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# Conduct of Christian schools

An overall plan of human and  
Christian education



*The Conduct of Christian Schools* is a work that was essential to the human and Christian education project of John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers. The first known manuscript dates from 1706. For three centuries this 'Rule of the Schools' has been the handbook for reference and evaluation of the educational and pedagogical work of the Brothers; more than 24 re-editions testify to the long-felt wish to re-write this founding text.

The reasons for this are many.

The first refers to the method thanks to which it was written: "*This Conduct was only written in the form of regulations after a very large number of meetings with the oldest Brothers in this Institute and those judged most capable in the classroom; and then only after an experience of many years.*" For some 20 years these Brothers looked at their practice and in the end kept only what was most effective and also most significant for their education project. It is therefore a collective work and not that of an isolated thinker.

The second relates to the fact that this *Conduct* is meant to be practical. It is not a general discourse on the teacher, the pupil, pedagogy... but a thought-out action, which chooses its battle-fields deliberately and puts in place its strategies with a precise aim in mind. This characteristic has often irritated the theoreticians of education who found this precision of detail a bit hard to take... but what else was there to do when you found yourself faced day after day by 60 or 70 children bursting with energy!

In the end, this text developed in the Institute a dialectic attitude which has never been contradicted since the beginning: to have a clear, precise, well-argued view of the human and Christian education project and, at the same time to endlessly question oneself on the real, practical, adapted conditions necessary for putting it into practice. This is what makes an educational tradition perennial.

This text is, therefore, one of the great sources of the Lasallian Project.

For many years now, Br. Léon Lauraire has been working methodically on the text of *The Conduct of Christian Schools*. While trying to understand the social and spiritual context in which it was drawn up, he is aiming at picking out the educational intent which motivated its first publication and this great attention to detail.

Some years ago in a French Lasallian review, Br. Léon wrote about twenty articles to help us understand the educational concerns of the authors of the *Conduct*.

Today he is proposing them here for our reflection.

These are short articles, conceived as 'meeting-points' for Lasallian groups, to be used in the following four-stage rhythm:

- the group chooses an article which corresponds to its preoccupations.
- the article is read carefully, looking for its educational intent and the practices which flow from this.
- in it the members of the group confront their own educational aim and the practical means at their disposal today.
- the group picks out some practical conclusions for the world of today.

I would like to thank Br. Léon Lauraire here for his fraternal contribution.

Br. Nicolas Capelle

- A School for young people

**Recent Lasallian Educational Mission Statements have tended to centre on three points: the service of youth, the associative nature of the work, and the pursuit of a holistic human and Christian education. These three points are rooted in three centuries of constantly updated tradition.**

A “school centred on the pupil”: a pious wish or reality? What does the Conduct of Christian Schools have to say on this matter? The key to understanding the original “mission statement” lies perhaps in half a dozen words.

### **Organisation**

De La Salle and the first Brothers had the chance of being able and being obliged to invent a new type of school that was different from those already in existence. Their approach was pragmatic and inductive, born of the needs of young people, as they perceived them, and proposing solutions.

This original concern inspired:

- the aims and general objectives of their school;
- structures sufficiently flexible to adapt to the individual needs of pupils;
- a division of the learning process into “lessons” and “levels”, which made it easier to divide up the pupils, so that each one was in a group which suited his needs;
- a new type of programme control which identified attainment goals in each of the subjects taught;
- a flexible management of school time which went so far as to modify the duration of learning stages depending on the number of pupils;
- follow-up of the progress of each individual by means of frequent and rigorous assessments, the importance of which we know.

## **Differentiation**

Such organisation made differentiation possible. In the Conduct, moving to the following class did not depend on obtaining an average of pass-marks: the pupil could be in different groups depending on the subject. This flexibility made personalised teaching programmes possible, even if working techniques were not those of present-day personalised pedagogy, since pupils in each subject worked in small homogeneous groups.

The result was a specific form of work, tailored to needs, taking into account the standard, the pace of work, the capability and even the future aspirations of each pupil. To achieve this, pupils were given a preliminary examination to determine their initial standard; they were assessed monthly; their behaviour was monitored to assess their attitudes; care was taken to discover what they wished to do when they left school.

## **Relations**

In the Conduct, as in the other writings of De La Salle, pupils are not considered simply as learners: they are persons who deserve consideration and respect. Mutual respect is the attitude which characterises best the inter-personal relations of decorum and civility, in school and outside. It is an attitude based on a Christian anthropology which underpins the Lasallian educational mission statement as a whole. In this way, the educational relationship becomes the moving force behind centring the school on the pupil.

To develop this relationship, a thorough personal knowledge of each pupil is necessary. The Conduct suggests various means for acquiring this knowledge: gathering information on admission; meeting parents or guardians whenever necessary; the long time spent by teachers with their pupils; the specific means used to make practical use of this observation (five Registers which provide a kind of X-ray of each pupil's behaviour), the summary assessment each teacher makes in the "register of the good and bad qualities of students"; and constant collaboration with the school Inspector who adds his view of the pupils.

All these are simple and practical ways, but above all, they are effective and make possible objective observation which otherwise could fall into the trap of subjectivity. The purpose of these

various procedures is to establish an educational relationship characterised by lucidity, trust, cordiality and affection. De La Salle uses powerful language - love, affection, tenderness - to characterise this relationship. It removes at the same time all weakness, sentimentality and compromise, so that the relationship can become an opportunity for a process of identification. This presupposes that the teacher is well-balanced emotionally and in his relationships.

In the face of the social, affective and spiritual needs of the pupils, this exemplary attitude on the part of the teacher constitutes a most valuable means of humanising, liberating and evangelising young people, because this threefold educational aim can be achieved only through the experience of true human love.

### **Participation**

The term “participation” is not part of De La Salle’s vocabulary, but it can help us to understand better what actually went on in his schools. Participation in them normally took three forms.

- The actual type of work implied constant and sustained activity by each pupil: it was a process of apprenticeship, in which no one can take the place of the apprentice. Each pupil was really responsible for his own progress. In the Lasallian school, the pupil was never a passive listener.
- At certain moments of group exercises, participation took the form of help given by certain pupils to those who had immediate need of it. They corrected errors, helped other pupils to overcome difficulties, and gave the example of correct answers. Mutual help went on also when the class was working in the absence of the teacher, which occurred at the beginning of each half-day’s work.
- But above all, there was a participation born of solidarity, thanks to the “offices”, which were ways of contributing to the running of the class as a whole. The opening sentence of the chapter of the Conduct entitled “School Officers” goes as follows: “There shall be several officers in the school. These officers will be charged with several different functions which the teachers cannot or ought not to do themselves”. The text goes on to list 14 of these officers and briefly explains their function. It involves a real devotion of responsibility on the part of the teacher, and real participation on the part of numerous pupils who are given an office.

## **Formation**

The preceding paragraphs sketch out an outline of a school centred on the pupils. This approach does not function of its own accord; and the example of the first Lasallian schools shows the need of at least two attitudes on the part of teachers: formation and commitment.

For De La Salle and the Brothers, formation was not simply one of the possible options: it was an essential responsibility and a constant concern, so much so that it occupied all the free time of the Brothers outside school time. Each one had to strive daily to improve his competence to the point that he became excellent. The Brothers met annually as a group to enrich and develop the associative dynamism that united them. In fact, the pupils occupied the time, energy, concern and even the daily prayers of their teachers.

## **Commitment**

Really centring the school on the pupils is the result of a deliberate, determined and shared decision, able to put aside external restraints or the inertia and resistance within the establishment. Even in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was not always easy. It would be unfair to minimise the desire of the Brothers to construct such a school. By entering the "Society of the Christian Schools", each one was conscious of the fact he was committing himself in a radical way to the service of the working class and the poor. It was a commitment to which he felt called: it was his vocation.

Today, the teaching profession is still considered to be a vocation by those who choose it. It implies therefore a commitment. In the Lasallian world, this commitment is at the same time individual and collective. This is what Association means. In the measure that we forget this, we run the risk of forgetting that the school exists first and foremost for the pupils.

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## **Preventive pedagogy**

Many historians of school education in France who speak of the *Conduct of Christian Schools* lay great emphasis on the chapter



on “*Correction*” as if it were the most characteristic aspect of the work. A rapid and superficial reading of the work leads them to make approximative assessments. This gives rise to the idea that the pedagogy advocated by De La Salle and the first Brothers was essentially repressive.

It is true that the chapter in question is the longest in the *Conduct*, but it is also the one with most differentiation, for the subject was a sensitive one at the time. In the thinking of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and in the system of sanctions in force in society, it was difficult to avoid corporal punishment totally. While the *Conduct of Schools* shows no leaning towards angelism, its chapter on correction does try to explain to teachers above all how to avoid having to correct children. It could not have been any different, since the Founder and the Brothers believed that teaching children was above all a question of the heart, and that it was essential to establish bonds of affection and cordiality with all the pupils. From this conviction was born a pedagogy which was essentially preventive.

### **Prevention is better than cure**

This saying born of popular wisdom applies perfectly to Lasallian pedagogy. We see it illustrated in all aspects of the school described in the *Conduct*. For lack of space, we shall choose only a few examples from the learning process, from class management, from the behaviour of pupils in school and out, and even from the preparation for their professional future.

The material context of the classroom already serves as a constant reminder for the pupil of his obligations. Displayed on the walls are five maxims intended to serve as a warning to potentially forgetful, distracted or negligent pupils. From the moment they are admitted to school, the pupils - and the parents - are clearly told what to expect. They know they will be punished “for not having studied, for not having written, for being absent from school, for not having listened during catechism, for not having prayed to God”. That is the content of the five maxims. They have the double merit of warning the pupils and countering arbitrary punishment by the teacher, his changes of mood and his personal preferences.

Regarding discipline in school, one can say that the whole second part of the *Conduct of Christian Schools* is devoted to preventive measures. From the outset, the text announces there are nine principal means “for establishing and maintaining order in school”. While we cannot analyse them all, we can say that essentially they can be summarised by the word “order”: order in all aspects of life and work in class. Order has a preventive connotation, in the sense that it avoids the unforeseen and eliminates chance from life in a group. On the other hand, order is necessary in classes with so many pupils confined to a space too small for them. And so it is not surprising to find the notion of order present in class discipline, in basic learning, in the putting away of teaching materials, in going from place to place in the school and outside the school, and in relations between people.

The prevention of moral dangers. Teachers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were very worried about morality. They mistrusted the natural inclination to evil which, in their opinion, characterised human nature and, in particular, children. They believed strongly in the contagious nature of example - whether good or bad - and they knew that dissolute persons were a widespread feature of urban life. These considerations throw light on various warnings we find in the *Conduct of Christian Schools*: warnings against bad company, visiting absent pupils, the expulsion of dissolute pupils from school (the ultimate punishment, according to the *Conduct*), the appointment of “inspectors” and of his two “supervisors” to keep watch over the pupils in the absence of the teacher, the observance of certain postures in class and in church to avoid all physical contact, the whole ritual governing the movement of pupils from school to the church and from church to their homes, the list of recommendations to give on the eve of holidays. Mentioned also is the need for good example on the part of the teacher, as well as of the pupils among themselves.

