

49. POOR

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1. INTRODUCTION

“The Definition of the poor, such as it was understood under the *Ancien Régime*, is very wide. The poor person is he who suffers, who is humble, afflicted, who has fallen into misfortune. In a more restricted view, he is a person who finds himself in ‘need’, who has only his work to provide him with a livelihood, who for want of savings, has preoccupation with his daily needs. The poor man is not entirely without resources; he may have his work tools, even a little put aside” (*Lexique Historique de la France de l’Ancien Régime*, p. 248).

Within the school, the principal ministry of this Institute from its very beginning, there has always been a special concern for the poorest among its pupils. However, the earliest formulas of consecration and the primitive Rules spoke not of vowed “service of the poor” but of “conducting schools gratuitously” (RC 1705). Similarly, the first chapter of the Rules of 1705 which all the biographers attribute to John Baptist de La Salle describes the end of the Institute as being to give “a Christian education to children” (RC chp. 1 art 4). In this initial use in the Rules the word children is

not modified in any way. The same can be said of the Bull of 1725 whose wording was presumably very much influenced by Brother Timothy, the Second Superior General, and the other principal Brothers of the period who had been close to La Salle. It is only by way of modification that the Bull employs the word “poor”.

In 1727 Canon J.B. Blain was commissioned by Brother Timothy to write the life of the Founder and to sketch the providential history of the Institute as it emerged under his guidance. It is clear that the major theme that the author is attempting to emphasize in chronicling these events is that La Salle, under God’s inspiration, was seeking through gratuitous schools to break the vicious cycle of poverty, abandon and ignorance that vitiated the society of his day. A consequence of this situation was that children, particularly those of artisans and the poor “were unable to live well and hence were far from salvation” (Bull. *In Apostolicae Dignitatis Solio*). In establishing the Christian Schools “he did not wish to exclude the families of any of the categories of the poor that others might devise nor indeed the children of

those who might be defined as rich or in easy circumstances" (CL 8 34ff). As Blain further says, "For De La Salle the danger was too great of taking on the role of a judge, something he believed he had no right to do and which he could not indeed do fairly" (CL 8 36). Hence the importance for La Salle and his Brothers of the principle of gratuity for it enabled them to maintain schools open to all children and so to convert into a reality the expressed objective of their Institute: "The end of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children and it is for this purpose that they keep schools so that children being under the care of the masters from morning till evening, these masters may teach them to live well by instructing them in the mysteries of our religion while inspiring them with Christian maxims and so giving them an education which is suited to them" (RC 1705 chp. 1 art. 4). Brother Yves Poutet would seem to be strongly supporting this interpretation of La Salle's intention when he writes in *Lasalliana*: "La Salle absolutely refused to follow the demands of custom which would have made his schools into ghettos reserved for the poor. This was a radical innovation because it made the least cultivated pupils come into frequent contact with the more favoured orders of pupils who had come to profit by the exemplary value of his schools" (*Lasalliana* 09-A-44. 1.6.86).

2. WHO WERE THE CHILDREN OF THE POOR?

Brother Maurice Hermans in a brief study (1971) entitled **THE POOR TO WHOM SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE AND THE FIRST BROTHERS DEDICATED THEMSELVES** has this to say: "It goes without saying that one must remember certain associations or contents. Thus it is, for example, that art. 3 of the 1st Chapter of the Rules where it is a question of the CHILDREN, is not to be put in opposition to arts. 4, 5 and 6 of the same chapter which speak explicitly of ARTISANS AND THE POOR, and even CHILDREN OF ARTISANS AND THE POOR (Hermans p. 6). It will appear all the same significant that the first word to which the author of Rules has recourse is a term of general impor-

tance or bearing: "The end of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children..." It is also very instructive to observe, as Hermans notes: "that the Rules which use the expression CHILDREN OF ARTISANS AND THE POOR so little, use about ten other times the word CHILDREN and sixty one times the word "écolier" (schoolboy, pupil, student). (Hermans op. cit. p. 6).

Brother Hermans also remarks that it is probably not without significance that the Meditations for the Times of Retreat give their preference to the terms, child, children, (more than eighty times) and DISCIPLES (between twenty five and thirty times), the related term PUPIL being used four times. The word POOR (singular or plural), whether used substantively or qualitatively, occurs rather rarely (Hermans op. cit. p. 6).

