

## THE LASALLIAN SCHOOL (5): A preparation for life

### I. DE LA SALLE AND HIS PREDECESSORS

For the predecessors of De La Salle the school was, first of all, a place for teaching Christian doctrine. The rest was incidental. The school was used as a "bait" to attract the children. De La Salle would not accept such reasoning because he considered that to work honestly was to live as a Christian and that the avoidance of idleness was, in itself, a virtue. Attracting children to catechism lessons was not his aim because there were other means of doing so which were less troublesome and less costly than the school.

He begins his chapter on "The manner in which the Brothers should behave in school" by imposing the obligation of keeping school, and goes on to make the obligation more explicit: Teach reading. Teach writing. Teach arithmetic and spelling. He then insists that the most important duty of the teacher is to teach prayers, catechism and the Gospel. De La Salle does not undervalue religious formation but he gives importance to secular instruction by recognising its intrinsic value, something which was quite new at that time (1).

"The Founder of the Brothers is an essentially practical genius, he creates schools which are a preparation for life" (2). He introduces an eminently democratic programme of studies. Thanks to him the common man will henceforth be able to learn of the glories of his country, read the Gospel and communicate by letter with those who are absent.

De La Salle refuses to impose on his schools an inconsistent programme of studies. "He made some decisive contributions to primary education" (3) as is evidenced by the position he took on the following questions:

a. **Learning French before Latin.** Latin takes second place in his schools. It is used only in reading while priority is given to French. In the memoir addressed by De La Salle to his friend, Godet des Marais, bishop of Chartres, he gives among other reasons for this preference the uselessness of teaching Latin to children of poor artisans, knowing that they would spend but a short time in school and that on leaving school, they would have no chance of continuing to study it (4).

b. **The simplification of writing.** De La Salle simplifies the rules of writing at a time when the writing masters had, by their numerous prescriptions, made it an impenetrable thicket, an area reserved to specialists and from which the poor were excluded. In spite of the complaints of the writing masters De La Salle does not cease in his efforts to popularize the art of writing. By putting a pen in the hands of the poor he is not giving them a dangerous weapon, as Voltaire and La Chalotais claim, but a tool with which to earn their daily bread and defend themselves.

c. **The good of the Church and of the State.** (cf. Declaration 47,3) The action of the Christian tends to promote the good of the Church and of the state. "The school aims at and attains the earthly objective (cf. Meditation 160,3) of preparing children for life here below by giving them the indispensable basic techniques, the essential tools: reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic." (5)

In De La Salle's schools the whole atmosphere speaks of diligent scholastic activity.

d. **The schools are designed to meet specific needs.** De La Salle adapts his schools to the concrete needs of everyday life. At Saint Yon he creates a form of higher education to meet the needs of the better off. This was the forerunner of what is called today modern secondary education. The "Sunday School" for workers and other adults

(1) Poutet, Y., *Le XVIIe siècle et les origines lasalliennes*, t. I, p. 402.

(2) *Conduite des Ecoles Chrétiennes*, Introduction par F. Anselme, p. 37.

(3) Sauvage, M., *Catéchèse et Laïcité*, p. 672.

(4) Blain, *La vie de M. J.-B. de La Salle*, t. I, pp. 375-376.

(5) Sauvage, *id.*, p. 678.

is a new type of school to meet the needs of the parishoners of Saint Sulpice. The seminary for country schoolmasters is another stroke of genius on the part of the Founder aimed at supplying teachers from his "Training College" to the villages. The income from these boarding establishments will be used for the benefit of the schools for the poor.

## II. THE LASALLIAN SCHOOL SEEKS TO FORM HABITS OF WORK

One of the fruits to be expected from the schools is the preparation of children for a profession. The school should prepare them to face life and to make themselves useful in the world when their parents decide to withdraw them from school (cf. Meditation 194,1).

"The school, as conceived by the Founder of the Brothers, should give the children a taste for work and gradually train them in habits of concentration. The pupils' efforts are stimulated and their progress carefully monitored throughout their period of schooling." (6) At the end of each school year the teacher puts on a sheet of paper all the information necessary for the parents and for the teacher who will have the pupil in his class the following year.

The "Management of Schools" which the Founder puts in the hands of his disciples is not, in itself, something sacred and immutable. De La Salle himself revised it several times. The more experienced Brothers helped him to assemble the treasures of pedagogical wisdom which it contains. Everything in it is important. It was the subject of much discussion and reflection. Good sense is evident in every line since its purpose is to contribute to the improvement of the instruction and education of poor children. We shall now consider a few of the methods which contributed to the success of the schools and to the welfare of the poor.

a. **Pupils are allowed to progress at their own rate.** The teacher cares for all his pupils but more particularly for the less gifted to whom he gives his time and attention while allowing the more able to work on their own.

b. **The uniformity of method** introduced by De La Salle creates an atmosphere of discipline and good order in all his schools. The time-table is adhered to and the silence observed by the teacher has no other purpose but to encourage the pupil to speak and explain himself. What the pupil finds out for himself will have more value than what the teacher too readily provides for him.

c. **Pupils are encouraged to work on their own and to help their less able companions** (7). Modern pedagogy insists on the necessity of allowing children to work on their own, on the value of individual initiative and personal research. The teacher should not do what the pupil can do for himself or teach another to do. De La Salle also uses the small group method for the weaker pupils and asks the more able pupils to help them even at the price of their own promotion. "Let the teacher be careful not to help them too readily to overcome the difficulties they meet in the solution of a problem. On the contrary, he encourages them not to give up and to look for the solutions which he knows they can find out for themselves. They should be persuaded that the knowledge they gain through sustained personal effort will be better retained. The teacher will not be satisfied with posing problems himself but will encourage his pupils to pose problems of their own according to their ability." (8)

d. **Subjects for study are taken from everyday life.** In arithmetic the pupils learn the elements of book-keeping, the use of money, how to make out invoices and how to make simple measurements etc. In reading they use manuscripts, records and legal contracts when they have mastered the elements.

As for social relations (9), De La Salle insists that the rules be learned from daily contacts among the pupils themselves rather than from formulas learned by heart. This, in spite of the fact that he wrote for them "Rules of good manners and Christian politeness", a work which Guibert says is better than anything that went before.

De La Salle requires that teachers and pupils reflect at the end of each school day on the way they behaved to one another and on the faults they committed. The child is thus led to think of others and to treat them with consideration. Our own Declaration says, "The school is one of the principal places for acquiring social graces both for children and adolescents". (44,2)

**Brother José-Luis HERMOSILLA**  
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(6) Sauvage, *id.*, p. 678.

(7) *Conduite*, p. 38.

(8) *Conduite*, p. 37.

(9) Poutet, p. 144. "La civilité lasallienne refusera de s'en tenir aux belles façades. Elle visera le coeur, l'esprit".