The prevention and immediate correction of errors during lessons. If we read the first part of the *Conduct of Christian Schools* with this in mind, we see how, in reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling and catechism, teachers try to help pupils to avoid making mistakes. As modern studies on the learning process have demonstrated, the experience - above all when repeated - of making mistakes and failing is counter-productive. It has no positive effect on the acquisition of knowledge. The authors of the *Conduct* were not aware of

this, but, to avoid the negative effects of making mistakes, they advocated a particular kind of learning: imitation and repetition of a model supplied by the teacher. When it was possible, recourse was also made to examples and corrections given by other pupils, which was a form of mutual aid. The aim was to avoid feeling one's way, or making fruitless attempts, since these always leave a negative impression on the mind. Immediate correction, of course, also plays a preventive role regarding what is learned next.

The prevention of after-school failure. This expression may seem surprising, but this kind of prevention was an important dimension of Lasallian pedagogy. De La Salle and the Brothers knew from what kind of socio-economic background their pupils came, pupils who were the children "of the working class and the poor". They were conscious of the impasse in which often their parents lived, and they wanted to ensure that the children had access to a better life. They wanted their school to be a means of advancement. This concern takes various forms in the *Conduct*. For example:

- *The fight against absenteeism*, because irregular attendance prevents the pupil from taking full advantage, and so compromises future success. If it disturbs the smooth running of a class, absenteeism is even more detrimental to the pupil who is guilty of it. In the same connection, a lack of punctuality gives rise to the same risk.

- *The quest for an effective school*, useful for the future. It is especially in response to the expectations and demands of parents that the *Conduct* insists on the importance of an effective school, but it is also through concern for the professional future of the pupils.

All the first part of the *Conduct* explains with abundant detail the conditions which ensure that lessons are solid, useful and of high quality. Competence acquired in this way and reinforced increases the chance of finding employment later on and keeping it.

A similar concern is expressed regarding integration into the Church, because the pupil is also a Christian, who must acquire good habits, practise the maxims of the Gospel and take his place in the parish: it is not enough to memorise the speculative truths of Christian doctrine.

Finally, there is a logical consequence of all this: to achieve this objective of socio-professional and ecclesial integration, it is nat-

ural for the school to establish relations with the parents of the pupils and the corporative background from which they come.

### **Prevention cannot be improvised**

Constant and concerted vigilance is not enough: prevention depends also very directly on the person of the teacher; it is his responsibility. If we go beyond the context of the *Conduct of Christian Schools* and analyse the thinking and actions of John Baptist de La Salle, we discover that good prevention depends on a number of pre-existing conditions. For example:

Initial formation which includes preparation for this preventive pedagogy. In the text entitled "Training of new teachers", it is explained how the aspiring teacher must prepare himself for coming into contact with his pupils and imposing his authority over them "with an engaging and winning manner". It is the sense of personal authority which does away with the need of exercising power.

Ensuring one is understood by pupils, so that they really profit from teaching. De La Salle makes this point a number of times in his writings, and it is mentioned also in the text on the training of teachers. Teachers must acquire "facility in speaking and expressing themselves clearly, logically and in a way that is understood by the pupils they teach".

Daily practice by the Brother in community to perfect his mastery of the exercises he will be giving his pupils. A sort of continuing formation, apparently modest in scope, but essential given the type of learning process used with the pupils, and the pedagogical context of the times. The teacher had to aim for perfection in order to be able to serve as an example for his pupils.

Prevention assured collectively thanks to team work in each school, in the form of collaboration and mutual help among the teachers, in particular, to ensure good order in the classrooms, and when moving from place to place.

More important still was the thorough personal knowledge of each pupil. The *Conduct of Christian Schools* lists a series of measures beginning with the admission of the pupil and continuing until the end of his schooling. Such a knowledge was based on a profound interest in each pupil, which made it possible to

adapt teaching to his ability. In practical terms, it involved keeping the various “registers” mentioned in the work.

At an even deeper level, prevention takes place also in the educational relationship wanted by De La Salle. This relationship goes beyond simple interest and becomes reciprocal love. In the final analysis, it is on this that preventive pedagogy is based. It is not a way for the teacher to protect his authority, or to avoid disorder in the classroom. Instead, preventive pedagogy seeks to protect the pupil from anything that can damage the integrity of his person, disturb his work, or make him make bad choices regarding his life.

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## Vigilance

Vigilance is a recurring theme in the writings of St John Baptist de La Salle. The second part of the *Conduct of Christian Schools* opens with the enumeration of the 9 “things that can contribute to establishing and maintaining order in schools”. The first is “the vigilance of the teacher”. It is one of the “twelve qualities of a good teacher” at the end of the work.

### **The vigilance teachers must show in school**

*“The vigilance of teachers in school consists particularly of three things: (1) correcting all the words that are mispronounced by a pupil when reading; (2) making all the other pupils who have the same lesson follow when any one of them is reciting; (3) enforcing a very strict silence. Teachers should constantly pay attention to these three things”.*

The importance given to vigilance may be thought surprising today. But it is interesting to note that the first condition for a school to run well, according to the Founder, is essentially the quality of the educational relationship, and not the structures, the regulations, the discipline, even if these aspects have their place in his work.

To allay our astonishment somewhat, we need to know the meaning given to the word “vigilance” in those days. It is a word that has been gradually contaminated by connotations of supervision, discipline, hints of mistrust - all clearly restrictive aspects of its primary meaning.

## Some semantics

If we turn to the definition given in the *“Nouveau Dictionnaire Français”* of Pierre Richelet (1709), we find: *“The great attention one gives to looking after something. Behaviour of a person who is alert and who is keeping watch over something so that all goes as well as one would like...”*

In Lasallian tradition, several of the texts of the Founder or of writers commenting on “vigilance” insist on the educational aspect of this attitude. They see in it a manifestation of zeal, and recall that the educator must exercise his vigilance, first of all, over himself, over the educational environment, and over the pupil himself, so he can see signs of his development and intervene in time by suitable advice. Vigilance is also seeing the young person with eyes of faith, and this is what gives it a spiritual dimension. Vigilance must not be apprehensive, distrustful, embarrassed, otherwise it would become insulting for the young people and awkward for the teacher. According to Brother Agathon’s commentary (18<sup>th</sup> c), *“this attention must, therefore, be peaceful, not agitated, not uneasy, not constraining and without partiality. All this makes it more perfect”*.

It is, therefore, an attitude connected with the exercise of the educational profession. It is the realisation on the part of the educator of his responsibility. It is a conscious and generous commitment to the educational relationship.

## Vigilance and preventive pedagogy

In De La Salle’s schools, vigilance and correction constituted two aspects of the same pedagogical aim: to ensure that order reigned. Exercised well, vigilance should forestall disorder in class and learning difficulties, avoiding in this way the recourse to sanctions. As the old saying goes: “prevention is better than cure”.

This is what leads De La Salle to advocate the constant presence of adults wherever there are children. This prevention does not concern simply the personal behaviour of the pupils, but also their school work. This is clearly implied in the chapter of the *Conduct* referred to earlier. The commentary is based on some very modern principles underlying the laws of learning, such as, “you don’t learn by your mistakes”, “teaching based on success is more effective”.

We can speak, therefore, of the pedagogical dimension of vigilance which seeks above all to ensure the quality and solidity of what is learnt, maintain and stimulate attention, create a silent atmosphere conducive to work by everybody, and to pursue an educational approach tailored to the needs of the pupils.

### **Educational dimension**

Vigilance according to De La Salle extends to the whole behaviour of the pupil: attitudes, persons they frequent, conduct... If we consider the *Conduct of Christian Schools* as a whole, or even his writings as a whole, we note that vigilance is a teacher's duty, both in and out the school, whenever pupils are present, but also a means of promoting their personal, professional and Christian development.

This educational concern is reflected, for example, in a letter to Brother Robert, dated May 21<sup>st</sup> 1708: *"Supervise the children carefully, for there will be no order in the school except insofar as you are watchful over them. That is what assures their progress. Their improvement will not be brought about by your impatience, but by your vigilance and prudent behaviour"*.

### **Spiritual dimension**

Like other educators of his time, De La Salle was keenly aware of the moral dangers encountered by the pupils of his schools, and he wished to protect them. For him, vigilance was rooted in a theology of salvation.

The Christian teacher had to strive to become a vigilant "Good Shepherd" - modelled on that of the Gospel - in order to protect them from sin, induce them to become converted, and so save their souls.

It is Jesus Christ himself in the Gospel who urges us to be constantly vigilant regarding ourselves and those entrusted to us.

John Baptist de La Salle sees vigilance as being very much more than supervision. He makes it an essential component of the exercise of the ministry of Christian education. Far from being simply a preventive pedagogical means, it is seen as a pastoral attitude *par excellence*. Its aim is not only to protect the pupil by its dissuasive effects, but to invite him and help him achieve high quality spiritual growth.

Understood in all its wealth and depth, vigilance is still for Lasallian educators today the royal road to educate young people in true personal freedom and responsible independence, in an atmosphere of mutual trust.



- A School that is relational

## How teachers should act towards their pupils

In his 33<sup>rd</sup> *Meditation*, St John Baptist de La Salle uses the parable of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10, 11-16) to give us a brief course in practical psycho-pedagogy, especially regarding teacher-pupil relationships.

Each of the three points of this *Meditation* speaks of two essential components.

- *“In today’s Gospel, Jesus compares those who have care of souls to a good shepherd who is very careful of his sheep. One of the qualities which Our Lord says distinguishes him is that he knows them all individually. This is also one of the essential qualities required of those who instruct others, for they must get to know their pupils, and discern the manner in which to act towards them. Some require great mildness, while others need to be directed with firmness. Some require much patience; others need to be goaded on. It is necessary to punish and reprehend some, in order to correct their defects, whereas others need to be continually watched lest they should wander and perish. This varied conduct must depend on knowledge and discernment of character, and this grace you must beg of God most earnestly, as being one of the most essential for you in the direction of those over whom you have charge”.*

Two essential components

### **Personalised knowledge**

The Lasallian teacher tries *“to know all his pupils individually”*. De La Salle returns here to a constant of his pedagogical thinking: there is no true educational impact which is not based on personalised knowledge.

