

89. READING IN FRENCH

Summary

Insert : Quotation from the biographer Jean Baptiste Blain (CL 7,375).

1. The memoir in support of reading in French

1.1.Origin 1.2.“Here they are in substance” 1.3.An introduction to the Lasallian approach to education.

2. First of all, Canon Blain.

3. What kind of world are we living in ?

3.1.The world of the Christian schools 3.2.Experience and usefulness 3.3.The St Yon boarding school.

4. Did you say “inculturation” ?

4.1.The question of meaning 4.2.What purpose does it serve ? 4.3.Barbarians 4.4.Inculturation and acculturation : to possess the world 4.5.An example : the pronunciation of French.

5. The future belongs to them

5.1.In a given society 5.2.Reading and educating oneself in order to live as a Christian.

Instructing, educating, teaching, learning, have all to do with culture. To have learnt one form of language rather than another affects the way in which one assimilates the culture in which one lives and, therefore, one's integration in society, and the degree of mastery and freedom one can attain.

De La Salle and the first Brothers did not shirk this problem. Their practice of making the pupils learn French first in the Christian schools demonstrates their basic attitude towards popular culture and the inculturation successfully promoted by their educational approach.

1. THE MEMOIR IN SUPPORT OF READING IN FRENCH

1.1. Origin

The text (given on a following page) comes from the biography of De La Salle written by Canon Jean Baptiste Blain. It recounts a discussion between De La Salle and the Bishop of Chartres, Mgr Godet des Marets, a friend of the Founder and connected with the court at Versailles. (He was a chaplain in the school

for young noblewomen, and a protégé of Madame de Maintenon).The discussion was about the fact that reading was taught first in French and then in Latin in the Brothers' schools. This was, in fact, a characteristic of Lasallian schools in France up to the 19th century. These were schools for the poor in which pupils learned to read first in French and then in Latin.

1.2. "Here they are in substance"

Did the conversation reported here really take place? Doubtlessly not, for who would have been there to report it? Is it a kind of "memoir" drawn up by De La Salle and used by Blain when writing his biography (as he did in the case of the *Memoir on the Beginnings*)? In any case, Blain does not claim to quote De La Salle literally, since he introduces his text with the words: "Here they are in substance".

1.3. An introduction to the Lasallian approach to education

While Blain clearly makes his own contribution to this document, we can still discern in it many very Lasallian ideas, in particular, those developed at greater length in the *Conduct of the Christian schools*. As it

stands, this memoir is a good introduction to the main characteristics of Lasallian pedagogy.

The author gives ten reasons (nine, in fact) to justify the changes introduced and maintained by De La Salle in his primary schools, especially that of giving French priority over Latin.

This approach reflects some of the main principles behind De La Salle's teachings on the school, instruction and education, and on the role they play in the lives of the children of the artisans and the poor in a given society. It shows how a school can provide a positive response to a certain number of needs experienced by the poor, and how salvation in Jesus Christ involves life as a whole and is not restricted to a consecrated building, but is rooted in daily behaviour that leads to freedom.

2. FIRST OF ALL, CANON BLAIN

Several remarks in the text clearly belong to Blain and not to De La Salle: "Women religious who recite the divine office in Latin really need to be able to read it very well, and yet of the hundred girls who come to the gratuitous schools, there is hardly one who can become a choir Sister in a monastery" (7).

The education of girls and the female religious vocation were not subjects De La Salle dealt with in his writings for the Brothers or the Christian Schools. On the other hand, it is clear that Blain, who was responsible for a community of Sisters, was concerned about this question.

"Finally, experience shows that almost all those who do not understand Latin, who have never studied it and are unable to use it, especially lower class

people and, even more so, the poor who come to the Christian Schools, never know how to read Latin properly, and when they do read it they arouse pity in those who understand this language" (10).

The argument based on aesthetics expressed here is far from being Lasallian. Moreover, De La Salle asked Brothers who had studied Latin before joining the community to forget it. This, of course, did not prevent them from teaching the children to read in Latin when the time came.

On the other hand, a number of Blain's technical comments on the pronunciation of Latin and French agree with what is written in the *Conduct of Christian Schools* (cf. what Br Maurice Auguste says about this text in CL 10,110f).

3. WHAT KIND OF WORLD ARE WE LIVING IN?

3.1. The world of the Christian Schools

What do these children do? What are the concrete circumstances of their lives? Given the existing constraints, in what way can instruction and education help them? The choice of educational priorities must be based on a serious and compassionate view of reality.

