

# 98. VIRTUES OF THE TEACHER

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## 1. A LIST OF 12 VIRTUES

Two of the works written by De La Salle, the *Collection of Short Treatises*, published in 1711, and the *Conduct of the Christian Schools*, printed in 1720, include a list of the "Twelve virtues of a Good Teacher", but do not provide any commentary. The virtues are listed in the following order: "gravity, silence, humility, prudence, wisdom, patience, reserve, gentleness, zeal, vigilance, piety and generosity".

This list is given without any explanation or context. This poses a certain number of questions:

- Why is this list of virtues added to the end of the text of the 1720 edition of the *Conduct*, when it does not appear in the 1706 manuscript of this work?
- When the Brothers asked the Founder to revise the text of the *Conduct* at the Chapter of 1717, did they ask him also to write a treatise about these virtues, but he was unable to do so before his death in 1719?

It is worth noting also that this list re-appears, but in only a shortened version in a text subsequently published under the title: *Formation of New Teachers, or Part III of the Conduct of Schools*. A shortened list of virtues appears also in the *Rule of the Trainer of New*

*Teachers* (Avignon ms.), which is divided into two sections:

- "Removing from new teachers what they have and should not have.
- "Providing them with what they do not have, but which is very necessary for them to have".

This second section explains in detail the ten attitudes that new teachers are expected to have. It includes only five of the 12 virtues: gravity, wisdom, prudence, vigilance and zeal.

But, as we shall see later, these 12 virtues do not reflect adequately nor fully De La Salle's views on the training of teachers. These views matured over a long period, from 1679 to 1719, and earned for him the title of "Founder of teachers" long before Pope Pius XII proclaimed him "Patron before God of all educators of children and youth". The purpose of this article is not to examine closely each of the virtues, but rather to consider their significance in the history of the Institute. For a more detailed treatment of this question, the reader is referred to other articles in the *Lasallian Themes* series: *Gentleness* (vol. 1), *Silence, Vigilance* (vol. 2), *Humility, Piety and Zeal*, in the present volume.

## 2. "EXPLANATION OF THE 12 VIRTUES" BY BR AGATHON

### 2.1. The work

In 1785, the Superior General of the *Brothers of the Christian Schools*, Br Agathon (Joseph Gouilleux, 1731-1798), published a short work entitled *Explanation of the 12 Virtues of a Good Teacher*.

Brother Agathon begins by considering whether to examine the virtues in a particular order or by groups, but finally decides to examine each virtue in turn in the order in which it traditionally appears.

The work begins with an introduction. There follow 12 chapters of unequal length, and the work ends with a conclusion. The insistence on gentleness is worth noting.

Br Agathon writes: "The plan [of this work] has been given to us by M. de La Salle, our venerable Founder. We have composed it on the basis of his principles and maxims. Any material taken from elsewhere comes from only the most esteemed authors. [...] The Virtues, or what is the same thing in this context, the qualities of a good teacher are...".

This brief extract from the introduction shows that Brother Agathon felt he was expressing the views of De La Salle, as they were understood in his days. The structure of each of the 12 chapters is identical:

- (a) A brief definition of the virtue to begin with: "The... is a virtue which..."
- (b) How this virtue differs from the others; its connection with the others; the group to which it belongs.
- (c) Reflections and considerations.
- (d) Practical application, including concrete examples.
- (e) Failings or defects opposed to this virtue.
- (f) Conclusion based on two or three quotations referring to this virtue, generally taken from the Scriptures or the writings of the Fathers of the Church.

In this short educational work, the author offers some clear, sober and practical observations accessible not only to the Brothers, for whom it was primarily intended, but also to all the Christian teachers of his days. The *Explanation* reveals an author who has experience, competence in his own field, who presents Lasallian teaching and practice with authority, and who offers a text that is easy to read and which will not tire the reader.

### 2.2. Its success

After the French Revolution, the work aroused sufficient interest for it to be re-printed several times in France and in Belgium. In these subsequent editions, certain changes were made which altered appreciably its presentation and content. The FSC Generalate archives possess copies of editions produced in 1808, 1815, 1822, 1838, 1845, 1856, 1875 and 1896.

The *Explanation of the 12 Virtues of a Good Teacher* had some success outside of France also. Within 12 years of the first edition, a translation appeared in Italy under a rather ponderous title: *Manuale dei Maestri di Scuola o sia le dodici Virtù di un Buon Maestro, esposte e spiegate per servire di guida a quelli che s'adoperano nell'educazione cristiana della gioventù ..., 1797*.

The virtues or qualities of teachers, especially Christian teachers, were a topic treated by numerous writers in the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century. Such works indulged in a great deal of moralising, but at the same time reflected the high opinion in which the work of the schoolmaster was held.

## 3. DIFFERENT WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING THESE VIRTUES

The way we see the person and the function of the teacher nowadays is so different from what is suggested by the list of the 12 virtues, that we find ourselves wondering about the meaning of the list left to us by De La Salle. Already in the 19th century, various commentators tried to arrange the virtues under a variety of headings.

