

STUDIES IN 18TH CENTURY LASALLIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS.

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I should like to put forward the theory that the boarding schools run by the Brothers in the 18th Century were an answer to the troubles which had started to affect French secondary schools in the 17th Century.

De La Salle himself, though concentrating on elementary schools, did also open secondary colleges, for example that for the Irish in Paris in 1689, and the rather more important one at St. Yon in Rouen in 1705. The latter had direct successors in Marseilles, Rossignolerie (Angers), Mareville, Melun, Nantes, Avignon, Charlemagne (Carcassonne) and several other places. They had some things in common with other contemporary secondary schools, though the methods of teaching introduced by De La Salle were revolutionary. (1)

Secondary schooling at the time was structured on classical lines, under the auspices of universities and was directed by religious orders, especially by the Jesuits and Oratorians. There were some colleges of secondary rank run by the order of Minimes founded by St. Francis de Paul, by the Barnabites, established by St. Anthony Mary Zacaria, by the Fathers of the Doctrine, Caesary de Bus's institute, by the St. Maura (2) congregation of Benedictines and by the Jacobite Fathers in the diocese of Beauvais. (3)

Now a crisis occurred in secondary schools at the end of the 17th Century. In fact it occurred also in universities and religious orders. This came about because their studies did not provide for what the majority of French people really needed. The middle classes, those who ran the business of the country, had been gaining ground during Louis XIV's reign (4); they had completely new ideas on how things should be run and they wanted an educational system which would cater for those ideas.

The more important members of the "Bourgeoisie", as these middle classes were called, ran the country, but soon began taking on the habits of the nobility, who tended towards traditionalism. But the lower middle classes especially wanted changes in the schools. These were the ordinary businessmen, lawyers, civil servants, who began making their presence felt throughout Louis XIV's reign. (6)

In the preface to his "Treatise on choosing one's course of studies and how to succeed in them", which came out in 1686, the social commentator Fleury has given us a description of French secondary schooling in the final quarter of the 17th Century. Fleury put school studies under the microscope

and emphasised the urgency of adapting them to what society really needed. Fleury had himself studied under the Jesuits, and disagreed entirely with their system of studies known as the "Ratio", and with what was taught in universities and by the Oratorians. Anticipating the English philosopher Locke, he placed the new general middle class hopes and ideas in an educational setting which would fit the Bourgeoisie.

In his famous "preface" (7) Fleury begins by highlighting the almost frantic desire French youth in his day had for study. This he says simply cannot be ignored by the authorities nor indeed by any reasonable person. (8) Once this has been asserted, he begins a tirade against the studies of the day, whose chief fault was that they had nothing to do with a student's future career.

His greatest stricture was that, after eight to ten years, those who had studied could hardly be distinguished in learning from those who had never been to school. Fleury, rather ironically adds that *"the student knows Latin somewhat, has a few snippets of the fables and history of Greece and Rome, and remembers the names of a couple of their orators. He knows that philosophy is divided into four parts, and has some vague ideas about those sections of it which have been dealt with at greater length: like universals, categories, the unity of being, the entity of reason, the infinite, the real meaning of quantity, and the three types of soul. He also has a smattering of terms which he has become familiar with, like: substance, accident, matter, form, deprivation, instinct, appetite; he can also recite a few propositions which he has stored in his brain as indisputable axioms, such as: nature abhors a vacuum; everything tends towards its centre, etc."* (9)

Fleury, who incidentally is dealing with secondary school programmes, informs us that in his account of the practical results of their studies, he is talking only of the average student; he does not include the stupid ones, who are the majority of the school population, nor of the lazy ones, nor of the highly gifted, who rise so much above the rest, that they walk off with all the prizes: but these bright scholars are so few that they can hardly be counted as the norm. (10)

He adds immediately, with the same heavy irony, that not even the latter are being taught properly: *"They have trained their memory and imagination, without practising judgment; they can recite mechanically a few Latin poems, some facts in the lives of Milthiades and Epaminondas, a couple of paragraphs on Roman History, a scattering of the customs practised by the ancients, one or two names of their magistrates and a sprinkling of their religious ceremonies. They can also compose Latin verses and prose, with which they display their stupendous intelligence. Their greatest achievement is in the way they talk; the more high-sounding the words they use, the greater the applause they receive. When they are asked to speak, although they know not the slightest detail of the subject in question, they get through it with distinction by using the longest words they know, which sound superb, but which mean not a thing. Yes, their ideas on empire and dictatorships make them ridiculously full of themselves, especially if they have received top marks in philosophy, for in that case, they can twist their ideas round with all kinds of sophisms on subjects as different as you can imagine. Rivalry and fear of being forced to admit that they might be wrong, makes them heated and stubborn in discussion, and just as bad in defending what they have asserted"*. (11)

