

BETTER THAN LIGHT

NICOLAS BARRE
1621 – 1686

by Brigitte Flourez

Translated by Helen M Wynne

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Infant Jesus Sisters

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Foreward

Since I am neither a theologian nor an historian, I have no authority for writing this book other than my admiration for Nicolas Barre and the light, peace and courage I have drawn from his message. This esteem has prompted me to make him known to a wider public. If, at the end of the book, the reader shares my admiration for the subject, it will have achieved its purpose. It is my hope that others in the future will throw further light on the legacy of this great mystic and apostle who, up to now, has been little known.

The words and thoughts ascribed to Nicolas Barre in the following pages are drawn from his writings and from the biographies written by his Minim contemporaries, Frs. Thuillier and Raffron. The style has sometimes been simplified, in order to make the content more accessible to a contemporary readership. In general these quotations are followed by references to the original texts.

I am grateful to all those whose encouragement has helped to bring this book to completion; those whose criticism has enabled me to improve it: Brother Michel Sauvage and Brother Yves Poutet, Monsieur Jean de Viguerie, the Sisters of the Infant Jesus of the Providence of Rouen, and the Sisters of the Infant Jesus — Nicolas Barre, among whom I am especially grateful to Jeanne Deleuse, Marie-Amelie de Massia and Marie Françoise Toulouse whose assistance greatly facilitated my work.

Brigitte Flourez

Preface

Twentieth century Christians are prone to imagine that the Church in their times faces greater challenges than any known to their predecessors. We take it as axiomatic that the circumstances of a post-Christian world confront us with problems qualitatively different from those of the "ages of faith", usually considered to have come to an end in the generation or so after 1789. The unyielding conservatism of an imagined Catholic past is often summed up in the phrase "Tridentine Catholicism", a phrase redolent of a frozen liturgy, a reactionary theology and an approach to pastoral problems locked into an essentially medieval framework of canon law. For modern Roman Catholics, the consciousness of living in the aftermath of Vatican Two, a revolutionary General Council, with all the profound liturgical, pastoral and theological changes which it initiated, heightens this sense of a uniquely new situation.

Understandable as it is, however, that sense is illusory. History, to be sure, does not repeat itself, but the dilemmas of organised religion in the West and the world influenced by the West are by no means without precedent. The Council of Trent itself was a revolutionary assembly, and formulated a pastoral vision and strategy for the Church which to many contemporaries seemed Utopian and unattainable. At a time when no institutions for the training of parochial clergy existed, it placed the parochial ministry at the centre of its distinctive vision for the renewal of Christendom. By the end of the sixteenth century that vision was still largely on the drawing board. Fewer than half the 290 dioceses of Italy had established seminaries, and even in great cities like Padua what seminaries there were might be no more than a huddle of shacks and a handful of half-starved boys. As late as the 1720s Pope Benedict XIII was struggling to achieve this most basic of institutions in the dioceses of central and

southern Italy. "Tridentine Catholicism" was itself a project, painfully laboured for, and never fully achieved.

At least to begin with, France was slower still in implementing the Tridentine reforms. Not a single seminary had been established in France by the end of the sixteenth century, and many of the other institutional reforms of the Council had been ignored or sidetracked. The later sixteenth century saw France plunged into bloody religious war, which sharpened confessional divides and decisively marginalised the Protestants who, in the mid-century, had seemed set to sweep all before them. Nevertheless the seventeenth century Church in France was confronted by huge and intractable problems at every level of its life. Its rank and file clergy were ill-educated, virtually without theological or pastoral training, mired, like their parishioners, in clay and animal dung. The nation itself, precariously stitched together in the wake of civil war by Henri IV, was profoundly socially divided, the poor sinking under ever-increasing tax burdens designed to finance a grandiose and unscrupulous foreign policy. In the mid-century, a series of risings by factional groups and whole regions plunged the country once more into civil war.

And established orthodoxy itself was under fire. New ideas in science, philosophy, biblical and historical criticism unsettled old certainties, and the rise of scepticism, symbolised by Descartes' method of systematic doubt, was symptomatic of that unsettlement. The emergence in the 1620s and 1630s of a rigorist and pessimistic theology of grace, associated with the name of Cornelius Jansen, provoked a ferocious debate on issues which many imagined Trent had settled once for all, and which threatened to tear the Church in two.

Yet in the midst of this upheaval, the French Church experienced the most extraordinary pastoral revolution since the early Middle Ages. It was in the first place a spiritual revolution, which borrowed a good deal from the mysticism of Spain, but naturalised what had been a monastic spirituality for lay people and the secular clergy. The most famous representative of this spiritual revival was Francis de Sales, whose *Introduction to the Devout Life* virtually invented spirituality for married lay people, and has a fair claim to be the single most influential text of the Counter-Reformation. Almost equally important was Cardinal Pierre Berulle, whose distinctive spirituality borrowed from the Spanish Carmelites an emphasis on the total abandonment of self before a mastering God, but characteristically, softened and emotionalised that abnegation in the form of a cult of the Infancy of Jesus, the childhood of God as a model for the humility of the human. Berulle's characteristic emphases, summed up in his aphorism that "Man is a nothing capable of the Infinite", gave decisive and definitive shape to the so-called "French School" of spirituality.

In pastoral terms, the Counter-Reformation revolution in France is associated above all with the name of Vincent de Paul, who initiated a practical transformation on every front - the training of the parish clergy, the evangelisation of the peasantry by preaching missions, and the foundation of a new type of religious life for women, dedicated to the service of the poor and sick, and recruited not from the aristocratic devout women who swarmed round Francis de Sales and Berulle, but from the peasantry itself.

Nicolas Barre, the subject of this book, belongs securely to this great movement of the French Catholic church in response to the crises and dilemmas of the seventeenth century, and is one of its greatest figures. Formed in the "French School" of

spirituality by one of its most distinguished exponents, the Jesuit Saint Jure, he retained a life-long devotion to the Infancy of Christ, and his distinctive theology of renunciation and self-abandonment drew much from the Berullian tradition. But Barre, like Vincent, was above all concerned with pastoral action, and even more, with the need to reach and help the poor.

The poor worried everyone in France in the second half of the seventeenth century. The rulers of France saw in them a tremendous danger, a rabble which, if given its head, could overturn all order and rebel against the natural rulers of society. There was a respectable theological justification for such attitudes, for many philanthropists and religious reformers saw in the poor humanity in a state of nature, sinful, self-destructive, in need of discipline. Much of the charitable action undertaken by lay people and clergy was designed to contain this danger. The secret association of wealthy lay people known as the "Society of the Blessed Sacrament", with which Barre, like Vincent, had connections, sponsored workhouses and houses of correction as well as almshouses, schools and hospitals.

What marks out the activity on behalf of the poor of both Vincent and Nicolas Barre was the deeply compassionate identification with the poor which informed their spirituality, and underlay their religious foundations. Barre was himself a notably observant member of one of the most austere religious orders in France, the Minims. He developed for the women he recruited as "Mistresses of the Christian and Charitable Schools" a way of life which, with its insistence on the absolute renunciation of the "vice of ownership", recalls the startling austerity and self denial of the earliest Franciscans. He sought for his teachers (men and women, though his experiments in an institute for men failed) an identification with the poor rooted in solidarity with their condition of destitution. For him, the highest test of religious spirit among

the "Mistresses" was whether or not their actions measured up to the standard set by the women who presided as wives and mothers over peasant households. Like Vincent, he simultaneously encouraged an intense inner spirituality among his teachers, and an absolute insistence that action took precedence over contemplativity. If God "visited" one inwardly while one was at work serving the poor, He was to be thanked for his graces but asked politely to go away till the work done in His service was complete: there was to be no retreat into the spirituality of the cloister. Much in the rules he devised for the Mistresses was designed to prevent the vices of formal "religious life" taking over. The Spartan life-style and total lack of security, for example, would keep away any potential women recruits intent merely on an escape from the drudgery and uncertainty of secular life.

Barre's schools for the poor, and the "Barre Sisters" who served them, decisively shaped one of the most vital and enduring expressions of Tridentine Catholicism, for the mission to reach and elevate the poor using the services of lay people without religious vows was wholly new. Over the next two centuries it was to play a major role in transforming the Christian populations of Western Europe. Barre himself had little success in male foundations, but his ideals and spirituality were passed directly on to the secular priest Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, who on Barre's advice abandoned a rich canonry to establish a community of peasant "Brothers of the Christian Schools", the first of many such orders, whose role in Catholic education till the present generation was incalculable.

We are accustomed to think of baroque Catholicism as aggressive, opulent, self assured. Barre represents a quite different but equally fundamental dimension of the catholicism of an age of crisis. Himself repeatedly afflicted with religious and

self-doubt, and the victim of at least one nervous breakdown, he understood the cost and the strain of faith. Alert to the social and religious problems of his own age, he devised a visionary but eminently practical response, which called Christian men and especially women to a life of heroic solidarity with the poor, and which offered a generation of remarkable women co-workers and disciples scope for their abilities, in a society which often denied even the recognition that women might have such talents.

In the upheaval which has followed the Second Vatican Council religious orders and institutes like the De La Salle Brothers and Barre's foundations for women were early casualties. Vocations plummeted, uncertainty about the nature and the worth of their distinctive vocation led to many departures, and schools and institutions which had looked impregnable in the 1950s and 1960s closed their doors or were handed over to lay management.

Yet Barre's legacy may well have a long life left. The Second Vatican Council called religious orders and institutes to a re-examination and re-pristination of their sources. More than most of the products of the Age of the Baroque, the spirituality of Barre and his pastoral innovations have a radical and open-ended character which may well prove able to inspire and shape a new phase of religious life for his followers. The call to evangelise the world in solidarity with the poor is as urgent and as absolute in our time as in his, even if the forms appropriate to seventeenth century France are no longer self-evidently the best ones for our age and place. But the clarity of vision and the unflinching whole-heartedness of his response to that call transcends the difference of tone and idiom between his culture and ours: he has something still to say to us.

Eamon Duffy,
College of St Mary Magdalene,
Feast of the Immaculate Conception 1993

CHAPTER ONE

Amiens

(1621-1640)

"The Saint is dead! The Saint is dead!" People came rushing from all parts of town announcing the news. The setting is Paris. The year 1686. A death has just taken place in the Minim monastery. The news spread quickly to dozens of villages throughout the length and breadth of France. It left a question in many people's minds: would the unity and vitality of his life's work survive? And how would it last in that state of precariousness which he repeatedly refused to surrender? "Whatever happens, be always at peace," Nicolas Barre used to say, "and put your trust in God." But they could not help wondering whether they were right to throw themselves into such a hazardous venture, and above all to involve so many others in it, without some rather more down-to-earth guarantees for their future security.

The future always grows out of the past. The fabric of history consists of the uninterrupted weaving of threads which intersect, giving direction to the future and meaning to the past. On 21 October 1621, in Amiens, a new thread was woven into the great tapestry of history. A child was born to the household of Antoinette Pelle and Louis Barre. He was to be called Nicolas, a name common in the family and in the region of Picardy. A son! The hopes of Louis Barre rested on this first child: as was customary for eldest sons, he would grow up to enter and expand the family business. The Barre family had been in haberdashery for several generations, but they sold all kinds of things: fish, candles, thread, wool, fabric, dyes, seeds, soap. The prosperous marriage of grandfather Philippe into the family of Marie La Goul had left the Barre family generously provided for. The young mother's family too was in the retail business; they

were merchant brewers. Their premises, called The White Hare, were on the quay. The child's future seemed already mapped out.

Amiens, situated at the mouth of a river, was prosperous during its all too rare periods of peace, handling the cloth trade from England, crops from the north, wine from Bordeaux and Champagne. Being only 110 kilometres from Paris it was a centre of communications. The trade fairs which took place yearly on the feasts of St Martin and St Nicolas drew traders from all the area around and lasted almost a month. The feast of St John the Baptist was marked by processions and great rejoicing and attended by people from outlying villages who came to join in the festivities. Water was the town's only natural source of energy. Numerous canals and waterways served the tanners, the brewers, and the hemp workers who dumped their dirty water back into them, creating pollution even then. The river Somme, with its rich yield offish, was a source of revenue, but also a recurring threat as the city experienced frequent flooding.

The Barres were members of the bourgeoisie, and known in Amiens for their great honesty based on a deeply rooted faith. Their house was in the main marketplace which was also known as the Herb Market or Straw Market. Through their business they had contacts among the merchants and customers in the surrounding towns, and were related by blood ties to influential people in the region. The deeply Christian environment in which Nicolas was to grow up was not untouched by the events and ideas that were shaking France in the early seventeenth century.

The fortunes of the world of trade were influenced by fluctuations in the local and national economy which, in turn, rested mainly on agriculture. A bad harvest, brought about by inclement weather or the march of armies through the land, caused

immediate repercussions in the towns, such as rising bread prices, a slump in buying, unemployment, or extreme poverty. Famine was common owing to the lack of planning and of an adequate economic policy. Such crises marked life in Amiens too: scarcely a decade passed without one such period of difficulty or even disaster.

Ever since the assassination of Henry IV in 1610 the political situation had been unstable.¹ Four years before Nicolas' birth, in 1617, Concini, the leader of the government, was in turn assassinated. For three years the religious war that became known as the Thirty Years' War had been rumbling along the French frontier and had broken out already on French soil, in the Midi, where Louis XIII was at variance with the Protestants. He had taken from them the strongholds conceded to them by Henry IV. Religious tolerance had been short-lived and the King's aim of propagating one religion to act as a unifying force throughout the land was to go on claiming more victims.

In the countryside and the land around the towns life was difficult for the poor. News of a mission preached by Vincent de Paul at Folleville, near Amiens, reached the town itself. There was certainly much to be done to overcome religious ignorance, just as there was to rescue so many families from extreme poverty. Louis and Antoinette Barre did their bit, without waiting for the riots of the hungry to bring the plight of the people to their immediate notice. But, for the moment, they were overjoyed at the birth of their first-born.

¹ *It was he who had brought about the religious peace between Catholics and Protestants that had been sealed in 1598 by the Edict of Nantes. When he died, his son, Louis XIII, was only nine and his mother, Marie de Medicis, became regent.*

It was customary for children at the time to be baptised straight after birth. Sometimes the ceremony was delayed, maybe because the baby was ill or because a godparent could not be present. In such cases the baby would be "sprinkled" (*ondoye*) privately at home. It was probably for one of these reasons that Nicolas was not baptised until 17 December. At three o'clock in the afternoon he was brought to the church of Saint-Germain accompanied by his parents, his godfather - great uncle Nicolas Gonnet — and his godmother, Marie La Goul who was his great grandmother. The church was close by; 13 parishes and 20 monasteries served a population of nearly 50,000 inhabitants. The cathedral was a masterpiece of Gothic art, a great picture-book in stone, wood and glass in which the simplest and most illiterate might read the whole history of salvation and that of the Picard people. Like all the children in Amiens, Nicolas would soon discover in it the beautiful stories of the Bible and those of the people of Amiens. He would hear his mother telling them to him and to his sisters, for he was not an only child for long. Catherine was born in 1623, Louise probably in 1627, Françoise in 1630 and Marie in 1636.

Over the course of these years the political state of the country grew no better. Marie de Medicis appointed Cardinal Richelieu to the king's Council in 1624. He demanded total obedience to the throne and its representatives. Right up to his death his political rule remained authoritarian and centralised. In 1628, when Nicolas was seven, the crowd at Amiens laid siege to the inn where an eminent figure, named Francois de Pommereu, was staying on his way from Paris to install Justices of the Peace appointed by the king. Up to then it had been within the jurisdiction of the local authorities to appoint them. Rumours spread in the town that taxes were to be levied on all merchandise. There was a revolt. Traders and master craftsmen came together to decide what action to take; the poor massed

together and surrounded the inn. Local government officials did nothing to stop them. Pommereu had to make his escape through the back gardens and ride full tilt back to Paris.

Feelings had run high in the town. The young Nicolas took it all in, listening to the conversations of his elders and gradually becoming aware that life for the people around him was far from a bed of roses. Nevertheless, their financial security cushioned the Barres from many hardships. However, calamity was to befall them too one day when young Louise fell seriously ill. Both her parents and the medical profession had given up hope of her recovery as her illness grew more serious. The whole family begged God to spare her, while preparing themselves for the worst. The death of a child was, after all, an integral part of daily life at that period. One child in four died in the first year of life while two out of four did not survive to the age of 20. Nicolas, who was deeply attached to his sister, could not reconcile himself to her death. One day, on his return from school, he found her worse than ever. Without a word to anyone he went to his room where he had set up a little altar and there, in tears, his face bent to the ground, he begged God to cure her. Suddenly, in the depth of his heart, the conviction came to him that God had heard his prayer and his sister would be restored to health. With tears rolling down his cheeks he ran to tell his family. His conviction amazed everyone, but it raised their hopes. A short time afterwards Louise made a complete recovery. This story, told by his biographers, Raffron and Thuillier, clearly illustrates the strong faith of the young Nicolas. It was a faith from which he would draw strength, as he later put it, to "hope against hope". "Even if everything seems to point to despair," he would say, "one must continue to hope, to the point where one can say: 'Even if God should strike me down, I would still hope in Him'." ²

² F 13

As for Louise, throughout her life she would remain deeply grateful to her brother, not only for her restored health, but also for the influence he was to have on her spiritual progress. Later on, when she had entered the Minim convent at Abbeville, she liked to tell the story, not without a touch of humour, saying: "My brother became my father, for he gave me back my life. And he is doubly my father in the spiritual order, because I owe it to him that I am a daughter of St Francis of Paola." ³

We do not know what illness had afflicted Louise. We know that the "plague" was almost endemic in the region. ⁴ It raged in Amiens in 1623 and 1628. In 1632 there was a particularly severe outbreak which lasted for three years leaving nearly 25,000 dead. This was during Nicolas' early years of studies and the college had to close down for a time. The majority of parish priests were so terrified that they refused to administer the sacraments to plague victims in the poorer areas that were most affected. A decree had to be issued ordering them to do so. Prayers, novenas and processions were organised to beg protection from the scourge. The town councillors made a vow, promising a gift to Our Lady if the plague abated. When it died out eventually in 1634, a great procession was held in thanksgiving to God. Similar events were organised after the new and deadly epidemic which broke out in the winter of 1636-37, claiming 1,400 lives in one week alone.

So it was that Nicolas' childhood and adolescence were shot through with painful experiences. On 13 February 1635, the waters of the Somme began to rise. An eye-witness reports: "The floods rose at around 10.00 p.m. on that day and lasted

³ Thuillier, *Life*

⁴ The word "plague" at that time covered a variety of little known and highly contagious diseases that claimed many victims.

until the twenty-first of the month. The waters invaded the streets of the lower part of the town and came right up to the high altar of the Minim church, preventing the priests from saying Mass or reciting the divine office in choir. Several houses were destroyed or swept away; the bodies of humans, cattle and horses could be seen floating on the waters. For six days no corn could be milled. Near Longueau the bridges were swept away causing grain prices to rise steeply in Amiens because of the ensuing difficulties of transport."

A few months later war broke out, bringing in its wake poverty, fear and suffering. It is not surprising that the adult Nicolas would later use images inspired by these happenings to describe the struggles of the religious life or the apostolate.

France declared war on Spain, which was then the strongest military power in Europe and ruled the Low Countries bordering on Picardy. From September 1635 the country people sought refuge in Amiens, increasing the level of promiscuity in the town. All able-bodied men were called up to reinforce the defences of the city. In April 1636, driven by poverty, hunger and fear of the future, the people rioted, but they were soon repressed by force. Throughout that year the war remained at the very gates of Amiens. Crowds of terrorised peasants surged towards the town bringing news of massacres, fires and rape. From August to November the town of Corbie, only 17 kilometres from Amiens, underwent a terrible siege, while the plague raged throughout the region claiming thousands of victims.

By now Nicolas was 15. From the age of about 10 he had been a pupil at St Nicolas', the large secondary school run by the Jesuits. We do not know who taught him to read and do simple arithmetic before that. Perhaps it was his mother, or a private tutor, or he may have attended one of the fee-paying "Little

Schools" run by the parishes. In any event he was well taught. The principal of the college at that time was Fr de Saint Jure of whom it is recorded that "his zeal was outstanding and matched only by his gift for making God loved by everyone who heard him speak". A man of outstanding spirituality, he was linked with Gaston de Renty and other masters of the Christian life at that period. His several books on spirituality, including a treatise on the love of God which was re-edited time and again right up to the end of the nineteenth century,⁵ enjoyed lasting popularity. It is highly probable that his thinking influenced Nicolas Barre. "I am happy and joyful," wrote Saint Jure, addressing the Lord, "to be nothing, so that You may be all." Nicolas as a teenager would have read these words; later on he would learn to make them a lived reality in his own life.

Schooling consisted of three years of study of what was termed "grammar", one year of humanities, another of rhetoric and two each of philosophy and theology. Nicolas had to be in school at 9.30 each morning. Class began with a prayer in Latin: "Loving Father, through the merits of your Son, Jesus Christ, pour out within us the grace of your Holy Spirit, by which our minds are ever more fully opened to that knowledge which makes us free, so that we may use that knowledge to your greater glory, for our own good and that of your holy Church."

Classes were made up of children and adolescents of very different age groups numbering anything up to a hundred. We know this from the report of one provincial superior to his father general: "When the pupils number more than 100 in a class, they are too much for the teacher and make no progress in their studies, with the result that some have to stay four or five years in the same class, because the teacher cannot get around to helping such a large number." Sub-groups of 10 were formed

⁵ Traite de la Connaissance et de l'Amour du Fils de Dieu, Notre-Seigneur Jesus-Christ

with a clever pupil, known as the *decurion*,⁶ in charge of each. His role was to hear the lessons recited, while the regent or teacher would explain, direct and check that the material had been understood.

A large proportion of the teaching was through Latin. The pupil took few notes. In the evening, he had to read them through, write out from memory the explanations given in class and then study them. Next day the *decurion* would check that the memory work had been done, while the teacher did a spot check to ensure that the material had been grasped.

Nicolas frequently had to write "compositions" — written pieces of work which, as they grew older, the pupils had to present and defend orally in the presence of their teachers, parents and local magistrates. He was an outstanding student whose written work, "exceptional for its eloquence, as well as its high standard in Mathematics and Geography, was, on the recommendation of his teachers, carefully preserved in the school, in the libraries of Amiens, and above all in that of the esteemed M. Dumont".⁷ Gifted in the humanities, Nicolas also showed great interest in the scientific and technical domains, then known as "the mechanical arts". He showed a great desire to learn and to know. Later he was to refer to what he called a "kind of profligacy of the mind which I had difficulty in curbing".⁸

The religious formation given at the Jesuit college was solid and rather austere. The main themes of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius were presented and developed through the catechism. Every day the pupils attended Mass after morning lessons and those who wanted to could join one of the "congregations" or

"sodalities" that came together to pray, reflect or engage in some common enterprise. Most often these sodalities were dedicated to Our Lady.

The young people at the school were not averse to a little rowdiness nor to enjoying the many feasts that marked the liturgical calendar. Masked parades at carnival time, though forbidden by the Church, had their following; fairs, games, cavalcades, were still in vogue, at least on the feasts of local and patron saints. When times were difficult, these often turned into demonstrations and riots. Visits of Louis XIII or Richelieu to Amiens, even when linked with war, drew crowds of curious onlookers, while youths eager to take to horseback would dash off to the city wall to watch the soldiers preparing for battle.

Nicolas' presence had a marked influence on the behaviour of his companions. They had a high regard for him and realised that swearing or criticising others was not acceptable in his company. From a young age he had been seized by God and was driven by a desire for perfection that sometimes bordered on anxiety. St Louis Gonzaga who, at a very young age, had made a vow of virginity was held up by the Jesuits as a model for their pupils. Nicolas made a similar promise at the age of 10, probably without understanding the full implications of such a commitment. He was a youth who had fallen in love with the absolute. He was also a Picard, a son of this people on whom the centuries had imprinted a fierce independence. Loyal, sincere, free, sometimes blunt and downright in manner, Picards often have an acute sense of reality. Their considerable ability in abstract reasoning is coupled with a determination to go further, to improve on what others have only begun.

Nicolas must have had some of these qualities when he left school at 19. His father, Louis, would doubtless have realised

⁶ *The military term for a soldier having ten soldiers under him. This language would not have sounded strange in a Jesuit school. (Translator)*

⁷ *Thuiller, op cit*

⁸ *Raffron Life*

long before now that he could not count on his son, the only boy out of his five children, to carry on the business, for Nicolas wanted to be a priest.⁹

Louis Barre was a man of deep faith and put no obstacle in the way of his son's desire to give himself completely to God. Amiens had plenty of monasteries: there were Dominicans, Premonstratentions, Canons of St Augustine, and the Jesuits who must surely have hoped to see their gifted pupil joining them. Moreover, his cousin, Anthony, had joined the Society of Jesus in 1635. Nicolas had thought first of entering a congregation "whose main concern was to work for the conversion of sinners".¹⁰ Was it the Jesuits? Or the Dominicans? He was deterred, notes Raffron, on hearing that they did not take religious vows soon enough for his liking. Here we see the real Nicolas: a true Picard seized by God, determined, without more ado, to fulfil his desire to give himself completely in return.

He was familiar with the Minim monastery which was situated in a poorer area of the town not far from his own house. One of his uncles, Francois, had been a Minim in the monastery at Compiègne and died when Nicolas was eight. He and his life of penance were still spoken about in the family. Nicolas had made up his mind: he would become a Minim. His father got together the dowry of 1000 livres which it was customary to bring on entering the novitiate, while his mother packed the few personal belongings that he would need. We can imagine their feelings as they accompanied their son to the monastery where he would join the sons of St Francis of Paola.

⁹ It was Marie, the youngest, who, together with her husband, was to take on the business in the Place au Feurre or Straw Market. This was well after her father's death, which took place around 1643, and close upon that of her mother which occurred around 1668.

¹⁰ Raffron, *op cit*

CHAPTER TWO

Nigeon-Vincennes (1640-1642)

By now Nicolas was 19. He could have become a rich businessman, a distinguished magistrate, a famous scientist, but instead he knocked at the door of the Minims seeking admission as a postulant. Doubtless he was attracted by their motto "Caritas", by their charism of penance for the conversion of sinners — a call that was close to his heart — but one wonders whether he was aware that he was entering an order where the members were called to be "minims" — the lowest — in everything, and permitted to study only in order to respond to the needs of preaching. "Throughout the order," wrote St Francis of Paola, "nobody must be awarded the rank of doctor, nor any other university degree." Nicolas, who had already earned the esteem of the learned of Amiens, was about to walk, in humility, the way of true greatness.

Let us pause for a moment to consider the Minim order.

Francois Martotilla, their founder, was born in Paola in Calabria, in southern Italy, on 27 March 1416. While still very young, he began to lead the life of a hermit committed to prayer and penance. But very soon he was joined by others and found himself, involuntarily, the leader of a lay community. His love for the poor and his gifts of prayer and healing caused his fame to spread beyond the frontiers of Italy. King Louis XI of France had fallen ill and wished to take advantage of the gifts of the famous miracle worker, so he sent a request, asking him to come to his castle at Plessis-les-Tours. The humble Calabrian refused. The King then enlisted the help of Pope Sixtus IV who, for political reasons, acceded to the request and ordered Francis of Paola to come to France under pain of excommunication! The saint

complied and, at the age of 67, left his native Calabria never to set eyes on it again.

He reached Plessis-les-Tours in 1483, but did not obtain for the King the hoped-for cure. Instead, he led the Monarch to accept his impending death and to live out his remaining days in a truly Christian manner. After the King's death, Francis continued to live on as a hermit in the grounds of Plessis. As at Paola, he spent his days in solitude, prayer and penitence, welcoming all who crowded round his cell from early morning. "Per carita," he would say as he prayed with them and for them. Many cures and conversions took place. Disciples came to join him, as they had in Calabria, and the King, Charles VIII, had a monastery built for them. After the death of Charles VIII, in 1498, King Louis XII continued to protect the young order, endowing it with a part of his wealth. At a period when decadence was common in religious life as among lay Christians, the first Minim community shone like a beacon for the European church. By defending the poor before kings and princes, by preaching conversion through a life of humility, penance and charity, and by his dedication to a life of unremitting contemplation, Francis of Paola proclaimed the way back to God to a people who often were Christian only in name. At the time of his death, the order had 32 monasteries, 13 of them in France. The poor loved the Minims, calling them the *bonshommes* or "good men"¹¹ - a nickname already given to Francis — both because of their kindness and their simplicity of bearing. This last distinguished them from many other religious of the period whose monasteries the Minims were to play a part in reforming.

¹¹ A term of endearment and affection as well as respect, applied to persons noted for their good nature as well as their simplicity. There is no adequate English translation. (Translator)

At the time when Nicolas was seeking entry to the Minims, the order was at its peak with 457 monasteries in all, 190 of them in Italy and 156 in France. The Minims still enjoyed Royale patronage. Although most of the monasteries followed the humble Minim lifestyle desired by their founder, the financial security they enjoyed as a result of being endowed by the Crown and receiving many donations and legacies was gradually turning the Minim order into a group of wealthy land-owners. The attractions of the intellectual life, and more especially the need to explore in greater depth the link between the Christian faith and the growing scientific understanding of the world, led some of them to devote themselves totally to the study of science, with outstanding success. The best known of these were to be Fathers Mersenne, Maignan and Niceron. The monastery in the Place Royale in Paris thus became, in the reign of Louis XIII, one of the centres of intellectual life in the capital.

We may well wonder whether Nicolas Barre was aware of this when he entered the order. It seems likely that the young man, whose intellectual refinement and strength of mind together with his maturity and judgement, had won the admiration of his teachers, made a mature and well-informed decision, a decision prompted by his attraction to the ideals of St Francis of Paola, by his knowledge of the Minim Rule, by the witness given by the poor Minims of Amiens. He was to discover only much later to what extent riches and final security can hamper the work of God.

In October Nicolas was admitted to the monastery of Amiens as a postulant. He had known the religious there - those *bonshommes* — since childhood, having frequented their chapel from time to time. The monastery had been found, in 1498¹²

¹² Bishop Pierre Verse had asked for them and Louis de Hedonville contributed a portion of his own wealth to build the monastery.

while Francis of Paola was still alive and was called "l'Annonciacle". He himself had appointed the members the first community. It seems to have exercised enormous influence, if one is to judge by the considerable number of vocations that came from Amiens and nearby. Compared with the great abbeys of the town this was a relatively modest foundation. After a short stay there, designed to test his vocation, Nicolas was sent to Nigeon (now known as Passy), near Paris, probably in December 1640 or January 1641. There he would begin his initiation into the Minim life, the life of those who referred to themselves as "the least of all". In the chapel dedicated to our Lady of all Graces he received the habit of undyed black wool.

