



01-A-05

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

These words have become familiar to us, but the title was strange and literally unheard of when de La Salle and a few schoolmasters from Rheims adopted it in order to identify themselves.

1) BROTHERS:

Men conscious of living in a brotherhood. "They shall be called by the name of Brothers and shall not allow themselves to be called otherwise," wrote de La Salle at the beginning of the first edition of the Rules.

Not allow whom to call them otherwise? First of all, those with whom they live, confreres and pupils; then those whom they meet normally, the parents of the pupils; finally all others who may be allowed or forbidden. If an unknown person calls me "padre" or even "monsignor" I cannot forbid him.

Signification. then and now: We must often reflect on what the choice of this title meant three hundred years ago and what it should still mean to-day. Very early on, we do not know exactly when, the schoolmasters grouped around de La Salle recognised themselves as "brothers." They did not have to invent the word but they recognised that it expressed the reality they were living.

In community: it meant taking the name "brothers" and really living as brothers with all that implied of evangelical sharing, mutual help and support, close union and collaboration in the exercise of the apostolate.

In class: it meant being called "brother" by the pupils and being truly a brother to them. De La Salle had wanted the relationship between master and pupil to be just that; not primarily a relationship of authority and paternity, still less a relationship of superiority, but, above all, one of fraternity.

The humble origins of the first companions of this man of noble family, as de La Salle was, have often been pointed out. The respect and affection with which the Founder addressed each of his disciples, especially in his letters, are very significant: "I am, my very dear Brother, yours," he writes to each one of them.

2) CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

The Facts: In seventeenth century France the Church controlled practically all the schools so they could be called "Christian." In fact they were known under various names: little schools, parochial schools, charitable schools, charity schools. There were, also, special schools known as schools of Christian doctrine where only catechism was taught.

When they wanted to characterise the schools they had charge of de La Salle and the Brothers preferred to talk of Christian schools. So much was this the case that these two words came to designate, without question, their schools as distinct from others.

Outsiders, even high ranking prelates, often wrote "of Christian Doctrine" or even "of the Schools of Christian Doctrine." The Brothers, themselves, never used those expressions.

Their schools were gratuitous but they were not charity schools. The latter could only admit the children of poor families, to the exclusion of all others. They were not parochial schools where the poor were admitted free but the rich had to pay. Christian they were from the start, open to all, free to all, rich and poor alike. They were Christian, above all, in their teaching, organisation and methods, which were focused on leading the children, who attended them, to live "as true disciples of Jesus Christ."

3) BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

De La Salle gave St. Joseph and St. Cassian as patrons to his Institute. Neither he nor his disciples ever called themselves Brothers of St. Joseph or Brothers of St. Cassian. The Founder wanted his Brothers to be particularly devout to the Child Jesus and to the Most Blessed Virgin but he did not suggest that they be called Brothers of the Child Jesus or Brothers of Our Lady.

They were sometimes called "Brothers of Saint Yon" from the property where the Mother House then was. The Brothers, themselves, never used that title.

Before them there were the Society of Jesus, the Congregation of Jesus and Mary and many others. In their own day they saw the founding of the Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of Notre-Dame, the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus...

Patrons and devotions were not to define the disciple of John Baptist de La Salle but his mission as Christian educator and, even more precisely, the privileged field of his apostolate. The Brother is a catechist, but in a school. He is not only a catechist. His ministry as Christian educator requires a meeting place where, each day, for long hours, he shares the life of the pupils: that place is the school.

In 1690, when he had to defend himself before the ecclesiastical Superiors of Paris on the question of the habit adopted by the Brothers, de La Salle was not afraid to reaffirm the uniqueness of a creation which he, himself, defined as "The Community of the Christian Schools" and its members as "The Brothers of the Christian Schools"! In the Paris of three hundred years ago it took no little courage to dare do that!

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As a supplement to this leaflet it may be of interest to reproduce the first chapter of the "Rules" of 1705 where the Founder and his first Brothers defined themselves and their role.

1) The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a Society in which profession is made of keeping schools gratuitously. The members of this Institute shall call themselves by the name of Brothers and they shall not allow themselves to be called otherwise.

2) They cannot be priests nor aspire to the ecclesiastical state or wear the surplice or exercise any function in the church.

3) The end of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children: It is for this purpose the Brothers keep schools, that, having the children under their care from morning to evening they may teach them to lead good lives by instructing them in the mysteries of our holy religion and by inspiring them with Christian maxims and thus give them a suitable education.

4) The necessity of this Institute is very great because artisans and the poor being usually little instructed and being occupied all day in gaining a living for themselves and their families, cannot give their children the needed instruction or a suitable education. It is, therefore, necessary that others take the place of father and mother so that the children may be instructed in the mysteries of religion and the principles of a Christian life.

5) It was to procure this advantage for the children of artisans and the poor that the Christian Schools were established.

6) All disorders, especially among artisans and the poor, usually arise from their having been, in childhood, left to themselves and badly brought up. It is almost impossible to repair this evil at a more advanced age because the bad habits they have acquired are overcome only with great difficulty and scarcely ever entirely no matter what care may be taken to destroy them whether by frequent instructions or the use of the sacraments. As the principal fruit to be expected from the institution of the Christian Schools is to forestall these disorders and prevent their evil consequences, it is easy to conceive the importance of such schools and their necessity."