

# 4. CATECHISM

## Summary:

1. The catechism and its origins. – 2. The parish catechism. – 3. Catechism in “The Parish School” “L’Escole Paroissiale”. – 4. Importance of catechism in the Christian School for De La Salle. – 5. The Christian School as a place for catechism. – 6. Importance of the Brother’s formation as a catechist. – 7. Catechism of Formation. – 8. Some general conclusions.

The study of the word **catéchisme** is approached first from an historical viewpoint. To appreciate the significance of the catechism lesson during the time of John Baptist de La Salle, there is an examination of two contemporary documents to help establish the background, and to note some possible influences. The primordial role of catechism in the Christian schools which De La Salle founded is examined through his own writings and through the practices he established in the Brothers’ schools and communities. An attempt is made to indicate something of the originality of his school-based catechism.

## 1. THE CATECHISM AND ITS ORIGINS

The Lasallian Vocabulary offers over two hundred uses of the word **catéchisme** in the writings of John Baptist de La Salle. The word itself is a **noun**, denoting a book containing a short summary of Christian teaching, or the essential elements of a particular church, as in the following definition from **Richelet, Pierre. Tome 1 MDCCIX**, contemporary with De La Salle:

**catechism** (catechismus) A small book containing all the instructions in religion (Canisius’s catechism was well-regarded).

Instruction given on some point of religion (teach catechism).

**catéchisme** (catechismus) Petit livre qui contient tou-

tes les instructions de la Religion (Le catéchisme de Canisius était fort estimé).

Instruction qu’on fait sur quelque point de la religion (faire le Catéchisme)

1.1. The origin of the **catechism** itself is probably attributed most accurately to the Hussites and subsequently to Luther’s Small Catechism of 1528, which was the second most frequently printed book after the Bible in the century which followed the invention of printing. The 24th Session of the Council of Trent made the teaching of Christian doctrine a responsibility of bishops and parish priests, at least on Sundays and feasts. Catholic catechisms were widely produced. The subsequent foundation and development of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine undoubtedly strengthened the development of systematic teaching of the truths of the catechism as an important way of overcoming the widespread ignorance of religion among ordinary people.

1.2. The above point is important to understand the lapse of time between the publication of the Decrees of the Council of Trent and the implementation of catechism as a pastoral practice within the French Church of the 17th century. The saints and reformers of this period — Vincent de Paul, Francis de Sales, Bérulle, Condren and Olier — all made use of catechism teaching in their “missions” to various corners of France. It is sure-

ly significant, however, that as late in the century as 1673, Claude Joly, Bishop of Agen, wrote his **Duties of the Christian, set out as a catechism**, with the avowed aim of providing a book and a method for those parish priests who had not instituted systematic catechism teaching in their parishes. The Society of Saint-Sulpice instituted regular catechism teaching in the parish and made use of the seminarians to assist in this pastoral work. One of the most famous catechisms, contemporary with De La Salle, was that of De La Chétardye at the time when the Sulpician was rector of the seminary at Bourges. De La Salle himself was to produce his own **Duties of a Christian** in four separate books, including both a classical **question and answer** form as well as a prose development and smaller summaries (abrévés).

1.3. Yet it is surely significant that De La Salle did not found a congregation of catechists, although his foundations were often confused with the idea of a Congregation of Christian Doctrine, even at the time of the Bull of Approbation (cf. CL 11). To understand just what De La Salle and his Brothers contributed to the teaching of the catechism, let us look at what was going on in France during the time when the first Lasallian schools were begun.

## 2. THE PARISH CATECHISM

The preface to the 7th edition (1713) of De La Chétardye's catechism, originally published in 1688, offers a broad perspective on various aspects of the parish catechism as it was practised, perhaps even as De La Salle himself experienced it as a seminarian during his eighteen months at Saint-Sulpice.

2.1 De La Chétardye begins by dwelling on the practical difficulties of composing a book of "methodical instruction" (iv), exact in doctrine, which offers a perfect knowledge of religion, expressing the highest theology in correct language. He insists on the difficulty of explaining "mysteries and the most sublime and obscure matters in a familiar style, which is intelligible, popular and

concise, without descending to something common or pedestrian" (passim). He considers the different audiences to be addressed: the uneducated people entrusted to a country parish priest who therefore wants "a little Catechism, containing only what is necessary, making use of stories and down to earth comparisons"; a parish priest in a larger town who wants "a more sustained and more strongly argued explanation", a third parish priest is looking for doctrinal teaching in a large city "where there are present some children of rank, important spiritual persons, elderly people of some importance, who look for a large Catechism which provides material for the whole year and explains our mysteries at some length". He mentions the religious women, who besides being engaged in teaching in boarding schools for girls, or for day pupils, are sometimes required to instruct recent converts; there are schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, and parents as well. In summary, he sees three kinds of catechism manuals being necessary viz., summaries or abridgements (abrévés) for children and the uneducated, more developed summaries for those more advanced, and a third kind (such as the book which follows), which contains matter for a more advanced instruction and development (passim V, VI).