Nicolas and the other novices, Gerard Nourri, Adrien Druelle, Louis Toffart and Francois de Beaucourt, lived in a separate part of the house so that they might not be distracted from their training. From the time of his arrival, the novice was examined on his attraction to the life of penance and continuous Lenten observance, and on his desire to be freed from everything that might impede his progress towards God. For penance is at the very centre of the Minim's life, giving witness in the church and in the world to the gospel warning: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" The path of conversion to which the Minim commits himself, and along which he is trained to lead others through preaching and the Sacrament of Penance, may be summed up in three words: prayer, asceticism and charity.

Apart from the celebration of the Eucharist, "prayer" included the solemn recitation in choir of the Divine Office, and personal prayer. "They will give themselves wholeheartedly to devotion and prayer," wrote Francis of Paola in his first Rule, "entering fully into the meaning of the words they use and allowing their emotions to be moved by them; then from affectivity will flow

enthusiasm, from enthusiasm a sense of proportion, from this derives humility, and from humility comes true freedom of heart." The Divine Office began at midnight with the recitation in choir of Matins, followed by Lauds at 4.00 a.m. The other Hours followed in turn during the day, up to Compline at 6.00 p.m. The founder wanted them to observe a certain restraint even in the saying of the Office which was recited daily on a monotone, the mode by the Church in Lent.

During the novitiate Nicolas learned the practice of personal prayer, "the summit of religious life", as the Rule puts it. "The selfless and fervent prayer of the just is a powerful force and, like a faithful messenger, it carries out its mission, penetrating where the flesh alone could never enter." Francis' insistence on the primacy of contemplation is a distillation of his own experience of silence, solitude and prayer in the cave at Paola. As he studied the example of his founder, the young novice learned to draw from a well to which he would return faithfully, even in times of crisis or doubt, or during periods of the most intense apostolic activity. "Most spiritual directors," he was to say later, "use books to help them in their ministry; sometimes this is good, but it is not the most reliable resource. Books can be dry cisterns containing only stagnant water. It is better to go directly to the spring and from there to draw fresh and life-giving water. If the director is not a man of prayer, where else will he learn what to say, what advice to offer, what questions to ask?"¹³

While in the novitiate Nicolas learned also to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, following the example of the founder whose colleague, Etienne Joly, once said of him: "His life is one of continual prayer and meditation." For many years Nicolas had already begun to live with that sense of God's abiding presence, sometimes manifest, sometimes veiled, but never interrupted.

¹³ MD 18

The novitiate only served to deepen his desire. Later he would write in his letters: "We must begin by seeking God first; other graces come after. Then, just when we think we have found Him, we must begin again, for we never find Him so completely that we need seek no longer. The second time our search is even more earnest than the first, and the third most earnest still for, the more one possesses God, the more one hungers for Him." He goes on to describe the different stages in this search as follows:

*First, we must seek God,
Then we find Him, but from afar,
catching only a glimpse of Him.
We approach,
Gaze at Him with wonder,
Contemplating Him with humility,
and then with love and trust.
We speak to Him, Listen to Him,
Embrace Him, Clasp Him tight.
We fall lovingly into Him,
Lose ourselves in Him,
And become one with Him at last.* ¹⁴

The novitiate was also a hard apprenticeship for a life of penance inspired by love. Asceticism for a Minim is directly linked to prayer, a means of freeing himself in order to attain contemplation, with a heart that is humble and open to God alone. If it is lived in the true spirit of the gospel, this asceticism leads to a deep experience of abandonment: "The Minim friar, in his poverty, is master of the world," says the Rule, "and being totally given over to God he holds sway, in faith, over all peoples." This asceticism involves the rejection of all worldliness. "You must abhor worldly vanities," Francis used to say to his

confreres, "all honour, fame, and the pomp of this passing world with its short-lived acclaim and riches."

This penitential way of life is expressed in the fourth vow which Nicolas, like all his brother Minims, was preparing to take, the vow of perpetual Lent. It involved abstaining for life from meat, eggs, cheese and dairy produce, and observing numerous fast-days. This diet - which may surprise our modern dieticians and attract the vegetarians - only makes sense within the whole thrust of Minim spirituality, for it was in order to follow Christ's example and to live out his love in all its fullness that Francis of Paola fasted, slept on a bare board, lived on greens and root vegetables and allowed himself to be constantly disturbed by those who came in search of consolation, encouragement, conversion or a cure.

Throughout his life Nicolas Barre was to practise voluntary mortification, imposing all kinds of penances on himself, "but unbeknown to anyone", records Thuillier. "Unless the grain of wheat dies, it remains a single grain, but, if it dies, it bears much fruit. In the same way, if the spiritual director does not die to himself and to the world, he can only bear Indifferent fruit. It cost Jesus his life to lead the human race back to the Creator. Why, then, should any less be expected of one who is called to cooperate in God's plans?" ¹⁵ In writing this many years later, Nicolas was drawing on his own experience of the path along which he had taken his first steps as a novice. The Rule, which he studied, meditated on and immersed himself in, invited him to leave all to become a true disciple, and Nicolas set himself to follow it with all the enthusiasm of youth.

¹⁴ Letter 4

¹⁵ MD 15

Although the novitiate period did not include time given to the apostolate or "works of charity", it served as a preparation for this by rooting the novices in the love of Christ. Now it was the burning desire to be of service and to work for the conversion of sinners that had led Nicolas to enter the Minims, a desire which grew stronger as he prepared to make solemn profession of the four vows. Towards the end of the formation year, as was customary in the order, he made repeated requests to be admitted to the profession of vows, a grace of which everyone surely feels unworthy. Like others among his confreres, he would soon be signing his letters, 'An unworthy Minim".

On 31 January 1642 he took his final vows in the chapel of Our Lady of All Graces. The young religious was then sent to the monastery of Sainte Marie des Rois, in the village of Vincennes near Paris, to prepare for the priesthood. It was a poor monastery in a working-class area. He was to remain there for 17 months of training. On 27 February 1643 he was made a subdeacon, and in September he left Vincennes for Paris.

Despite the strict enclosure of these years in formation, Nicolas was not entirely cut off from the events that continued to disturb the country. War was still in progress; there was mounting opposition to Richelieu whose death in 1642 was followed closely by that of Marie de Medicis, mother of Louis XIII, and by that of the King himself the following year. Would this new page of history usher in an era of peace? Louis XIV was only five. His mother, Anne of Austria, became Regent, assisted by the ambitious Mazarin, the Italian Nuncio turned naturalised Frenchman who had been brought into the government by Richelieu. There was still every reason to be fearful.

In the church too there was unrest, in the wake of the debates and tensions that followed Rome's condemnation of the

Jansenist propositions in the *Augustinus*. The tensions were focused on the Abbey of Port-Royale which had become the seed-bed of hard-core Jansenism, under the influence of the secular priest, Saint Cyran. These disturbances, which were to last several years, left no religious community unscathed: in 1650, the Minims, who had come together for a chapter, were to affirm their fidelity to Rome by officially renouncing the 12 propositions of Jansenism.

Nearly a century after Trent, the Minims, who were committed to spiritual renewal through conversion, must have been overjoyed to see the effects of this Council coming to fruition in France. Italy and Spain had been more open to its teachings. At the time when Nicolas was due in Vincennes to prepare for ordination, Monsieur Olier, the parish priest of Saint Sulpice in Paris, was training priests to take charge of seminaries. Great reports were being circulated about the priests of the "Congregation of the Mission" whom "Monsieur Vincent" (de Paul) was sending out to preach in rural areas.

Nicolas had deliberately chosen an order which specialised in evangelising poorer districts and which allowed young men who joined it to become involved in this apostolate without too much delay. He felt ready to take on such a mission and wanted to be numbered among those apostles springing up in the French church at that period who would raise people from their miserable plight. But it was not to these simple people that his superiors would send him. They had noticed the outstanding intelligence of the young religious, his amazing gift for discernment, the sure lucidity and simplicity with which he dealt with theological and philosophical issues. As they saw it, his place was clearly marked out: he must go to the illustrious monastery situated in the Place Royale in Paris.

CHAPTER THREE

Place Royale (1643-1657)

When the Minims arrived in Paris in 1605, they were in very straightened circumstances and had no money with which to build a monastery. After the death of Henri IV, Marie de Medicis wanted to be the "foundress" of the monastery that the Minims were hoping to build in the capital. This meant that she made payments to them, on a regular basis, from her revenue. Other generous donors soon followed the Queen's example. The plans were ambitious and work was slow because of the political unrest.

When Nicolas was sent to the monastery in 1643, the church had not yet been completed, but he was to see it finished in the years that followed. The design was by the famous architect, Mansart, who was then completing the work on the splendid main doorway. The best painters of the time, Mignard and Jouvenet, had a hand in its decoration. Being in the Marais, the aristocratic quarter, with its imposing private residences, the monastery was frequented by the upper classes. The nobility dreamed of having a monument erected to them in one of the side chapels; all the best preachers were to be heard there.

While the church and monastery attracted some fervent believers, others went there because it was fashionable as a result of the royal patronage. The Queen sometimes came to Vespers, attracting crowds of on-lookers, while lords and ladies of the court were known to hold amorous assignations there, causing scandal by their idle chatter and their behaviour. Going to hear a sermon was at times not unlike going to the theatre: the orator was the attraction rather than the Word of God. In 1654 the community had to employ a verger to control beggars

who were making a nuisance of themselves. In the annals of the monastery for 1654, however, it is the gallants and courtiers who are singled out for mention: in that year the police had to be called in to put an end to the scandals and conversations taking place in the church, especially on Sundays and holy days.

In other respects too, it cannot have been easy to lead the Minim life in its integrity in the monastery of the Place Royale. Some of the community were themselves part of the intellectual elite. Prelates and scholars, as well as people of high standing in the eyes of the court, came to consult them. Madame de Sevigne, that keen observer of contemporary manners, charges them with becoming court-followers themselves: some Minims had written a tract dedicated to the King in which they compared him to God, except, she writes, that "the text is so written that it is clear that it is God who is the copy"!

There were, however, some Minims at Place Royale who refused to let themselves be drawn into this way of life, so alien to the wishes of the humble hermit of Paola. So it was that Fr Charles le Roy, a man too highly acclaimed as a preacher for his own humble liking, gave up preaching altogether to devote himself to evangelising the poor and writing a catechism for them.

The individual who was mainly responsible for the intellectual reputation of Place Royale monastery was undoubtedly Fr Mersenne. He was a small, stooped man with twinkling black eyes. Very knowledgeable about the Bible and the author of many scientific publications, he was in communication with Descartes and with scholars all over Europe. He was a friend of Pascal and devoted himself passionately to all kinds of research and experiments, in fields such as Mathematics, Physics and

Music.¹⁶ Every Sunday morning he held meetings in his cell with the greatest minds in Paris; other learned monks joined them, including Fr Jean-Francois Niceron, the famous mathematician and optician. Topics for debate were cogently introduced by Mersenne, as a means of encouraging research and of sharing his conviction that knowledge and scientific exploration can lead to God, and that reason and intellect, far from being an obstacle to faith, can in fact sustain it. The system of Mechanics which he invented was very alien to the Thomistic philosophy officially adopted by the Church and consequently the subject of heated debates.

One can understand why Nicolas Barre's superiors, realising the "breadth and sharpness of his mind",¹⁷ should have sent him to Place Royale while he was still a scholastic: he would be able to continue his preparation for the priesthood and, at the same time, become involved in the mission to the intellectual elite undertaken by a section of the community. He had, after all, from a very young age "shown aptitude and facility for all areas of advanced learning and an understanding of the principles of all the branches of knowledge, both liberal and scientific, taking an unusual delight in debating any and every subject with all sorts of people. He would often say that it was useful for an apostle to know everything, so as to be able to use everything to lead people to God".¹⁸

The young Minim, then, would have found the best of teachers at Place Royale and he undoubtedly won their admiration. As Raffron records, he "soon plunged into the deeper recesses of philosophy and theology, and forged ahead so rapidly, thanks to

his lively mind, that he discovered many beautiful doctrines not learnt from his masters, with the result that they foresaw him making a great name for himself in the area of speculative thought". Another confrere, Fr Thuillier, corroborates this evidence when he writes: "Leaving his fellow-students quickly behind, he rose to heights of learning where his teachers themselves could not have led him. It became evident that the young religious would make a name for himself by his astonishing ability to penetrate, instantly it seemed, into the mysteries of knowledge. Those who witnessed and admired his extraordinary facility often wondered whether the young man was really learning, or whether, as was said of Plato, he was only remembering having learnt!"

From 1644 on, at the age of 23 and even before his ordination (which may have taken place between October 1645 and September 1646 - the records have disappeared), Nicolas Barre was entrusted with the task of teaching philosophy to his younger confreres. Very soon he was given further responsibility. The newly ordained priest was appointed to the mission which is proper to every Minim: to preach and hear confessions. From 1647 onwards he taught Theology and, at 30 years of age, was given faculties to hear the confessions of the community. Finally, in 1653, as well as holding the post of lecturer in Theology, he was appointed librarian. He became responsible for choosing books and manuscripts for a library of some 15,000 volumes. It served as a meeting-place for researchers whose choice of sources he often guided. The post also afforded him the opportunity of extending his own knowledge.

We cannot help noting the apparent contradiction between the aspirations to humility and penance of the young man entering the Minims at Amiens, turning his back on the career that could have been open to him through his family and his studies, and

¹⁶ *His experiments bore particularly on gravity and the frequency of sound*

¹⁷ *Raffron, op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Thuillier, op. cit.*

the reputation the young Minim was gradually acquiring! But he was well aware, and often repeated, that scholars are like deep pools apparently full of fresh water. Without God's special help they end up polluted.¹⁹ In the spirit of St Francis of Paola he was later to write: "Knowledge is a great obstacle to holiness. It is useful in that it can enlighten consciences, but it can also puff people up, feeding self-love and pride, and the diseases of the spirit are more difficult to cure than those of the body. In order to belong totally to God, one must become the least."²⁰

"Blessed are you, Father, who hide these things from the wise and the learned and reveal them to mere children." Few are the wise and learned who understand this, but they are saints.

Nicolas advanced along this path, but at a cost: that of prayer and penance. Each day he spent three or four hours in prayer. When his responsibilities were heaviest and the days were not long enough for all he had to do, he would take time from the night for personal prayer. A letter which he wrote some time later to Etienne, a friend and fellow religious who like himself taught Theology, reveals something of his own fidelity in this matter. "When teaching Theology," he admonishes, "you must cultivate a special sense of dependence on God, while striving to live in accordance with the eternal truths. And whatever you do, do not omit prayer, even for a single day. Without it everything will go awry. However mediocre it may be, it ennobles and sustains us, gradually and imperceptibly obtaining for us great blessings which we would never otherwise receive. Do not be afraid that your studies will suffer because of prayer; on the contrary, they will be raised to a new dignity, breadth and seriousness. As you are aware, and will come to appreciate more and more, contact with God in prayer leads to a knowledge of divine things that is

of a higher and quite different order from the inert words on paper that scholars read in books."²¹

The country was going through difficult times and the monastery in the Place Royale was not unaffected. Here is what we read from the pen of Angelique Arnaud, abbess of the convent of Port Royal, in 1652: "France is in a state of devastation. There is not a province that is not suffering grievously. Paris and its surroundings are the worst off. All the villages round about are completely deserted and the surviving inhabitants have taken refuge in the woods, the rest having died of hunger or been beaten to death by the soldiers. We have had to open St Louis' hospital to care for the soldiers wounded in the terrible battle at Etampes. The countryside around there is in a worse state of destruction and desolation than ever before, the corn lost, vines dug up and the villages burnt to the ground. Such is the shortage of flour in Paris that bread, even the blackest kind, costs six sous a pound.²² We have only enough now for five days. We have wheat, but we can only get it ground with extreme difficulty because of the soldiers who are despoiling the mills."

Meanwhile the Minim monastery in Paris was spared this penury thanks to the numerous endowments for Masses which it enjoyed. It could not otherwise have realised its architectural ambitions. The wealth of the monastery, as of other religious houses in the same district, gave rise to tensions and even conflicts with the local clergy who ran the parish of St Paul's within which lay the Minim monastery. In 1641, when Maitre Masure, a lawyer and doctor of Theology, was put in charge of this parish, he was determined to end the long history of petty rivalries, some of which had already necessitated intervention by Rome some 12 years earlier. In point of fact, by their regular

¹⁹ MAP 145

²⁰ MAP 80, 81

²¹ Letter 18

²² A sou was roughly equivalent to a halfpenny

provision of Masses, sermons and confessions, and by allowing funeral rites in their chapel, the religious were depriving the parishes of a valuable source of revenue.

Fr Masure, whose strength of character is well documented, had been deputed by his colleagues in the adjoining parishes to take action on their behalf to remedy the situation. In 1641 he had taken the problem before the Parlement and the conflict, which thus became intensified between Maitre Masure and the Minims, was not to be resolved finally until 1658. It left a deep impression on the years that the young Nicolas spent in Paris.

Each time a corpse was brought to the Minim church, the problems surfaced again. Sometimes fights broke out in the street around the coffin. The parish priest of St Paul's did everything he could to get the upper hand of the Minims. These, however, clung jealously to their total independence of parishes and secular clergy, which had been conferred on them by statute, and they were determined to demonstrate it. And so, when Maitre Masure ordered them to build an altar of repose outside their church for the procession on 30 May 1644, the Minims confined themselves to incensing the Blessed Sacrament as the procession itself was passing the monastery door, while the crowd smiled or smirked, depending on their persuasion. In 1645 a decree was promulgated by the Parlement regulating affairs between religious houses and parishes over such matters as prerogatives, responsibilities, and arrangements for funerals and processions, so as to ensure that expenses and income were fairly distributed. However, up to 1658, relations were to remain strained between secular clergy and religious.

Nicolas felt all this deeply. These petty rivalries, this grasping for money and riches, which corrupted even the very worship one claimed to be giving to God, was to him a total contradiction of

the Gospel message. In this setting, which was fraught with difficulties within and without, he prayed, prayed constantly; some would say he went too far. Unbeknown to his confreres, he would spend hours in the dark cold chapel during the night. He did not consider himself any different from those around him, but rather in need himself of conversion: "Lord," he prayed, "take from me this heart of stone; break it, crush it to dust and then remould this dust stone, for the true stone is Christ. Take away its natural hardness and give it instead a supernatural constancy in pursuing what is right."²³

With characteristic wholeheartedness and idealism he plunged into the life of mortification. The Rule did not prescribe instruments of penance such as the use of the discipline or the hairshirt as a means of curbing the passions. However, such practices were common among the religious of the time, either as a means of overcoming those obstacles in themselves that impeded their search for God, or as a voluntary sacrifice undertaken for the conversion of those entrusted to their ministry.

Fr Barre was among the latter, though one would never have suspected it of this affable man who was always approachable. And yet, in his practice of mortification and penance he even went so far as to endanger his health. He took little sleep, often sitting upright at his writing desk rather than on the plank which was his bed. He ate little, at times mixing ashes with his food, a practice not unknown at that time. His strength began to fail and he became ill, to the anxiety of his superiors. But he would smile and reassure them saying: "This condition is good for my soul. Besides, St Paul would have Jesus say: 'My strength is made manifest in your weakness.'"²⁴ His health declined, however, to

²³ MAP 15

²⁴ Thuillier, *op. cit.*

the extent that his ministry suffered. It came to a point where he had difficulty in speaking, in sustaining a conversation, in applying himself to study. Today we might call it "depression". This time his superiors forbade him to undertake further mortification, an order which he obeyed, believing that "obedience is better than sacrifice". Looked at from a purely human point of view it was already too late. Nicolas would never again enjoy robust health. "Long, acute" illnesses and painful cures would dog the rest of his days.

At a deeper level, however, Nicolas had entered into a terrible period of crippling doubt which had gradually been taking hold of him. This man whose clarity of mind and expression had enlightened the minds of students hungry for learning or the many who thronged the monastery chapel to hear him, who, in the eyes of his order, was to have become a beacon for the whole century, was himself plunged into darkness.

The Provincial Superior decided to send him to Amiens. There, it was hoped, in his native air and away from "all intellectual speculations" which, they concluded, had ruined his health, he would make a complete recovery. The city of Amiens was calmer than Paris had been during his stay at Place Royale. The years 1648-1652 had coincided with a particularly troubled period in the capital. Increased taxes following in the wake of the wars, the centralisation of power by an absolute monarch thus curtailing the privileges of the nobles, and the unpopularity of Mazarin, all this had set the scene for civil war. The Parlement, the princes and the people of Paris rose as one against the ruling power in a war that became known as the *Fronde*. Barricades were erected and battles fought on the streets of Paris. The Fronde was forcefully suppressed leaving many dead and wounded and a trail of ruins. It would do the young priest good to get away from Paris with its political and intellectual

unrest. At the beginning of September 1657 he left Paris for Amiens.

CHAPTER FOUR
Dark Night, Amiens
(1657-1659)

It is difficult to know how to interpret the crisis undergone by the Minim, this man who, ostensibly at least, seemed so strong in his faith. No doubt reflection on his spiritual journey permits us eventually to see the trial transformed into a time of grace - and there are letters in which we see Nicolas himself engaged in this process. Without its purifying effects he could not have entered as deeply as he did into that mystical depth of relationship with God; he would not have been in a position to lead to God so many souls who were searching for Him in vain; maybe he would not have been able to withstand the opposition he was to face in his work of educating the poor; true enough... But all this is hindsight, when the meaning is made clear and one can again "step forth bravely into the darkness", knowing, as it were, yet not knowing, that the "darkness of this night is far better than light".

We can only surmise as to what brought Nicolas Barre to this dark night of anguish and doubt and then retreat in silence before the mystery of God's dealings with us. Perhaps his upbringing and his education had left him excessively susceptible to strain and tension. He was an only son, the eldest of five children, a sensitive lad who liked being on his own. He had grown up in what was probably a peaceful family atmosphere but against a background of war, fear and insecurity which can give rise to anxiety.

In the college at Amiens, under the tutelage of Fr de Saint-Jure, he had received a solid Christian formation centred on the person of Christ. But it was also a demanding and austere formation which called for total forgetfulness of self, which invited

the student to identify with Christ, to live in union with Him who is the sole worshipper "in spirit and in truth", and to lose himself in Christ, in order to find himself anew in God. This concept of "incorporation" into Christ, which was central to Berulle's spirituality and the seventeenth century in France, becoming the hallmark of what is termed the "French School of Spirituality", would have been presented to the young boy as an ideal requiring harsh self-denial. De Saint-Jure advocated making acts of desire for outstanding, even impossible, holiness so as to urge one to greater daring and even greater heights. As a child, Nicolas had taken this ideal to heart. He spent more time in prayer than other boys of his age; he did not stop at making those "little acts of self-sacrifice" which all Christian mothers recommend to their children. Without fully realising it, it is possible that he saw sanctity more as a conquest than as a gift. "You must be ready to do great violence to your desires," Saint-Jure used to say, "in order to enter into the designs of God which are as far beyond ours in strength and purity as He, who is Himself the Source of all Good, is beyond His creatures who are but vanity and nothingness."

Perhaps we should also consider the fact that, while Nicolas was a young religious, his father died. This event, which probably occurred in 1643, brought about changes in the family circumstances and left his mother alone with his four sisters to carry on the business. We do not know how Nicolas reacted to the event, but we can assume that it caused him to suffer and to question his decision to enter the monastery.

We may also wonder about the paths to sanctity chosen by the young Minim. Did he understand that holiness is a gift from God, or was he tense, too tense, in his search for God and his manner of giving himself to Him? Perhaps his approach to God comes across more like an exercise in asceticism than as an attitude of

openness to a gift freely given. There is some justification for that opinion. In order to move from the one to the other, a person must learn to let go of everything, especially the false notion that he or she is making progress towards God; one must learn to accept love from an Other, a gift to be shared. For it is not suffering itself which is redemptive but the capacity to go on loving, even in the very midst of suffering. Only after the trial had passed could he write: "The Divine Lover chooses whom He pleases as His beloved. He will not have us choosing our own targets of perfection. It is self-love that makes us act like that. No, no, that is not the way to go about things! All we have to do is to place ourselves before Him and desire to be His. Then, in the knowledge that we are unworthy of being so loved, we must set about moulding and forming those whom His sovereign love calls to become His true children. For it is God who makes saints. Many people want to serve God, but most of them are not willing to be unconditionally at His service.²⁵ You must place yourself in the hands of God like a paintbrush in the hand of a painter, like a quill pen in the hand of a writer. And note that a quill, if it is to write well, must often be cut, trimmed and shaped."

We may speculate, then, that his illness owed something to an inordinate striving after perfection, or the result of excessive penances. Fr Thuillier also recalls his tendency to overwork intellectually which, according to some of his confreres, could have occasioned his "state of lethargy". What seems clear is that he did not pace himself in carrying out his duties as researcher and teacher. He had acquired a deep knowledge of the Bible and of the Fathers of the Church. He had studied the *Summa* of Aquinas and read the Spanish and Rhino-Flemish mystics. He was familiar with the writings of Ignatius of Loyola and St Francis de Sales and was conversant with the writings of Cardinal

Berulle. His interest extended to the work of the most famous scientists. He had read Luther and Calvin and their arguments against the Catholic position, but also their statements on predestination and the inability of the human being to merit salvation or even to collaborate in achieving it, as well as their reflections on suffering.

He had taken up the cudgels against the excesses of Jansenism which inspired so much fear in the area of religious practice with its moralistic and pessimistic attitude to life, its belief that salvation is reserved for the few. Of course the fact that one refutes a religious or philosophical trend does not necessarily guarantee exemption from persistent hammerings of doubt about its validity. Perhaps this was the subject of that inner questioning which Nicolas underwent. This man who had staked all his trust on God experienced complete inner imbalance. The years 1643-57 which he spent in the Place Royale had coincided with his brilliant intellectual development; they were also a kind of "descent into hell" which had been going on long before any of his confreres knew about it. When the darkness engulfs us, when everything around us seems to deny the God in whom we believe, when we no longer know in our hearts whether we believe or not, and when we go on believing nonetheless, it takes time to recognise that this path of dispossession is none other than the journey of faith.

"He is overworking," was all most of his fellow religious said. One wonders whether some of them were aware of the tension he experienced between his inner aspirations and the life of the monastery at Place Royale. While many of the poor of Paris eked out a meagre existence, the monastery was a meeting place for the rich and influential. In 1656, just when Vincent de Paul was founding the General Hospital to house large numbers of beggars and sick people, and Bourdoise was creating an

²⁵ PM 31 *The pun in the French is lost in English: "Many people want to (servir) God, but most do not want God to make use of (se servir de) them."*

association of prayer to promote vocations for teaching the poor, the Minims of the Place Royale were receiving benefices from the King and princes for the embellishment of their church. These royal favours had, moreover, incited the populace to reprisals against the monastery: during the *Fronde*, the house was twice ²⁶ broken into and searched by anti-Royalists convinced that an establishment which enjoyed the Queen's favour, as this one did, must have hidden treasures. While Monsieur Olier at Saint-Sulpice was investing his energy in renewed apostolic endeavours to help the poor, the Minims - like other religious orders in that area of Paris - were at loggerheads with the parish priest and taking their grievances before the Parlement.

The order, too, was going through a time of tensions created by political pressures connected with the election of a superior general, Fr Bachelier. The French province appealed to the Pope to have him dismissed. The King intervened in the elections in which participation was restricted and centralized, despite the fact that the order had always been very democratic. A provincial was then excommunicated by the former superior general who had been deposed. In addition to the conflicts within the monastery of Place Royale, there was much rivalry too in the various provinces. The fame of some of the Fathers, and the consequent notoriety of the monastery, incurred the disapproval of those community members who remained deeply attached to the humble Minim way of life.

This situation had left its mark on Nicolas Barre, now aged 36. Thirteen years earlier he had left everything, inspired by an ideal of holiness in the service of Christ, for the conversion of sinners. Now all this had fallen apart. He had wanted a humble lifestyle and they wanted to make him a lecturer in Theology. He had

²⁶ 31 January and 24 February 1649.

aspired to the true Minim lifestyle in which everything should bear the mark of poverty, lowliness and simplicity, yet here he was in a monastery which, in part at least, had become the meeting place, not only of scholars, but of courting couples and pedants as well. His desire had been to be apostle to the poor and they were appointing him librarian. He had fallen ill and so the penitential practices at the heart of the Minim vocation were forbidden him. He had studied long and hard in order to lead others to God and here he was, himself a prey to doubt.

When it comes to describing this spiritual crisis we must turn to those who themselves have walked this road. Perhaps only they can grasp the meaning of the strong language used by the Minim to reveal something of his experience. We are reminded of the language of John of the Cross and of other mystics. "I was led to seek righteousness in the sight of God along ways so little frequented and so far beyond human endurance that, if I were to describe them to you, you would: either be terrified or disbelieving. In those days, if I looked down upon the earth, huge gulfs opened up ready to swallow me; if I looked towards the heavens, they seemed made of iron and steel; if I looked to others for consolation, there rests no one there: they were oblivious of my plight; if I descended to the depths of my innermost self, I found only the deepest darkness, doubt and confusion in matters of faith, to such an extent that I seemed no longer to believe even in the existence of God, although everything proves and confirms it. Above, below, within, without, everywhere I experienced only terrors, no comfort anywhere, for the light of faith was denied me."²⁷

Elsewhere he writes: "For the past 12 years especially, I trusted in the divine mercy for my eternal salvation, aware that I was unworthy of it, yet confident that I would be saved. But now I am

²⁷ Thullier, *op. cit*

overcome by anguish and can scarcely hope to be counted among the elect. On the contrary, I seem to see in myself evidence of my damnation. I who help others to be sure of God's mercy am myself terrified and tormented by His justice. I have to keep my mind occupied if I am not to be totally crushed by the anguish of it. I cannot understand how others can offer me the least praise; even if they were to carry me off to church as a saint, they would be unable to wrest from my heart the abject and base opinion I have of myself. This anguished suffering seems to be driving me to despair, discouragement, blasphemy, atheism, denial of God. Yet, I nevertheless, summon up all the faith, hope and love, all the patience and courage I can muster, crying out to heaven, without receiving the slightest reassurance that my prayers have been heard." ²⁸

"Lord", he prayed, "You are trying me beyond my limits! Why have you turned me against You? Why am I a burden even to myself? Why do You persecute me when all I want is to please You? Nevertheless, let not my will but Yours be done. My heart is ready, Lord, yes, my heart is ready!" ²⁹

To say yes, yes to the darkness, while still continuing to hope and to believe: this is not the work of a few days. Yet Nicolas somehow held on. He himself tells us in his advice to those being put to the test that it calls for realism, humility and abandonment. As far as possible, Nicolas continued to do the work entrusted to him. Like Jesus, at the decisive moment of his Passion in the Garden of Olives, he prayed even more insistently. He would reaffirm his faith, whenever the opportunity arose, in the silence of his heart as well as in word, Above all, he learned gradually to entrust everything to God, knowing, like the Canaanite woman in the Gospel, that he cannot be refused the

few crumbs that fall from the master's table - for, after all, they are offered only to puppy-dogs. He learned to accept everything as permitted by God and to welcome everything as coming from His hand.

