

# 84. MODESTY

## Summary

### 1. The context

1.1. The meaning of “modesty” in De La Salle’s time 1.2. Christian modesty.

### 2. “Modesty” in De La Salle’s writings

2.1. For schoolchildren and the general public 2.2. For the Brothers 2.3. The meaning of “modesty” for De La Salle.

3. “The admirable modesty of M. de La Salle” (CL 8,307).

## 1. THE CONTEXT

### 1.1. The meaning of “modesty” in De La Salle’s time

Like the Latin root *modus* from which it comes, modesty means moderation, measure, control. In De La Salle’s time, the word meant the practice of controlling all the postures and movements of the body and the use of the eyes and speech.

The *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1721), gives two synonyms for modesty: *pudeur* (feeling of shame, or guilt), and *retenue* (control, or restraint). This indicates two separate meanings:

- an interior attitude. *Trévoux* gives the example: “Modesty is a control of the mind that leads a person to think less of self than of others”. As such, it resembles humility.

- exterior behavior. We read in the same dictionary: “The modesty of the clergy gives much edification to the people; their modesty must become apparent in their words, in their actions, in their meals, and in their posture”.

This twofold meaning can be seen also when false modesty is denounced, an interior attitude opposed to modesty betrayed by a forced exterior demeanour. The authors of the Trévoux dictionary (Jesuits) denounce it without reserve: “False modesty is the ultimate accomplishment of vanity.”

### 1.2. Christian modesty

The Vulgate uses *modestia* to translate the Greek *epieikeia* and *praotes*, meaning goodness, or gentleness. Saint Paul uses these Greek words to describe the goodness, or gentleness of Christ (2 Co 10,1); the word carries the same meaning in 2 Tm 2,25, Col 3,12, Tt 3,2, Ph 4,5, and 1 P 3,16. This sense of the gentleness expressed by the Vulgate’s use of *modestia* is lost in the French *modestie*, as also in the English *modesty*.

Saint Ambrose († 397) wrote a treatise for priests in which *modestia* indicates an interior spirit of humility. To his description he adds directives for the practice of silence, moderation in the manner of speaking, and the control of all bodily movements. This seems to mark the appearance of a new understanding of modesty, based on the control of speech and bodily attitudes.

The *Rule* of Saint Benedict († ca 543) speaks of *modestia* as the 12th degree of humility, taking the publican in Jesus’ parable as the model of the interior attitude proper to the virtue. He exhorts the monks to let all their exterior behavior reflect this inner attitude of fear of the judgment of God because of their sins. The emphasis is placed on an interior attitude which will allow the external demeanour to follow quite naturally, without going into details.

The Franciscans, at the end of the Middle Ages, were trained to an elaborate practice of exterior *modestia*. In later years, Saint Ignatius († 1556) drew up a list of thirteen precise rules of the virtue which

influenced all the spiritual training of men and women in the 17th and 18th centuries, including Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

## 2. "MODESTY" IN DE LA SALLE'S WRITINGS

### 2.1. For schoolchildren and the general public

De La Salle makes reference to modesty in all his writings. However, in three of his works he develops his doctrine on modesty with considerable detail; it seems adequate for the purpose of this article to focus on these writings.

The *Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne* was published in 1703 and probably written between 1694 and 1702 (cf. CL 19). This was a text in reading for the schools conducted by the Brothers and was very popular during the 18th and 19th centuries, as more than 150 reprintings and editions testify.

A critical edition by Brother Albert Valentin, FSC, was published by Ligel (France) in 1956. An English translation of the original text was published in 1990 by Lasallian Publications, Romeoville, Illinois, under the title, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*.

While one purpose was to provide a reading text for the students who had mastered the fundamentals of reading in French, the subject matter itself was aimed at helping the students learn and practice the polite manners of the society of 18th Century France. In writing his book De La Salle reflected his own bourgeois upbringing as well as familiarity with several treatises on the topic that were published between 1649 and 1685 (cf. CL 58).

Nonetheless, for De La Salle modesty was more than a civic virtue. In his Preface he insists on the Christian motivation — the interior attitude — that is essential to his idea of modesty. In one sense this is original to De La Salle, in that he does not make interior humility the motive for the virtue of modesty. He states that when parents want to train children in the practise of bodily care and simple modesty they should "carefully lead them to be motivated by the presence of God... In other words, children should do these things out of respect for God in whose presence they are" (CL 19,III = RB 0,0,6).

A few pages later, De La Salle makes a distinction between modesty and civility, the former being the virtue that governs one's exterior behaviour, whether one is alone or with others, the latter being the virtue that governs one's exterior behaviour in the presence and in relationships with others (CL 19,VI = RB 0,0,15).

### 2.2. For the Brothers

The *Recueil de différents petits traités à l'usage des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes* was probably written by De La Salle between 1700 and 1715, and possibly first published in 1705, though the earliest extant edition is dated 1711 (cf. CL 15). In a handwritten text consisting of a single page with no date, De La Salle writes that this "small volume" contains "the principal rules and practices which are common in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools" (CL 15,x). Modesty is the eighth of the eleven virtues listed and described under the heading, "Principal virtues that the Brothers ought to practice" (CL 15,175 = R 15,8,1).