The simplest explanation for this varying terminology is that La Salle and the early Brothers used these terms interchangeably because all the children who came to them, with few exceptions, could be classed as poor. Thus whether they were thinking of the children of labourers, of workers in the simplest mechanical arts (artisans) or of shopkeepers; they saw them all as belonging to the world of the poor. In fact as will be evidenced from testimony from the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the majority of the French population could be appropriately described as poor and its lower echelons as indigent (*misérable*). As is also noted elsewhere, for the common people, this poverty was more or less intermittent and for many the economic situation was one of insecurity rather than of permanent poverty or destitution. (POUTET-PUNGIER, *Un éducateur aux prises avec la société de son temps*, p. 29). This distinction is also made clear by Blain when he analyses the categories of poor in the Brothers' Schools in Paris in the first decade of the 18th C. (CL 8, 9).

3. HOW CAN THE DICTIONARIES OF THE 17th CENTURY HELP US?

What reality, indeed, did these words express in the last years of the 17th C. when La Salle was reluctantly becoming involved in the business of the schools?

Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* (2nd. ed.) published in 1701 begins its definition of the word poor, as the person "Who has no resources; who is in distress; who does not have the necessities to sustain life or maintain his status". He goes on to say that there is a Poor Board in Paris; a tax is levied on the bourgeois for the poor; collections are made in parishes for the poor; that there are Commissioners for the Poor; that *Hôpitaux Généraux* have been established to incarcerate the poor who were previously a threat to life as they begged alms. He also refers to the PAUVRES HONTEUX, a category mentioned by Blain as identifying the parents of some poor, people of respectable family who suffer greatly without daring to make their situation known" (CL 8, 9).

Furetière's dictionary makes no distinction between the French words AISÉ and RICHE defined as: "He who has plenty of resources, who has an abundance of all things; who is rich in money, in rents, in lands, and honours".

Poutet and Pungier, referring to Richelet's dictionary of 1680 indicate that there was effectively little difference in economic status between artisans and the poor (Poutet-Pungier op. cit. 9.29). We may therefore, for our purposes here, virtually consider the terms to be synonymous. At least it may be said that many artisans lived in a near permanent state of insecurity and were in regular need of assistance. They were among La Salle's poor (See Theme: Artisans; Bedel ED 275/8; Hermans DC 401/ 17 D3).

4. THE TESTIMONY OF SOCIAL HISTORIANS

4.1. The situation in the 16th and 17th centuries

Who then belonged to the world of the poor in La Salle's time. Paul Christophe in his study *LES PAUVRES ET LA PAUVRETÉ* quoting Jean-Pierre Gutton offers an answer: "For the 16th and 17th centuries, those who were prone to become poor could be considered as poor, that is to say, labourers who had nothing but their strength of limb to support themselves and who had no reserves, a situation which pretty well characterised the common people in general (P. Christophe p. 7).

Further, he comments, that in the towns many craftsmen in a small way lived on the verge of destitution. These included: shoemakers, door-men, innkeepers, launderers, water-carriers, etc. What is really difficult to do, he adds is to separate difficulty from poverty, and poverty from indigence, beggary and vagabondage. He again quotes Jean-Pierre Gutton's view: "From poverty to beggary is a difference only of degree and not of nature" (J.P. GUTTON, *La Société et les Pauvres*. Quoted Christophe op. cit. p. 9).

4.2. Comparative Meanings

Poutet-Pungier help us to make a comparison with our own day: "According to present day criteria, people would be authentically poor who could not afford the minimum requirements of workers who have to be satisfied with SMIG (Subsistence wage). But in the 17th C. lack of basics was general. The great majority of the French population would have to be classed as poor; from beggars to craftsmen, to small shopkeepers and even to some degree rural nobility. However, the standard usage of the period does not see the matter in these terms. It distinguishes the poor from those in distress. It is not lack of basics which characterises the poor but the insecurity of tomorrow (Poutet-Pungier op. cit. p. 29).

Was the question of insecurity uppermost in the mind of the concerned Bourgeois, La Salle, when in his *Meditations of the Times of Retreat* he comments: "Consider that it is only too common for the artisans and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over as if they had no home, until they are able to be put to some work. Their parents have no concern to send their children to school because they are too poor to pay teachers, or else they have to go out to look for work and leave their children to fend for themselves" (MR 194.1). Here La Salle speaking for himself identifies two categories of poor. Those whose money is so limited that they have none to pay teachers, and those who have the money but do not have the time or energy to see to their children's schooling because they have to give their attention to finding jobs that will keep the money coming into the home. La Salle outlines

further his perception of the poor whose children he was called to serve in a similar passage in another of these meditations: "One of the main duties of fathers and mothers is to bring up their children in a christian manner and to teach them their religion. But most parents are not sufficiently enlightened in these matters (poverty of knowledge); some are taken up with their material needs and the support of their family; others, under constant concern of earning the necessities of life for themselves and their children, cannot take the time to teach their children their duties as christians" (MR 193.2).

