

CIRCULAR LETTER OF 10 APRIL 1786

CONCERNING THE PUBLIC CONTESTS
AND COMPETITIONS CARRIED OUT
AT THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR
IN DIFFERENT HOUSES OF HIS CONGREGATION

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CONTENTS

Preface to the English Edition	45
Circular Letter Concerning the Public Contests and Competitions	47
First Proposition —abuses with regard to the students	49
Second Proposition —superficial learning	51
Second Section —abuses with regard to the Teachers, abuses affecting community life, troubles that the Contests cause Teachers and students	53
—something more about the Competitions	60
—conclusion and directives	61

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

The document that follows is a translation of the complete text of the printed Circular Letter of 10 April 1786 addressed by Brother Agathon, Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, to the members of his Institute.¹ Brother Agathon, the fifth Superior General, was elected in 1777 and proved himself to be an outstanding educator and leader. His Circular Letter of 1785, entitled *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*, has been, after *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* of John Baptist de La Salle, the most important educational book of his Institute. Brother Agathon defended his Institute in the National Assembly, in 1792, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, when all religious congregations eventually were formally dissolved. He was incarcerated in three different prisons but was freed after eighteen months. He died alone in 1798.

My intention in offering this complete translation is that my recent rereading of the original text reminded me forcibly that the shortened version fails to convey some of the subtlety both of the content and of the argument of the original. I am also confident that the following comments and the footnotes in the text, by helping readers to see more clearly the situation that Brother Agathon found it necessary to address, will help them appreciate the different levels of appeal throughout the letter.

Some historical background

The Brothers of the Christian Schools were founded to offer a gratuitous education to the children “of artisans and the poor.” This foundation principle was jealously defended by them throughout their long history, especially before the French Revolution and for a good part of the nineteenth century. This meant, therefore, that the establishment and maintenance of any foundation depended on founders—individuals, corporations, or bishops—who were prepared to pay an agreed-upon sum of money annually for the support of the Brothers’ community, which had no other source of income.

It was natural that these “founders” gradually came to look for some public proof that the work they were supporting was successful. This resulted in some persons wishing to offer prizes to students who had distinguished themselves. Gradually, from the school’s viewpoint, it was important to have some public manifestation of the success of the school and, at the same time, to recognize its founders and benefactors, hence the growth of what are called throughout the following letter “Competitions” or “Contests,” which gradually became more and more elaborate as the taste for such public showing-off developed. If at the beginning these public Competitions resembled “spelling bees” or arithmetical contests, not unlike modern quiz programs, they very quickly took on a life of their own, adding declamation, short scenes from plays, and so on and causing the problems that the Circular Letter addresses. As Brother Agathon had given a number of experienced Brothers the opportunity to do further studies in order to prepare them to teach in the boarding schools, this may have broadened their own cultural horizons.

1. An abbreviated version of this Circular Letter has been used for a number of years in the Buttmer Institute and in the Lasallian Leadership Institute, where its educational relevance has been appreciated by the participants.

Who were these students?

The modern reader has to allow for the fact that the students were often only a very short time in school, and it was essential that all receive what we would call today a basic education in literacy and in their religion. As there was no compulsory education, the age range could run from between seven and eight years of age in the majority of the schools (which were elementary schools) to fifteen and sixteen in the boarding schools. But it is highly likely that children of different ages sat in the same classrooms, depending on the age at which they first were sent to school by their parents. The reference late in the document to those who leave after First Communion needs to be understood according to the norms of the time, when the boys would probably be at least twelve years of age.

Teachers and Brothers?

Throughout the document that follows, the author speaks sometimes of the “Teachers” and at other times of the “Brothers.” They were, of course, the same persons. One of the important things about this document is the way in which the author’s argument is sometimes pedagogical and at other times religious as he addresses the Brothers of his Institute. But the distinction made is very real and historically remarkable for the way in which Brother Agathon sees teaching as the professional duty of the Brothers, linked inseparably with their reason for existing for “the Christian education of the poor,” their “state” in life. The Brothers were never full-time catechists, nor did their schools offer others forms of teaching simply to have the opportunity to catechize the students. Everything, all forms of teaching, had to be integrated. Whatever was not educationally sound, therefore, was to be opposed and denounced. These same “Teachers” were also members of the Institute, Brothers, and as such they were bound to a way of life and to a Rule that they had agreed to live by. Both these levels of appeal are to be found in the present work.

Some comments on the translation

Brother Agathon has a vigorous style of writing that is not always easy to bring into English. Some of his sentences are very long, as he makes a good deal of use of the French semicolon when he is listing numbers of things. Sometimes it has been necessary to break these long sentences down to shorter English sentences so as not to lose the line of his argument, but I think the reader will find that the vigorous style is largely maintained.

The English terms “Contests” and “Competitions”—translations of the French word *répétitions*, which occurs frequently in Brother Agathon’s original text—highlight the competitive and public nature of these events.

Although there is no table of contents in the original text, I have offered one, because it enables the reader to see the development of the argument more clearly.

Brother Gerard Rummery
30 September 1999

My very dear Brothers,

Some years ago there were introduced into a number of our Houses² certain public Competitions or Contests, carried out by children³ attending our schools, in the presence of a number of the most important personages of the locality where this custom was established.

These Contests consist in having the students recite from memory whatever they have learned during the school year and present before the assembly their workbooks of writing, arithmetic, and spelling, replying to the various questions addressed to them, whether it be on Christian doctrine or reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic. Finally, the sessions end with a prize distribution to those among the students who are judged to have so merited.

Such, at the beginning, were the Competitions, which simply had as their objective that the students give an exact account of each section of our teaching.

If these Contests had remained within reasonable bounds, they would have been simply praiseworthy and completely in accord with the spirit of our Institute. But as is often the case in most practices that have been established to obtain some benefit, they soon lose their initial purpose and frequently degenerate into an abuse. So it is with these Competitions and Contests, simple as they are in principle and potentially so beneficial to both teachers and students, but they have become injurious to both, as our observations on this topic will prove.

The subject matter foreign to our lessons that has been introduced into these Contests has quickly changed the nature and the benefits that could have been expected. Simple demonstrations that aimed only at producing a praiseworthy emulation among the children in their mastery of each part of our teaching have become a kind of stage presentation, more an imposition on the students and on their fathers and mothers, with the incentive of some praise or flattering reward than something of any real advantage to the children.

