

**THE TERCENTENARY  
OF A FORGOTTEN EDUCATOR  
CHARLES DEMIA (1/2)**

1989 was the tercentenary of the death of a priest and educator, Charles Demia, who upset the peace and quiet of Lyon by publishing a fierce little book describing the plight of the children and young people of the town and suggesting solutions for this problem.

In 1966, in a Lyon library, I had an opportunity to examine the writings and biographies of this eminent and determined educator who was a contemporary of De La Salle and 14 years his senior. I myself had written about him in my book "La Salle, Patron del Magisterio". Brother Saturnino Gallego, in his two volume work on De La Salle (published by BAC), refers to Demia on 18 separate occasions. The writings of Demia, he said, "made an enormous impression all over the country" (Vol. 1, p. 112). As a result of reading him, Canon Roland of Rheims was inspired to involve himself with education to the extent of founding a Congregation of Sisters. Shortly before his death, he entrusted this Congregation to the care of De La Salle, and it is still in existence today. It was on the threshold of these Sisters' house that there took place the historic, or rather, the providential meeting which led De La Salle progressively to devote his entire life too to education. Thus there are three links in the chain: Demia, Roland and De La Salle.

In 1687 and 1688, De La Salle wrote four times to Demia, even sending him some money for some books he wanted him to buy. It is a pity than none of these letters has been found up till now, but Demia's notes refer to an exchange of letters.

Demia was born in Bourg, to the north of Lyon, in 1637. He was educated by the Jesuits in his native town with its population of 6.000. When he was 23 and had completed his law studies he entered the seminary in Lyon. A few months later, he joined the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris. Three years later he was ordained.

For several months he preached at Blois, Tours, Poitiers and in the surrounding area.

He finally settled down in Bourg. Here he gave proof of his great apostolic zeal by teaching children

catechism, helping the poor and by organising monthly talks for the local clergy.

In 1664 he was living at Laon, a town of about 70.000 inhabitants. The archbishop, Cardinal de Neuville, Primate of all the Gauls, soon realized what an exceptional person Demia was, and gave him various responsibilities, the last of which was to be "The Promoter General of the archbishopric". This entailed having personal contact with the clergy, the parishes and the work they undertook. «It was during his visits as Promoter that he was struck by the ignorance and depravity of young people, especially among the working classes. It was then that the idea of the educational apostolate came to him, and he set to work to organise it» ("Charles Demia", Rynois, Lyon 1937, p. 31).

In 1666, he wrote his famous "Remonstrances" to the town authorities, drawing their attention to the problems involved in the education and instruction of working class children.

The Larousse definition of "remontrance" is "a reproachful remark, warning, reprimand". Formerly, "Remonstrances: remarks drawn up by the Parlement of Paris to draw the King's attention to the possible disadvantages of an edict".

Demia wanted to "demonstrate" the mistake the authorities were making by neglecting the education of the poor.

Gabriel Compayre, an expert in this matter, writes as follows: «reading it, you would think it was setting out the reasons for a modern piece of primary education legislation which called for the creation of schools» (Rynois, op. cit. p. 35).

Its title is quite long, especially when you realise how short the actual work is: "Remonstrances made to the Provosts of the Merchants, municipal magistrates and leading citizens of the town of Lyon with regard to the need and usefulness of Christian schools for the instruction of poor children».

What was the result of this? In spite of the author's eloquence and the soundness of his reasoning, «there was no reaction... But if the authorities did nothing, private enterprise was moved to act... The first school... opened on January 9th 1667» ("Souvenir des fêtes du troisième centenaire", Mgr. Lavallée). «Following the reading of the "Remonstrances", the Gentlemen belonging to the Company (name not given) promised to give annually the sum of 200 livres to pay the salary of a schoolmaster in the St. George district» ("Vie de M. Demia", Faillon, Rusand, Lyon 1829, p. 55).

Demia returned to the charge. He wrote another paper in 1668 explaining his reasons, this time more fully and more subtly than in his first. It is this second edition, which we think is better, that we will analyse rapidly and illustrate with some extracts so that the reader can judge its merits for himself. Demia's reasoning is still relevant for a big part, even perhaps a major part, of Brazil. The edition of the "Remonstran-

ces" we shall be referring to is the one contained in Faillon's biography (pp. 487-504) which we have already quoted: «This text is very important and not very well known in our days. We reproduce it in full at the end of this work» (Faillon, p. 56). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this article are taken from here.