Gropingly, in the darkness, he learned to be humbly patient and at peace with himself. If he still continued to mortify himself, it was no longer with extraordinary acts of penance, but "gently and with discretion", simply in order "to hold on and keep going". Then a new prayer rose to his lips, one which was to sustain him throughout his life, though we do not know whether he was ever freed from doubts. It ran:

*Lord, I want nothing more, I desire nothing more,
so as to dispose myself to desire what You want,
in the way that You want it.*

You see me, my God. You take care of everything.

You look after all my concerns, everything that happens to me.

*Nothing escapes Your adorable guiding presence in my life,
and that is sufficient for me.*

O Jesus, O Love!

You are my God and my All!

Centre and depth unfathomable of goodness and might!

Lord I leave You free to desire in me,

To do and dispose everything exactly as it pleases You,

And I will try to desire, act and follow You

everywhere and in everything, without reservation or boundaries.

Finally, Lord, I want to belong wholly to You,

without division, withholding nothing,

*In life or in death, in distress or in consolation,
on earth or in heaven.*

My beloved is mine and I am His, forever!

O Jesus! O Love! ³⁰

²⁸ Letter 54

²⁹ Thuillier, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Letter 12

During the two years he spent at Amiens, Nicolas carried duties of sacristan so as to avoid all intellectual strain. The task permitted him to savour that silence which he had always loved. His health prevented him from following the Rule in all its rigour. He was dispensed from saying the night Hours of the Office and was probably allowed a special diet. His mother and sisters came to visit him, especially Louise whose cure had been made known to him in prayer when he was a child. These meetings probably influenced the young woman in choosing her vocation; after all she regarded her brother as her father in the faith, the one who had sown in her the seed of the Minim life. In 1658, she too committed herself to this way of life in the Minim convent at Abbeville, while Nicolas was at Amiens. Later on she was to become prioress there, "a responsibility which she carried out with much wisdom and gentleness".

It was also during the years which he spent in the humble monastery at Amiens that Nicolas conceived the idea of working for the education of poor children. In what precise way was not yet clear to him; 10 years would elapse before the idea came to birth, but it was in the depths of his own suffering, of his utter physical, psychological and spiritual prostration, that the inspiration had come to him. How, exactly, we do not know, so once more we can only pose the question.

It may have been a reawakening, after the trial, of earlier motivation in joining the Minim order. Or a desire to respond to the call of the Church which, since the Council of Trent, had begun to address the spiritual needs of the hitherto neglected poorer classes. Perhaps it was the influence of Bourdoise, whom Nicolas may well have met, and who 1649, had founded an association of prayer in Paris to pray specifically for Christian educators. Perhaps it was triggered by the setting of the monastery at Amiens, so different from the district around the

Place Royale. It may have represented a desire to follow and complement the inspiration of Vincent de Paul who, in 1656, had opened a General Hospital which became home to a horde of abandoned children. Later on Nicolas was in fact to write:

"Spiritual needs are of much greater importance than of the body. Yet, whereas beggars are rarely at a loss when it comes to wheedling a few shillings, almost all the poor die of spiritual hunger... People giving alms are often deeply moved by the poverty they can see, but remain quite unaffected by the fact that the same poor fellow is in danger of losing his soul. Admirable as it is to feed and clothe the body, it is better still to teach the poor the truths of salvation. The sign given in the Gospel to show that Jesus is the Messiah is that 'the poor have the Gospel preached to them'. When Jesus miraculously cured physical ailments, it was in order that he might cure the soul." ³¹

Dark night, doubt, silence, anguish... the trial that had struck Nicolas head-on had plunged him into this spiritual struggle. What the trial requires, however, is not brute strength, not the undertaking of self-initiated activity on behalf of God, but the courage to place ourselves continually in His hands. The trial, like the dark night of Bethlehem, is the birthplace of new life, no longer fashioned by human hands alone, but proceeding directly from the heart of God.

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³¹ MAP 219-222

CHAPTER FIVE

Rouen (1659)

Father Barre's health remained poor, but he was strong enough to consider resuming his ministry. On 15 September 1659, a chapter was being held at Peronne, a monastery some 50 kilometres from Amiens. The priests there, who would have met him several times during his two years of convalescence, elected him superior, or "corrector" as the Minims call it.

The news was immediately communicated to the monastery at Amiens. It came as no great surprise; the community there had a high regard for Nicolas and had themselves elected him as delegate to the provincial chapter which was held in Nigeon at around the same time each year. Like the other great conventual orders, the Minims have a strong tradition of democracy and all major decisions are taken during chapters — "assemblies" held at local, provincial or general levels. One of the tasks of the assembly at Nigeon was to ratify the election of local superiors.

When Nicolas received the news of his election, his response, doubtless, was to reflect on its implications in silence and prayer. But his heart was troubled as he wondered how could he accept this responsibility. A "corrector" should be exemplary in the observance of the Rule, whereas his health obliged him to restrict his practice of penance. The doctors had discouraged him from spending hours at night in prayer, as he would have liked. On 26 September, he took the stagecoach to Paris. His confreres at Nigeon were delighted to see him again. He was no longer the silent, dejected man who had left Paris two years earlier. Now, they thought, they would be able to count on him again; soon he would be drawing crowds by his preaching, resuming his Philosophy and Theology classes with his

accustomed zest, and above all the ministry of spiritual direction which was his forte. His post of responsibility at Peronne would probably be just a stepping stone in the career of a brilliant confrere.

When the time came, however, for the assembly to approve the election of local superiors, Nicolas asked to be given the floor. He begged his brothers not to confirm his election. His health, he said, militated against such an appointment. Would he not give scandal to the weak by being absent sometimes from community prayer, or by not exemplifying that active zeal which should inspire every Minim in his work for the conversion of sinners?

He was given a hearing. These were not the words of a man who shirked the cross of responsibility, but rather those of a lucid and courageous man, above all a free man. The chapter understood and the election was annulled.

His superiors then decided to send him to Rouen, the chief town of Normandy, where there had been a Minim presence since 1591. Their monastery was in a poor area and from there they carried out a variety of ministries: preaching, hearing confessions and, most recently, giving missions.³² A number of itinerant priests or "missionaries" would travel around an area, stopping for a while in each town or village, adapting their preaching to the simplest audiences, speaking the local dialect and composing simple hymns. The people would be grouped together for prayer or catechesis, according to their age or circumstances: men or women, married or widowed, young people and children. Each group was given special attention. They tried to involve the parish priests and curates as closely as possible in their efforts, but this did not always prove easy!

³² *A new form of apostolate initiated in France by Vincent de Paul, John Eudes, Jean-Jacques Olier and Francois Regis.*

Preaching, hearing confessions, giving missions, these, then, were the ministries open to Fr Barre when, at the age of 38, he went to join the community at Bourg l'Abbe Street, a monastery bordering the rich and working-class districts of the town. To the east, in the parishes of St Maclou, St Vivien and St Nicaise, lived the cotton workers, day-labourers and journeymen.³³ These included manual workers and unskilled labourers of all kinds, a seasonal and occasional workforce for the agriculture, weaving and pottery industries. As Nicolas tramped the narrow streets, past the houses with their doors ajar, he could often see the whole family at work. Children became involved at a young age, because work was paid by the piece. In families that were overwhelmed with debt and threatened with confiscation of goods, thousands of boys and girls were robbed of their childhood in order to ensure the family's survival.

Nicolas observed these children and young adolescents grown old before their time. During his earlier stay in Paris, he had shared the concern of Jean Jacques Olier and Adrien Bourdoise for children left to their own devices and the inevitable problems that followed. "What we need," wrote Bourdoise to Olier, "are teachers who will work at this task in a truly Christian spirit, and not like mercenaries who regard the profession as a demeaning occupation invented as a way of earning a living. To devote oneself to working for the formation of such teachers is surely a more meritorious and useful service to the Church than to spend one's life preaching from the most prestigious pulpits in the best cities of the kingdom. In my opinion, any priest who aspired to sanctity would become a school teacher and this would be his path to canonisation. I'm sure that, if St Paul and St Denis were alive today in France, they would come back as school teachers in preference to any other profession."

³³ *By contrast with the day labourers, journeymen or compagnons were members of a trade guild and had already completed an apprenticeship.*

It is indeed difficult for people to escape from abject poverty if the young are condemned to illiteracy, or for the youth of working class areas to find a meaning in life if deprived of human and spiritual education of a kind suited to their needs. There is little hope of liberating the masses from the oppression of fear - that oppressive fear engendered by superstition and magical practices - if their hearts and minds are not exposed to the liberating influence of the central truths of the Christian faith. These thoughts went round and round in Nicolas Barre's mind as he walked the streets of Rouen on his way to preach in the parishes of St Maclou or St Nicaise; they stayed with him too at times of prayer. He could not turn a blind eye to the crying needs of young people. Frequently an image would flash through his mind of Jesus with his apostles as he placed a little child among them, saying: "Let the children come to me. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who become like them. Woe to whoever scandalises them." Children were regarded as of no account, they were exploited, despised, yet Jesus had placed them in the centre. Furthermore, God, who is all powerful, takes delight in being among the little ones. And, in order to draw close once and for all to the least, the most vulnerable of all human beings, not only did He become man, but He became a little child.³⁴ This was surely an imperative reason for trying to remedy a situation that was bringing disaster on the common people and on the Church.

The authorities in Rouen were already aware of the need to take steps to remedy the problem. In 1654, the managers of the General Hospital had started up a class which catered for the children gathered there because they were orphaned, homeless, or on the streets. In 1657 the project had been put in the hands of Adrien Nyel, a zealous and enthusiastic layman from Laon. These children formed part of the great mass of poor people,

³⁴ *SR 1.2*

known as *pauvres valides* or "able-bodied poor", against whom European society had decided to protect itself while putting them to work at something useful. This was because the poor, of whom there was an ever increasing number, were often looked upon as dangerous or a nuisance. As vagrants and beggars, they were regarded as spreading heresy which constituted a threat, not only to the faith, but to national unity! It was feared too that they were carriers of contagious diseases. Moreover, all these unemployed were a blot on a country that claimed to be well governed and were a potential source of further revolts against the ruling power.

The solution lay in the General Hospital, a large building designed to receive, not so much the sick as the destitute, the trouble-makers, those seen as public nuisances. Other General Hospitals soon sprang up in all the cities of France and of other countries too. Already in Rouen, in 1645, girls from poor families had been shut up in one to rescue them from prostitution. In 1654, it was under-age boys who were regarded as a danger to the public. These "unmanageable children" were thrown in with beggars, delinquents, the mentally ill, the penniless, the prostitutes, in what became known as the "general institutionalisation" of the poor and vagrants. In this way the authorities hoped to round up those they considered useless, to get everyone working, and to put these poor unfortunates back on the straight and narrow.

The administrators of the General Hospital, and also Adrien Nyel, would sometimes frequent the Minim chapel. Nicolas Barre's talks to the Third Order of St Francis of Paola had quickly attracted a wider public. People liked the simplicity of what he had to say and each person seemed to find "manna for his own soul". In the congregation could be seen two members of the *Parlement* and their wives: Claude de Grainville and Pierre

Fauvel de Touvens, together with Michel de l'Espinay, the Louver brothers and Monsieur Maillefer, an adviser at the Audit Office. Some of these were members of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament.³⁵

If it was true that prominent people frequented the Minims' chapel, many very ordinary people came too to hear Nicolas Barre. They crowded in. This was because, unlike so many preachers, he was able to express matters of great spiritual importance in very simple language. He could communicate effectively with the least educated by using images and parables that made his style homely and colourful. "The beauty of the world consists of many different kinds of beauty," he would say. "If a tree wanted to glow with the brilliance of gold, or if gold took on the green of the leaves, the flowers or the fruits on the trees, the whole of nature would be in disorder! So it is with the spiritual life: you must not try to follow the path that is right for another or lay claim to the same graces. This would lead to the ruination of everything, including oneself. It can truly be said of every saint: "This person was unique."³⁶

Fr Barre was convinced that each person, every human life is called to bear its own special fruit. Whenever anyone went to him for advice, he would try to "discern this fruit, to give it its true value, and to lead it to full maturity".³⁷ It was probably this special gift of discernment that led so many to seek him out. And yet he could be firm, even harsh, in calling people to conversion. "The Kingdom of Heaven is God present within us, but God alone, Jesus alone. This is the precious jewel for which we must

³⁵ *Founded between 1627 and 1630, the Company of the Blessed Sacrament was made up of clerics and lay people whose aims were to give assistance to those in material need, to foster a spirituality centred on the Eucharist, and to live out their Christianity to the full. Its members observed a code of secrecy in the interests of greater effectiveness. The political rulers were uneasy about the influence of this relatively powerful group.*

³⁶ MAP 113

³⁷ MD 41

be prepared to sell everything, that is to forget ourselves completely. Our soul must be to God what the hand is to our body. This can only be achieved by humility and self-annihilation, by destroying in us what is not of God, so that God may take flesh again in us, so that Jesus may become incarnate in our very selves, in us, creatures." ³⁸

These strong words were music to the ears of Jeanne Dubois, wife of Pons Maillefer, reawakening as they did the fervour of her recent conversion. She was born in Reims in 1623 and had married an accountant from Rouen. A few years earlier she had been considered the most worldly lady in town. One would pick her out at the midday Mass at Notre Dame, where she outshone all her rivals by the splendour of her attire. She would already have modelled it on a tailor's dummy made specially to her size, with the face and hands copied from her own. She was a superb hostess, serving nothing but the best. For the most part, however, her interests stopped short at the stir she was causing. One evening, in 1655, a beggar knocked on the Maillefers' door asking for food and shelter for the night. The coachman begged the mistress of the house to let him sleep in the stable, but she refused: "Send the tramp away!" she ordered. The coachman, however, disobeyed and secretly let the poor fellow into the stable. In the morning, alas, the beggar was found dead in the straw! The news spread through the house like wildfire. Madame Maillefer was so angry that she dismissed the coachman and, throwing a sheet to her servants, ordered them to remove the body immediately.

Now, that evening, as she was sitting down to dinner, Madame Maillefer found the sheet, carefully folded, in her place at table. Had her orders not been obeyed then? All the servants vouched for the fact that the beggar had been buried in the sheet she had

given that morning. Nobody would have dared to admit publicly to having flouted Madame's orders. Yet, someone had wanted to teach her a lesson. She had refused the beggar food and shelter; he in turn had refused the winding-sheet she had so grudgingly given. The blow struck home. Jeanne Maillefer burst into tears and made up her mind there and then, at 32 years of age, to change her life completely. She did so with the same panache which had typified her life up to then. On the following Sunday, she appeared at High Mass wearing a dirty apron of coarse cloth over her finery. As she passed by, heads were turned, smiles exchanged, whispered jibes overheard: "She's gone mad! Religion has gone to her head!"

Distressed by the public outcry, Monsieur Maillefer forbade his wife to indulge in this kind of bizarre behaviour. She gave in, but banished all extravagance from her life and her home and resolved to dedicate her life to the service of the poor. When Nicolas Barre arrived in Rouen four years later, Jeanne Maillefer would often go to hear him in the Minim chapel. Soon she would become his ally in the establishment of the Charitable Schools.

Among those who also attended Fr Barre's sermons regularly was a young girl named Marguerite de Bonsons de Couronne. Her father was president of the *Parlement* of Normandy. While a student with the Jesuits in Paris he had had the opportunity of meeting Francis de Sales, the great advocate of the spirituality of the laity, who had twice told him: "You will have a large happy family." He did in fact have nine children, the youngest of whom was Marguerite. The eldest, a boy, entered the Jesuits to go on the missions, but he died while still very young, before he could fulfil his ambition. One after another the seven daughters

³⁸ RR 1

entered the Visitation Convent in Rouen.³⁹ Marguerite was sent to the school attached to the Visitation Convent where, as a child and later as an adolescent, she could see her sisters who were happy in their chosen life and she felt called to join them. This was too much for Monsieur de Couronne. Surely the youngest of his nine children would remain near her father and give him the joy of being a grandfather! When Marguerite was 15, he decided that the time had come to wean her from the influence of the convent and to put before her the pleasures of life in the world. In this way, he hoped, she would forget her ambition to enter the cloister. The young girl's life from then on became a whirlwind of parties, balls, travels, encounters, society drawing rooms and appointments with dressmakers and hairdressers, to the great joy of her father. This continual social whirl, however, could not completely stifle the inner voice, though Marguerite each time did her best to suppress the thought of religious life.

While still a student at the Visitation Convent, she had confided in Fr Barre that she felt called to the life there. He had not forgotten and had several times reminded her of it, to no avail. Marguerite remained in his thoughts and prayers. One day he came to hear of the many love letters and compliments she was receiving from her admirers. This gave him an idea for a daring way of getting through to her. He wrote her a note himself and had it delivered to her address. That evening, when she came home, Marguerite began to read the flattering missives from her admirers. What a shock was in store for her when her eyes fell on these brief words: "God is calling you! God desires you for Himself Take heed!" followed by reproaches for her resistance to grace.

Deeply affected, Marguerite hesitated for an instant and then tore up the letter. Life was too sweet to give up all it offered her. And yet, these words were to remain buried in her memory. One day, when she was travelling with her father, she stopped for Mass at the church of Notre Dame des Ardillers. During the consecration the inner voice became more insistent: "It's no use! You are wasting your time; you will become a nun; God wills it and you know that only too well." But she could not accept these words that clearly came from deep inside her. She left the church, more determined than ever to forget, to bury herself in all the pleasures that life could offer to the youngest daughter of the president of the *Parlement* of Normandy. No, she reasoned, she could not disappoint her father, she could not ask that of him.

Shortly afterwards, when Marguerite was 21, her father died suddenly. It was a terrible shock for the young woman. It had been to please her father that she had thrown herself into this worldly life. She went in tears to find Fr Barre and at last gave ear to the inner voice that she had so often stifled. She knew that God was calling her; she knew that she would never again be happy if she continued to refuse His call. She even wanted to go further: why enter the Visitation where the Rule was relatively relaxed? Perhaps she should rather enter a more austere order, to make reparation for her years of resistance? The Minim listened, but he refused to go along with her excess of zeal. This seeking out oneself what is hardest could be yet another subtle way of doing one's own will, under the very guise of doing God's. It was life in the nearby Visitation Convent that had first awakened in her the call of God; she should, then, follow the attractions of this grace and join her sisters there. "It is in the depths of your inner self," he said to her, "that you must die and become as nothing in order to make room for God. Rid yourself of that spirit of self-sufficiency, of independence and vanity that

³⁹ This new foundation was attracting many young women. It started out with a widow, a mother of four children and Francis de Sales who was her spiritual director. Their aim was to make contemplative life more accessible, to link it with the service of the poor, in simplicity and love.

is puffing you up, in order to empty yourself for God. Only then will you know the fulness of life and of happiness."

Marguerite vacillated no longer and, despite the opposition of her friends, entered the Visitation. When she had been in religious life for several years, her family offered her a pension from her father's estate⁴⁰ which would give her greater autonomy within the convent. But she refused it, on the advice once more of Fr Barre. He was to remain for her a clear-sighted, exacting and understanding spiritual director.

Edmond Servien de Montigny, another person whose life underwent a radical transformation, also came under the influence of Fr Barre. He was born in 1620 into a family who were deeply involved in politics. He himself took up a similar career and, in 1653, became secretary to the cabinet of Queen Anne of Austria. After two years, however, he gave up his post and went back to live with his family in Rouen. Ordained to the priesthood, he resolved to devote his life and his fortune to social work. He became one of those influential men in the town who were concerned about the material poverty and spiritual ignorance of the poorer classes.

Some initiatives had already been taken to help the poor. Adrien Nyel and Laurent de Bimorel had founded a few Little Schools for boys, but they were still not well organised; the Ursulines had arrived in Rouen in 1619, but their efforts for girls made little impact on the children in the poorest areas. In the parish of Saint Madou, the sisters of Notre Dame de Bernay had been gathering together the younger girls to teach them the catechism, as well as some reading, writing, needlework and embroidery. But all these different projects were meeting with seemingly insurmountable problems. The extreme poverty of working-class

families meant that they could not dispense with their children's meagre supplementary earnings and their daughters' help with running the home, in order to send them to school. Apart from Antoine de la Haye at Saint Amand, the parish priests were not supportive of such initiatives, not appreciating the need. The masters and mistresses, who were untrained, showed little dedication to the task and not much love for these difficult and unreliable children.

As Nicolas Barre made his way from parish to parish preaching Lenten sermons and missions, the plight of these young people preoccupied him constantly. Sometimes he succeeded in interesting young women in the work. He would suggest that they get groups of little girls together, at the time best suited to their parents, to teach them the catechism and the rudiments of reading. But a few months later, when the mission was over, the group would split up. Nicolas remained convinced that the lack of human and religious education available to young people, and especially to girls, lay behind many of the sufferings and aberrations to be found in family and social life. He did not share the commonly held view that a child is not a full human being in its own right. He knew from experience that children, from a very young age, are capable of being open to God, and that they must be given access to Him, rather than allowing them to fill their hearts with false doctrines and frivolities.

The task was not an easy one. The little girls of varying ages arrived at any hour of the day to avail of the teaching which these young women were offering purely out of good will. It required great patience, gentleness and firmness to discipline them. Whenever the opportunity arose, Nicolas would go along to observe, offering encouragement and advice. And so it was that, when he was invited to preach the mission at Sotteville, he

⁴⁰ *This was common at that time*

decided to enlist the services of some young women whose zeal for this task had come to his notice.

CHAPTER SIX

Sotteville-Rouen

(1662-1666)

Sotteville was four kilometres from Rouen. It was a mainly working-class town populated by small farmers and workers in the ceramics factories. A mission was due to take place there. Over the course of several weeks, everyone in turn would be invited to attend the sermons, go to confession, put their lives in order. Although the people of Sotteville had been baptised, they had almost no knowledge of their faith, having little understanding of Latin, the language used in church. They practised a form of practical Christianity that was, in part at least, a mixture of superstition and magic.

The mission coincided with a time of great social problems. The previous year's harvest had been bad and there were signs of famine already in 1662. In the outskirts of Rouen children had died of hunger. Each new day saw the unfortunate mothers worried about what they would give their children to eat. They themselves went out to look for work as washer-women and skivvies, hoping for some food in return.

Some of them sent their children out to beg in the rich quarters of the town, at times even encouraging them to "take", where possible, in order to survive. Nicolas liked preaching missions in the villages and in the poorer areas. He would often say to his friends: "We would only be pretending to love Jesus if we had no compassion for the crying needs of our neighbour. Yet so many of the poor, in addition to their material needs, are dying of spiritual hunger."⁴¹

⁴¹ MAP 208 -219

Nicolas Barre went from house to house, inviting men, women and children to the different mission events. He could hear and see how the families were suffering. He admired their ingenuity in finding the means of survival in the midst of such poverty, and wondered how he could awaken in their hearts a yearning for God comparable to the thirst they displayed for survival and bodily nourishment.

He prepared for the different gatherings by long periods of prayer, knowing that the Holy Spirit alone can touch people's hearts. Although they had been neglected for years by priests who had no training and were often more preoccupied with what was in it for themselves than with being of service, these poor people retained in the depths of their hearts a longing for God. And this was exactly where the preacher's words could reach them. "You seem to relate better to these poor people," said a friend to him one day, "than to those important gentlemen who come to the monastery to see you." "That," replied the Minim, "is because I don't have the same feeling for the upper classes and the naturally gifted as I have for those of humbler birth. I prefer to have little to do with those of high rank, lest they monopolise me and interfere with all that I receive from the ordinary people."⁴² According to Raffron, "he made no distinction between people, unless it was to prefer the poorest, the humblest, the most timid to all others".

In his mission for girls who, by order of the bishops, were not allowed to attend lessons with boys, Fr Barre enlisted the services of two young women: Françoise Duval and Marguerite Lestocq. Françoise came from Honfleur and was aged 18, while Marguerite was from Picardy and related to the Barre family. She was 20. For the best part of a year they held classes for younger girls in a little room in the town which was lent to them for the

⁴² Raffron, *op. cit.*

purpose. Some came in the mornings, some in the afternoon, depending on family circumstances. They named it the School of Jesus Humiliated.

Several times a week, Nicolas would come to visit them at work, taking a few minutes afterwards to go over with them their method of dealing with the children and with their mothers. "Try to remember," he would say, "that God wants to use you to teach these children the way to salvation. Abandon yourselves to the guidance of His Spirit. He gives His grace to the humble and puts His words on their lips. Ask Him to speak to the hearts of these children through you. Do not talk too much, but proceed rather by way of asking questions. Avoid all affectation and complicated language. You will do better to speak in a humble, gentle, homely way, so that even the youngest and least educated can understand you."⁴³

The parents of these little girls, and sometimes the grandparents acting in tandem with the parish priest, had already put dreadful ideas of mortal sin and of hell and damnation into the heads of these poor children. Fr Barre would say: 'Be very careful about introducing topics like mortal and venial sin! All you need to say is: 'God doesn't like that; it's bad. You must avoid it at any cost.' That is a sufficient deterrent for any good Christian who wants to love God wholeheartedly... Never forget that you would be wasting your time teaching them their prayers and preparing them for the sacraments, if you were not also teaching them to live out the Gospel, by loving God with all their heart and their neighbour as themselves. Put before them the eight Beatitudes, and teach them to speak and act like Christians, not according to the spirit of the world which says and loves in a way completely

⁴³ RC

opposite to God. Make sure, above all, that your own discourse is loving as well as informative." ⁴⁴

Francoise and Marguerite loved these exchanges with Fr Barre which made their task easier, but especially gave them a joyful sense of being apostles. They could then go back to the children with a listening ear and an open heart, as if God Himself were coming to them. "During the mission in Sotteville," Marguerite was later to record, "many notable conversions took place, including as many men as women and older girls, and many made a general confession. The Little Schools had been up and running for about a year and were greatly esteemed. I can vouch for the fact that almost the whole village was converted."

Nicolas drew no self-glorification from all this; only the great joy of knowing that the little group of apostolic women he had formed were not toiling in vain. He himself had given his whole life for the conversion of those who have gone astray. "Educating people in their faith and enabling them to meet God," he was to write, "is better than building churches for Him or decorating altars, because what you are doing is preparing spiritual dwellings and living temples for Him to dwell in." ⁴⁵

Fr Raffron, his biographer, gives us an eye-witness' account: "It was difficult, once one knew him well, not to respond to his gentle yet powerful persuasions, such was the selflessness and uprightness of all his schemes, the fervour of his words, the nobility of his sayings, the godliness and consolation of his counsel, and the consistent holiness of his life - like that of the saints through whom great graces, such as the conversion of sinners, have been received. Thus God worked extraordinary

⁴⁴ *idem, passim*

⁴⁵ *PM 13. It is interesting to note that, at the time when Barre was saying this, Rouen was a city of many magnificent churches, and is said, at one time, to have boasted a hundred spires. The splendour of those remain still witness to their former glory. (Translator)*

conversions through him among the most irreverent and irreligious sinners, libertines and others of the like who for years had been leading such dissolute lives that one would never have expected them to return to the paths of righteousness. I can give examples of those still living, no longer in the darkness of their stubborn ways but bathed in the pure and gentle light of the most perfect holiness. They never weary of acknowledging the great favours they have received from God through the dedication and tireless zeal of Fr Barre who, at the foot of the Cross, had learned how to win over the proudest and most hardened hearts. It was this influence that he exercised over sinners which gave rise to the proverbial saying often used of those regarded as incorrigible: 'You'll have to send him (her) to Fr Barre.'

Those who came in contact with him wondered at the power that shone through this frail, delicate man. Nobody would have believed that this affable, cheery soul continued to be tortured by doubts while at the same time strengthening others in their faith. To a few close friends only he revealed how God had helped him to accept the darkness without trying to force the dawn. "It is self-love," he would say to them, "that makes us want the certainty and brightness of the light, when all we need to do is to place ourselves before God without considering ourselves worthy of His favours. Then we should get on with the task of serving, forming and fostering the development of those whom He has entrusted to us in His love as His very own children, and forget about ourselves." ⁴⁶ Again in his letters he writes: "What opposition and contradictions we have to pass through before reaching union with Him; what anxieties we must endure before obtaining peace; what depths of darkness we must traverse before attaining the source of all light, of all brilliance, the depth of all honour and of all contentment and yet it is the only way!" ⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *PM 5*

⁴⁷ *Letter 2*

And again he writes: "How wonderful yet incomprehensible is this journey of the spiritual life on which we advance by patiently enduring our suffering even when we experience no sensible consolation. And all the while Heaven is quietly coming to our assistance, strengthening us in secret."⁴⁸

Ever since his time in Amiens, Nicolas had embarked on the long road of shedding his illusions about himself and about God. He was convinced that God alone is holy and can make us holy, and that we must not wait to attain holiness ourselves before leading others along that path.⁴⁹ He is aware that muddy streams can carry pure, limpid waters⁵⁰ and that, of himself, he is naked, poor and wretched, but enriched by the spiritual wealth of others.⁵¹ He had received so many lights and graces through those who had themselves come to him seeking advice in their search for God.