We need to take this question of constant concern and insecurity further in order to clarify our understanding of the word poor in the world today in comparison with its meaning for La Salle. It must not be assumed that the two are identical.

4.3. Further Distinctions in Meaning

In order to attempt this identification, a further initial clarification must be made. Even from an objective point of view the word POOR does not have the same referent throughout the world today. Starting from the widest perspective a distinction must be made between what the word means in a developed or First World country, and what it means in developing or Third World society. In the typical First World society the population generally falls into three categories: A relatively very small affluent group, a relatively large middle income group, and a relatively small deprived group. Within each of these three categories there is a corresponding economic range.

So, for instance, for the typical North American, French, Australian, Dutch, Spanish or English Brother or his colleague, the poor are a relatively small portion of the population. In economic terms one speaks of the poverty line and of those who live below the poverty line. In addition, in the typical developed country, there are those people who for a variety of reasons such as chronic illness, alcoholism or drug addiction are at the very bottom of the economic scale and may be classed as indigent. To these today must be added the street-kids (Cf. Poutet-Pungier op. cit., p. 29).

The indigent (*misérables*) of today may be entirely dependent on social welfare or charity. They are sometimes, in more emotive terms, referred to as THE POOREST OF THE POOR. This group of people is still to be found in societies where there is a comprehensive system of social welfare. For various reasons they are not able to avail themselves effectively of even the readily available welfare and charity resources.

On the other hand in the typical developing or Third World country the situation is quite different. There may be a relatively small affluent class, a similarly small though more numerous comfortable middle group and finally a very large group living at subsistence level. Such societies normally lack an official social welfare system. Maternity allowances, sickness and disability benefits and age pensions are non-existent. Lack of basic education and hygiene, recurrent famine and inter-ethnic conflict assure that a large proportion of the population lives in abject poverty. Such are the poor for many Brothers in parts of Africa, Asia and South America. It would seem that the majority of those who would be classed as POOR in those societies would have to be considered as INDIGENT in the terminology of developed countries. Considering what has already been said of the conditions of France in the 17th C. it would appear that we are closer here to a helpful contrast of relative economic conditions. We are also less likely to arrive at the naive conclusion that our use of the word POOR and theirs was identical.

Would La Salle have recognized the categories of Paul Christophe, of Jean-Pierre Gutton, of Jean Pungier and Yves Poutet? Since we cannot arrive at the answer from La Salle himself, we need to look elsewhere. His first biographers, among them men who were close to him and knew his mind, do have something specific to say on this matter. One of these is Canon Jean Baptiste Blain, his close friend and ecclesiastic superior of the Brothers at St. Yon, who outlived him by thirty years and wrote while many of the Founder's contemporaries were still living. These Brothers were quite ready to challenge perceived distortions in Blain's work which they certainly did on several issues (CL 8. Appendix Letter to Superior General).

5. THE TESTIMONY OF BLAIN

To seek some answers to this question let us plunge into a situation of conflict for the embryonic Institute in the Paris of the years 1704-1706 and join Blain as he writes: "So that in future the Writing Masters might not cause any more troubles in the schools, De La Chetardye sent Abbe Gergy, his Vicar at this time and today his successor as Parish Priest of Saint Sulpice, to investigate the financial standing of pupils' families. The pious priest spent several weeks doing so and drew up a list of the student's ages, names and addresses. The Brothers were told to admit only those who presented a note signed by a priest from the Community of Saint Sulpice designated by the Pastor to verify the financial status of the children's parents" (CL 8, 7).

It is important for us to remember that La Salle was adamantly opposed, according to Blain, to this prying into the private affairs of the families of the pupils flocking to the schools. Blain's claim is confirmed by the continuing troubles La Salle had with the Writing Masters. However, at this time, the alternative was the closure of the schools and so he reluctantly agreed to the issuing of certificates of poverty: "Fathers and mothers were thus obliged to come from all over the parish to secure a ticket, which was like a key which opened the doors of the gratuitous schools for their children. The procedure disarmed the Writing Masters completely and deprived them of any pretext for further harassment. It protected the Brothers and their schools and brought peace and quiet back to them. Yet they did not lose a single student. The classes were filled as usual, and no child who asked for admission was turned away. The great number of pupils was a fresh source of displeasure for the Parisian schoolmasters, but it would no longer excuse them for causing further trouble. The issuing of tickets which protected the schools from any invidious visitations was, when all was said and done, nothing but a pure formality; for the same students whose supposedly easy circumstances had provided a pretext for the lawsuits filed by the Writing Masters came back to the Brothers with their tickets duly signed, since the Priest in charge felt that in conscience he could not refuse them. Better informed than the Writing

Masters' imagination, he did not feel justified in classifying as RICH those who had a little money but also had large families, who owned well-stocked stores but owed more than they owned" (CL 8, 43).

