

# 15. DECORUM AND CHRISTIAN CIVILITY

## Summary:

Good manners and Politeness according to S.J.B.L.S. – 1. Good Manners and Politeness of the lay Christian. – 2. Dignity of the lay Christian. – 3. The vocation of the Christian. 3.1. The call to personal holiness. 3.2. A call to work at the sanctification of social and cultural relationships. – 4. The virtuous character of exterior actions. 4.1. Modesty. 4.2. Respect. 4.3. Affection, union, charity.

## DECORUM AND CHRISTIAN CIVILITY ACCORDING TO ST. DE LA SALLE

When J.B. de La Salle decided to write a book on good manners to be used by the children of artisans and the poor, his only difficulty was what title to give it: he was familiar with a large number of these manuals meant for use in schools or peddled between the towns and the countryside. To name but a few: *Les Pratiques familières de la Civilité pour enseigner aux enfants à vivre et à agir à l'extérieur avec honnêteté et bienséance*, of J. de Batencour, *La Civilité nouvelle, contenant la vraie et parfaite instruction de la jeunesse*, similar to that of the Jesuits; *Le Nouveau Traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France*, of A. de Courtin; *Le Traité de la Civilité nouvellement dressé d'une manière exacte et méthodique, et suivant les Règles de l'usage vivant*, by an anonymous author of Lyons; the countless *Civilités honnêtes et puériles* and even that entitled *Les Règles de la bienséance civile et chrétienne*, whose title is so similar to the Founder's book that it may be surmised that it may have inspired that of *Règles de la bienséance et de la Civilité chrétienne*. Nevertheless the choice of this title is very meaningful. For just as J.B. de La Salle wished to make of his schools, Christian

schools, to the same extent good manners and proper behaviour which he aims at could be nothing else but Christian, giving the word its strongest meaning. It is interesting to draw a parallel between the definitions given of BIENSEANCE and CIVILITE, on the one hand, the dictionaries of the time, and on the other PREFACE of the *Règles de la Bienséance et Civilité Chrétienne*.

Furetière (1701): "*Bienséance*": that which suits a thing; which lends it charm and attractiveness; or if so desired, an action which conforms with the times, the places, and the persons; consideration which is shown in every circumstance. This becoming conduct knows no boundaries: sex, age, character imposes different duties; and if all these differences are not observed, one is considered ill-mannered. "*Civilité*": An honest, gentle and polite way of doing things and talking with others. Everybody must be treated with deference. Civility is a sort of jargon used by men to conceal their reciprocal ill-feelings. Richelet (1709): "*Bienséance*": A behaviour which conforms with the times, the place and the persons. Consideration shown towards time, place and persons. "*Civilité*": A way of refraining from doing or saying anything which is not honest or opportune in one's daily dealings with others. A behaviour which is honest and polite (...). Naturally, civility must be polite, wise and judicious.

“Christian civility is hence a wise and well-ordered behaviour which one manifests in one’s conversation and in one’s external actions through sentiments of modesty or respect, or union and charity towards one’s neighbour, taking into account the time, the place and the persons with whom one is talking, and it is this way of looking at one’s neighbour which one calls civility”. (RB. IV).

So, on the one hand, we have the humanist dictionaries reflecting life as it is lived. On the other, we have an undertaking the aims of which are pastoral, entirely geared to a life of Christian perfection. The Christian perfection of the lay Christian.

### 1. CHRISTIAN DECORUM AND CIVILITY OF THE CHRISTIAN LAYMAN

J.B. de La Salle stresses, in several places of his *Règles de la Bienséance*, that the book is meant for Christians living in the world their vocation as baptized people. He does not use the word “lay”, but “secular”: there are obligations that bind only seculars (Visits p. 159); there is a modesty that suits only seculars “to look down when walking p. 18; the arms folded”, p. 37. “It is ill-mannered for seculars to hide their hands under their clothes or to fold them when talking to someone: this bearing denotes more the religious than the secular”, p. 39. The preface refers to Christians “in the world”, “to persons who live there” (p. 1) and very specially to the “fathers” and “mothers”, the “laymasters” and “laymistresses” (p. 11).

### 2. DIGNITY OF THE CHRISTIAN

The most meaningful passages of the RBB and the most beautiful are related to the awareness the Christian has of his dignity “He is of noble birth because he belongs to Jesus Christ and is a child of God, who is the Sovereign Being” (p. 3). He considers his body as the living temple “where God wishes to be adored in spirit and in truth” (p. 43), as a tabernacle which Jesus-Christ has chosen “for His dwelling” (id.), as “the tabernacle where Jesus Christ kindly accepts to rest often” (p. 62), as “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (id.).

