

**THE LASALLIAN SCHOOL (4):
A place of interpersonal relations
and pupil participation**

1. THE SCHOOL: A CHRISTIAN AND HUMAN COMMUNITY

De La Salle was a man of his time. For that reason his pedagogical writings contain some principles which are now outdated. We cannot deny, however, that there are others which are modern and still relevant today. We find there, in embryo it is true, but still valid: the psychological study of character, an essentially practical education for life, attention to the child's background, the participation of the child in the running of the class, care and attention given to the individual, etc.

In the study of the Lasallian system there is something with identity of its own which must be preserved and developed. I mean the educative relationship between teacher and pupil as well as the pupil's active participation in the educational process. We would say today that every school should try to become a human community. The Declaration underlined for us the constitutive elements which such a school community should possess:

- human relationships which encourage dialogue and acceptance of persons as they are;
- a margin of liberty which allows the pupil a degree of responsibility for the conduct and discipline of the school.

From the beginning, Lasallian pedagogy has tended to make of the school a community where the child is at the centre. It sees him as a person whose potential must be developed by affording him all the help he needs. The child is, first and foremost, a person. In the school the relationship of love is the only one that can make all other relationships valid. The child is more affectivity than intelligence. Everything he thinks about reaches him through his emotions.

The Lasallian school is Christian which implies that it is open to all without distinction of class or colour. It is gratuitous: it freely gives what it has freely received. The Brother makes a gift of himself to others. His time is his pupils', he belongs to them. He lives for them.

The teachers are called Brothers, not masters. They are not functionaries working solely for a salary. They are not content merely to give instruction because they do not separate instruction from education (2).

Brother, not priest. This has clearly marked us and, in my opinion, happily so. Our schools have always been distinguished by simple relations with our pupils and with other people with whom we come in contact. We were always able to come down to the level of our pupils and mix with them as one of themselves. I don't think the Brothers found it difficult to accept the democratic demands of modern society. We were always accustomed to them. We had only to improve and perfect them.

We are conscious that distances between classes have lessened, that interpersonal relations have become simpler, that more importance is placed on the personality of the individual. The personality of the teacher is marked by humanity. That is the quality we like to see develop in a teacher (3). Teachers and pupils go through a process of mutual education in the practice of the precepts of the Gospel and in the fulfilment of the duties required of them by their respective situations (Med. 202). Pupils and teachers help one another to live in a manner worthy of God. This is apparently the meaning of de La Salle's Meditation 198,3.

The presence of the Brother among the pupils has as its purpose to help them to live in a manner worthy of God. It is what the Brother does when he predisposes the pupils to have the same sentiments and the same dispositions as Jesus Christ (Med. 198,3). In this way the Brother becomes for his pupil a guardian angel and a guide to his path (Med. 197,1) Teacher and pupils should both keep their regard fixed on him who is, par excellence, the Unique Master, Jesus Christ, and learn from him how to live.

(1) *Conduite par le Frère Anselme*, pp. 31-42.

(2) *Sauvage, Catechèse et Laïcat*, p. 593.

(3) *Rodríguez G., Adolescentes: experiencia humana y mensaje cristiano*, (Ed. Sigueme, 1971), p. 204.

2. THE SCHOOL: A PLACE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

St. John Baptist de La Salle insists that the Brother must have the cooperation of the pupils in his educative task. The teacher can do nothing if the door he knocks at does not open of itself. In this matter force and cunning are of no avail. You need the key of love and devotion. The child must be convinced by experience that the teacher appreciates and esteems him. The teacher must gain his confidence. There must be between teacher and pupil what de La Salle calls a manifest bond of goodness, tenderness and affection (Med. 134,2). "They shall love all their pupils tenderly", the Rule tells the Brothers. It admits no exceptions: "all their pupils" (Med. 157,3).

De La Salle requires from the Brothers that they present themselves before their pupils, not with a sombre and severe expression, but with one that denotes joy and affability (cf. *Cahiers Lasalliens*, 24, pp. 185-186) which in no way means weakness or excessive familiarity. They should combine the firmness of a father with the tenderness of a mother (Med. 101,3).

The fruits of this system of education were apparent to all. Lacordaire, referring to the Brothers, could write, "Obscure apostles of the people of France, they create without noise... law and order, peace and fraternity" (Rigault, tome V, p. 241). Félicité de Lammenais added, "These men are respected for the austere gravity of their lives and loved for their goodness" (*id.*, tome IV, p. 393). And Lamartine writes in the same vein (*id.*, tome V, p. 114).

We quote only these three significant tributes from a period when the defence of the Catholic school had become an urgent necessity.

All this was made possible thanks to the methods employed, to the goodness of the persons involved and to their dedication to a specific task which brought about a notable change in the children of the common people (4).

Participation of the pupils

Modern pedagogy insists on the participation of the pupils in the educational process. Lasallian schools never neglected this aspect of their work. They stressed the importance of the relationship between the persons involved, teachers, pupils and parents.

1. *Relations of the pupils among themselves.* De La Salle wanted the children to live as well-behaved persons. His books were read in class: The Duties of a Christian, The Rules of Good Manners and Christian Politeness.

At a time when education was not yet obligatory the saint encouraged his pupils to show the human aspect of their school to their companions, less accustomed to the demands of school discipline, and to win them by their advice and good example. (*Management of Schools* by Brother Anselme, p. 222)

The list of offices that de La Salle confided to his pupils is well known. There are fourteen of them. We all know how seriously a boy takes an office entrusted to him. The distinction greatly honours him. It is, doubtless, one of the ways in which he can impress his companions with his personal worth. Such an office helps him to avoid the egotism common at his age. He realises that he must reckon with other people in his life. He must visit a fellow pupil when he is ill and find out why he is absent from class. Other pupils collect the food left over from the mid-day meal or the afternoon snack and distribute it among those who are in the greatest need.

2. *Teachers and pupils.* De La Salle, at all times, considered the school a place where efficiency reigns and where work should be exemplary. To attain this objective the teacher must have order and discipline. Correction was a thorny problem in de La Salle's time. Though he reduced them and would have liked to see them abolished, he minutely listed and adapted punishments to the faults committed. He maintained that a lot of absences were due to lack of restraint on the part of the teacher when correcting his pupils (*Cahiers Lasalliens*, 24, p. 184).

The manner of correcting, as de La Salle prescribed it, is such as to elicit the affection and tenderness of the pupil rather than the contrary (cf. Blain, *Relations de plusieurs choses*, p. 110). We leave aside the passage where de La Salle speaks of "vigilance". He uses the word "assistance" but the meaning is the same. The child must be assisted because he is weak. He must be made aware of his faults in order that he may correct them. (Med. 197,3) (5).

3. *Teachers and parents.* Relations with the parents are important when it is question of admitting a pupil to the school. Brother Director ought to ask the parents for certain information: the pupil's state of health, his outstanding qualities and defects, his character, etc. This information must be brought to the notice of the teacher to whose class the pupil is assigned.

Today great stress is placed on the role of the school counsellor. This is a key post in relations with the pupils and their families. It demands a high degree of tact and delicacy in dealing with people. It is a very effective role. If there is a post for a Brother who is a real educator, this is it. In such a position he can guide, direct, enlighten and unite.

Some of the above points will be developed in a subsequent article.

Frère José-Luis HERMOSILLA
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(4) Voir l'affection réciproque entre La Salle et les enfants (Blain II, pp. 164-165). Aussi Blain II, *Relation de plusieurs choses*, p. 102 (*Cahiers Lasalliens* 8).

(5) Pour plus de détails, voir: Alcalde, *El Maestro en la pedagogía lasalliana*, p. 417.