These Competitions, however, have quickly acquired a certain celebrity, as a result of which it was soon concluded that accustoming students to these kinds of Contests was an excellent way of instructing them, a method that offered all the advantages that could be proposed for the education of youth. As a result, some persons who are enthusiastic supporters of education have put down substantial sums of money for the prizes intended for those among the students who distinguished themselves by their talents. Among the parish priests, several were convinced by these Contests of the results that could be produced through our schools and have seized the opportunity to enhance the reputation of the schools and to disseminate books appropriate for spreading education through families, thus combatting so many bad works found among people today.

At these public meetings, patrons of Christian Schools and founders⁴ of these new establishments sometimes find themselves witnesses, along with the parish priests, of the great good that is brought about through their generosity. For their part, the Brothers also have wished by these

2. The French word *maison* (house) throughout the text refers in a narrow sense to the residence of the Brothers who form the community, but it is also used more loosely to refer to the school conducted by those who live in the house or residence. Where the word is used, later in the text, in a more obvious reference to the community, *maison* is translated as community in various places, after the beginning of the Second Paragraph of the Circular Letter.

3. The author uses both the word "children" and the word "students" throughout the text. It should be remembered that some of the schools were basically elementary schools, but there were eight boarding schools; they enrolled students for many more years.

4. Founders are those responsible for the financial arrangements that led to the founding of the school.

means to prove to those interested in the instruction of children and in the public good that they are fulfilling the duties of their state and at the same time proving the usefulness of their teaching.

But in spite of the utility of these public Competitions and the praiseworthy motives that led to their establishment, we believe, all the same, that we should make some comments on the supposed advantages espoused by those in favor of these Contests. We will oppose them by showing the real abuses that result, in order to allow you to judge the matter justly and impartially.

1) First of all, it is said that through these Contests a certain natural shyness proper to the age of the children is dissipated. Secondly, the idea is to encourage a general competitiveness among the students by the prospect of some praise and public awards at the end of the year to the most deserving among them. This is the kind of motivation considered appropriate to sharpen up lazy or indolent children while inspiring with a new ardor those who enjoy concentration and work. The end result is that all make progress.

2) There is a desire to recognize the founders of the schools publicly and to express praise for their zeal on behalf of education by demonstrating the results produced by their devoted support with regard to a whole multitude of children who, lacking such support, would for the most part grow up in ignorance of their duties toward God, their parents, their superiors, and society in general.

3) It is said that schools take on a greater importance and have a tendency to proliferate as they attract the confidence of the local authorities. Parents have more confidence in them, and this makes them more careful about sending their children to school, and finally, the children themselves have a deeper love for the Christian and civic instruction given in the schools.

4) There is a desire to accord teachers the degree of esteem that is merited by their zeal, their talents, and the results of their work by placing them in a kind of necessity of carrying out their functions worthily by presenting students in these Contests who do them credit. It has been suggested that a worthy desire is aroused among the teachers for each one to distinguish himself through his class. Certainly, some of these effects have resulted from these kinds of Competitions.

5) It has been suggested that giving children this opportunity to appear in public arouses in all those who are endowed with the right dispositions the desire to surpass one another and by these means to have a kind of awakening emerge by this sharp stimulus among several who are naturally disposed to a type of inertia.

6) There is a desire to reward achievement by presenting to the students a goal that can be both a reward for their past efforts and an efficient vehicle for the future.

7) It is proposed, finally, that children will gain a certain assurance in their manners, ease in their whole exterior, facility in self-expression, and courage to express themselves in public. Such different ends have undoubtedly been proposed for these annual public Contests. While it cannot be denied that certain of these expectations have been met, we are forced to admit from experience that in several other aspects they have degenerated into various kinds of abuses.

These abuses can be considered from two different viewpoints, one concerning the students and the other, the Teachers.⁵ Simply setting out both of them will show clearly that they have produced some good but have also brought about a greater evil.

In order to make known the abuses that these public Contests have created with respect to children, I will set out two propositions that will prove that these Competitions expose the Teachers to neglect an essential part of their duty and that the education of those admitted to these competitions with their emulation prizes is not very solid.

5. Throughout the text, Brother Agathon seems to distinguish between the Brother as a teacher and as a member of the Institute. This distinction is highlighted by the capitalization of both words in the text.

FIRST PROPOSITION

These public Contests, in general, prevent Teachers from carrying out the duties of their state, namely, to teach all their students equally and to give special attention to those among them who are most in need of instruction, whether because of their lack of natural ability or their poverty, which deprives them of any other source of schooling except the Charity School, whose principal objective is the instruction of the children of artisans and the poor.

FIRST ABUSE. Out of some 300 to 400 children, only twenty or so (and every year practically all the same ones, along with some others added to their number) are chosen to shine in these public Contests; however, it is obvious that the end proposed to us is not to instruct only a small number of children but to ensure the instruction of all.

SECOND ABUSE. The students chosen for these Contests are usually those most gifted with natural talent. With little effort they obtain prizes that should be awarded only after greater effort. Moreover, this selection introduces a certain division that should not be made among the children.

THIRD ABUSE. If to the children most endowed with natural talent and likely to shine there are added others who lack talent, these latter are admitted to sharing the glory of the first group only through friendship, particular affection, or the recommendation of their friends or of persons interested in showing them some kindness. But with regard to these protégés, making up for what nature has failed to give them requires extraordinary attention on the part of the Teachers. These signs of favoritism can have the most dangerous consequences, since all students in a class have an equal right to the care and attention of the Teachers.

FOURTH ABUSE. The students chosen to figure in these public spectacles are usually selected soon after the beginning of the school year, and from then on they are designated as those who have potential as actors. From then on, also, the Teachers give constant attention to these contestants for glory. They are never lost sight of; their work in and out of class is uninterrupted. Special lessons are added before and after class, on holidays, and on Sundays and feasts. The first consequence of this choice by the Teachers in favor of the privileged students is to have even less esteem for the others, all of whom have the right to the same means of encouragement used by the Teachers toward those who attract their particular care.⁶

FIFTH ABUSE. Those less favored by nature and lacking the qualities that are capable of being developed successfully—being ordinarily little impressed by the advantages to be gained from attending school, since they are not aware of any—resent the distinction made between them and the chosen ones. This distinction shocks them, and they consider themselves debased and totally neglected. They become discouraged, develop an aversion to school and to their Teachers, and to justify their disgust and dissatisfaction, every means is vindicated. They tell lies; they exaggerate;

6. We would not wish it to be understood by what we have said about the preference given to those destined to appear in these Contests that the Teachers are carrying this preference so far as to be guilty of injustice to those whom they did not judge worthy of being admitted to these Exercises, as though they were neglecting, for example, the lazy pupils, the unintelligent and inane, those whose external appearance is off-putting, the poor, and those whose parents have not been completely honest with the Teachers.

