

2B. THE CHILDREN OF ARTISANS AND THE POOR

Summary:

1. General usage of the word Artisan in La Salle's time: 1.1 Dictionary definitions. 1.2. Artisans and the Destitute. – 2. La Salle's use of the word: 2.1. Vocabulaire Lasallien. 2.2. In association with the word, Poor. 2.3. Other Uses. – 3. The evidence of Sociologists. 3.1. The basis of social categorisation in La Salle's time. – 4. The Bull and the Vow Formula and the clientele of the Christian Schools. – 5. Usage in the contemporary Institute. 5.1. Rule. 5.2. Declaration. 5.3. Circulars and Letters. (See also: Lasallian Themes; The Poor).

1. GENERAL USAGE IN LA SALLE'S TIME

1.1. Dictionary definitions in the 17th and 18th C.

ARTISAN f.m. Worker who exercises one of the mechanical arts, such as shoemaker, locksmith, carpenter. He may be termed a poor artisan, a lowly artisan, a skilful artisan, by extension a master artisan in the liberal arts.¹

ARTISAN n.m. One who practices one of the liberal arts.²

MECHANICAL ARTS n.m.p. Are those in which one works more with the hand and body than the mind. They are those workers who normally provide us with the necessities of life such as watchmakers, carpenters, bakers, shoemakers...³

Quoting Richelet's dictionary of 1680 Brothers Poutet and Pungier, in referring to the situation of artisans in La Salle's day have a pertinent comment which further confirms the content of these definitions and indicates the futility of trying to distinguish between artisans and the poor as the Founder employs the terms.⁴

Their commentary concludes:

"They (the artisans) had no security because unemployment was general. They had no steady income and no capital to help them weather an economic crisis. Consequently, they were poor".⁵

Furetière, as we note above (1) links our two words in his definition of the artisan, Poor Arti-

san. It seems quite natural in view of the fluctuating fortunes of the artisans of the 1680's that La Salle and his Brothers should use the words interchangeably because, in view of the economic situation, all children who frequented the Christian Schools could, with few exceptions, be classed as poor.

"Thus whether they were thinking of labourers, of workers in the simplest mechanical arts (artisans) or shopkeepers; they saw them all as belonging to the world of the poor. In fact, as will be evidenced from testimony from the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the majority of the French population could be described as poor and its lower echelons indigent (miserables)".⁶

Artisans, therefore, of the humbler ranks experienced a poverty which was for many of them, intermittent, rather than permanent. It was a poverty controlled by such factors as: supply of raw materials, harsh winters, the fluctuations of war and the unreliability of markets. It was for the artisan, as Richelet notes, a life of insecurity rather than of permanent poverty or destitution. (misère) This distinction is also identified by Blain when he analyses the categories of Poor in the Brothers' Schools in Paris in the first decade of the 18th c.⁷

J.P. Gutton's research confirms Richelet⁸ and Blain's⁹ contemporary observations.

1.2. Artisans and the destitute

A further distinction is drawn between the word Poor as applied to these workers and those

persons and families reduced to absolute destitution. It was for these latter that the State had established the *Hopitaux Généraux*. These institutions housed permanently and forcefully those whose insecurity has become chronic, as well as many aged poor (former artisans without means of support) and orphans and other children entirely dependent on the local Poor Board.¹⁰

“Here we are talking about genuine poverty. The poverty of those who rarely ate their fill, who lacked the means to provide heat in the winter and were unable to get married before the age of thirty since they could not afford to support a family. Those who were poor in this sense composed about one-third of the manual workers. For nearly all of them periods of unemployment and semi-starvation were inevitable”.¹¹

So here is seen again a terminology which finds it impossible to distinguish between “artisans” and “the poor”, but clearly identifying differentiated levels of need.

2. USE OF THE WORD ARTISAN BY LA SALLE

The word “ARTISAN” occurs relatively rarely in La Salle’s writings. In view of the limited use he makes of it it seems appropriate to quote the examples of its use in their entirety.