### **The discernment of character**

This expression is more original and more profound. Personalised knowledge calls for an effort to understand what is below the sur-

face, for empathy, and therefore, for a real dialogue. It goes beyond purely empirical or scientific data: it comes from intuition, from internal enlightenment which one can request and obtain by prayer. It is spiritual *"as one of the [graces] most essential for you in the direction of those over whom you have charge"* (MD 33,1).

It is therefore on condition that the teacher uses practical and effective means to acquire a personalised knowledge, and has the *"gift of the discernment of character"*, that he will find the right way to behave, that is, have a suitable educational relationship with each pupil. He will then be able to apply a body of true psycho-pedagogy.

In the first point of his meditation, J.B. de La Salle gives us several examples: *"some require great mildness"*, while others *"firmness"*; *"some require much patience"*, *"others need to be goaded on"*; some it is necessary punish and reprehend, in order to correct their defects, and *"some need to be continually watched lest they should wander and perish"*.

These examples are an illustration of the formula De La Salle uses twice in his writings: in dealings with pupils *"have the firmness of a father and the gentleness of a mother"*. These few words do not claim to constitute a whole catalogue of educational behaviour, but are sufficiently characteristic of the "Lasallian view of young people", which can be described as follows: lucid and realistic observation of individuals and their situation, deeply-rooted trust which never despairs and which inspires creative dynamism; an ambitious and optimistic outlook which perseveres despite difficulties; a cordial and affectionate relationship, which seeks *"to touch hearts"* and not simply the intellect; disinterested service supporting young people's plans; exigence, without which there is no true education; a call to surpass oneself, because the aim is to achieve responsible autonomy, and true interior freedom.

The educational relationship with young people is constantly under-pinned by love for the pupils, gentleness towards them, constant vigilance and affective nearness. From the very beginning, De La Salle attached much importance to the length of time spent with young people. Up till recently, the Brothers made it possible to follow in his footsteps, by setting more value on multi-subject teachers than on specialists. The former option no doubt

has its dangers, but its advantages become immediately clear where a personalised knowledge of pupils is concerned.

### **A modern concept**

Contemporary pedagogy has often had recourse to the discoveries of the psychological sciences and applied them to its own field. In the course of the last few decades, much has been said and written about the nature and implications of the pedagogical relationship, and its essential and central role has been stressed. At the present time, teachers are being urged to take into account the *personal projects of pupils*, and "mediation" pedagogy is being developed and further researched. Examples illustrating the educational insights of *Meditation 33* are not lacking. This research has the merit of offering a conceptual and more objective basis for factors which initially were purely empirical. Serious personal or team reflection would make it possible to discover in this type of educational relationship the secret of the success obtained with pupils in difficulty. The human and affective approach - the approach through the heart - can certainly do more in this area than educational technology on its own.

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*"It is also necessary, says Our Lord, that the sheep should know their shepherd, in order to follow him. Two things are required, therefore, of those who have charge of souls, and should characterise them. Firstly, they should be very virtuous, in order to serve as an example, for unless they walk in the right path, those who follow them would be led astray. Secondly, they should manifest great tenderness for the souls confided to them, so that anything which might be capable of injuring or wounding these souls will call for their attention. In this manner, the sheep will love their shepherd and be pleased in his company, since they will find therein their repose and their relief.*

*If you wish your disciples to practise virtue, do so yourself. You will lead them to it far more easily by giving them the example of a wise and reserved conduct than by anything you can say. If you wish your pupils to be silent, be silent yourself. Similarly, you will make them pious and modest if you show yourself to be such".*

Commenting on the Gospel parable of the Good Shepherd, De La Salle compares the teacher to a shepherd responsible for leading

his sheep and watching over them. To do this, it is not sufficient to have a personalised knowledge of each pupil and the ability to discern characters. Point 2 of *Meditation 33* highlights other factors which constitute an educational relationship.

## The sheep need to know their shepherd

This, clearly, is the counterbalance for what was said previously. The educational relationship is not one way. It is a verbal or non-verbal exchange between teacher and pupil. By its very nature it is reciprocal.

The teachers' necessary interest, their legitimate curiosity, their persevering efforts to know their pupils, need to be matched by similar attitudes on the part of the pupils towards their teachers - so long as the teachers agree.

Serve as an example to others

Like his 17<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries, De La Salle considered setting an example both important and efficacious from an educational point of view. He often mentions this in his writings in a language which may seem to us moralising and outdated. But the deep significance of what he said is clear from the importance we attach today to the role of giving witness and the psychological process of identification. Young people have more need of witnesses than of teachers, we sometimes read. Sociological research and analysis make it possible to confirm the decisive influence of witness and of identification - two essential factors of the educational process.

Recognise great tenderness in them

This is the atmosphere in which Lasallian education takes place. It requires warmth from its models or witnesses. As St Exupéry wrote: *"It is only with the heart that one can see well..."* Education works at a deeper level solely through an affectionate relationship; through constant attention to young people and a spontaneous sensitivity regarding whatever concerns them; through an understanding of their particular world with its language, attitudes, interests, values, expectations, but also needs and difficulties. And so, there is reciprocity: *"love the pupils"*, *"win over their heart"* and *"touch their heart"* are expressions used by De La

Salle. This establishes between them and us a bond of trust, makes dialogue possible, makes the sharing of confidences easier, and makes educational accompaniment possible.

#### Meaning for today

Far from taking refuge behind the professional mask, try to be close and transparent to the pupils, by being cordial and by making an effort to be with young people. This attitude involves more risks, is more uncomfortable for an adult, but it is a necessary condition for educational influence.

Of course, young people find their models outside school also - at home, in the Church, in society - but this does not dispense teachers. It is the strength of witness which gives moral authority, authority which comes much more from the quality of the personality than from the force of regulations.

On this condition, adds De La Salle: *"You will lead them to it far more easily by giving them the example of a wise and reserved conduct than by anything you can say"*.

Allow them to know you. This takes place also through school work, the methods used, the type of relationship that is established through them. The educational relationship will be all the more rewarding as these methods involve pupils and teachers at the same time. What is needed therefore are active and participatory activities.

If we look at what has happened to the educational relationship over the last forty years, it is clear that it has gradually evolved towards a type closer to what De La Salle proposes in his *Meditation*. From being magisterial it has progressively become the accompaniment of young people, support of a personal project, embracing a new concept of the process of educational and professional career guidance: its role now is more that of mediation.

It is normal therefore for Lasallians to feel at ease with these guidelines: they see in them their own educational tradition.

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*"It is also an obligation on the part of the flock of Christ to listen to the voice of their pastor. It is your daily duty, therefore, to teach the children confided to your care. They must hear your voice,*

*that is to say, you must give them instructions suited to their capacity, otherwise your labour would be in vain. You must study to word the questions and answers of the catechism lesson in so clear a manner that they will be easily understood. In your exhortation you must point out judiciously the defects of your pupils, and suggest the means whereby they may correct them. They must be told the virtues suited to their age, and must be urged to practise them. They must be inspired with a great horror of sin, a detestation of bad company, and, in a word, they must be trained in everything conducive to true piety. Such is the way in which disciples must listen to the voice of their master”.*

The need for a personalised knowledge of pupils and the educational power of adult witness are two indisputable aspects of educational relationships, but there are others. According to St John Baptist de La Salle, there are two other professional requirements which guarantee the efficacy of an educational relationship: adaptation to young people, and credible teachers.

### **Make yourself understandable to the pupils**

This is a concern which returns frequently in the writings of St John Baptist de La Salle. He would no doubt agree with what Janusz Korczack writes: *“You say: it’s tiring to be with children. You’re right. You add: because you have to go down to their level, lower yourself, lean, bend down, make yourself small. But, in this, you’re wrong. That’s not what’s most tiring. Rather, it’s the fact you have to raise yourself up to the level of their feelings, You need to stretch yourself, make yourself taller, stand on tip-toe. So that you don’t hurt them”.* (When I become small again).

Such an attitude implies many things: using language understandable by young people; using methods suited to their age and mentality; listening to them, reaching out to them, accompanying them in an ongoing dialogue, perhaps preferring to use personalised teaching techniques; in a word, offering them an education tailored to their needs.

### **Make yourself heard**

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> point of *Meditation 33*, the verb “heard” is used 4 times. The teacher must make himself heard.

To avoid misunderstanding this passage, let us recall that the Founder is referring here to the Christian dimension of the educa-

tion of young people, to the proclamation of the Gospel. In any case, the reference to “catechism” gives us the key. The educational relationship cannot be restricted solely to the learning of profane subjects and to human education. Given the Lasallian insistence on the holistic education of young people, this education includes also moral education, the spiritual dimension of the person, and the proclamation of Jesus Christ; and these constitute the crowning point of De La Salle’s educational approach.

This is a point which we include today in the Lasallian Educational Mission Statement, as for example, in the following passage: *“The choices are realistic and take into account, the times, places, resources, available staff and, above all, the young people we are dealing with. But this realism is inspired by the Gospel and not only by purely scholastic and social success. To translate the Gospel daily into the educational relationship is the choice which inspired John Baptist de La Salle”.*

We find here the same requirements regarding language, method, behaviour, personalised attention to young people as in the *Meditation*. In practice, we have to make *“the means of salvation”* available to young people by an explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ; witnessing to the Gospel in our person and in our life; and having the necessary inventiveness to bring present-day relevance to the Christian formation of young people.

### Speak with authority

If we fulfil the conditions mentioned above, we will be able to make ourselves heard, because we will be credible and we will speak with authority.

It is difficult to limit the idea of authority to a simple definition. It is something you perceive, that you guess is there; something you draw benefit from, rather than something you can describe; and yet it is the crowning point of the teacher-pupil educational relationship.

To speak with authority, the other dimensions of the educational relationship must be present as a necessary condition: personalised knowledge, an ability to listen and to discern character; closeness which makes possible transparency and tenderness; witness which convinces and attracts; and professional competence which reassures and makes adaptation easier.

What we have said, however, does not do away with the need for being sufficiently demanding to make young people aware of their own limitations, needs or defects, as the third point of the *Meditation* recalls, as well as of their talents, ability and qualities. That is why the educational relationship calls for a certain degree of firmness, constant vigilance, and a generous commitment on the part of teachers, as De La Salle shows in other texts.

The educational relationship, therefore, is not only “relational” in nature. It involves an approach on the part of the teacher that is multi-faceted, that reflects his person, his lifestyle, his competence, his convictions and his ability.

One cannot stress too much the importance of this relationship in education, since education has very much to do with human beings and their relations. Techniques even when very sophisticated, cannot replace them entirely. And this applies not only to teachers, but also to adults who have an educational role in the family and in society.

For it is in the educational or pedagogical relationship that man is revealed, and God is revealed to young people.