Our intention is not to insinuate that the Teachers are unjust to the poor with respect to the instruction with which they are principally charged by their state. The abuse concerns only the care and the special attention that they give to the privileged parties, with the result that nothing is left for the rest of the students, and while the latter are not necessarily harmed by this, they might think that what is more accorded to others is taken from what should have been given to them. (Note from the original French text)

they resort to calumny so that as a result they leave school and abandon instruction.⁷ This is a too common result of these unjust preferences.

SIXTH ABUSE. Experience shows that children at a certain age who come to realize that they will never be chosen to appear in these Contests become discouraged and develop an aversion for everything concerning the duties associated with school. They consider themselves both disgraced at not being allowed to appear in public with the others and publicly humiliated by the Teachers and by those preferred to themselves—sentiments that they do not fail to express at the least opportunity. Thus instead of encouraging a spirit of competition among the children, the selection has a completely opposite effect on the majority of them.

SEVENTH ABUSE. Very many students who are not destined to take part in these Contests—not wishing to assume that their failure to advance is due either to their lacking application or to their having little natural talent—attribute their lack of progress to the favoritism of the Teachers, whom they accuse of giving all their attention to the chosen children. Nevertheless, to tell the truth, as we have already remarked, those favored by natural talent joined to other advantages obtained by their parents make far more rapid progress in a shorter time than those others would after the greatest effort.

EIGHTH ABUSE. Poor parents have no other possibility of educating their children except through the help of the Charity Schools, and because of the small services that they often must derive from their children, they indeed have only a limited period of time in which to send them to school. These poor children, given the brief time they attend, can draw only limited profit from school. Will not the parents, however, even though unjustifiably so, be led to complain and to believe that their offspring are making less progress because of the greater attention given by the Teachers to their companions, the ones destined for the Contests, who will bring more public applause, rewards, and honor to those who teach them?

NINTH ABUSE. Everyone knows that a given student, without much time or application, will make enough progress so as to be judged worthy of the first prize, while another, with fewer natural advantages and therefore incapable of shining in certain kinds of study included in their common education, will be judged unworthy of competing. Nevertheless, even with the most dogged work, this second student, not being capable of overcoming the natural obstacles to brilliant success, will be put to one side precisely because his progress cannot be compared with those with whom he is competing. He will thus be deprived of any motive for encouragement, even though his effort far exceeded that of the person preferred to him. Now, I ask, has distributive justice been safeguarded? If a child who lacks great natural qualities fails to find in his courage and in his reason the motives to sustain his application, will he not be tempted to give up everything and remain wrapped in the darkness of his ignorance? This outcome is undoubtedly opposed to the goal that is proposed in awarding prizes according to merit.

TENTH ABUSE. Parents sometimes make real sacrifices in depriving themselves of their children's help during the entire school year so as not to interfere with their application to school lessons. If they see their own children to be hardworking and well behaved for the whole year but in no way recognized publicly for such effort and when they learn, moreover, that students with less work and application are preferred to their own children in the prize distribution, do not these fathers and mothers, mindful of the sacrifices they have made in supporting the application of their children, believe that they have grounds for complaint? Would they not consider themselves justified in withdrawing their children from school and leaving them in ignorance?

ELEVENTH ABUSE. A father of a family, very poor himself, seeing that his child is never admitted among the prize winners, may judge that it is because his son is poor and badly dressed that he is not well regarded, being incapable of offering presents to his Teachers, while the more favored rich, who easily make a good impression, are the Teachers' darlings.

The preceding, then, is an overview of the main abuses of these public Contests that we are discussing. As we have seen, such abuses are obviously very prejudicial to the well-being of education in general. Nothing more is needed to prove the truthfulness of our first proposition.

7. That is, religious instruction.

SECOND PROPOSITION

These Contests usually provide only superficial learning to those who compete and are, moreover, prejudicial to the good order and running of the school.

First of all, we maintain that these Contests produce only superficial learning in those chosen to compete for the prizes. The proof of this is easy to establish.

It would be an imposition to seek to persuade you that all from the total number of students chosen to compete for prizes in these Contests make great progress in every aspect of our teaching. No, ordinarily a child who has the appropriate talent for writing, for example, will be carefully coached, and in order to commit him to be honored for this talent and not to distract or discourage him, he will not have to be concerned about anything else. He will be left to follow his natural attraction, quite happy if he can develop an outstanding handwriting. That, broadly speaking, will be the whole value of this student.

Another student, if blessed with a retentive memory, will be entrusted with such activities as will show it off, for example, speeches, acting certain roles, dialogues, and word-for-word recitations from the catechism.

Someone who shows the appropriate talent or disposition will be channeled to define the principal operations of arithmetic, to answer questions put to him about these, and also to explain selected rules of French grammar. Finally, there are others who cannot succeed in any of the above but whom the Teachers wish to associate with the Chosen Ones. They will be formed exclusively to read well. These, in brief, are the results ordinarily obtained by the Teachers and students who dedicate themselves for a good part of the year in order to be publicly honored through Contests for the progress they have made.

It is therefore very rare that this progress is extended to all aspects of teaching for each of the chosen students, because, as we have already observed, each one is concerned almost exclusively with the part that favors his personal taste and in which he can best succeed. Thus one student will know how to write but know little or nothing about spelling or arithmetic, and so on. Another, who knows how to calculate, will understand nothing of the catechism or of what he should know about other matters, because he never has any practice. As a general rule, then, the instruction of those destined to compete for prizes is nothing other than superficial.

If there are Teachers who, as they should, require the students who are destined to compete for prizes to make progress in all areas, or at least in the most important components of our teaching, this attention of the Teachers, praiseworthy as it is, far from eliminating the abuse, only multiplies it in certain aspects. The more things that are demanded of the students, the more necessary it is to give time and special care both to support their concentration and to help them to advance. But in order to be able to obtain these advantages, the Teachers believe themselves justified in modifying, changing, or even overturning the school's curriculum in their regard, so that while the ordinary students are directed to follow what is prescribed for each hour of the class, those in the privileged group, at the expense of the order and discipline so wisely set out in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*⁸ so as to maintain a uniformity of teaching among the Brothers,

8. This is the book of pedagogy that was written, after some twenty-five years of experience, by John Baptist de La Salle around 1705-06, "only after a long series of conferences with the oldest and most experienced teachers." Its methodology was obligatory in all the schools of the Institute. Brother Agathon worked on an updated version, which was never finished because of the suppression of the Institute during the French Revolution.

do whatever most pleases them to make up for what is lacking in the section in which it is proposed they are to shine.