2.2. More can be learned about contemporary practice in catechism teaching e.g. "that it is prescribed under penalty that catechism be taught every Sunday and feast days of the year; that a parish priest who is keen on instructing his people can exhaust the **abridgement** in seven or eight weeks" (VIII). De La Chétardye pursues his argument in favour of the larger volume he is here presenting by pointing out the likelihood of some parish priests being incapable, without the help of such a book as he is proposing, of being able to continue to teach catechism regularly. He depicts quite graphically what he himself has experienced where catechism teaching is carried out faithfully and consistently from the earliest age: "Four year old children reciting the long acts [presumably of Faith, Hope, Charity & Contrition], and others, around six years of age, replying perfectly and in a free and exact manner to the longest and most difficult questions..." (ibid IX) He concludes his argument by suggesting that, as not everyone has

the time or ability to summarise a large catechism, there is need for three different catechisms:

*"the first for small children and the most uncivilized; the second for those who are ready to approach the sacraments; the third, for the most learned, and especially for the catechists themselves..."* (ibid IX).

2.3. The author is far from seeing the catechism lessons simply as passive listening. He considers that the participants are being invited to five forms of activity, which he characterises in the following way:

*"1. To believe 2. To receive 3. To do 4. To avoid 5. To meditate"* (ibid). He bases these activities on an exegesis of the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel, immediately before the Ascension, and takes up the same point in the first chapter of the Catechism in a longer explanation.

2.4. De La Chétardye offers four main comments on the methodology to be followed:

1. The catechism must be well-prepared beforehand; it cannot simply be improvised with the aid of this written text.

2. The catechist should avoid much talking, for "long discourses only bore the children".

3. The catechist is to question a great deal so that no one can complain afterwards about having been overlooked. A catalogue should be kept and the progress of each pupil noted with regard to the ability to answer the questions of the catechism.

4. The catechist should make extensive use of sub-questions (i.e. derived from the questions in the text) so that the content of the catechism is well understood (ibid XIII).

2.5. The whole of the second part of the Preface offers detailed remarks for catechists who are beginners so that the method they follow will prove to be useful and easy for the children to learn the catechism. De La Chétardye is not only a good theologian, but shows himself also a master of good catechetical method, counselling constant adaptation of the content to the audience, insisting that the catechist limit his own words to what is strictly necessary i.e. to speak and give the correct answer only when none of the pupils can offer

a correct reply, breaking down long answers into shorter sections, never punishing (if possible) during the time of catechism lest the lesson become associated with something disagreeable. He shows how to include any adults present in the questioning, without exposing them to humiliation before the children; he suggests that the catechist repeat aloud the answers when the child's voice has not been sufficiently heard; he insists that memorising is an activity **to follow** understanding and so on (passim XV-XVI).

2.6. There are further practical points which give insight into the practices of the time. The catechism is taught in the church; as far as possible, avoid having boys and girls together in the same lesson; insist that the teaching of the girls take place in the main nave where there is plenty of light; observe rules of prudence about speaking with individual pupils or hearing memorised passages from girls, apart from the lesson itself (XVIII-XX).

He recognises that some adults (and perhaps some slow children) will not easily be able to repeat the catechism answers correctly. He proposes a method of **acquiescence**, or of leading questions, which indicate the **reply** e.g. *"Don't you believe that there are three Persons in the one God? Yes, sir, I believe that there are... or Yes, sir, I am prepared to die for that..."* (XXII).

2.7. It is not hard to guess, from certain emphases in the concluding part of the Preface, that there was still considerable difficulty in having everyone, children and uninstructed adults, present themselves regularly for the parish catechism.

De La Chétardye, in common with the author of L'Ecole paroissiale, sees the catechist as needing to cultivate certain virtues to succeed in this exacting work. The list of virtues is as follows:

1. **modesty**, accompanied by a true gaiety;
2. **gentleness**, to encourage the timid and the weak;
3. **seriousness** (gravity), which maintains others in their duty of not being capricious and lacking respect;
4. **great patience** in putting up with the igno-

rance, bad manners and lack of refinement of people;

5. **unswerving charity** so as to leave no one without instruction (XXVIII).