- A School for life in society

## Decorum and Civility, John Baptist de La Salle's position

*"It is surprising that most Christians look upon decorum and politeness as merely human and worldly qualities and do not think of raising their minds to any higher views by considering them as virtues that have reference to God, to their neighbour and to themselves. This illustrates very well how little true Christianity is found in the world and how few among those who live in the world are guided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ..."*

*Christian decorum is, then, that wise and well-regulated conduct which governs what we do and say. It arises from sentiments of modesty, respect, union and charity towards our neighbour. It leads us to give due regard to proper times and places, and to the persons with whom we have to deal. Decorum practised towards our neighbour is properly called civility."*

(John Baptist de La Salle: *Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, 1703, Preface § 1 and § 9)

The 17<sup>th</sup> century was particularly prolific in works on decorum and civility. This school of thought was widespread in Europe. And yet, at the end of the century, De La Salle thought it opportune to join the ranks of the authors, not in competition, but because he considered "Christian" decorum and civility as one of the central pillars of the education he intended to offer in his schools to the children of the workers and the poor.

Of course, like his contemporaries, he thought that this education was primarily the responsibility of the parents, as he mentions in paragraph 4 of his *Preface*. But, in this area as in many others, he knew that in the world of the workers and the poor, they were incapable of performing this task. And so he adds immediately: *"It is likewise something about which teachers, entrusted with the instruction of these children, should be especially concerned"*.

Quite apart from the rest of the work, the first 15 paragraphs of its *Preface* are particularly rich and dense. They really deserve a long

commentary from a threefold point of view: anthropological, theological and educational. We can recommend an excellent reference book recently published by Br Jean Pungier in the *Cahiers lasalliens* series (volumes 58, 59 and 60).

From the outset, we note De La Salle's dissatisfaction with works treating decorum solely from the human and worldly point of view. Psychology cannot compete on the superior level he immediately occupies as he views the daily reality of personal and social life with the eyes of a Christian.

### **The relative nature of external signs**

De La Salle does not seek to make sacrosanct the external forms of decorum and civility. On the contrary, he states that they are relative, depending on time, place and persons (§ 9). He admits even that they can vary enormously, because they change and have the opposite meaning, depending on the circumstances in which one finds oneself. But more important than the relativity of appearances, to which, however, much importance was attached in those days, was setting one's eyes on Jesus Christ and aspiring after him. (§ 8).

### **The fundamental basis**

For De La Salle, the profound reasons and basis for decorum and civility went far beyond the social conventions governing politeness, beyond good breeding and courtesy: they were rooted in the depths of human nature. This decorum was not a superficial veneer imposed by a form of etiquette which could easily become hypocritical or artificial: it was rather a view based on a Christian anthropology which created modesty, respect, union and charity among people (§ 9). It was the inspiration for the impulse, the conviction and finally the freedom in social behaviour which leads to charity and love for one's neighbour.

And so, it is a view of others rooted in faith which is the best justification for the unconditional respect for them, and which makes, as it were, natural and unquestionable the marks of decorum and civility De La Salle describes throughout his work. They are not practices which can be improvised on meeting someone: they must flow naturally from the respect one has for oneself. Without forcing the meaning, this is what § 9 of the *Preface* says: decorum practised with regard to oneself consists in "*wise and*

*well-regulated conduct*" which is called "*civility*" when "*it is directed towards others*".

### **Positive pedagogy**

Paragraph 5 also is interesting. It speaks of the way to teach decorum and civility to children. The approach is not to repress, blame, ridicule or have a low opinion of the pupils, because there is no positive motivation in this; it is not an approach based on encouragement. On the contrary, the teacher must inculcate in the pupils "*purely Christian motives concerned with the glory of God and salvation*" and "*lead them to be motivated by the presence of God*". As in all De La Salle's writings, our attention is drawn to the spiritual nature of people. That is why "*teachers should urge them to show others those signs of consideration, honour and respect appropriate to members of Jesus Christ and living temples of God enlivened by the Holy Spirit.*" And the title of the work declares: "*The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility for use in the Christian Schools*"

### **The success of the work.**

Among the numerous 17th century works on civility, very few survived the wear and tear of time. The reputation of De La Salle's work, on the other hand, was long-lasting: there were 176 re-issues, and the work was widely used outside Lasallian schools. Other treatises are interesting historical or archival documents, and the question arises why De La Salle's work was so long-lived.

There are certainly many different reasons. It was the Brothers' Institute which normally undertook to re-issue the work, but Brother Maurice Auguste, in the preface of *Cahier lasallien* 19, speaks of other sources also. The main reason has to lie, however, in the wealth of the contents of the book, and the fact that it served as the basis of the education offered to the children. The work highlights the fundamental and permanent reasons for Christian decorum and civility. Apart from events and changes in social environment and historical periods, it is the very nature of a human being which justifies this type of inter-personal behaviour.

One wonders, in fact, whether it is not precisely when society loses its points of reference regarding human nature that civility also disappears.

\* \* \*

## Decorum and Civility: from theory to practice

When the Founder wrote the *Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, he made no concessions to the fashion of the time by indulging in an exercise of style. Decorum and civility, in fact, were the backbone of the educational programme he offered the children of the working class and the poor. While this work was widely used outside the framework of the Lasallian schools, it was not primarily intended for this purpose.

It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a great affinity between this text and the *Conduct of the Christian Schools*. The coherence that we note here can be found in the writings of the Founder as a whole.

### **An aim shared by the Little Schools**

In theory, teaching civility was on the programme of all Little Schools. In practice, however, it is very doubtful whether the majority of the teachers were capable of running such a course. Quite simply, they had received no training in this subject.

De La Salle, on the contrary, had first been trained in civility at home, and then by his studies in Rheims and Paris. It was very much part of his nature and, as we read in his biography, he imagined with difficulty that teachers could behave in any other way. His first contacts with them provided him with abundant proof that they could..

Without going into detail here, let us recall here that one of his initial concerns in 1679 was to initiate the first community into this lifestyle. We find this same concern later in the formation given to novices and to new teachers: they had to give an example of the kind of polite and appropriate behaviour that was expected of them in all aspects of education.

### **Decorum and civility: *leitmotiv* of the Conduct of the Christian Schools**

The readers targeted by the *Rules of Decorum and Civility* and those targeted by the *Conduct of Christian Schools* were not exactly the same. De La Salle destined his book on politeness for the whole of society, without distinction of class or social category. The *Conduct* was limited to the children of the working

class and the poor, who constituted the normal clientele of his schools. These children would no doubt never have an opportunity to put into practice certain tenets of civility, such as those regarding mounting a horse, or stepping down from a carriage; neither would they often have the opportunity and pleasure of learning how to drink wine at table, cut their meat or dip their bread into soft-boiled eggs! This is true also of various other aspects of civility.

And yet, the author says, the rules of decorum and civility needed to be learnt and practised preferably when one was young, if the corresponding habits were to be acquired and maintained. The eighth and penultimate reading level is entitled "*Civility*", and the *Conduct* states: "*When pupils know how to read perfectly in both French and Latin, they will be taught to write; and as soon as they begin to write, they will be taught to read in the book of Civility. This book contains all the duties to God and to parents, and the rules of civil and Christian decorum. It is printed in Gothic characters which are more difficult to read than French ones.*"

But teaching decorum and civility was not restricted to this reading. In any case, it would have been too late and of little use. When we read the *Conduct*, we realise that decorum and civility are constantly required of the pupils in their attitudes, relations and behaviour, in school and out: in fact, practice precedes theory.

Given this, one can see a certain parallelism between the *Rules of Decorum* and the *Conduct of Christian Schools*. As an illustration, we should like to suggest a comparative reading of what is said in these two works on such topics as: deportment and care of the body, speaking and pronunciation, the polite posture when sitting, care for the cleanliness and modesty of clothing, the way of eating one's food, behaviour in the street, etc

### **The human model proposed**

Thanks to these points of comparison, one quickly realises that the social model which serves as a point of reference and aim of these prescriptions: it is that of the *honnête homme* of 17<sup>th</sup> century France. As we know from other sources, the *honnête homme* has good manners, he is modest and reserved, is calm and restrained; he seeks to strike a balance, refusing excesses and extremes. In a word, he shows self-control at all times.

To us in the 21st century, this model might seem too studied, fixed, even boring in the light of the strange, eccentric and extravagant things that have become common practice in our times. And yet, this *honnête homme* was not dull: he could be open and attractive but without any ostentation. His behaviour was based on respect for himself and for others. For De La Salle, such behaviour was based on and justified by the view of faith we have of people. To understand his thinking, we need to return to the interior and spiritual motivation for all conduct. As the Conduct of Christian Schools says, this is what we want the pupils to acquire.

### **Well-trained teachers**

It would be enlightening to establish parallels between the *Rules of Decorum*, the *Conduct* and the *Rule* of the formator of new teachers, sometimes called “*part three of the Conduct of Christian Schools*”. For the aspiring teacher, acquiring the qualities of the *honnête homme* consisted first of all in eliminating anything that was ridiculous, extravagant or agitated about himself; or neglected or superficial in the way he dressed, spoke, walked stood, or appeared before his pupils.

Finally, when we consider the enormous difference there was in the 17th century between the lifestyle of the common people and that of a cultured and rich minority, we can see the extent to which the Lasallian educational programme for the children of the working class and the poor was ambitious. Such a programme enabled them to enter and feel at ease in the world of the *bourgeoisie*, a class that often boasted of its good education.

This optimistic view of the possibilities of poor children and of the means taken to teach them decorum and civility, was underpinned by a difficult undertaking that was certainly fascinating and perhaps utopian. Contemporary evidence which would enable us to judge the success of such an enterprise is rare but significant.

\* \* \*

### **Decorum and Civility: A most urgent aim**

In the last two articles, we saw how, for De La Salle, decorum and civility were based on a Christian anthropology: the eminent dig-

nity of the human being, who deserves total respect, not only in theory, but in the concrete circumstances of daily life. It was such a strong conviction that he made it the main thrust of his human education programme. We would be wrong to think that his was an obsolete position, one more suited to less enlightened times.

### **An identity crisis?**

Analysts of personal and social behaviour over the last few years reveal a loss of the sense of the individual, of his dignity, of his uniqueness. It is sufficient to cast a glance at the world around us to see the truth of this analysis.

There is no need to comment at length on the confusion that reigns over age, sex, status and function, to see the extent of this loss of identity. It confuses social relations. To attract attention, people take refuge in what is original, strange or shocking, because they feel uncomfortable the way they are.

We see how far this is from decorum and civility, which consist in respecting and valuing others, in recognising their uniqueness and their otherness. If identity is confused, there is hardly any reason for respecting others and treating them with civility.

### **The reign of incivility**

We can all find dozens of examples in everyday life. There are the children who drag their parents up before judges; pupils who verbally or physically abuse their teachers; those who take pride in wearing patched or torn clothing; the coarseness, vulgarity or obscenity which take the place of language and become a sign of modernism. People have lost the sense of decorum and civility. Appearance is thought to be a substitute for human dignity.