And so, the intellectually correct theory — that, since French is derived from Latin, a knowledge of French should be based on a knowledge of Latin — is,

in practice, incorrect. Children are born in a given cultural context: they do not need to go through a process of linguistic ethnology from Latin to French in order to learn their mother tongue and, in the final analysis, to adapt to the world in which they live.

Their world is one in which going to school lasts a very short time because, "in the first place, when they are old enough to work they are withdrawn from school, or they cannot attend any longer because they need to earn their living" (8).

Quotation from the biographer Jean Baptiste Blain

The established practice in the Christian Schools is to begin by teaching the children to read French before teaching them to read Latin. For Mgr Godet des Marets [Bishop of Chartres], this did not seem to be the natural order, and he wished to change it. But M. de La Salle, who had made changes in the past only for very serious reasons, asked the prelate to hear him out, and gave such convincing reasons for the changes he had made, that the prelate agreed. Here they are in substance.

“1. Reading French is much more useful and widespread than reading Latin.

2. Since the French language is their natural tongue, pupils find it incomparably easier to learn than Latin, understanding as they do the first but not the second.

3. As a consequence, much less time is needed to learn to read French than to learn to read Latin.

4. Reading French prepares one to read Latin, but as experience shows, reading Latin is no preparation for reading French. The reason for this is that, in order to read Latin well, it is sufficient to stress all the syllables and to pronounce all the words well. This is easy when one knows how to spell well and read French. It follows, therefore, that persons who can read French well, have no difficulty in learning to read Latin. On the other hand, after having spent a long time learning to read Latin, much time has still to be spent learning to read French.

5. Why does it take a long time to learn to read Latin? It has been said that this is because its words are barbaric for any person who does not understand their meaning, and because it is difficult to remember syllables and to spell correctly words whose meaning one cannot imagine.

7 (*sic*). What is the use of knowing how to read Latin for people who will never use it in their everyday lives? To what use can the boys and girls who attend the Christian and gratuitous schools put their knowledge of Latin? Women religious who recite the divine office in Latin really need to be able to read it very well, and yet of the hundred girls who come to the gratuitous schools, there is hardly one who can become a choir Sister in a monastery. In the same way, out of a hundred boys who attend the Brothers' schools, how many are there who go on to study the Latin language. And if there

were some, would it be right to concentrate on them to the detriment of the others?

8. Experience shows that the boys and girls who attend the Christian Schools soon give up coming, and do not attend long enough to learn to read both French and Latin well. In the first place, when they are old enough to work they are withdrawn from school, or they cannot attend any longer because they need to earn their living. This being so, teaching them first to read Latin has the following consequences: they leave before learning to read French, or to read it well; they leave not knowing how to read Latin particularly well, and soon after, they forget all that they have learnt. As a result, they never learn to read well in either Latin or French. Finally, the most damaging result is that they hardly ever learn Christian doctrine.

9. In fact, when one begins by teaching young people to read French, they at least know how to read it well when they withdraw from the school. Once they know how to read it well they can teach themselves Christian doctrine; they can learn it from printed catechisms; they can make Sundays and feastdays holy by reading good books and by well-composed prayers in the French language. On the other hand, if they leave the Christian and gratuitous schools knowing only how to read Latin, and badly at that, they remain ignorant all their life of the duties of Christianity.

10. Finally, experience shows that almost all those who do not understand Latin, who have never studied it and are unable to use it, especially lower class people and, even more so, the poor who come to the Christian Schools, never know how to read Latin properly, and when they do read it they arouse pity in those who understand this language. It is of no use whatever, therefore, to spend a long time teaching people a language they will never use”.

(CL 7,375)

You need to live with poor people, or at least know their life from close-up, in order to realise something very typical about it: the precarious nature of family resources make it necessary for children to start work at an early age. (See also the *Conduct of the Christian Schools*). Education that wishes to serve young people (and their families) properly must use pedagogical methods and provide courses that take these factors into account.

This is a world also in which people will never use Latin during their lives (7), nor in their family, human, social and professional relationships. We should note the insistence here on life as it really is.