2.1. Lasallian Vocabulary

ARTISAN

- CE 187 D Of what import is it for an artisan to know how to read and write
- Da 120 C To refrain from servile work such as was performed by Artisans
- 122 D One can only blame those artisans who work on the Holy Days
- 158 B Artisans whose work is hard and exhausting
- Db 118 A Artisans whose work is exhausting, (the poor) dispensed from fasting
- Dc 86 D Artisans whose work is exhausting, the poor
- 129 C Work which is performed by artisans and merchants
- 129 C To refrain on Sundays from work which is done by artisans

- GA 374 B The sick, the old, artisans whose work is exhausting
- I 115 C Merchant and of what type of goods, or artisan and what trade
- 230 A If the artisans have not worked conscientiously
- MF 232 C She (the Blessed Virgin) was taken for the wife of an artisan
- MH 2 17 Those who have worn only the clothing of simple artisans
- MR 11 C A practice which is only too common among artisans and the poor
- 78 E Piety is deepened among artisans and the poor
- RB VI B An artisan who would not be self-sufficient
- VI B This artisan ought to have more respect for his master
- 60 A That artisans leave woollen clothing for people of higher status
- 154 A Others which are more common to artisans and the poor
- 157 A Usually only artisans and the poor who stay there
- 248 C As would be an artisan or a peasant
- RC 2.4 Artisans and the poor being ordinarily little instructed
- 2.5 To procure this advantage for children of artisans and the poor
- 2.6 Disorders among artisans and the poor come (from the fact that they have been abandoned).¹²

2.2. The word, “Artisan” used in association with the word “the poor”

It will have been noticed that the word “ARTISAN” is most often found in La Salle’s writings in association with the word “POOR”. Brother Maurice Hermans tells us that it is used, in immediate association with the word THE POOR, seven times in all. Two of these, however, are of no great significance and are found in the Rules of Politeness and Good behaviour.¹³

The remaining five examples are more important, three of them occurring in the primitive Rules of 1705 and 1718. These phrases are found in articles 4, 5, and 6 and are employed to define the end of the Institute.

The first, article 4, explains the why of the children's spiritual abandon:

"Ordinarily having had little instruction and being occupied all day in earning their livelihood and that of their children, ARTISANS AND THE POOR, cannot themselves give them the instructions which are necessary for them and a suitable education".

The second, article 5, explains the how of their rescue from this state:

"It was with a view to procuring this advantage for the children of ARTISANS AND THE POOR that the Christian Schools were established".

The third, article 6, specifies the advantages to be hoped for by the establishment of the Schools:

"All disorders, especially among ARTISANS AND THE POOR, usually arise from their having been, in childhood, left to themselves and badly brought up... and the principal fruit to be expected from the institution of the Christian Schools is to forestall these disorders and prevent their evil consequences".¹⁴

The same expression, combining the words ARTISANS AND THE POOR, is employed by La Salle in two meditations. The first of these from the Meditations for the Times of Retreat is clearly a summary of the above three articles from the Rules:

"Consider that it is only too common for the artisans and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over as if they had no home, until they are able to be put to some work. These parents have no concern to send their children to school because they are too poor to pay teachers, or else they have to go out to work and leave their children to fend for themselves".¹⁵

The second instance is from the concluding meditation of the series which speaks of the rewards that the Brothers can expect for having devoted their lives to the service of these children:

"Look upon this, then, as a considerable reward that God gives you, even in this world, to see, by means of the establishment of the schools placed by God in your responsibility, that religion and the practice of the faith are increased among the faithful, especially among the artisans and the poor".¹⁶

2.3. Further uses of the word Artisan

Another interesting employment of the term is found in the meditation for the Eve of the Nativity, in which Mary is referred to as "the wife of an artisan".¹⁷ In all La Salle uses the word ARTISAN twenty four times. In none of these contexts is there any detail which would assist us in determining exactly who might be designated by the term nor is there help in distinguishing them from another, at first sight, distinct group, THE POOR. In fact, the contexts would seem to indicate that La Salle was virtually using the terms as synonyms. Such also would seem to be implied in the conclusion of the joint authors of BEGINNINGS:

"According to present day standards a poor person is anyone who is unable to afford the minimum comforts available to those in the lowest wage category. But in the 17th century such comforts were lacking generally. According to such a norm, most of the population of France would be considered poor — from the lowliest beggars to the Artisans and the small shopkeepers".¹⁸

3. THE EVIDENCE OF SOCIOLOGISTS

3.1. The Basis of Social Categorisation in La Salle's Time

Brother Yves Poutet finds it important to stress in any attempt to determine the identity of the clientele of the Christian Schools that economics was not the basis of social division in the 17th c. Differentiation was based on function rather than on the laws of economics. Society was a society of ORDER rather than of Class. This being understood, it is clear that the school in so far as it was concerned with secular matters either was intended to be, or certainly in practice functioned as, a vehicle of upward social mobility. Poutet would certainly claim a conscious awareness in La Salle of this social function of the school. Without such a consciousness it would be rather difficult to explain his writing of a text on good manners.¹⁹ It would seem then logical to conclude that when he employed the expression ARTISANS AND THE POOR in the formal situation of the Rules, he was using the words interchangeably and in a very fluid sense. In a short article entitled LA VÉRI-

TABLE HIERARCHIE SOCIALE AU TEMPS DE SAINT J.B. DE LA SALLE, following the insights of Bluche and Solnon, Poutet concludes:

“In suppressing, in the schools, all discrimination based on economics, (gratuity for all, which no longer humiliated the poor but allowed the better-off to attend there...) J.B. de La Salle mingled artisans, sailors, surgeons... pages, valets, secretly poor...)... We can attest a movement favourable to a levelling out of society”.²⁰

Bluche and Solnon identify 569 levels of taxation in France at the end of the 17th century supporting the thesis that the basis of society in La Salle's time was one of ORDER and FUNCTION. In his unpublished study Brother Henri Bedel furnishes a great mass of data concerning the situation of artisans and the poor. This data relates to towns such as Amiens, Dole and Lyon in particular. While establishing the fact that there was among the population of each city and town a group specifically designated as the POOR,²¹ the data makes it clear that the economic situation of the country at large continually spawned, from among the lesser artisans, intermittent and temporary POOR.

“Among those whom we have seen considered as poor it seems, however, that there were some, while having usually sufficient resources to provide for their needs at least at the level at which we have situated them, could find themselves presented from doing so temporarily”.²²

Bedel cites other cases of persons admitted to the Hôpitaux who are identified as artisans and whose situation is one of temporary poverty. Quoting from the poor register of Dole a little later than the period with which we are concerned, Bedel cites a typical case involving artisans in the weaving trade:

“The lack of work by reason of the dearth of resources had similar (need for assistance) effects. Thus at Dole right through the year 1750, we see a household of spinners of wool address themselves to the Confraternity of the Cross in terms like these: That being reduced to extreme necessity they and their family composed of four children, because of the lack of work in their profession and through the high price of food, not having even the means of sustaining themselves with even the worst and most ordinary food”.²³

Reading the numerous applications for assistance given by Brother Bedel it becomes increasingly clear that the terms “artisan” and “poor” although having their own referent are in the period under consideration most often to be recognised as identical in meaning.

Again while coming to this conclusion we need to be aware of what has been noted above. Within the social hierarchy of the times there was an ORDER known as the POOR. The very fact that La Salle links the terms artisan and the poor, particularly when he is writing formally, would seem to indicate that he is not limiting his poor to the official poor. He is clearly, it would seem, including the type of poor Bedel identifies among the artisans as does Gutton:

“The embarrassed poor person is only poor because his social standing leaves him outside the world of poverty. Even when effected by poverty, he did not belong to those who socially were considered as forming part of the POOR.”²⁴

Bedel concludes with Gutton that the small artisan who depended on his bodily strength to gain a modest livelihood was in constant danger, due to the fluctuations in food prices, of being considered as poor:

“The characteristic common to all those who formed this ensemble appears to us to come from this ancient definition of the “poor” taken up again by J.P. Gutton: “the person who has only his work to enable him to live”, which the author makes precise by saying: “the poor man lives from day to day”; he has no payment in advance, but simply the wages for the work of his arms”.²⁵