Nicolas' experience of life at Sotteville left a deep mark on him. It was to be a turning point in the lives of Marguerite and Françoise. Enthusiastically they agreed to work on a more permanent basis for the education of girls of poor families, this time in Rouen itself, in the area around the Minim monastery. Nicolas was sent as a delegate to the provincial council of his order. There he had an opportunity of telling his confreres about the new apostolic possibilities opened up by the mission at Sotteville thanks to the help of the two young women. He had also spoken several times to his near neighbours, Monsieur and Madame de Grainville, about the great good that had taken place in the district. Generously Madame de Grainville stepped forward with the offer of a room in her huge house where the

girls could be brought together. Large numbers came, because there was no charge and they were free to come at any hour. Soon there was not enough room and a second venue was opened in the Rue des Carmelites. Marguerite and Françoise were joined by Marie-Anne, Anne and Catherine. Several of them were members of the Confraternity of the Holy Infant Jesus which held its meetings at the Oratory church. Its members, consisting of priests, religious and laity, desired to dedicate themselves to the Word Incarnate and to cultivate a childlike spirit, following the invitation of Jesus who said: "Unless you change and become like little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Marguerite Lestocq and her sister Catherine had become members on 24 March 1664. This was how they came to meet Marie Deschamps and Anne Corneille and to tell them about Nicolas Barre and the work that had begun. For his part, Adrien Nyel continued to gather together a few male teachers for the boys and to give them the opportunity of being directed and advised by Fr Barre.

All this did not happen without giving rise to some disapproving voices. Teaching the catechism to these poor children, it was argued, could only do good by helping young people to know right from wrong and to avoid being led astray, but why waste time teaching girls to read and write? Bad enough doing this for boys, most of whom would not need it. It could turn their heads and encourage them to go and join the ranks of the good-for-nothing clergy or to buy up public offices which were already over-subscribed.

The master scribes were up in arms asking what was to become of their jobs if children were being taught to read and write free of charge. For the Little Schools were non fee-paying.

⁴⁸ Letter 54

⁴⁹ PM 8. The special effect achieved by the use of the one French word meaning 'holy' and 'saint' is lost in English and subsequently of Fr Barre's terse style.

⁵⁰ MD 7

⁵¹ MD 11

Nicolas Barre and Adrien Nyel had managed to raise interest in the project among members of the *Parlement*, thus obtaining a modest livelihood for the young teachers engaged in the venture. These teachers did not always persevere. After a time some of them preferred to take jobs that attracted greater esteem and better pay. The women on the other hand stayed on. They enjoyed, moreover, the backing of the parish priest of St Amand where they had begun to work. Antoine de la Haye was a zealous priest and a close friend of Nicolas Barre. His whole life's energy was devoted to the poor and to those who had strayed far from God.

Marguerite Lestocq herself leaves us this account of those early days: "There were four or five of us, sisters, living in total abandonment to God, not in community but dispersed. Two of us gave lessons at Rue des Carmelites and three at Madame de Grainville's house. Fr Barre came from time to time to give us talks, and drew up for us a rule of life. Our spiritual exercises were laid down. We would teach the elementary classes from 8.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. Then we took the children to Mass. There were 130 of them, and sometimes more. From noon to 2.00 p.m. we gave our attention to the older girls, teaching them reading and the catechism. Then we took the little ones again up to 5.00 p.m. After that we would go around to the homes, instructing the simple people in the principal mysteries of the faith and, especially, teaching them how to go to confession and Communion properly."

The five young women found their days very full. "I can assure you," Marguerite goes on, "that such was the ignorance in Rouen (at the time) that most people knew nothing about God," and she continues to relate one of the many incidents that remained imprinted on her memory. One day she asked an old lady of 80 whether she knew how many gods there were. The

poor woman, terrified by the question, replied that there were three... and passed out. When she came to her senses, she again asserted that there were three and that she was not to be taken for a dunce!

The lives of the poor were plagued by anxiety: worry about the immediate future, about having their belongings repossessed, fear too of the parish priest, and fear of God. In church, many preachers spent more time instilling the fear of hell than preaching the merciful love of God. The writings of Francis de Sales and of other authors who encouraged a spirituality of trust had had no impact at all on the approach of uneducated priests. On top of their lives of poverty, promiscuity and backbreaking work, the poor often felt that God condemned them. This was why Marguerite, Francoise, Anne-Marie, Catherine and their companions set so much store by the making of a general confession in which they could confess the outstanding faults of their past life, receive forgiveness for them, and once again feel at peace with God and with themselves. At the very beginning there were at least 400 such confessions, testifies Marguerite, prepared for by informal instruction. Nicolas was very insistent on this approach: "In order to win souls, you must treat them with great gentleness, never talking down to them, but acting with great humility and modesty, with kindness and a zeal inspired by love. People are more readily drawn to God by this kind of sensitivity than by the authority and rigour of laws. Besides, this is how the Holy Spirit acts in our hearts."⁵²

As they went from house to house, the young helpers often received confidences which revealed the sexual violence to which the mothers and daughters were subjected. "Gently and respectfully," writes Marguerite, "in all charity and simplicity, we advised them not to allow the boys and girls to sleep together, nor the children with their mothers and fathers. And, most

⁵² PM 19, 20

wonderful to behold, these poor mothers who had no beds for their children, would put them sleeping on straw on the floor or make beds out of chairs. Sometimes the children would ask to stay in school to sleep on the benches." The teachers approached some of their benefactors, asking for beds to be given to the very poorest.

On Sundays and holy days, they held catechism classes. So many came that they had to knock down walls to make rooms big enough for the women and girls who poured in. Nicolas was there, advising, encouraging, supporting and teaching. "You must not teach what you are not clear on yourselves, so as not to confuse their minds further. Teach them above all the prayer of the heart and to live in the presence of God." ⁵³

Never before in Rouen had such crowds gathered to hear young women, lay women, and outside the parish church at that! Some of the parish priests were becoming worried. Granted, the women had the backing of Fr Barre, but not all his confreres in his own monastery were supportive of what he was doing. The priest at St Amand, in whose parish these gatherings had begun, was tireless in praising the young women as being truly apostolic. But after all, thought some, they are only weak women. Everyone knows that their inferior nature is an indicator that their role is to remain under the protection of their father, their husband or the convent walls, instead of engaging in such enterprises. It is enough to upset both church and society. Moreover, it is the priest's job to teach catechism. With a certain amount of humour, Marguerite writes: "It so happened that our parish priests and clerics raised difficulties about our Sunday morning catechism classes, saying that we were doing their job and that they did not know where they stood. But we replied with such tact and respect, so deferentially and submissively - as

befits their status - that they gave their approval to our classes, granting us full permission to carry on teaching." She makes special reference to "the late parish priest of St Vivien, a very distinguished doctor and canon. He examined the first communicants, in the presence of several priests, questioning them even on theological issues (sic), twisting the questions in all sorts of ways. But he found them so well versed that he gave us full permission to work throughout his parish, with his blessing".

Some middle-class women of Rouen came forward with offers of time and money to support the new work. Madame Maillefer was planning another Little School for girls, at Darnetal, a small industrial town near Rouen. Little by little, the status of women was being changed. It was not the first time, however, that such initiatives had been started. This one seemed to be more fruitful than the previous ones. But, it remained to be seen whether it would last.

⁵³ RC 6

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rouen

(1666-1669)

For almost four years now the group of young women, led by Fr Barre, had been working unstintingly at running the Little Schools and Sunday schools. They were given financial help by such active and committed adults as Laurent de Bimorel, the administrator of the General Hospital, Monsieur and Madame de Grainville and Madame Maillefer. Some of the priests, including Antoine de la Haye, lent their full support, while Adrien Nyel, for his part, was working with great zeal for the Little Schools for boys. The women sometimes called themselves "Charitable Mistresses" (school teachers), because they taught without exacting any payment for their services. Their profession was a difficult one and held in low esteem. A meagre salary of 50 ecus was paid to them, enabling them just about to survive. Not all of them persevered. Those who did, Fr Barre noted, were the most selfless. The rest left. The bonds between the little group were growing stronger; they were united in one spirit. They came together for prayer, faith-sharing and formation; above all they worked as one in their mission. They had no fears for the future. God would look after them, if they gave themselves completely to His work. This was truly the mind of Fr Barre. When he was with them, however, another idea began to take shape. It matured slowly, but became ever clearer, badgering him even during prayer: the moment had come, he thought, to suggest that these "Charitable Mistresses" form a community. Not a religious community, but a lay one, united in their commitment to a common mission, inspired by the same spirit, and totally abandoned to the providence of God. A community which would reject the material security enjoyed by monasteries and convents in order to be free to reach out, wherever they were, to girls and women trapped in poverty, desertion, rejection and prostitution

and give them that human and religious formation which is their right.

Not one of the young women had ever entertained this idea. The first time it was first hinted at, they did not grasp what was being suggested. Let us listen again to Marguerite as she writes: "A short time after (the catechism examination in St Vivien's parish), Fr Barre told us that he had a strong urge and inspiration to form a community! This is how he put it as he sent us away: 'Go off, ' he said, 'and have dinner with your sisters who teach near the Carmelites; then invite them to come and dine with you at your school (known as the Penitents) and see whether you can live in harmony with one another.' We went out of obedience, but blindly, not understanding the mystery. After that Fr Barre put it to us: 'Would you like to form a community, on the strict understanding that you will not have any security for the future? You will only have enough to live on - and little enough of that. If you are ill, you will be sent to the public hospital. You must be prepared to die anywhere,⁵⁴ forsaken by everyone, and remain in this spirit (of abandonment) throughout your lives. This is the commitment you would be making, if you agree.' We replied with our whole hearts: 'Yes we want to abandon ourselves in complete selflessness to divine providence.' No sooner said than done. WE came together as a community."⁵⁵

Nicolas had not imposed anything. He had simply said: "See whether you can live in harmony with each other", and "Consider what you should do". Without beating around the bush the young women gave their consent. It was founded on their experience of the past months and they knew that they would not be disappointed.

⁵⁴ *Literaljy, 'in the corner of a ditch'.*

⁵⁵ *FM 4*

The little group set about becoming organised, with Françoise Duval as co-ordinator and Madame du Buc, a woman whose talents were well known, taking charge of the material and physical well-being of the little community. She was known as the superior. These early years, if not easy, were happy and radiant. "We lived", writes Marguerite, "in a blessed harmony of gentleness, humility and concern for each other, and in an atmosphere of recollection and silence."⁵⁶

In the same year, Aden Nyel attempted a similar course of action with the Masters in the boys' schools, but the bonds between them were not so strong and unity was more difficult to achieve. In 1666 also, the support group of influential men from the town who were members of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament in turn were dealt an unexpected blow. The Company was suppressed by order of the Monarch and dissolved. The King's authority brooked no opposition. In the eyes of Louis XIV the Church, divided though it was in France, remained a force to be kept in check. He was intent on preventing the interference of Rome in national affairs. Relations between Church and State - in particular with certain bishops, religious orders and lay groups - had been and would remain strained.

This was the climate which prevailed when Nicolas Barre was once again elected delegate to the provincial chapter at Nigeon. A few days before, the Minim community had come together to elect their superior. They did this every year and nobody was ever elected for two years in succession. On this occasion the voting went in favour of Fr Barre. His confreres admired his tireless zeal, but above all that capacity for being firm, demanding and kind, all at once, which made him such a reliable leader. If Nicolas were to protest his unworthiness for the task, it

could no longer be for the reasons adduced at the end of his stay in Amiens. When he returned from Nigeon, his appointment had been ratified.

A short time after this, there appeared in Rouen a manuscript copy of a text addressed to the authorities at Lyon and written by one Charles Demia. He was a priest who was responsible for all the schools in his diocese and very well known in the area. The document was read and passed around, evoking comment, astonishment, enthusiasm and outrage alike. But the situation outlined in these "Remonstrances to Heads of Commerce, Magistrates and leading citizens of the town of Lyon" was the very same as Nicolas Barre, Antoine de la Haye and the group of Charitable Mistresses had been trying to remedy for several years now in Rouen. If others too in the kingdom of France were aware of the sorry plight of young workers and were raising awareness of it, then there was every reason for hope.

Not without a certain irony, Charles Demia began his remonstrances by praising the administrators of the city of Lyon which had become rich and famous for its silk trade. Thanks to them, he writes, "the town has achieved a reputation for its efficiency in trade, the regularity and good order of its buildings, and the enforcement of regulations, right down to the condition of the paving stones and the state of the roads." However, this apparent wealth and good order, Demia countered, is "only a cover-up for a cesspool of evils".

"The children of the rich," Demia goes on, "have every opportunity for learning, but the poor, not having the means to bring up their children in this way, leave them in ignorance of their obligations. In their struggle merely to live, they forget to teach them to live as Christians. Having had an inadequate upbringing themselves, they cannot give what they have not

⁵⁶ ML 9

got... Thus one is saddened to note that the education of poor children is completely neglected, though there is no form of education more important in the life of the nation. They constitute the largest sector and it is as important, and even more so, to run free elementary schools for them as it is to run secondary schools for the children of the middle classes. The outcome of this negligence of youth is their total ignorance of God which, in turn, causes much harm to society and to individuals. For the young who lack an education readily slip into idleness, with the result that they end up aimlessly wandering the streets. You can see them gathered at street corners, engaging usually in lewd gossip. They become involved in unruly, dissolute behaviour, in gambling, blaspheming and quarrelling and give themselves over to drunkenness, sexual misconduct, petty theft and robbery. They end up being the most depraved and seditious members of society and would corrupt the others in no time, were it not for such disincentives as the whip, the Prince's galleys and the hangman's noose... If education is a crying need for boys of poor families, it is no less so for girls: being weaker by nature they have even more need of an education in virtue. This is clearly the source of so many domestic problems and jealousies, so many establishments of low virtue in the town, so many children left to grow up in the General Hospital, and so much immorality in public life."

Demia's account is as dramatic as the situation was real. He knows how to state his case. "There is only one way of stanching the flow of so many disorders and bringing the towns and provinces back to Christianity. That is by setting up Little Schools for the Christian education of poor children where, in addition to the fear of God and how to live an upright life, they can be taught reading, writing and arithmetic by teachers competent to teach them these things, thus equipping them to work in most crafts and professions." If they grasped the nettle of girls' education, he

argues, they "would then have less difficulty in purging the town of its houses of low repute, since idleness and poverty, the two causes of prostitution, would have disappeared, they would be providing a remedy for both opening the young girls' minds to higher things which, in turn, would induce them to work hard at earning their living and prepare them better for whatever employment might come their way... To offer the poor bread when they are hungry or clothes when they are cold is to offer them temporary remedies. But a good education is an enduring form of alms-giving, and the formation of young people's minds is a lasting advantage from which they will go on deriving fruit throughout their whole lives."

The appeal made by the young priest of 30 years of age was pressing and moving and contained also a good number of practical suggestions as to how the Little Schools could be organised to the benefit of poor children in need of education. Such was its impact that, a few years later, his text was to be printed for wider distribution.

But it was already being circulated. It was being talked about in Paris, and maybe even in Rheims where a young deacon named Nicolas Roland, whose family was connected with the Maillefers, was preparing for the priesthood. He was imbued with a great desire to serve the poor and immediately, after his ordination in 1668, went to Paris hoping to benefit from the teaching and pastoral experience of the friends of Monsieur Olier and Vincent de Paul. He then decided to extend his trip to take in a visit to Rouen. He had already had the opportunity of visiting the Maillefer household, before beginning his studies for the priesthood, when his father had had dealings with one of their family concerning the cloth trade. Antoine de la Haye was already known in Paris for his zeal and the whole apostolic movement that had begun in his parish centred on the Little

Schools. When Nicolas Roland arrived at la Haye's presbytery, he found it full of young boys from poor homes who were thinking of becoming priests and whom the parish priest had taken in so as to help them to study and acquire the rudiments of the Christian life. Nicolas Roland asked the parish priest if he could offer him "a corner of his house where he might stay and make a retreat", but the latter refused, because he had no room... or no time.

"I have nowhere to put you, Father, unless you take my own room."

"O no, Father! anywhere would do me, but not your own room!"

"There's a space under the stairs, if you would be happy with that..."

The new ordinand took him at his word and moved in under the stairs, sleeping there for six months. In no time at all he was in contact with Nicolas Barre and the group of Charitable Mistresses. Under their influence, the 26-year-old resolved to dedicate his life thereafter to caring for youth at risk, embracing poverty to the point of stripping himself of all his possessions. Nicolas Barre could detect in his namesake the makings of a saint and, in agreement with Antoine de la Haye, invited him back to Rouen in 1670 to give the Lenten sermons.

In 1668, an outbreak of the plague spread throughout all the provinces of the north of France. The town of Rouen was hit, as was Amiens. Since September 1667, Nicolas Barre's term of office as "corrector" was up and he was able to concentrate all his energies on his pastoral work. His regular meetings with the teachers and catechists were for him an oasis of joy in the midst of the suffering caused by seeing hundreds dying from the

epidemic. The young men being trained by Adrien Nyel had in their turn asked to form a group of "Brothers of the Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus", and Barre had agreed to guide them. He was becoming more and more convinced that only a solid grounding in the spiritual and apostolic life could sustain these young men and women in a way of life "founded on abandonment and total detachment".⁵⁷

Meanwhile, most of his time was taken up with spiritual direction, and above all with his ministry of prayer and welcome for those estranged from the faith. When people warned him to slow down, he would reply: "Look at how Jesus, the head of the Mystical Body himself, suffered a continuous inner torment, much worse than his physical sufferings, at the sight of the ravages of sin in us, his members. He carried the weight of the sins of others. In imitation of our Saviour, we must spare no effort to save our neighbour from his sins. To that end we must be prepared to give up our time, our interests, our possessions, our lives, like St Paul who said: 'I will gladly give everything I have, even my own self, for the salvation of souls.' (2 Cor. 12:15)"⁵⁸ He kept night vigils, he prayed, he fasted, in order to find the right words to soften the hardest hearts. And he succeeded, for he could see right into their hearts, touching from within their hidden sufferings. "In imitation of Jesus," he writes, "I see myself as a sinner in all sins of my brethren."⁵⁹

It was while he was accompanying several penitents on this difficult road to conversion that a message was brought to him. The plague had not spared his own mother; she was at death's door. His sisters wanted him to come and see her, to help her in her last days. Fr Antoine Ringaut, his superior, encouraged him

⁵⁷ *PM 4*

⁵⁸ *MAP 217 and 218*

⁵⁹ *RR 10*

to leave as soon as possible. Fr Barre hesitated, but his friends insisted. He went to his cell to pack. As he did, his thoughts turned to his mother, and then to the people he would have to leave in order to go to her. It would be such a comfort for him and for her if he went. But what would become of the poor sinners he had promised to help in the coming days, if he were to go and leave them? So ran his thoughts as he got ready. He paused for a moment, made a silent offering to God in his heart and then went straight to Fr Antoine's cell. "I am not going to Amiens," he said. Making for the chapel, he placed before God this extreme self-emptying of a heart overflowing with love for the mother he would never see again. There he remained in prayer until peace came to mingle with the sorrow in his heart.

September 1668 found him once again superior of the monastery for a year. During the chapter his election had been strongly opposed by Fr Antoine Masson in the presence of all the other priests. While he was well aware, argued the latter, of the fine qualities of the man elected by the confreres at Rouen, his heavy involvement in directing individuals and communities ought to have precluded the appointment. But now that the election had already taken place, he argued, it behoved the chapter not to confirm the appointment. The assembly of confreres, however, did not follow his lead, knowing as they did as they did Fr Barre's exceptional qualities and his remarkable intellect. Nobody could claim that his fame came in the way of his observance of the Minim Rule. On the contrary, it seemed that the more highly regarded he was, the more aware he became of his own weakness. Some from within the community as well as without were critical of him for supporting such untimely innovations as Sunday schools taught by women and this quite unnecessary move to educate young girls. This did not disturb Nicolas. "One must be tireless in doing good to all," he would say, "and expect to be treated badly in return! And as far

as insults are concerned, it is best to act as if caught in a downpour: run for cover, stand under a tree, say nothing and wait in silence for the storm to pass. Then one can come out and resume one's journey or one's work as if had happened."⁶⁰

It was certainly not these criticisms and objections leveled against the work of the Charitable Schools that disturbed him. For some time now, under the pretext of making sure that the work would have a secure future, criticisms were being voiced insinuating that too much was being asked of these men and women. It was all very well living without security or provision for the future, the argument ran, but that could not last. If, on the other hand, some wealthy individuals were to guarantee the continuity of the schools out of their own pockets, that would increase the numbers and zeal of the Masters and Mistresses. Moreover, several of these gentlemen would be prepared to do so. Nicolas was not of this persuasion: guarantees and security would be the ruination of the work. He had already discussed the matter several times with the first women who had thrown themselves heart and soul into the venture. They were of the same mind. Anyone joining their little group - now approaching 30 in number - would have to accept these conditions. To ensure that they were fully aware of them, they drew up a text to be signed by each new member on the day she first joined the community. It read:

Jesus

The spirit of the Institute of the sister Mistresses of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus is to teach their neighbour of their own sex the basic principles of Christian doctrine. They do this in an apostolic manner, and in that same spirit of selflessness which impelled the apostles to spread the message of salvation to the whole world. It is essential, then, that anyone wishing

⁶⁰ MAP 35

to be admitted should be well informed. They must realise that a house of the Institute is not like that of other institutes, a fixed and permanent establishment. Those accepted into it are given no assurance of being looked after there for the rest of their lives, or even longer. In fact they are given so little security that the superiors do not promise to give them anything at all in the event of their dismissal from the Institute.

It is the intention of their founder, Reverend Fr Barre, to make them so dependent on the wise, loving and all powerful providence of God, that they shall rely totally, continually and definitively on it alone for their temporal support and maintenance. He insisted on this, out of a firm conviction that, if their services for God and their beloved neighbour were given freely and out of pure love, their recompense would be beyond those which human power alone can bestow. They would certainly be worthy to receive the great and admirable rewards which God has promised, in this life and the next, to those who seek only His Kingdom.

From the very beginning, all who come shall be aware of the content of this article which is so essential to the spirit of the Institute, so that there shall be no grounds for complaint if later on they should be dismissed for their repeated failures or infidelities. They must be fully aware that they are being accepted only under the following conditions:

- 1) that they work with might and main for their own perfection by serving God and their neighbour faithfully;*
- 2) that they expect no other temporal remuneration for the service they have rendered while in the Institute, regardless of how long or significant that service may have been;*
- 3) that, just as they shall be free to leave the Institute at any time, should they so wish, so the superiors shall have the right to send them away without recompense, and even after several years of service to*

the Institute, should they consider them unworthy or unfit for the task entrusted to them.

The text is clear. For the expanding group, now being scattered throughout the suburbs and the surrounding countryside, it set out the essential points of the commitment uniting them. It ends:

We, the undersigned, having read and re-read what is written above, have accepted these conditions and acknowledge that we have entered the community of the Charitable Schools only on the above conditions.⁶¹

There follow 30 signatures, more or less adroitly penned; the document left no room for ambiguity, but that was not to be the end of the story!

⁶¹ FS

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rouen – Paris - Rouen (1670-1675)

When Nicolas Roland returned to Rouen in 1670 to preach the Lenten mission, he spent many hours talking to Nicolas Barre, Antoine de la Haye and all those who were working with them in the education of the poor. He often had talks with the Minim, and he had the opportunity too of hearing the criticisms of his opponents. One must not be surprised at that, Barre used to say, "The spirit of our little group of Charitable Mistresses is rarer and more exceptional than one would think. Very few people really possess it fully and many are critical of it. It is founded on abandonment and total detachment." ⁶²

Sometimes the lay administrators, who were not themselves members of the young Institute but had undertaken to support it, over-stepped their authority: their advice, prompted by purely human wisdom - a perfectly understandable trait in managers - was at times in danger of ruining its spirit. In vain Nicolas kept on repeating: "The Institute is a supernatural project; it must not be made to depend, in the way that ordinary projects do, on worldly wisdom and human prudence." ⁶³ His view was not always heeded. Their aim was to set up the enterprise on solid material foundations and to protect it from economic difficulties in the future. Servien de Montigny, Monsieur de Grainville and others declared themselves willing to invest capital from their private means in order to ensure a fixed income for the schools. Sometimes individuals among the Charitable Mistresses agreed with them, either out of anxiety about the future of the work or because, as time progressed, they were finding this practice of living in abandonment too demanding. One or two even spoke to

their confessors who in turn put their case to the administrators. Nicolas Barre came to hear of it and it made him sad. The community was expanding and some of them had begun to move away, in twos and threes, into the surrounding countryside. But all that would be of little use, if the original spirit were to be lost.

He discussed the problem with Nicolas Roland who was working steadily on his plan to start the same work in Rheims. Barre repeated insistently: "You must not accept anyone, as manager, lady associate or sister Mistress, in any of the communities, if they do not possess a spirit of deep faith, great zeal for the salvation of souls, complete selflessness and total dependence on divine providence. To neglect this spirit would mean neglecting the Holy Spirit! That must never happen, no matter what advantages these people may have to offer or promise in terms of material support or this meant the loss of one of the kingpins of the work for the personal competence." ⁶⁴

In later years Marguerite Lestocq was to record some of the difficulties they experienced at this period in preserving the original inspiration: "After a number of years serious problems occurred, arising sometimes because of the parish priests and other churchmen, sometimes because of the religious or lay people, all of whom sorely tried the patience of Fr Barre causing him much suffering. He sweated and toiled and sacrificed himself to get the Institute established. He wore himself out and ruined his health giving us saintly and totally supernatural talks, feeding our hearts and minds with food for our own salvation and that of our neighbour. I cannot begin to describe the pains taken by our holy founder." ⁶⁵

⁶² FM 3,4

⁶³ FM 8

⁶⁴ SA 8

⁶⁵ ML 10

In order to set up a similar apostolate at Rheims, Roland decided that he needed a woman from among the pioneers at Rouen who was imbued with its spirit. When he expressed this wish, both Antoine de la Haye and Nicolas Barre thought of Francoise Duval. At 26 she had a great love for the poor and immense zeal for the apostolate. Francoise accepted the challenge and Anne Le Coeur was sent with her. Roland set off for Rheims full of hope; he would notify them as soon as he had found a suitable house. A short time after this, however, the death occurred of his friend and collaborator, the tirelessly zealous priest, Antoine de la Haye, to the great grief of his friends and the ordinary people. Large crowds of poor people were seen filing past his remains in tears. For Fr Barre, this meant the loss of one of the kingpins of the work for the Little Schools and one of the chief guardians of its apostolic spirit. From now on he would have to stand alone against its many enemies.

The news reached Nicolas Roland in Rheims. He was grief stricken. Since his return he had devoted all his attention to the orphans, especially those being cared for in the home of Madame Varlet. This led to tensions between him and the civic authorities. They complained that he was doing too much for poor children, incurring unnecessary expenses on their behalf, as well as relying too much on divine providence. But Roland was not to be deterred, confirmed as he was in his resolve by the experience of Rouen, inspired by the memory of his friend, Antoine, and inwardly strengthened by the counsel of Fr Barre.

When he did not receive the funding he had requested from the General Hospital on the grounds that he was looking after the girl orphans in their stead, he had to use his own resources to buy the house in Rue Barbatre, on 22 December, in order to set up a Little School there. The training of the young women volunteering for this work was to be confided to the "Sisters of

the Infant Jesus" or "the Sisters of Providence" - the name by which they were now known in Rouen.⁶⁶

On 27 December; Francoise Duval and Anne Le Coeur left Rouen for Rheims. The hearts of their companions were torn: two of their best-loved colleagues were going off into the unknown, and yet, there was every reason to hope that, with M. Roland, they would be able to bring about the same wonders as in Rouen.

Nicolas Barre, who meanwhile had again been appointed superior of the Minim monastery in succession to Fr Antoine Granjon, saw them off with joy in his heart. He must certainly have taken the time to speak at length to the young women. "Never forget," he would say, "that the Charitable Schools exist only for Jesus, and for the ends for which He came on earth. Follow Him in all His ways; in all your endeavours act as He would have done: in a spirit of poverty, humility and lowliness of life. Never stray far from the crib of Jesus. You must retain simplicity too in everything, even down to the decoration of your chapel... "⁶⁷ Truly everything about this Institute seemed to run counter to the spirit of the time: even the chapels were to avoid that highly ornamented Baroque style which was taking over church buildings at that period, in the name of giving glory to God though more probably to the glory of the artists and benefactors!

What could have been more meaningful for Francoise and Anne than to set out at Christmas time! Their whole life derived its meaning from the daily living out of the Christmas mystery. Soon others would come to join them, from Champagne and from

⁶⁶ "Filles de l'Enfant Jesus." The word "Filles", as it was used at that period and in that context, did not imply religious sister but rather an unmarried woman dedicated to the apostolic life, usually in schools or hospitals.

⁶⁷ FM 11

Normandy: the Institute was growing and putting down roots. The two young women remained in contact with the community in Rouen. Sometimes they received messages of encouragement from Fr Barre. Roland had complete faith in the Minim. As a counsellor he had a way of inspiring, stimulating and encouraging with kindness, gentleness and patience. Then, when he had discerned the path along which God was calling the individual, he would urge her, with equal love and firmness, to launch forth with courage and energy, no matter what difficulties she might experience. Then, when the person was strong enough to withstand trials, he would go so far as to neglect her or even ignore her for a time, so that she would learn to trust in Jesus alone.⁶⁸ He knew that Roland, Francoise and Anne were of this calibre and this is how he dealt with them.