A common dignity shared by all Christians and is the foundation on which rest all social relationships: “since every Christian having to behave according to the precepts of the Gospel must show honour and esteem towards others, considering them the children of God and the brothers of Jesus Christ” (p. 3). A dignity strongly considered — in the context proper to this end of the 17th century — as very exacting, in matters connected with good manners and civility, to behave demurely. “That which contributes most to a demure behaviour in a person and causes him to be noted for his modesty, as a wise and well-disciplined person, occurs when he holds all the parts of his body in the position which nature or custom has allotted to them” (p. 1); composure and even a certain majesty are required “there must always be in the bearing of a person a certain amount of gravity and majesty (...). Only modesty and wisdom which a Christian must manifest in all his actions can produce this gravity” (p. 3).

### 3. THE VOCATION OF THE CHRISTIAN IN THE WORLD

The invitation to holiness rings out from the first page of the *preface*. A holiness which is to be lived in what constitutes in practice the existence of men and women engaged in the world; in the daily life of individual and social behaviour; from the moment one rises to when he goes to bed, at table, during games, in conversations and visits, in travel and correspondence. It is a personal call to sanctity and an invitation to work at the sanctification of social and cultural relationships.

3.1. *An invitation to personal sanctity*, since one needs to live and to behave “according to the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Préf. p. Is); to act in such a way that “The spirit alone animates all one’s actions, to render them holy and agreeable to God” (Préf. p. II).

3.2. *An invitation to work at the sanctification of social and cultural relationships*. J.B. de La Salle observes somewhat pessimistically the level of evangelisation of the Christians of his time: “It is

surprising that most Christians consider good manners and civility a purely human and worldly quality, and without any effort to raise their thoughts higher, they do not view it as a virtue related to God, to one's neighbour and to ourselves" (préf. p. I). These motives need to be redirected and submitted to the judgement of the Scriptures: parents, educators, those to whom the children are entrusted "must never, when teaching them the rules of politeness, forget to teach them that they must be practised only out of purely Christian motives, directed to the glory of God and their salvation; and far from telling their charges, that unless they do those things they will be reprimanded, that they will be poorly esteemed, that they will be laughed at; these are so many ways which serve to imbue them with a worldly spirit and keep them away from that of the Gospel" (Préf. p. II). Which are these "purely Christian motives"? J.B. de La Salle refers the reader to St. Paul and St. Peter: "when they want to encourage them, to lead them to these exterior practices which concern bodily bearing and modesty, they will be careful to do so reminding them of God's presence, as St. Paul does when writing about the same subject to the faithful of his time. He warns them that their modesty must be seen by all men, because the Lord was close to them, that is out of reverence for God's presence in front of whom they were; if they teach them or make them practise good manners related to their neighbour, they will exhort them to show these signs of kindness, honour and respect only to others as members of Jesus Christ and as living temples animated by the Holy Spirit. That is how St. Peter exhorts the first Christians when writing to them to love their brothers, and to honour each according to his status, thus showing themselves true servants of God, manifesting in this way that it is God that they honour in the person of their neighbour" (Préf. p. III). Purely Christian motives, explaining outspokenly the conscious relationship between the three divine Persons, of course, but aiming at behavioural attitudes and practices which are genuinely Christian. To intend to behave that way is quite insufficient. J.B. de La Salle underlines clearly the Christian's responsibility in the very act of "allowing himself to be led by the Spirit" "There are few people who (...) behave according to Christ's spirit. Yet it is

this spirit alone which should animate all our actions to make them holy and pleasing to God; and it is an obligation of which St. Paul warns us when he says to us in the persons of the early Christians, that as we must live in spirit with Christ, so must we also behave in everything by this same spirit" (Préf. p. Is). The Christian is not "God's puppet" (K. Barth): The spirit makes available to him freedom and strength so that he may act according to his temperament, his creative possibilities and his heart.