Brother Maurice Hermans also quoting Gutton, *Society and The Poor in Europe*, gives further support to the view that for La Salle the terms ARTISAN and the POOR were virtually synonyms:

“Artisans are so poor, we read regarding the city of Poitiers in 1684, that it is necessary to put them in the Hospital as soon as they stop working”.²⁶

Herman's conclusion is that artisans of the more humble sort were in constant danger of being identified with what he calls the TRULY POOR. By this he means those who were designated by occupation as POOR or BEGGAR on offi-

cial documents and who were not subject to any level of taxation.

Brother Hermans also examines the Conduct of Schools at length and finds references in models of admission, applications, etc. which identify the parents as artisans. The word itself is used several times as is evidenced in the list of citations in the *Vocabulaire Lasallien*. It would seem clear that the artisans in question are, in general, those of the humbler sort; such as carder and serger.

However, he also comments that there are numerous references in the Management which give evidence of a certain measure of financial ease among many of the students (Hermans op. cit. p. 10). The ARTISANS referred to by La Salle, as Brother Bedel's Study affirms, experienced their economic ups and downs as do the ordinary workers of today even in First World countries.

4. THE BULL AND THE VOW FORMULA AND THE CLIENTELE OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS.

The wording of the Bull of 1724 is presumably, in major part, either composed by the Institute or from information provided to the Apostolic See by the Brothers. After the standard introduction which mentions in general terms Institutes founded "to favour the progress of children of the poor" it goes on to specify those who were to benefit from the initiative of John Baptist de La Salle. These are identified as children of persons belonging to one or other of two categories: "Those crushed down by want or those busy with manual labour in order to gain a livelihood".²⁷

Echoes are immediately recognised here both of the primitive Rules of 1705 and 1718 and of the first two chapters of the Founder's Meditations for the Times of Retreat. In both instances the attention is drawn back to the linking of the words "the Children of artisans and the poor". The Bull makes a distinction between these two groups but it would seem once again only for the purpose of indicating that there was a wide range of economic need involved. We are looking here not really at two distinct groups but at two aspects of a continuum. At the same time we are reminded that the insecurity of the times established a close relation-

ship and even an identification between the two. The Bull has two further references which clarify the situation a little further. In specifying eighteen rules under which the Brothers are said to live, the Bull notes: that they make it their chief duty to teach children (in general) and especially poor children (in particular). It further notes that such teaching is given gratuitously.

What needs to be noted here is that, in practice, La Salle and the first Brothers and those who followed after the Bull of 1724 made no distinction in the application of the principle of gratuity to pupils in the elementary classes. If we are to persevere with the notion of two distinct groups, they taught both groups gratuitously. That is they made no distinction between children of ARTISANS and the POOR in this regard.

The general expression of the Bull concerned the aim of teaching "children in general" and only by way of modification of "teaching the POOR". It was perfectly logical then for the vow formula after 1726 to continue to speak of teaching gratuitously without modification. There appears to have been, from the early part of the 19th century a growing debate within the Institute as to whom gratuity referred. In due course the formula was revised from "to teach gratuitously" to "to teach the poor gratuitously". It would seem that, once again, we would be chasing a chimera in any attempt to establish that La Salle, in linking the two words, was consciously identifying two distinct groups.

5. USAGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY INSTITUTE

5.1. The Common Rules and the Rule

The Common Rules have traditionally linked the words ARTISANS and the POOR. The Rule of 1947 is the last of the revisions which retains the traditional format. In Chapter 1, THE END AND NECESSITY OF THE INSTITUTE, the word ARTISANS is used three times.²⁸ In Chapter 18 on the vows it is employed twice. The opening article of the post-Vatican II Rule of December 1967 retained the nexus between the children of ARTISANS and the POOR, but this is the sole re-

ference. Subsequent versions of the Rule progressively speak of the mission of the Institute as being the SERVICE OF THE POOR THROUGH EDUCATION.