### 3. CATECHISM IN "THE PARISH SCHOOL" [L'ESCOLE PAROISSIALE]

One of the incidental achievements of the Confraternities of Christian Doctrine, wherever they developed, was to offer at least the basic elements of literacy to the children who attended its classes. The book known as the "Parish School" of Jacques de Bathencourt, republished in 1685, offers some idea of the kind of catechism lessons being given in Paris at the time De La Salle and his first Brothers came to take over the parish schools of Saint Sulpice. A simple narration of these elements can help to form the basis for an understanding of the contemporary practices of catechism taught in the so-called "petites ecoles", and so offer a basis for comparison with the practices initiated or adopted by De La Salle and his first Brothers in their development of catechism lessons taught in the classroom, not in the parish church on Sundays.

#### 3.1. Under the heading of Instructions and Catechism lessons, the text reads as follows:

"We shall show firstly the method of teaching piety to the children, before writing about the practice of it which has to be shown to them as much in the Church as in the school. This will be seen in the instructions and Catechism lessons which are of five kinds,

1. The daily Catechism lesson,
2. The diocesan Catechism,
3. The Catechism on the Mysteries,
4. The Catechism on the Sacraments,
5. The Catechism for Sundays and Feast Days" (op. cit. pp. 85-86).

All of these sections find an echo in the work of the Christian schools.

3.1.1. As regards the daily catechism lesson, this is to be given "every evening, using the last

quarter of an hour to give them some instruction on piety" (ibid 87).

3.1.2. Concerning the subject matter of this daily lesson, there are a series of directions, among which the following are noteworthy:

"Two weeks before the ordinary days for Confession, the subject matter of this Catechism lesson will be the Sacrament of Penance. This fortnight is ordinarily the two weeks before Christmas, Lent, Palm Sunday, Pentecost, the Assumption, All Saints and throughout Lent. This Catechism has no other purpose than to instruct the children on this sacrament up till the Saturday before Palm Sunday. **During this time, the Master tries to obtain a full half hour for this instruction, which continues on until after five o'clock** (ibid).

Outside of the above times, we are told, the lesson is a quarter of an hour and is used to remind the children of their principal duties, and to teach them prayers and practices, such as how to say the Rosary and so on.

3.1.3. The **manner of teaching the catechism** (Art. 1,4) is instructive:

"As soon as the bell rings for the end of the last quarter of an hour, he (the teacher) must prepare the children to listen, making them promptly put away their books, pens, papers, writing materials, by ringing the bell to indicate this. Having done this, and when all are in their seats, 1. He will make the sign of the Cross, and the pupils will do the same. 2. He shall propose to them the questions which he has to ask them, two or three only, and if he had already begun the same matter in some preceding lesson, he shall repeat succinctly, before putting the questions, what was said the first time. 3. He shall put the questions which he will have to ask, and repeat the first, one two or three times, without changing the words. 4. He shall put the question to someone who does not need it and who is known to be one of the most attentive; and thus, having had it repeated by eight to ten, he shall repeat it himself to put to them the second and third questions in the same way. 5. He shall repeat the three questions together, and shall finish it with a **short story** (my emphasis) appropriate to the subject. Now, if he wishes to carry out this duty worthily, he must prepare the questions and the story before going into school" (ibid 88-89).

3.1.4. The direction regarding the diocesan catechism is that:

“By order of the Precentor, Superior of the Little Schools of Paris, each week on Wednesdays and Saturdays in the afternoon, a lesson from the diocesan Catechism is to be taught and explained, and the children made to learn it” (passim). This directive, and similar ones in other dioceses, will oblige De La Salle and his Brothers to do the same for their own pupils. The text goes on to specify how this learning was to take place, and the importance of cards being kept so as to record the progress of each pupil in mastering this catechism.

3.1.5. The indications on **The Master’s preparation for this Catechism** are instructive in the light of our later considerations regarding the Brothers.

“The schoolmaster, who has to teach catechism, must, on that day or on another day, read attentively the lesson from the catechism which he shall have to deal with; even foresee the questions from the Small Summary of the Faith, which he is to ask of the smallest pupils; as well as prepare a story to confirm what will have been said to them. This story will be drawn from the books noted above... and in doing this, he will be careful not to change the stories, and not tell ones that the pupils have already heard, unless it was a long time before” (passim 90-91).