#### 4. THE VIRTUOUS CHARACTER OF EXTERNAL ACTIONS

"... all our external actions, which are the only ones we can control through our good manners, must always possess and carry with them the stamp of virtue". Without regarding as sacred the relative nature which certain rules of decent behaviour or of civility may have for J.B. de La Salle, their practice is never neutral. Nor the relation which it they establish very concretely with God, with others and with oneself. The rules of politeness and civility are, for him, a manifestation of one's manners which engages the moral reality as well as the spiritual reality of man. The moral reality first. J.B. de La Salle is not one of those men of God who run away into passionate mysticism or simplistic illuminism. The intensity of the virtuous effort is considerable in the RB: "All our external actions, the only ones that can be controlled by good manners, must always possess and carry with them the stamp of virtue" (Préf. p. 2). "All our external actions... must... always have". Such radicalism is typically Lasallian. We come across it once more in this condemnation, rather strong in our view, of those persons who have a poor control over their impressions and allow them to show on their face: "These persons whose face changes on every occasion which presents itself are awkward, and difficult to put up with; at times they evince happiness on their face, at others they put on a melancholy air, at times their face reflects worry, at other times eagerness; all that proves that one lacks virtue, and does not work hard enough to control one's passions, and that one's behaviour is entirely human and na-

tural, and totally devoid of the Christian spirit (p. 12). This passage is interesting, moreover, in that it points out to us in a nutshell the means to discover the virtue which characterises politeness and civility; it renders human relationships more attractive and facilitates them — it controls passions — a control of self even externally — for reasons which transcend moral or physical spontaneity.

For J.B. de La Salle, politeness and civility “is” a virtue: he blames “most Christians”, as we have seen, who consider “politeness and civility just a purely human and worldly quality” and do not hold it “as a virtue related to God, to one’s neighbour and oneself” (Pref. p. I). A virtue which embraces many others. The RB have been structured around three of these: modesty, respect, affection, “Politeness and civility are therefore solely made up strictly speaking of the practice of modesty and respect towards one’s neighbour; and as modesty shows itself in a particular way in the bearing and respect for one’s neighbour, in ordinary actions which normally take place in other people’s presence, it has been decided to treat these two things separately. 1. Concerning the modesty which should be seen in the bearing and the deportment of the various parts of the body. 2. Concerning the external signs of respect and particular affection which have to be shown, in the various actions of life, to all those in front of whom the actions are performed and those one has to deal with” (Pref. p. VI). Or as is stated in the definition of politeness and civility: modesty, respect, union and charity. “Christian decorum is therefore a wise and well-ordered behaviour which is manifested in one’s conversations and external actions through a sentiment of modesty or of respect, or of union and of charity towards one’s neighbour, paying attention to the time, the place and the persons with whom one converses; this decorum related to one’s neighbour is properly called civility” (Pref. p. IV). The list given hereunder shows at a glance the numerous virtues which a Christian must practise in his bearing or in his interpersonal relationships. They have been listed in three columns corresponding to the three “pivotal” virtues, the numbers indicate how many times each is mentioned in the RB:

<i>Modesty</i>	45	<i>Respect</i>	121	<i>Affection</i>	6
<i>Humility</i>	2	<i>Esteem</i>	23	<i>Gentleness</i>	9
<i>Moderation</i>	14	<i>Submission</i>	7	<i>Charity</i>	16
<i>Prudence</i>	9	<i>Consideration</i>	20	<i>Union</i>	6
<i>Self-Control</i>	16	<i>Deference</i>	4	<i>Friendship</i>	8
<i>Wisdom</i>	40	<i>Discretion</i>	4	<i>Sweetness</i>	12
<i>Circumspection</i>	8	<i>Justice</i>	3	<i>Gratitude</i>	7
<i>Simplicity</i>	2	<i>Filial Piety</i>	1	<i>Affability</i>	5
<i>Sobriety</i>	5			<i>Fidelity</i>	4
<i>Temperance</i>	2			<i>Sincerity</i>	8

