



THE SCHOOL OF ST. J-B DE LA SALLE (1): INTRODUCTION

04-C-13

EDUCATOR AND SAINT

He was certainly not an educator first and a saint afterwards. A master of pedagogy, he was also a past master in the art of guiding souls in the ways of the Spirit. Yet for more than two hundred years he has been better known as an educator than as an ascetical writer.

"If we did not dwell at some length on his educational achievements we would fail to understand fully the man and would, in fact, overlook the most original characteristic of his sanctity, and that which has made his influence so widespread" (1).

De La Salle was a born director, a sure guide, an organiser who could bring to fruition the precise ideas conceived by a lucid mind. Wherever he went, he left things in order and did away with routine. He was a creative genius well in advance of his time.

Rigault makes clear the attitude of de La Salle when he undertook to have Nyel's foundations in Rheims accepted: "The first step, by no means timid, but circumspect, of the future organiser of primary education" (2).

His role did not consist in sitting in a classroom teaching children though he did this occasionally (3). That does not prevent us from recognizing in him a man who had an outstanding knowledge of people and knew how to make himself acceptable to them. He had a perfect understanding of the human heart. On one occasion he remarked that he had only to hear a person speak a few words to know what that person was. His manner of governing the Brothers and the psychological notes he has left us in his writings show that he knew how to handle people.

We can more easily imagine the saint in an attitude of prayer than as a traveller and writer. He was an extraordinarily active man who had to impose on himself a rigid spiritual programme for the days when he found it impossible to pray with the community (4).

The day was not long enough for de La Salle, he needed hours of the night for writing (5). He has left us almost three thousand pages of writings in which we find an almost equal proportion of ascetical elements and of those of a pedagogical or educational nature.

Rather than by observing or copying other educationalists or religious legislators, de La Salle drew his inspiration from the experiences lived each day both by himself and by the community, reflecting in each line the limpidity of his soul, his exigent and practical mind in regard to himself and others which sought to lead people to the transcendent but also wanted them to live it in the present.

He undertook nothing without invoking the light of the Holy Spirit so that his Meditations are for the teacher a manual for action and, at the same time, a spiritual guide which aims at forming his spiritual personality at the deepest level.

His teachings are well thought out and expressed in precise terms with the aim of strengthening the Brother in his vocation as a teacher. It is the father encouraging his son. De La Salle has no doubt that in forming the souls of his disciples he is at the same time forging the spirit of the Christian school. What preoccupies our Founder is the desire to see the school "well conducted". (An expression already well-known in Lasallian circles.) This meant that it should be:

- a source of edification by the competent way in which it was run,
- attractive to the pupils,
- a place of formation for the minds and hearts of children,
- a place of preparation for life and in the art of living,
- concerned to form children in the faith and to good habits.

Lastly, de La Salle shows his interest in the success of the school by his insistence on the constancy of the teachers. In his writings, as in his life, de La Salle does not try to attract attention to himself by making a lot of noise. On the contrary, he gently influences our minds and souls as we gradually enter into dialogue with him (7).

His style is that of clear reasoning which draws its conclusions from lived experience. He wants us to be saints as well as good educators, prepared to die, if necessary, in the service of our ministry (8).

DE LA SALLE. A MAN OF HIS TIME (9)

We cannot, of course, ask de La Salle to solve all the problems of today for us. He is neither an oracle to give an answer to every question nor a yoke to carry on our shoulders as a burden we must bear.

A man of his time, he bears the marks of the paths he has trodden. Nevertheless, he has had inspirations of a universal character and we must recognize that, in his capacity as Founder, God intervened in his life for the good of the Society he was called upon to found. He had other inspirations limited to the era in which he lived, to its culture and to the places where he carried on his work: regulations, influences, recommendations in his letters, etc.

We recognise the universal inspiration which goes beyond time and place when:

- he speaks of the spirit of the Institute, the spirit of faith and the spirit of zeal,
- he bases our whole life on personal and community piety,
- as master of the spiritual life, he recommends the presence of God as a means of tending to perfection,
- he points out that Christian education aims at the development of an evangelical attitude in the person involved in and with society,
- as an eminent educator he tells us to transmit a deep human culture as a basis for the formation of a Christian personality (10).

We are invited today to return to the sources, not to copy slavishly, but to discover what were the principal forces and motivations which caused him to act and which constituted the leaven which permeated his work which was destined to spread throughout the world. That means possessing within ourselves the charism of the Founder.

Our Declaration leads us along this path when it urges each one of us to make the spiritual principles which inspired our Founder part of his own life.

De La Salle was in advance of his time in many respects. By penetrating himself with the spirit of the Gospel he sought and found man in what he has of the eternal.

"M. de La Salle? He is a volunteer of progress, of continuity of development, an enemy of school segregation, a pioneer of learning through French, of personalized education and of monthly evaluation" (11). "It was in thinking about the progress that could be made that he broke with routine and brought to perfection methods which had been employed before his time" (12).

NOTES

- (1) Ravelet: St. J-B de La Salle, p. 345 (an article by Rigault added to the biography)
- (2) Rigault: General History of the Institute, T. 1, p. 345.
- (3) The Saint had taught class in Rheims, Grenoble, Avignon and Vans (cf. Rigault, T. 1, pp. 366 and 374).
- (4) "Rules which I imposed on myself" (Cahiers Lasalliens, No. 8, p. 319).
- (5) Brother Bernard (Cahiers Lasalliens, No. 4, p. 20).
- (6) Rigault, T. 1, pp. 329 and 549).
- (7) Luis Diumenge: El Amor en la Doctrina de San J-B de La Salle San Pio X, 1971, p. 43).
- (8) Meditation, No. 155 (St. Cassian).
- (9) Cf. Diumenge, p. 43. Sauvage: Catechèse et Laïcité, p. 47.
- (10) Discourse of Brother Superior General at opening of General Chapter, 1976.
- (11) Léon de Marie Aroz, Cahiers Lasalliens, No. 40/1, p. 6.
- (12) Rigault, T. 1, p. 541. Refer to Management of Schools. Rigault mentions this, p. 562 and following pages.

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