The text then instructs the master how to pray beforehand so as to have the dispositions and the help he needs. There are further practical indications as to how to proceed with the questioning, how to deal with lazy pupils, the kind of prayer to be recited by the master after the lesson.

3.1.6 There are detailed instructions as well as how to deal with the catechism on the **Mysteries of the Year** or the Great Mysteries. The Master must instruct on these “*as being something of the greatest necessity for Christian life*” (Art. III p. 98).

The text laments the general ignorance on these matters and sees this ignorance of parents and of the majority of Christians as stemming from a lack of understanding because of the failure to be so instructed in their youth.

This topic comes up later (Art. 1,4) under the heading of Questions from the summary to be done on the solemnities of the mysteries of faith and concludes that “*it will always be neces-*

*sary to ask them (the pupils) some question on the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, in order that they may never forget what they are obliged to know and believe explicitly for their salvation*” (page 102).

3.1.7. The conclusion to the catechism lesson tells us:

“After the children have all recited their Catechism, (the master) shall make a short recapitulation, urging them with words expressing both love and fear, to the practices which they have just heard in the instruction, supporting what he said by the story he has prepared, and finishing in this way, asking God’s forgiveness for the faults committed...” (Art. 7, p. 105).

It is clear that the lesson is to end on a positive note and that the children are to go home, filled with the sentiments of the story so carefully prepared by the master. This same practice is found in De La Chétardye’s work as well in the Brothers’ tradition, and seems part of the common experience.

#### 4. IMPORTANCE OF CATECHISM IN THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL FOR DE LA SALLE

John Baptist de La Salle’s role as Founder of an institute for the Christian education of the children of artisans and the poor was something which developed during his life as “one commitment led to another... not seen at the beginning”. But from the beginning, there is no doubt about his choice: this work is not to be a French version of an Italian Congregation of Christian doctrine, but “*the end of this Institute is to give a **Christian education** (sic) to children, and it is for this purpose that the Brothers maintain schools so that the children, being under the control of the masters from morning until night, can teach them to live well by **instructing** (sic) them in the mysteries of our religion and by inspiring them with Christian maxims, thus giving them the education they need*” (Rule 1705 [3] CL 25 p. 16).

It is to be noted that the words “instruction” and its related verb “instruire” in the French usage

of De La Salle always connote religious instruction. (cf. *Catéchèse et Laicat*, p. 599). This gives special force and clarity to the following article of the Rule:

“This Institute is of a very great necessity, because the artisans and the poor are themselves usually little **instructed** (sic), and being busy all day long in gaining their livelihood for themselves and their children, cannot give this **instruction** (sic) necessary nor a proper Christian education. There need to be persons, therefore, who substitute for the parents in instructing the children in the mysteries of religion and in the principles of Christian living” (idem [4]).

In speaking of the spirit of zeal which should mark members of the Institute, the same Rule of 1705 specifies that “*the Brothers will endeavour by prayer, instructions and by their vigilance and good conduct in school to procure the salvation of the children entrusted to them by bringing them up in piety and in a truly Christian spirit, that is to say, according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel*” [10].

#### 4.1 Prescriptions regarding catechism in the *Conduite des Ecoles*

Chapter IX of the *Conduite des Ecoles* (Cl 24, page 97-109), first circulated in manuscript after 1706, sets out in clear detail the various aspects of catechism teaching in the Christian school. There is little doubt that what is here commended is largely a compilation of much that was already being practised. Regulations regarding the frequency and content of such lessons pass also into the Common Rule of 1718 i.e. they become an integral part of the life of the Brother who lives under this Rule (cf. CL 25 p. 35, 46).

4.2. Article 1 deals with the “time to be employed in teaching the catechism and the parts to be taught” and goes on to specify that “the catechism will be taught every day for half an hour, from four o’clock to half past four” (p. 97).

The text then indicates in great deal the particular ways in which this will be carried out, specifying particular feasts to be observed, taking into account the longer lesson to be taught on the eve of a feast or Thursdays when there was no school.

These regulations indicate the usual catechism lesson as lasting one half hour, the catechism preceding holidays as lasting one hour, and the catechism for Sundays and feasts as lasting for an hour and a half. It is clearly specified that, in these longer catechism lessons of an hour, or an hour and a half, the first half hour is to be spent on teaching and revising the “principal mysteries”. On ordinary days, the subject for the week will be taken up for the remaining time, but on feast days the catechism will deal with the feast itself.