During the course of the following summer the Minim monastery at Bourg l'Abbe Street suffered a tragic bereavement. In the course of a bathing outing with his young student confreres, Fr Etienne Molien, their teacher, lost his life tragically while trying to save two of them from drowning. In addition to the great grief felt by all at the death of a young priest, the sad loss of Fr Molien was a severe blow for Fr Barre. Etienne had not only been a member of his community, but his friend and confidant as well. Like Fr Barre, he taught Theology. Etienne also had experienced hours of intense doubt, the feeling of being abandoned by all, even by God Himself. They had corresponded while Etienne had been away from Rouen as a student. It was most probably to Etienne that he penned these lines: "Whenever I receive a letter from you - be it but three words - I always experience an upsurge of joy and gratitude to God for the outstanding graces and favours He has bestowed on me through this precious other self, my dearly beloved Etienne. In him, as in another me, I have

been able to pour out freely the deepest feelings of my poor heart and my faltering love for God."⁶⁹

First Antoine, now Etienne: his best friends were leaving him. The work he had begun continued to meet with both open and secret opposition. The political situation in France remained tense: the Protestants were again being persecuted, and it was rumoured that the war-mongering Louis XIV would soon take up arms again. After all the years of famine and plague, the people could now expect further rises in taxes to meet the cost, not only of the opulence of Versailles, but of war and its ravages. Many people were extremely worried. Nicolas was aware of all this, but he strove to maintain a calm which seemed imperturbable. Whenever bad news reached him, he greeted it without a word of protest or dismay, content simply to pray, and to assert that God's mercy can make all things, even the most hopeless, come right and turn them to our good and His own greater glory.⁷⁰ Even amid the darkest night of the soul and of the mind, he held on to his conviction that there is no difficulty or trial so great that it cannot in time become our way to salvation. Even when everyone was working against the setting up of the Institute, he kept on repeating that all was well and that events must always take their course."⁷¹

One day Nicolas was called to a person needing help, most probably one of those poor mothers of families whom the members of the community used to visit. He went round to see her, accompanied by some of the men associated with the mission. Suddenly a man appeared, in a highly emotional state. Nicolas had no idea who he was and we do not know whether

⁶⁹ *Letter 18*

⁷⁰ *Raffron, op. cit*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

this event had anything to do with the calumnies that were already in circulation in the town about him. Whatever the reason, the man became angry and, in a fit of rage, began to hurl abuse at the Minim in front of the bystanders who could not make out what was happening. He insulted him, struck him and knocked him over, uttering all sorts of horrible threats. However, past sufferings - interior and exterior - had forged in Nicolas the extraordinary strength of the gentle. In front of the man, who glared at him, first with scorn then with disbelief, he knelt down. Although innocent of all the accusations levelled against him, he acknowledged his guilt, begged for forgiveness and declared his willingness to do whatever was expected of him. The man went away, completely disarmed and dumbfounded. Nicolas got up. People gathered round him, some of them expressing amazement that he had allowed himself to be trampled on publicly like this. Was this not a sign of weakness in the face of false and unjust accusations? No, not weakness, Nicolas insisted. If that is how you react, it is because you do not appreciate the strength of soul or depth of faith required in order to maintain one's inner calm in the face of such unexpected attacks.

Next day the man, who by now had calmed down, appeared at the monastery door. Moved by the priest's patience and humility he had come to ask him to forgive and to forget the insults he had hurled and to pray for him. Nicolas willingly granted his request; he even went so far as to take an interest in the poor fellow's life and treated him with the greatest kindness.

In September 1672 Nicolas once again took the stagecoach to Paris for the provincial chapter. He was not to know it then, but he was about to be invited to assume another responsibility: the chapter would elect him provincial "definitior", that is the councillor to the provincial with responsibility for all the

monasteries in Paris and the surrounding areas. No doubt some elected him because they had confidence in his remarkable qualities. Others, perhaps, because they secretly wanted him away from Rouen and more taken up with the specific works of the order. At the same time, he was asked to be in charge of the community house at Nigeon where the novitiate was. He would then have to leave Rouen, since, through the vote of his confreres, that was what God was asking of him. What was to become of the work he had begun? God would look after it, the Minim reflected, since it was His very own.

Meanwhile, as "definitior", Nicolas remained in contact with his brothers in Rouen, visiting them several times a year. On the occasion of one of these visits he arrived in a town late one evening and decided, along with the Fathers who accompanied him, to spend the night there. The coach always stopped at the same hotel where the travellers shared a few large rooms. There was plenty of accommodation, and the Minims had the money with them to pay for it. The other travellers, however, made it quite clear that they had no intention of spending the night in the company of these poor religious. So they were shown the door, regardless of the dark night or the pouring rain. For hours they searched the town in vain for another room and eventually were obliged to seek shelter in the corner of a stable. Not a word of complaint escaped Nicolas' lips. On the contrary, he joked about it and seemed to enjoy the adventure. After all, he had warned the first members of the Institute that they should be ready to die by the roadside, and he himself had the warmth of a stable and was not even dying! Moreover he was in good company, since the parents of Jesus had been snubbed in the same way!

Fr Barre's reputation had preceded him to Paris. In between visiting his confreres and the different Minim houses of the province he gave talks to members of the Third Order and

preached in the parishes and monasteries. He did not spare himself. His jovial exterior concealed a tough inner life of prayer and penance. He was taking less sleep and for some time now had resumed the practice of private penance which meant so much to this son of St Francis of Paola. He remained in contact too with Nicolas Roland and the new beginnings at Rouen. He was aware that Françoise and Anne not only taught children now, but were drawing to the Rue Barbatre older girls and women whose knowledge of the faith had been totally neglected. They taught them with great patience, it was said, and these women, happy to be better informed, turned from their old ways and began to lead an altogether more Christian life. He would also have learned that Canon Roland, while being criticised by some groups in the town, was highly regarded by others who admired his faith and his zeal. What he most likely did not yet know was that a young seminarian of 21 had just come to the Canon in search of a spiritual director. This young clerical student, who was a cousin of the Maillefers, had recently lost his father, and his mother was only a year dead. He thus found himself responsible for his six brothers and sisters. Faced with these family duties, the young man was worried about whether he should give up his studies for the priesthood. Nicolas Roland, however, encouraged him to persevere: nothing, he counselled, must be allowed to deflect him from answering God's call. The name of the young man seeking direction was Jean-Baptiste de la Salle.

In September 1673 Nicolas Barre left Nigeon for the Place Royale in Paris where it was decided to place him again as preacher and confessor. The monastery was in need of reform. In Fr Mersenne's time it had become a centre for the greatest scholars and academics of the century and drew a certain amount of pride from this. Since the scholar's death in 1648 it had been somewhat confused about its role. Some of the

members, however, were aware that the theological and pastoral reforms of Berulle, Olier or of Vincent de Paul were nearer to the spirit of Francis of Paola than the path recently followed by some of their confreres and they were eager to enter into this movement for renewal.

At Place Royale there was a Fr Francois Giry who, on 19 November 1652, had had to run away from home in order to join the Minims, against the wishes of his family. A friendship soon developed between Nicolas and Francois who greatly admired the older man. Fr Barre greatly impressed his confreres whom he had left 15 years earlier for Amiens.

His stay at Place Royale was to be short. A year later, on 27 September 1674, he was relieved of his duties as provincial "definitior": Amiens and Rouen, the two communities that knew him best, had both elected him as their superior. The chapter decided to accede to the request of the monastery in Normandy and he was again sent to Rouen. He was welcomed with open arms there by all those who, for two years, had missed his direction. On his arrival he found that the number of Charitable Mistresses had increased and the schools had multiplied. But, by their very generosity, the lay managers were still sometimes an obstacle to that spirit of complete selflessness and pure love which was his dream for the Masters and Mistresses. The mission needed to be consolidated, but this would only happen by entering ever more deeply, both spiritually and materially, into abandonment and humility. Of this he was convinced.

This may have been the year when an event took place, which is recorded by his two biographers, involving a request by a princess. This date seems likely, as his two years in Paris had again made him known for his special gift of discernment and his deep understanding of the Christian life. His reputation spread

throughout the salons⁷² of the wealthy where literary discussion and local tittle-tattle often gave way to theological debate. Sometimes the lay people taking part developed a real interest in the mystical life, but this was not always the case. These high-society gatherings were often the scene of idle curiosity, petty rivalries and frivolity of all kinds.

One day Fr Barre was told that a lady who was a princess and connected with the royal family wanted to meet him. We may conjecture that it was Marie de Lorraine, Duchess of Guise, or Elizabeth d'Orleans. The Minim was far from pleased at the news. He feared, not without some justification, that she might be inviting him out of curiosity and felt that it could serve no good purpose for him, the lady or her entourage. Besides, it went against his preference for the poor; he also suspected that his confreres, and even his superiors, were flattered by this request to their illustrious companion.

None of this was in harmony with the spirit of the Minim order. When Francis of Paola had gone to the King of Naples, it had been out of obedience and, far from flattering him, he had shown strong disapproval of his politics; when he had gone to see Louis XI of France, it was at the Pope's behest and he had not bowed to the latter's request for a miraculous cure. Like a true son of Francis of Paola, Fr Barre begged his superiors to excuse him from seeing her. The princess may have been one of the benefactresses of the monastery of Place Royale who must not be offended by a refusal. Whoever she was, she despatched her coachman so as to make the two-day journey easier for him. "And his superiors", records Raffron, "not wanting to upset a person of her status", asked the religious to go. Without more

ado, he complied. At the palace they were expecting to hear a man who would give extraordinary talks, transporting them to the loftiest heights and subtlest depths of mysticism, a speaker who would address them in radical, impassioned language, who would inflame some and displease others, giving rise to magnificent debates. But the Minim came across as full of modesty, never initiating an exchange, but holding back until questioned. The effect of this was to arouse even more interest among the many guests who had gathered for the event. When the moment came for open discussion, the princess asked some carefully thought out questions to which she had long been seeking answers. Nicolas' replies were brief and to the point, understated, both in style and content.

Predictably, this did not please everyone. They were expecting a studied discourse, emphatic in style, with seductive arguments. Instead they found him cold; some of them scoffed at his arguments, while others made remarks about what they considered to be his overrated reputation. However, the accuracy with which he answered and the great simplicity of his bearing touched the princess' heart. She recognised in him a man of God and said as much. Some religious and priests among her followers, seeing that she paid great heed to these exchanges and was prolonging them, asked to join in. They too had heard widespread reports of the Minim and wanted to see for themselves. They had prepared some difficult questions about the mystical life and the way in which God acts in different ways through the twists and turns of people's lives. They listened to his views, thought up their objections and tried to side-track him into hair-splitting subtleties. Wisely and cleverly, Fr Barre spied the traps being sprung for him and, without allowing himself to fall victim to their verbal ambushes, replied with confidence, gradually winning their grudging admiration.

⁷² *The salons of the period, which became famous as centres of serious literary and cultural debate, were hosted by some of the rich and learned women of the day. (Translator)*

Among those questioning him was a young theologian who had little or no experience of life but was bristling with book-learning. He listened scornfully to what Fr Barre had to say, totally missing the depth of the priest's wisdom in his intellectual approach to religion. In an attempt to show off his own superior knowledge, he seized an opportunity to contest one of the Minim's replies. He accused him of altering a text of Aquinas which Nicolas had used in one of his arguments, and publicly treated him as if he knew nothing. In a few words Nicolas refuted the allegations of the young theologian, without showing impatience. But the latter held to his point. The Minim was accustomed to meeting accusations, insults and contradictions with silence. On this occasion, however, it was not he himself who was under attack but the truth concerning the works of Thomas Aquinas. He had somebody fetch a copy of the *Summa Theologiae* and asked for the passage in question to be read. To the great embarrassment of his opponent, they heard read out, not only in the same order but almost word for word, the points touched on by the Minim. The princess drew the session to a close with a smile, urging the young theologian to become a regular and docile disciple at the school of Fr Barre!

Some days later, when Nicolas was setting out again for his monastery, he gave thanks to God who had been pleased to make use of him, against his will, in order to touch the heart of the noble lady. She, in turn, realised that her invitation, motivated as it was at the time by curiosity and scepticism as to the soundness of the Minim's theology, had opened for her spiritual horizons hitherto unsuspected which would beckon her onwards ever after. "I refused to believe," she confesses, "what I had been told about your wisdom. I had to witness it for myself; but I now realise that what I was told was in fact less than half the truth."⁷³ Francis of Paola had gone to visit the King of France

against his will and this had proved providential for the spread of the Minim order. If the princess, of whom both Fr Raffron and Fr Thuillier speak, was in fact Marie de Lorraine, the Duchess of Guise, we may have here a parallel case. Nicolas went to visit her against his will, yet this meeting was to play a providential role in the growth of the Institute of the Charitable Mistresses.

⁷³ Thuillier, *op. cit*

CHAPTER NINE
ROUEN—PARIS
(1675-1677)

September 1674 found Barre again in Rouen, but only for a year. His term as superior having expired, he was again sent to Paris, to the monastery of Place Royale. Here, as in Rouen, he became renowned as confessor, preacher and spiritual director. People went out of their way to seek his advice, as we see from a letter addressed to someone in Rouen by Henri Marie Bourdon, the Archdeacon of Evreux. Comparing the zeal and role of the parish clergy with the influence of the religious, he writes: "What an impact Fr Barre has had in Rouen! Simple religious, as I myself have witnessed, are known far and wide in distant provinces, in places where not even one of the secular priests of Rouen is known by name! Many parish priests in Rouen have sought advice of Fr Barre, but I have never known of a single religious who consulted these clergy."⁷⁴ Such comparisons were odious to Nicolas who was well aware of the influence for good exercised by Antoine de la Haye and many other priests both in Paris and Rouen. If anyone spoke like this he would reply: "This kind of talk is divisive. The love of Jesus, by contrast, is a unifying force. It is not right to have respect for the parish clergy and despise the religious, or to pay honour to the religious orders and treat the secular clergy with indifference. We must be catholic, united in Jesus with all who, like us, belong to him."⁷⁵

It was most likely his glowing reputation which prompted his superiors to recall him again to Paris. After his death Fr Thuillier was to record, with the enthusiasm of a friend: "Where the spiritual and mystical life is concerned, it is quite clear that Fr

Barre was unequalled in this century. He had reached the highest limits of this science. There are many people who, without a thought for what others may think of them, publicly proclaim that, under God, they owe to Fr Barre's zeal the conversion of their hitherto hardened hearts."

Meanwhile, this growing reputation, this gift of being able to convert and transform lives that up to then had been superficial, dishonest, proud and dissolute even, together with the hours he spent teaching the Mistresses of the Charitable Schools, continued to fan the flames of criticism, jealousy, and even at times suspicion. Letters were sent to his superiors about him; people went to them, impugning his integrity. They even appealed to certain bishops or superiors of religious orders. He was denounced as an "unprincipled and dissolute man."

They went even further, accusing him of misleading simple people, of using magic and spells to pry into their innermost thoughts and influence their behaviour. This was a serious accusation at a time when, not long before, such denunciation might, after very thorough investigations, have incurred the death penalty. Things had only very recently changed, but ecclesiastical courts still continued to summon any priests suspected of such practices to appear before them. If they were found guilty, they were suspended from the exercise of their ministry. Nicolas Barre was summoned several times before ecclesiastical judges to answer accusations brought against him. Calmly he replied: "Leave them alone. Don't try to silence my slanderers! God wants me to be tried like this; they can't take it too far. You will see! God, in His mercy will make all things work together for our good and His own greater glory."⁷⁶ And so it was. The wisdom, humility and prudent replies of the Minim to his judges soon put an end to the inquiry. What is more, the

⁷⁴ *Positio 35*

⁷⁵ *MAP 144*

⁷⁶ *Raffron, op. cit*

members of the tribunal would invariably encourage him to carry on his ministry, and even to extend it.

Nicolas Barre's relationship with God must have been very deep for him to show such peace and strength in the face of these trials! It is remarkable that he should have endured so many inner sufferings - dark night, doubt, desolation - and so many external trials - suspicion, slander without - his peace of soul. For his faith, far from sparing him suffering, seemed, on the contrary, to make him even more sensitive to certain injustices. But, as he tells us in the outpourings of his Spiritual Canticle, he consented to all of this "in gentle freedom". Thus, he could truly say of his apparently dark night of suffering:

The soul, which is totally devoid of self, endures the purification permitted by God. Yet not like an inert body from which the life and spirit have gone forth, nor like a rock or a piece of crystal, transfused for an instant by the brightness of a flame, yet possessing of itself no principle of life, no power to participate in its own transformation. The suffering of the soul conceals within itself the seed of life." ⁷⁷

For Fr Barre, sufferings, humiliations, scorn and contradictions can all become means of growth in love. Little by little they transform us into God without our knowing, for, if we did, we would still be focused on ourselves rather than on God. ⁷⁸

During his year in Rouen he had used the opportunity to consolidate the work of the Little Schools. The previous two years of his absence had highlighted the difficulty of retaining the original inspiration in all its vigour. The need to provide training, both spiritual and professional, for the young women joining the

group of Charitable Mistresses was proving imperative. A "seminary" or house of formation was required, where these young people could be given some professional training for their role as teachers. First they would observe for a week, ⁷⁹ then they themselves would teach for a year under supervision, before being sent out into the country areas and to other towns. ⁸⁰ The aim was not to give them a theoretical formation, but to help them to reflect in an on-going way on what they were doing, and above all on the problems and difficulties they would encounter in carrying out their mission. As he watched with insight the development of each one, Nicolas noticed that the teachers who were sent straightaway into class made much greater progress than if they spent a long time first under instruction before beginning to teach religion and other subjects. The need to get down to practical teaching, he noted, makes one resourceful and open to finding appropriate strategies and "is an effective way of learning to be a teacher; difficulties and failures deepen our understanding. Moreover, the best way to learn is to teach!" ⁸¹

Once engaged on this path, the Mistresses continued their training on the human, spiritual and professional planes, so as to be better equipped for their task. Sometimes this simply meant daily practice in reading and writing in which they themselves were far from adept, although they were teaching literacy skills. Sometimes the need was to deepen their own faith, so as to be better able to share it with others, or in order to have a better grasp of the daily demands of the Christian life and so give guidance to troubled souls.

⁷⁷ *Canticle 28*

⁷⁸ *Letter 37*

⁷⁹ *SR 10:4*

⁸⁰ *SR 14:20*

⁸¹ *MIS 2*

Nicolas was there throughout it all, supporting, encouraging, inspiring, offering up his prayers and sacrifices, and taking little account of his health which sometimes gave cause for anxiety. He may have had a premonition that he would never again come back to live in Rouen when he left for Paris, in October 1675, to teach Theology once more. Perhaps it was in these circumstances that he admitted to a friend that there are times when one must opt to pray "Thy will be done" rather than "Thy kingdom come". He knew that the work he was leaving was as fragile as it was dynamic and he must have worried as to whether it would last. It was totally apostolic, its sole aim to give to the poor their dignity as children of God and to open their hearts to his love; in this it was a living expression of "Thy kingdom come". The seed had died in Paris; it was buried at Amiens; now Nicolas Barre had seen that seed bearing fruit in Rouen. He sensed that the hour had now come for him to leave for Paris for the last time: "Thy will be done..."

Back in Paris, in the monastery of Place Royale, he again found himself living in the quarter known as the Marais, with its sumptuous residences and vast gardens. Nearby were the Hotels of the de Guise and Rohan families.⁸² The carriages that came and went in the narrow streets drew crowds of curious on-lookers, while the numerous convents and monasteries also played a part in making this a much frequented quarter. As a result, poor people hung around there, beggars and wretches in rags looking for something on the cheap and hoping to escape the roundups of the police who would have marched them off to the General Hospital. The "ladies" of the Marais⁸³ had a reputation throughout Paris. In short, this district, with its sharp contrasts, had changed little since the day when Nicolas had left

it for Amiens 17 years earlier: a few new buildings were in evidence, and street lamps lit the main roads in an attempt to make them safer by night.

Inside the Minim monastery he found a further contrast: on the one hand there were the humble cells of the monks, and, on the other, the splendour of the church and especially of its side altars which belonged to the richest families in the area and contained their extravagant monuments and tombs. Even the monastery itself, like others of the time, evinced a certain pursuit of artistic elegance in its decor, instead of being the "poor and simple" monastery desired by Francis of Paola. Nicolas revisited the chapter room with its *grisaille* paintings by la Hyre depicting scenes from the Gospels and landscapes. Visitors trooped to visit the upper gallery of the cloister where Fr Niceron, himself a painter, had so arranged the perspective that his pictures, looked at one way, revealed a landscape decked with flowers and trees yet, seen from another angle, showed scenes from the life of St John on Patmos and of Mary Magdalene. There were other things of interest too: memorabilia of the scholars and scientists who had lived in the monastery during the first half of the century still attracted visitors.

Nicolas showed little interest in all this. He had come to teach Theology, to hear confessions and to play a part in leading the community back to a more authentic form of the Minim life. "Learning is often an obstacle to sanctity," he used to say to those who lamented the fading glory of a bygone age. "It is useful in so far as it informs our judgment... but it can puff us up, feeding our pride and self-love... We must become Minims in the full sense of that word. This means far more than becoming the least."⁸⁴

⁸² *Large town houses of splendid architectural design and proportions which can still be seen in the area, and particularly in the square which is now known as the Place des Voges.*

⁸³ *A euphemism (Translator)*

⁸⁴ *MAP 80, 81*

From Paris Nicolas retained contact with the work in Rouen. He remained spiritual director of the Institute he had founded and the members in turn wrote to him and kept him informed. He was in communication too with Nicolas Roland and rejoiced to hear that, after five years, Francoise, Anne and their companions at Rheims were now teaching up to a thousand children in different parts of the town. Not far away from the Paris monastery, near Saint Jean-en-Greve, stood the palace where Marie de Lorraine, Duchess of Guise, then aged 60, lived a life of simplicity, devoting a large part of her wealth to the care of the needy. She wanted to open a free school for the poor in her parish and was prepared to finance it herself. Such initiatives had already sprung up in different areas of Paris but with varying degrees of success.⁸⁵ So it was to Fr Barre that Marie de Lorraine looked for help, hoping for the services of a few women to care for poor girls in the neighbourhood of the Place de Greve. Fr Barre naturally approved of this project and, in consultation with the administrators of the Charitable Schools in Rouen, sent for Anne Corneille to come and begin gathering the little girls in a room at the Hotel de Saint Faron, near the Rue des Billettes. The first signatory of the document signed in 1669 had been Anne Corneille. She had freely opted for a life of total availability and now she left Rouen for Paris without demur, knowing that she would have the support and the counsel of Fr Barre to help her, an assurance which outweighed the sadness of leaving her own hometown.

In the stagecoach bringing her to Paris, there must surely have been talk of the dramatic court case in progress there at the

⁸⁵ *The Sisters of St Genevieve were working at St Nicholas of Chardonnet, the Holy Family Sisters in the parish of St Paul, the Sisters of St Agnes at St Eustache and the Daughters of Christian Union in the parish of Bonne Nouvelle. Like the Charitable Mistresses of Rouen, they did not take vows and retained secular status. They were financed by rich individuals in their respective parishes. Their communities were limited in number and were localised in a particular area of town, so they could not hope to respond to the huge needs of youth who were almost completely neglected*

time. It had something to do with poisons, they said, and many influential people at court, and even clerics, were mixed up in it. The chief defendant was the Marquise de Brinvilliers. Anne could not have foreseen that a few months later, on 17 July 1676, right in the same square where she was to open school, her pupils would be among the crowd thronging to witness the execution of Brinvilliers. Nicolas Barre prayed for this woman and for all those who were troubled by these cases of poisons, witchcraft and black magic. Some of them came to him for guidance in the midst of these dark intrigues. He counselled those who were caught up in the problem as a result of the practices of their friends.⁸⁶

On 7 November the 40 Minims of the community at Place Royale (20 priests, seven students and 13 brothers) came together to meet their "corrector" general, Fr Pietro Corti, a native of Cosenza. He met each religious alone, in order of age, beginning with the eldest. Nicolas was then 55 and had spent 35 years in religious life. He was the eighth man to go in to talk privately to the superior about the life of the community and the province. These were quite formal interviews with the priest swearing on oath, his hand on his heart, to speak the truth. Nicolas was happy to be able to speak positively of the life of his monastery and of his province. When he took leave of his fellow religious at Place Royale on 19 November, Fr Corti felt reassured by the sincere desire of the majority of them to live increasingly in accordance with the spirit and Rule of their founder. He had also heard tell of the great good which had been done in Rouen by the Mistresses of the Charitable Schools under the inspiration and direction of his confrere, Nicolas. He had listened to the misgivings expressed by some of the priests as to the durability of a work that depended entirely for its

⁸⁶ *Letter 38*

success on the frailty of women and on the providence of God! But he put no obstacle in the path of the new enterprise.

In no time at all other young women came to join Anne Corneille. Some came from Rouen: Marie Deschamps and Marie Hayer. Others were from Paris. They were attracted as much by Anne's spirit of zeal and selflessness as by their own desire to serve the poor. Aware that she drew her inspiration from Nicolas Barre, they also wanted to learn from him. Young people too were becoming involved in the running of the schools for the poor, helped and supported by the Minim. Pleas for help were multiplying: that same year, 1677, saw a new development in the life of the Institute which Nicolas felt increasingly was being called to extend its mission. Marie de Lorraine was looking for Fr Barre's teachers to educate the women and girls of the duchy of Guise. Rheims and Paris had followed upon Rouen and, no doubt, Guise would be next. The young tree was sending out new branches.

Meanwhile, in addition to the main house in the Rue Abbe de l'Epee, a house of formation for the young male teachers was being set up in Rouen, and another for the women; Paris would soon have a similar need; maybe Guise too one day, and elsewhere also, if it was the Lord's will. The time seemed to have come to draw up in writing the statutes of the group, to outline its priorities, its apostolic and educational aims, and its directives for community living which had gradually evolved out of their experience.

In August 1677 a document was drawn up which became known as the "Statutes and Rules of the Mistresses of the Christian and Charitable Schools established in the cities, towns and villages".

The text opens with the words:

"The Institute of the Mistresses of the Charitable Schools has its origin in the very heart of God who so loved the world that He gave His only Son to instruct all people, and teach them the way to salvation, so that those who believe in Him may not die but have eternal life."⁸⁷

From these words we can see clearly at the primary focus of the Institute is not its good works but its inner life nourished from the very heart of God Himself. This in turn is the source of its apostolic thrust, modelled on the example of Jesus. It is this inner life which alone can effect a radical transformation of society. The Mistresses then must be ready at all times to go and "instruct", that is to teach the faith to believers, wherever they are sent, imitating the example of Jesus who left heaven to come upon earth and whose "mission was directed above all to the simple and poor".⁸⁸

These Rules did not hesitate to spell out details. Ten years of lived experience had shown the value of giving precise instructions, not only about the organisation of life in common, but also about the spirit which ought to inform their relationships, both internally among themselves, and externally with the people to whom they were sent. Many weaknesses were creeping into the daily observance: the acceptance of money or gifts, to the detriment of the spirit of total selflessness; gossip and criticism which breed division; the exaggerated practice of private devotions and penances at the expense of that "public apostolate" to which they had committed themselves... Nicolas was aware of all this and once again, as in 1669, he wanted to be sure that these women knew exactly what they were undertaking. If their desire to grow in this spirit was not to be seen in continual conversion, it was better, he believed, to send

⁸⁷ SR I

⁸⁸ SR I:17

away those still clinging to attitudes inimical to the spirit of their vocation: those who went to teach the well-to-do in their homes, rather than remaining available for the service of the poor; those who allowed themselves to be caught up in the "vice of ownership"; those who persistently thwarted the other members of the group.

The rules were warmly welcomed by the Mistresses, administrators and lady associates. The complex web of relationships which had grown up around the Little Schools did not always run on oiled wheels; many were looking to these directives to iron out some of the problems. But Nicolas was at pains to remind them that no regulations would be of any use if their lives were not inspired by love. "Love must be the soul of your obedience, of your selflessness, your patience, your modesty, your fidelity and your perseverance to the end in this work. Strive to do everything out of love."⁸⁹

In May 1677 Nicolas Roland was in Paris, and again from November to April 1678. The purpose of his visit, in fact, was to obtain legal recognition for his Institute by letters patent. That would make the running of it much easier and allow him to obtain, through endowments, the financial help he needed. The administrators in Rouen were also keen to try this approach. That, however, was not how Nicolas Barre viewed the matter. It would amount, he felt, to seeking a security that could compromise the spirit of abandonment. The administrators in Rheims and in Rouen held the Minim in high regard, but not to the extent of adopting a position which they regarded as extreme. But the language of those who are fools for God's sake is not easily understood.

⁸⁹ SR I:4

Canon Roland, like Fr Barre, wanted a rule for the group which would allow them complete freedom of movement in the interests of their mission. However, what he had in mind was a religious community taking simple vows. This was a new form of life then emerging for women who did not wish to be cloistered. Francoise Duval was of a different opinion. Whenever the Mistresses in Paris or Rouen questioned Fr Barre on the subject, he would reply with a very clear rejection of any form of vows,⁹⁰ in the present or at any time in the future. This did not mean that they were dispensed from leading a life of genuine poverty with only the bare necessities at their disposal,⁹¹ of obedience expressed in total availability for the apostolate,⁹² or of chastity through a love shared with all.⁹³ But, experience had clearly shown, he would say, how, right down through the century, the work of apostolic women had been deflected from its original inspiration whenever, because of external or internal pressure, the women in question had been persuaded to take solemn vows. They had found themselves shut up in enclosed convents, restricting their services to those who were in a position to come to them, and more preoccupied with their own spiritual progress than with fostering the growth of others. In this way, what had originally been "intended for the good of others gradually deteriorated into the pursuit of personal gain".⁹⁴ But why not then take simple vows, or even private ones? It was not just the fear of seeing his teaching Mistresses end up cloistered that led Nicolas Barre to reject the idea of vows. He was well aware that other groups of lay women had taken them without compromising their apostolic thrust. In order to pronounce simple vows, however, an institute had to have its existence officially

⁹⁰ SA4

⁹¹ ML

⁹² MI

⁹³ SR IV: 7, 8

⁹⁴ SA 4

recognised by Rome or by a bishop, as well as by the King. This official approval was only given if the group could claim to have sufficient financial security (in the form of endowments, real estate, capital) not to be a burden on the state or on the communes. It was precisely to this security that Nicolas Barre was opposed.

Moreover, behind his opposition lay a whole spirituality of the mystical life. On the day they entered the Institute, these women had offered themselves, freely and out of love, for the service of the Gospel message. Freely and out of love they remained, and in freedom they could leave at any time. For them love took the place of vows. Any other bond which would give their commitment a legal character would be yet another form of security, and this security would detract from that total abandonment which must be lived right down to their very manner of belonging to the Institute. It was enough to make one dizzy, this unconditional opening of oneself to the immensity of Love!