Besides overturning order, how much care and embarrassment this situation brings for the Teachers! On the one hand, they are not unaware that their attention should be given to all the students; on the other hand, they feel that those who are concerned with matters foreign to the common lessons need their special help. Whose side will they take? The very idea of Teachers being placed in this situation between duty and the urge to make the contestants shine proves the abuse of the Contests themselves. There are even more questions concerning the students who are destined to act out some role during the Contests. Are they even ready and in a state to appear on stage with distinction? How much anxiety is there not on the part of the Teachers that these chosen contestants will abandon their part! But in order to encourage them to persevere in this glorious career, how much freedom will they not be allowed! All their shortcomings are tolerated; their most serious faults are covered over; the Teachers even become slaves to their whims. The other students grumble because what was never allowed to them is condoned with these others. They are not listened to because the others are needed; they must be in the Contests to uphold the honor of the class in public. Furthermore, the privileged students make fun of those who cannot be included among their ranks; they are proud of their advantages over them and look down on them. Because of this, there arise petty dislikes and reciprocal insults and attacks. Can these common faults among children be effectively reprovved by the Teachers? Is it easy to recognize the authors of such disorders when they occur? Who dares accuse students who have been protected with impunity regarding their faults?

It is quite obvious by everything that has been said that these Contests are harmful to the order and general discipline of the school. Our preceding reflections with regard to the students have shown that these abuses have very many unfortunate consequences over the pretended advantages they may produce.

SECOND SECTION

Abuses that these inflated Contests bring about with regard to the Teachers

In order to make known the abuses of these Contests with regard to the Teachers, we will content ourselves with setting out one proposition whose development will afford the greatest evidence of the truth of these abuses.

The annual public Contests are harmful to the rest and tranquillity of the Brothers and disturb the order and calm of our communities. They banish the spirit of retreat and recollection. They are in opposition to the humble and simple spirit of our state of life. They affect the health of the Brothers by the extra care and work that they bring. Finally, they are bad in themselves, either by the nature of certain matter they deal with or by the end they suggest. These truths, learned from experience, will be demonstrated.

1) The students chosen for these Contests receive various kinds of exemptions. Among others, they have the privilege of being able to come to class before the prescribed time, to remain after the other students have left, and to return at different times of the day as they consider appropriate. They are often unsupervised, a situation that should never happen. They come and go, play, and make lots of noise, thus disturbing order, silence, and the calm of the Brothers, who lose time that should have been used in preparing lessons or carrying out some duty. Thus it is that these students are an occasion of upset, waste of time, and distraction with regard to the Brothers' spiritual exercises. Those who favor the Contests become, perhaps without realizing it, dupes of a self-love that blinds them. Because they believe in their talents and in their ability to succeed in public, they make of this insignificant event a major affair to which they devote all their time and attention, perhaps even that of their devotional exercises. At the least, there seem to be some grounds for fearing that the community exercises of those who wish to appear with honor suffer considerably. Thus everything is directed toward this prized objective of their own vanity.

3)⁹ Plans are made well beforehand; actors are selected, and the material to be dealt with in the public Competitions is chosen. From now on, compliments are prepared; catalogues of different historical situations appropriate for the ceremony are carefully assembled; the various sections of catechism, grammar, and arithmetic are distributed among the students most likely to succeed in those sections. Those who are to question and those who are to answer are designated, different actors being needed, as the one who can question well does not himself give the answer. The same attention is given to those who will shine through writing and to those chosen only to read. When these arrangements have been made, the only concern from this time on is to take the appropriate means to ensure the greatest possible success.

4) Throughout the entire time of class outside the common lessons, as we have already noted, the Teacher never loses sight of the ones chosen to act in the proposed Contest. Everything is employed for their advancement. In the section assigned to him, each contestant is pressured—sometimes forced—to become skilled. Even punishments are employed when they are thought necessary. Parents are asked to take the children in hand. This is an important matter; this is the public event itself! It is not only the part of instruction with which each actor is concerned that is, all things considered, the most necessary; the well-being of the Contest demands it, and this must be preferred to the good of any individual!

9. The numbering in the original text proceeds from 1 to 3, skipping number 2.

5) As the big day approaches, activities are multiplied; greater efforts are made. It is then that people are convinced that the urgency not to fail in the Contest must take precedence over every other consideration and even every community duty. Any orders and prohibitions of a Superior on this matter are no longer respected. The example that each Brother is called to give to his Brothers by his fervor in carrying out common duties is sacrificed. The order of the community is turned upside down. Brothers remain in distant classes with students, going there ahead of time and returning, alone, very late. There is no end to these departures, comings, and goings, since Brothers are completely occupied with frivolous aims that distort their judgment against every rule and order.

6) It is also at this time that the Brothers begin to prepare or to have prepared by others, in what concerns gestures and declamation, the students destined for the Contests. This means that the Brothers are preoccupied by matters absolutely foreign to their state while carrying out their own strictest duties very imperfectly. It is also worth noting that wherever these Contests are established in schools, the beginning of this extensive preparation, which lasts for months, is always the moment when good order and attention to teaching decline. It is true that if the Brother Visitor comes at this embarrassing time, things are momentarily restored to order both in the school and in the community. But from early morning until night, once he departs, the students are never left. The Director, through either connivance or weakness, pays no heed to it, and so the abuse prevails and is perpetuated.

7) Experience shows, my very dear Brothers, that toward the end of the school year, students lose their taste for work, relax their attention to duty, and long for vacation. They are not only less disposed to apply themselves; they are also less likely than at any other time of the year to be satisfied with order. No matter what attention their Teachers wish to bring, the students draw little profit. Now if in addition to the natural difficulties arising from the nearness of vacation in having students do their duty, we add the extreme embarrassment and great distractions that the Contests necessarily entail, is it not obvious that general teaching is practically reduced to nothing?

8) If it happens that through illness or some other cause, some students already prepared and ready for the Contests are withdrawn from the school, what a surplus of difficulties this produces for the Teacher and what new trouble does it not bring with regard to order in the classroom! For the gap has to be filled; efforts have to be redoubled, and rehearsals of the parts assigned have to continue all the time. These students will be coached and drilled during prayers, during catechism, and even while the others are at Mass. It cannot be denied that this unfortunate occurrence increases disorder. But no matter the cost, it is necessary to repair the losses that affect these public Competitions. Everything must be subordinated to this important objective.