The media reports events which illustrate this incivility: insults, rackets, kidnapping, imprisonment, voyeurism, violence, theft, rape, torture, casual murder, etc. They reduce people to the rank of pastimes, common currency. It represents a radicalisation of incivility, and it makes life in society unbearable. Such behaviour does not deserve any sympathy.

Without sinking into pessimism, or even exaggerating, we can easily see how decorum and civility are keys to communication, civilisation and freedom from apprehension. Civility accepts dif-

ferences and diversity. It is tolerant, because it respects otherness: it is the path to growth in freedom.

Many people, including politicians, have noticed the harm inflicted by incivility. To remedy it, they propose the promotion of a “spirit of citizenship”. This is good, but “good citizenship” should not be confused with civility. There can be no good citizenship without a foundation of civility, because civility is deeper, more interior and more personal.

### **A primary aim of educational mission statements**

The text *Lasallian Educational Mission Statement* recommends the promotion of five fundamental values. Clearly, all 5 deserve to figure on this list: freedom and independence of young people, responsibility, respect for the dignity of everybody else, civility, love of self and of others.

Following what we said earlier, we will quite naturally want to put these values into an order, and when we do so, we will realise that the starting point of the educational process is civility. Without it, the other values lack both consistence and reality. It would be a good thing if all Lasallian establishments drew up an educational mission statement based on civility, and considered how it is shown in the respect and love of others, and in the promotion of dignity, independence and freedom. And this would lead also to fraternal relations, sociability and conviviality.

Decorum and civility are what is most missing in social life at the beginning of this new century. To practise them assiduously would not be simply conforming to some social code of politeness - which is necessary - but restoring dignity to human beings. The alternative would be to run the risk of losing the social bonds which make it possible to live in society.

Practising them would mean also adopting Lasallian spirituality and living according to it. It would mean giving meaning to life and setting out on the path leading to one’s own evangelisation and that of other.



- A School for the poor but open to all

## Gratuity and the service of the poor: a radical initial choice

This is not a study of the educational service of the poor as a whole, but only of one particular aspect: the gratuity of teaching - a problem which lasted for 300 years of Institute history.

*“Consider that it is only too common a practice for the working class and the poor to allow their children to do as they like and live like vagrants, wandering around the streets, until their parents are able to put them to work. These parents make no effort to send them to school, either because they are too poor to pay the teachers, or because they are obliged to leave home to look for work, and as a result have to leave their children to their own devices.*

*The consequences of this are most unfortunate, because these poor children, accustomed to leading an idle life for many years, find it very difficult to accustom themselves to working. In addition, through association with bad companions, they have learned to commit many sins which they subsequently find very difficult to give up, because of the bad habits they have contracted over such a long period.”* (MR 194,1)

### **Gratuitous schools**

John Baptist de La Salle was not the first to create gratuitous schools for the common people. Day schools for poor girls were already functioning in various convents: gratuitous “Charity Schools” constituted a form of aid for poor families provided by the parish: and the “General Hospitals” offered free schooling to the children in them, and so on.

Everything leads us to believe that the first schools opened by De La Salle in Rheims were planned as parish charity schools, even if very quickly they proved to be different. The first biographers of the Founder call them “gratuitous schools” or “Christian and gratuitous schools”.

A short explanation: the running of a school and the upkeep of the teachers involved expenses, obviously. What De La Salle and the Brothers wanted was that the parents of pupils should not have anything to pay. This is what we mean by gratuity.

The “founders” of these schools - town authorities, factories, bishops, parishes, poor boards, private donors - undertook to meet the expenses. The constitution of an endowment or a capital sum was intended to ensure the continued existence of the school.

### **“This is essential for your Institute”**

These words appear in two places in the Founder’s writings. De La Salle became very quickly convinced that schools had to be gratuitous, and he never changed his mind. As early as 1683, on the advice of Nicolas Barré, he gave up the idea of using his personal fortune to set up a foundation to ensure the future of his schools. He relied on the generosity and the continued commitment of the “founders”. It was a radical choice which the first Brothers shared. But by linking the survival of the Institute and gratuity in the formula of the vows, the Founder probably did not suspect he was creating a problem for his successors which would last 300 years. In any case, there is no lack of archival material which confirms that the Brothers understood the formula in this way.

### **Why gratuity?**

The passage above from MR 194 helps us to understand. It has to do obviously with the usual clientele of the first Lasallian schools. The working class and the poor did not have the necessary resources to pay the schoolmasters. Generally living on the subsistence level, they had to ensure first of all what was essential, that is, food.

Their only hope was to find a gratuitous school kind enough to admit their children. De La Salle was aware of this situation and tried to provide a solution. Distributing goods to the poor was an ad hoc solution: teaching them, on the other hand, contributed to their socio-economic advancement in the long-term.

The gratuity of his schools was therefore directly linked to these precarious and unstable socio-economic conditions.

As a consequence, he forbade all forms of fee-paying to the community as a whole, and all sorts of presents or gifts to individual

Brothers. Not to accept, not to receive anything from pupils or parents became another principle.

Because his concept of a school went far beyond simple instruction and aimed at the evangelisation of the children, De La Salle saw in gratuity an essential theological and pastoral dimension. The fundamental criterion here was to bring salvation in a way that reflected the gratuity of God in Jesus Christ. To proclaim the Gospel gratuitously had to be the greatest source of pride for teachers (cf. MR 194,1 and 207,2)

### **The struggle to maintain gratuity**

The actions of the Founder and various writings indicate that he did not envisage an exclusive gratuity. He refused to submit to the strict obligation of admitting solely the children of families officially registered as poor. He also admitted children whose parents could have paid fees, and who in any case, contributed to the running of the school to some extent by paying for their children's books, pens and paper, while this material was offered free to the poor.

It is interesting to see this gratuity offered to all without distinction. De La Salle did not want a sort of ghetto reserved solely for the poor. This view was not shared by the teachers of the Little Schools and the Writing Masters who ran fee-paying schools to earn their living. Because some of their pupils left them to go to the Brothers' schools, they felt they were financially damaged. And they were right.

This was the motive for the complaints, accusations and the ransacking of schools, and for court cases they brought against De La Salle and the Brothers, and the condemnations they obtained. For twenty years, the Brothers remained unmoved and let nothing change their stance regarding gratuity for everyone. And here was the paradox: De La Salle opened schools for the poor - and no one complained.- but he had to fight in order to admit and keep the more well-off of his clientele.

These vicissitudes no doubt helped to reinforce the Brothers' conviction that gratuity was *"essential for their Institute"*. And yet, during the life-time of the Founder, they did not make the vow of teaching gratuitously, even if their common aim was to *"run together and by association gratuitous schools"*. All the same, in

their eyes, to infringe gratuity would be to pervert the very nature of the Institute, to change the reason for which it was founded, and bring about its disappearance. This kind of thinking lasted for 300 years.

## Gratuity and service of the poor: the refusal to segregate

The problems the Brothers had regarding “gratuity for everyone” did not disappear with the death of John Baptist de La Salle.

The Bull of Approbation (1725) and the new Rule (1726) served as a pretext for a dispute between the Brothers and certain civil authorities, simply because of ambiguity of language.

*“Bull of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XIII approving the Rules and Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools” (1725)*

*“Fifthly. That the said Brothers teach children gratuitously, and that they accept neither money nor presents offered by the pupils or their parents.*

*Ninthly. That the vows of the Brothers be those of chastity, poverty, obedience, stability in the said Institute and to teach the poor gratuitously.”*

### **The havoc caused by ambiguity**

Let us look at the small difference between the two paragraphs of the Bull quoted above: *“to teach children gratuitously”* (5) and *“to teach the poor gratuitously”* (9). This difference may appear to be a detail, but incredibly, for 250 years, the existence of these two formulas was the cause of a dispute between the Institute and the civil authorities.

Why ? Following the example of the Founder, past practice in the Institute and their own experience, the Brothers opted for the broader interpretation: the teaching they gave had to be gratuitous for all. And they refused to move from that position. Unlike the Brothers, certain town authorities, and later, the minister himself, wishing both to provide schooling for the children in their jurisdiction, and safeguard the meagre resources of their communal or national budgets - while at the same time benefiting from the pedagogical efficacy of the Brothers - considered that gratuity was to

be restricted solely to the poor, and that more well-off families had to pay school-fees.

The Brothers opted for article 5 and treated the subject in chapter XIX of the 1726 Rule which explained the obligations of the vows they made.

### **The first skirmishes**

The opposition came sometimes from groups of teachers who earned their living from charging fees for teaching, and who were angry to see a part of their clientele deserting their classes for the gratuitous schools of the Brothers.

Town councils appealed to the Brothers, but felt their hands were tied by their town budget. Local authorities, marked by the anti-clericalism inspired by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, found that the Brothers cost their town too much, even when they accepted minimal payments.

The civil authorities seem to have been well informed regarding the normative texts of the Brothers and their practices. They knew, for example, that the Brothers opened boarding schools and were paid fees by the pupils. Was that absolute gratuity ? They tried therefore to draw up plans which would not go against the supercilious convictions of the Brothers. For example, they suggested that they themselves would fix the fees of better-off families and collect them; that they would decide who had to pay and who was exempt; that they would distribute an admission note to all pupils, without the Brothers having to be involved, or knowing who paid and who was exempt.

But this was not enough to make the Superiors of the Institute change their mind.

### **Recourse to experts**

As these skirmishes became more and more frequent, and neither side seemed prepared to give way, it occurred to the Brothers to ask for the arbitration of experts. Up to the 1789 Revolution, this role fell to the theologians of the Sorbonne, and in particular, to the "Council of Conscience". The Brothers and the town authorities of Boulogne sur Mer agreed to go to arbitration, and each side drew up a "memorandum" presenting its case.

After an examination of the texts (*Bull, Rule, Formula* and explanation of the vows), the experts considered that the Brothers' formula of vows applies gratuity more widely than the Bull, the Rules and Constitutions and constant practice. Like the Brothers, they believed that absolute gratuity was a guarantee of the continued existence of the Institute.

Therefore, *"the vow that the Brothers make to teach gratuitously applies indiscriminately to all the poor and rich pupils"*.

That was their final conclusion in 1783.