This text shows how Fleury rejects the emulation schemes used in the "Ratio", which were so much in vogue in secondary schools, and which he says had degenerated into infatuation with words for words' sake, by the undue stress on form with little attention to content. He therefore concludes that was why reflective, knowledgeable people took no notice of what teachers and tutors taught, and why parents, using their common sense, held in low esteem those who instructed their children and landed them up in such a mess, that only when they left college did they start learning anything useful. Parents decided that then was the time to start working on what the teachers had left out: to give their children a solid spiritual training, to exercise their intelligence and good habits, to learn how to keep their imagination under control and to fill their heads with what they would need in real life. (12)

Therefore Fleury advocates a realistic and practical programme in secondary schools. His ideas can be summarised in saying: "Only what is going to be useful in their later life should be taught them". The results of doing this will be immediate and there should be no turning back, "we have to do things according to our own customs, to speak and write in our own language, change study programmes and learn the things which are really useful" (13)

He does not even concede that traditional studies are of value intrinsically, merely as scholarship. In this he was following Seneca, (14) and he affirms with Seneca that knowledge acquired in school is only really useful if it is directed at real life. (15) He starts with the principle that it is a grave error to believe that we should occupy children with useless matters until they are old enough to tackle serious ones. When this is done, children more often than not become shallow, and it is never too early to get them out of shallowness provided the process is gradual. Allow something to fit their age; allow them to play and enjoy themselves and give them some entertainment, but don't wear them out with useless, disagreeable studies, which have nothing in common with what children enjoy other than their uselessness, and which are serious occupations only in the weariness they cause. (16)

Fleury cannot however be said to be a defender of effortless education. He maintains that young people should be kept occupied in doing things in order to avoid boredom, but that these things should be taxing, so that they will learn how to work hard. But he does not think that the most suitable subject matter to achieve this is "a discussion of universals "a parte rei", or the unity of being: geometry and jurisprudence can produce the same effect, with better results and greater advantages". (17)

To sum up, we can say that Fleury maintains that only studies useful to life should be pursued, that real utility takes precedence over traditional humanism, practical subjects over formal literary studies, philosophy being reduced to aspects of logic, that progress brought about by the passage of time has proved that what is done in other countries in

accordance with their customs, should have nothing to do with what the people of our own society have to learn.

I should like to ask in conclusion, "Are Fleury's ideas the foundation, within a Christian setting, of the 17th and 18th Century Lasallian methodology, whether in elementary schools or in boarding schools for the middle classes, where practicality, imagination and up-to-dateness seemed to be the very embodiment of Fleury's theories?" (18)

Once accepted, this theory goes a long way towards proving that, if Fleury can be said to be the theoretical educator of the middle classes by what he says in his well known Preface, we can equally affirm that **de La Salle and his teachers were the practical exponents of those same practical ideas in their boarding schools**, opened specifically to fit the actual needs of the middle class.

Notes and References

- (1) C. Alcalde: "The teacher in the pedagogy of St. John Baptist de La Salle". pp.324-329 in Spanish edition.
- (2) Un ancien professeur: *De l'instruction publique en France dans le passé et dans le présent* (Paris. 1864). p. 45.
- (3) Delettre: *Histoire du Diocèse de Beauvais*. T. III. p. 789.
- (4) G. Mongredien: *La Vie de société aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris. 1950) p 45.
- (5) R. Mousnier: *Les XVIe et XVIIe Siècles* (P.U.F. Paris 1954) P. 45.
- (6) G.Mongredien. o.c.p. 32
- (7) The "Dossier de François Bottu de Saint Fonds". in the private archives of the College of Mongré. *Adversaria*. T. I. pp 31 to 35. contains this famous document. It remained unpublished until F. Dainville had it printed in the review "XVIIe Siècle". numbers 17 and 18 of 1953. The references are to this review. The "Dossier de Saint Fonds" tells us that Fleury "l'avait composé pour mettre à la tête de son livre", but he did not publish it because "il craignait - avec raison - d'attirer contre lui toute l'Université s'il la faisait imprimer" (Id p 31)
- (8) Belin: "Recherches sur l'enquête relative aux Universités et Collèges du Royaume, ordonnée en 1667 par Louis XIV" (*Revue Internationale de l'Enseignement*. 1898) pp. 440 and following.
- (9) Ibid p 43.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Ibid.
- (12) Id p 42.
- (13) Id p 44.
- (14) Seneca: *Letters to Lucilius*. Letter CVI.
- (15) "Mais, dira quelqu'un, ces études sont bonnes au moins pour l'école: comme si l'école estoit un état désirable pour luy mesme, et non pas un moyen et un chemin pour arriver aux connaissances nécessaires pour la vie". (Id p 44)
- (16) Fleury: l.c.p. 44
- (17) Ibid.
- (18) C. Alcalde. l.c.