9) A Brother who has mastered every aspect of our teaching, who has the advantage of being able to do it well along with the precious talent of inspiring students to piety and love of virtue, but who, in addition to these fine qualities, does not have the ability to train them to perform well in the Contests, will be looked upon as someone of little ability, and his students, although better taught, will be regarded as uncouth and ignorant. It will be the same for a naturally timid Teacher, one who is never more embarrassed than when he has to display his knowledge. Such a Teacher, although capable of honoring his profession and acquitting himself zealously, will not know how to perform; he will lack the manners and poise to make himself appreciated and will bring himself little honor in the public Contests. Another Teacher, however, of very mediocre ability, often with no other merit than that of being able to impose himself by his boldness, his chattering, and his dexterity, will pass for a great man and win all the applause of the assembly.

10) A young Brother who has all the success envisaged in the Contests is dazzled by the praise heaped on him and the compliments and congratulations given him in the public recognition by parents and all those who honor and flatter him. This Brother, being perhaps of ordinary talent, is tempted to believe himself someone of importance. If he is not solidly grounded in virtue, has he not to fear that his humility, modesty, simplicity, and love of his state will come to an unfortunate shipwreck? If his head is not completely turned by this high point of glory, has he not at least to fear that from now on he will be disdainful of ordinary tasks and even of teaching the poor, considering himself deserving of some more exalted task? Will he not become more sensitive and delicate on this point of honor? Will he not lose by this single public act everything he

has acquired over many years? This disadvantage alone is enough to distance himself as far away as possible from these Competitions.

11) Might not the care taken to train students in declamation, in the art of public speaking, in charm, harangues, and the singing of flattering songs in honor of the dignitaries assisting at the Contests be inspired by the ridiculous motive, at least in this regard, of equality with the Colleges¹⁰ and of sharing in the applause they attract by their literary Competitions? Is it not in view of this that rooms are prepared and theatres set up for these Contests, that those chosen to play certain roles are dressed up, that the principal celebrities of a place are invited personally or by note, that we hasten to multiply admirers, or rather, critics, perhaps even scoffers? For we should not hide the fact that if in these public Contests some sincere praise is received, how many other expressions are only contrived, trivial, and intended solely to intoxicate the foolish. When the pompous feast is over and the applause has been given and received, there is still need of a ceremony to go to thank the personalities who honored the occasion by their presence. If some distinguished persons in the town were unable to be present with others at this public spectacle and wish to see it repeated, the Teachers and the students go to them, and each takes his role and plays his part once again. When the presentation is over, the applause begins anew. The satisfied assembly praises the children once more and offers further compliments to the Teachers. Such is the end of this scene that is proclaimed soon afterward in other towns where these Competitions are established. The Brothers write to one another and share in their mutual success. They generally give a report on all they have done and the satisfaction received. It is in this way that vain objectives keep the Brothers busy both before and after the Contests.

12) The end of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools—we can never repeat it too often—is to bring up the children who frequent them in a Christian manner, that is to say, to educate them in the fear and the love of God.

The means given to the Teachers to attain such a noble end are to fill the youthful hearts of these children with Christian precepts, to engrave on their hearts the Commandments of God and of the Church and everything else needed for their salvation. Furthermore, Teachers are to instruct these same children to read, write, spell, and do arithmetic. Such are the boundaries of our teaching. Departing from these is to adopt a style of teaching that is not really our own. The method we are to follow without straying from it has enough breadth to occupy fully the teachers employed to do so. Now a Christian and religious Teacher who finds that the time intended for school is hardly enough to discharge his essential obligations is very far from using the time to train students for declamation and other theatrical practices that are only too likely to give them a taste for secular plays, from which children cannot be too far removed. Moreover, what use would it be for the children of artisans and the poor, for whom the Gratuitous Schools were specifically founded, to know how to recite compliments gracefully, give harangues, and reel off other pieces of eloquence while these same children often remain ignorant of what they need as essential, whether it be religion or those elements of knowledge necessary for their state? Would not the praise received by the children for having starred in these useless presentations, however, give them the idea that things concerning religion are not worth retaining or, furthermore, that they rank only second in the esteem of the people?

13) The extreme trouble associated with public Contests and the excessive amount of work demanded of Teachers in order to succeed can appear to very many a legitimate reason for not carrying out certain community spiritual exercises, on the basis that they cannot help the preferred work. They leave them aside. If there is a Brother Director zealous for the order and regularity of the community who wishes to rebuke this concession, how are his reproaches received? How is this zeal interpreted? From this unfavorable situation, can there not be reason to fear some act of disobedience or scandal? If the situation does not go as far as that, it will at least be difficult not to be followed by coldness, bad feeling, and discontent.

14) The excessive work and the anxieties imposed by the heavy tasks associated with the Contests may appear to a Brother to be sufficient justification to fail to get up at the normal rising

10. The reference is to the Colleges of the Jesuits, of the Oratorians, and of other groups that offered the traditional classical education of the time to the sons of wealthier families.

time of the community, to omit his meditation and even his assistance at Holy Mass. He believes he can sufficiently justify his conduct and repair the damage he does to himself and the bad example given to the community by exaggerating the burdens of the night before and complaining of his lot, seeing himself, so to say, as the victim of his own zeal for the public good and the honor of the community. This is how someone is pleased to delude himself.

15) The fatigue brought about by the Contests is not only the source of a thousand distractions to the Brother's spirit; it is also an occasion for exhausting his body and catching many illnesses that little by little ruin the best temperaments. Indeed, after having experienced many incidents of this type in the course of a year, a Brother feels his health considerably altered when vacation time has hardly arrived. He must therefore have recourse to remedies, begin dieting, and receive special consideration outside the common order, such as forbidding himself all concentration and spiritual exercises, which are most damaging to the state in which he finds himself. These exercises are replaced by frequent brief pleasure trips, walks through one town or another, and so forth. The exercises of the annual retreat made during the vacation are absolutely forbidden to the Brothers of whom we are speaking, worn out by their zeal. Their whole concern is to regain their strength and to put themselves in a position to be able to apply themselves to what they call the Main Event,¹¹ that is to say, to teach school after the vacation is over. Nevertheless, this retreat, so useful for the fervent, is even more so for those whom the Contests have thrown into such a state of distraction that deficiencies from which they have suffered throughout a great part of the year can have serious consequences for their health. Everyone knows how important it is to profit by this time of retreat to make up for spiritual losses and to renew the interior spirit, the very soul that guides a religious. It is during these holy exercises that there can be discovered the hundred frivolities that strengthen the passions and overwhelm the spirit to the detriment of our perfection and of the holiness to which our vocation calls us. Finally, it is during the retreat that after recognizing the tricks of self-love and the vanity of all that distracts us, we take effective means for a wise reform of our way of thinking and of acting. Piety reclaims its rights. A soul pierced by a religious spirit is an appropriate instrument to communicate piety and a love of virtue to the hearts of children.

