authorities and the editor of the "*News*" insinuated that the "good Fathers" were no strangers to these events and that the Vicar General was under their influence to such an extent "that he had forbidden the Superior of these schools to allow these young Christians to assemble for the recitation of the *New Testament*".

Moreover, a pamphlet produced by the Jesuits announced that the archbishop, *Cardinal de Rohan*, at the time, on being informed of this distribution of the *New Testament* "has ordered all copies to be carefully withdrawn".

Another priest from the parish of St Jacques, a certain *Martin Pérard*, emboldened by all this support,

felt justified in writing a letter on February 16th to a pious lay person of Rheims, a *Monsieur Henri*, who was the generous donor of the New Testaments. The text of the letter is as follows:

"You have decided to induce the children who are in the care of the *Brothers of the Christian Schools* to read the New Testament. You have distributed 15 copies to the school (4). On the face of it, there could be nothing more laudable. Allow me, however, to say that the reading of Holy Scripture, despite what *Quesnel* may say (5), is not for everybody. It ought to be allowed only to those who are in a state to benefit from it. It is not up to an ordinary individual like yourself to recommend it to be read. This right belongs to Superiors who, enlightened by God, can judge for whom this reading is fitting, and for whom it is harmful. Some passages of Scripture are suitable for some persons and some passages are not suitable for them".

The supporters of the Bull did not restrict themselves to this private reprimand, which the recipient shared with his trustworthy friends who were not lacking in Rheims. The "Molinists", to use the term used even by the "News", added some rather wounding insinuations in their pamphlets:

"The person who is distributing copies of the *New Testament* is called *Henry*, an idiot (6) but astute enough to induce the children to learn by heart its fine passages".

These episodes, marked by a certain partisan aggressivity, occurred within the space of less than three weeks. The principal stage on which they were acted out was the charity schools of the parish of St Jacques. Apart from causing unpleasantness that our fellow Brothers of the time had to suffer as a result of the controversy surrounding the Bull "*Unigenitus*", these incidents serve to throw unflattering light on the painful context of doctrinal and pastoral conflicts.

In the strictly educational context, these conflicts did not come to an end in 1738: the Community of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus - at least, a good number of these fervent and devoted daughters of Nicolas Roland - had still to undergo a regrettable experience.

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(1) School opened in 1679 thanks to the generosity of *Mme de Croÿère*. Rapid success: in a short time it had 5 teachers. The Founder himself taught here wearing the Brothers' habit.

(2) The *New Testaments* distributed were probably a translation by *Le Maître de Sacy*, published in 1667 and quickly very popular: 1667: 5 editions; 1668: 4 editions.

(3) Reference to the Bull "*Unigenitus*" (1713) which condemned 101 propositions taken from "*Moral Reflections...*" on all the verses of the New Testament.

(4) A few weeks later, there died in Rheims a certain Maillefer d'Arcy who also had distributed a "number of good books" in the town. It should be noted that the same Vicar General Langlois had forbidden M. Maillefer to gather a few friends at his house "to exchange ideas about Holy Scripture". (M. Maillefer d'Arcy, d. April 20th 1734).

(5) *Quesnel* has a very long "Prayer to Our Lord Jesus Christ in the name of young people and of all those who wish to read the Word of God and above all the Gospel". (Cf. "*Prières chrétiennes...*" Approbation in 1687). In the 1738 edition, this "Prayer" occupies 51 pages of in-12 format. It is followed by numerous passages from Scripture itself and from the Fathers showing the need to read Scripture.

(6) This term needs to be understood in its classical sense, meaning "uneducated", not cultured and, in this instance, lacking competence in Scriptural studies. It does not mean "insane". In any case, "*Monsieur Henri*" is recognised as being "astute"!