### **The reason for this conflict**

After more than two centuries, this conflict may seem derisory. We need to look more closely. The intransigent position of the Institute is explained by:

- The desire to be faithful to the thinking and practice of the Founder. This is undeniable, and is recalled in the numerous documents used in the conflict.
- A real concern for the common people and the poor: the Institute and its mission was identified with this concern. Its clientele came primarily from the poor, the working class and the common people. This humble obstinacy is in striking contrast with the contemptuous declarations of some of the wits of the Enlightenment. The statistics of the 18th century bear witness to the fact that this service of the poor was real: it was a service no one else provided gratuitously.
- The type of schools run by the Brothers had hardly changed since the time of the Founder: they were essentially gratuitous primary schools, in which, in response to requests or needs, the Brothers did not hesitate to enrich the curriculum with new subjects: geometry, technical drawing, architecture, hydrography... Although the State had not yet taken over responsibility for education, one can say that the Brothers felt they were working in gratuitous public (i.e. "State") schools.
- It is very easy for us to understand today the importance of this refusal to segregate the poor from the rich (this temptation will appear on occasions in the 20th century); and the Brothers' refusal to meddle in the financial situation of families. It is easy to understand also that this mixture of social backgrounds was already a

good social melting pot. Of course, the clientele came exclusively from the “Third Estate”, for a variety of reasons, but this mixture made it possible to diminish many social barriers which characterised the society of the Ancien Régime.

- In any case, concern is for economic poverty. One has the impression that the other forms of poverty, although certainly mentioned in the Founder’s writings, appear only rarely in 18<sup>th</sup> century documents. This economic poverty is one shared by the Brothers themselves, whose living conditions border on destitution, and who never have more than the bare necessities. It is a poverty they have chosen and accepted, but which was also sometimes imposed by the authorities who paid the Brothers.

Despite the vicissitudes encountered, the ordinary Brothers and the Superiors with their various responsibilities maintained their combative spirit throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and succeeded in preserving gratuity for everyone. But the Revolution brought about a truce. It was an imposed truce since the Institute was suppressed and its members dispersed.

It was a truce, but not peace: the Institute was reborn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had to take up again its fight to maintain gratuity.

## Gratuity and the service of the poor: the battle for gratuity is lost

“You know, My Very Dear Brother, that the gratuity of schools has always been absolutely essential for our Congregation; that we have never accepted any establishment without this perfect gratuity. Consequently, I charge you very expressly to oppose formally such an innovation (i.e. school fees) and rather abandon the establishment if it were decided to introduce a practice so opposed to the principles established in our Congregation”.

Letter from Brother Frumence, Vicar General of the Institute, September 1809.

### **Gratuity regained**

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Brothers who had gone to Italy or had become secularised in France, began to regroup in various towns in France to reconstitute the Institute and to go back to school. Recognised officially in 1808 and made part of the

“University”, the Institute was able to devote itself to its preferred task: teaching in “gratuitous public (i.e. State) schools”. This regained gratuity was something the Brothers clung on to fiercely, despite the problems which were not slow to appear. This type of school seemed the best way of reaching the poor and giving them a Christian education.

### **The threat of school fees**

In 1830, there was a change in the political regime in France. The “bourgeoisie” came to power. Economics took priority over all other aspects of social life: the rise of industry brought with it a great need for education.

The Guizot Law of 1833 was an essential factor in the organisation of an educational system, especially at primary level. Despite increasing funding to meet educational costs, the Government and local authorities could not satisfy needs, and decided to make families contribute financially for their children’s education. This meant that school fees would have to be paid in public schools. In the Institute, there was great agitation. In the name of a sacrosanct principle of gratuity for everybody, the fight had to be taken up again to prevent school fees from entering our schools, even if they were public, and these were in the majority. Too bad, if they had to be an exception in the educational system as a whole.

### **The fight for gratuity**

Dossiers were constituted, memorandums were written, letters were exchanged with ministers, the Institute was absolutely determined to preserve its specificity which, it believed, identified it and was a condition of its survival. It was confronted, however, by successive governments which were determined to impose their decisions. The trial of strength between the Superior General Brother Philippe and Ministers of Education Rouland and Fortout, at the beginning of the Second Empire, is a good illustration of this confrontation.

Once again, there surfaced the type of reasoning used in the 18th century regarding which alternative was right: gratuity for everybody or gratuity only for the poor.

It would take too long to recall all the episodes of this conflict. It continued from the First to the end of the Second Empire, reach-



ing its peak in the period between 1830 and 1870. At times, the tirades came very close to blackmail, as for example, when the Brothers said that if they were obliged to charge fees, they would withdraw from the schools. And this actually happened. When the authorities took them at their word, the Brothers were obliged to open “private schools”, supported by subscription or generous “founders”. But these schools were gratuitous for all pupils.

### **The turning point in 1854**

The archives show clearly that the Brothers always hoped the situation would change and that the conditions they had known before would return. Apparently, they did not know that history never repeats itself. As time passed, the number of withdrawals from public schools increased but the authorities did not give in. Perhaps it was time for the Institute to re-examine its position? But as foundation texts approved by the Holy See were involved, nothing could be done without recourse to Rome.

There began a period during which petitions were sent to the Pope requesting rescripts to change traditional practice, not only in France but also in the whole Institute. And so, it was provisionally accepted that well-off families paid school fees as long as the Brothers did not have to collect them.

As what is provisional tends to become permanent, the Institute now had to come to terms with this last restriction.

### **A bitter conclusion**

The situation did not improve under the 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic. The education authorities, as active proponents of anticlerical positivism, wished to diminish the influence of the Church and of congregations in education.

A law in 1881 established gratuity in all public schools. Another law in 1882 secularised teaching programmes, even where members of congregations continued to teach. A law in 1886 forbade members of congregations to teach in public primary schools. Finally, a law in 1904 forbade congregations to teach in France.

The irony of history! The Brothers who had fought for gratuity in all public schools, were expelled from them and had to open private fee-paying schools ! Those who had imposed fee-paying on public schools now proclaimed them to be gratuitous for everybody!

## The Law and facts

But the work of the Institute and its concerns were not restricted to this long legal battle. The battle involved mostly the Superiors, and it is not certain that the ordinary Brothers were really aware of it. The Brothers continued their work in the service of the poor and opened up new fields of action, and what they achieved is astonishing. While the majority of them worked in gratuitous primary schools, the appearance of new needs generated by socio-economic developments, inspired new responses to the benefit of children, young people or adults. These responses included the first orphanages run by the Institute, work in prisons, the first schools for the deaf and dumb, the creation of lunch-time courses for young apprentices, evening and night classes for adult workers, teaching reading and writing to young conscripts or soldiers, the first horticultural and agricultural schools, the education of child chimney sweeps and their formation into associations, the first workers' associations which foreshadowed Christian trade unions, the proliferation of parish clubs, Sunday meetings for young people and adults, faith-support groups, etc.

A fine set of achievements which makes the 19<sup>th</sup> century a great period of creativity for the Institute in the educational service of the poor, for all the innovations mentioned above benefited thousands, or even, tens of thousands of persons.

Looking back, one may well wonder whether the position defended by the Institute was not too narrow; whether it was not wrong to take such a stand on gratuity alone, creating bitter feelings which cost the Institute dear from 1880 onwards. One could have the impression that the Institute thought it could continue its mission as a self-contained organisation, disconnected from the changing social reality all around. Would it not have been better to do the opposite, and analyse the situation and find ways of modifying texts in order to respond to the new needs of an evolving society?

## Gratuity and the service of the poor: in mourning for lost gratuity

We described the courageous battles fought by the Brothers to preserve the integrity of gratuity in schools during the 18th and

19th century. But convictions and courage were not enough. In France, educational legislation at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, forced the Institute to concern itself with fee-paying private primary schools, and to ask the Pope for increasingly long and generalised rescripts dispensing it from gratuity. This situation affected also most of the other countries where the Brothers were present.

After 1905, despite the wishes of the Brothers and their attachment to the principle of gratuity; despite the ingenious generosity of Christians - and often also of the clergy - who were determined to see their schools survive; despite experimentation with a variety of formulas to keep schools or categories of pupils gratuitous, funded sometimes by nearby fee-paying schools; it has to be admitted that gratuity was no longer possible.

### **Illusion and nostalgia**

Despite these changes during the first half of the 20th century, statistics published by the Institute continued to calculate the number and percentage of non-fee paying pupils. Of course, the graph curve could not be anything but disappointing.

And yet, official spokesmen of the government of the Institute, continued to dream of an impossible return to the situations of the past. Superior Generals still wrote circulars on the topic of gratuity - Br Adrien in 1933 (circ.278), Br Athanase Emile in 1951, to mark the tercentenary of the birth of John Baptist de La Salle (circ 332). And we should not forget to mention the "Short treatise on the religious state" published in 1950.

In these official documents, but also in various notes sent to successive General Chapters, one could say that the "uneasy conscience" of the Institute was expressed. This attitude, no doubt, could be attributed in part to ignorance, or to a faulty analysis of the changes that had been taking place in society, in the State, in mentalities and educational systems since the end of the 19th century. One gets the impression that the Institute was looking at itself from the inside, in its own texts, and with the conviction it was right. It ran the risk of becoming stuck fast in its refusal to change, or in a dreamworld divorced from the reality all around it. Without exaggeration, we can say that this risk was not avoided.

## **The wake for lost gratuity**

In his work "The Institute in the service of the poor" (LS 7, Rome, April 2000), Brother Bruno Alpago concluded his penultimate chapter with the following words which ring so true: "It took a good half century to organise the wake for lost gratuity" (p. 362) The 1956 General Chapter also made the following powerful statement: "The world of the poor is unknown to us: our formation, the teaching we give, our lifestyle, what we worry about, places us in the average middle class, among the white collar employees, rather than among the poor and the working class." (id. P. 362)

## **A wake leading to rebirth**

This somewhat belated realisation ushered in a new approach to the "educational service of the poor". This is clear from the debates of the 1956 General Chapter and from the decisions taken. It becomes even more striking in the 1966-67 Renovation Chapter. A new kind of language appears in the *Rule* and in the *Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today* of 1967.

It was a new approach: it was broader, deeper, realistic and full of nuances. Instead of restricting itself to the study of 300 year-old texts, the Institute decided to give priority to the analysis of the existing socio-economic situation, the living conditions and the mentality of the poor, that is, of their present needs. The response was not entirely academic in nature.

This approach, boldly begun in 1966, which brought with it new thinking and new action, continued to enrich itself and mature during the last 35 years of the 20th century. In this connection, it is most important to read the last chapter of Bruno Alpago's book, which covers this last period.

The change in language is quite clear. Debate is no longer polarised solely on gratuity (but its importance is not questioned), but on the poor, even, on the very poor and on their educational and pastoral needs. This is accompanied by repeated calls for a genuine "return to the poor", and for notable and effective undertakings on their behalf. We do not yet have an exhaustive study of what was done in practical terms for the poor in the last 35 years of the century, so that we can measure the extent to which there

was a change. One feels, however, that there was a real renewal of the Lasallian “scene” all over the world.

### **Some questions remain**

We are justified in wondering whether the Institute in its pronouncements does not tend to limit itself to material poverty, even though allusions to other forms of poverty regularly appear. For Lasallian teachers, what causes more concern: to be poor in material goods, or to be poor “in humanity” - a poverty we see everyday in many countries?