CHAPTER TEN

New Developments (1677-1684)

In 1677 or 1678, with the approval of the administrators in Rouen, Fr Barre acceded to the request of the Duchess of Guise by sending a few teachers to her territory. Marie Hayer, the daughter of a doctor from Bernay, was chosen to be in charge of the little group, though she was still very young. She had joined the group in Rouen in 1676 and had proved to be a woman of considerable competence and deep faith. In reply to those who grumbled that she was too young for such responsibility, Fr Barre replied: "In order to train a Mistress well you must put her in charge, even if she is imperfect, provided that she has the potential and, above all, the spirit of the Institute. In that way she will make great progress. That is why the responsibility must be shared among as many as possible by changing every year."⁹⁵

In Guise there were many needs to be met, as Nicolas was well aware. There was a Minim monastery there which he had visited when he was provincial "definitior". The young women whom he sent there provided religious instruction, taught reading and writing to the children, counselled the mothers, and in some instances cared for the sick. Other women came forward to help them; the news got around in the marketplace and their reputation spread through the region so that, within 18 months, the "Little Barre Sisters",⁹⁶ as they were sometimes called, were installed in four other districts.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ *MIS 3*

⁹⁶ "Les Soeurs Barrettes" — a term of affection.

⁹⁷ *Hirson, Aubenton, Boue and le Nouvion.*

In Paris, too, the Charitable Mistresses were expanding their apostolate: they were to be found in the parishes of St Eustache, St Roch, St Louis-en-l'Île, St Laurent and St Gervais. In Normandy there were similar developments: Bayeux and Bernay each had its Charitable School. In Rouen itself, the administrators had bought a house in the Rue de l'Épée to cope with the growing number of Mistresses. Adrien Nyel was investing all his zeal and his educational expertise in the schools for boys. Madame Maillefer had been widowed in 1678 and could now live a life of extreme poverty while devoting herself wholeheartedly to the schools for the poor. Some people thought she was mad and used to point at her, but to others she was the "mother of the poor".

In April 1678 Nicolas Roland returned to Rheims after his stay in Paris. He was worn out from his many exhausting and useless attempts to obtain letters patent, but he cut short his stay upon hearing that one of the Mistresses was ill. On his arrival he found the community in the grip of purple fever. As a result of ministering to them night and day he himself fell victim to the disease and took to bed, never to recover. Calling for Françoise Duval, he asked her to beg pardon of each member individually on his behalf, particularly for not having helped them sufficiently to grow in holiness. He was then aged 35. He had made his will and appointed one of those to whom he was director as his executor. This was a young priest aged 27, ordained only a few weeks earlier. His name was Jean-Baptiste de la Salle.

The spread of the Charitable Schools did not take place without eliciting further questions and criticisms among Fr Barre's confreres. He gathered together some of the young school Masters at the Rue de la Mortellerie, in the parish of St Gervais, and was training them through weekly meetings. In the Rue Saint Maur he had opened a training school for the Mistresses

and regularly went there to help sustain their apostolic fervour. All this, in addition to teaching Theology to his own confreres, preaching, and spending long hours in the confessional was, some said, too much for him. It was also unwise, his opponents felt, among them Fr Giry who was now his provincial superior. This man, who would one day succeed Fr Barre as the director and ardent defender of the Charitable Schools, did not at this stage share the views of his older colleague. He could not believe that young women from simple backgrounds were capable of continually travelling around the countryside, like the apostles, on zealous expeditions that seemed ill suited to their femininity and natural frailness.

And yet, from numbering 30 in 1669, these apostolic women had grown to a total of about 200 in 10 years. Now, in addition to the existing demands of the Charitable Schools, adult catechesis and prayer groups, they were adding Trade Schools. These were workshops where the Masters and Mistresses taught young people manual skills that would enable them to earn a living. They must not, however, Nicolas insisted, require them to work on their behalf. Any profits accruing from the work done in the workshops must go to the apprentices so as to help their families: "Every vestige of self-interest must be banished from the Institute of the Holy Infant Jesus and of Charity, the First Lady, of his court."⁹⁸

When the house of formation for the Mistresses was opened in the Rue Saint Maur, it was Marie Hayer again whom Nicolas Barre asked to take charge of it. He refused to buy the building, but instead rented the four-storey house that was newly built on land belonging to the merchant, Pierre Legeai. Like everything else in their lives, their dwelling too must bear the seal of abandonment to divine providence. Marie Hayer willingly went

⁹⁸ TS 12,13

along with this view. The number of women in the Rue Saint Maur quickly grew to 30. Every morning they would go off in twos and threes to different parts of Paris. This meant that heavy responsibility fell on the shoulders of the young Marie. During holiday time, when she could get away to her family in Bernay and dropped in to visit the nearby convent, a question would occur to her time and again: was she really on the right path? Should she not be devoting herself more to working for her own sanctification, like these enclosed nuns?

Fr Barre, having been consulted, wisely asked her not to rush into a decision. There was every possibility that this was a temptation and an illusion, for he knew Marie well. He knew how much she was contributing to the Church by her life of hard work and active service among the people; he had seen the fruits of her teaching. Indeed, he concurred, the cloistered life is to be esteemed: he held contemplatives in high regard and was director to many of them. But the young woman was not being called to this more leisurely, tranquil life.⁹⁹ The path to holiness for her was one of inner transformation through union with Christ in his mission.

Marie willingly agreed to postpone her decision. She knew that Fr Barre would never try to deflect a person from her proper vocation, no matter what the consequences for himself. After a few months in Paris she finally gave up the idea of the contemplative life.

The year 1679 was an eventful one, in Rouen, Rheims and Paris.

In Rouen, the administrators were following through with their plans to obtain legal recognition, so as to be able to accept

⁹⁹ MIS 1

financial endowments for the Charitable Schools. It is probable that, though some of the women favoured the idea, not all of them did. Nicolas was deeply annoyed whenever anyone brought up the subject of this development which seemed to be emerging in Normandy. "It would be better," he would often say, "that the schools only lasted for 10 or 15 years without endowments, and maintained their fervour, than that they lasted longer but became lax in spirit, as has happened to so many institutes that were endowed. No, I am adamantly opposed to all endowments! If you become endowed, paradoxically, you will flounder," he would repeat,¹⁰⁰ "If you really love this Institute, you must reject all endowments, should the matter be raised after I am gone. And even if I should incline towards it myself in my own lifetime, you must do all you can to stop me. Otherwise the spirit of the Institute will be lost. If it comes to accepting endowments, you will see that, in no time at all, everything will change. I only agreed finally to the purchase of a house in Rouen because they felt there that it was necessary for the spread of God's Kingdom. But I don't want to hear any mention of doing the same in Paris. Human prudence is what motivates us to seek security, but it is a mistake; we must preserve the work of God in all its integrity."¹⁰¹ What makes these women so strong in their vocation is their love of poverty, their pure desire to work for the salvation of others and their abandonment of themselves to divine providence. By contrast, if they accept material securities for the future, you will see girls with nothing to live on wanting to enter the Institute in order to be guaranteed a livelihood."¹⁰² This had been happening in many enclosed convents at the time.

¹⁰⁰ *The pun and the rhyme in the French are lost in translation: Si vous fondez, vous fondrez.*

¹⁰¹ *RE passim*

¹⁰² *RE 4*

Then he would add: "If you were to allow your community house to be endowed and had to respect the wishes of your benefactors, you would no longer enjoy that blessed freedom to change neighbourhood or parish, whereas we already know from experience that this has sometimes been necessary."¹⁰³ There were very few who understood Fr Barre's stance. Right up to his death it was contested and even afterwards continued to be the subject of many disputes.

In Rouen, Madame Maillefer, who was now running the school at Darnetal, had remained in contact with Nicolas Roland up to his death. She had promised him financial aid in setting up schools for boys in Rheims and was resolved that the death of the zealous canon should not prevent the realisation of the project. So she sent for Adrien Nyel and suggested that he go to Rheims. The financial administrator of the Rouen schools agreed to the proposal, and set out armed with a letter from Madame Maillefer to Françoise Duval, the person most closely in touch with the dead canon's wishes. Nicolas Barre was almost certainly informed of this plan. As soon as Adrien Nyel arrived, Françoise apprised him of how good Jean-Baptiste de la Salle was to the group, both spiritually and materially. He was in fact in the house and they called him.

When Nyel explained his plans for opening Little Schools for boys in Rheims, Jean-Baptiste was wary. The schools for girls had already met with much criticism and opposition in the town, and it would be better to be extremely discreet about it, if such a project were ever to materialise. It would certainly be wise to take a different tack from Rouen. Jean-Baptiste offered to introduce Adrien to a few parish priests and others whose advice was to be valued, but he did not see himself becoming particularly involved. Meanwhile, around Christmas time, as a

gesture of help to Adrien Nyel, Canon de la Salle offered to rent a house near his own where the Masters could live, and to arrange for the preparation of their meals at his own house, since he was in a position to do so. And so, without realising it, Jean-Baptiste had taken the first step along a path which would lead him where he had never expected to go. This path would soon cross that of Nicolas Barre, and this encounter would point him in a new direction for life.

Back in Paris, politics and social life were still being influenced by the lawsuits connected with the poisons case. In April 1679, a special court was set up, known as "La chambre ardente",¹⁰⁴ to hear the cases of those involved. Two more women, known respectively as La Voisin and La Filastre, were accused of witchcraft and poisoning. A year later they were to be burnt to death. The Minim monastery itself was disturbed by the searches being carried out by the police inspector, La Reynie. Fr Martinet, the community apothecary, was suspected of having colluded with Monsieur de Vanens and Monsieur Cadelan, two practitioners of magic who were up to their eyes in the affair of the poisons. Under orders from Madame Bosse, who was in league with La Voisin, they had taken advantage of the Minim's good faith and asked to use his stills and pots in order to make powders from herbal infusions.

We do not know what happened to Fr Martinet, whether he was sent away to another monastery or whether he chose the anonymity of a life outside the Minims. The fact remains that La Reynie, the inspector, was unable to make him appear at the trial because he was not to be found in the monastery. Often mere suspicion of complicity was enough for the *Chambre ardente* to pass sentence, without right of appeal, on the

¹⁰³ RE 11

¹⁰⁴ Literally "the burning Chamber", so called because they imposed sentences of death by burning at the stake.

strength of false testimonies drummed up out of a spirit of revenge or rivalry. It was surely better to disappear and to avoid such scandals. For Nicolas Barre and his confreres, the whole painful business served to underline the fact that their community had a long way to go if it was to recapture the purity of its original inspiration. Fr Martinet's secret experiments to change lead into gold, whether related or not to the dark intrigues of the poison case, could scarcely be reconciled with the mission confided by Francis of Paola to his spiritual sons.

The year 1680 brought another request from Marie de Lorraine. In the small town of Notre Dame de Liesse, in her territory, there was a hospital-cum-hospice almost in ruins which she had undertaken to restore. The basilica in the town had a shrine which was a famous place of pilgrimage attracting large crowds of pilgrims. Some of the poorest required cheaper accommodation than the inn could offer and care if they were ill; and the same was true of the poor of Liesse itself and of Marchais. The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul had been approached, but they were unable to respond to the appeal. The little "hospital" was then confided to a Mademoiselle Herisse, but she had to be dismissed a short time afterwards when certain abuses in her administration were brought to light. The bishop and the Duchess of Guise then appealed to Fr Barre to send some young women to take over the hospital and the Christian education of women and girls in the town. And so it came about that Marie Constant and Catherine Lejeune were sent from Paris.

The departures of the *Soeurs Barrettes* from Paris or Rouen to the provinces became more frequent in response to new requests,¹⁰⁵ which were so numerous that not all could be met.

¹⁰⁵ These included Rumigny in the Ardennes, Vermand in Aisne, Anceville in Moselle, Bergues in the Nord, Dieppe and Caen in Normandy and Pontoise near Paris..

As for the men trained by Fr Barre, they too were being dispatched to different places.¹⁰⁶ The superior of the training school at Bourges wrote to a friend who was a helper of Fr Barre: "I am fully *au fait* with the marvellous results being achieved by the Institute of Charitable Instruction. It seems to me to be one of the greatest graces of this century. Already in different parts of the country several people, inspired by the same spirit, have successfully set up similar projects. But this Institute is truly a fount of inspiration which others must take as their model."¹⁰⁷ We may wonder what was the ground for this admiration. These women were not always more competent than others engaged in similar work in their village or neighbourhood. They did not always live in perfect harmony with one another: they were human like the rest. But they had inherited a special spirit from Fr Barre: one of great zeal and selflessness. They were content with very little for themselves and asked nothing of the parents whose children they taught. If a parish asked for their services, the people undertook to pay 40 or 50 crowns a year for their upkeep, but were at liberty to dismiss them at any time. Their superiors were free to send them anywhere in response to the needs. They did not own the house they occupied and had no permanent home, but went wherever they were sent with equal zeal and love, entrusting the future completely to divine providence. Forgetful of their own interests, they gave themselves totally to their mission in great serenity of spirit, and without anxiety as to what would become of them one day.¹⁰⁸

The economic and social climate of the time, however, gave little cause for serenity or peace of mind. Bitter hostility and persecution had again broken out against Protestants; rising taxes, uprisings and outbreaks of war were having increasingly

¹⁰⁶ They were sent to the region of Poitou, to the Auvergne, Lorraine, Normandy, Picardy, Champagne, Burgundy, Bourbonnais and Berry. MI 7

¹⁰⁷ M1 10

¹⁰⁸ MI 6(c)

adverse effects in the provinces. Travel was hazardous because the roads were unsafe. But the distress of the poor moved Nicolas Barre and his followers deeply, and he would say that "to save even one little one from being lost, one must be ready to sacrifice oneself as if the whole world were at stake".¹⁰⁹

In this new missionary impetus the women were generally more persevering than the men. This was evident in Rouen and Paris as well as in Rheims where Nyel had an uphill struggle on his hands. He himself taught, while seeing to the basic pedagogical formation of the Masters and contending with the multiple demands of administration. The spiritual formation and support of the young volunteers left something to be desired and augured badly for the future. Jean-Baptiste de la Salle was worried, although he himself had his canonical duties to see to as well as the education of his own orphaned brothers and sisters. He had proposed a rule of life to the Masters but it was not really observed: they each followed their own inclinations and their level of competence was generally indifferent. All this left the young priest in a quandary. When the time came for renewing the lease on the nearby house occupied by the teachers, he wondered whether it would not be better if these young men came to live with him. But he was aware that to offer lodging to these uncouth young men, who in many respects were socially inferior to his own servants, could create problems in his family. Moreover, he might be taking over Nyel's role.

Since he had to go to Paris on business, Jean-Baptiste decided to visit the Minim monastery to seek Fr Barre's advice. He outlined the whole situation: the good work being carried out by the women in the face of constant difficulties, the problems besetting the men. Nicolas could enter easily into the situation which was replicated in Rouen and Paris. If the Masters were left

to themselves, nothing lasting would be effected. Unhesitatingly the Minim advised Canon de la Salle to bring the men teachers to live with him. This was an enormous step. If Jean-Baptiste had entertained the slightest idea of where Nyel's earlier suggestions would lead him, he would have abandoned ship immediately. For three months he wavered. When Lent came, he took a first initiative by inviting them to eat at his home, counting on his household's forbearance during the liturgical season of mortification. But the mannerly inmates were shocked at finding the young men so "boorish". Shortly afterwards, when Nyel had to go off to Guise where some of the Masters had been sent, Jean-Baptiste finally made up his mind and, on 24 June 1681, he brought them to live permanently with him. And so La Salle was able to bring about what Barre, because of his own commitments as a religious, had been unable to effect: to form a first attempt at community with the men. He refused to answer those critics who reproached him with being taken up with the teachers and neglecting the education of his own brothers and sisters. A year later he left his home to live with the Masters in a rented house.

Nicolas Barre was kept informed of these developments. He cannot have been surprised then when, in 1683, Jean-Baptiste came to him again seeking guidance and reassurance at another decisive moment in his life. He explained what was happening in Rheims. Despite the efforts and tireless dedication of Jean-Baptiste, the Masters lacked perseverance. Some found the regulations drawn up for them too constraining, while others, after a while, refused to work without a salary: they only had their bed and board. All of them felt that their future would be precarious in the event of illness or failure. They were currently living off the canon's own resources, but had no provision for the future. Jean-Baptiste had prayed hard to find a solution to this difficult situation. Should he, like Roland, he wondered, make a financial settlement which would gain interest and serve as an

¹⁰⁹ MD 37

endowment for the growing institute and its schools? He knew that Fr Barre was of a different persuasion. But Rheims was Rheims, not Rouen and not Paris. The Minim's response was unambiguous. The idea of establishing a fund as a means of providing for the material support and needs of the community could not be from God. Their only secure foundation must be the providence of God Himself "Remember what Jesus said," replied Nicolas: "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air nests and shelter, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Very well then, who are the foxes today? They are worldly people who are attached to earthly goods. And the birds? These are religious whose cells become their place of refuge. But people like you who set out to teach the poor and instruct them in the faith must have no other lot on earth than that of the Son of Man. You must, then, not only strip yourself of all your worldly possessions, but you must also give up your living as a canon and turn your back on anything that might distract you from whatever is conducive to the glory of God."

For Jean Baptiste de la Salle, from then on, there was no going back on his response to God's dealings with him. He returned to Rheims and gave up his canonry and the income that went with it. First he had to overcome the opposition of his confessor. He renounced his office in favour of a simple priest who was not related to the family.¹¹⁰ He gave all his to the poor, not even retaining patrimony for the work of the schools. Like his impoverished Masters he too became poor, for the service of the poor. From Nicolas Barre he drew the strength to leave behind the advantages of his social background and to follow the secret promptings that haunted him in prayer: "Go, sell everything, give to the poor and follow me!"

¹¹⁰ This was contrary to the common practice of nepotism in his day

Nicolas Barre and Jean-Baptiste were to remain in contact. The Minim would have liked to see Jean-Baptiste leaving Rheims for Paris, for he was aware of how much the Schools of the Charitable Mistresses had grown since having a base in the capital. But Jean-Baptiste's spiritual director was advising against it. The Masters' need of him was too great. Nicolas Barre was saddened, but he gave way, and maintained contact with him by correspondence. He had met with so many obstacles himself, so much criticism and opposition in his work, that he was well placed to give sound advice and encouragement to the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. "Be generous in your undertaking," he wrote. "Do not let your conscience be troubled and remain at peace, having no fear of the criticisms of others who neither know what they are talking about nor what they are doing. Do not take it to heart. God alone is the support and the witness of your undertakings. Be of good heart in the midst of discouragement!"¹¹¹ Nicolas Barre was now sure that the teaching of working-class boys was in the capable hands of one who would bring to it what he himself had been unable to provide for his own male teachers, the Masters of the Christian and Charitable Schools of the Infant Jesus.

His many responsibilities had undermined his health. In 1682 he was relieved of his Theology classes, and was able to devote himself exclusively to spiritual direction and the leadership of the Institute. The "Little Barre Sisters" were being sent further and further afield: to Dijon, the Vendee, even to Canada which was then known as "New France". Communication was not easy: contact was lost with those who went away. In France itself the unrest throughout the kingdom made written communication unreliable. But Nicolas did not become over anxious about teachers setting off into the unknown or letters going astray: in Dijon, Marie Anne Le Teinturier was left for months without a

¹¹¹ Letter 42

reply to her queries. "I am surprised that you have not received any of my letters," Nicolas wrote, "but I give thanks that God, who cares for you as the best of fathers, has used this as a means of leading you to greater trust in Him." ¹¹²

In the region around Bernay, the departure of Marie Hayer for Rouen five years earlier had been followed by others, in particular that of her cousin, Jeanne Francoise Jouen who, in 1678, was then aged only 15. Two years later she was back again in Saint Martin-des-Chenees turning her family home into a poor school with the help of her own sisters. In 1683, the episcopal vicar of the diocese, Canon Lange, invited them to take over the First Communion programme for adults in a poor area of Lisieux. This initiative was to give rise to yet another poor school. Reinforcements were requested from Rouen and Paris. Jeanne Francoise, still only 20 years old, was the leader of the little group and Francoise Duval, one of the pioneers of Nicolas Barre's first foundation in Sotteville, was sent to assist her.

Francoise, that woman of great courage who had given, buffered and struggled so much to establish the Little Schools at Rheims, had in fact chosen to let go of the work which she had helped to bring to birth. The fact that the institute in Rheims had been accorded letters patent and had opted for a religious Rule of life meant that she could no longer stay. She wished to remain faithful to the original inspiration of Nicolas Barre. Anne Le Coeur, on the other hand, decided to remain with the newly constituted institute. As for Francoise, she left Rheims to begin yet another adventure. Together with "Soeur Dieuzy" she was sent to Lisieux where the new work needed her support. With her she brought her experience of life, and a spirituality tested and strengthened by trials that had rooted her in an unshakeable trust. In her fidelity to the spirit of the origins she could not go

along with the decisions taken by the administrators in Rouen who had been unable to live with the insecurity: the work, they felt, was now too extensive and influential not to need the generous benefices being offered to it. In adopting this stance she knew that she had the backing of Nicolas Barre. She would have had the opportunity of meeting him in Paris on her journey from Rheims to Rouen. She may even have been able to attend some of his talks. Everything she heard reinforced her conviction that what is wisdom in the eyes of God often seems madness in the eyes of people generally respected for their wisdom.

¹¹² Letter 60

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Go Out And Proclaim!

Nicolas Barre's strength was declining, but he made no concessions to his health. He slept little at night, sometimes without even getting into bed. He would sit at his table answering the many letters he received or preparing talks and then fall asleep in his chair until time for Matins.

In the year 1684 he had another attack of an illness which, like the previous bout, left him for several days in a state of lethargy. They thought he was dying. Yet he recovered and was able to resume some of his activities at a slower pace. From now on Fr Giry became his assistant in directing the Masters and Mistresses of the Charitable Schools.

For years, both in Rouen and Paris, Nicolas' aim in training his teachers had been to influence their hearts, to cultivate inner attitudes which would provide the sap to nourish their teaching method and make it bear fruit. He had wanted to set their hearts on fire with his own burning desire for the Kingdom of God. What he showed them was the paradox that lies at the very centre of the apostolic life: that in order to 'proclaim the light of God's grace, one must first confront the darkness; that to spread the Good News, one must be ready to penetrate to the very depths of humanity's despair where there is no gain without the loss of everything'. Let us pause at this point in our narrative to consider these formative years and listen to Fr Barrel as he guided these young women who had thrown themselves into the venture.¹¹³

They frequently questioned the value of their vocation which was so often criticised, ridiculed, devalued even, by comparison with

the high esteem in which the enclosed life was held. The one and only thing that the Minim wished to bequeath to this group of women apostles¹¹⁴ was that their sole preoccupation should be the proclamation of the Good News to the poor, thus avoiding any preoccupation with themselves, even with their own salvation since, in a certain sense, to strive to save one's soul is already to lose it.

Very often the first question to arise in their private conversations with him would concern their prayer. One day he said to them: "Many of you have remarked that you often experience dryness during prayer time, whereas God makes Himself present to you when you are with people, teaching the children, talking to their mothers. And some of you interpret this as a sign that He is calling you more to savour His presence in contemplation than to spend yourself for Him in active service. Quite the contrary. It is a sign that this is precisely where God wants you, since it is here that He comes to visit you. If He were too prodigal of His consolations to you during prayer, you would go off and leave the mission He is confiding to you to run after the consolations of the contemplative life. When He comes to visit you during class time, thank Him and ask Him if He wouldn't mind putting off His visit until prayer time, because you now have to attend to His concerns. Don't allow yourselves to be distracted from the preaching of the Gospel. That will stop you falling into mistaken notions. I can appreciate your desire for the peace of an enclosed convent: at the present time it is often an easier life and always more highly respected. However, I put it to you whether you are willing to undergo the pains of childbirth in order to give God a multitude of sons and daughters. Or would you prefer to be like Rachel, more beautiful but sterile?"¹¹⁵ Do you

¹¹³ Quotations from Fr Barre in this chapter are mainly drawn from *Particular Maxims* and from *Memoirs and Instructions for the Sanctification of the Sisters*. All other sources are given.

¹¹⁴ He coins the feminine form, *apostresses*, to convey the parallel role. See L62.

¹¹⁵ Fr Barre's high regard for the contemplative life has already been mentioned and is clear from his letters. This was not, however, the vocation of the *Charitable Mistresses*. It is interesting

want to be like those cowardly soldiers who work the system so as to remain garrisoned, leading an easy life, instead of fighting for the interests of their king?"

Many, however, saw themselves as very inadequate soldiers indeed! How could anyone, they wondered, hope to lead others to love God while having so little love for Him themselves? There can scarcely have been one of them who did not feel like this occasionally.

"Don't be led astray by such thoughts," Fr Barre would say. "It is a grave mistake! *God is holy and He alone can make us holy. For our part, it is by co-operating in His work of making people saints that we ourselves become holy.*"¹¹⁶ *"Besides it is easier to sanctify others than to be holy oneself. Strive only to form copies of Jesus Christ, to make them like the Original, since God has formed us all in His image. He will see to it that you are transformed into Him, without your even knowing it. Moreover Jesus has told us: 'There is no greater love than to give one's life for one's friends.' Keep your eyes fixed on Him; He is your exemplar. Follow Him who doesn't even have a stone on which to lay His head.*

"You must regard yourselves as servants of the children of Jesus your Master. Servants have neither the time nor the means to think about their own finery, taken up as they are with washing, dressing and adorning the children in their care, and that pleases their master. Well, then, if Jesus sees that, out of love for Him, we are intent on serving our neighbour and fostering the development of the true life within him, then He Himself is pledged to taking care of us.

that the first choir stall, on entering the choir in Amiens Cathedral, has a magnificent wood carving of Jacob with his two daughters, Leah and Rachel. (Translator)

¹¹⁶ Dieu est saint, et Lui seul fait les saints. Nous, c'est en coopérant à son oeuvre de faire des saints, que nous devenons saints. The pun is lost in translation. (Translator)

"The only way to enable this life to grow is by practising gentleness, humility and simplicity, inspired by great love. Three things are needed if you are to succeed: discernment, to enable you to facilitate the growth of each person in accordance with her own natural gifts; inexhaustible love, like that of a mother who puts up with everything, forgetting herself completely for the sake of her children; and finally that inner attitude of gentle, persistent pleading with God for His grace and His Spirit, both for yourselves and for those whom you want to lead to Him. I want you all to be holy, learned in the truths of the Christian faith, exemplary and, if necessary, persecuted even! Yes, holy, or at least desirous of becoming so; able to guide troubled consciences; zealous in seeking out the lost; exemplary, for otherwise your words will have little effect; and persecuted like Jesus Christ who was Himself abused and cursed."

The young women certainly did not escape criticism. It was not surprising that they should suffer at the hands of those who despised the church or the poor. Sometimes, however, the obstacles they encountered came from the parish priests! Some of these took offence at their success, or were annoyed at their initiatives and suspicious of their competence. Nicolas Barre was well aware of the great difficulties that some of the young women were having to face. But he singled out two dangers that lurked beneath these trials: self-sufficiency and disunity. He told them fairly and squarely:

"Your success is breeding a sense of self-satisfaction and vanity. If all is going well with your undertakings, it does not mean that all is well in your own hearts! You must turn to Jesus, asking Him to transform your still self-centred hearts with His love. Ask Him too to help you to act wisely when dealing with the clergy, so as to avoid any disharmony. Do not undertake anything without

their consent and, as far as possible, go along with their idiosyncrasies and their moods, in order to lead them in turn to a greater commitment to God's work.

"You need to know how to handle them and at the same time, keep an eye on yourselves; for, as you are well aware, it is easy to find oneself on the slippery slope, and for all the very best reasons! You must know how to go along with them without losing your independence! ¹¹⁷ Have them on your side, without surrendering yourselves to them, in order to win them to the interests of God's glory! This will require great grace and strength of mind, if you are to remain totally true to your commitment."

The gift of patience was to prove sorely necessary when their zeal was balked by the rather authoritarian stance of one of these priests. Barre had no wish to curb their enthusiasm nor to put too tight a rein on the younger ones ...still, they would have to learn, by being put to the test, the patience of the strong.

"You will need two kinds of patience," he would say. "First of all with yourselves, when you see how little progress you are making. Keep up your efforts, however, even if you cannot see your own progress, and be happy to see others advancing and to help them along. Secondly, you will need patience with others, which means never growing weary or giving in to discouragement, no matter how hard-hearted, intractable or obstinate they appear."

"Three things, I feel, are leading you to lose patience: a sense of disappointment at not succeeding; then the kind of thinking that leads you to regard someone as not worth all the trouble that

¹¹⁷ Again a pun in the French: *Il faut savoir les prendre sans titre prises!*

you are taking; or finally, thinking up spiritual reasons, such as that God does not want you wasting your time like this, time that would be better spent on others who are more responsive! And so you become more and more indignant at the thought of how little you have to show for your great dedication, and your impatient enthusiasm would have you drop the project and be up and off elsewhere!

"When you notice this happening, learn how to wait and resist the feelings of agitation. Often this will lead to unexpected results, overcoming the resistance of the person in question or winning others around in the process."

'As I have often told you before: many people want to offer themselves for God's service, but at heart they do not want God to make use of them in His way.' ¹¹⁸ You must be like a quill in the hand of a scribe, and please note in passing how often he has to trim, cut and shape the quill if it is to write well!

"If you place yourself like this in the hand of God, or rather, if you allow Him to take Possession of you for His work, you will find yourself able to harmonise the active and the contemplative life."

Marie Hayer was among those who listened with joy to these words which seemed to sum up for her all that had happened since her departure from Bernay for Rouen first, then Paris and Guise, and now Paris once more. She pondered over the many words that, through her, God had already written in hearts of flesh. She reflected too on the future of the group. Sometimes they would talk about it openly among themselves. They had agreed not to seek security for their old age — if they reached it, for at that time death often struck people down at the height of their powers. In the rules he had drawn up for them, Nicolas

¹¹⁸ PM 31

Barre had insisted on the care, attention and affection to be bestowed on anyone who became ill, and they were doing just that. But they knew too that, deep down, they must be ready to die on the side of the road, or in the public hospital, if their missionary activity should require it, and to expect nothing in return for their services. Marie had given her consent to that the day she was received into the group. A question mark, however, still hung over the future of these women the day their strength would no longer permit them to leave the Rue Saint Maur each morning for the poor areas of Paris.