A surface reading of these passages would lead to the conclusion that there was a considerable portion of students of families IN EASY CIRCUMSTANCES in the gratuitous schools of the parish of Saint Sulpice. This conclusion, however, would not accord with the remark Blain makes in an earlier chapter regarding similar problems in the Faubourg Saint Antoine: That in a hundred poor children who frequented the Christian Schools three or four might belong to families in easy circumstances (CL 8, 7). The key to this problem is, perhaps, to be found in determining the distinction Blain is making between families in POOR and families in EASY circumstances.

6. BLAIN AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE 17th CENTURY

There are numerous passages that could be cited to indicate that there is considerable difficulty in interpreting just what is meant in Blain, in Bernard, and indeed in the texts of La Salle, when the terms POOR, IN EASY CIRCUMSTANCES and THE RICH, are used. Light, however, is thrown on the problem when we look at the evidence as to the meaning of the words at the turn of the 17th C. as indicated above from Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* of 1690. It would seem that in Blain also the two later expressions are used interchangeably and, further, that he employs no intermediate terms between RICH and POOR. In other words RICH as used by Blain and also possibly by La Salle embraces those described as IN EASY CIRCUMSTANCES: "They shall show equal affection for all their pupils but more so for those who are poor than for those who are rich because they are more entrusted by their Institute with the care of the former than of the latter" (RC 1705 3.13). Yet these would come from families little removed from those described as POOR. This word in turn, as has been indicated above, covers a wide spectrum from MISERABLE to those embraced by the word INSECURE. In fact,

it seems not unreasonable to conclude that those pupils described by Blain and La Salle as RICHE or AISÉ were only so, by contrast, and were, economically, from families, as is said above not far from those described as POOR.

In their study *Les Français et L'Ancien Régime*, Goubert and Roche identify an intermediate group LES MÉDIOCRES (the in-betweens). "Aux confins de l'indépendance économique se trouvaient les médiocres. Médiocres au sens classique, c'est-à-dire moyens, ainsi appelait-on avant 1750 les gens qui n'étaient ni "AISÉS" ni "PAUVRES" (Roche op. cit. p. 167). The term *médiocre* does not appear to be used by Blain. This perhaps is understandable when we consider the order of society from which both Blain and La Salle came. The interchangeable use of the terms RICH and THOSE IN EASY CIRCUMSTANCES thus becomes clearer when the terminology is clearly situated in the period and the context to which it belongs. The period was one in which society was divided virtually into three categories: a very small category of very wealthy people: some noble, some bourgeois; a second and still proportionally small group of moderately well-to-do-people: some noble, some bourgeois; and finally the vast majority of the people, POOR in a sense that is somewhat different from the poor in our day (see Pungier-Poutet comment above) but again composed of all ORDERS of society.

Blain himself offers us some help in situating the social and economic status of the families to whom he is referring.

He is commenting on the conflict between La Salle and the Writing Masters in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine in 1704 and suggests several factors La Salle could have pointed out to defend himself against the accusations of the Writings Masters that he was receiving into the gratuitous schools children of parents who were RICH or Well-OFF:

"How often do the walls of a house disguise seriously straightened circumstances which remain unknown to the public? How many indigent people suffer in secret the hardships of poverty while having a reputation of being well-off?"

That the fact that some people are called surgeons, masons, butchers, locksmiths, wine merchants and so on does not imply that all of them are in fact in easy circumstances (d'être à leur

aise); many poor people exercise these roles.

That some of those (listed as wealthy) might have large families to provide for, something that soon exhausts the resources of those who live by a trade or have only limited income.

That everyday illness, business reverses and other misfortunes bring to the poorhouse (l'Hôpital) people who belong to all these professions, and who moreover are both skilled and diligent workers" (CD 9, 9).

