

THE TERCENTENARY OF A FORGOTTEN EDUCATOR

CHARLES DEMIA (2/2)

And what are the fruits of these schools? Demia becomes enthusiastic when he starts describing the society of the future made up of well educated and instructed members: «By this means, factories and workshops will be gradually filled with good apprentices who will subsequently be able to become excellent master craftsmen... It will not be difficult to rid the town of houses of ill fame, since idleness and poverty, which are the two causes of prostitution among women, will be banished from it...» (p. 494).

The author speaks also of gifts that are wasted for want of cultivation. One would discover in the ranks of the poor «people who were as much, and at times more, gifted in the arts, sciences and virtue than the rest of mankind» (p. 495). «These public schools would be also like academies of perfection for the poor children. In them the fiery passions of youth would be tamed and submitted to reason, their minds enlightened by the virtues they would be taught, their memory filled with all the good things they would hear, and their wills stimulated by the examples of virtue they would see practised there» (p. 495).

This enthusiastic educator realises that some people will stray from the path that has been traced out, but he thinks they will eventually return to it. His optimism knows no bounds with regard to the results of education: «It is absolutely certain that good habits acquired in youth are only rarely lost, and that the seed sown in their minds at an early age will bear fruit sooner or later, so much so, that, if sometimes you see them straying from their duty at a certain time, they return to it much more easily at another. One can say that they have been sanctified by the yoke of the Lord that they have been made to bear since childhood» (p. 496).

Also he sees the school as a sort of job centre or professional advisory centre. The schools «would serve also, if you like, as skill centres. Well-off people could go there and sign on someone to work in their house, or somebody else to work in their shop. Some even could be helped to continue their studies. Thus

one could send out these little workers, made perfect in this academy of virtue, into the Lord's vineyard (Matt. 20), and employ them, each according to his talents and ability» (p. 495).

In his enthusiasm to prove his point, Demia advances overwhelming arguments in favour of establishing free schools for poor children, and he paints a marvelous picture of the city in which the inhabitants have been properly educated. Having let himself go for a while, Demia adds other arguments based on authority to support his point of view: «Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church are full of passages which confirm the need for a good education. It is enough to indicate here a few instances as in Job chap. 2, Jeremiah chap. 3, the whole of Ecclesiastes. St. Chrysostom wrote a treatise on the subject. St. Jerome wrote the epistle "Ad Letam...". The great Gerson, although chancellor of the first university in the world, had such great esteem for these small schools that he was not ashamed to be involved with them» (p. 497).

He draws attention to the recommendations of the Council of Trent, and invokes the decrees of Sovereign Pontiffs (Alexander III) and royal statutes.

Whose responsibility is it to establish these schools? It belongs to the parishes and the holders of authority, «commonly called the fathers of the people. Certainly, by establishing these schools, they would have an extra claim to this title, and would be so in a more excellent way than their natural fathers, since these latter, having given them their being, have left them only misery and vice as their inheritance in a life that often ends in everlasting death. The former, however, make up for what is lacking in means and ability on the part of the others, by providing them with instruction which procures for them a second life which is much more precious than the first, and whose conclusion can only be very happy» (p. 500).

That is why «the alms of a good education would be more profitable and worthwhile than any other» (p. 501).

With a great deal of tact, he wants to harness the good will of the «magistrates (who) worked so successfully to bring prosperity to the citizens of Lyon, making it one of the most important cities by its trade, one of the most harmonious by its building, one of the best policed by its regulations. Their vigilance extended even to the condition of the streets and the mud at crossroads. There is good reason to hope that they will not let such a favourable opportunity pass by to make their name famous for posterity, but will work for the spiritual good of this city through the good education of poor children» (p. 502).

Finally, and the tract ends in this way: «It is to be hoped also that His Lordship the Archbishop, whose zeal for the salvation of his flock is matched only by his solicitude for the good of this city... will not let this occasion pass by to give paternal signs of his piety and zeal to so many poor children who implore him by means of this crude piece of writing; and signs also of

his authority in support of this work which is so important for the glory of God, the good of the State, the benefit of the individual, the advantage of the city. Having become endowed, by means of this establishment, with the crowning mark of beauty, which was seemingly the only thing lacking to make it perfect, it will be able to serve as a perfect model for the other cities of the Kingdom» (p. 504).

What repercussions followed this new offensive? «The magistrates, taking note of these remonstrances, met together on December 30th 1670, and decided to pay the sum of 200 livres each year out of public funds, to be used to establish a public school where children would be taught the principles of the Christian religion **and even reading and writing**» (Faillon, p. 61). The ending of this paragraph is strange, because Demia never separated secular studies and religion in the schools.

Beginnings were difficult, like the departure of a sailing boat. Once clear of the port, however, the sails fill with wind from the open sea. Demia founded 16 schools in Lyon, and others in the surrounding area and towns: at Bourg, Saint Etienne, Villefranche, Saint Chamond...

let us now look at how the day was organised in Demia's schools (Cf. "Reglements"):

In the morning, there was class from 7.30 to 11. Prayer, catechism, lunch, reading, writing. On Mondays: arithmetic. On Tuesdays: politeness. On Saturdays: spelling.

In the afternoon, class started at 1.30 (2 in summer) and went on till 4. Same programme as in the morning.

From time to time, "debates" were organised, covering the parts of the programme that had been explained in each subject. This exercise obliged the pupils to assimilate what they were taught.

The teaching was free (the teachers were not allowed to accept either money or presents from the parents) and compulsory. Demia seems to have been the first person ever to acknowledge the State's responsibility in this matter.

He recommended methods that appealed to the imagination like, for example, teaching reading by using little cubes of wood (like dice) with letters or syllables written on them.

With regard to spelling, he suggested a form of simplification which is still being called for in France today: the elimination of letters without any phonetic value (for example, the "p" in "baptême"), the suppression of useless or double consonants ("affaire" instead of "affaire", "aporter" instead of "apporter"), the replacement of "y" by "i" ("moien", "employer").

One thing he insisted upon was perhaps revolutionary for his day: all pupils had to have a medical examination: «No child will be accepted without having been previously examined by a doctor or surgeon to make sure he is not suffering from a contagious disease» (Rynois, p. 45).

The training of teachers was also one of his basic concerns: «His responsibility as Director General gave him the right to inspect all schools... He found that most of the teachers (men and women) were ignorant not only of the methods of reading and writing properly, but also of the principles of religion. There were heretics among them, ungodly people, and some who had exercised vile professions» (Faillon, p. 81). Would this be the reason why «Mr. Demia did not want his schools to be run by lay people»? (idem p. 80). He trained his teachers in the community or seminary of St. Charles.

He founded a congregation of teaching Sisters, the «Sisters of St. Charles» who «are still an important and flourishing congregation to this day» (Rynois, p. 53), with a number of houses in particular in Brazil (Petropolis, Parana and S. Catarina). They have inherited the enterprising spirit and zeal of this great and dynamic apostle of popular schools in the second half of the 17th century, Fr. Charles Demia.

He died in Lyon on October 23rd 1689, at the age of 53. «The great city organised a magnificent funeral for him. The 1.600 pupils of the schools he had founded were there, with their schoolmasters and mistresses, heading a triumphal procession made up of an immense crowd and of the leading citizens» (Rynois, p. 32).

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