

**THOSE FOR WHOM «DUTIES I»  
WAS INTENDED:**

**1. THE BROTHERS**

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**Introduction**

**The questions**

According to the historian Georges Rigault, "The Duties of a Christian (Part I)" ("Duties I") occupies a special place among the writings of St. John Baptist de La Salle. This catechetical treatise poses a certain number of problems for the reader. Did the author, like any other writer, ask himself the following or similar questions: What am I going to write? For what reasons? What is my aim? How? For which people?

**The answers**

With regard to the work we are considering, De la Salle himself answers the first four questions. As for the fifth one, he leaves us wondering.

1. As A. Carion says, he wrote a theological treatise which was "accessible to Christians of average culture".
2. He had noticed with great sorrow the ignorance of little children (pupils) and of adults (Christians, parents, teachers). They had to be offered the means of acquiring a Christian education.
3. For this reason, the aim of Duties I is to "form Christians" (Preface).
4. The original method he adopts for his explanation is that of a continuous text. This approach is more accessible, more pleasant and more coherent than one involving questions and answers.

In future articles, we shall try to answer the other question: For whom did De La Salle write Duties I?

**THE PERSONS FOR WHOM  
HE MAY HAVE WRITTEN «DUTIES I»**

The life and work of De La Salle form a single and consistent whole. Together, they are dedicated to the fulfilment of the aims of the Institute founded by him: "to give a Christian education to children" who are in school "from morning till night" (RC I,3).

This ministry, which is of capital importance for society and the Church, presupposes three agents: teachers, pupils and parents. It is my opinion that Duties I was intended for all these, taken separately or together.

**THE BROTHERS  
OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS**

They were closest to the Founder. They were constantly the centre of his attention and those who primarily carried out his educational programme. As is made clear in the preface and in the content, it is for them that he wrote first and foremost and explicitly such works as the Meditations, the Conduct of Schools, the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer, the Collection of various small treatises.

**THE BROTHERS are not mentioned in Duties I**

If De La Salle had the Brothers specifically in mind when writing Duties I, then he would have stressed areas of particular importance to consecrated persons and to the teaching ministry. And also, if this were the case, how does one explain the fact that neither teachers nor their duties with regard to the fourth Commandment are mentioned; or the casuistic treatment of the sixth Commandment, which is of little use to Brothers and their pupils; or his silence with regard to the counsels of perfection; or the treatment of and casuistic approach to the sacrament of marriage; or the omission of questions on the duties of a consecrated person in the examination of conscience before confession? Finally, how does one explain the fact that neither the word "teacher" nor "Brother" appears a single time in the text?

**THE BROTHERS are borne in mind in Duties I**

Blain refers to this when he writes: "After De La Salle had embodied all the practices and customs of the Community in a set of rules in a way that satisfied him, he decided to enhance them with several other

works which were very useful for the Brothers and their schools... **catechisms** of all kinds, small ones for the children, others for the **Brothers**, which were **big-ger**, more detailed, more learned and contained also moral considerations and pious practices. It is in **these works** that the teachers of the Christian schools **found** the material they needed in order **to explain** the great truths of religion" (Blain I, p. 341). It is very likely that the Brothers used Duties I at moments in the day set aside by the Rule for the preparation of catechism lessons (RC XXIX).

What Blain says is corroborated by the Superior General Br. Timothy at a time when the memory of the Founder was still fresh: "This catechism which is full of such holy and sound doctrine was drawn up by its pious author for use by persons whose task it is to instruct those who are normally totally ignorant of the mysteries of our holy religion" (Preface of the 1727 edition).

Duties I attracted a great deal of ecclesiastical approval, and was recommended for use by teachers and hence by the Brothers. One such recommendation is given in 1786 by Bordier, the Vicar General of Rouen: "This work seemed to us to be suitable for the instruction of children and useful for the **teachers** who instruct them" (1787 Rouen edition).

What we have said above shows that the Founder had the Brothers implicitly in mind when he was writing Duties I. This is only logical in the light of the ministry he was proclaiming for his sons, the Brothers: "You should consider yourself as a depository of the faith" (M 61, 2); "The Church, whose ministers you are" (M 199, 2); "You are successors to the Apostles in their task of catechising and teaching the poor" (M 200, 1); "You are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ" (M 195, 2); etc...

In order that Brothers may fulfil the tasks implied by these and other titles in a responsible and competent way, he says to them: "You ought at least to have sufficient knowledge to teach the good and wholesome doctrine of the Church" (M 120, 1). He tells them where they can safely find this doctrine: they must "hold to the practice of following in all things what the

Church teaches the faithful in her approved catechisms, that is to say, in the catechisms composed or adopted by the bishops united with the Vicar of Christ" (M.5, 1).

As one who liked suitable and practical solutions, De La Salle came to the help of his Brothers by providing them with a sure and accessible stock of doctrine which would enable them to fulfil their ministry competently and also face up to the heresies which were then fashionable: Jansenism, Gallicanism, Quietism...

And so he was able to insist: "Apply yourself to the study of religion... You must strive to attain a perfect knowledge of the truths of religion by study, because ignorance in such matters would be criminal since it would cause ignorance in those whom you should instruct" (M 153, 1). It is hardly possible to speak more clearly and bluntly.

## CONCLUSIONS

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By comparing, then, the results of internal criticism of Duties I with what the biographers and ecclesiastical censors said, as well with De La Salle himself said, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. The **contents** of Duties I is not addressed either directly or explicitly to the Brothers as consecrated persons.
2. Duties I was a precious source of help for the Brothers in their personal training and in their work as catechists, and was possibly written with this aim in mind.
3. The daily contact of the Brothers with the text of Duties I, which was used as a reader in classes for more than a century and a half, leads us to conclude that it was meant primarily for them and that they benefited greatly from its contents. The explanations they had to give their pupils to help them understand the vocabulary forced them to become familiar with the rich and sound doctrine of Duties I.