

**TWENTY-SIX YEARS
EXILE IN ROME
COURAGEOUS GABRIEL DROLIN
(1/2)**

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"Admirable soldier" is the name given to one of the first members of the De La Salle order, Brother Gabriel Drolin, by the historian of the Brothers' Congregation, Georges Rigault. All alone for twenty-six years, member of an insignificant fledgling order, he kept doggedly at his duty, "kept up the guard", in spite of constant disappointments, until the "guard was finally changed". **We can introduce him** by reminding readers that in 1691, with De La Salle and Nicolas Vuyart, he made a vow never to abandon the educational work of the small band of Brothers; this vow is now known as the "heroic vow" and its third centenary has just been celebrated. Very little has been written about Drolin himself, but we do possess letters that he exchanged with De La Salle during his 26 years of exile in Rome, where he persisted faithfully, and we might say heroically, in what he had vowed.

I shall now turn to **the details of my subject**. Gabriel Drolin was born in Rheims on July 22, 1664, and when he was twenty, joined the Brothers of his own city in their main house in New Street. Hardly a year later we find him with Brother Bourlette in the town of Laon. It was in 1702 that he set off for Rome with his own blood brother, Gerard, also a member of the Institute.

As for his qualities, it seems he was a good teacher, had some knowledge of Latin, was of a frank and open character and had a life-long admiration for De La Salle, whom he considered a living saint.

We have **25 letters** exchanged between himself and De La Salle, and it is not surprising, when we remember the poor postal service of those days, that we know of twelve others which have been lost. The latter must be borne in mind however when studying the extant

letters, for they hint at solutions to some obscurities in the letters we still possess. Brother Drolin later handed the letters he had received from De La Salle to the institute, which now has them in its archives. I wonder what would have happened to them if De La Salle's biographer Blain had got hold of them: a lot of the papers he received to write his biography have been lost.

So in September 1702 **Brother Gabriel Drolin set off for Rome** with his brother, an event which is recalled in a painting by Mariani, now hanging in Pope John-Paul II room in the Brothers' Mother House. They are shown kneeling down to receive the blessing of St. John Baptist de La Salle, whilst porters are taking their luggage outside to a waiting stage coach. This is a rather fanciful depiction of what really happened. What we do know is that they were called to Paris by de La Salle, who was staying at the Grande Maison. From there they took the shortest route via Fontainebleau, Burgundy and Savoy, which meant a 21 days' walk. They next crossed the Alps to reach Turin, then passed through Bologna, Florence, Siena and Viterbo, until they arrived in Rome. The whole of that took forty full days.

In their packs they had written references from a friend of theirs, Mr. Guyart, who was a canon, addressed to his bishop, Cesar d' Estrees, Duke of Laon and cardinal of the Church, at the time doing business on French affairs in Rome.

As there were lots of thieves roaming along the route, they kept the hundred francs de La Salle had given them well hidden in their packs; it was not much, but de La Salle was not well off, and it gave them at least something to start with. If they went short, they had been told to beg, just as the poor did.

At the time of their arrival in Rome the pope was Clement XI, who reigned from 1700 to 1721.

The beginning was not too easy. Off they went to the residence of the Cardinal of Laon, confidently bring along their references. The Cardinal's assistant or vicar, Francisco Gualtieri, met them and explained that his superior was away, but that he would put them up for at least a few months. Incidentally we next meet this vicar in 1703 at Vaison, a town in the papal estates of Avignon, where he had been named bishop, and where he later requested the Brothers to teach.

Our two Brothers did not know Italian, but a start had been made, so Gabriel changed his name to Gabriele Drolini and added Santenot as a surname, which is the one found on several of his letters. Brother Gerard soon found the going too hard and returned to France, whilst Gabriel had to prevent people murmuring about this "monk" being all alone, with no community

or superior, and a time when France and Italy were at war.

Meanwhile Gerard set off home, and en route, stopped off at Avignon, where he met Mr. Chateau-Blanc, who later started some Brothers' schools in that city, which belonged at the time to the Pope. The last mention we have of Gerard is from letters of De La Salle: he had left the institute and was sacristan in the parish of St. Roch in Paris.

