

INTRODUCTION

In the history of the foundation of the Institute we note that the majority of texts written by St. J.B. de La Salle date from 1700. It seems that, after 20 years of research and experimentation, the Founder and the first Brothers felt the need to formulate their common experience.

Thus it is that about 1705, *The Rule*, *The Meditations for the Time of Retreat* and *the Management of Schools* appear almost simultaneously. It is, therefore, an important moment in the self-awareness of the Institute and in its consolidation.

To read *the Management of Schools* to-day requires a complete intellectual displacement. We must continually keep in mind that it was written for primary school teachers, concerned with giving a basic education in schools entirely staffed by Brothers.

The evolution of education and pedagogy, the diversification of the scholastic and educational commitment of the Brothers, the co-operation of Brothers and lay teachers in the same tasks, the geographic expansion of the Institute to varied cultures and educational systems, all emphasise the "strangeness" of *the Management of Schools* to our twentieth century mentality.

We must, consequently take an overall view of a text which is characterised by an obvious concern for precision and detail. But under the rather off-putting surface of the text we find orientations and educational insights of astonishing richness and of singular relevance to our own time. It is these educative insights which give sense and coherence to the "ministry" of the Brothers which is so well synthesised in *"Meditations for the Time of Retreat"*.

1) THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS: PART OF THE PEDAGOGICAL MOVEMENT OF THE TIME

We know, especially after the Lasallian studies of the past twenty-five years, that de La Salle organised the Brothers' schools in the educational context of the late 17th century, that is, in an era of increasing concern for popular education. By his training and his contacts de La Salle was well aware of previous efforts in this field and of what was being done at the time of the foundation of the Brothers' Congregation.

His biographers and historians of education have shown the influence that Charles Démia, Nicolas Barré and Nicolas Roland had on him. From the point of view solely of schools it would be interesting to study the resemblances between *the Management of Schools* and such works as: *"The Parochial School"* or the *"Remonstrances"* of Charles Démia, or the ideas stirred up by *"La Lettre"* of Deacon Paccory. *The Management of Schools* shared, therefore, the educational concepts widespread in society or explicitly formulated at the beginning of the 18th century.

At the same time, its content is coherent with the particular end of the Foundation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. It is meant for schools which admitted the children of artisans and the poor — children who must be saved while, at the same time, receiving instruction and serious training.

2) MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS: A PROFESSIONAL GUIDE

"The Management of Schools was written in the form of regulations only after a great number of conferences with the Brothers of the Institute who were the most senior and best qualified to conduct schools, and after the experience of a number of years. Nothing was included which had not been agreed on and well tested, advantages and disadvantages weighed and the consequences, good or bad, foreseen as far as was possible." (*Manuscript of 1706 - Extract from the preface*)

The Management was written with the aim of helping the Brothers in their daily task of instructing children. Other texts and studies of de La Salle have shown how anxious he was that his schools should be successful. That preoccupation is evident in the Management of Schools and dictates the choice of methods of work and the system of organisation there presented.

Why such a guide?

- Because teaching is a noble task. For the Brothers of the Christian Schools it is a "ministry". To be convinced of this one has only to read the last two paragraphs of the foreword to the Meditations for the Time of Retreat. Here de La Salle quotes St. Jerome, St. Gregory, St. Protogenus, St. Cassian and the Chancellor of the University, Gerson, as illustrious forerunners of the Brothers in this ministry.

- Because the Brother must not separate "his employment from his state of life". It is in and through the school that the Brother fulfills his mission. He must bring to his daily task the same seriousness, the same conscientiousness as to the spiritual exercises which regulate the life of the Community.

- Because the Brothers must be effective in their work the Management of Schools gives them the means. Effectiveness means the success of the pupils. That is only natural. But we know that de La Salle reminds the Brothers:

- that it is the poor who should benefit by their work,
- that their modest or poor condition does not permit the waste of school time,
- that progress in their studies is the guarantee of their future.

The corollary to this concern for efficiency is the importance given by de La Salle to the formation of future Masters or young Brothers.

A professional guide to what?

To understand the importance and necessity of the directions given in the Management of Schools we must put ourselves in the context in which it was written. Essentially it was at a time when popular education in France had just begun. It was still at the initial stage. Brothers and schoolmasters had to be pioneers in many respects. They had to organise their classes so as to reconcile collective teaching with the needs of the individual pupil. They had to introduce the teaching of reading in French instead of in Latin...

The Management of Schools mentions the introduction of training in new subjects so as better to prepare the pupils for social and professional life: for example, legal documents such as wills, contracts etc. required in daily life.

These few reminders explain the need for a complete and precise text on the organisation of classes, methods of teaching and the working tools of the teacher etc.

3) THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS: A GUIDE TO OUR MINISTRY

Teaching in a Brothers' school was not just a matter of practising a profession. The Brothers were not just a new "Corporation" like the "Writing Masters or the "Masters of the Little Schools". Besides instructing the children, the Brothers were concerned for their salvation. They exercised a ministry. This was their real *raison d'être*.

The Management, therefore, gave an important place to all the daily activities which could help directly in the salvation of the children:

- Good example — to-day we would call it witness — which the Brother should give to the pupils in his conduct.

- The acts of piety which punctuated the school day for the class: prayer in common, recalling the holy presence of God, the morning reflection, recitation of the rosary.
- Assistance at Mass in the parish church.
- Daily catechism lesson.
- The choice of edifying texts in the teaching of reading.