#### 4.1. Modesty

It is the virtue which characterises decorum. “It is the rule which controls the behaviour of a Christian in all his exterior actions” (pp. 63s). It is an exacting virtue: nothing exterior eludes modesty. The general bearing of the persons, “his expression” (p. 1), his control over “every part of the body” (id.) listed in the various chapters of the first part of the R.B.: “From the head to the ears” (II), “Concerning the hair” (III), “Concerning the face” (IV), “Concerning the forehead, the eyelids and the cheeks” (V)..., “Concerning the back, the shoulders, the arms, and the elbow” (XI), “Concerning the knees, the legs and the feet” (XIV)! This modesty controls your every gesture as soon as you get up and follows you in the intimacy of your bedroom: “As soon as you are in bed, cover all your body, except the face which must always stay uncovered; you must not, even if in search of greater comfort, take up any other position even if the excuse of sleeping better prevails over propriety; to draw up your knees is unbecoming, you must stretch them out, and it is advisable to sleep now on one side, then on the other; for it is not becoming to sleep on the stomach” (p. 54). Modesty is an art made up of measure and balance: Although nothing ought to appear calculated in one’s exterior, it is necessary however to control rigidly all the movements and to plan well the bearing of all the parts of the body” (p. 2). Children and those who have not been brought up in this manner “in their early childhood, must strive hard to acquire it in a special way, until they become accustomed to it and find these practices easy and quite natural” (pp. 2s). It is self-effacement which controls decorum in matter of clothes. In J.B. de La Salle’s view, it has a meaning as wide as it is deep: “So that your clothes may

be modest, you must not allow in them any sign of luxury or of vanity. To show attachment to one's clothes and to look for gaudy and sumptuous ones, is a sign of vulgarity, and those who do that deserve the contempt of any sensible person, but what is even more important, is the fact that they give up the promises made at baptism and the Christian spirit; on the contrary, those who shun this kind of vain practice show their generosity and nobility of mind; they show, in fact, that they strive harder at decorating their soul with virtues, than at embellishing their body, and they reveal, through the plainness of their clothers the wisdom and simplicity of their soul" (p. 64). Lastly, it is modesty which controls our behaviour during conversation. The way we speak for example: "Some people are so full of themselves, that they always talk to others about what they have done and what they are doing, and expect others to praise all their words and actions. In conversation, this type of behaviour, puts people off and is a burden to them. To boast and to speak in praise of oneself is a thing which clashes with the rules of propriety; it is also typical of a mean mentality; a wise man never speaks of personal things unless he is answering questions put to him; and even then he must do so with much moderation, modesty and self-control" (p. 206).

As a virtue characterising a Christian's intimate life, modesty is also as a virtue a silent witness, a "silent sermon", as François de Sales called it. It must "show itself". In J.B. de La Salle's view, a Christian "professes modesty" in and through his humblest efforts to try to please others. "A person who wishes to practise humility and modesty and show exteriorly wisdom and self-control, is in duty bound to train his eyes to look gently, peacefully and with self-restraint. Those whom nature has not endowed with this asset should endeavour to correct this defect through a gay and modest appearance, and not to make their sight more disagreeable through their neglect" (p. 17). Biblical reference to this is to be found in St. Paul; he it was who warned "the faithful of his time that their modesty should be visible to everybody because the Lord was near i.e. out of reverence for God's presence" (Pref. p. VI). Let us dwell on this dynamic of faith: a realisation of God's presence — modesty in one's personal behaviour — profes-

sion, an outward manifestation of something spiritually practised. The RB specify clearly that they refer to the modesty expected of seculars. John Baptist de La Salle distinguishes, in fact, availing himself of all the culture of his time, the modesty which the clergy and religious should practise from that which suits those who live "in the world"; for instance: As it is not becoming to raise one's eyes too high, it is not becoming for those who live in the world to look too far down, for that suits more a religious than a lay person; clerics however, and those who aspire to join them, ought to be seen looking and behaving exteriorly in a reserved manner. For it behoves decorum, in those who are already engaged or are preparing to join that state of life, to get used to the practice of mortification of their senses, and to show through their modesty, that being consecrated to God or wishing to be consecrated to God, their mind is absorbed in him, and in that which concerns him" (p. 18); "You should not fold your arms; for that is done only by religious, and does not become seculars. The most becoming position for your hands is for them to be in front, slightly leaning against the body, and held one against the other" (p. 37). In this way, whether one is a cleric, a religious or a secular, significant behaviour is necessary. Without dwelling on it any further, J.B. de La Salle reminds the Christians of his time not of the examples given by isolated individuals but by a community, a Church whose members following the steps of St. Paul and "the first centuries" (pp. VI, 65), edified each other mutually and were an example for non-Christians: living thus as genuine Christians, behaving exteriorly as Jesus Christ and as their profession required of them, they will show how different they are from pagans and nominal Christians, for as Tertullian says, the Christians of his time were known and recognised as such by their exterior and their modesty" (Pref. p. IV).

#### 4.2. Respect

When J.B. de La Salle speaks of respect, in the R.B., he examines it from two different angles: a respect as behaviour required by moral law and that which springs from an understanding of the mystery which every Christian carries in himself.