4.3. The second article is entitled “Manner of asking questions on the Catechism” (p. 99) and begins with an overall direction which is highly significant:

“*The teacher will not speak to the pupils during catechism as though he were preaching, but he will ask them almost continuously questions and sub-questions. In order to make them understand what he is teaching them, he will ask several pupils, one after another, the same question. Sometimes he will ask it of seven or eight (or even of ten or twelve, and sometimes even of a greater number)*”.

*There follow directions about the order to be followed, about variations to be introduced, but “he will question all his pupils each day several times, even, if he is able to do so”* (p. 100:7).

His questions on the “principal Mysteries” follows a different pattern, since this is meant to be mainly an exercise to recall what is already known, and therefore the questions are more widely spread and the topic less strictly followed. Thus we read:

“*He will continue to ask questions in this manner on the summary (sic) throughout the first half hour. In his questions, he will make use of only the simplest expressions and words which are very easily understood and which need no explanation, if that is possible, and he will make his questions as short as he can*”.

There is insistence on correct and entire answers being given, but the skill of the questioner is to help encourage such answers from slow or timid pupils by gradually acquiring a complete answer from a number of pupils, or by having the answer repeated a number of times by a pupil who knows it well, so that the slower pupil can be en-

couraged to repeat it after him.

What is at stake, here, of course, is the matter of **knowing** the principal mysteries which are necessary for persons to be saved. This particular era in the Church placed great importance on **exact knowledge of the truths necessary for salvation** and hence laid great stress on the use of the abridgements or summaries in which these truths necessary for salvation were expressed (cf. Pungier, Jean: **Jean-Baptiste de La Salle: le message de son catéchisme**, pp. 20-22; see also the important note on **La volonté salvique universelle** by Sauvage, M., in **Catéchèse et Laïcat**, Note A, p. 589).

4.4. The third article specifies the **Duties of the Teacher during Catechism**. Here we come across the concern already met in **L'École paroissiale** that the teacher's task is to **catechise** rather than teach i.e. the pupil's knowledge of the text must be based on understanding and not simply on rote-learning.

*"One of the principal tasks of the teacher during catechism is to conduct the lessons in such a way that all the pupils will be very attentive and may easily retain all he says to them. To this effect, he will always keep all his pupils in sight and will observe everything they do. He will take care to talk very little and to ask a great many questions"* (p. 102).

The text continues with an emphasis on keeping to the subject of the day and not departing from it. The teacher, we are told, *"will always speak in a serious manner, such as will inspire the pupils with respect and restraint, and he will never say anything that might cause laughter"* (ibid). Mentioned here we find the importance of that seriousness or **gravité** signalled earlier [see 2.20], as well as the counsel to avoid *"untimely reprimands and corrections; and if it happens that some pupils deserve punishment, he will postpone it ordinarily until the next day, just before the Catechism, without letting them know it"* (ibid p. 103).

We note also the importance of keeping the attention and interest of the pupils, particularly on those days when the catechism lasts an hour or an hour and a half.

*"... he will always choose some story that the pupils will enjoy, and tell it to them in a way that will please them and renew their attention. He will*

*tell it with details that will prevent them from being bored..."* (ibid).

As regards judgements on the moral gravity of certain actions or cases cited, he will never allow himself to pronounce in a dogmatic way but will say simply, *"That will offend God very much"*. *"It is a sin very much to be feared"*. *"It is a sin that has evil consequences"*. *"It is a grievous sin"* (passim).

Another methodological point of great importance is the attention to be given by the teacher to his questions which should fulfil four conditions:

*"1. They must be short. 2. They must make complete sense. 3. They must be accurate. 4. The answers must not be suited to the capacity of the most able and most intelligent pupils but to that of the average ones, so that the majority may be able to answer the questions that are asked them"* (p. 104).

#### 4.5. **"Leaving not a single one in ignorance"** (p. 104)

Lest the previous point about questioning be reduced simply to a methodological observation, there follows a paragraph which brings out the basis for the whole catechetical work of the teacher.

*"The teachers will be so careful of the instruction of all their pupils that they will not leave a single one in ignorance, at least of those things which a Christian is obliged to know, in reference both to doctrine and to practice. In order not to neglect a matter of such great importance, they should often consider attentively that they will render account to God and that they will be guilty in His sight of the ignorance of the children who have been under their care, and of the sins into which this ignorance has led them, if they who have been in charge of them have not applied themselves with sufficient care to deliver them from their ignorance, and that there will be nothing on which God will examine them, and by which He will judge them, more severely than on this point"* (CL 24 p. 104).