There was no ambiguity as to the Christian orientation of the Brothers' school. Here again we encounter the general thinking of the time. In a country where Catholicism was the State religion it was essential that children be taught the mysteries of religion and the truths of the Catholic faith. Other sects, even Christian ones, had had no legal existence for a number of years.

The Brother and the Master share in God's universal plan of salvation. They are workers in the cause and are given a great responsibility in what concerns the children's salvation. They will have to render an account on the Day of Judgement. That responsibility is all the greater when it concerns "children of artisans and the poor" because they are generally "farther from salvation". We recognise in these expressions the themes developed by de La Salle in "Meditations for the Time of Retreat".

4) THE MAIN EDUCATIONAL LINES OF MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS

If we go beyond the letter of the text, the impression of uniformity and repetitiveness and the feeling of constraint it conveys to the modern mind and if we try to place it in the context of the period, then we can discern in the Management of Schools the main educational lines that guided de La Salle and the first Brothers in their schools. These orientations can surprise by their richness and their modernity. Here are some of the more obvious ones:

• Priority of the Person

The text of the Management of Schools brings us back time and again to the child, to his needs, his personality, his behaviour, his character, his future, his surroundings, whether family, parochial or social.

This attention to the children is all the more evident when it is a question of "poor" children, that is, of those whose families live in difficult conditions without help from anyone. For them the schools plays an essential and effective role in supplying the deficiencies of the home.

The priority given to children demands availability, attention and presence on the part of the Brother or Master and great flexibility in the organisation of the school and the class. A revealing detail is the provision of a supernumerary teacher so that the pupils are never without a teacher if the Brother or Master is absent or ill.

• An all round formation

The text of the Management of Schools reveals a concurrent concern for: Scholastic formation: acquisition of the indispensable rudiments of reading, writing, arithmetic and knowledge of legal documents required in ordinary life.

— Training in a trade, as far as was possible at the time, to prepare for life after school and to give the pupil a better chance in the struggle to earn a living.

— Doctrinal formation through knowledge of the mysteries of religion and revealed Truth. Insistence on this aspect of religion is explained by the controversies of the period: Jansenism, Quietism, Gallicanism.

— The acquisition of good habits. It is not enough to have an abstract knowledge of the truths of religion. We must form good habits of conduct.

• In an atmosphere of close personal relationships

Concern for the Brother's relations with the family, the parish and the area in which the pupil lives, is everywhere evident. To this is added concern for the Brother's relations with the pupils in class. Here, for example, are some of the usual recommendations:

- Effective attention of the Brother to each pupil through constant vigilance.
- Reception of the pupil and parents at the time of enrolment so as to get to know the family.
- Importance attached to mutual respect among the pupils and between teachers and pupils.

- Importance of good example on the part of teachers and pupils alike.
- Practical mutual help in lessons and work.
- Personal relationship even in correction so that it may be understood, accepted and, therefore, effective.
- Retention of some pupils during lessons when their presence is beneficial to the group even though they are capable of promotion to higher grades.

All these provisions are aimed at creating and sustaining mutual affection among all, pupils and teachers. The Brother is asked to love all his pupils tenderly. The reciprocal affection of the pupils is the best indication of the good order and progress of a class. In this way is a "fraternal" school created.

• A pupil centred school

Historians of education in France have stressed the contribution of de La Salle and the Brothers to simultaneous or collective teaching. This risks giving a deformed image of the Brothers' schools at the beginning of the 18th century. In reality the Management of Schools describes a school where Brothers or Masters:

- give to each pupil, in each subject, work adapted to his age, his knowledge, his progress and even to his character;
- maintain great flexibility in school structures and organisation so as to permit the admission of pupils in the course of the school year, change of lessons at appropriate times for the pupils, special holidays for certain among them and varying times for beginning and ending school according to circumstances;
- form heterogeneous classes for pupils of different levels of attainment or "lessons". The latter term meant "learning units" in different subjects.

This is far from the image of the monolithic class. Thanks to sub-divisions in reading, writing arithmetic etc. each pupil could find the work adapted to his ability and rhythm — a program made to measure.

CONCLUSION

It is not a question of attempting an exaggerated exegesis of the Management of Schools. The text, as we have seen, owes much to previous or contemporary thinking, as is often the case in the history of educational currents or ideas.

But the concepts formulated in the Management of Schools made possible the creation of a school adapted to the needs of the time and especially to those of the poor. This is what accounted for the success of the Brothers' schools and drew large numbers of pupils to them.

What is more important to us to-day, wherever we work, is to understand and follow the procedure which produced the Management of Schools at the beginning of the 18th century. This procedure may be summed up as:

- attention, awareness and openness to the needs of the child;
- analysis of those needs;
- trying out concrete suggestions in answer to those needs;
- consultation in order to find out the best answers;
- rationalisation and development of effective positive answers.

This is what the first Brothers did and the preface to the Management of Schools, quoted above, bears it out. If "Meditations for the Time of Retreat" is the theological synthesis of the Brothers' ministry, the Management of Schools is, if we may say so, the description of its daily application.

By the method of its composition and application it illustrates perfectly the expression contained in the formula of vows of the Brothers since the beginning, "Together and by association".

Brother Léon Lauraire, FSC
Director of the Central
Education Office
Casa Generalizia - ROME