

«THE SCHOOL IS DOING WELL...»

The Founder uses this expression only in his correspondence. Other variations include:

1. «...In Avignon. The schools there are doing well.» (L. 16,3 p. 68. Letter to Brother Gabriel Drolin, Feb. 11, 1705).
2. «I am pleased that your school is doing well...» (L. 44.20. Letter to Brother Robert, April 26. 1709).
3. «Nothing should be left undone to ensure that the schools do well, especially your own.» (L. 8.18. Letter to Brother Hubert. June 1, 1706).
4. Take care that the classes run well.» (L. 52.8. Letter to Brother Joseph, Dec. 1706).

These words suggest to us what must have been a continual concern of St. John Baptist de La Salle. However, of themselves they still leave us in the dark because of the lack of any context which might throw light on what standards he had in mind when he used them. It helps little to know that the Founder wants the schools to "do well" if we do not understand exactly what he means by this formula. Our natural inclination would be to interpret it in the light of what we mean by it today in our own circumstances.

We do have some passages which are more explicit.

5. «Take care that your school runs well and that your community is faithful to the Rule». (L. 42.12. p. 144. Letter to Brother Robert, Feb. 26, 1709).
6. «You must carry out not only your class duties, but also the other exercises, for classwork without the spiritual exercises will not do.» (L. 62.6, p. 177. Letter to Brother Mathias, April 13, 1708).

The first of the above quotations (5) might leave us with the impression that there is only a coincidental relationship between a school which is going well and fidelity to the exercises among the Brothers. Yet, that harmony accords perfectly with the ideal defined in the Rule.

The second (6) leaves no doubt about the interpretation. The words used are categorical. They establish between the two terms employed a strict relationship of causality: the school doing well depends upon the proper performance of the spiritual exercises. Certainly these are not the only factors (it would be an exaggeration to pretend that they are). However, they are a decisive element, a condition *sine qua non*.

There are other passages which support this assertion. Even though they do not use the words we are investigating, they express the idea perfectly.

7. «Since you ask it, I will see that you have plenty of students. Be keen on carrying out your school duties, but please be as keen about your spiritual exercises as you are about class.» (L. 64.4, p. 179. Letter to Brother Mathias, May 16, 1708).
8. «Your spiritual exercises and your school require all your care. If you involve yourself in anything else, you are acting in opposition to the designs of God.» (L. 12.5, p. 44. Letter to Brother Hubert, Oct. 2, 1710).

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At this point we must recall a key phrase of the MEMOIRE SUR L'HABIT: «The exercises of the community and work in the schools require a well integrated man.» (1) This document, written between 1689 and 1691, is definitely anterior to the letters which we quoted above. Brother Miguel Campos, in his *Itineraire évangélique de St Jean-Baptiste de La Salle* (Rome, 1974) makes the following commentary on this passage:

«...community requires a totally committed man – totality both in his life and in his work as a member of the community, in view of its mission. It would be well to note here that the expressions "exercises of community" and "work" are already used by De La Salle and that they are not understood as two parallel realities. Community is the word which unifies the unique way of life of the Brother – doing the will of God. The exercises of the community are designed to emphasize the evangelical dimension of the work of the community; i.e., the work of the community empowers this evangelical life within the redemptive mission of the Son of Man» (CL 45, p. 194).

We must not lose sight of the fact that the main purpose of St. John Baptist de La Salle (in both senses of the word as given by Littré: goal and its logic) is apostolic rather than pedagogical. If the Founder has restructured schools, it was not that they "do well", but according to the Rule in Art. 3: «to make them available to the poor as signs of the Kingdom and a means of salvation». This is best expressed by Brother Michel

Sauvage in *"Annoncer l'Évangile aux pauvres"* (Paris, 1977) in a section which he, himself, entitles "that the schools do well...":

«In De La Salle, evangelical inspiration moves his practical efforts to adapt the school to its concrete, earthly conditions. In an effort to make the means of salvation available to poor children on their level, he does not hesitate to question traditional pedagogical procedures when he finds them inadequate. He is concerned about the effectiveness of teaching even with regard to the minutest details. Today, these seem to be very nit-picking, but we can understand their existence against the broader picture of the lack of preparation of teachers during that period. The history of education recognizes that because of De La Salle and his Institute significant progress has been made in institutional learning. By seeking the Kingdom of God those who worked under evangelical inspiration also contributed to the advancement of the human education of poor children within their earthly condition... In other words, spiritual motivation stimulated educational creativity. The attitudes which the Founder inculcated in his disciples with regard to an evangelical love for children and their real participation in the "work of God" are actually the basis for an effective transformation of our human condition... The Meditations of the Founder remind us that professional competence also results from the intensity of the spiritual life of the Brother.» (pp. 271c, 272a, 274a, 280a).

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I have limited myself to these two passages because they bring us to the point we want to make. They help us to see that we lose the meaning intended by De La Salle when we limit it to a strictly pedagogical sense, even when it seems to be within a purely pedagogical context. I have previously discussed this matter in Lasalliana 15-11-C-58.

While recognizing the pedagogical competence of the author, I must confess that I do not recognize the thought of the Founder in the interpretation as it is presented. In effect, it is saying:

«The school is doing well". This means right now.

- That the users are partners.
- That each is responsible for the whole.
- That the ability of each is necessary for the common work.»

This constitutes a real shift in the meaning. The author, (even if what he says is perfectly acceptable) actually substitutes his own ideas for those of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

By his own words, which may sound like a slogan, the Founder expresses the same fundamental requirement for his school; i.e., that teachers, be they Brothers or lay people, must be penetrated with a Christian spirit, consider themselves as "ministers of God and dispensers of His mysteries" (1 Cor 4:1 quoted in MTR 1, 1), thus "cooperate with Him and enter into His plan to bring about the salvation of children" (M. 56, 1 in CL 12, p. 157).

However, the word "salvation", which is found in the Conduct of Schools (Cf. CL 24, pages 151 & 186), is not found in the article quoted above. When it is read and re-read, one is struck by its secular tone. It is not enough to insert the word Christian from time to time at the end of a sentence in order to transform a pedagogical text into a pastoral presentation.

We find here the phenomenon of the secularization of the writings of the Founder as has been pointed out by Brother Jean Pungier in *"Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, le Message de son Catéchisme"* (Rome, 1984): «...What these texts contain that is universal in time and space have become a mere laicized commentary. Since the 18th century we see in the Schools of the Brother... a pedagogical instrument... become so modern that in a certain sense it has lost its religious purpose... and often, in the eyes of the bourgeoisie of the Enlightenment, it has become the model for training in the skills.» (p. 32-33).

If Lasallian schools ought to be "excellent schools" aimed at "success", it must not be for excellence in itself nor in success for itself. These two qualities are part of a project for the total liberation of the human being as a necessary condition for attaining Salvation.

The school of St. John Baptist de La Salle strives "to bear fruit" in both meanings of the expression – personal sanctification (of the teacher) and evangelization (of the student). «I have chosen you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain» (John 15:16).

To profane a word of St. John Baptist de La Salle is, in fact to desacralize it.

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(1) I have often found this expression abbreviated into: «The school needs an integral man». This vitiates the thought of the Founder and almost always eliminates its religious and communitarian content.