

ANNOTATION

Rigault, George. "A Teaching Brotherhood Finds Its Identity: The Secularization Period of 1904-1920," translated and edited by Gerard Rummery, FSC, PhD (Lulu Publishing Services, 2017). 332 pp.

Anyone interested in the topic of "the church under attack" at a time when "leadership is ill-equipped to deal with crisis" might be interested in reading this book.

A 2017 translation into the English language by Lasallian scholar Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC, of "the final volume of the immense [10-volume] work of [Institute historian] Georges Rigault" (ix) – a study commissioned in 1951 by the then Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and completed in 1954 – provides both "a very precious contribution to the history of [French] education in the twentieth century" (x) and an overdue analysis of one of the three great periods of crisis in the history of the Lasallian educational mission and the De La Salle Christian Brothers.

Entitled in English *A Teaching Brotherhood Finds Its Identity: The Secularization Period of 1904-1920*, the study recounts and analyzes the upheaval and tumult that was triggered by the French State's banning of teaching by religious Congregations at the opening of the twentieth century. This so-called "persecution" was the consequence of the confluence of a number of factors: a mentality of secularization in France, the catapulting to prominence of Émile Combes and the "radical anti-clericals," the Alfred Dreyfus affair, and a Freemasonry ambition of separating "the church from the children of the people" (1, 113, 234, 258). The atmosphere within which the events recounted in this book unfold is described as one of "struggle against laws, watchful police intervention, sectarian hate, the prudence of judicial advice, the attitudes and plans of a large part of the episcopate and of the clergy and the general lack of understanding of the masses" (85-86).

At this cataclysmic juncture, the Lasallian reality in France in 1904 counted a membership of almost 11,000 Brothers (195) and unfortunately found itself with a leadership in disarray – both ill-equipped to respond and completely lacking in unity of action (xiv-xv, 40, 44-46, 51, 53, 61). However, there were some "lights" of leadership (37, 46-48, 109, 130), on-the-ground initiatives, and local (both lay and clerical) support. In fact, interwoven as sub-text all throughout the story is the support of so many friends and former students in France (xv). A tension relative to conflicting views over the primacy of the religious state of life versus that of the primacy of the apostolic ministry of education (221-222, 269) is another *leitmotif* of the story being told.

The varying priorities of different bishops (207, 210-212, 227, 230) and confusion at the Vatican, which took strong and vacillating positions (218-220, 227, 295), only exacerbated problems. During the years 1905-1906, the laws of 1901 and 1904 were most rigorously enforced. This was for the "Congregationalists" the period of roughest attack (235-236, 248-249). The orders of July

1904 alone “condemned more than eight hundred [of 1,500] establishments directed by the Brothers of the Christian Schools to perish” (17, 31).

Rigault’s thesis is that the Lasallian history unfolding in the first two decades of the twentieth century is the heroic witness of a desire on the part of the Brothers in France to maintain the apostolate in many cities and municipalities (a desire to save the schools) and to affirm the “indestructible vitality” of the Lasallian educational mission and the Institute (63). This desire found expression both in the secularization of about 4,000 Brothers (87-88, 225) and in the exodus across the frontiers of France by many others (58-60, 64-65). The unintended consequence of the exodus chosen by the 4,000 Brothers who left France (72) was the *de facto* internationalization of the Institute as Brothers – well-trained and in great numbers – moved outward to embrace the four corners of the world. Little by little in the nineteenth century, Brothers were moving outward from France, but these “foreign foundations were viewed more or less in the eyes of those who directed the congregation as being annexes, perhaps even colonies.” Brothers of John Baptist de La Salle outside of France were, henceforth, to become the new normal (72-83, 85).

The secularized Brothers most often suffered during this period, and great sympathy for them is evidenced in the book that doesn’t really concern itself much with the exiles. Superior General Brother Gabriel-Marie, FSC, [1897-1913] refused “to receive, or even greet, former Brothers clad in secular dress” lest there be a declaration of “false secularization”; and excellent “jurists supported his fears and confirmed him in his attitude” (35, 248-250). This led to “reciprocal misunderstanding.” While it was hard to leave one’s country [those who chose expatriation], “it was no less difficult to take off one’s religious habit in order to maintain Christian teaching” (63, 127). The secularized Brothers had to accept “material difficulties, moral sufferings, a much more persistent poverty, a semi-isolation, probable persecution, even humiliations, scorn, suspicions and misunderstandings” (64, 240). Unfortunately, “the insufficiency or absence of firm directions brought about very many abandonments” and “mistrust was generated against Brothers in lay dress and prejudice, justified or not, in the minds of religious who had chosen to preserve their vocation by going into exile” (125, 265, 300-301).

While the laws of 1901 and 1904 were finally repealed in 1940 (322), what actually led somewhat earlier to what is called “the normalization” was the interruption and refocusing of French national priorities in the buildup to and reality of the Great War of 1914-1918 (62, 248). There had always been some 1,000-plus non-teaching Brothers in retirement houses in France who were allowed all throughout this period to continue to wear the religious habit and follow the *Rule* of the Brothers (21, 90-91, 261), but post-1920 things eased up so that the secularized Brothers could begin to return (313). “The election of Brother Imier-de-Jésus, FSC, [1913-1923] marked the beginning of a very fertile period of heroism, of really wonderful bloody sacrifices, strong decisions and considerable progress in the long term” (62). The vigorous force of the newly elected Superior General was felt (317); and by the end of 1928, “497 French houses existed once again indeed for the Institute. A teaching group of around 4,000 Brothers instructed more than 66,000 pupils, a third of them gratuitously, 2,000 subjects were in formation in the junior-novitiates and novitiates of the District of France” (316). However, “the Brothers [in France] never found the same place as they had previously occupied” (ix).

While at times confusing and tedious going for one unfamiliar with the names, cities, and departmental units of France, the story of these years nonetheless presents the reader with a rich panorama of the Lasallian mission at a time when it was undergoing crisis and “persecution” (234-242). The gradual erosion of identity on the part of some Brothers (127-128, 162-163, 171, 239) and the extraordinary fidelity to an ideal on the part of others (113-114, 118-119, 122, 135-136, 142, 157, 164-165, 188) is the backdrop against which the story of the heroism of the secularized Brothers unfolds.