This is a sensitive question to which there cannot be one single answer. It leads to another equally sensitive one: Can we continue to use a single language to a Lasallian world present in 80 countries? And if not, what is the implication for the way we give leadership and govern a group so diverse in its composition?



- A School that promotes interiority

The *Conduct of Christian Schools* describes the components of a holistic education of pupils. It reflects John Baptist de La Salle's strong conviction that the basis for such an education lies more on the level of motivation and conviction, than simply on that of repetition of external forms of behaviour. What is most important is interiority.

Among the school activities described in the *Conduct* there are many whose purpose is to promote this interiority. The principal ones are: \* the morning reflection, \* the regular recall of the presence of God, \* silence in school, \* the evening examination of conscience, \* and even the time for punishments.

## The morning reflection

In the *Conduct of Christian Schools*, the reflection was clearly one of the means to be used to give Christian formation to pupils, and fitted quite naturally into morning prayer. It was one of the three occasions when the teacher spoke to the class as a whole. He spoke from the heart, he was convincing, and his words were well prepared. In a word, it was an exhortation. It was such an important exercise, that the Founder mentioned it in several of his other writings and in the *1718 Rule*.

The form this reflection took in practice may surprise us and be distasteful: a limited number of subjects, fixed in advance, developed in a stereotyped manner, focused on sin, conversion and salvation... But, then, the aim of the reflection was the formation of an individual conscience, encouragement of personal reflection and interiority; and to modify or acquire moral and Christian personal behaviour.

The reflection is a truly living tradition: in the three centuries of the Institute's existence, several General Chapters and various Superiors of the Brothers have recalled the need and importance of the reflection. Obviously, evolution in the types of establishments run, the diversity of local situations, and the development

of society and of the Church, have resulted gradually in a change in the way of giving the reflection.

The main changes are as follows: changes in the form of the reflection; inclusion of a great variety of other subjects; adaptation to increasingly old pupils in school; a task shared by the teachers of the same class; the use of current events outside school life as starting points.

A period of transition: the last few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the publication of “Collections of Reflections” especially in France, Canada and the United States. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some Brothers created their own personal collection of reflection subjects. However, during World War II and the post-war period, initiatives gradually petered out. The reason for this was perhaps forgetfulness or a loss of interest in this means of formation, but also the widespread changes in teaching staffs and in the internal organisation of Lasallian schools. We should recall, however, the work undertaken on the reflection by the Italian Brothers in 1934: a questionnaire was sent out to the Brothers, the results were analysed and published in the *Rivista Lasalliana*. In recent years, a number of Brothers in other countries have found inspiration in this research.

Many retired French Brothers today, and no doubt the first lay teachers who came to work in our schools, knew about or actually gave reflections. More recently, there has been a revival in several countries. We note works produced in Italy, Spain, in France, in Australia, in United States.

Interest and relevance: The text of the *Conduct of Christian Schools* contains the following important words: “suited to their capacity”. These words refer to the pupils and recall a constant pedagogical concern of De La Salle: to make oneself always understandable to the pupils so that they can benefit more from the teachings offered them.

The reflection is precisely the kind of activity which can be adapted to all ages and to a school population coming from all kinds of backgrounds. It suits perfectly the kind of pluralistic situations that we encounter today. In a spirit of great openness, tolerance and respect for the conviction of others, it can become a powerful instrument in the teaching of values, of those values we advocate in the *Lasallian Educational Mission Statement*: justice, solidarity,



dignity, civic responsibility, respect for the environment, openness to world issues! It can be a very important means of forming a critical judgment in the world of today. It makes it possible to establish a brief dialogue between adults and young people. It is a way of “touching hearts”. It is an opportunity to teach young people about true freedom. It is a dimension of school pastoral care in its deepest sense.

\* \* \*

## Recalling the presence of God

The bell-ringer had a little bell. At the hours and half-hours, he rang it to attract the attention of the class or of the whole school. Immediately it rang, the teacher and pupils stopped whatever they were doing, and the teacher said: “*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God*”, and the pupils answered: “*Let us adore him*”. There followed a moment of recollection together, which the teacher brought to an end with some pious invocation.

It is impossible to know, of course, what went on in the heads of the pupils when all this was going on. One can suppose that it all depended on the individual and varied from day to day. In the long-term, however, this often-repeated exercise must have left some impression.

### **The conviction of John Baptist de La Salle**

His personal understanding of human nature was based on the conviction that human beings, created in the image of God, are living temples of the Holy Spirit. Being aware of this and recalling it from time to time becomes a source of motivation for all actions. This conviction is also the key to understanding “*Christian decorum and civility*”. In the preface to this work, we read: “*They must never forget, when they give them the rules of decorum, to teach them that they must be put into practice only for purely Christian motives which have in view the glory of God and salvation... They will induce them to do this for the motive of the presence of God*”.

### **Put into practice in everyday life**

We find the same idea in the first paragraphs of the *Conduct of Christian Schools*. The chapter which deals with “*entering*

*school” reminds the pupils to wait for the doors to open “with such great restraint that passers-by can be edified”; and then to enter the classrooms without making any noise; and “to walk silently and with such great composure that they cannot be heard”. In a word, “they will be induced to enter their classrooms with the deepest of respect on account of the presence of God”.*

The same recollected attitude is required of teachers and pupils during the daily periods of prayer: *“At each hour of the day, some short prayers will be said. These will help the teachers to recollect themselves and recall the presence of God; and it will serve to accustom the pupils to think of God from time to time, and to offer God all their actions, and to draw upon themselves God’s blessings”.*

### **The final objective**

The call to be “modest”, recollected and silent, is such a recurrent theme in the *Conduct of Christian Schools*, that our list of quotations could go on and on.

It is easy to imagine that the frequent recall of the presence of God throughout the whole school-life of a pupil would leave a mark, would create a sort of reflex. Some former students have confirmed this, saying that they had kept the habit in their personal and professional life, associating the presence of God with the beginning of a new activity.

In one of his Meditations, John Baptist de La Salle seems to summarise the objectives of this exercise: *“If you are a true lover of Christ, you will take every possible means to instil his holy love in the hearts of your children whom you train to be his disciples, and your aim will be that they think often of Jesus, their good and only Master; that they speak frequently of Jesus, that they aspire only after Jesus, and that they live for him alone”.* (MF 102,2) An ambitious aim! Utopia? Perhaps, but these lines highlight the strength of the conviction that inspired St John Baptist de La Salle.

### **A real tradition**

The practice of the regular recall of the presence of God may seem strange to certain people today, but it was a long-lasting tradition in Brothers’ schools. Still followed in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it persists still in certain parts of the Lasallian world. Its demise is essentially the result of the recent changes that have

come about in school life and in teaching conditions. In the last few decades, religious pluralism among pupils and teachers has led people to have second thoughts about such practices. Respect for religious freedom and freedom of conscience is the determining argument regarding this question.

### **But an urgent need**

It is none the less true that teaching interiority remains essential, and that there is a particular urgency for it in the present world..The cultural and media-dominated environment does not help much. But what is at stake is most important: interiority is what makes it possible to have personal freedom. A “surplus of interiority” seems indispensable if we are to live freely in the society and Church of tomorrow.

The question deserves to be asked: what practical means do we use to develop interiority in young people at the various stages of their school career?

\* \* \*

## **The educational value of silence**

*“The care that the teacher should have to ensure that very strict silence is observed in school”*: this is the title of the 3rd article of chapter 1 of Part 2 of the *Conduct of Christian Schools*. According to St John Baptist de la Salle and the first Brothers, silence is another means of teaching interiority.

Three centuries later, teaching conditions have changed a great deal. We are more likely to speak about teaching through dialogue, communication or participation. We live in the age of the media. We need to ask ourselves, therefore, what is the relevance of “very strict silence”. It is not as if we wish to reproduce the type of school organisation described in the *Conduct*: we wish simply to understand the value that silence could have had in education, and which it continues to have, no doubt, today. We shall restrict ourselves to three aspects of silence in class.

### **A practical measure**

*“Silence is one of the principal means of establishing and maintaining order in school”*. It is imposed, first of all, for organisa-

tional reasons. Most of the Little Schools were not models of organisation. This had to do with the way they were run. De La Salle and the Brothers knew this, and it is no doubt, in response to these shortcomings that they considered it indispensable to prescribe such strict silence. The overcrowded classrooms and the presence in them of several different divisions or levels of attainment, made it necessary.

Silence was imposed also for reasons of discipline. There can be no good personal education without good discipline, and this depends partly on how much talking there is in class. This is an unchanging educational principle: Little talking guarantees order, listening and group discipline. And all the more in those days. The more they speak, the less teachers are listened to.

Finally, silence was imposed for the sake of efficiency. Organisation and discipline lead quite naturally to efficiency. It is well known - and mentioned frequently in the *Conduct* - that one of De La Salle's fundamental concerns was to have useful and efficient schools. This characteristic was even an absolute necessity in the educational service of the poor. Silence was first of all a necessary condition for a coherent school process, characterised by organisation, discipline and efficiency.

### **Social aspect**

From the very first chapter, the *Conduct of Christian Schools* shows us pupils who, before entering the school, dispose themselves by their quietness, self-restraint and composure, to work in silence; and then it shows them occupying themselves silently while waiting for the teacher to arrive. The *Conduct* goes on to say: "*When the pupils walk inside the school, the teacher should ensure they are bare-headed, their arms are folded and that they walk without hurrying, without dragging their feet or making a noise with their clogs if they have them, so that nothing disturbs the silence that must constantly reign in school*".

Silence has a social aspect: by creating an atmosphere conducive to work, it indicates a concern for others, and true respect for them.

This is well illustrated in the last paragraph of article 3 on silence. The article describes in detail the attitudes and behaviour pupils should adopt to make silence easier for their companions;

because teasing, provocation, jokes... are so many incitements to break silence or diminish the quality of the recollection necessary. In fact, it is a short description of self-control regarding looks, gestures, behaviour and moving from place to place. In a word, it is a description of a silence that embraces the whole body and not only the tongue.

### **Spiritual aspect**

It is this aspect of self-control, of a constant watch over one's body, which leads us directly to the aspect of interiority, and therefore to the spiritual component of silence. We are not concerned here with a defence of silence for the sake of silence, but rather with a silence that reflects De La Salle's view of human nature, his understanding of "*Christian decorum and politeness*", and his concept of education.

As the following words recall, silence is based on a spiritual motive: "*The teacher will explain to the pupils that they must keep silence, not because he is present, but because God sees them and it is his holy will*".

Silence is not an absolute in itself. Under certain conditions, it can lead to interiority. Since we are concerned here with the *Conduct of Christian Schools*, two riders seem to be called for.