4.2.1. *Respect as a duty commanded by God.* In his “Devoirs d’un Chrétien envers Dieu” (CL 20) La Salle holds respect as one of the duties towards people in authority, in accordance with the 4th commandment of God: “God orders us in his 4th commandment to honour our father and mother: these names stand for all those who have authority over us e.g. fathers, mothers, tutors, guardians, godfathers, godmothers, male and female teachers, husbands towards their wives, employers, magistrates, bishops and Church pastors (...). Children have five duties towards their parents: they must love, respect and obey them (...). Servants of both sexes must respect their masters and mistresses, love them and obey them (...). Tutors are to be loved, honoured, obeyed and listened to willingly (...) Magistrates and seculars wielding authority have the same rights as tutors and others (...). To love them, respect them, obey them as to Jesus Christ himself whom they represent, are the duties of the diocesans towards their bishop, the parishioners towards their parish priest and subordinates towards their spiritual superiors (...)” (pp. 123-129). It is always a question of respect owed to somebody; a respect which may be exacted, even socially. It is proportional, one may say, in its external manifestations, to the degree of authority of the person who has a right to it. That is why the R.B. mention 28 times “persons to whom respect is due” and ten times “persons to whom much respect should be shown”. The multiple differences take into account the socio-cultural realities of the period. As one may see from this passage of the Preface: “One must also get to know oneself and what is one’s social position, for whoever is inferior to others is bound to express submission to his superiors, either because of their position or because of their qualities, and to show them much greater respect than would those who are equal to them in every way. A farmer, for instance, must show greater exterior respect for his lord than a tradesman who is not in his employ, and this tradesman ought to show much more deference to this master than to another gentleman who would visit him” (p. VI). The vocabulary used in this case is revealing: we are in the realm of civility: the important thing is “to show much more respect” to the one than to the other, “to honour exteriorly” the one more

than the other. These marks of respect — a typical Lasallian expression — are as varied as the situations and the meetings. Thus, in correspondence: “It is necessary that those (the letters) which are addressed to one’s superiors be very respectful; those addressed to equals, courteous, and evince always some signs of consideration and respect; as for those one writes to one’s subordinates, they must contain marks of affection and kindness” (p. 243). So, during a visit made or received: “When intending to visit a person, to whom one owes consideration, and to whom one owes respect, one must wear white linen and clean clothes, for that is a sign of respect; one must also foresee what one is going to tell him” (p. 162); if the same person returning the visit is of high standing or if much respect is owed to him, it is becoming to go to meet him at the entrance, or even before, when one has been warned of his coming, to be able to show him the very high respect one owes him” (p. 167). A careful reading of the RB leaves sometimes the impression that every detail has been dealt with minutely — subordinates, equals, superiors — to such an extent that any resort to creativity by the various characters is non-existent. Quite the opposite, an attentive reading of passages such as have just been quoted makes one aware of the margin of initiative and adaptation which is left to and required of the persons concerned: it is up to them to find the right form of respect, that which suits the situation, the relationship between different social classes; it is up to them to see how far they must go to greet the person who deserves their respect. *Savoir-vivre* is an art, even here. And an art practised by a Christian...

4.2.2. *The respect which arises from the conscious awareness of the mystery which every Christian carries in himself.* Through the sacraments which identify us as Christians, we have entered into a mysterious privileged relationship with each of the Persons of the Trinity. In this domain, various theological expressions exist which J.B. de La Salle appreciated in a particular manner; they are to be found in his catechism and in his Civility. In his *Devoirs d’un Chrétien envers Dieu*: “Baptism is a sacrament which wipes out original sin and any sins we have committed before receiving it, which makes us children of God, members of Jesus

Christ and living temples of the Holy Spirit" (...). This sacrament lavishes on the soul an abundant grace which renders it holy and agreeable to God (...). This grace makes us children of God because through it we have a share in the holiness which God possesses by nature and it is in giving it to us that he adopts us as his children (...). Baptism also opens to the soul that receives it the gates of heaven which were closed previously and frees it from the devils which possessed it: that is what the Church signifies through the exorcisms which the priest performs over the person who is being baptized; the Holy Spirit takes possession of it; hence it is said that through Baptism we become the temples of the Holy Spirit. We also receive the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and this sacrament unites us in a way so particular and intimate that as soon as we have received it, we are considered by God as members of his Son become Man" (pp. 211-213). As far as the Eucharist is concerned: "This sacrament has some extraordinary effects on our bodies it sanctifies them through its presence and the contact with the body of Our Lord; and it consecrates them and makes them become effective members of Jesus Christ; it makes of them living tabernacles of the Blessed Sacrament and in this way, says St. Cyril, we become God-Bearers, carrying Jesus Christ in us when we receive his sacred body in our heart" (p. 260). In his RB, J.B. de La Salle refers us to these theological and mystical facts to base on them our respect for ourselves and our bodies as well as for others and their bodies.

