

DE LA SALLE'S DEALINGS WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF HIS TIME (1)

Contrary to what often appears in works concerning schools for the poor, it is not true that Louis XIV was not interested in charity schools and purely and simply left them up to the Church and her clergy. It is certainly true that the royal authority delegated the right and the mission of supervising the elementary schools of the cities to the bishops and precentors, who were the forerunners of our present day Diocesan Directors of Schools. Yet, the King, religiously consecrated in the cathedral of Rheims, held the highest authority over all school matters. It was the royal authority which, by an edict of December 1606 (article 14), periodically renewed, required the school teachers to have the approval of the parish priest or of the ecclesiastic in charge of such matters. But in case of a disagreement, each party had a right to appeal to the king for justice. The royal justice alone decided definitively. We are limiting ourselves here to the scholastic period during which John Baptist De La Salle lived.

1. The King or the church?

There is a royal edict, registered by the Parliament of Paris, 12 January 1686, which requires that children of Protestants "between the ages of five and sixteen" should be placed with the Catholic families of their relatives, if they have any. If they do not have any Catholic relatives, then the judge will assign them to families which will rear them. It was Louis XIV who asked the bishop to increase the number of gratuitous schools in their dioceses and drew the necessary funds for their support and development from the revenues derived from the assets of the Protestants who had emigrated. It was he who gave the orders on 13 December 1698 that men and women teachers should be assigned to "all the parishes where none yet exist, for the instruction of children", and especially for the children of former Protestants, and that they should be taught catechism as well as the reading of scripture. He specifies that teachers' annual salary should be guaranteed by local taxes. Article 10 of this "Declaration" specifies that school attendance will be obligatory "until the age of 14", without prejudice, however, to the right of families to hire their own tutors.¹

After 1651, in fact, Louis XIV reigned as an absolute monarch. Theoretically, all the legislative, executive, judiciary, and financial authority and even the possibility of operating within the religious domain, depended on him. Let us, therefore, not be too hasty in blaming the Church for certain situations which she rarely had complete control over in the seventeenth century.

2 — The interventions of Louis XIV and of Louis XV

All appearances to the contrary, the royal authority was implemented by intermediaries who strangely rendered them democratic. These were the people "elected" by regions, those who bought parliamentary seats as one would today pay to study law or would buy a law office, the "Assembly of clergy", town magistrates or councilors, always elected, the "notables" of the parishes, etc. who proposed the decisions to be taken or presented their "objections". Often some or other of these people were not restrained from implementing the point of their objection, with the understanding that it would eventually get royal approval. In fact, everyone thought that a decision could not be judged good and therefore liable to approval unless it was first put into a life experience to demonstrate that it was worthwhile.

If it was not easier to approach the king to ask a favor of him than it is today to personally ask a favor of the President or one of his ministers, still everything went up to him. They got all the way up to him the same way as the execution of royal decisions passed through a number of intermediaries who could, if they so wished, cause some difficulties. The State Secretaries, military governors, managers, all had their little say. It was essentially through such intermediaries that John Baptist De La Salle approached Louis XIV and the future Louis XV when he was still a child.

2.1. *Financially.* Louis XIV considered as normal the annual salary of 150 pounds for men teachers in the charity schools and only 100 pounds for lady teachers. To maintain the same purchasing power in spite of inflation, Louis XV would raise this amount up to 250 and 200 pounds. La Salle accepted these financial conditions in the contracts for his founding gratuitous schools. This was with this provision however: each time that four classes were founded, he would have to provide the school with a fifth Brother without asking the least remuneration for him. This "extra" Brother was intended as an assurance of the school's continuity when a teacher is sick or to oversee the entire school and assuming its direction. This revolutionary pedagogical innovation was possible only because of the vow of poverty which the Brothers obliged themselves to follow, in 1694, "to live on bread alone" rather than require the pupils to pay.²

Blain declares with reason that Louis XIV did his utmost to multiply gratuitous schools all throughout his reign. He was a witness to this effort. At Calais, upon the insistence of the magistrates, the king ordered the financial services to pay the Brothers 450 pounds a year, which was the salary of three teachers. It was Louis XIV who offered them the land needed for the construction of a school. At Boulogne-sur-mer, also, the land for the school was provided by the royal authority.³ At Alès and at Fontainebleau, it was likewise the king's order which guaranteed the financing of the teachers. In the first city, the funds were raised by the "clipping" tax levied against land owners. In the second, a capital of 10,000 pounds was raised to provide the annual payment of 500 pounds for two Brothers who would be provided for a Lasallian school. This latter school was not opened until after the death of the King, but without him it would not have become a reality so soon.⁴

Under the Regency, the proposed payments to the Brothers of Calais seemed to have been forgotten. A renewal by royal decree was often needed after the death of a monarch to preserve the executive binding force. Also, after the time Louis XV had reached his majority, the requisite funds were again blocked. It was he again who stood up to the various enemies of the Lasallian schools, within his Council, to award "Letters Patent" to the Brothers. These conferred a legal personality with the right to receive legacies and to acquire property. Louis XV did even more: he gave his agreement to the Pontifical Bull which approved the Institute. He pressured the Parliament to register it. As usual, a cascade of intermediaries came into play in both cases, but the will of the King and strong arguments overcame their opposition.

