

THE ORIGINALITY OF LASALLIAN EDUCATION IN THE 17th and 18th CENTURIES

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St John Baptist de La Salle is a contemporary saint because, in the past in which he lived, he sensed our present. No one who has not lived intensely immersed in the society of his day, sensitive to his surroundings, can cast his shadow on the future and, even less, be considered to be a “saint”.

“The figure and personality of St John Baptist de La Salle has always evoked the respect and admiration of historians of all persuasions, and no one today dares to call into question the exceptional value of his work, both historically speaking, and on a social and civil level” (John Paul II, 1980).

Today, De La Salle lives on in his work and through his writings. The first is evident, the second less so. Following the Vatican II Council, which called upon religious congregations to return to their roots, founders have gradually regained their place in contemporary history. Many of them were, and continue to be today, true masters of the spiritual life. Under the influence of their writings and their spirituality, many people pursue evangelical perfection.

Exactly the same thing is happening in the case of De La Salle. The rediscovery of his work is an invitation to sanctity for the Church and the world, especially in the context of education.

“De La Salle was the true founder of modern schools for the working class, by the foundation of primary schools, establishments for the training of teachers, secondary vocational education in night-schools or Sunday schools for workers and apprentices, and residential institutions for persons sentenced by the courts” (John Paul II, 1980).

The bibliographical heritage of John Baptist de La Salle is very striking. Present-day studies of the “roots” and the gradual publication of critical editions - which are indispensable - present us with a spirituality which offers a way to achieve holiness to Brothers of the Christian Schools, as well as to the lay men and women who accompany them on their journey.

“However, behind this Saint’s ingenious psychological and pedagogical innovations there was a “Christian” vision which endowed the concepts of “culture” and “education” with an enriched and global meaning” (John Paul II, 1980).

Nevertheless, as we consider the “figure” of John Baptist de La Salle (his person, his writings, his work) we can limit ourselves to a statistical point of view, and devote our time to archaeological pursuits, driven by nostalgia and even triumphalism. ‘We must see what De La Salle was like !’ But this does not lead anywhere worth the trouble. On the other hand, a dynamic and stimulating approach - pursuing “the driving force behind his vocation” - will always lead us to the essence of Christianity, which is what De La Salle was concerned with.

*“For him, school could not be simply a place in which it was possible to transmit and inculcate ideas, however useful and interesting they may have been, **but it had to be a***

true community of love, in which the pupil had to be considered not ‘as a recipient to be filled, but as a soul which had to be formed’” (John Paul II, 1980).

De La Salle teaches us to interpret reality from the privileged position God has placed us in. He helps us to see it as “the history of salvation” , in which we have a part to play.

“De La Salle rooted his life in prayer and faith. God was for him a “rock” and a “shield” (Cardinal Angel Suquía).

Each one of us who belongs to a Lasallian educational community can have become involved in the task of Christian education in a more or less conscious way; some, perhaps for simply professional reasons; others through a desire to ‘do some good’; and possibly for some, as a way to spend time helping others...

If we look to De La Salle to learn from him, we need to take into account a number of points regarding education :

- We should not fall into “archaism” : after three centuries education and pedagogy have evolved so much that it would be ridiculous to go back and copy what De La Salle created for the young people of his time.
- So, we should not ask ourselves “What would he do if he returned ?” This is a kind of question which can never be answered in a serious or satisfactory way.
- On the other hand, knowing what De La Salle did, and inspired by his spirit, we should ask ourselves “What can we and must we do today as persons involved in education?”

For a number of years now, on the basis of serious in-depth studies of his life and work, we Brothers have been rediscovering our Founder. We should consider his rich personality (his tenderness, his common sense), the quality and depth of his evangelical life, the universal value of his spirituality. We will be surprised by what we have on our own “doorstep”, close at hand, without our knowing it. Now that we value it more, we feel driven to share it, confident that others can benefit from this treasure. And those who will welcome this most must be those who share our common mission.