To be "children of God", "members of Jesus Christ", "living temples of the Holy Spirit", "living tabernacles of Jesus Christ"... these are tenets of our faith that are apt to strengthen a culture and a civilisation built on respect. We are here in the very heart of the Lasallian message. Let us listen to it: "... every Christian who wishes to comply with the Gospel precepts ought to show respect and consideration to all the others, seeing in them the children of God and the brothers of Jesus Christ" (p. 3); "mothers and fathers will advise their children to give these signs of kindness, respect and consideration only as to members of Jesus Christ and living temples animated by the Holy Spirit" (Pref. p. III). "As we should not consider our bodies as anything but living temples, where God wishes to be adored in spirit and in

truth, and as tabernacles which Jesus Christ has chosen for his dwelling, we must also in view of the fine qualities which they possess, show them much respect; and it is this consideration which should prompt us in a particular way not to touch them and not even to look at them unless that is absolutely necessary" (p. 43); "Neglect in dressing proves that one does not pay sufficient attention to God's presence and that one does not respect him sufficiently; it also shows that one does not have enough consideration for one's body, which however should be treated as the living temple of the Holy Spirit, and the tabernacle where Jesus Christ is kind enough to stay with us often" (pp. 61s).

#### 4.3. Affection, union, charity

The words which J.B. de La Salle uses to define the third axis round which revolve the RB are, as we have seen, "affection", "union" and "charity". For a good understanding of what each word stands for, we gain to look once more at the Lasallian catechism, *Les Devoirs d'un Chrétien*. As with "modesty", as with "respect", affection, union, charity, need to find their place in a spiritual rather than in a moral, perhaps even mystic, context. For instance, when the author of the RB speaks of affections, he give us to understand that he is not referring to "natural affection", but to affections such a Jesus Christ would have. If he mentions union and charity, he is alluding to those that the Holy Spirit spreads in hearts.

4.3.1. *Affection*. The transformation which the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist operates in us affects primarily our affections before influencing our whole moral conduct: such is the Lasallian doctrine expressed in *Les Devoirs d'un Chrétien*: "When Jesus Christ instituted this sacrament, he manifested to us his love, in a manner very peculiar, for in it he unites us to him but in a much more intimate and excellent fashion than can ever be imagined, giving himself to us as food, which is the most intimate union in nature; he does not transform himself into us, but changes us in him, as far as he can, through the reception of this sacrament, through changing, not our substance, but our affections and our habits, in order

to make them conformable to his own” (pp. 249s). In this manner, “our affections and our behaviour”, all that in one way or another has to do with civility and good manners, are made to conform with the affections and morals of Jesus Christ, when welcoming the love with which Christ gives himself in this sacrament. The author of the Rules of Decorum and Christian Civility is not mistaken: Christians so renewed are not the only ones we meet with in everyday life. There are also those “who, when in company speak of nothing else but what they like, and sometimes even of things that are rather very private; if they love a dog, a cat, a bird, or some other animal, they will not refrain from making it constantly the topic of the conversation; they will even talk to it in the presence of others, and will sometimes interrupt the conversation for that purpose; that may even not prevent them from paying attention to what the others are saying (...)” (pp. 209s). A moral effort is necessary: “To show melancholy or despondency on one’s face is not becoming; nor should one evince passion or some other dissolute affection” (p. 11); “If one has to look at a person, he must do so in a natural, gentle and honest manner, so that, in his looks, there will not be any evidence of disordinate passion or affection” (p. 19). On the other hand, to “show” “external signs” of affection, “in the different actions of one’s life to all those in whose presence one does them, and with whom one has to deal” (Pref., p. VI), presumes that one is careful to observe the rules and customs required by the socio-cultural milieu in which one evolves. So that, according to the RB, one shows signs of affection only “towards subordinates”; after having received some kindness from someone, we show our gratitude “and our debt to him, expressing our affection and fidelity in his service” (p. 225). And concerning the handshake: “It is never becoming for a person who owes consideration towards another, to offer his hand as a sign of his esteem or affection; it would be a serious lack of the respect due to that person and a mark of undue familiarity; if however a high ranking person, or one who is superior, places his hand in that of the other who is of lesser quality or inferior, the latter should deem it an honour and should immediately offer his hand and welcome this favour as a notable sign of goodwill and

