



07-A-37

DE LA SALLE AND THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES (2)

4) SOME EXCEPTIONS

La Salle never sends the Brothers into a village where there will not be enough children to fill up, one day or another, a minimum of five classes. He says this quite clearly in a prospectus whose purpose it is to make the Institute known: "The Brothers of this Institute will run schools only in towns where there will be at least five Brothers, four for maintaining the school, and one of these will also be in charge of the house, and a fifth serving Brother to look after the household needs and to replace a school Brother who should fall ill or should require some days of rest".

Let us understand this point clearly. He is not insisting on a minimum of four classes at once. For La Salle to accept a new foundation it suffices that the demographic conditions be satisfied in the future. Consequently, for classes of 50 each (in keeping with the directives of The Conduct of Schools) a town must have at least 200 boys of school age that is boys over six and under fourteen years of age. In actual fact, on this point La Salle always shows himself most anxious about remaining faithful to these principles. When the parish priest of Crosne, a village near Paris, asks him for a teacher, he answers that he has no "married teachers". He adds that "it is not fitting for a school teacher to be in an office if he really wants to be dedicated to his school". In other words, the duties of a clerk or helper of the clergy are incompatible with the scholastic dedication of a Lasallian teacher.

The same refusal was made to Guipavas, near Brest, in 1705. After sending two Brothers to that place, La Salle recalls them again because the allusion to Brest deceived him. It was not exactly a suburb of the city, that they were referring to but only a distant village and very sparsely populated. With regard to Darnétal, which someone informed him is close to Rouen, the Saint begins by being apprehensive: is it not farther away than he is told? Are there not fewer children of school age than he is being led to surmise? In other words how many "first communicants" in the parish, that is to say, not how many church goers but how many residents of school age? Once this matter is cleared up, he agrees to send Brothers to maintain there a popular school for boys.

A systematic study reveals that only nine cities out of twenty-five concretely supported the school projects initiated by the parish priest or Archbishop. Three cities, Le Puy, St. Omer, and Lyons began negotiations but without arriving at a conclusion during the lifetime of the Founder. Of the thirteen cities in which the Brothers established themselves with the solicitude of the municipal authority, four rapidly demonstrated a real hostility. In Mâcon the Brother had to pull up stakes. In Protestant regions, the municipal budget did not make a real contribution. Legislation of Louis XIV, hostile to the Reformists, put at the disposition of the civil authorities the assets of the émigré. Thus the Christian Schools at times became "royal schools", that is to say, supported by the royal budget thus profiting the local communities without costing them anything. Let us be precise in stating that the financial support coming from the civil authorities, and not from an explicitly Protestant source, did not stigmatize the beneficiaries as plunderers. This type of situation facilitated the development of the schools of Alès, Mende, Les Vans and Calais.

5) CONCLUSION

The Lasallian will to remain master of their programmes, methods, life-style, choice of directors and the teaching force in the school is manifest. Likewise, the unyielding determination of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is not tolerating any discrimination among the students because of money often hampered the generosity of the civil authorities. They never ceased to believe, during the Founder's lifetime and in the following centuries, that the rich should finance the education of their children as far as they are able. On their part they considered as nothing the humiliation which paralyzes the poor when they have to reveal their financial condition in asking for enrollment in a school. This was also a failure to recognize the cultural value of having children of different social backgrounds present in the same school. This was in effect to despise the human value of scholastic programmes oriented towards trades and commercial employment and to stress rather the types of employment which give access to liberal careers of magistrates, lawyers, doctors, academicians, professors in colleges and those responsible for municipal, provincial and governmental finances, all employments which, at this epoch required a certain down-payment, fee or tax as a prerequisite for acceptance.

La Salle's independence with regard to city authorities corresponds, in a word, to his desire to serve at the same time, both Church and State, God and children, the family and society, without anyone being able to interfere with his ever greater promotion of expansion and enrichment of his secular studies as well as the quality and extent of the religious formation given to the pupils in his schools. These schools were opened by him not merely "to master the catechism", but above all to help the children "live a Christian life from morning until evening". Profane and religious instruction thus join hands, without it ever being forgotten that education is also, and ever more so the apprenticeship of moral living imbued by the spirit of faith, that is to say, by a permanent relationship with God.

Frère Yves POUTET
134, Cours Gambetta,
33400 TALENCE (France)

P.S.: Sources and related reading can be found in: Yves Poutet: "Le XVI siècle et les origines lasalliennes", Tome II, p. 68-74.

For a quick grasp of the contemporary realities of St. John Baptist de La Salle,
cf. Yves Poutet and Jean Pungier: "Un éducateur et un saint aux prises avec son temps". p. 100 (dépot: Slepca, 134, Cours Gambetta, 33400 TALENCE - France).