It is the world of the poor who attend the “Christian and gratuitous” schools of the Brothers (7), not to become part in an elite (7), which would leave the social background it knows to do secondary studies and study the Latin language, but rather to obtain solutions to some of their needs. These include learning how to read, write and count, so that they can have a better life in their society, and achieve independence and Christian freedom, the latter, by teaching themselves Christian doctrine (9).

In practice, the children we are speaking of can never stay at school long enough to assimilate the whole programme: “They leave before learning to read French, or to read it well. [...] They never learn to read well in either Latin or French” (8). And so, is it up to these poor children to fit in with existing school structures, or should it be the school that makes a real effort to meet their needs? If a school insists on an elitist view of knowledge — Latin first, then French — it cannot fulfil its mission: “They hardly ever learn Christian doctrine” (8). It is the school that has to change, therefore, if it is to be of use to the poor and not only to a very small minority.

3.2. Experience and usefulness

The author of this memoir uses two expressions which are significant: “as experience teaches us” (4,8,10) and “of what use” (1,7,10).

On the basis of realism and an analysis of needs, choices can be made regarding young people that are both educational and liberating. This is what De La

Salle did. He insisted that the poor children had to begin by learning to read French so that they could have a real chance to achieve freedom. He refused to allow himself to be trapped either in a particular curriculum, or in centuries-old intellectual habits which, in fact, he himself had experienced, or in a set of choices favoured by the intellectual and social elite. For him what was important, was **the needs and the present and future life of the greatest number**.

To be a Lasallian educator is to do practical and liberating things for young people.

3.3. The St Yon boarding school

We see this realism and this priority given to the needs of young people and their families in the approach adopted towards the social category catered for at the “St Yon boarding school” (CL 8,32f).

Here we are no longer dealing with the poor, but with families that are quite well-off, living in the large city of Rouen with its port and commerce, and connected with the leading and dynamic exponents of the French economy, based on the industries, commerce and businesses that had sprung up around the port. These parents wanted their children to follow specific courses: commerce, hydrography, technical drawing (machinery, buildings), accounting, algebra and geometry, foreign languages and, of course, reading and writing. Their life and needs are bound up with the world of the written word, of administrative or commercial documents. All these courses are means to enable them to cope well in their kind of life. They too have no use for Latin, and the Brothers did not include it in the curriculum at St Yon.

Even though the Christian and gratuitous schools and the school at St Yon had their own specific aims and clientele, the former catering for the poor and the latter for an up-and-coming social class of French society, they nevertheless shared important characteristics: **the fact they dealt with the real needs of their pupils and with their future life in society; and their concern to put them into contact with what was modern, and to give them access to it, at whatever level.**

4. DID YOU SAY “INCULTURATION” ?

What we have been saying about learning to read in French first is really all to do with *inculturation*, in the very modern sense of the word.

To what culture does education give access ? Is this education organised in a way that is in harmony with this culture ? What are the fundamental values of the social background concerned and how can they be made a part of one's life ? Does education make it possible at the same time to consider contact with other cultures, to establish inter-cultural dialogue ?

4.1. The question of meaning

Language is at the heart of every culture and therefore also at the heart of inculturation. In practice, does it bring you into contact with a certain number of values and enable you to adopt them ? and go beyond them ? Does this culture and, consequently, this language, help you to understand the world better ? to make it exist in a way that you can take possession of it, something all mankind is called to do ?

The author of this *Memoir on learning French* does not express himself in these terms, of course, but it is clear that these are the questions he is asking and the answers he is proposing.

The first point he makes is that **the mother tongue can give access to life**: “Reading French is much more useful and widespread than reading Latin” (1). Since the French language is their natural tongue, pupils understand it while they do not understand Latin (2).

It is worth noting here the modern stress on meaning in the questions that are posed: Understanding or not understanding (2), understanding the sense, imagining the meaning (5); Does the language (culture) we acquire at and through the school give us access to the meaning of life, to make it part of our consciousness and personality ? Does this language enable us to orientate ourselves in this world and to interpret it ?

He bases himself on his personal observation of the methods used to teach Latin and French, and on the results they produce: “Reading French prepares one to read Latin, but as experience shows, reading Latin is no preparation for reading French. The reason for this is that, in order to read Latin well, it is sufficient to stress all the syllables and to pronounce

all the words well. This is easy when one knows how to spell well and read French. It follows, therefore, that persons who can read French well, have no difficulty in learning to read Latin. On the other hand, after having spent a long time learning to read Latin, much time has still to be spent learning to read French” (4).