kindness” (p. 40). It is fair to add that Christian freedom may go beyond the “rule” and the “custom” and allow novelty to invade the very heart of civil relationships: “When someone talks disparagingly about someone in public, etiquette demands that his shortcomings be excused and that the listeners would somehow speak well of him; turn the conversation to his advantage and that some action of his be praised; that is the way to draw other people’s affection and to make oneself pleasant in society” (p. 196)... pleasant to everybody, agreeable to God!

4.3.2. *Union and charity.* When in his *Devoirs d’un Chrétien* J.B. de La Salle deals with “De l’obligation que nous avons d’aimer le prochain” (pp. 98ss), he first refers to the double commandment of the Gospel: “We should not be satisfied with pleasing God, we must also love our neighbour: it is the second commandment of the Law which Our Lord puts forward and it is similar to the first, because it forms part of it; for as St. John says, whoever does not love his brother whom he sees, how could he love God whom he does not see?”. This is a typical Lasallian trait, this preoccupation to link the love of neighbour with that of God.

Even though this love of neighbour is not equal towards everybody: “When we say that we should love our neighbour, we mean that we should love all men who are close to us and our brothers, since they are all begotten by the same Father; however, we need not love them in equal manner; some we are obliged to love more than others, and those are true Christians who live according to the Law and the maxims of Jesus Christ; for they belong to us in a much more particular way than other men, since they are our brothers through a divine birth which they received at baptism which made them children of God, whilst other men are only our brothers through a birth which is purely natural and human”.

This “obligation” to love “more than others” those who are our brothers in the faith is binding on all, not only from the moral point of view, but as a way of opening ourselves to and welcoming the Holy Spirit; the “union” which is called for is in reality of a mystic nature: “We have also contracted another union much stronger with Christ-

ians, which consists in that we are all members of Jesus Christ and of the Church and that we form a single body with them: "it is the Holy Spirit who by animating the Church produces this union among the faithful, and binds all very closely together in Jesus Christ". What repercussions may these texts have on the RB? It goes without saying that J.B. de La Salle does not forget that he is writing a treatise on civility for a modest public: the children of working class people and the poor, their parents, the male and female teachers of the popular schools. He limits himself to what is practical and shuns long humanist or theological considerations. However, he does not lower his cultural and pastoral aim. The meaning he gives to gestures of friendship is significant.

The hand shake: "To place one's hand in another's to show one's civility is a proof of friendship and particular union towards that person. For that reason, this should be done ordinarily only by people of the same social rank, since friendship can only exist between persons of the same standing who are in no way inferior or superior to one another" (p. 40). The kiss: the kiss is another way of greeting a person. It too is done ordinarily between people who are in some way related and enjoy a particular friendship. It was very common in the primitive Church, among the faithful, who used it as a very tangible sign of their intimate union, and of perfect love; thus St. Peter exhorts the Romans, and all those to whom he writes, to welcome one another" (p. 169); visits: "Christian decorum is inspired by charity when during a visit you contribute to the salvation of a neighbour in whatever way possible, or render him some temporal service, pay him your respect if you are of a lower rank than he or maintain with him a truly Christian union" (p. 160).

As for Charity, he one must know how to be delicate: "When someone says or does something which should not have been said, if one notices that the speaker did so in an off-guarded moment, and that he feels embarrassed when he thinks of himself or of what he said, one must pretend to have noticed nothing and if he excuses himself, it would be prudent and charitable to interpret the incident in a favourable light. Do not poke fun at whoever says something unreasonable and still less treat him with disdain; for what he says may

not have been fully understood. Finally, it is unbecoming of a sensible person to humiliate anyone" (p. 203); then again: "Referring to other people's imperfections, these are either innate, or are acquired. If they are natural, it is unworthy of a sensible and honest person to laugh at them or use them as entertainment, since he suffers from them, is not responsible for their existence and can do nothing to eliminate them, and such a thing could have happened to anyone; if these imperfections are harmful, it is not charitable to laugh at them, that being most uncharitable and contrary to the Christian spirit, which should rather show compassion in that case and help others to correct themselves than use them as a source of entertainment (pp. 134s).

