



04-C-14

THE SCHOOL OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE (2) A school for the most needy

DE LA SALLE, A MAN FOR OTHERS

For de La Salle the service of the poor was not just an ideal but a way of life. He experienced in his own flesh what it was to be poor and to be treated as such. He made himself poor: a man available to others.

To become so he had had to renounce his canonry, dispose of his property — something not done at the time, according to Blain — and subject himself to community life for some forty years.

De La Salle had not far to go to meet the poor: he had them with him in the person of the Brothers. He had to begin with a rescue operation: rescuing them from ignorance and from the contempt in which schoolmasters were then held; settling them in their employment and inspiring them with love for their vocation as teachers.

Besides poverty of spirit he also experienced poverty in his body. In Vaugirard they had scarcely enough to eat. That house has remained the prototype of extreme want and of the most generous fervour. The Brothers lived joyfully in almost absolute poverty. They were following in the footsteps of a real giant of holiness and generosity of spirit. The saint had no need to urge the Brothers on, he had rather to restrain them. Some of them died young. The local people called the house the "little Trappist Monastery" (2).

In this climate of detachment and fervour the Brothers did not consider the words of their father exaggerated when he told them, "You are obliged by your state in life to love the poor since the task you have is to devote yourselves to teaching them" (3).

De La Salle always sought to take the most perfect path in order to do what was most pleasing to God. The voice he listened to was not that of the flesh or of nature but that of the Spirit who manifested himself in the calls made on him: priests who joined him, missions he preached, the reform school he opened at Saint Yon at the request of his friend, M. de Pontcarré. Louis XIV himself, who saw in the organization of primary education a powerful instrument for combatting Protestantism, sought the help of de La Salle whom he aided, for his part, by according him a form of protection and official recognition. His successor granted the Letters Patent later (4).

Much is said today about protecting the worker, about living among the people... Nobody took as great an interest in the people as did de La Salle. He must be ranked amongst those who tried to rescue the children of the poorest classes from the abject situation in which they lived. One of his principal preoccupations was to prepare them for a stable employment which would enable them to make a living. The instrument he used to attain this end was the provision of popular education to which all had access. In addition he provided secondary education at Saint Yon for the children of the better-off.

If he established boarding schools (the first was in Guise) and if his disciples opened more later on, they did so with a view to supporting free schools for the poor.

THE BROTHERS WERE FOUNDED TO TEACH THE POOR

The words "poor", "poverty", "indigence" abound in the vocabulary of de La Salle throughout his writings. Poverty is a constant preoccupation with him.

He wanted and he established free schools. That does not mean that the poor alone attended them. They were open to all. Nevertheless, as we read in the Rules, it was the poor, above all, who were to fill the classes.

That meant: the sons of workers who, though employed, had no professional qualifications (artisans) or worse still, the poor who had no steady work and had to be content with casual labour (5).

Those who attended the Brothers' schools were the children of the poorer classes. By improving the profession of teaching and teaching methods, while at the same time giving the school a "soul", the master, de La Salle, created among the sons of the workers and their families a current of hope which enabled them to face life with a degree of optimism.

Throughout the Institute we have heard anew the unanimous voice of the Brothers (and it is a sign of vitality) demanding that their lives be dedicated to the most needy, putting them, as did de La Salle, at the centre of the work in which they are engaged.

The Regional Chapter of Spain and our own District Chapter, in their reports and proposals, are in complete accord with this general feeling, when they define, with precision and in the spirit of the Declaration, those amongst us who are the poor and most needy today.

Here is how they define them: Today's poor are the people who live their lives on the fringe of society, those without work, those who work for a wage which does not cover basic family needs. The poor are those who live in inhuman conditions of poverty, hunger, violence, illness, social emargination, or who are physically or mentally handicapped. These are the people who have particular need of our assistance (7).

We work for the most needy when:

- we teach backward pupils who have little ability;
- we try to raise the cultural level of parents;
- we try to find jobs for school leavers so that they may continue to lead the Christian lives begun at school;
- we give of our time, our strength and our person to make up for the lack of parental love and understanding and of faith (8);
- we want to speed up adaptation of our collective life style to the material standards of the milieu in which we work and of the educational establishments of which we have charge (9);
- we share our goods with others;
- we encourage the elite groups which we direct to make common cause with with the poor and promote the training of: urban and rural leaders, social organizers and animators, trades union leaders among the workers.

Our documents evidently follow the lines of the Founder's charism. However, the fact of having a clear vision of the ideal does not necessarily mean that we completely identify with it. What has changed in our way of acting is perhaps that we are unwilling to give up the comforts and security that modern life offers. Materialism has influenced us.

We find it easier to talk for an hour about the poor and their needs than to endure their presence for fifteen minutes. We must begin by living the reality of each day with a heart and spirit poor in the sight of God and in the presence of others. Let us follow the example of God who acts gratuitously, bestowing His gifts on us in abundance and with generosity. In school the Brother co-operates with God in revealing Him to his pupils and in being, himself, a GIFT to them.

NOTES

- (1) Blain, T. 1, p. 216 (CL 7).
- (2) Rigault, T. 1, p. 254.
- (3) Meditation 173,1.
- (4) Role of Louis XIV, Boarding school for Irish boys. Calais school for sailors' sons and sailors on shore. At Boulogne-sur-mer he gave them land to build a school. Prison established at Saint Yon. Cf. Blain, T. 11, p. 71 and T. 1, p. 367. Rigault, T. 1, p. 41 and T. 5, pp. 267-273.
- (5) Poutet Y., T. 1, p. 105.
- (6) Declaration, 28,2-3; 28,1; 13,4; 31,6; 34,4.
- (7) Boletín de la Asistencia, No. 60, pp. 263ss (1975).
- (8) Rules 86.
- (9) Declaration, 49,1.
- (10) Rules, 6bc.
- (11) Declaration, 31,6.
- (12) Meditation 196, 197.

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