So Brother "Gabriele Drolini" was now "Italian", by himself and was soon short of money. The best thing he could do was to earn a bit by teaching catechism in the parishes of San Lorenzo-in-Lucina and of the Jesuits' Gesu. He added a few private lessons to sons of the people he had begged lodgings from. One of these was a sculptor called Theodon, who later helped in getting some of De La Salle's letters to him. Another of his lodgings was with Mr. Claude de la Bussiere, a French businessman, to whom De La Salle wrote thanking him for looking after Gabriel (letter 27.7). This fine man was first in a line of "benefactors of the institute" who have always given tremendous help to the Brothers.

And now we have reached 1705; not so long a time, but filled with plenty of ups and downs. These were the years of disasters in Rome, still suffering from the floods caused by the overflowing of the Tiber in 1701 and 1702, which drowned the Campus Martius and the poorest districts of the city. Then in 1703 there was an earthquake, strong enough to knock down several arches of the Colosseum. You can still see the stones of those arches, which Clement XI used to build the Ripetta Bridge over the Tiber.

Drolin wrote to De La Salle asking him to send a Brothers' soutane, and a New Testament and some money. It seems that he was having a rough time, since De La Salle answered the letter saying: "*I didn't believe that things could be quite as bad as you have described*" (letter 24,16)

But then things began brightening up. The Paulist priests had had a house in the San Lorenzo-in-Lucina parish since 1703, and Father Rene Divers was their bursar. It seems that Drolin heard Mass in their house and went to confession to Father Divers, who learning about the hard time Brother Drolin was having, turned out to be his Good Samaritan. He did all he could to contact people of influence with the ultimate hope of bringing about De La Salle's dream of having Drolin run one of the papal schools. But five years' residence in Rome was normally needed before one could ask the "Sapienza" to run a district school, and then one began simply by helping out the teacher in charge,

provided the students rose above 60. Drolin accepted to do this at a wage of 15 livres a month in a school near the Ripetta Bridge in a poor district, called at the time "the port of Rome". Not far from there was the Mausoleum of Augustus, around which the children dashed about among the people buying and selling in the vicinity.

To be accepted for this secondary role, our Brother Gabriel Drolin had to follow the procedures, consisting of an test of suitability, good conduct and adherence to the Catholic church. When he had passed that hurdle, Brother Drolin put up a notice on the front door of the building which was both his school and his house announcing: "*Free school for the children of the neighbourhood*". He immediately began to use methods in vogue in the Lasallian schools; he encouraged the students with little certificates and gave them pictures as rewards.

In 1708 his protector, Father Divers, was no longer in Rome, but he had put him in contact with Mr. Joseph de Guyon de Crochans, secretary to Cardinal de la Tremouille. It seems that the Pope thought highly of this man, whom he appointed Bishop of Cavillon, in the county of Venice, when he was only 35. In three months he was promoted from simple acolyte to priest.

Through his help, in 1709 Drolin was appointed to the headship of a Papal school, which "*was what I really wanted*", wrote De La Salle with enthusiasm. (letter 27.4)

In the parish of St. Susanna there was a papal school, which had been empty and without a teacher since 1707. With the help of Mr. Crochans, this was the post which Brother Drolin took over, first provisionally and finally in 1712 with tenure. De La Salle wrote to thank the bishop, and later actually had a meal with him in France (letter 27,5)

The Roman school run by Brother Gabriel Drolin was in what was then called Via Ferrera, near the present Via Veneto, right next to Piazza Barberini, in the Capuchins' parish. Brother Gabriel became familiar with the whole district and offered to do work out of school hours in the parish as secretary. He also taught catechism in the church, because the parish priest did not think it right for him to teach it in school..

On the door of Drolin's house was a notice with the papal shield and the words: "*Teacher in papal schools*". Therefore everything had now improved and the sun was appearing on the horizon. Brother Drolin could look to the future with confidence. He had a fixed post and lodgings and a monthly wage, rather small admittedly, but enough.