Great stress is placed in the concluding paragraph of this article that the teacher be affable with his students, readily approachable for them, aware of the efforts made, especially by those who may not be so naturally endowed with intelligence [idem]. The point of all this is not simply a peda-

gological counsel, but another way of seeing in this good relationship between pupils and teacher a greater likelihood that the pupils will come to know, understand and learn these truths necessary for their salvation.

4.6. The remaining articles of the **Conduite** (p. 104-7) stress the duties of the pupils during the daily catechism lessons. It is clear that this lesson is seen as of great importance, and the methodology is such as to try to ensure that all the pupils come to an understanding and verbal accuracy with regard to the principal mysteries of religion, familiarity with the prayers and devotional practices most common at the time, the frequent experience of being conducted to Mass and to active participation according to the norms of the time. De La Salle saw this catechetical work of the Brother as his principal duty, but it is a ministry carried out through the overall experience of the Christian School.

## 5. THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL AS A PLACE FOR CATECHISM

De La Salle was certainly not original in choosing the Christian school as a place for a well-thought out catechetical activity. As we have already seen, this was a normal part of the work of many other schools for the poor of the time. At the same time, there were a number of emphases about the role of this new kind of Christian school which marked out these schools from others of the time.

5.1 The **first** emphasis is to be found in the Rule of 1705 (Art. 5, 6, 7, 8 CL 25 p. 35). "*Their principal care [my emphasis] will be to teach their pupils the morning and evening prayers, the answers at Holy Mass, the Catechism, the Duties of a Christian, and the maxims and precepts which Jesus Christ has left us in the holy Gospel... For this purpose they will teach catechism every day for one half-hour, on the eves of holidays for an hour, and on Sundays and feasts for an hour and a half...*".

This is a clearly stated priority of the school time-table which is in strong contrast with the ci-

tation [3.13] from the **Parish School**, that time has to be added on **if possible**, and the school day prolonged to achieve this.

A **second** emphasis is the condition for being accepted and remaining in the Christian school which is unambiguously stated:

*"They will not accept nor retain in the school any pupil who does not assist at the catechism on Sundays and feasts as on the other days when there is school"* (ibid No. 8 p. 35).

Taking into consideration other basic principles of the Christian school e.g. the insistence on **gratuity**, as well as the school being open to all who wished to attend, without any discrimination on the basis of wealth or poverty, it is clear that faithful attendance at all catechism lessons was not simply **another** condition, but rather the indispensable condition.

5.2. The role of catechism teaching, among the other subjects taught in De La Salle's Christian School, was not so great in quantity — 30 minutes in a schoolday which grouped the children for close to six and a half hours — **but** it was consistent: it was to take place "*every day*". This is a third point of emphasis very frequently recalled by De La Salle in his Meditations, e.g. No. 39:2.

*"...for you have to communicate holiness to others as much by your good example as by the words of salvation which you address them every day"* or, in the 3rd point of the meditation on St. John the Baptist No. 138,.

*"You are obliged by your duty of state to teach the truths of the Gospel every day"*.

Some other examples are 116:2; 33:3; 159:1; 100:2 and 200:1, but the point is found throughout many of De La Salle's writings.

A **fourth** point of emphasis is that this teaching was to take place always **in the school**, even on Sundays and feasts when Parish catechism was taught in the church. De La Salle addresses both these questions in Letter 28 (AMG; EC 28; BL. 1.34) to Gabriel Drolin and insists on the tradition of the Institute. In another letter (No. 49) to the experienced Brother Ponce, De La Salle reminds him bluntly that "*it is against our Rule to teach catechism in the Church*". On another occasion, De La Salle remonstrates with a Brother Director

who has allowed a Brother to demonstrate the method of catechetical instruction to clergy in the church.