2.2. *Pedagogically and Morally*, Louis XIV on many occasions moved the bishop of France in general, and sometimes certain bishops in particular, to watch over the continuance of the separation of boys and girls in the schools. He also took many measures to see that the ecclesiastics could never be suspected of the least familiarity with young women. Louis XV acted in the same way.⁵ The pupils who learned to write in the charity schools were sometimes between 12 and 14 years old. The men and women teachers held their hand to guide it. Even in the Lasallian schools, in this field, the method could not help but be individual, after a more or less collective instruction. This sociological context with its moral and psychological consequences, hardly concerns us today except, perhaps, with regard to instructing illiterate adults. We would have to take this into consideration in our evaluation if we want to understand the advice and prudence of the king.

On the other hand, the question of the liberty of conscience, at this distance, seems to have been misguided. In the area of Cévenol, the number of former Protestants who had become "new Catholics" after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, was quite large. The children were baptized as soon as their parents had declared that they were renouncing Protestantism. These were the children whom the king obliged to attend the Brothers' gratuitous Christian schools in Alès, Mende, and Vans. The governors, administrators, and local authorities were pressured into having the royal decrees respected. The Protestants — it is too often forgotten — retained the right to rear their children in Protestantism because the legislation imposed fidelity to Catholic convictions only upon those who said that they no longer belonged to the "Pretended Reformed Religion". In fact, there was a lot of hypocrisy in all of that: not all the children thought, at the age of 12-14, as their parents. The catechesis of the Brothers in a milieu so disturbed by the general insincerity was not easy. The royal pressure, with its financial sanctions (fines) or its transfers of parental authority to the judiciary authority (placing children in homes) only increased the difficulties of evangelization and of a true Catholic education.

2.3. *The king also worked through intermediaries* who were anxious to please him or at least to please personalities who had a great influence over him. Thus, Achille de Harlay, President of the Parliament of Paris, did not even for a moment dream of displeasing Madame Maintenon, whom Louis XIV called "his firmness" when she wrote to him on July 3, 1698 (or 1699 'it is not certain').⁶ "Sir... I am not afraid to make a recommendation to you today in behalf of the charitable schools of the parish of Saint Sulpice... The men and women teachers sometimes cause trouble there... I therefore, beseech you, sir, to procure the relief of the parish priest of St. Sulpice".

It was thus that La Salle won the case which was filed against him under the pretext that he was receiving gratuitously children who were not entirely poor. He absolutely refused to follow the demands of custom which would make his schools into ghettos reserved for the poor. This was a radical innovation because it made the least cultivated pupils come into frequent contact and conversation with the favored class of pupils who had come to profit by the exemplary educational value of his schools.

A short time after the interventions of Madame de Maintenon, Louis XIV who was protecting the Irish friends of the king of England who had been expelled from their country by an anti-Catholic persecution, asked Cardinal de Noailles, Archbishop of Paris, to look after the education of some fifty immigrant children. The usual cascade of influence poured down from one level to another. The Cardinal passed on the request to the parish priest, and he, in his turn, referred the matter to De La Salle. Financially, it was evidently the royal treasury which re-imbursed the parish priest for the advances which he had to make.⁷

In 1709, "by order of the king", the Duke du Maine, the illegitimate son of Madame de Montespan and of Louis XIV, grandmaster of the artillery and lieutenant general of the army, gave the Center for the Training of Country Teachers, which had just been established at Saint-Denis near Paris, the gracious permission to allow passing troops to be lodged there. It is known also that his mother, who died in 1707 after many long years spent far from the temptations of the Court, had greatly shown her devotion for the thousand children who, about 1698, attended the Brothers' schools in the parish of Saint Sulpice in Paris.⁸ More than strict regulations, more than legislation, often enough quite flexible, it was human relations which allowed institutions to be established and to prosper. In this regard, La Salle is seen to be at one and the same time a prudent and determined founder and a polished diplomat, very sure of his arguments based on experience as well as on strict reasoning.

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