3.1. They can be considered from a **psychological point of view** and the 12 chapters arranged in the following way:

- gravity, wisdom and humility are qualities teachers should cultivate quite independently of their contact with children;
- prudence, patience, reserve, silence and gentleness likewise are virtues a teacher should cultivate with a view to his own personal development, although they are more directly relevant than those previously mentioned to his work as a teacher of children;
- zeal, vigilance and generosity are virtues that should

be cultivated as being particularly necessary for teaching;

- piety is a virtue that can give all the others a spiritual dimension which enables them to lose their profane character and become Christian virtues.

To use more modern terminology, we can say that these 12 virtues or qualities promote the following three attitudes :

- interiority, personal enrichment and freedom;
- self-mastery, resulting in a balanced personality and ability to discern;
- commitment of the teacher to his work of education.

**3.2.** Another way of looking at the *Explanation* is not to see in it a progressive or systematic development of a single line of argument. Instead, one can read through the various chapters, **picking out anything** which, even nowadays, is **particularly enlightening**. Such an approach reveals valuable observations regarding three areas : culture, professional com-

petence and educational approach :

- basic culture, renewal, ability to communicate;
- professional competence, choice of life, enthusiasm and diligence, pedagogical training, order, a sense of proportion, justice, respect, balanced and serene behaviour, a vigilant presence, firmness.
- educational approach, model of lifestyle, patience, authority, balance, simplicity in relationships.

**3.3.** There are various **other ways** of interpreting this list of 12 virtues, depending on one's point of view or on the particular point one wants to prove.

The language of the *Explanation* is, of course, old-fashioned and incapable of expressing the dynamic and creative pedagogy of today, nor the type of relationship we expect teachers to have, as we approach a new millennium. It is pointless also bemoaning the fact that words have lost a wealth of meaning as a result of the semantic evolution that has taken place since the Age of Enlightenment.

#### 4. LIMITATIONS OF THESE 12 VIRTUES : DE LA SALLE AND TEACHERS

One cannot fail to wonder to what extent Br Agathon's work really reflects De La Salle's thinking, knowing as we do, the personality and responsibilities of the author.

From his earliest years as founder of schools for "the children of the artisans and the poor", De La Salle had to face the same major difficulty all his predecessors had had to face : the wretched situation of school-teachers. It would be impossible, in this short article, to go into the reasons and consequences of this wretched state, but suffice it to say that all modern educational historians agree that this was so. Without trained, competent and highly motivated teachers, it was not possible to provide children with a true education. De La Salle's inspired choice, among others, was to concentrate primarily on improving the situation of the teachers. An analysis of his achievements and of his writings, reveals 5 areas on which he concentrated his attention and efforts :

**4.1. Promoting the dignity of teachers** in a society in which their image was very negative, and teaching itself was a despised occupation. There is an extraordinary difference between the contempt in which teachers were held and what we read in De LaSalle's

writings on the ministry of the Christian teacher who, called by God to cooperate in his plan of salvation, becomes a minister of Jesus Christ and of his Church, continuing the work of the Apostles, bishops and saints who preached the Gospel !

**4.2. Making them assume responsibilities** by helping them to become aware of the importance of their work for the pupils and their parents, for the good of the Church and of the State, in accordance with God's plan of salvation. De La Salle never tires of reminding his Brothers of this in his *Meditations*.

**4.3.** However, to attain this dignity, **the teachers had to be trained**. De La Salle set about training the Brothers in the novitiate, and the lay teachers in the "seminary" created for this purpose. He organised a programme of initial formation adapted to the needs of both Brothers and lay teachers. For the Brothers above all, but not exclusively, he integrated a form of continuous formation into the "community exercises", including daily supervision by the School Inspector, and educational meetings during the annual holidays.

**4.4. Improving pupil-teacher relations** and organising the school so that each pupil received indi-

vidual attention. This personal relationship with each pupil was characterised by cordiality, and by the fact that each pupil was given work adapted to his age and ability.

**4.5. Ending the isolation of teachers**, who were often compelled to teach alone, not in contact with other teachers, and without any opportunity to com-

pare their experience with that of colleagues. It was a great innovation to take on schools only if they included several classes, and always to work in them "together and by association". In this way, De La Salle succeeded in introducing stability to the teachers working in these schools, and in contributing to the improvement of their image in society, and to a change in the status of schools and children.

*These final considerations go beyond what might be considered as the narrow confines of the "12 Virtues". They should help the reader of Br Agathon's treatise to come away with a more complete picture of the way De La Salle envisaged the Christian teacher. If this list of virtues cannot be considered as a point of reference for us today, the commentary on it can at least stimulate reflection and encourage teachers to deepen their understanding of the apostolic ministry of education and to update it. It would be useful, therefore, to give some attention to the numerous tactful and practical considerations regarding the work of education in Br Agathon's text.*

#### Complementary themes

Christian teacher  
Correction  
Example-Edification  
Guardian angels  
Gentleness

Goodness  
Gratuity  
Hearts (to touch)  
Humility  
Love-Charity

Piety  
Pupil-teacher relationship  
Reward of the teacher  
Silence  
Vigilance  
Zeal

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