4.2. What purpose does it serve ?

The other point he deals with is the usefulness of learning, and he links it with effectiveness. What purpose does it serve ? Its aim is not to provide a purely utilitarian education, but to ensure that this education attains its goal, that is, to enable young people to cope with the kind of life that awaits them, and to provide them with the means to be able to do so.

Being able to read French is very useful because it is “more widespread” (1), it is “easier” (2), and faster to learn (3). It can lead to other things: being able to read French is “a good basis for learning to read Latin” (4). On the other hand, there are problems about learning to read Latin: there is no real motive to do so (7), and it is of no use to most people. It is “of no use” whatever, therefore, to spend a long time teaching people to read a language well when they will never use it (10).

4.3. Barbarians

The remark in paragraph 5 shows clearly that inculturation is involved here: because “its words are barbaric for any person who does not understand their meaning”. We have here an inversion of conventional cultural values: the civilised language, that of clerics and classical authors is called barbaric, because it has no meaning for the common people.

4.4. Inculturation and acculturation : to possess the world

Any process of inculturation in education has its starting point in reality and seeks to restore (or give) meaning to reality. Educating means enabling young people to discover by themselves the meaning of the world. This process seeks to ensure that what is learnt is both effective and useful, especially when there is urgency involved. One of the characteristics of true

inculturation is its capacity to break down frontiers. Language is one of the means which gives access to meaning.

The effectiveness of this educational process of inculturation in Lasallian schools was reinforced by both the rigour and coherence of their approach regarding school structures, discipline, training of teachers, and by the standards that were pursued in reading, writing, arithmetic. The overall aim was to respond to the practical needs of artisan and poor families.

The Christian schools of De La Salle were characterised by the dual process of inculturation and acculturation. As the children began to understand and learn about their world — inculturation — they also became a part of the dominant culture, that of the social elite — acculturation —. This latter process has to do with social attitudes, relations, behaviour, food, etc... and is treated, in particular and at some length, in the *Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness*.

The result for these children and young people was a new self-image and a new view of the world, which engendered self-esteem and energy. Finally, they were given back access to their own culture and the real possibility of understanding it better and extending it.

In the world of De La Salle social changes took place very slowly, assimilation was spread over a longer period, and the risk of distortion was much less than it is today. Such factors enabled the children of the poor to take their place once again in the history of their country and, in their turn, play an active part, as is illustrated by the French Revolution.

4.5. An example : the pronunciation of French

De La Salle speaks of linguistic matters — an important aspect of culture — in the *Conduct of Christian Schools*, chapter 3, entitled “Of Lessons”, and in the *Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness*, chapter 9, entitled “Of Speech and Pronunciation”.

The chapter in the *Conduct* describes the process of learning to read in the Christian school, beginning with the alphabet and syllables, moving on to reading the *Book of Psalms* in Latin, and ending with the *Rules of Propriety* and manuscripts.

This chapter seems to be purely technical : it deals with the most effective means for children to master

reading in French. The aim, however, is to make the children learn and practise all the rules of French pronunciation, and to pronounce French perfectly. (CL 24,35 = CE 3,6,5) This perfect pronunciation is that of the leading citizens of society. At the other end of the scale there is the bad country accent which should be lost (CL 24,27 = CE 3,2,16).

The inculturation involved in learning to read — understanding what one is reading, reading more quickly — is accompanied by acculturation. New habits and new ways of speaking have to be acquired. The children enter a new world, characterised in particular by the control of one’s body :

- The person reading should open his mouth wide,
- he should not pronounce his letters through his teeth,
- he should speak neither too fast nor too slowly,
- without an affected tone,
- in a natural tone.

It is worth asking ourselves what is meant by a “natural pronunciation”. One of the tasks the *Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness* sets itself is to promote natural behaviour. What is meant here is behaviour in which the body is controlled by reason. This is the classical view of nature : nature is submissive, organised, regulated and mastered.

The careful pronunciation of French is none other than that of the court, adopted in the towns by the elite : the nobility, intellectuals, bourgeoisie, administrators and clergy. It is a sign that a person belongs to the dominant social group.

In a certain way, Lasallian education is subversive because it tends to blur the boundaries separating the classes, if not the castes, which were so important at the time. If a poor person can speak like a duke, how can you tell who is a duke and who is a poor person ?

