

**HOW THE BROTHERS GOT  
THE NICKNAME  
OF "IGNORANTINS".**

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Some of you might already be aware that the Brothers of the Christian Schools were known in the 18th Century by the not too flattering name of "Ignorantins", which freely translated can be rendered "Little Mr. Know-nothings". Some Brothers get rather worked up about this, imagining that the aspersions on their spiritual ancestors sprinkle them as well; others are simply mystified; others couldn't care less.

Now "ignorantin" is a nickname and nothing more: "an annoying satirical appellation", to quote the dictionary, "somewhat insulting and humiliating", and it was meant to apply to the whole congregation.

Now how was this nickname coined; who first used it, and why?

**1. Back to sources**

"Ignorantin" as applied to the Brothers began its rounds about 1730, which is far from surprising when you consider the cultural background and ideas of the time.

Paul Hazard in his book "Crisis of European Conscience" (1), dealing with the period between 1680 and 1715, writes: "*Hierarchy, discipline, the authorities' conception of order, dogmas with clear definitions, in fact all that 17th century man loved, were the very things that 18th century man detested*".

Hazard continues: "*Instead of a civilisation based on a sense of "duty" - to God and the King -, the new philosophers, "philosophes", substituted a society founded on "rights": the right of individual conscience, the right to criticize and think for oneself, the rights of man and citizens*".

These ideas reflect the kind of atmosphere being created throughout the 18th Century, ending with the French Revolution. The actual storm however took time to build up. Our "intellectuals" the "philosophes" knew how to use these ideas and give them publicity in battering whoever did not agree with them. Their chief enemies were two: the Jesuits, who taught the upper classes to confront the "philosophes" with their own dialectical weapons, and the Brothers of the Christian Schools, teaching the poor to defend themselves with vigour against any doctrine less than orthodox. Teaching

reading and writing the way the Brothers did, was according to the "philosophes" an offence.

So the Brothers had to put up with a lot of laughter, somewhat similar to the kind of jeers the Founder experienced because of his loyalty to Pope and Church at a time when this was out of fashion. They had wanted De La Salle to sign his name as an "appelant", which he resolutely refused to do, with the result that support was withdrawn both from him and from his schools, open to all without discrimination. To suppress them, they appealed to the law.

The Brothers of the 18th Century had therefore a good model to follow when certain people wanted them to ensure that the only function of the Christian School was to forge meek catholics and citizens who blindly obeyed the law of the land. (2) The Brothers also knew how to walk out of step, by defending their freedom to teach secular subjects and the right of the poor and the artisan to get as good an education as the rich. Quietly and persistently the Lasallian Schools spread education among the poor masses of French Society. Rocard, the Prime Minister of France, was right in declaring that the Brothers had brought basic culture to ordinary strata of society before the French Revolution (3).

**2. The waters turn sour**

Such is what happened in the cultural setting of the 18th century. French society deteriorated under the influence of ideas against the faith and against morals. The self-appointed "new philosophers" favoured a Godless society bereft of religion and completely secular. People with different ideas became the object of scorn.

Among the latter were the Brothers, who were attacked for their fidelity to the faith. Between 1730 and 1775, assaults came chiefly from two directions:

● **From the Jansenists**

This movement was condemned by Rome for exaggerated rigourism, particularly over the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Clement XI condemned the thesis of Quesnel, their vademecum. They refused to accept the condemnation and appealed for a Council decision. Those who agreed with the Pope, like the Jesuits and the Brothers, were their enemies and got the backlash.

Certain events in Paris in 1733 aggravated matters. Miracles were supposed to have happened at the tomb of a certain deacon whom the Jansenist wanted the Pope to recognise and canonise. The Brothers remained outside the squabble, so were counted as too faithful to Rome.

The Jansenists began calling them "ignorantins", meaning ignorant of religion; as, in addition, they were not allowed to study Latin and Greek, the nickname caught on.

In fact "ignorantins" as applied to the Brothers first appears in the Jansenist magazine "Church News" (4) and from then on it spread.

● **The other source of attacks on the Brothers were the "new philosophers", usually anti-religious, definitely anti-clerical and quite often anti-popular education.**

Their ideas spread via the "Enlightenment", whose major work was the "Encyclopedia", the first volume appearing in 1750.

Many of these "philosophes" propagated all sorts of ideas against established order, whether political, social, religious, educational. Their war cry was sometimes as clear as "Rid society, the family and school of God" and replace him by Goddess Reason. Faith became marginalised.

Among their most important followers figure the following:

– **François Marie Arouet, - Voltaire - (1694-1778).**

His work spread especially with the motto: "Ecraser l'Infame" which meant crush Jesus Christ and the Church. His ideas formed the basis for the French Revolution of 1789. He agreed with the educational ideas of La Chalotais for whom "the people don't deserve an education". In his letters he referred to the Brothers as "Ignorantins".