The advice relative to the silence of the pupils applies to the teachers also, it is almost identical. It is a recurring theme in the *Conduct* that the teacher must be a model in all things for his pupils, and practise whatever he demands of them. This is surely the basis of all true teaching.

On the other hand, the chapter on silence in school is immediately followed by the one on "*Signs*", which is a useful complement. It is an opportune reminder, even in our days, that inter-personal communication is not solely verbal. The *Conduct of Schools* deals only with signs, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, semiology teaches us that many different languages exist, and several of them have found their place in contemporary pedagogy, as for example, mime, body language, images. We would do well to see what place they occupy in our teaching, and understand how they can express the riches of interiority, in the place of the vacuity of much idle chatter.

\* \* \*

# The examination of conscience

## Morning reflections and evening examination of conscience

*“An examination of conscience is part of the evening prayers. This examination contains those sins which children most commonly commit. The examination is divided into four articles, and each article is subdivided into five points. Every day one article will be read, and this same article will be read every day of the same week. In this way, these four articles will be used in turn for four consecutive weeks. After the last of these weeks, it is the turn once again of the first article. Regarding the five points of the article that is read during the week, the same order and the same practices will be kept as are indicated above regarding the five reflections that are included in the morning prayer.” Chapter VII*

In the Conduct of Christian Schools, the pupil’s day began and ended with a characteristic “exercise” one of whose aims was the teaching of interior life: the morning reflection and the evening examination of conscience.

One notices immediately from the way the two exercises are presented and carried out that they are intended to complement each other. The subjects are fixed in advanced for everyone and not left to the free choice of the teachers. This is an example of the uniformity intended by the Conduct of Christian Schools, and whose positive aspects are not immediately evident.

The topics were repeated month after month, and this no doubt removed fairly quickly any element of novelty, or of the unexpected, but also perhaps, any element of interest and motivation.

Symmetry can be seen also in the order in which things were done: first, there is the reading of the point indicated for the day; next, pupils are invited to reflect; and proceedings are closed with a brief commentary and exhortation from the teacher.

The two exercises clearly bear the mark of their times. This is why, throughout the history of Lasallian schools, changes were seen to be necessary and were made.

## Essential aims

The morning reflection invited pupils to reflect about a form of behaviour described in the text and commented on by the

teacher. It served, therefore, as a means of setting out guidelines for the day, by fixing some specific aims. Educational coherence called for a matching exercise at the end of the day.

The examination of conscience after a day's work and life in school was a time for real introspection. We should not pay too much attention to the word "sins" in the text, because it reflects a 17<sup>th</sup> century religious mentality. What is worth noting, is the benefit of this retrospective glance at the day that has just ended, when the pupil assesses his own conduct and makes a personal evaluation, without any external pressure, in the light of the text he has heard read and of the teacher's comments.

We cannot comment here on every detail of the text, but it could be enlightening to read the questions asked in the four articles. What we see listed in fact are the "duties" of the Christian, of the pupil, of the young person in his own environment. As the title of the exercise says: "Let everyone question himself", and the pupil is invited to examine successively four essential aspects of his behaviour:

- as a Christian, the accomplishment of the Commandments of God;
- as a member of society, outside school, observation of the "*rules of Christian decorum and civility*";
- as a member of a very special group, his class, behaviour towards his companions;
- as an individual, his conduct outside school, but also in his school work.

This "examination of conscience" is therefore something very typical of De La Salle's thinking. It reflects his wish to take into account the whole person with a view to a "unified" education. I prefer the term "integrated" (holistic) education, because I think it expresses better the Lasallian educational approach in the past and today.

The interiority that De La Salle wishes to develop is not only "psychological" in the sense of introspection - which would already be something very interesting - but it has also a "spiritual" or religious dimension, an indispensable feature of De La Salle's approach to education. Moreover, that is why the examination of conscience ends with a collective act of "contrition" and of "offer-

ing the night that is coming", before the hymn that ends each school day, according to the *Conduct of Christian Schools*.

Seen from this angle, the exercise was particularly formative of interiority, to the extent that it developed a real and lucid self-awareness. In fact, it served to reinforce the sense of one's responsibility in the conduct of one's own life. In the measure that pupils entered sincerely into the process of discernment, they developed their own maturity, their interior freedom.

In addition, the repetition of this exercise throughout the course of schooling - even if it never lasted more than three years - could prove to be a voyage of discovery during which certain moral values are acquired. Here also, one might think there is an excessively narrow moralistic viewpoint, but that was very much part of the mentality at the time.

### **Discover and give a meaning to life**

It was precisely in this socio-religious framework of the Counter-Reformation that these pupils could gradually discover a certain approach to life and to being a Christian, and to give meaning to their lives - at least within the guidelines subscribed to by all Christian educators at the time.

Apart from any moralising elements, the assimilation of values was intended to mould the social behaviour of the pupils, developing in this way the Christian decorum and civility expected by society, and considered by the Church to be one of the aims of its schools, and of Little Schools for the common people. Maturity, responsibility, freedom are all components of interiority: today they are still relevant and urgently needed.

\* \* \*

### **Conversion-correction**

In addition to their daily examination of conscience, certain pupils were summoned to make a very special examination. These were the pupils who had earned a punishment by some misdemeanour. This is mentioned in the *Conduct of Christian Schools*, but also in many other writings of De La Salle such as *Meditations for the time of retreat* 203 and 204. These latter texts are the basis for the commentary that follows.



*“You too must reprove and correct your disciples when they commit some fault, the more so because it is typical of children that they often make mistakes by doing many things without thinking. Reproof and correction cause them to reflect on what they have to do and lead them to watch over themselves in order not to be making the same mistakes all the time” (MR 203, 1)*

*“The result of wise correction is that those receiving it are disposed to correct their faults, whereas when correction is administered through uncontrolled emotion and without having God in view, it serves only to turn the disciple against his teacher and to arouse in him feelings of revenge and ill-will, which sometimes last a long time. Results are generally related and similar to the cause that produces them: if you want your corrections to have the results they ought, administer them in a way that can please God and those that receive them” (MR 204, 3)*

We know that punishments held an important place in the pedagogy of the 17th century. That is an historical fact we do not need to comment on here. John Baptist de La Salle thinks that correction is useless, even harmful, when it provokes the refusal or rebellion of the person concerned, because such an attitude indicates clearly that the pupil is not aware of his misdemeanour, nor of having deserved a punishment. He needs to reflect to assess his responsibility in the matter, and accept the consequences of his actions. *“You too must reprove and correct your disciples”*. To make them reflect and change their conduct, one must *“use this remedy which will procure them wisdom”*.

## **The aims**

The reasoning of De La Salle is coherent. In MR 203 he explains that a child who has acquired a habit of sin *“has more or less lost his freedom and has made himself a captive and unhappy”*. The teacher must therefore *“bring him into that liberty of the children of God which Jesus Christ obtained for us”*. For this, it is not necessary to have recourse to repressive measures, as one hurriedly might have assumed reading the above, *“but to use two means in their regard; the first is gentleness and patience; and the second is prudence in your reproofs and corrections”*. At the same time, it would be a failure in one’s duties as a teacher not to reprove and correct the pupils, because we are responsible for their conduct to their parents, their pastors and to God himself.

What emerges from MR 203 and 204 is that all correction should be approached with spiritual inspiration and an appeal to interiority.

### **Conditions required**

The teacher, of course, has to have this spiritual inspiration, but so also the pupil to be corrected. Under these conditions, the teacher will be able to act “with the greatest possible wisdom and in a manner best suited to make it useful to the one receiving it”. It is interesting to note that the primary role of correction is not repressive, but to bring about an interior change that will influence exterior behaviour. At the same time, one realises that this change in direction can take place only if the pupil has reached a sufficient degree of maturity and interiority.

This interiority and sense of responsibility are inseparable and constitute the moving force behind conversion. They enable the pupil to assess correctly his own actions, to recognise his own limitations and mistakes, to admit the wrong he may have done to others, and finally to accept the rules governing life in a group. Seen in this light, “conversion-correction” is not directed only at the present in a school context: it prepares also for life in society and in the Church.

### **References**

To illustrate what he is saying, De La Salle, as usual, has recourse to biblical examples. In this case, we are referred to the reproofs of Samuel to Eli, Nathan to David, Jesus to the sellers in the temple and to the Pharisees, and St Paul to the Corinthians. He could just as easily have commented on the parable of the Prodigal Son: the lessons drawn apply particularly well to the subject of this article. This is especially true of the various stages in the interior conversion of the elder son.

These biblical examples highlight the extent to which De La Salle’s intentions are first and foremost spiritual and not disciplinary. He shows how interiority makes it possible to know oneself and to discover oneself, but also to discover God in oneself, and attain also “*the freedom of the children of God*”.

To change one’s conduct, that is, to become converted, through personal conviction, after reflection, is to exercise one’s freedom,

to act as an adult. It is to witness to the fact that one has reached the very heart of interiority. It is not incongruous, therefore, to associate interiority and correction..

In the modern context, it is easy to see the educational importance of this subject today. When I see certain things happening in society today, I feel there is a pernicious connection between the refusal to accept one's responsibilities, the rejection of laws governing life in society, the confusion about the nature of freedom and a lack of interiority. A vast subject!

To teach interiority to children would be most beneficial for them, for their quality as human beings, for their spiritual equilibrium and their true freedom. And most beneficial for life in society.

What a marvellous school mission statement could be based on this topic!



- **An urgency, the formation of teachers...**

Historians of education in France, consider St John Baptist de La Salle as “the teacher of teachers”, and on April 26th 1950, Pope Pius XII proclaimed him “Patron of Christian teachers”. There is no doubt he has every right to these titles.

Before J.B. de La Salle, there were some attempts to train teachers for the Little Schools, for example, in the parish of St Nicolas du Chardonnet, in Lyons, especially by Charles Démia, by the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. These, however, were local initiatives which did not last. It was John Baptist de La Salle who opened the road to the training of teachers.

### **A true precursor**

From his first contacts with the teachers of the Little Schools, De La Salle saw clearly that the most urgent problem facing these schools was the teachers’ lack of training. For 40 years, from 1679 to 1719, the greater part of his activity had to do with this training, training of the teachers of his own schools, who would become Brothers; and of those sent to him for training in his “*Seminaries for country schoolmasters*”. Despite a number of failures, these “seminaries” were a great success.

The success of the training was almost immediate. The reputation of the Founder spread very quickly beyond the confines of the diocese of Rheims. One result of this was that he was asked to allow young laymen to benefit from the high quality and thoroughness of this training. For the Brothers especially, but also for the country teachers who requested it, this initial training was accompanied very quickly by a form of continuing formation which included enrichment of personal culture, daily self-improvement exercises in community, constant presence of an inspector in each school, annual meetings for pedagogical discussion and exchange of information, regular correspondence between the Founder and each Brother.