"One day," the Minim would say, "your strength, like mine, will decline. Maybe you will no longer be able to go out as you do today through the streets, the houses, the parishes. If you then want to complete the work of your sanctification, this is what you must do: acknowledge and accept quite simply that you are a burden on the others and, as Landsperg¹¹⁹ put it, that you now are like poor people taken in out of charity. Do not be critical of your younger colleagues, saying that things were done better when you were young. Give time to personal prayer and pray for those who are in active ministry. If, in spite of your declining strength, you happen to be offered a mission, accept it. If you think it is beyond your capacity, make known the problems you foresee and their consequences but, if the superior insists, be confident that obedience can make possible what does not seem feasible. Notice the mothers in poor and peasant families: they never eat until the family have finished and then only the leftovers. Sometimes they do not even sit down to table, but eat standing up against the wall or sitting on a block of wood! Study

¹¹⁹ Landsperg (1489-1539) was a Rhine-Flemish Trappist monk whose manual of spirituality, *l'Enchiridion de la Vie Spirituelle*, placed great emphasis on abnegation and humility. Its language and imagery were still in vogue in the seventeenth century. (Translator)

them and take them as your model, never forgetting that you entered the Institute only to serve God and your dear neighbour."

The Minim must have had several meetings with Marie Hayer. The number of women coming forward to join the group in Paris and in the provinces was growing steadily, and Marie took her responsibilities very seriously. She wanted, she said, to be their servant so as to teach them by example to love the poor and lowly. Fr Barre repeated to her what he had already written to Anne Le Teinturier and others who carried similar responsibilities:

"You must have a great attachment above all to those two noble ladies, Gentleness and Humility of heart, who serve as assistant teachers in the divine School of Jesus the Master: 'Learn from me,' He says, 'for I am gentle and humble of heart.' That is why we take great care to accept into our Institute only those Masters and Mistresses who strive to be truly gentle and humble of heart. Thus it is not they who are the real teachers, but rather Jesus who, through them, teaches, touches, converts people's hearts. This becomes a source of great happiness for us, but the glory redounds to Him alone."¹²⁰

Whenever girls came forward offering their services, Marie would try to get to know them, in order to judge whether their dispositions were suitable for the Institute. Fr Barre was very strict about this.

"Do not accept them," he would say, "unless you detect in them a real desire for God and a readiness to give up everything for the spread of the Gospel, as well as great selflessness, and the capacity to do God's will in everything, relying only on His providence. Teach them to make these words of Jesus their

¹²⁰ Letter 60

own: *'Do not worry about what you will have to eat or drink, as the pagans do. Seek above all the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all the rest will be given to you as well.'* Those who seek the comforts of this life will not have the graces necessary to bring about the reign of God and His justice, either in themselves or in others."¹²¹

Some families make it extremely difficult for their daughters to join the Institute, because their parents fear for their old age. But if they really believed in the God who is calling them, they would overcome this difficulty.

*"There are thousands of good women in the world," he continued, "who devote their lives to working as servants or chaperones, with no assurance of permanence in their position and no guarantee of succeeding. They do this for purely human motives. Do you not think, then, that there must be at least a hundred or so who would want to do as much for the sake of Jesus, with the help of God's grace? A hundred or so who would choose instead to devote their lives to the salvation and sanctification of others, which is the sole reason why Jesus came on earth? I have no doubt but that God will shower blessings on this Institute, as long as the members are faithful to their calling!"*¹²²

As he walked the streets of Paris from the Rue Saint Maur to the Minim monastery, making his way through the bustling crowds, this prayer would rise to Nicolas' lips: ***"This Institute is and must always remain rooted in the truth, and in Jesus Christ alone, without a trace of self-interest. Adorable Lord and Saviour of our souls, let it never be otherwise, so that it may remain for ever Your possession, Yours to dispose of as***

You see fit." His deep desire was that the lives of the Masters and Mistresses should be a living expression of the Gospel. Again and again he would repeat: "You have received freely, now give freely in return" or those other words of Jesus: "Let the little ones come to me." For it is more important to inspire love than to communicate knowledge, and it is not enough simply to educate in the faith, one must also pray for those whom one wishes to lead to God. His great desire was to lead everyone to savour the prayer of the heart and to live in awareness of the abiding and loving presence of God in their lives.

Again and again he had to remind them, not hesitating to be specific, of how the spirit of ownership is inimical to their vocation. It is so easy to fall into the trap of self-interest! In one instance the apprentices had been made to work on the teacher's behalf; another had exacted jobs from school-going children when they should have been at lessons; others were accepting gifts, putting themselves under obligation to the parents who gave them. One Mistress was disposing of gifts for the benefit of herself and her family. Another kept finding excuses, such as having jobs to do for others or good works to be carried out, in order to escape being full-time in the work to which she had committed herself. He even knew of Mistresses absenting themselves from their mission on the pretext of going to confession, when Sundays and holy days should have sufficed for that.

The apostolic life should help them to go beyond a purely inward-looking kind of religion. It may begin in the intimacy of one's inner relationship with Christ, but the apostolic life goes well beyond the purely private dimension and the pursuit of a secure lifestyle in an individualistic, secure existence. Instead it is a call to live and work in order to bring about a transformation of human relations within society. The "vice of ownership" is

¹²¹ SA 5

¹²² SA 6

diametrically opposed to this. To place one's whole life publicly at the service of the poor is to regard all one's goods and all one may ever receive as the "patrimony of the poor". To dispose of it according to one's own wishes would be to steal from them! No matter how often these words are repeated, it is not easy to live one's entire life by them, but those who refuse to do so have no place among the Masters and Mistresses of the Charitable Schools. He longed to see them strong in their "determination to live united in heart, mind and apostolate"¹²³ which for them took the place of vows, and to see them burning with the pure love of God who alone could transform these young girls and boys into true apostles, daring and free.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Come And Listen!

First in the provinces, and now in Paris, Fr Barre became known as "one of the, great masters of the spiritual life in this century".¹²⁴ Many were impressed by his particular gift for discerning what lies hidden in the deepest recesses of people's hearts, for helping them to allow themselves to be touched by God, and to respond in the way that is special to every individual. His penetrating glance revealed at once a kindly, compassionate, yet exigent man who knows that there is no going to God by half measures. In fact, he refused to direct anyone who came to him and was not serious about it. He could only help, he declared, "those who seek Jesus alone and are ready to put themselves totally in His hands, to the point where they are free, not only of any human motivation, but of any selfish spiritual motives as well".¹²⁵

He was exigent, because God asks us to give everything, and compassionate, because God forgives everything. Many were aware of this from their own experience of being directed by him, while many more could deduce as much from hearing him preach. One such person was the noble lady who for many years had lived an empty and worldly existence in dubious company. Now she could not stop telling her experience to anyone who would listen to her.

"I knew very well," she would say, "that I had to change my way of life, and one day I was brought to Fr Barre by a woman friend. He began to talk to me straightaway of the severity of God's judgments, to such an extent that I was deeply shocked by it, terrified even. It seemed to me that I could never make

¹²³ SR 15

¹²⁴ Raffron, *op. cit*

¹²⁵ Letter 47

reparation or do penance for my past sins. Seeing me thus overcome with anguish, he spoke to me of the goodness of God and His forgiveness with such tenderness that it touched my hard heart and filled me with boundless confidence in the mercy of God. This man of God can strike you dead and restore you to life, lead you to the gates of hell and bring you back again. He shows sinners the gulf that yawns beneath their feet, striking fear in them of the everlasting gulf of hell in which they are already trapped; then, with the inexhaustible patience and tenderness of Jesus Himself, he leads them back to the straight and narrow path of virtue and raises them up to taste that extraordinary joy which only God can give."¹²⁶

He had the right words for everyone; and there were many, of every rank and station, who found their way to the chapel where he heard confessions. Sometimes, when it came to giving absolution, he had difficulty in disguising the emotion which his trembling hands betrayed. Some of his friends noticed this and asked the reason. "It is," he replied, "because at that very moment I am taking the place of Jesus Christ; I am, as it were, the penitent's judge, the vehicle of that forgiveness which Jesus wishes to pour out on her. I hold the life of Jesus in my very hands, His blood which has been poured out for this individual. But it is very difficult to know the true disposition of the person who is kneeling there in front of me. And so I tremble as I give absolution, aware that this extraordinary gift of God might be dispensed unworthily through my fault."¹²⁷

One day a religious came to confession. Accustomed as he was to the practice of weekly confession, his approach was sometimes a bit casual; after all, he reckoned, he did not exactly have serious sins to confess. Admittedly, his daily recitation of

the Psalms during the Divine Office had been full of distractions. To tell the truth, like many another, he accepted the situation as inevitable. It was the kind of fault that one confessed, while regarding it as a peccadillo that the Lord smiles on indulgently. The last thing he expected was that it be singled out for comment. But Fr Barre took the matter very seriously, becoming quite impassioned. "What are you saying, dear brother? Where was your mind during prayer? You were in the presence of God, and what became of that interior respect you owe Him? If you are not conscious of the presence of this God who is listening to you, who understands you and who, more especially, is the life of your soul, how can you hope to offer Him true worship? If you had really contemplated Him as you ought, you would have been able to see Him with this inner eye of faith, and even feel His presence within you. You would have felt a deep respect; you would have enjoyed happiness, peace of soul and a deep sense of being centred in His presence. There is nothing at all laborious or difficult about this. God is present everywhere: everything is caught up into His infinite goodness, mercy, justice, wisdom and love. Remember this: our lives are constantly being taken up into Him in whom we live and move and have our being. He has never left us for a moment. However, at times of prayer He comes even closer. At these periods, His presence should be even more intimately felt."¹²⁸ Taken aback at first by these words, and then deeply moved, the religious went away, never to forget them.

For many years now Fr Barre had practised living constantly in the presence of God, at times of work as well as of prayer. Those who knew him were struck by this. Few people showed such respect for others, such discretion or such humility. In the silence that preceded his words one sensed the tangible presence of an Other. From this crucible of silence he drew

¹²⁶ Thuillier, *op. cit*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

burning words like coals that would set other hearts on fire. He was asked to take on the spiritual direction of many: those who had gone astray, who were disturbed, a prey to scruples or in rebellion, priests no longer faithful to their calling, as well as mystics and great apostles. He left no stone unturned in his efforts to lead them to God. Other spiritual directors, 'even the most eminent, would consult him. One can easily reconstruct from his writings the kind of conversations he would have had with those who came to seek his advice and draw on his experience. **Let us eavesdrop on such a conversation, as he guides, perhaps, a less experienced director.**¹²⁹

"You ask me, dear brother, how souls are led to God. Well, what leads to a soul's being touched by God is neither what we do nor how we do it, for it is God who 'gives the increase'. We may cast light, but it is not within our power to convert souls or even to ensure that they make progress in the spiritual life. If you wish to co-operate in the work of God, you must act with complete selflessness, striving only to promote His action in people's hearts. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to lead each one; all we have to do is to remain dependent on Him and reinforce the attractions of grace. For all progress in the spiritual life is founded on the attraction of God."

- Nevertheless, from what I hear, you yourself, Fr Barre, have been instrumental in leading great sinners to conversion?

"Well, the director is mostly like the bed of a muddy stream which nevertheless carries clean water... Many of the graces and lights that he receives are given to him for and through others. He draws his riches from their storehouse. If one were to subtract what is given to him for others from his personal gifts and graces, he would feel almost naked and completely ill equipped for the task of bringing others to salvation. God Himself takes special care of us and gives us abundantly what we need for this ministry. Thus He makes us practise first what we preach by providing abundant opportunity. And so, the director is like one who knows the different parts of the house like the back of his hand, and can walk around it in pitch darkness guiding others and pointing out to them the pitfalls."

- So, does our task, then, Father, consist mainly in guiding and clarifying?

"God wishes to make His home in the heart of each one of us and this is the plan in which we are called to collaborate. That was Jesus' one desire, and He gave His life for it. The fruit that we in turn bear will be very mediocre, unless we consent to be the seed which dies so that it may bear fruit."

- I understand what you are saying, and that seems to me the heart of the matter. But could you give directors like me some practical advice about how to deal with those who come for help?

¹²⁹ The exchanges which follow are inspired by his *Maxims for Spiritual Direction*. Only references to other sources, then, are indicated.

"Yes, willingly! You must be more intent on affirming the good than on destroying the bad; act with gentleness, never with disdain, so as to win souls. Like the good Samaritan, you must mix oil with the wine! It is more important to listen than to speak, and often God will give you what you need through the person in question. God is like the centre of a circle that can be reached in an infinity of different ways. You must be careful not to lead a person away from her own particular path, as this would mean leading her astray."

- But some of these paths, Father, are very mysterious. I had someone a while ago who was undergoing great suffering and my best words of comfort seemed to do nothing for her.

"In cases like that, when people are going through trials and difficulties, you must listen patiently, showing compassion for their sufferings, even when you do not know how to relieve them. Your gentleness in talking to them will remove much of the bitterness from their heart, while waiting for God Himself to send them consolation. By offering them support in their trials, you will enable them to turn them to their good."

- But, Father, I'm told - and I've seen this sometimes in your letters to people who have allowed me to read them - that you are sometimes very hard on those you direct!

"You must realise that one can only act like this with the strong, those already won over to God, who are seeking Him alone. When dealing with a beginner in the spiritual life, you

must lead her to God in accordance with her natural bent, the way the Holy Spirit normally does. Then little by little you must lead her by a higher path; according as you see her being drawn by God. If the person is weak, you must proceed gently; if not she will be discouraged and, in trying to achieve too much, you can sometimes risk losing everything. Beginners must be offered milk, that is, go along with them a little, so as not to scare them away. But one cannot offer comforts and the challenge to holiness at one and the same time. As soon as the individual is strengthened in her desire to belong to God, the director must be more demanding, weaning her gradually from human props, and even from the support of the director. She must not be allowed to remain like a delicate vine that cannot grow without clinging to a stake!"

- I agree that we must be more demanding of those who are seeking God sincerely but surely we must know how to go about it. It's not an easy task!

"Once the person's heart and mind have been touched by God and you have discerned the unique path along which God is calling her, you must then firmly and insistently put before her what you see as God's will for her. But this must be done tactfully, out of love, so as to awaken the desire to cooperate, and not by invoking the austerity and rigour of the law. Do not flatter those who come to you for direction, no matter how exceptional the graces they receive: the greatest favours are hidden; let them remain veiled, lest pride should enter in and ruin everything. And no matter

what heights of sanctity a person may attain, he or she can always be invited to greater. For those who are seeking God it is our role to be at once a servant, companion, friend, brother, master, physician and king; but, sometimes too the destroyer and torturer of the evil that is in them. At the appropriate time we must be ready to let them see that we are at enmity with all that is still worldly in them and not of God. The human being is a capacity to be filled by God and, cut off from Him, we are on the road to destruction. We must sever, break down, destroy whatever is alien to God, in order to make space for Him alone and for the fulness of holiness, wisdom and happiness. That is the work of a lifetime. Thirty, forty, fifty years of struggle, sweat and tears would not be misspent on such a project!"¹³⁰

- Have you some advice to offer for dealing with those who are really open to being led by the Holy Spirit?

"Always be prepared to state what you see as God's will, even if you have to suffer for it. You must be prepared for criticism, censure, contradiction, blame, even from people of considerable wisdom whose outlook, nevertheless, may be all too human. Keep reminding yourself that God is all, and that, In order to possess that All, we must be prepared to lose all.

Treat everyone with the same respect, since all human beings are God's handiwork. Do not seek personal honour or wealth by favouring those of noble birth and distinction, rather than

the ordinary people. The Lord Jesus was rarely to be found in the dwellings of the great. He spent His time rather with the ordinary people, with publicans and sinners. Pay no heed, then, to the social standing of your penitents, and strive to teach them all, irrespectively, the way to holiness."¹³¹

If that is truly your only aim, then you can legitimately ask of those who come to you for direction complete fidelity and obedience to the inspirations which, through you, they will have received from God. Those whose lives are founded on perfect obedience and who abandon themselves totally into the hands of God need have no fear of anything.¹³² Encourage them to use words sparingly and to savour silence, and to remain alert in the presence of God. In this way God Himself will be able to form them, set them on fire with His love, and so reign in their hearts.

As for those who find it difficult to follow this path, don't discourage them. Teach them how to wait patiently, longing for the day when God Himself will come and fill their hearts binding up the hidden wound of unfulfilled desires and aspirations which rise ceaselessly towards Him like a murmur or a cry"

- It is true that some think they have attained a high degree of virtue, though in fact they are very far from God. Others, by contrast, think they are very far from Him, and are miserable

¹³⁰ Letter 31

¹³¹ Thuillier, *op. cit*

¹³² Letter 32

and bowed down by their suffering, yet are living, unknown to themselves, in the very heart of His mystery.

"That's very true and explains why we have to curb the flight of the eagles of the spiritual life! By which I mean those who want to serve God in an exalted and highly intellectual way. We must leave it to the angels to serve God as pure spirits. All He asks of us is that we serve Him as human beings. For our part, let us be content in our littleness and teach others to do likewise. Consider Jesus: He never employed the sophisticated reasoning of the great sciences in order to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Instead He used simple parables, making no attempt to dazzle by His arguments. He went so far as to declare: 'Unless you become like little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.' Yes, the humbler we become, the more God allows us to draw near and to become familiar with Him. If we want to be sure of entering into His most intimate favours, we must become like little children in everything."

Those who listened to Fr Barre came to recognise him for a great spiritual guide. In order to bring people to God, he destroyed their illusions; to open them to life, he made them pass through death; in order to lead them to happiness, taught them how to accept "hell". All who were willing to be led by him on the paradoxical path of faith bore witness to the fact that it was precisely there that God came to meet them.

To destroy illusions... beginning with the conceit that we can know God and that we are capable of doing anything of ourselves. He himself had to walk the long road of

dispossession, being stripped of everything, before entering into that state of "enlightened ignorance" of which he speaks in his *Spiritual Canticle*. Only then could he become a guide in their darkness for those not yet convinced that this "dark night" is "better than light"! For it is just such an illusion to believe that darkness is nothing more than darkness, that trials are nothing but pain, and that what fills our hearts can satisfy them, when often it is nothing but emptiness and a void. In order to find ourselves we must lose ourselves, dropping the masks that scarcely conceal the emptiness in our hearts. How often we play games with ourselves, with others, with God! But whoever believes he possesses anything of himself, and is not prepared to be divested of his imagined self-sufficiency, cannot lay himself open to truth. He is imprisoned in himself and in the ruins which he is piling up around him. Anyone would think our value in the sight of God was somehow related to our self-worth! As if we were not totally dependent on Him who loves us freely and asks nothing of us in return but our freely given love! Only by dropping his illusions can the human being become truly free and set others free. But this can never be attained unless he consents to undergo death, "annihilation" and the total loss of self, so as to receive that self back again as a gift from God.

In Greek mythology we learn how Zeus condemned the Danaides to filling a bottomless barrel. This terrible trial which led to despair and exhaustion bears a strange resemblance to that vicious circle in which so many men and women become trapped by imagining that they are in total control of their own destiny. Fr Barre used this image of the Danaides, adapting it slightly, for one of his correspondents who was disheartened at seeing no results for all her efforts.¹³³ He relates the story of a poor woman who, not having even a crust of bread to eat, took a job drawing water from a well. Promised a good price for every

¹³³ Letter 49

barrel she filled, she set to work, but all her efforts were to no avail. She soon discovered why: the bung had been removed. Hastily she replaced it, setting to work once more with even greater determination. But the master returned and instructed her to remove the bung and to get on with her task. After a while, discouragement got the better of her: what a waste of time and energy! "I just cannot go on," she said to her employer. "But I asked you to do it," he replied. "Can you not accept that it is giving me pleasure?" She resumed her task and even ended up enjoying it, content in the knowledge that she was making her employer happy. When the time came for payment, she said: "I don't deserve anything; on the contrary, I wasted time grumbling." But the master then revealed to her a huge reservoir which, thanks to all her hard work and effort, was now filled with clear water. And to thank her for having carried out a seemingly thankless and useless task out of pure love, he paid her double, making her rich for ever more. We can imagine her delight! And Fr Barre concluded the parable like this: "Here we have an image of those who act only out of love for God, and strive to give Him glory by working for the salvation of others and for their own sanctification. They see no results and no progress, but persevere throughout their lives, conscious of their poverty, never seeking a reward, and only too happy that God should choose them to work for His Kingdom."

And so the impossible mission of the Danaïdes, this utter inability of the human being to satisfy the inner void by his own efforts, became for Nicolas Barre the very locus of salvation offered and received.

The soul stripped and naked,
 Reduced to such extreme poverty
 has and desires nothing
 So that through this very poverty

It may find its all in God.¹³⁴

The road which leads to this state is, however, not an easy one. "You must expect contradictions in order to reach the light, and confusion in order to attain peace."¹³⁵ For Nicolas Barre, who had been through it all, it was a veritable descent into hell.

Hell... all his contemporaries preached about it as a threat to those who strayed from the right path! But he had little to say about that particular Hell: it is the great mysterious unknown, and "one normally makes much greater progress, he would say, when one acts out of love rather than out of fear of Hell".¹³⁶ On the other hand, there is another hell which comes in various guises and which is within each one of us. He had personal experience of this: it is the very opposite to love, the inability within to distinguish good from evil, life from death; it is the world of illusions. In order to live, to be reborn, one has to escape from this world of illusions, allowing oneself to be dispossessed of it. But it is also the mystical hell of darkness, of doubt, of the absence of God, of the sense of being reprovved and rejected; it is the temptation to despair. Experience had taught Nicolas Barre that one had to enter fully into this night, this darkness, for it to become a fountain of living water. If one accepted it, this apparent lack of grace could become a source of grace, this extreme poverty a source of wealth.¹³⁷ But only on condition of our staying with this state of desolation, not fleeing from it, nor complacently accepting it, but entering into it as the place where God wishes to form us in the image of His Son. There, in the very depths of the pit, He calls us to trust Him to the point of madness, so that suffering may take on for us the features of love.

¹³⁴ *Canticle 5*

¹³⁵ *Letter 2*

¹³⁶ *MAP 7*

¹³⁷ *Letter 10*

Among those who sought Fr Barre's advice were some who, like himself, had experienced this descent into hell. "Take courage in your extreme discouragement," ¹³⁸ he wrote, "and be patient amid your weaknesses, so that through them you may come to God." ¹³⁹ "Live at peace in the very midst of the battle."¹⁴⁰ For the one who is led by this path will only really experience being lost at the very moment when he knows he is saved. Then "the sight of his weaknesses and of his unworthiness can be changed into a gentle, humble and serene awareness", ¹⁴¹ as he realises how this very experience of personal weakness can become a "hidden channel of love for God".

And so, as Fr Barre would explain to those who could understand this mystical language, we are called to live simultaneously in hell, in paradise, and on earth, "below, above and in the middle". Below: by descending to the lowest depth, like Jesus and with Him, and by entering deeply into the knowledge of our own poverty and "nothingness". Above, because the lower we plunge to the depths, the more God fills us with His peace, with the sweetness of His own gift of happiness, with the intimate and inexpressible knowledge of His being. "It is death and life together, the depths and the heights at once, being raised up and brought low, all going on together. The deeper the valley the higher the mountain." ¹⁴²

But the double thrust of these two movements that go on simultaneously and unremittingly leads to the "middle state", where, out of love and faith, we are led to act solely on behalf of our neighbour, to place ourselves at his service, to forget

¹³⁸ Letter 15

¹³⁹ Letter 12

¹⁴⁰ Letter 29

¹⁴¹ Letter 46

¹⁴² RR 8

ourselves in order to meet his needs, to show him, too, the path to God.

"Throughout the forty-four years I have devoted to the spiritual life, this is the path that I have found to be the shortest, the surest, the most peaceful and the most exalted." ¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Letter 56

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Final Testing

Nicolas Barre was in demand day and night but, although at times he was harassed, he maintained a calm exterior. Those who knew him regarded him as a saint, but he brushed aside all praise saying "You don't know me well, in fact I don't think you know me at all." His was not a pious modesty, a false humility that secretly savours the praise. Through prayer Nicolas Barre had come to dwell peacefully in that total inner detachment which he saw most powerfully symbolised in the Child of Bethlehem. Treated as of no account by society, born in the insecurity of an exodus, a symbol of weakness and poverty this Child is the very locus of God's revelation. In order to be born of God, and constantly re-born, one must enter into the nakedness and fragility of birth. Nicodemus, in his old age, was shocked at the thought of this re-birth, but Nicolas Barre had learnt to remain at peace in the awareness of his own nothingness, that womb from which one is constantly re-born to the infinite and in which the human becomes the divine.

Far from alienating us from the world, from locking us up in complacent enjoyment of the knowledge that we are blessed, true sanctity increases our sensitivity to evil and sharpens our capacity for suffering. This kind of suffering, however, originates in love and becomes its visible expression. Sanctity is not a form of human perfection, nor of moral rectitude. It is an ever growing openness to the infinite gift of God, in the midst of all one's finiteness, weakness, limitations and sinfulness. It is a process of continual turning-back, of conversion. In this way it enables one to enter into the suffering in others that is caused by evil, and to burn with a desire to see them free of it. One day, as Fr Barre was about to give somebody Communion, he had a blinding revelation of this truth. He was just reciting with the communicant

the words: "Lord, I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof, but only say the word and I shall be healed" when he suddenly noticed that he was saying the words "under my roof " while it was the communicant who was receiving Communion. It was like an inner flash of light. Suddenly it struck him: "In Jesus I am she and she is me, and I can say this on behalf of everyone else too, including sinners. I am truly a sinner in all the sins of humanity. This was how it was with Jesus throughout His life. He took all our sins upon Himself. If we who are members of His body want our lives to be one with His, we must, out of love, see ourselves as sinners bearing responsibility for all the sins of the world, and be prepared to carry the pain and suffering they cause. Our neighbour is another self: let us see his sin as our own, until the day comes when God will separate the good from the bad in which we now share. Only then shall we be at one also with all the good that is in humanity, and it will be the source of our joy for all eternity."¹⁴⁴

Some were astonished and unable to grasp the mysterious depths of this experience, seeing it as an unhealthy shouldering of useless burdens, but he would reply that it was not a burden but an expression of love. Won at the cost of bitter struggles, this serenity would never again forsake Nicolas Barre.

He was happy to note the same strength of soul in a good number of the Mistresses of Charitable Instruction. So many parishes were asking for them that Servien de Montigny, his administrative assistant, was unable to meet all the demands. In the light of their experience and the expansion which was taking place, a need was becoming apparent to revise the regulations and organisation of the new Institute. Difficulties, tensions and searching marked the progress of the group, side by side with

¹⁴⁴ RR 10

enthusiasm and generosity. The few communities made up of larger groups of women were looking for some internal regulations that would shape their daily life. Many wanted a revision by Fr Barre himself of the Statutes and Rules first sketched in 1677; they felt this would lend greater weight to them in the face of divisions. Nicolas drew up a new text, the content of which had been well tried out in practice and could now go to print. In this way each one could have her own copy and the increasing number of those being sent out in groups of two to the provinces could refer to it. However, minute details regulating the daily life of a group of twenty to forty women living together scarcely applied to them. "In their situation," wrote Fr Barre, "they must take care, at least, not to neglect their prayer and the recitation of the Office of the Blessed Virgin,¹⁴⁵ attendance at Mass, spiritual reading and the examination of conscience. They must also take care to have proper meals and rest, so as to keep up their spiritual and physical strength."¹⁴⁶

Another text, drawn up a few years earlier and intended for a wider public, was added by Fr Barre to the new edition of Statutes and Rules. He called it a Memoir of Instruction to highlight the value of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus. His idea was that anyone seeking the collaboration of these women should know what they had a right to expect of them. At the same time, young women attracted to this life would have a clear idea of the kind of lifestyle that they as apostolic women would have to lead. Dedication to the human and spiritual development of the poor would require of them total selflessness, and complete independence in regard to persons, places, money, success and the pursuit of security.

Nicolas Barre may have sensed that his end was approaching. Perhaps it was this awareness that prompted him to finish drawing up a structure for the Institute. Again, he may have been spurred on by his friends. In any case, in that same year, 1685, he drew up his Rules for the Trade Schools which had meanwhile increased in number. But there were probably other factors precipitating publication of the principles that were to be normative for the Institute and its rule of life. The split between the administrators in Paris and in Rouen was becoming more acute, to such an extent that it seemed as if the Institute now had two distinct centres of government. It happened that historical circumstances just then, in the shape of an order from the King, were to lead the Soeurs Barrettes to settle in Languedoc, in the south of the country, and to open up schools there designed to cater specially for those recently converted from Protestantism. More than ever before the Mistresses of Christian Instruction needed a clear concept of their mission, their aim, and the spirit which should inspire them if they were to avoid being ruined by divisions and losing sight of their *raison d'être*.

The "new converts" to whom the King ordered them to be sent were victims of the religious intolerance of the monarchy itself which, in that same year, 1685, had just decreed the suppression of all rights enjoyed by Protestants, leaving them no option but to "convert", flee, or risk death. It was a sad period in a long history which persists in people's memories up to our own day. Almost a century earlier, King Henry IV, prompted by a desire for peace, had promulgated the Edict of Nantes. This accorded freedom of religion to the Protestants who were numerous in the south of the country, along with rights which some Catholics came to regard as excessive privileges. Before long, the ruling power began to find ways of reducing these rights and of multiplying prohibitions, so as to undermine the

¹⁴⁵ *The prayer recommended for daily recitation at the time by every Christian*

¹⁴⁶ SA 3

influence of the Protestants who were also known as "Huguenots". This repression of Protestantism by the erosion of its freedoms began as early as 1629. All kinds of pressures were brought to bear and conversions were bought with money and offers of employment. Those members of the Protestant faith, which was known pejoratively as a "so-called reformed religion", represented five to six per cent of the population, or a million believers. Theirs was a living faith, nourished by the reading of the Bible to which few Catholics yet had access, though some were very familiar with the Psalms. From 1661 on, prohibitions were multiplied in their regard: restricting their right to meet, preach, emigrate, enter certain professions, be buried in Catholic cemeteries, even hold funerals during the day time. A fund was set up to buy recantations. At his coronation, the King, Louis XIV, had sworn to "abolish heresy in the kingdom". No stone should be left unturned in order to enforce the unifying principle of the absolute monarch: "One faith, one law, one king".¹⁴⁷

1681 saw the introduction of suppression by force. The soldiers of the mounted infantry, the dragoons, as a means of extracting recantations, spread terror through the villages and towns by looting, brutality and massacres. Those who tried to flee abroad were hunted down and condemned to the galleys. The majority of Catholics approved the action of the King and his armies, manipulating the words of Jesus in the parable to justify their stance: "Force them to come in!" (Luke 14:23) This reign of terror led to many "conversions", as many as three or four hundred thousand. The rest of the story follows with a ruthless logic: since the so-called "reformed faith" had been wiped out in the country, everything previously decreed in its favour by the Edict of Nantes was now obsolete. So the earlier edict was revoked by the Edict of Fontainebleau in October 1685. Churches and schools were closed or destroyed, and the goods

of the exiles confiscated, unless they returned within four months. Two hundred thousand Huguenots chose exile.