Let us dwell on this last point: "The Christian spirit suggests rather to have compassion ... and to help others to correct themselves...". Here again, we find ourselves in the very heart of the Lasallian message conveyed by the RB. As we have already stated, just as he wanted his schools to be "Christian", so J.B. de La Salle wishes his rules of good manners and civility to be "Christian". Christian because they are to be practised by Christians who are such not only "in name" (Pref., p. IV).

Christians who aware, of course, of socio-cultural situations that are at times quite complex, "noting the time, the place and the persons with whom you speak, as the Preface says (p. IV), but aware also of the Mystery they bear witness to. A question one may ask is: How can one acquire this "Christian spirit", which in a given situation such as here, when confronted with the scandal caused by "vicious" habits, prompts us to feel spontaneously sentiments genuinely evangelical — in this case, compassion and a desire to help the person to correct himself? What brings about this sensitivity which focusses our minds spontaneously on that which "pleases God"?... The fine expositions which J.B. de La Salle consecrates to visits which "decorum imposes on all seculars" may point out in which direction to look for an answer. In short, let us say that this education which is first a conversation of our sensitivity, is the result of a contemplative attitude towards the saints, and especially towards Jesus Christ, he who represents man's relationship with the Father, with himself and with others. Here it is necessary to focus our

attention and reflection “to know well and discern” what one should do. “Even the Most Blessed Virgin, although she lived a very retired life, paid a visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and it would seem that the holy Gospel relates this in some detail precisely so that this example may serve as a model for us. Jesus Christ also paid visits out of simple charity, since he was certainly not obliged to do so.

To understand clearly and to ascertain correctly the occasions when we should make visits, we must be convinced that Christian decorum should be governed in this matter only by justice and charity and that it obliges us to make visits only out of necessity, to show someone a token of our respect, or to cultivate union and charity. (...)

“It was always for one or other of these reasons and with some such motive in mind that Our Lord Jesus Christ acted in all the visits he made. He did so to convert some soul to God, as when he visited Zacheus; to raise the dead to life, as when he went to Saint Martha’s house after the death of Lazarus and when he accepted the invitation of the chief of the synagogue; and to cure the sick, as when he went to St. Peter’s house and to the Centurion’s house. He performed all these miracles only to win hearts to God or as a token of friendship and good will as in the last visit he made to Saints Martha and Mary Magdalene” (pp. 159-161).

## CONCLUSION

The character of the RB, extremely well situated historically, especially on the socio-cultural

level, does not invite Christians for whom the book was meant, to “copy” the Saints or Jesus Christ, or to “tack” Christians intentions on to any kind of behaviour. This has been noted all through the preceding pages. J.B. de La Salle’s aim is not to create facsimiles, but disciples of Jesus Christ animated by the Holy Spirit. Could it be said that the RB is a “spiritual manual” for use by seculars in the early XVIIIth century? Why not? In any case, it certainly challenges us, lay people living in the closing years of the XXth century. Doesn’t its message tie up with that of the apostolic exhortation *Christi Fideles Laici*, on the vocation and mission of lay people in the Church and in the world: “The vocation of lay people to a life of holiness, requires that life according to the Spirit express itself particularly in involvement in temporal realities and in participation in earthly activities. The Apostle himself invites us to do it: “Whatsoever you say, whatsoever you do let it be done in the name of Jesus Christ, offering through Him your thanksgiving to God the Father” (Col. 3,17). Applying the words of the Apostle to the lay faithful, the Council firmly asserts: “Neither the care of the family, nor temporal business must keep them away from spiritual matters”. According to them, the Fathers of the Synod have declared: “Cohesion between the spiritual and the temporal in the life of the lay faithful is extremely important; they must, in fact, sanctify themselves in their ordinary existence, be it professional or social. In order to correspond favorably to their calling, the lay faithful must therefore consider their daily life as an opportunity to seek union with God and accomplish his will, as well as serve other men, leading them to communion with God in Jesus Christ” (para. 17).

### Complementary Themes:

Love-Charity; Christian; Commandments of God; Conversation; Duties of a Christian; Duties-Obligations; Edification; Spirit of Christianity; Spirit of the World; Maxims of the World; Mass-Eucharist; Modesty; World, Relationship with the World; Mystery.

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