This new terminology reaches its climax in Chapter 2 of the Rule of 1987 art. 11, and is spelled out more clearly in arts 39-41, as indeed in the vow formula itself.²⁹ The Rule however, retains the expression THE CHILDREN OF ARTISANS AND THE POOR in two significant articles. The first in Chp. 1 art. 1 “As he became aware by God’s grace, of the human and spiritual distress of THE CHILDREN OF ARTISANS AND THE POOR, John Baptist de La Salle devoted himself to forming schoolmasters totally dedicated to teaching and to christian education”.

The second in Chp. 2 art. 11 “John Baptist de La Salle was deeply moved by the way in which THE CHILDREN OF ARTISANS AND THE POOR were abandoned and left to themselves”.³⁰ The retention of these two references to artisans in such significant locations can hardly be interpreted as a mere quirk of style or a bow to nostalgia. It surely acknowledges that the Institute still considers among its clientele the lineal descendents of La Salle’s artisans whether they be called labourers, factory workers, craftsmen or whatever.

5.2. The Declaration

The First Session of the Chapter of Renewal 1966-67 designated a small group of delegates to make a study of the identity of the Brother during the inter-chapter period. Subsequently this group presented to the Chapter the seminal document known as the Declaration. As is acknowledged in the text, the thinking of its joint framers was much influenced by such conciliar and papal documents as *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Gravissimum Educationis Momentum*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Populorum Progressio* and *Ad Gentes*. The text of the Declaration was discussed and voted article by article by the Chapter many of whose members had presumably experienced the realities confronted in the Council documents. As a consequence the Rule ad experimentum of 1967, as stated above, which eventually emerged from the Chapter faithfully reflected the Church’s concern for

poverty and injustice. There is no direct reference to ARTISANS in the Declaration but in art. 31.6, the two words OUVRIER and TRAVAILLEUR would appear to be substitutes for the word in a passage which begins: “The Brothers will promote the self-improvement of the poor as a group”.

5.3. Some selected Institute Circulars

5.3.1. *Circular 412, 15th September 1979*

The Circular THE EDUCATIONAL SERVICE OF THE POOR AND THE PROMOTION OF JUSTICE speaks of the need for a precise study of the expression ARTISANS AND THE POOR and makes reference to Brother Bedel’s study.³¹ However, the circular goes on to refer to those designated by these terms as two distinct social categories and in that context speaks of the openness of the schools in La Salle’s time to the children of different social CLASSES. Evidence already brought forward in this paper would indicate that the distinctness referred to was far less clear than the circular would imply. La Salle would certainly have been aware that there were groups of people who were officially designated as Artisans and Poor but he also knew that in reality and practice the situation was very different. There is adequate evidence that he rejected these categories as a basis for admission to the schools unless absolutely forced to do so. As Blain points out La Salle resisted vigorously attempts to have children excluded from the Paris schools on the basis of this official categorisation.³² Ascribing a motive for La Salle’s determination, Blain points out that in such a delicate matter one cannot always judge from externals.

5.3.2. *Pastoral Letter 1st January 1988:*

“The destiny of the Institute our responsibility”

Section VI of this letter deals with solidarity with the POOR.

The second criterion of *Perfectae Caritatis* in defining all renewal of life and works is a return to the original inspiration of the Founder. This call is presumably the basis for the 39th General Chapter’s call as referred to in paragraph one of Section VI of the Letter. Thus what the Brothers are being

urged to do here is to return to the Founder's original commitment to the poor. Such presumably too is the reason why the 1986 Chapter delegates retained the many references to the experience of La Salle and the first Brothers. It is therefore somewhat puzzling that while La Salle consistently linked together ARTISANS and the POOR some contemporary Institute citations speak of return to the poor while omitting reference to groups who might legitimately be considered to be their modern day counterparts. It would seem to be more faithful to La Salle and his intention to use such expressions as reorientation of our works to the poor and to those who are either victims of insecurity in its many forms or likely to become so. This was the situation of the ARTISAN in La Salle's day and it is the situation of the common people today who support their families by their own labour. Above all we must not claim to know certainly what La Salle meant when he wrote of the end of the Institute to be instruction of the children of ARTISANS AND THE POOR. Bedel, Hermans, Poutet all seem to agree that the Institute has much to do before it can determine accurately what La Salle understood by the words THE ARTISANS and its constant companion THE POOR. This would perhaps not matter if we were simply dealing with historical problems. But we have an on-going challenge to return to the service of those to whom La Salle's concern first directed the Institute. Hence we must continue to search as we continue also to serve.