16) The numerous inconveniences of the Contests have already inspired very many Brothers with a distinct aversion for those of our communities where they have been introduced, so much so that they go there only with difficulty and remain there only with repugnance by whatever means they can. Those among the Brothers who have nothing to do with these disturbing Competitions justly complain about the troubles they bring to our communities and the upsets they cause. From every side the Brothers complain that the long painful preparations for the Contests dry up the spirit of devotion in them, ruin their health, and take away the time they need either to prepare their daily lessons or to create examples of writing.

Very many young Brothers do not dare to commit themselves to the Institute because of their fear of being subjected to these Contests, which are so harmful to their vocation and so contrary to recollection. These Competitions have really been carried to such a level of difficulty and variety in several towns that they have become a heavy burden on the Brothers. It is too arduous a counterweight to satisfying self-love, especially when it is contrary to a person's wishes.

17) The competitiveness that arises naturally among the Teachers who have a taste for Contests can become a source of jealousy, discontent, and coldness toward one another. Each Teacher wishes to succeed in his plan, even so far as to sweep away his imitator, hence the efforts of work and attention by one and the other to obtain the advancement of those chosen to compete for the prize. This doubling of zeal would be quite praiseworthy if it were aimed at the advancement of all his students.

18) If one Teacher has an advantage over another, the latter sees this superiority of his confrere only with despondency. He tries in every way to persuade himself—and to have others understand—that the former has, despite all the advantages over him, certain weaknesses that would have left the two of them equal from a certain viewpoint, at least if the matter had been seen from another angle. To justify himself, he projects a part of the humiliation he is experiencing

11. The French text uses the expression "le Principal."

onto the fortunate disposition or age of his rival's student. However, if the merit of the successful one is so plain as not to be in doubt, he is upset, disconcerted, and discouraged. He can be relieved of his difficulty by the change of community that he asks for, not taking any account of the damage that frequent changes among the Teachers can cause for the advancement of students.

19) The Teacher of one class will persuade himself that his students are on the same level as those of another class and consequently should be equally represented in the distribution of prizes. If it happens, nevertheless, that those who judge the prizes think otherwise, the Teacher can believe himself wronged; he calls it unjust, because all the care he has taken goes unrewarded. Indeed, the bitterness he feels and maintains is the most likely result.

20) In the competitive atmosphere of the Contests, it is not easy to see others having more success than ourselves. If humility does not come to the rescue, it will be difficult to see the talents of our Brothers justly and pardon them for their merited superiority. Self-love is wounded; people remain offended. If someone cannot gain or win some degree of consideration against those of whom he is jealous, there seems to be no other cure for the evil than to shrink from the view of those who injure the eyes by the sight of their merit or to find reasons for a change of community. If this cannot be obtained, the Brother falls into a bad mood, and everyone in the community is likely to suffer all the disagreements, as though a person had the right to blame everyone else for not having all the talents he wishes.

21) It sometimes happens among Teachers that the desire to surpass one another in the public Competitions leads a person to make use of little tricks and underhanded intrigues that are likely to reduce or cut across what others are doing. All of this activity is intended to find a way for personal relief, and from this there follow sharp reprimands and other offensive remarks, all equally opposed to union, peace, charity, and honesty.

22) A Teacher who would have been happy to present his students at the highest rank in the Contests and who has not received the desired reward will doubtless feel the supposed injustice committed toward him and his students. If he has the discretion to be content publicly, will he have the prudence not to allow his grief and resentment to burst out when those who distributed the prizes are no longer present and to impute faults of judgment or justice to them?

23) Finally, someone who has had certain difficulties in these Contests is easily persuaded, no matter the source of these sufferings, that there is ample justification for not wanting to remain in a town that can no longer please him, because of the rebuffs that he experienced from these public Competitions; the situation is no longer supportable.

The development of this multitude of abuses originating from the Contests proves beyond any doubt the truth of the proposition that we have set out. But in order to make it even more striking, we are going to state the reasons alleged by Brothers who disapprove of these kinds of public Competitions. These reasons are drawn, in part, from what has been said in a number of points already cited.

According to these Brothers,

- 1) their state in life does not oblige them to do this;
- 2) they do not have sufficient health to support the surcharge of work that the preparation of students destined for the Contests requires;
- 3) these extra concerns rob them of the time needed to prepare the obligatory teaching and to pause for their spiritual exercises;
- 4) it is impossible to do both things at the same time without sacrificing many obligations of the Rule;
- 5) very few results are obtained from the multiple cares exacted by the public Competitions;
- 6) some do not believe they have the talent necessary to shine, although they have sufficient talent for whatever good is required of them by their state;
- 7) others, endowed with the qualities needed to succeed in the Contests and less distrustful of their own abilities, are not prepared to take on work that is too difficult;
- 8) others, from the viewpoint of modesty and humility, prefer virtue to vanity;
- 9) there are those who dread the censure and the mockery of critics who find it ridiculous for the Brothers to be mixed up in things that have nothing to do with their state;

10) balancing the pros and cons leads some to reject completely these Contests that have such little utility and so many abuses;

11) the distinction accorded to the small number of students chosen for the Contests and the particular attention given to them are a kind of injustice for which they do not wish to be reproached;

12) there are too many visits by parents who ask the Teachers to put their children where they can shine with honor and be distinguished among the troupe;

13) the upset and trouble brought to ordinary class duties and the study of particular subjects foreign to our teaching displease those who love order;

14) very many Brothers in favor of Contests, having successfully added and considerably increased the task from year to year, have eventually found themselves at the end of their tether, with the result that they have been obliged to change community. Their successors, not wishing to be less distinguished, do not wish to risk failing in taking on more than they can do with distinction.

After this account, it is easy to conclude that the feelings of those who are opposed to the Contests deserve to be considered.