Demia begins by praising the interest shown in the town by the leading citizens: «The outstanding proofs of zeal given at all times by the Provosts of the Merchants and by the municipal magistrates of the city of Lyon to make it one of the best policed in all the Kingdom, and the piety of its leading citizens, have caused some persons to draw to the attention of the Gentlemen of the Consulate and other important people living in Lyon, that the best way of crowning the splendour and magnificence of this great city is to establish Christian schools in it, where the poor of both sexes can be instructed without payment while they are still young» (p. 487).

Next the author shows the importance of such an undertaking: «There is nothing more worthy of the attention and care of the magistrates, since on it depend happiness and public tranquillity. These can be maintained only if individuals fulfil their duties to God, their country and their family. Now, it is impossible to do this if young people are not instructed at an early age... since all they bring into this world is ignorance, sin and a great inclination to evil» (p. 487).

«Is it not remarkable», says Compayre, «that a man living in the 17th century should use the grand word "country" (patrie) which was hardly used in his days, and that on the other hand, he forgets sometimes to speak of the King and of duties to the King?» (Rynois, p. 35).

The rich have the wherewithal to become educated. «But the poor... their preoccupation with staying alive makes them forget to teach them (the children) to live well. Having been brought up badly themselves, they cannot pass on a good education they have never had» (p. 488).

A little further on, he remarks with some bitterness: «This education of the children of the poor working class is totally neglected, although it is of the highest importance for the State, since they outnumber everybody else in it; and since it is as important, and even more important, to run public schools for them rather than colleges for children of well off families» (p. 489).

What are the results for young people of such negligence? «An extraordinary ignorance of God, whom they are nevertheless obliged to know, love and serve, if they wish to share in his Kingdom. But how will they know if they have no teachers to instruct them? How will the teachers instruct them if no one supports them? Who will support them, if the city authorities, the parish priests and the churchwardens in each parish do not shoulder this cost?» (p. 489).

He then rejects what must have been a standard objection that «young people could certainly obtain this knowledge by means of sermons and parish catechism lessons» (idem).

Why does this solution not satisfy him? The zealous champion of schools then indulges in a little exaggeration: «Since some do not go to them and those that do get no benefit from them at all, either because most of the lessons given there are beyond their grasp, or because the divine seed that is sown there is often stifled by corrupt nature and bad company...» (p. 490).

Demia, it would seem, was aware that some people did not value theological arguments very highly, and so he hastens to describe the disastrous social consequences of a lack of education. The picture he paints is a truly distressing one:

«Badly brought up young people normally become indolent. The next thing that happens is that they spend their time in the streets, they gather at crossroads and indulge most often in licentious conversation. They become rebellious, free-thinkers, gamblers, blasphemers, argumentative. They become drunk, lascivious, they steal and they rob... As the most corrupt members (of the State), they will contaminate the rest of the body if the torturer's whip, the galleys of princes or the gibbets of Justice do not rid this world of these poisonous serpents...» (p. 491).

This is a picture of childhood and youth. What about adults? «It is difficult to find trustworthy servants and good workmen... you see so many layabouts and drifters in the streets. The only thing they know how to do is to eat, drink and give birth to unhappy wretches» (p. 492). This was the truly vicious circle that the school had to break.

Demia does not forget girls, whose «good education... is no less necessary for the glory of God and the public good» (idem). Then, with great pathos, he asks the following questions: «What do you think the origin is of so much disorder and jealousy in homes, of so many houses of ill-fame, of so many abandoned children in hospitals, of so much public immorality, if not the fact that too little attention has been paid to the education of girls, who have been left in ignorance? They fall into idleness, then into deceitfulness, rebelliousness, inconstancy and finally into that wretched state which is the usual reef on which a girl's virtue normally founders» (p. 493).

And so just as «the means has been found to improve the clergy and religious houses by establishing schools called seminaries and novitiates, so there is no other way to dry up the source of so many disorders except by setting up small schools to instruct the children of the poor people» (p. 493).

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