Blain then poses a very practical question and in doing so he claims that he is faithfully recording the Founder's own dilemma: "Who has the right to inventory the possessions of a child's parents to prove whether they are in poverty or in easy circumstances... Was it his business to decide on the poverty or wealth of their parents? ... must the child who seems wealthy and who often enough is not at all so... choose an ignorant teacher (or have none at all) because his parents are not on the list of paupers duly recognised by the State?" (CD 8, 4)

As a closer examination is made of the meaning of these words we can better appreciate the dilemma of the Brothers in Paris of 1704-1706 and the frustration of parents at the behaviour of the Writing Masters who could not or would not understand the insecurity of their lot. Their great desire was to have their children's future bettered by an education that had been denied them by the social circumstances of the past and by the absence of schools such as La Salle was pioneering. These schools established an indispensable link between instruction in the faith and the teaching of basics. In due course the "Conduct of Schools" was to suggest that parents torn between the desire for their children's betterment and the urge to have them contribute to the family income should be put under pressure to leave them in school. The means proposed was that they should be deprived of parish assistance if they contributed to the absence of their children from school.

Blain, and perhaps it is not rash to accept that he was reflecting the mind of his friend, La Salle as he claims, expresses very sensitively an understanding of the world of the poor in the above quoted passages. Blain is certainly speaking out of a rather wide interpretation of the meaning of the word POOR and it would seem reasonable to conclude both from his actual comments and the theoretical

definitions of the word that La Salle in using it is thinking of a quite wide range of people as had been remarked above. Caboudin and Viard would seem to corroborate this interpretation in their comment on the word POVERTY in the *Lexique Historique de la France de L'Ancien Régime*: "The definition of the poor, such as it was understood under the *Ancien Régime*, is very wide. The poor person is he who suffers, who is humble, who has fallen into misfortune. In a restricted view, he is a person who finds himself in "need", who has only his work to provide him with a livelihood, who for want of savings, has preoccupation with his daily needs. The poor man is not entirely without put aside" (Op. cit. p. 248).

7. A DISTINCTION BETWEEN PAUVRES AND MISÉRABLES

In seeking to identify the POOR as La Salle knew them a closer look needs to be taken at the group known as the MISÉRABLES (the indigent).

The truly MISÉRABLES among the population of Paris, Reims, Rouen were to be found in the *Hôpitaux Généraux*. These people could no longer cope with life at all and the were forceably incarcerated in these centres. Adrien Nyel had devoted his life to teaching these people in the children's section of the *Hôpital* at Rouen. Why did not La Salle devote his life to founding a group of dedicated school masters to work in these centres? Consider the temporary residence of one group of Brothers in the *Hôpital* at Rouen (CL 8, p. 21). If his call had been to work with the most indigent among the poor then it would seem, perhaps, logical that the *Hôpital* would have been the place to direct his zeal. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that his work was not to be concentrated on alleviating the situation of those who had failed totally to cope with the situation of the day. His aim was perhaps rather to establish an association of men whose task it would be to break the vicious cycle of poverty, vice and ignorance which resulted in the peopling of the *Hôpitaux généraux* of Paris and the other cities of France. His work was to be, in the first place, remedial not palliative. It was also to be universal.

In this regard it is perhaps significant to note the Memoir that the Brothers of Rouen wrote to La Salle when exhausted by attempting to combine the work of the four city POOR SCHOOLS with the demanding tasks of the *Hôpital*. They remarked in the Memoir that the good of the POOR required that they withdraw from the Hopital. The quote is again from Blain: "In this document the Brothers brought out clearly how necessary it was to get them out of the *Hôpital*, where the spirit of their Institute ran as much risk as did their health. The advantage of the poor as well as their own required it" (CL 8, 24).

Blain concludes his discussion of this crisis with the remark that the conditions imposed on the Brothers working in the four city Charity Schools were such that the Board seemed to consider that "the Brothers should have been happy to pay for the privilege of serving the poor" (CL 8, 29). Is Blain perhaps making a distinction between the MISERABLES in the *Hôpital* and the POOR in the four city schools? Even though we may not presume so, the comparison cannot be without significance.

Brother Maurice Hermans has a number of reflections on the options that appeared open to La Salle in his efforts to establish the Christian Schools. In regard to the episode in the *Hôpital Général* of Rouen he concludes rather tentatively: "A second option: the Charity schools and not the *Hôpitaux*. In Rouen, the Brothers' responsibility, from 1705-1707 was for the poor children in the *Hôpital Général*. Then they withdrew to conduct the Charity schools of the four parishes of the city. If the *Hôpital Général* was abandoned, it was above all, it seems, because of the very multiplicity and difficulty of the services that were demanded from the Brothers outside of the school and education properly speaking" (Hermans op. cit., p. 12).

8. THE OPTION OF THE HÔPITAL GÉNÉRAL

As has been commented elsewhere La Salle gave no indication of perceiving his ministry as being one directed towards the schools of the *Hôpitaux Généraux*, the schools of the miserables (the indigent, the marginalised). Rather, in Rouen as

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