We think it appropriate to remark that none of the zealous partisans of these illustrious Competitions has noticed at the same time or in the same place all the above-mentioned abuses. Nevertheless, all these inconveniences have arisen, plus many others that we will cloak over in silence. In certain towns they have been more plentiful, and in others, fewer. We are convinced that after reading our observations, the vast majority of Brothers will believe that we still do not know everything reprehensible in these Contests.

As for the rest, let no one believe that Competitions are a proper means for sustaining and extending the reputation of our schools. No, experience has already dissipated the charm of that illusion. It is recognized that these Contests obtain for the children destined to figure in them only a particular teaching, very imperfect and more harmful than useful.

A happier experience has already proven that our teaching, when practiced in the spirit of and according to the rules established among us, can produce and has produced the greatest benefits and blessings. Teachers need to strengthen themselves in the spirit and the simplicity of their vocation. Consequently, they should distance themselves from the world and its folly. All Contests foreign to their profession that take them away from their community spiritual exercises will make them also leave their state and cause the loss of schools.

We should not fear that the suppression of the Contests will attract unfavorable comments on the Brothers or that they will be lacking means of encouragement, so long as they carry out all the duties of their profession exactly. Will it be objected that the public will be able to think that this suppression has no other cause on the part of the Brothers than a lack of zeal, a love of rest, and a desire to shield themselves from a searching examination of the progress of their students and the care taken by Teachers to teach them well? These difficulties have nothing to fear from a judicious public aware that things have never been better and that society never draws more profit from its members than when each of them contributes in the way he should to the general good, in which are necessarily enclosed the particular advantages of each individual.

If we accept this indisputable maxim, it follows that these public Competitions, which are required neither by the Brothers' duties nor by the founders of our establishments, can only be harmful in every way and, as such, ought to be suppressed.

As for examining the progress of students and the way in which Teachers carry out their teaching, our regulations have provided for this in establishing an Inspector who must visit the classes at least once each month and promote those students who are ready to pass to a higher grade. Moreover, once each year, a Visitor entrusted with examining everything passes through. Furthermore, Brothers carry out their teaching as a matter of conscience and by a special dedication to this good work. They cannot be suspected of any lack of zeal or of justice toward the public by blameworthy neglect of their task.

There are means of encouragement established in the schools; for example, small presents are distributed; there are places and marks of distinction; there are exemptions granted for merit

and for application. There are penances to be accepted, a certain shame to be cleansed, so as to stimulate and wake up the lazy and slothful.

All the means made use of with respect to zeal sustained by work are within the reach of the Teachers, the only means at their disposal. For to give more importance to the prizes founded to stir up competition, it has been thought appropriate that some very distinguished persons, by the fact of distributing the prizes, assure themselves that they are carrying out the intention of the founders. But this way of distributing prizes, although more flattering for the children who receive them, does not have all the usefulness of which the foundation is capable, for several students have been deprived of it whose application deserves a reward but who are compelled to leave school before the prize distribution. These kinds of foundations do not give the Teachers other means for thanking the students who have distinguished themselves in the different competitions held in the classes during the course of the year. They produce, as it is easy to understand, only a portion of the advantages that can be drawn if the Teachers were at liberty to make use of them to encourage competition and to thank the students who are outstanding, above all, for their piety and assiduity in Christian instruction.

Yes, if to the means established in our schools to stir up competition among students and to sustain the zeal of the Teachers there was added to the prize distribution a general examination of the progress of the students, above all in religion, experience would prove that Teachers and disciples would be led to carry out their duties. But the way of conducting the general examination at the end of the scholastic year deserves to be treated with some breadth and with particular attention.

It belongs doubtless to the reverend parish priests and to other ecclesiastical superiors to examine whether the children who attend our schools are instructed as they should be in everything concerning Christian doctrine. But the large-scale pompous Contests carried out in church or classrooms on the letter of the catechism, accompanied by dialogues and lectures, certainly do not offer the best way of being assured that children are well taught.

Indeed, a word-for-word repetition of the whole catechism and a number of dialogues on certain moral questions may very well prove that those who recite with fluency what they were given to learn by heart are endowed with good memories, but it in no way proves that they have been well taught, since it can happen—and is quite common—that children recite from memory many things that they do not understand. This is how they recite the discourses and instructions in these pompous Contests: they reel off the speeches and recite all the roles they have been given to learn without having anything more in their minds than the words.

Therefore, if the reverend parish priests are content with a literal recitation of the catechism in these Contests of which we speak, it will inevitably happen that the children will never come to know more. It could also happen that some Teachers will be led to believe that this literal repetition of the diocesan catechism would satisfy their obligation to teach religion in depth to their students. This would be a dangerous opinion.

To know with certainty whether the children have been in fact well taught, they need to be questioned in class or in church but without following the order of the content, the sequence of questions, or the order of the rows of students. They should be questioned first on one topic, then on another, some students in sequence and others without any order. When it is certain that the children know the text of the diocesan catechism, which is the first thing they should know, it is important to examine whether they understand the meaning, since without that understanding, the whole point of teaching them would have been missed. Now the way to make sure that students understand the meaning of the text is to ask them many subquestions, changing them, presenting them in different ways, but always within their understanding in relation to the topic they have been given for instruction. Other means of teaching, more or less related to their age and to their greater or lesser natural intelligence, can be used. The way of presenting children with the truths of which we wish to be assured they have a complete understanding can even help them to grasp them if they did not do so previously. The answers given by the students to these kinds of subquestions are always to be crystal clear with regard to the point of the instruction being offered or to the things on which they are being examined.

We should not be satisfied to have such an examination at the end of the school year or to wait until then to distribute all the competition prizes. Some students, who leave immediately after their First Communion, before the end of the year, cannot profit from the advantages procured by these well-prepared examinations or obtain the prizes or rewards that are the result of their application and merit.¹²

In the type of examination of which we have just been speaking, after concentrating on the progress of the students in every aspect of Christian instruction, we should not neglect to examine whether all of the children read correctly with pauses, whether they have been taught the rules of punctuation and accents, whether they can understand old-style [Gothic] and new-style writing, whether the students at the highest level can write dictation, whether they can spell accurately. To be sure that they possess the principles of French grammar, they can be examined in the principal rules, the different parts of speech, the conjugation of verbs, and the formation of tenses.

As for arithmetic, they can be questioned on the definition of the principal operations. Some small problems to be solved can be proposed that they should be asked to work out, explaining what they are doing and giving reasons for each operation. Writing is the easiest thing to judge. Looking at the writing books, giving preference to the style that is the freest, lightest, best formed, and most correctly spelled, can quickly decide the merit of the competitors.