6. CONCLUSION

Brother Hermans concludes and we would conclude with him on the weight of the evidence available that La Salle's use of the word POOR cannot be interpreted as limited to those whom society considered as most worthy of assistance, the miserables.³³ Similarly, we are obliged on the weight of the evidence drawn from: La Salle's own writings; those of Bernard, Maillefer and Blain; and those of contemporary Institute scholars such as AROZ, BEDEL, HERMANS, POUTET, PUNGIER; to conclude that his use of the word ARTISANS also had as referent a considerable proportion of the urban populations of his day. It is, of course im-

portant to add that, judging by the general tenor of the Founder's language, his special concern lay with those artisans at the lower end of the economic scale.

Postscript

In conclusion a comment from the speech of Michel Rocard, French Prime Minister, in the presence of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the beatification of Brother Scubilion Rousseau, May 1st 1989 on the Island of Reunion:

"Our country is proud to have given to the world in the XVIIth century a great benefactor of humanity in the person of John Baptist de La Salle. If he was one of the great educationalists of modern times because he reformed teaching methodology... his greatest achievement was that he understood the importance of educating the CHILDREN OF THE COMMON PEOPLE".³⁴

¹ FURETIERE, *Dictionnaire Universel*, 1690.

² DUBOIS, *Dictionnaire du français classique*, 1992, p. 33.

³ FURETIERE, *o.c.*

⁴ RC de 1705 et MR 2.

⁵ POUTET-PUNGIER, *Un Educateur aux prises avec la société de son temps*, p. 29.

⁶ H. BEDEL, *Les artisans et les pauvres au temps des origines de l'Institut*, AMG ED 275/8.

⁷ BLAIN II, p. 34.

⁸ JP GUTTON, *La pauvreté et les pauvres*, p. 242.

⁹ P. CHRISTOPHE, *Les pauvres et la pauvreté*, tome 2, chapitre 1.

¹⁰ P. CHRISTOPHE, *o.c.*, chapitre 2.

¹¹ AROZ et divers, *Beginnings*, p. 65-66.

¹² *Vocabulaire Lasallien*, volume 1, p. 261.

¹³ M. HERMANS, *Les pauvres auxquels se vouaient saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle et les premiers Frères*, AMG DC 401/17 D3, p. 5.

¹⁴ RC 1718, ms.

¹⁵ MR 2.1.

¹⁶ MR 16.

¹⁷ MF 85.

¹⁸ AROZ et divers, *Beginnings*, p. 65.

¹⁹ Y. POUTET, *Lasalliana* 09-A-44.

²⁰ Y. POUTET, *La véritable hiérarchie sociale aux temps de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*.

²¹ H. BEDEL, *o.c.*, p. 33.

²² H. BEDEL, *o.c.*, p. 27.

²³ H. BEDEL, *o.c.*, p. 28.

²⁴ Quoted in Bedel, p. 30.

²⁵ H. BEDEL, quoting Gutton, *o.c.*, p. 85.

²⁶ M. HERMANS, *o.c.*, p. 3, quoting Gutton, p. 56.

²⁷ Rule of 1947, p. VIII, Bulle.

²⁸ Rule of 1947.

²⁹ Rule of 1987.

³⁰ *Declaration*, p. 54.

³¹ *Circular 412*, p. 72.

³² BLAIN II, p. 9.

³³ M. HERMANS, *o.c.*, p. 12.

³⁴ M. ROCARD, in *Lasalliana* 16-4-B-80.

Complementary Themes:

Decorum and Christian Civility, Christian, Conduct, God, School, Scholar, Child, Education, Brothers, Gratuity, Instruction, Parents, Rule, Vows, Zeal.

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