– **Louis René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais.**

In his speeches in the Brittany parliament, where he was chairman, he also used the term "ignorantins" in referring to the Brothers, because their schools

– were Christian, apostolic and Roman, faithful to the Pope, whereas he advocated a Godless kind of school, run by married people, not celibates.

– raised the cultural level of artisans' sons, whereas he maintained that the poor should keep to their task and state of life, and not aim at getting out of it.

– were open to everyone and required no fees. Hence for La Chalotais, the Brothers were the "new Jesuits". According to him the school had no reason to remain free of charge.

– **Jean Jacques Rousseau**

His educational ideas are found in "Emile" (1762). He replaces Christian morality with a natural morality, avoiding the concept of sin.

The "educational" ideas which predominate in these and in other "philosophes" of the period maintain:

– that teaching ordinary folk to read and write is a waste of time since they all end up as good-for-nothings;

– they don't need teaching but guiding;

– the poor have no reason to be taught;

– the poor don't need all the time in class that is given in the schools of the time and in higher educational establishments (5);

– the poor should concentrate on labour: France needs them for the fields and ordinary jobs... (6).

### 3. Vicious campaign against the Brothers and the Jesuits.

It is not surprising that in the era of the Encyclopedists the Brothers and the Jesuits should be the main target, because of the nature of their educational work.

– in 1760 a review came out called "**Collection of Anecdotes**" in which the Brothers were violently attacked, especially if they were in positions of authority like Brothers Timothy, (Superior General), Irenaeus and Stanislas who all lived at St. Yon (7).

– in 1764 appeared the "Granet Report" on the Brothers. Granet was an municipal official of Toulon. He was asked to draw up a report on the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who had asked authorisation to open a school in the area. The report repeats the refrain of the "philosophes", however it is worth noting that some of the criticisms are to be proud of:

\* The Brothers have become very popular;

\* everyone praises their methods of teaching and of giving catechism, including the insistence on "order and silence";

\* the Institute keeps making progress inspite of difficulties;

\* they have boarding schools for the well-to-do and the money left over they use on their poor schools ;

\* the Brothers don't become priests so as to have more time for teaching the poor and simple;

\* they follow the orders of their bishops and authorities to the letter.

– The Jesuits had a harder time of it than the Brothers, especially after the publication of the "Provincial letters" of Blaise Pascal. The parliament of Paris forced them to give up all their establishments in 1763, and shortly afterwards they succeeding in convincing Clement the XIV to suppress the Company of Jesus; only in 1808, under Pius VII, were they reinstated.

– Paradoxically, the Brothers found a few supporters among the "philosophes". Diderot for example thought that education should be free; De La Luzerne opposed Rousseau's ideas on schools.

During all these troubles, the nickname of "ignorantins" became so common for the Brothers that people took no notice of it (8), in fact many thought it was their real name, with no pejorative overtones. However it had been hard going up till then, even though the institute continued growing and looking after the poor.

Georges Rigault (9) has this to say of the period: "*The Brothers had never had such difficult opponents as the Jansenists, wrapped up in their grim and joyless morality*". Brother Yves Poutet writes: "*If Voltaire fought the Brothers, it was not because they were ignorantins, but because they raised the cultural level of the people and gave them solid instruction, which neither he nor his enlightened companions thought they should receive. The Brothers went clean contrary to the tenets of the "philosophes", who envisaged a society without the poor and those who had no means of becoming cultured*". (10).

### Notes.

(1) Paul Hazard: The European Crisis of the 17th and 18th Centuries.

(2) Y.Poutet. Le XVIIe siècle et les origines lasalliennes. T.II. p 59-60.

(3) Talk in La Réunion given by John Paul II at the canonisation of Brother Scubilion. 2nd May 1989.

(4) p.19

(5) G. Rigault. Histoire de l'Institut des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes. T. II. p 356. 419. In Provence for example the Brothers were accused of enticing workers away from the fields.

(6) Brother Agathon wisely employed anything useful from the new "philosophes" to improve his schools. like not being too bookish, being in contact with local life, having contact with nature, knowing the history of one's town and province, studying science, having a critical attitude to what one is presented with.

(7) G. Rigault. T. II p 407

(8) Followers of César de Buss called themselves "ignorantins" through humility. Cf Rigault Vol II p 404. The Minimes. Father Barré's congregation called themselves "smallest" because they considered themselves the lowest in society, the most insignificant branch of the Franciscans.

(9) G. Rigault. Vol II p 408.

(10) Yves Poutet. Vol II p 59-60.