

**Attacks and Defence of the
Christian Schools of De La Salle
between 1697 and 1706.
MADAME DE MAINTENON
and the MARQUIS D'ARGENSON.**

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1. A glance at events.

In general the 17th Century was anchored in tradition. Anything new or novel was looked on with suspicion and, as happened with De La Salle's Schools, was attacked. De La Salle needed great strength of purpose to withstand all the tensions and disappointments that came his way because of this. There were of course quite a number of schools in De La Salle's time, but the type he started was completely new. That is why conflicts occurred, which he had to face mostly alone, though at times he had supporters.

Another thing about the 17th century was its legalistic attitude, which made everything depend on the Law. It was the Law which decided whether a thing was good or bad. Hence De La Salle had to face the Law in confronting the teachers of the Petites Ecoles and the writing masters. De La Salle's followers were very different from the latter two. For one thing they called themselves Brothers and did not charge for their teaching. The writing masters on the other hand emphasised their title of master and when they attacked the Christian schools, they were defending their livelihood and that of their families. De La Salle therefore was their enemy because he stole their customers, and they, like ivy, hung on to anything in order to win the battle. That is why they frequently took De La Salle to court.

Between 1697 and 1710, in fact, De La Salle was involved in several court cases, always with the same charge of taking in students who were not poor.

Naturally De La Salle did not put his students through interrogation before accepting them, so he did not know their economic circumstances. All he wanted was to accept anyone who turned up. In this way he was initiating free education for all, irrespective of circumstances, a matter which governments later took up for themselves. But at that time all De La Salle received was attacks, accusations and interference. The teachers' unions brought their pleas to the High Court and to the Chatelet police headquarters in Paris.

De La Salle took all means necessary to defend himself. On some occasions he had to accept the ruling, which allowed him to play for time or to ask help from influential friends. If the parish priest did not support his case, he usually lost it, but if he did help or if the court was influenced in his favour, then the matter was very different, as we shall see.

The police acted according to existing law, and in some cases, by order or approval of their superior D'Argenson,

Paris chief of police between 1703 and 1706, they closed school premises. This was the case with 200-strong St. Anthony's School in Charonne Street, where they also confiscated the furniture, the teaching material and the books, with the result that De La Salle had to abandon it entirely, since it was not supported by a parish priest.

The teachers in the Petites Ecoles and the writing masters, encouraged by this victory, applied the same methods to some of the schools of St. Sulpice, especially those in Princess Street and St. Placide Street. The parish priest Joachim de La Chétardye happened to be ill at the time and his financial obligations to the schools were not paid up, so he could not do much against the attacks on the schools, with the result that De La Salle had to give in to some extent by permanently closing the school in Prince's Trench Street and for a time that in Princess Street.

Upsets like those in the capital were occurring also in other localities.

De La Salle usually left unpaid the costs of legal cases he lost, since he had no money to pay for them. We therefore presume that in some instances they were waived. The Augustinian Father Leonard of Saint Catherine, who wrote in his diary about some of the events of his day, made some interesting references to these lawsuits of De La Salle's. He knew that he had been found guilty, but he also knew that he remained undaunted in this schools business, even when they were raided. And he added as an afterthought: "This is how he usually carries on", in other words he stuck to his guns, for he saw the silver lining round the blackest of clouds.

Sometimes De La Salle got the friends of friends to help him out with his free schools. He was defending not himself but the poor children of his Christian schools and their parents who had opted for them.

There were also those who helped him because they saw the value of his schools and their fresh methods of teaching. They approved of learning to read French directly, instead of through Latin, the teaching of drawing, etc., and offering adult courses.

2. Supporters and enemies of the Christian Schools.

De La Salle had opposition to his schools but he also had his supporters.

*** Parish priests and parents of the students.**

Parish priests for the children of their parish and parents were naturally the first defenders of De La Salle's schools.

In 1704, for example, the parents manifested in favour of De La Salle's school in Charonne Street and tore the notices of official closure off the walls. Biographers also mention how the Dominicans of the Cross, in whose convent De La Salle used to say Mass, wept when the Brothers had to leave their district.

When the Brothers left the Princess Street school the parish priest realised the harm being done to his flock and intervened, rather late however, since by then the parents were already applying pressure for the return of the Brothers, which De La Salle acceded to some months later in 1706.

When the school attacked was St. Placide's near those of Princess and Bac Street, the parish priest Father de La Chétardye asked the help of a highborn woman called Madame Voisin (1) who was a friend of Madame de Maintenon to bring the matter to the notice of the palace. In fact the Marchioness de Maintenon sent a letter to the President of the Paris Parliament, Achilles d'Harlay, asking him to pro-

tect the St. Sulpice schools, with the following complimentary words: "There have never been schools as useful as these, nor less self-interested, but the other masters keep trying to close them", thanks to which the matter was successfully dealt with.