This episode at Moulins, which is reported in some detail in Blain (Vol. II page 69-70 CL 8) gives some important insights into this practice of the Brothers:

*“M. l’Abbé Languet... was so taken by their manner of teaching catechism, that he asked the older of the two Brothers to come on two or three occasions into the parish in order to teach catechism to the children publicly in the presence of all the young priests, and all the other catechists of the town were obliged to be present so as to learn the method of the Brothers and use it themselves. The Brother obeyed, but against his inclination, for it is not customary for the Brothers to teach catechism in the church; this is something left to ecclesiastics since it is their prerogative”.*

While it seems consistent with the original Rule of 1705 which, by specifying the lay condition of the Brothers and limiting their functions in church to supervising their pupils and singing with them, withdrew them from activities which might incline them towards wishing to enter the clerical state, this may not have been the only reason. There may well have been important pedagogical reasons why the Brothers taught always in the classroom. The pupils were in familiar surroundings, they had set places, they were already seated in a certain order, their attendance was more easily controlled, they had the possibility of writing if need be, they were not exposed (as would have been the case in church) to the presence of adults and strangers who were present but not taking part in the lesson. At a more profound level, there could be little doubt that the continuity of relationship, established throughout all the other school activities of the week, gave a great advantage to the Brothers in meeting their regular students in situations where they, the Brothers, were in complete control. We may speculate also whether De La Salle’s own experience of teaching catechism as a seminarian (about which we have no certainty), may not have led him to favour the classroom.

## 6. IMPORTANCE OF THE BROTHER’S FORMATION AS A CATECHIST

From the time of the first Daily Regulation through the Rule of 1705 down to the Rule of 1718, there is a consistent emphasis on the time spent each day in the study of catechism as well as in the preparation of the lesson for the following day (CL 25 pp. 94-111). Each day there was at least one half hour set aside for the study of catechism and this period finished with all the Brothers being examined on this study by the Director or Sub-Director. No one was exempt from this regulation, and in later versions of the Rule even the serving Brothers or Brothers entrusted with temporal affairs, who could not make this exercise at the same time as the others, were obliged to have another regular time assigned to them.

In the set of topics indicated for the daily recreations in the Rule of 1705, Nos. 30 and 31 speak of this point:

*“The obligation which the Brothers of the Society have of properly carrying out their duty in the school, of **instructing the children well, of teaching the catechism well...** Different maxims and practices which can inspire the children to acquire the spirit of Christianity” (ibid, page 33).*

This study was complemented by exact preparation of the lessons to be given. The **Daily Regulation** (CL 25, No. 35 p. 102), for example, specifies that

*“at 8 o’clock there will be study of catechism to consider how the questions and sub-questions of the catechism answers can be made to be understood”.*

This emphasis finds an echo in Meditation 33; 2, where we read:

*“You must therefore study to form your questions and answers in catechism in so clear a manner that you will be easily understood”.*

The Rule of 1705 and that of 1718 enter into great detail to specify the time and duration of the study of catechism throughout the whole year. It would be true to say that, with the exception of

the last three days of Holy Week as well as the time of the Annual Retreat, the Brother is called by his Rule to study catechism every day.

### 6.1. The books to be studied

It is clear that the Brothers were called upon to teach the catechism of the diocese where they found themselves. Normally, this would mean one or other of the usual small summaries (abrévés) with its summary of the principal mysteries, but there could also be study of particular sections of a larger catechism, especially in the preparation for first communion and confirmation. We must not lose sight of De La Salle's own **Instruction méthodique pour apprendre à se bien confesser**, nor of the much more important **Devoirs d'un Chrétien, Catéchisme des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes**, and **Le grand et le petit Abrégé du dit Catéchisme**. All of these books, submitted for printing in 1703, represent important sources of catechetical formation of the Brothers.

As regards the **Devoirs**, we have the excellent studies already made by Hno. Manuel Fernández Magaz (Doctoral thesis, 1968), as well as recent series of articles in *Lasalliana*. Reference has already been made to the detailed analysis of the second volume done by Frère Jean Pungier [4.13].

The fact that De La Salle, aware as he was of the many other catechisms of the period, not least the magisterial work of De La Chétardye, produced his own series of catechisms probably means that the first two volumes of the **Devoirs** became the basic theological texts for the formation of generations of Brothers, even if they had to use the diocesan catechism in their classes. There is certainly plenty of evidence to suggest with Magaz, that some of the **readings** prescribed at certain times in the school e.g. during the breakfast snack, may well have come from the first volume. It is important to recall that there was no other way of obtaining a theological education. The prohibition against the study of Latin effectively precluded any study through the usual sources, such as the seminary or the university.

There is much evidence that De La Salle ranged over other sources in the composition of his **Devoirs** (cf. Pungier op. cit). We can also notice that the popular **Catéchisme de Montpellier**

was probably known and used by some Brothers. As this was later perceived to be clearly Jansenist in many of its orientations, it was formally proscribed by the General Chapter of 1745.