What we can discover about De La Salle is found without doubt in the convergence of three elements. To gain access to the treasure that De La Salle represents for us, we need to know the three key-words which reveal the meaning of his writings and his work : culture, experience, charism. Without these three elements, it would not be easy to discover the nature of this treasure.

John Baptist de La Salle was a man who accepted and responded to the cultural challenges of his age. This is the first thing that De La Salle teaches each and every one of us who form Lasallian educational communities, while at the same time challenging us regarding our enculturation in the 21st century. (Ch. 1).

*“De La Salle stepped into the mud of the streets. Because he had the heart of a poor man he was able to write the following advice to his sons **“Have as much esteem for the poor, and teach them with as much care as you would if they were the sons of princes”*** (Cardinal Angel Suquía).

Sometimes De La Salle has been presented outside any historical context, as if he had created everything out of nothing. De La Salle’s creativity is different : he has critical awareness, eyes open that see the reality of his age, that perceive needs. In order to act on and be true to his ideas, he

adapted, transformed and invented whatever he considered necessary (Ch. 1).

De La Salle was a part of a powerful movement promoting education which was current in France at the time, inspired by such men as Pierre Fourier, Nicolas Roland, Charles Demia, Fr. Barré, and by the writings of Vives, Comenius, and the “*Parish School*” (Ch. II).

The *Conduct of the Christian Schools* reflects partly the contribution of the predecessors referred to above, but breaks the mould by setting out a complete transformation of schools, and not fearing to change what was lacking in the education of children.

The Christian school of today would benefit greatly if it imitated the surge of innovation which characterised its birth (Ch. 2).

“De La Salle is both an educationalist and a saint. Both aspects run parallel in his life and work. By nature, he was a born guide : an organiser able to implement successfully the clear-cut ideas of his lucid mind. Whatever the context, they created order and dismissed routine. He was a creative genius ahead of his time. His genius was to be a guide, to be a beacon; to be the soul of the school, so that teachers, on which he concentrates so much of his energy, should also themselves be its soul” (Cardinal Angel Suquia).

De La Salle began a trend in the Church, this is clear; but this beginning was influenced - although not exclusively - by the sources he had recourse to. De La Salle is to a certain degree an eclectic; it is difficult to classify him as belonging obviously to a particular group or “school”.

He was influenced greatly by the French School of Spirituality - the equivalent of the Golden Age in Spain - represented by Bérulle, Olier, Condren, Vincent de Paul, John Eudes...The 18 months he spent in the seminary of St Sulpice enabled him to assimilate the teachings of this school, extraordinarily rich in their biblical and especially Pauline inspiration.

However, his life and work were influenced also by other sources : the Fathers of the Church, and by St Augustine in particular, who had a great impact on 17th century in France; by St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, Lawrence of the Resurrection, and various Jesuit authors.

In his writings, De La Salle says and stresses certain things which today perhaps jar or surprise us, but they simply reflect the spiritual trends of the period, which were quite normal at the time. There is, for example, his insistence on mortification, “abjection”, self-abnegation before God, his pessimistic view of human nature. All these ideas, in a radicalised form, gave birth to Jansenism.

His insistence in asking the Brothers to be loyal to the Church, the Pope and the bishops in communion with the Pope, was a logical reaction to the Gallicanism which was growing in the France of his day.

Culture provides the symbols on which language is built. De La Salle expressed his experience and his feelings within the context of his culture. What he intends to say to us is influenced, for better or for worse, by his cultural context with its particular anthropology, ecclesiology, religion and politics.

It would be absurd to expect his cultural tastes and inclinations to coincide with ours. But it would be even more absurd to give up learning what he has to say to us, simply because of the difficulty we may have reading his works.

We are fortunate to know a person who speaks to us on the basis of his great knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, and especially, of the New Testament, and who has a thorough theological training; as long as, of course, we do not expect him to be knowledgeable about modern exegesis, and accept that his theology is the product of his age, that is, influenced by Scholasticism and the Council of Trent (Ch. 1).