***Madame Françoise Scarron, Marchioness de Maintenon.**

This well-known lady was on several occasions the defender of the Christian schools, which from her exalted position she was able to be (2). The parish priest of St. Sulpice, Joachim de La Chétardye, had free entry to Court since the king himself had asked him to be his confessor. It would not therefore be hard for him occasionally to meet Madame de Maintenon, who was in any case quite interested in schools. It was she, for example, who favoured the foundation in 1686 of St. Cyr for the sons of nobles; she approved and supported several charity schools for working class children; finally she encouraged Fénelon to write his book "On the education of girls", a neglected area at the time, which was published in 1687; in fact it was she who suggested Fénelon as tutor to the Duke of Burgundy and as Bishop of Cambrai.

At St. Cyr she was called the "first teacher of France", a name she received because of her well-known love of children. Moreover in the schools she patronised, several important educational innovations took place. She was a dominant and strong character who well knew how to deal with educational problems arising at the time.

Brother Saturnino Gallego thinks that she was the person whose influence was felt at the court of Louis XIV in some definite cases concerning De La Salle and his Brothers. Here are some he mentions:

a. In 1690 when De La Salle fell seriously ill, a series of people successively asked one higher up to do something about it, so that Father de La Chétardye approached Madame de Voisin; she saw Madame de Maintenon, who in her turn arranged for the court Doctor Adrian Helvetius to look after De La Salle, and even some other Brothers later on.

b. Between 1714 and 1718 when the Brothers were applying for official royal recognition, the archbishop and Madame de Maintenon were among those who exerted their influence.

c. Biographers talk about the efforts of the archbishop of Paris and the parish priest of St. Sulpice to get De La Salle to open a boarding school for exiled Irish boys of King James II's court. Behind these efforts was Louis XIV himself.

This boarding school was opened in the "Grand House", where if space was adequate, everything else was missing. It was then that Madame de Voisin intervened by giving money for furnishings and adaptations. In fact the amount she gave was the considerable sum of \$120,000, (7000 livres), which seems to indicate that she received some of it from the court: one would suppose it to be a matter of related royal families looking after one another.

*** Marc René de Voyer de Paulmy, Marquis d' Argenson (1652-1720).**

Argenson (3) was right in the middle of the fighting over De La Salle's schools because he was chief of police for 20 years including the years of the legal battles. From 1694 to 1697 he had held different official posts and from 1697 was Lieutenant General of Paris Police. He had his eye on everything and kept Paris in order with a firm hand. Among

other things he kept the Jansenists so much at bay that they called him the "wrecker of Port Royal". Because of his efficiency, King Louis XIV had complete confidence in him. History remembers him as a devoted worker fully given to his police work. In 1719 he was appointed President of the Financial Council.

The upsetting events surrounding St. Anthony's and Princess Street Schools took place under his mandate. All the plunderings, confiscations, closures, posting of notices were either his orders or his consent, a black mark as far as we are concerned.

3. Continued difficulties for the schools.

De La Salle's difficulties over gratuitous teaching of the poor persist even now. Non-state schools including those of Christian foundation are finding things hard, since a lot of people would like to see the back of them.

It's like Jacob and the Angel. Some important issues like parental choice are at stake, as well as justice and equal distribution of resources so that everyone can have free education. In many countries parents have to pay twice, once to the school, another time to the state if they prefer a non-state education. The results affecting schools and their teachers, parents and students, have the same old causes of fear and self interest.

We can learn a lesson from what De La Salle did.

– Defend free schools open to everyone and indiscriminate in allowing everyone to choose the school they want independently of their financial situation. Nowadays gratuity of schools depends on official policy and equal distribution of resources.

Free education is in many countries still a long way off, but you will always find the equivalent of Mesdames de Voisin and de Maintenon using their influence in favour of the poor.

– Having schools open especially to the poor and needy, who thus have access to culture and faith: "The poor have the Gospel preached to them".

– Having Christian Schools which evangelise, teaching Christian values as well as culture to those who want to receive them. If the Christian school fails in this, there will be no reason for it to continue. ●

Notes:

(1) Charlotte Trudaine, madame Voisin (or Voysin), was wife of Daniel François Voisin de la Noiraye (1654-1717), Chancellor of France. In 1715, at the death of Louis XIV, she became a member of the Regency council. She got on very well with the King and Madame de Maintenon. (Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle XVII. Voysin. Also Gallego "Vida y Pensamiento de De La Salle. BAC. "Voisin")

(2) Marchioness de Maintenon (1654-1719), Françoise d'Aubigné, Madame Scarron, being married 17 years to Paul Scarron from whom she was widowed at the age of 24. By 1673 she was at court and secretly married Louis XIV in 1683 when the queen died. When the king himself died, all her court influence vanished. (op cit under "Maintenant")

(3) Marquis d'Argenson. op. cit. p 102-3 Argenson, d'Argenson.