### 6.2. De La Salle's insistence on regular study of the catechism

The point is linked necessarily with De La Salle's insistence that the Brother's "state" or "profession", "principal duty", "the task to which God destines you" is to be a catechist. (Cf. *Catéchèse et Laïcat*, pp. 592-598) e.g. Meditation No. 120:1.

"You are obliged by your ministry to have enough (knowledge) to teach the children confided to you, the good, sound doctrine of the Church".

Letter No. 94 offers us in a concise form a number of De La Salle's emphasis on this point:

"Why are you not as keen about teaching catechism well, which is the main purpose of your vocation, as you are about writing, which is merely a means for this end? You know how necessary it is for the Brothers to study religion, and yet this is one of the things most neglected. Writing is necessary, but religious studies are surely more in keeping with your profession. It must be the first of your daily occupations, since your first care is to instill a Christian spirit into your students".

The 3rd point of the Meditation No. 91 for 30th December offers a comprehensive view of what De La Salle wished the Brother to attend to in his catechetical mission:

"It is your duty to teach your pupils their religion. Have you applied yourself zealously to this during the past year? Have you looked upon it as your chief duty? Do the pupils know their religion? If they are ignorant of it, or if they know the Christian doctrine only imperfectly, is it not the result of your negligence? Have you been careful to teach them the gospel maxims and to see that they practise them? Have you furnished them with the means of doing so in proportion to their age and ability? All these subjects should often have formed matter for reflection for you during the past year, and you should have taken the means to succeed. A master who is truly pious will 'breed wisdom', as the Scripture says, which means that he will procure wisdom for himself and at the same time communicate it to those whom he instructs".

In the 3rd point of the Meditation for the following day No. 92, De La Salle comes back to the same topic:

“Have you faithfully taught catechism every day and during the whole time indicated? Have you done so in the manner prescribed? Have you striven earnestly to have all of your pupils thoroughly grounded in the truths of religion? This is your chief duty, though none of the other subjects should be neglected”.

## 7. CATECHISM OF FORMATION

One of the oldest traditions among the Brothers is that of the so-called **catechism of formation**. It is encountered first in the Rule of 1705 for the novices which states:

“At 8 o'clock a novice shall teach catechism or some other school subject in order to learn to do so correctly” (CL 25, No. 22 p. 150).

A manuscript version of the 1718 Rule in the Archives is more detailed.

“On Sunday, catechism shall be taught at 8 o'clock in the evening and the Brothers to whom questions are addressed shall not ask any question of the one giving the catechism; they shall answer with much wisdom and modesty. The Brothers shall teach catechism after having prepared themselves first” (Ch. XXVIII).

This practice, which becomes standard in subsequent editions of the Rule, is confirmed by a note of Frere Agathon in 1785, cited in Circular No. 300:

“On Sunday evenings all the Brothers must assist at the 8 o'clock Catechism, except those boarding

school Brothers whose presence elsewhere is indispensable. When the house numbers six non-professed Brothers who are obliged to teach catechism, they shall do in so in succession in the community on Thursday, or on the feast day that may fall during the week”.

The manuscript of 1696, referred to as **Règle du Formateur des Nouveaux Maîtres**, prepared by Frere Agathon for the Chapter of 1787 but not published until 1811 (cf. Frère Anselme, Introduction, p. 19), specifies how the young Brothers are to present themselves to their mentor on Sunday evening in order to show him the catechism questions to be treated for the week, and showing the list of explanations and sub-questions which they have prepared. It is clear that the role of teaching catechism demands a certain period of apprenticeship to a more experienced teacher.

## 8. SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The first **Christian schools** of John Baptist de La Salle and his Institute clearly use and develop many of the emphases of catechism of their times.

Their particular contribution was to make catechism as such the indispensable condition for attendance at their schools. Their insistence on a school-based catechism probably helped to set the whole work of the Christian school its organisation, its structures and set methods — in an atmosphere which facilitated a broader **catechesis** (sic) during the whole day through the quality of the overall relationship between the Brother and his pupils. Everything contributed towards this task of forming what De La Salle called “true disciples of Jesus Christ”.

### Complementary Themes:

Christian, Conduct, Duty, School, Church, Scholar, Instructions, Mystery, Salvation.

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**Other references are acknowledged within the text in relation to the citation. Historical details as regards the origins of catechisms are drawn mainly from my own doctoral thesis "*The concept of catechesis and the concept of religious education in a pluralist society*", lodged at the University of Lancaster, England 1973.**

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