In a word, when we approach the writings of De La Salle, we should not confuse the message he communicates to us with the cultural packaging in which it is conveyed. This is not something to deplore, but simply to note; and we should try to go more deeply into things to identify the message. His teachings have more to do with his spiritual experience and his charism : normally these are conveyed in “packaging” (Ch. III).

This “packaging” influences his writings, hence the importance of identifying and highlighting anything that has any bearing on De La Salle’s message and on whatever he teaches. His life-journey challenges our own at a very profound level.

The most significant thing he teaches us by his own life is that he discovered and saw his life in terms of the history of salvation. In the concrete circumstances of his life, in his relations with the people he met, in the specific commitments facing him, he recognised the voice of God, and asked himself how best to respond in order to be a good “instrument” of God’s Work. His fidelity is not to the letter but to the spirit of the Gospel; not to a past history of salvation which ought to be repeated, but to a history of salvation which is ongoing in the mission he was pursuing. That is what is valuable for each one of us (Ch, III).

However, the greatest service De La Salle rendered his community and continues to render us today, is that he helped it, and continues to help us, to become aware of the mission we are pursuing - a mission of salvation, representing Christ; and to become aware how this mission is the foundation of the community and of our own salvation. He helps us, then, to seek perfection, not for its own sake, but because we need it in order to fulfil our mission as “saviours” , and so that the Mystery of Christ may be revealed.

“For this to happen, the Christian school calls for the dedication of the whole person. Good is accomplished by personal contact and dialogue. The school needs to be attractive, form the mind and educate through and for life. The teacher has to lead the way along the path he encourages others to follow, as the first witness to it” (Cardinal Angel Suquía).

By his own life-journey, De La Salle reminds us that at the centre of things, it must not be us, and our desire to sanctify and save ourselves, but rather the work which God accomplishes through us (Ch. III).

This is the great sign that Brothers give to those who share our mission today (although it is not a sign to be copied, but to make us think, so that we can see what we can do with our own identity).

De La Salle’s consecration for “the glory of God” to the mission is inseparable from the community. In reality, the community is the sign which makes it possible for all the other elements of his consecration and mission to become signs themselves. The community is the place where consecration and mission become united; where there is listening and searching for answers, together with God, children and young people.

“Associated” with his Brothers is how the Brother procures the glory of God, as he states in his formula of vows.

These considerations, taken from a Degree dissertation entitled *The Originality of Lasallian Education in the 17th and 18th Century*, seeks to help us in our daily lives to realise and understand better what we were, what we are now, and what we ought to be in the future, taking into account what De La Salle achieved at a specific time in our history as Christian educators.

But we need to experiment (as De La Salle did) and adapt whatever is needed in order that our sign can be perceived clearly. It should be characterised by the mutual cordiality we show, the visibility of the community element, the way we fit into the context, our capacity to welcome, our relations with the other members of the educational community; by the organisation and structures, adapted to the needs of the individual; the appearance of the classrooms and furniture. By means of the above, we will communicate a characteristic sensitivity, and a way of practising and interpreting the specific community life of the Brothers.

Let us conclude this Degree dissertation, entitled *The Originality of Lasallian Education in the 17th and 18th Century*, with the words of Cardinal Angel Suquía regarding what our task should be, when we analyse the writings and work of St John Baptist de La Salle :

“De La Salle is not the point of arrival but of departure. De La Salle will continue to be valid for us to the extent that we believe that the school continues to be valid, and a place which gives priority to the holistic education of the individual, that is rooted in the Gospel, takes as its model, and focuses on Jesus Christ, and follows the guidelines of the Church.

De La Salle interests us today if he tries to adopt a basic educational approach which promotes the values of justice, respect for the individual, and the development of a critical awareness of life; and which involves itself with the terrestrial city in order to make it more human and Christian.

He believes that education does not end when a child leaves school, but that it must continue to guide young people at a critical point in life when they need a Brother, a Teacher, a Companion and a Friend” (Cardinal Angel Suquía).