The *Règles communes des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes*, based on the 1705 text, had sections added or modified in 1718. One of the additions was a chapter entitled "On Modesty", which reproduced in its 15 articles material from the 1711 *Recueil*, material which itself was largely borrowed from the *Regulæ Modestiae* of St Ignatius (Cf. CL 16,44-47).

According to the biographer Blain, the Brothers attending the 1717 chapter discussed the revision of the 1705 *Règles communes*, and then asked the Founder to draw up a revised text as he thought fit (CL 8,136).

### 2.3. The meaning of "modesty" for De La Salle

The *Recueil* makes clear that the virtue of modesty is important for the Brother of the Christian Schools: this virtue is necessary "for their profession".

In his description of modesty De La Salle does not speak of any motive except to give good example to

everyone, to give evidence of a well-ordred interior by exterior actions, especially in view of the Brother's role as teacher — and probably as one professing to be specially consecrated to God. He evidently takes for granted the motivation he stressed in the *Rules of Christian Decorum*. The *Recueil* was used as part of the training of the Brothers in the novitiate and in community (cf. CL 15,ix), so that the fundamental motivation for all the life of the Brothers could be presumed for the virtues described in the *Recueil*.

There are 15 articles under the heading of modesty in the *Recueil*. The first article is an introductory and specifies that this virtue governs exterior actions with great modesty, humility, together with good behavior appropriate to Brother's profession (CL 15,175 = R 21,1).

Inserting the word "humility" in this article might be construed to mean that De La Salle considered humility as an interior motivation for the Brother's practice of modesty. However, this would be the only explicit reference to such interior motivation in De La Salle's treatment of modesty. To say the least, he does not put emphasis on that motive as much as he puts on the presence of God in the *Règles de la bienséance*.

The ten following articles describe in detail the correct way to hold one's head; the proper expression on one's face, joy rather than sadness, and without frowning, or wrinkling the nose; the look of the eyes, especially when in the presence of women or superiors; the position of the lips, hands, arms, and legs; the

manner of talking and walking, alone or with others; and the proper care of one's clothing. Such attention to detail probably reflects the social practices of 18th century France as much as it does the traditions of spiritual doctrine.

Br Maurice Auguste Hermans has shown in parallel columns (CL 16,41f) how the text of the *Recueil* became the source of Chapter XXI of the 1718 *Règles Communes*, and that the literary source of both these texts is the *Regulae Modestiae* of Saint Ignatius. It is clear, then, that De La Salle intended the practices of external modesty to conform to the traditions of the religious orders and institutes of the 16th and 17th centuries.

We should note that article 6 of the *Règles* does not come from the *Recueil*: "Recollection will be considered by the Brothers of such great importance that they will regard it as one of the principal supports of the Society and look upon immodesty (*dissipation*) of the eyes as the source of all kinds of disorder in a community".

It seems that this texts alludes to the "interior recollection" which is listed by the *Recueil* as one of the four "interior supports of the society", together with mental prayer, the spirit of faith and the presence of God (CL 15,6 = R 4,1). The use of the word "support" in article 6 of chapter XXI is not fortuitous therefore. Very probably it is a reference to this passage in the *Recueil*, as well as to another section of the *Rules*, article 8 of chapter XVI, "On Regularity".

### 3. THE "ADMIRABLE MODESTY OF M. DE LA SALLE" (CL 8,307)

In book four (or rather in part two of volume two) of his biography of De La Salle, Blain describes the modesty of the Founder in his usual elaborate language, and compares it with that of several great saints (CL 8,307-316).

Blain treats this topic in a section of chapter III entitled "On the Charity of the Holy priest", after speaking of De La Salle's love of God shown by his attachment to prayer and by his constant recall of the presence of God. Modesty is viewed as the external reflection (radiance would be a better word) of De La Salle's interior union with God.

Blain also recalls the following anecdote: "A Brother Director complained to him one day that the

Brothers in his charge had no confidence in him. 'It's your fault', he was told. 'Why don't you try to acquire the equanimity that you need so much. The Brothers complain that they never see you even-tempered and generally agree that you look like a prison door' " (CL 8,312).

This was clearly a contrast with the altruistic dispositions of De La Salle and his affable behaviour which drew people and, in particular, children to him. As the same biographer said elsewhere, basing himself on a note a Brother had sent him: "He was never seen angry, never upset, never sad and he rarely laughed. He was always the same" (CL 8,311). That was, after all, his ideal of modesty.

*De La Salle associated the external practices of modesty with the internal practice of remembering the presence of God. In adding the topic of modesty to the Brothers' Rule in 1718, he did not want to minimize the inner motivation for the details of the Brothers' life. This is clearly indicated in the other paragraphs he also added at the beginning of the chapters on the spirit of faith (RC 2,1) and regularity, whose first article recalled the primacy of charity, and article 8, "the internal supports" of the Institute (RC 16,1 & 8).*

*In particular he wanted the Brothers to be motivated in all the small details of their lives by an awareness, or remembrance, of the presence of God in this world, to link their lives and their everyday actions to God's plan for it. From motives of faith and to make their pupils have confidence in them, the Founder wanted the Brothers to have a dignified bearing and to appear self-possessed in their teaching apostolate. In this way, the pupils would respect their teachers and learn as much from their example as from their words.*

#### Complementary themes

Christian teacher

Example - Edification

Humility

Joy

Peace

Retreat

Supports of the Society

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