The task now was to instruct in the Catholic faith those who remained, and especially their children. Thousands of children who had been "converted" by force, snatched sometimes from their Protestant parents by Catholic aunts or cousins who believed they were doing the right thing, were now to be instructed in the state religion by order of the King.

Numerous religious orders were therefore summoned to send some of their members to teach these newly converted boys and girls and to run boarding schools for those who had been taken away from their families. Despite not being legally recognised, the Institute founded by Fr Barre was nonetheless well known to the authorities. Fr Servien de Montigny, its administrator in the Paris region, had many contacts among the King's circle. The Monarch ordered him to send eight of the Mistresses to Languedoc and undertook to defray the cost of the journey and their installation in Montpellier and Montauban. Monsieur de Baviille, the governor of Languedoc, decided that they should live in the household of Madame d'Amboise at Montpellier, in the parish of Notre-Dame; at Montauban they should occupy a huge building, in the Moustier area of the town, constructed a few years earlier at the King's expense for the ministry to the "new Catholics". The "teaching ladies", as the Charitable Mistresses were called in Montpellier and the Cevennes region, were soon welcomed by the wounded populace. They showed great gentleness, kindness and respect for their pupils, for they had learned from Fr Barre that "true freedom of conscience is a fundamental right".¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ The rhyme in French makes it more memorable: "Une foi, une loi, un roi". (Translator)

¹⁴⁸ SA 1

They quickly set about organising free schools in various poor areas of the town, not confining themselves to the sections indicated by Monsieur Bavielle. We may wonder to what extent Fr Barre was associated with this sending. We have no documentation to enlighten us here and neither of his biographers mentions it. By the end of that year, 1685, his health had greatly declined and others had taken on the running of the Institute.¹⁴⁹ It was to Servien de Montigny that the King's secretary addressed the correspondence about the sending of Mistresses to Guyenne and Languedoc. Nicolas Barre is not mentioned, either in the request or in the reply. Only one mention of young Protestant girls is made in the writings of Fr Barre which survive. In the Rules for the Charitable Schools it is stated that Huguenot girls could be accepted on condition that they did not bring with them any book or catechism other than that in use in the schools.¹⁵⁰ There is no mention of "conversion", either as a condition of entry or as a goal to be desired.

Barre was unanimously recognised as the *'instituteur'* or founder and inspirer of this group of apostolic women whose only ambition was to share with the poor the Good News that God loves them, and to restore them to His image and likeness. Silently he supported and prayed for the mission to the young converts from families often ruined and broken by religious persecution.

The expansion of the Institute of Charitable Instruction had surpassed his wildest imaginings. Hearing mention of Siam (present-day Thailand) and of the difficulty the missionaries were having in making contact with the women there, some of the

¹⁴⁹ Frs Montigny, Giry (now Provincial of the Minims) and Raffron in Paris; Messieurs de Grainville, de l'Espinay and Fauvel in Rouen.

¹⁵⁰ Frs Montigny, Giry (now Provincial of the Minims) and Raffron in Paris; Messieurs de Grainville, de l'Espinay and Fauvel in Rouen.
AD 21

Mistresses even began to think of travelling to far-off places.¹⁵¹ Soon afterwards, and for a period of some years, the "Barre ladies" were also to become involved in training the future religious of Saint Louis, in the establishment at St Cyr founded by Madame de Maintenon. This woman, whose real name was Francoise d'Aubigne, for two years now had been the King's wife in secret. Known sometimes in later years as "France's first primary teacher", she had had a chequered career.

Despite being of noble birth, Francoise was born in prison! Her father, Constant d'Aubigne, had wasted the family fortune. Charged with murder and forgery, he seduced the daughter of his gaoler and Francoise was the third child of their union. She was sent as a nursing to one of her aunts and grew up in the country. At the age of eight, she rejoined her parents and set sail with them for the West Indies where her father, now released from prison, hoped to make his fortune. This was not to be, however: he died leaving his family destitute. From there they returned to a war-torn France where Francoise again experienced a life of homelessness, abandonment and adoption.

At the age of 16 she became the wife of Paul Scarron, the deformed and crippled poet of the Burlesque genre. He was 32 years her senior and died when she was 24. Just at that point the King's mistress appealed to her to bring up in secret the children she had had by the King. Once they had been legitimised, Francoise continued to look after them at the court itself. A few months later she supplanted Madame de Montespan in the King's favour. Thanks to the generosity of the King she was able to purchase the castle of Maintenon with its

¹⁵¹ In the year after Fr Barre's death Servien de Montigny was to ask the King to sanction officially the departure of Mistresses to Siam. This authorisation, however, was refused because of the risks to a small group of women on such a journey in the company of sailors.

accompanying title, thus becoming "Madame de Maintenon".¹⁵² Soon after the death of the Queen, Louis proposed to her and a secret marriage took place in 1684. Now that she had status and was titled, Françoise d'Aubigné did not forget her unhappy childhood. She knew that there were thousands of young girls in France, of military families, whose fathers had been ruined by the wars. Reduced sometimes to penury, they found themselves obliged to marry anyone with a noble name who was interested in them, in order to avoid complete social degradation.

One of her friends was teaching a little group of poor girls in the outskirts of Paris, but was about to give up for lack of resources. She asked Françoise for assistance, knowing that she was well placed to obtain it. In 1684, Madame de Maintenon offered her a house at Rueil where she could carry on the work she had begun. She liked to go to visit her friend there for, unusually for the time, she had a genuine interest in education and in the teaching profession. In 1684, the increasing number of pupils at Rueil necessitated a move to the castle of Noisy and Servien de Montigny was asked for the help of one of the Charitable Mistresses. Charlotte Giltier de Saint Pars was chosen to lend a hand.

Seeing the success of the school at Noisy, Mme de Maintenon conceived the idea of offering free education to 250 girls, daughters of the impoverished nobles, in a boarding school specially built for the purpose in the village of Saint Cyr. To this end she wished to found a religious order, the Dames de Saint Louis. These women needed to be trained. Her plan was to ask the Daughters of St Vincent de Paul to teach them some nursing skills and elementary pharmacy, the Visitation and Ursuline

¹⁵² Her nickname, "Madame de Maintenon", was a witty pun on her title and on her role as the mistress now in favour. (Translator)

orders to form them as religious, and Fr Barre's teachers to train them as educators.¹⁵³

We do not know, having very little information to go on, whether Fr Barre was consulted about the project before he died. Their departure for Saint Cyr took place three months after his death. One can justifiably suppose that this short-term mission, on behalf of young people whose lives had been marked by suffering and poverty, bore that character of availability and selflessness that he desired for his Institute. Besides, the women had already been sent to many places to initiate works of education for the poor. Ursula d'Orléans for instance was preparing to set out for Lyon to help the Sisters of St Charles, a group founded by Charles Demia. Sometimes, under pressure from the bishops, or because of difficulties in communication, the group would become autonomous, thus giving rise to a diocesan congregation or a totally new institute. It mattered little, provided that, in the end, the poor were given back their dignity: selflessness in everything was the very bedrock of this Institute.¹⁵⁴

Fr Barre was aware, however, of the possible risks in store for Charlotte at Noisy, and for other Mistresses elsewhere who, by their competence, had attracted the admiration of influential people. In November 1685 he wrote: "If any Mistress, because of her competence or for some other reason, were to be so valued and accepted by the powerful of this world that she should

¹⁵³ *Twelve Mistresses, known as dames externs or "externs", played a part in the teacher-training of the Dames de Saint Louis, and in the actual teaching carried out at Saint Cyr where they were sent in August 1686, after the death of Fr Barre. They were to leave there in 1694, once the Dames de Saint Louis had been professed. But Charlotte de Saint Pars decided to remain on and to join the new congregation. After the departure of the Barre educators, Louis XIV and Mme de Maintenon showed their gratitude for the help given to a work that was dear to their hearts. The King paid an annual sum of 5,000 livres to the motherhouse. In response, when the Spiritual Maxims of Fr Barre were published by Fr Servien de Montigny in 1694, they bore a dedication to Mme de Maintenon.*

¹⁵⁴ FM 4

became attached to her success and believed herself superior to others, she must discreetly be weaned from this accursed and worldly spirit and brought back to her true Father, the Child in the stable at Bethlehem, Jesus Himself. If she does not co-operate with this change of heart, she should be sent away from the Institute of the Mistresses of the Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus."¹⁵⁵ The aged Minim knew that any pursuit of power or prestige would risk bringing to ruin the Institute which he had founded. Behind the evident successes, dangers were not lacking. It remained to be seen what fruits would result from a whole life spent serving others, particularly the poor, a life dogged by struggle and trials.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Last Months (1686)

For a long time now Fr Barre had entrusted his life and the Institute he had founded into the hands of God. What was going to become of it? There was a real danger of its losing the purity of that apostolic spirit which he was determined to defend to the hilt by steadfastly refusing endowments. That was the very nub of the hidden conflict dividing the administrators of the two main foundations of Rouen and Paris. Monsieur de Grainville bore total responsibility for the foundation at Rouen. He could not imagine the Institute surviving without some guarantee of material security for the future. But, in Paris, Nicolas Barre held out. It was useless pleading with him, telling him it was madness, that it could only lead to a split between the foundation community at Rouen and the Paris-based group which was now spreading all over France; useless trying to persuade him that the future was much too uncertain to allow such risks; the reply of the fragile invalid remained as firm as ever: it was a steadfast "No". He would rather have seen his life's work fail than compromise its independence through excess of security. In its very precariousness, he believed, lay its strength. There were few who understood. Those who did knew that the "Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus are the work of God and, if human beings put their hand to it, God will withdraw His. As soon as they take upon themselves the role of endowing it and taking care of it, God will leave it to them, no longer recognising it as His own work. He will cease to grant it that very special protection which gives the Institute its distinctive character".¹⁵⁶

Nothing must detract from the total abandonment to Providence of these "Daughters of the Infant Jesus" who are called,

¹⁵⁵ TS 18

¹⁵⁶ RNF 14

everywhere and always, to be "women apostles": no security arising out of endowments, no legal recognition by letters patent, no official status in the Church. But the danger was there already, and he knew it. He had been told that, in some communities, this spirit was being undermined by the "vice of ownership" in regard to money: in one place each one wanting for herself the 200 livres allocated for her upkeep, and then arguing over who should pay the communal expenses; in another they were angling for gifts of food and clothing so as to be able to spend the money allocated for their expenses on other things; in Languedoc the eight women dispatched at the King's behest had divided between them the 30 gold coins that remained at the end of the journey and promised to keep it a secret.¹⁵⁷ These, he was well aware, were instances of human weakness from which none of us is exempt but, if one is not vigilant, they can destroy, little by little, that spirit of total detachment that is the mark of the true apostle.

The King's order to send eight Mistresses of Charitable Instruction to Gascony, the enthusiasm with which Servien de Montigny responded, Mme de Maintenon's manifest appreciation of the educational talents of Charlotte de Saint Pars at Noisy, all this could indirectly breach the defences he had erected to ensure the continuing integrity of the work. At the close of his life he was acutely aware that the mission was in danger of collapsing, both in Rouen and Paris.

His friends were also aware of the problem: if nothing were done while he was still alive to unite the houses in Rouen and Paris, the split would later become irreparable. Something had to be done, and quickly. Contact was made and a meeting of the administrators in both places was convened for 10 April. There

were to be three representatives from Rouen: Messieurs de Grainville, de l'Espinau and Fauvel. All three held important posts in the political and administrative life of Normandy. Three would represent Paris also: two Minims, Frs. Giry and Raffron, and the secular priest Fr Servien de Montigny. A neutral venue was chosen, half way between Rouen and Paris, in the town of Magny.¹⁵⁸ The meeting had been carefully prepared; each one knew that the negotiations would not be easy. Before they left, Nicolas again warned his three friends to oppose endowments.

These, however, had already planned their strategy. If the gentlemen from Rouen were to prove adamant, refusing to cooperate with Paris unless endowments were accepted, a deadlock would be reached. Their strategy then might be to agree that the Paris house be the beneficiary of an endowment, but not the Mistresses in their various places of apostolate. If this proposal were accepted, they would try, on their return, to win Fr Barre round to accepting the concession. Furthermore, M. de Grainville was an excellent administrator and was considered in Rouen to be the "instituteur" - the initiator - of the Charitable Schools. He would not readily break with this work which he regarded, justifiably, with a certain pride. They would suggest then that he transfer to Paris and take charge of the whole operation. In this way it would not look as if Paris were dictating to Rouen.

The meeting was not an easy one. Economic issues dominated the debate, and the sticking point for re-unification, insisted upon by Rouen, was that Paris also should seek letters patent. If they agreed to allow the house there to be endowed, then Rouen would place all its assets in the common fund, on condition that Paris would agree to maintain five members of the Rouen

¹⁵⁷ *The facts are told in the account of the meeting at Magny to which reference will be made later in the text*

¹⁵⁸ *A handwritten document exists in the archives of the Congregation of Rouen giving a verbatim account of this meeting and of the issues raised*

community. With regard to M. de Grainville the verbatim account of the meeting is quite clear: "he is not prepared to give himself over to Paris" unless "letters patent for the purpose of endowment" are obtained.

Moreover, the gentlemen from Rouen were of the opinion that this arrangement needed to be further refined and clarified. They wanted to know: "What work have you in mind for M. de Grainville to balance the work he is currently engaged in and which you want him to leave? Is the task you have in store for him more conducive to the glory of God than what he already does here?" The proposal would appear to have been unacceptable for the account continues: "It must surely be possible to find someone in Paris to fill the role, whereas it would be impossible to find someone in Normandy to cover all the things he does there." There were few points of agreement and the future seemed in jeopardy. However, as a proof of goodwill on both sides, they agreed to a joint discussion on a number of issues relating to the life of the Institute and on "the abuses known to have crept in, both in the communities of Paris and Rouen and in all other places where one or several members have been sent". Again, their willingness to admit openly to each other that there were difficulties can be seen as a further sign of goodwill. Nonetheless, the administrators of the two main houses agreed to "take the problems in hand separately, without seeking advice from the other".

In addition to the issues surrounding the spirit of independence and ownership in regard to money, which they hoped to remedy by "finding a way of making the members of the group, young and superiors alike" more accountable to each other, there were other issues raised: difficulties arising out of the inexperience of some of the younger women teachers; the three Mistresses in the Montpellier area who were at loggerheads about everything;

others who arranged to have special food for themselves at table; questionable friendships; superiors trying to win the confidence of young members so as to worm out of them everything that was going on; young members who got others to write glowing letters to their superiors about them... Goodwill was again apparent in the decision taken to send several Mistresses to places dependent both on Rouen and Paris. Francoise Duval was among those named. She was to be sent to Gascony.¹⁵⁹

As the six men ended their meeting, they were aware that, while some progress had been made, the unity remained tenuous. On their return to Paris, Frs. Giry and Raffron found Fr Barre in the community infirmary where he had been transferred some time earlier. They were intent upon persuading him to accept the reasonable proposal which would allow endowment without, at the same time, conferring personal security on the individual Charitable Mistresses. In order to ensure that Fr Barre would agree to this solution before his impending death, they had decided to enlist the support of Fr Antoine Perier, their superior general, to bring pressure to bear on his decision.

Worn out by illness and exhausted by the remedies insisted on by his doctors, the invalid nevertheless remained immovable as a rock in his resolve: "It is better to fall into the hands of God having no human security than to fall into the hands of men through endowments." This stance, as he was well aware, would lead inevitably to schism, and some of the women in Rouen

¹⁵⁹ *Francoise Duval had helped to set up the foundation at Rheims, after which she assisted in setting up the house at Lisieux where she was greatly loved and respected. Being deeply attached to the founding principles of Fr Barre's Institute, she was probably a thorn in the side of the administrators at Rouen who were happy to see her go. However, she died at Sotteville, in September 1686, before being able to set out for Gascony.*

were worried, not knowing who would succeed Fr Barre in Normandy. In Paris it was known that Fr Giry was primed to take up the torch. But where and by whom would they be led in Rouen? There was great anxiety among the group and one of them decided to write directly to Fr Barre asking him to name his own successor. They wanted also to affirm their union with the Minim symbolically and publicly by enrolling in the cord of St Francis of Paola, the cincture with three knots worn by members of the Third Order.

By the time the letter reached the Place Royale, Fr Barre was too weak to write. On 17 May, his condition had deteriorated. Whenever his friends enquired about his health, his reply was always the same as on the many occasions in the past when illness had struck: "I have placed everything in the hands of God; I entrust everything to His goodness and His mercy: my life, my death, and therefore my health too."¹⁶⁰

On 24 May he said Mass at 7 a.m. as he did every day. But by 11 o'clock he had deteriorated. Fits of vomiting and nausea continued throughout the week, right up to the end. He could no longer receive Communion. He felt that everything was slipping away, little by little. But it did not matter: he had long since allowed himself to let go, and the time had come to put radically into action the closing prayer of his Spiritual Canticle:

*O God, creator of all that is,
O depth, foundation of all that exists,
O centre, holding all things together,
O King whom all acknowledge as master,
O Spirit, pure and exalted,
By whom all creation is sustained,
Life and animator of souls,*

¹⁶⁰ Thuillier, *op. cit.*

*Be for us, in your kindness,
The spirit, the source and the flame
That fuels all our desires.
Give us a holy longing
To die to the transient things
Of the spirit, the world, the senses,
That we may make space
For your life in us.
Grant that we may pass from death to life
In you,
Lose ourselves and cease to be,
In you,
That you may work
In us.
Your love for our nothingness would indeed be small,
Our sinfulness great,
Were you to refuse us this favour.*

On 25 May he was extremely weak, yet he went on seeing the religious who were making their retreat with him in preparation for the feast of Pentecost, as well as some lay people who were in the habit of coming to him for confession. His superior felt that it was too much for him and asked that he not be disturbed. The invalid, however, was intent on replying to the letter from Rouen. He no longer had the strength to write, so he asked a confrere to write while he dictated. Its message was one of confidence, in the absence of any certainty. It read:

As you undoubtedly know, dearly beloved sister, I have been overtaken by illness and infirmity for a long time now, so I write to you in a borrowed hand in order to reply to your letter. You

ask if I can foresee the leadership of your Institute, ¹⁶¹ or rather the Institute of the Holy Infant Jesus, after my death. I commend it to our Lord every day. Our esteemed administrators in Rouen raised this matter with me several years ago, asking me insistently which of our Fathers would be best suited to carry on the directorship of the Institute. I was obliged to suggest the names of several to them who seemed to me best suited to the task.

"I hope that these honourable gentlemen will co-operate fully with the spiritual director in their deliberations and decision-making for the good of your Institute and the progress of all the members. We shall be asking the same favour later of Messieurs Dacquerville and de l'Espinay who, as from now, seem willing to follow the example of their fathers and continue this good work."¹⁶² Pray to God about it and entrust yourself to His divine providence. I willingly agree to your being enrolled in the cord of St Francis of Paola together with your companions, because of the perseverance with which all four of you have been asking for it. If God restores me to health, I shall reply to your questions about your own spiritual life.

"Whatever happens, dearly beloved sister, remain always at peace, and trust in God: it shall be done to you according to your Faith, your Hope and your Charity, and even more abundantly. Take this as coming much more from Jesus, than from the hand of one who is completely devoted and committed to your personal sanctification as a means to the sanctification of others. I am,
Yours, through the grace of Jesus,

¹⁶¹ In writing to Anne Le Teinturier, at Dijon, in 1682 Fr Barre writes "our" Institute. Does the change owe anything to a sense of separation between Paris and Rouen, or does it indicate an inner detachment in the face of death?

¹⁶² No mention is made of the meeting at Magny nor of the administrators who took part.

Frere Nicolas Barre, unworthy Minim."

On 26 and 27 May he was able to pen some letters himself, although with difficulty, concerning "the business of the Schools of Providence". This may have been a follow-up to the meeting at Magny. On the 27th, at 3.00 p.m., he was too weak to continue and his writing desk was removed from his room. But in the early hours of that night he wanted to continue his correspondence. Fr Thuillier was there beside him and dissuaded him, saying that his superior thought it better that he would not tire himself further by writing.

"I know what that means," he said.

"Yes," replied Thuillier, "I think your sufferings are like the star of Bethlehem which beckoned the Magi to set out to find Jesus Christ. It is the sign of the great King calling you."

"Then let us not forget what followed and say wholeheartedly with them: `Let us go and offer our hearts to Him."

Thanks to the rest he had had the evening before, he seemed better and, on the morning of the 28th, the good news spread quickly to the delight of his friends. Some went to his room to say how pleased they were. Fr Thuillier, however, was not taken in. This was only a remission, and he was anxious to spend the remaining hours peacefully with his friend as he journeyed towards death. He went back to his sick-room and continued talking to him about the work he had accomplished.

- Fr Barre, you are aware that the King has expressed his admiration and approval of the Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus. That must be a source of great consolation to you to think of the extraordinary good these Mistresses and schools

are bringing about all over France and beyond! You can apply to yourself the words of Jesus to His Father before He died: "I have finished the work You gave me to do. The time has come for me to go to You."

"I know, dear friend, what you are trying to tell me by these words. And I think you know more about the progress of this illness than those who talk to me about getting better."

That afternoon they found him deeply drowsy and feared that he was lapsing into a comatose state as he had two years earlier. Thuillier roused him and tried to keep him talking its prevent this happening.

- Tell us which words of Scripture are most helpful to recite when one is ill and extremely weak like you at this moment.

He opened his eyes and exclaimed here times: "My Lord and my God!"

Then looking at the people gathered in his room he added: "These are the words most pleasing to God and most consoling for us, for God is good, and the thought of His goodness sustains our hope. Help me to repeat these words during my last agony, and also: ***You alone are holy, You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ!***"

"My Lord and my God!" In all its terseness and depth of meaning, this was the cry of faith of the doubting apostle, Thomas, who could not bring himself to believe in the impossible. This was the cry uttered by Nicolas Barre at the end of his long journey through the darkness. "In the midst of our sufferings," he wrote to a friend, "I often send letter upon letter to

heaven, in the guise of prayers, sighs, shouts, exclamations, torments of mind and body, all of which lead me to the point of despair. How wonderful yet incomprehensible is this journey of the spiritual life: heaven appears not to respond, yet interiorly and imperceptibly it is strengthening us all the while."¹⁶³

"My Lord and my God!" The hour had come for the final struggle between doubt and faith, the struggle of faith in the midst of doubt.

Between 7.00 p.m. and 8.00 p.m. Thuillier came to his room again, to spend the night with him. He found him agitated and uneasy.

"What is wrong? Has something happened to you?"

"Ah, my dear friend, for the last hour my old torments of mind have been back in full force. Help me to get rid of them, please, by fetching some holy water."

He then regained his calm and they could hear him murmuring repeatedly: "***I believe, I hope, I want to love for ever.***"

On 29th May, towards 9.00 a.m., Servien de Montigny called to ask how he was. His only reply was: "It is time for me to be going."

Soon after that one of his confreres approached him:

- Will you be still with us to receive the Holy Spirit on the feast of Pentecost? he asked.

"I do not think so," he replied, "but I shall go ahead of Him."

¹⁶³ Letter 54

- And what will you ask of Him on behalf of your beloved Charitable Mistresses?

"Their Institute is a little cell in the Church, and I shall tell the Holy Spirit that He must always be its source of life; it is a school, so I shall tell Him that He must always be its master. It is a squadron which I am lining up against His enemies. I shall tell Him that He must always be its captain."¹⁶⁴

On the 30th, Fr Giry came to visit him. For several years now it was he who had been going to the Rue Saint Maur for the informal discussions and confessions which Fr Barre was no longer able to provide on a regular basis.

- What would you like me to say to them today?

"The approaching Pentecost season is the time when the Holy Spirit takes possession of us. Speak to them of how the Holy Spirit must take possession of them, and they of Him"

Around 3.00 p.m. he asked for the Sacrament of the Sick. As was customary with the Minims, the whole community gathered in his cell. Then, with great gentleness and humility he asked pardon for any wrongs he might have committed and added: "Yes, I have good reason to ask pardon of all the members of our province for, owing to my protracted illnesses, I have not always given the edification you might have expected of me."

Throughout the following night and morning he experienced alternating periods of calm and agitation. He could be heard murmuring: "***In a spirit of humility and with a contrite heart,***

may I be welcomed by You, O Lord, and may my sacrifice be an acceptable offering in Your sight".

On the 31st, towards 10.30 a.m., they sensed that the end was near. Thuillier placed a lighted candle in his hand.

- This is the symbol of faith. May this light rid you of all doubt and distress. Hold it and repeat in your heart: "I believe. The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" It is also the symbol of the divine glory to which you are going. Keep your lamp burning, so that you may enter with Jesus into the wedding feast! Can you hear me, Nicolas?

Breathless he whispered:

"Yes, I can hear. I understand. It's the burning lamp of the wise virgins. What a joy it will be to enter Heaven with them." A little while later he murmured three times: "***Jesus! Mary!***" These were his last words. At noon he drew his last breath. His face was calm, serene and peaceful.

Then the death knell began to toll, and the news spread throughout the city. "The holy Minim is dead! The holy Minim is dead!" A great crowd converged on the monastery: School Mistresses and pupils, nobles and servant girls, members of the bourgeoisie and footmen. Many wept openly. They wanted to see him and touch him. As soon as his body was laid in state in the traditional way at the church doorway, there arose "a great commotion throughout the whole city".¹⁶⁵ They came to kiss his feet, strew flowers on his body, touch him with their rosary-beads. They tried to take hair from his head, from his beard, or bits of cloth from his garments. Before the burial, one of his friends, whose spiritual director he had been, had a wax death-mask made, so that his face would be remembered.

¹⁶⁴ AD 9

¹⁶⁵ Thuillier, op. cit

The young painter, Joseph Vivien, who was passing that way and saw a large crowd gathered around, came over. He too was struck by the beauty of this face, emaciated but radiant, and as if transfigured. He immediately picked up his pencils and executed a portrait. This was to be engraved in copper by Simoneau and reproductions distributed throughout the country.

In Rheims, Jean-Baptiste de la Salle was deeply saddened by the death of the man whose advice had nurtured the foundation of his own institute.

In Rouen they mourned the deceased Minim with great emotion as they re-read his last letter: ***"Whatever happens, remain always at peace and trust in God..."***

And, in the midst of their tears, these men and women, whose spiritual director and guide he had been, recalled what they had learned from him: that ***"suffering is not merely suffering", and that darkness itself can be "better than light"***.

Afterword:

The Followers of Fr Barre Today

At the end of the eighteenth century, the French Revolution dealt a fatal blow to the Minim Order in France. Several of the religious were executed. They were all expelled from their monasteries, and did not return when the period of persecution was over. Today the Minims are to be found in Italy, Spain, Brazil, the United States of America and Czechoslovakia.

The group of Masters of the Charitable Schools, founded by Fr Barre, did not survive. However, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, or de la Salle Brothers, took up the torch and retain a deep gratitude to Nicolas Barre.

Several diocesan congregations in France were greatly helped, at their foundation, by the Institute of Charitable Instruction, or even adapted its statutes.

After Fr Barre's death, Rouen and Paris remained under two distinct administrations. All attempts at reconciliation failed and, in 1690, Servien de Montigny had recourse to the King himself to settle the matter. "This separation," he wrote, "is against the wishes of Fr Barre, and Monsieur de Grainville is only the so-called superior of Rouen." The disunity, in turn, led to divisions among the women; some of those who had been sent to Languedoc preferred to recognise the authority of Rouen. The matter was settled by the King who, in 1691, separated the two branches, placing Monsieur de Grainville over Normandy and Brittany and Servien de Montigny over the rest of France. Some links were retained, however, and further attempts at reunification made in 1685, 1700 and 1707, though these too were destined to fail. A formal act of separation was then drawn up.

In our own day, the Sisters of the Infant Jesus — Providence of Rouen are a diocesan institute with a missionary outreach in Madagascar and Central Africa.

The Sisters of the Infant Jesus — Nicolas Barre are an international institute to be found in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The Second Vatican Council has invited them both to return, like pilgrims, to their sources. As a result, relations have been re-established across three centuries of history and of differences lived separately. A federation of the two institutes has been set up which, at the same time, respects the autonomy of each.

MANDATORY NOTES

General Hospital: A seventeenth century institution established by Vincent de Paul and the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. Their aim was to create a refuge for victims of homelessness, unemployment, war, taxation... as well as of disease. Although it was endowed by the "Company", the General Hospitals were subject to state interference and later complete control. The system was then extended and the institutions used as a "dumping ground" to clean up the image of the state by institutionalising the poor, the insane, the sick, the vulnerable, and even homeless children.

See W. Makin, *Director in the Darkness: a Life of Fr Barre* (no date).

Little Schools: Another common feature of seventeenth century life and not to be confused with "school" as we use the term today. For this reason, although not a proper noun, it appears capitalised throughout the text. Little Schools, set up by Fr Barre and age, or adults, could be taught the rudiments of learning: the 3Rs and the basic elements of the Christian faith. The sexes were taught separately, to comply with church ruling. In the case of Fr Barre's schools, as we see, flexibility was a key characteristic, so as to enable as many as possible of the unlettered to benefit.

Mistresses: Like "Master", the word "Mistress" designates "school teacher". I have used the word throughout, and not "sisters" for the most part, in order to avoid any possible inference that we are dealing with religious sisters. They were

lay people, eventually coming to live out the spirit of the vows, in community, for the purposes of mission.

Parlement: In pre-Revolutionary France the Parlement d'Etats was the national assembly of the three Estates: the Clergy, the Nobility, and the burghers and professional classes. This body voted taxes and was called by the King occasionally (rarely under Louis XIV) to debate matters of national interest. It did not possess the same powers as the English Parliament at Westminster.

Each region and major town or city had its own Parlement which served as a local assembly and court of appeal. Such was the Parlement of the city of Paris, or the Parlement of Normandy of which Monsieur de Grainville and Monsieur de l'Espinay were members. The office of membership was usually bought and often passed on to the successor of the member's choice. The members or "councillors" were people of considerable influence in their locality.

For an account of their three-fold function, see Makin, op. cit., p. 17-18. There is no English equivalent for this institution, so I have not translated the term. (Translator)