

THE “CONDUCT” WAS BORN IN LIFE

«If I had but known...»

V.O.

Not an exception

These words that Canon Blain has put in the mouth of St. John Baptist De La Salle are indicative of his conduct as founder and of his complete abandonment to the hands of Divine Providence. The full river that the Institute came to be began to flow in that quiet parlor of the College of the Most Holy Infant Jesus.

The daily happening, through his entire life, culminated in the royal and the pontifical recognition of his Institute.

The code of rules which he left to his sons, the Brothers, was begun with a pen dipped in the inkwell of the daily duties fulfilled in the very lives the ones for whom the rules were intended. It was set to writing only after having been fixed by innumerable experiences and even then was left open to further and well-thought out amendments.

La Salle wanted the *Conduct* to be what the *Rules* were for the Brothers. Like the *Rules* the *Conduct* was written by students and teachers in their everyday fulfillment of classroom duties; it took on shape in “the experiences over several years of the Brothers who were the most competent in the classroom”. All that it contained had been tried out by them and proven effective. They constantly weighed the advantages and inconveniences of what was prescribed. The founder himself approved the revisions and adaptations whenever they were shown to be necessary; a measure dictated by the changing circumstances of place and time.

It begins with life itself

Contrary to today’s practice, the *Conduct* required the student to know how to read both French and Latin correctly before he would begin to write. Shouldn’t we transpose this practice to the revision of the *Conduct*?

Life speaks to us through living beings. We have to learn to read it in those signs. Humanity wrote down the signs and gestures many centuries after they existed in fact.

The *Conduct*, like a precious stone, was prised from the quarry of life. Many years of experience went by in which teachers practiced in the classroom what was later put down on paper. Before the regulation, was the practice; before theory, experience; before the inert letter, student life. Such was the ordinary procedure of De La Salle.

Vital structure

The reader who looks for an organized treatise on pedagogical principles in the *Conduct* will end by being disappointed. The same thing will occur to the one who looks for subtle disquisitions on theory and methods of teaching in the *Conduct*.

But what *is* found by an attentive reader is the organism of a being which is quickened by a collective soul and the vivifying breath which that soul has given it. Such is the structure of the *Conduct*; the vigorous life that flows through each of its pages.

Open the first chapter with “*The entrance of the students in the School and the beginning of class*”: this is school life as it begins each morning. In an uninterrupted litany it goes on to describe in detail all that the students must do, until it arrives at the matter of the following chapter.

The second chapter is devoted to "*Breakfast and the Morning Snack*": These are pages enlivened with the responsibility, liberty and social participation of the scholars.

After their breakfast, they continue with "*Reading*", which is the third chapter and which is described in the most minute detail. It goes on to specify all the prescriptions for "*Writing*" with the same attention to the least detail. "*Arithmetic*" and "*Penmanship*" are the subjects of the fifth and sixth chapters respectively.

The seventh chapter, entitled "*Prayer*" goes on to enumerate all the occasions through the day in which the children pray in class and is the invisible, vivifying chain that binds together each and every one of the activities that Lasallian students perform in the school day.

The morning session in the school of De La Salle would generally finish with attendance at Holy Mass. Here too the *Conduct* enters into a wealth of detail to demonstrate how the children should actively participate in the Mass. This is all treated in the eighth chapter.

The culmination of the afternoon session is constituted by the explanation of the catechism class which is the meaty part of the text. No student was excused from this class and in the ninth chapter both catechists and students of catechism have their duties clearly spelt out for them for the time of catechism class. The "*Singing of Hymns*" forms part of the explanation of the catechism and the *Conduct* treats of the matter in chapter 10.

The scholastic day is about to come to an end. The doors of the Lasallian school which opened at seven-thirty in the morning are going to close at four-thirty in the afternoon. If entrance into the school follows its ritual and importance, the departure in the afternoon is given equal weight and is thoroughly treated in the eleventh chapter which is the last of the first part of the *Conduct*. Day after day, with the uniqueness of the living organism which can never be repeated, all takes place against the unchanging background of the Lasallian school.

The second and third parts of the *Conduct* are devoted to behavior, norms, attitudes and pedagogical procedures which should be applied within the existential framework of the first part. The very expression of each chapter speaks of an experimental praxis rather than abstract theory. Thus: *Of the signals that should be Used in the Christian Schools* (2nd part. C.2.); *On Absences* (3rd part. C.6); *On the Admission of the Students* (3rd part. C.2); *On the Transfer of Students from one grade to another* (rd part. C.4): These are based on real, living situations.

Once again, the realistic, empirical and pragmatic manner of De La Salle is set forth in his authorship of the *Conduct*. Its pages channelize the torrent of teaching experiences of the most competent Brothers whom De La Salle could count on in the beginnings of the Institute.

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