The acquisition of this pronunciation also gave access to some of the practices of the emerging new society. By cutting out having to go through Latin, De La Salle prepares his children to enter directly into the world that counts and will count even more in the future : that of the leading citizens of towns who can read, write and express themselves clearly.

The *Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness* begin by speaking of pronunciation in purely physiological and even mechanical terms, referring to the mouth, lips, teeth and tongue as instruments to be used in elocution.

Very quickly, however, moral attitudes and psychological judgment are introduced as governing factors: one should not say a single word hastily or thoughtlessly; persons with lively temperaments find it difficult to pronounce well; speaking correctly, that is, in a soft and calm tone of voice, without shouting, without harshness, makes a person seem respectable and benevolent (CL 19,28 = RB 109,1,85f).

The opposite of this educated pronunciation is to be found in a number of unsuitable ways of speaking:

- "Changing the tone of voice like a preacher, lowering the voice at the end of words, changing the pronunciation of letters.
- Speaking in a way that is feeble, slow and languid, as if one were complaining. This denotes a certain flabbiness and languor, a normal and acceptable defect in a woman.
- Speaking in a rough and uncouth way. Peasants speak in this way.
- Speaking in a high-pitched and rapid manner"
(CL 19,30f = RB 109,1,92f).

It is interesting to note, *en passant*, De La Salle's prejudice against women and peasants. It reflects his social class which could be defined as being ecclesiastical, male, antifeminist and town-dwelling.

At the end of chapter 9, we are given a description of good French pronunciation which is very much the hallmark of a particular culture: "French pronunciation must be simultaneously firm, quiet and pleasant. In order to learn how to pronounce well, one ought to begin by speaking little, saying each word separately, without hurrying, pronouncing all the syllables and all the words" (CL 19,32 = RB 109,1,95).

This definition reflects a passage in the *Conduct of Schools* (CL 24,35 = CE 3,6,5). This passage refers to a type of behaviour typical of a social category far removed from that of the working classes: "Above all, one should converse normally only with persons who speak purely and pronounce well" (RB 109,1,95).

5. THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THEM

5.1. In a given society

What happens when young people who have learnt to read French well leave school (9)? What does the future hold for them?

School is not an end in itself. When you go to it, it is in order to be able to leave it. School is not for the personal satisfaction of teachers and parents, nor to keep up educational or other standards: its purpose is to put the future within the reach of the youngsters.

In the course of this educational process, those at the receiving end play an active part themselves. They are the builders of their own cathedral, for the first form of freedom is learning to be free.

In 17th and 18th century France, society as a whole expressed, understood and fulfilled itself through a certain way of practising the religion of Jesus Christ: all aspects of social life were imbued with Catholicism, and schools prepared their pupils for this society.

5.2. Reading and educating oneself in order to live as a Christian

Paragraph 9 gives the young people of the 17th century an outline of this society. It indicates also how what they have learnt at school enables them to be at ease in this world and to build themselves a solid future in it.

It is a Christian society, in which the catechism and Christian doctrine are determining factors when one becomes part of society, in which Sundays and feasts are kept holy, and in which personal prayer exists and one understands what one is saying. Hence the importance of knowing French.

Understanding Christian doctrine in all its purity is essential in this society — involving a risk of intellectualism, one might add. For this is needed the ability to read well so as to instruct oneself from "good books" (9) and learn the "duties of Christianity" (9). One such good book was the *Duties of a Christian*, a catechism composed by De La Salle. It proposed a

series of practical attitudes and behavioural patterns, and included religious teachings which were the basis of both Christian life and the life of society as a whole.

It should be added that what was proposed by these duties of a Christian and these catechisms was in no

way childish. It invited a person to look upon all facets of his life, his relationship with God, and his social, family and professional relationships from a Christian point of view. It is a book of life for one's whole life.

Learning a language gives young people a means of understanding the life that surrounds them, through a process of open inculturation. It enables them to take their own life in hand, and to take their place in a society in which they are responsible for their own lives and independence. Education offers a way of achieving this.

Helping young people to become free calls for a true process of liberation which lies in a future still to be built. In Lasallian terms we can express this as follows: "To be true cooperators with Jesus Christ for the salvation of children" (MR 196,title), or "To procure for them the means of salvation appropriate to their development" (MR 193,3).

Complementary themes

Child - pupil - disciple

Conduct of the Christian Schools

Conversations

Decorum

Instruction - to instruct

School

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