Something more about the Competitions

It follows from the outline just given with respect to the ends proposed in these public Contests, the way they are conducted, the subjects introduced into them, and the abuses to which they have given rise, as we have clearly demonstrated,

1) that the sum of the inconveniences they cause is far greater than any advantages that can be credited to them;

2) that they bring a certain prejudice against the students who are not selected to compete for the prizes, and, consequently, their mutterings, discontent, and complaints are only too well founded; therefore, it is for the greatest benefit of our teaching that they be suppressed;

3) that they are likely, in general, to cause the poor and those who lack a naturally happy and outgoing disposition to distance themselves from our schools;

4) that they cause disorder, upset, and restlessness in our communities;

5) that the Contests degenerate into purely pompous ceremonies, more showy and noisy than solid; that they demonstrate only a superficial kind of teaching, which is not our own and brings no advantages either to the Teachers or to the students;

6) that they cause disorganization among the students, bitter enmities, scorn, and other attitudes contrary to the mutual friendship that they should always maintain among themselves;

7) that the small number of students chosen to compete does not prove that our schools are generally well served or that the students are well taught;

8) that there is another way of ensuring whether students are well or badly taught and whether they profit from all aspects of our teaching in a way commensurate with their ability and with other circumstances that are more or less advantageous;

9) that this other method is simple and easy, without inconveniences, is capable on the contrary of producing good effects, and is thus to be preferred to the Contests;

10) that we have been led to see as well that the Contests expose the Brothers to the contagious air of vanity and to the danger of being drawn away from the simplicity required by their state;

11) that the Contests can be a source of discouragement for Brothers and the occasion of a vicious competitiveness among them, contrary to both humility and charity;

12. The Teachers themselves will find in these examinations (in which the prayers, the responses at Holy Mass, and the ways of behaving toward one another should not be omitted) both motives for encouragement as well as lessons to be followed in the manner of explaining doctrine in order to give the children a developed intelligence in proportion to their capacity. (Note from the original French text)

12) that they bring about frequent changes (always harmful to the good of a school) by the disgust they arouse among the Brothers who have an aversion for these kinds of glossy Competitions and for the communities where they are in force;

13) that they expose the Brothers to a multitude of distractions, to a kind of restlessness harmful equally to their soul and to the spiritual aspect of their task, because someone with a restless soul who has lost the taste for piety and acquired the habit of skipping the community spiritual exercises, which have been set up to support and inspire him, is hardly likely to inspire others;

14) that they bring about an infinity of transgressions of the rules and a loss of time and of the moments set aside for class preparation;

15) that they constitute for the young Brothers a temptation against their vocation;

16) finally, that the just reasons advanced by the Brothers opposed to the Contests, joined to those deduced from the various propositions we have set out, leave no doubt in proving the need to suppress these pompous events known as Contests.

On more than one occasion, my very dear Brothers, we have complained that these public Competitions were being augmented annually, that these successive increases have made them more and more intolerable in the Institute and at the same time insupportable because of the burden of embarrassment that they bring with them. Our warnings and complaints have not been able to stop this itching desire to distinguish oneself. Things have only worsened. That is why we have believed it our duty to make known that the consequences have become so worthy of condemnation that they speak more efficaciously than all our reprimands.

When we were established in the different places where we now have schools, neither the founders nor the towns required us to form young people to the graces of eloquence or to teach them useless things. Thus the most critical people have always considered that if we would be introducing in the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools any public Competitions of such a nature as those we are opposing, we would at the same time be introducing a spirit of carelessness and of pride and, as a result, relaxation and all kinds of disorders. This is how the Institute has always been thought of, and experience has proved that the suppositions formed about this topic were not without foundation.

We have grounds for hoping that everyone following the outline we have just given will find it quite appropriate that we condemn public Contests, declamations, recitations, and graceful compliments, that by these present considerations we forbid our Brothers so to prepare their students, and that we advise the Brothers to limit themselves to the commitments laid down by our Rules and Constitutions and by *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, with respect both to the different sections which comprise it and to the method of presenting them.

Since we are proposing by the suppression of public Competitions a very important good and have shown that it will be so, we have reason to believe that everyone who takes a true interest in the instruction given in schools will wish to second our efforts in this regard.

After all we have said, some will ask how the prize distribution will take place where there are foundations and how we are to come to recognize the students who have so merited.

As it would not be possible to carry out simultaneously the distribution of prizes and the choice of the students as candidates, it is necessary, some days before the ceremony, to choose the most deserving from each section of our teaching. Having already stated enough about the way of examining them, we are satisfied to repeat here that for calculation, arrange dictation to see how they use the rules of arithmetic that are within their grasp; for spelling, dictate a letter or something else to them; for writing, select some pages from the paper on which they are currently working. These three examples will be signed by them and presented to the judges of the competition. In the same way, after all the students have read, a list of names will be made out of those competing in reading. During the competition, they will read from the beginning in a book that they have not been accustomed to read. As for catechism and grammar, they will reply to the questions asked of them. The best answers will be concise repetitions of what the students have learned.

Since good behavior, true piety, promptitude, and noticeable application deserve to be included in the competition, care should be taken that these qualities are not overlooked. It is for the students themselves to discern, by vote, those who best deserve these awards. The competitors on this occasion need not be designated until the very day of the competition.

The rationale for distributing prizes seems to require:

- 1) that they be given, in the presence of all the students, to the truly deserving;
- 2) that in all the classes the most advanced students in each lesson compete among themselves for the appropriate prize;
- 3) that with regard to students who have been drilled in every aspect of the lessons, rewards will be given only to those who have excelled in the greatest number of them;
- 4) that all students will be questioned by the examiners only in those matters that should be taught in our schools.

During the competition, someone should be entrusted to note the sum of the faults committed by each of the contestants in the subjects on which he will have had to prove his ability. Those with the least number of faults will deserve the prize that will be given after all the examinations, beginning with the first. With regard to writing, two or three faults can be overlooked in favor of the one student judged best, and one or two faults for those students who come closest. In case of a tie, the one who has done the best throughout the year deserves to receive the prize.

By the method just proposed for distributing awards to the students, my very dear Brothers, we do not intend to prevent you from following better methods which you can easily find.

Upon the reception of the above observations, our Brothers Directors will have this letter read in the refectory in the presence of all the Brothers, and they will preserve copies in our Houses in order to produce the effect that it should have.

Brother Agathon
Maréville (where we are on a visit to the community)
10 April 1786