

**"L'École Paroissiale"
an important pedagogical work
of the 17th century**

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1. Introduction

A few years have passed since I first read the pedagogical work entitled "The Parish School" (*L'École Paroissiale*), which was written in 1654. I was agreeably impressed by the richness of its contents and by the fresh approach it must have signified to the schoolteachers of the 17th century. It was no surprise to me that it has been said, with reference to this work, that through it the teaching programmes and methods of the Charity Schools of the 17th and 18th centuries were determined in a fairly precise manner. This work is now recognised as the classic portrayal of the teaching methods in vogue during the period of the "ancien regime".

During the lifetime of the author, there were many reprints of the work. For example, it was the author himself who made improvements in the edition which I use and which is dated 1685.

The book gained a considerable reputation for itself among the pedagogues and founders of congregations dedicated to teaching at that time. For instance, Charles Demia recommended it to teachers when he was writing his "Règlements"; in addition, it was recommended by Louis Aubery (1), a priest and a pedagogue of Moulins, in his work which bears the same title. De La Salle and the Brothers were surely inspired by it when they were drafting the "Conduct of Schools".

"L'École Paroissiale" was, then, a vade mecum for the schoolteachers of France and it was, in fact, a bestseller in its time.

2. The Author of "The Parish School"

For a long time, the name of the author of this very important work was not known. Historians and literary antiquarians never succeeded in uncovering the identity which was concealed under the signature "I.B.D." The honour and the credit of having solved and made this public in 1963 (2) fell to Bro. Yves Poutet who proved that the three letters

denoted the authorship of Jacques de Bathencour. Moreover, he has provided us with details about the man himself.

Whenever I.D.B. wrote his signature, he added "unworthy priest" and "Priest of a parish in Paris".

An author's concealing his name in this way was quite common in the 17th century. Blain did the same when he published his life of De La Salle in 1733.

The words "unworthy priest" are an expression of humility. We come across the same words in Father Nicolas Barré who used to append them to his writings.

Jacques de Bathencour was the priest in charge of a school belonging to the parish of St. Nicolas de Chardonnet. The establishment of the Seminary with the same name was the undertaking of Adrian Bourdoise, who together with J.J. Olier implemented a profound reform of the clergy by means of spiritual renewal. In addition, Bourdoise had been the founder of the "League of Prayer" to obtain from the Lord good schoolteachers who would be both "competent and virtuous". Bourdoise prepared his priests both for parish work and for the work of teaching (3).

Jacques de Bathencour, as has been pointed out, belonged to a parish in Paris, precisely to that of St. Nicolas de Chardonnet. He belonged to the diocese of Evreux but by 1654 he was already in Paris. His work, "The Parish School", was the fruit of 18 years' experience in schools.

Before this time, he had written two other books which appeared two months before. They were entitled "Informal instruction in catechism form for all the solemnities of the year" and "Manner of giving Catechism. An easy method for teaching children in the elementary schools (petites écoles) in a Christian Manner".

3. Pedagogical value of "The Parish School"

Various authors, among them Georges Rigault (4), have demonstrated the merits of the work, the "Parish School", and those of its author.

On a personal level, the following points have impressed me:

- The teacher is called by God to work in the school. He must show that he is grateful by affection and zeal in his commitment to this task.
- The work of a teacher is difficult and distressing. The life of one dedicated to this task is hard (preface).
- The supreme dignity of the school teacher. It is an employment which is holy and useful.
- The child deserves the greatest respect and ought to be treated with gentleness.
- In his occupation, the teacher often experiences upsets which sometimes come from the children and at other times from the parents or from people who do not rate this occupation highly..., an occupation which, of course, is of the greatest importance in the eyes of God and of decent people.
- The child is conditioned by his environment: family poverty, the actual situation of his parents... All this has an effect on the teacher's task.
- Reference is made to a topic which is still relevant: forms of punishment and repressive measures. We must educate without instilling fear into the pupils. The teacher can use

punishment as a way of letting the pupil know that he has not done something very well.

– The author also speaks of ways of letting the pupils cooperate. He refers to different tasks or "offices" which can be entrusted to the children, such as the "observer", the "officer", the "overseer", etc. These terms seem to have been taken from military usage.

To sum up: the teacher ought to make an effort to get to know the child, to think seriously about the methods he uses and he must try to improve the way he goes about his job as a teacher.

4. The work is a mirror of the customs of its time

Thanks to this book, we know about its author and also about a fair number of the school practices of the 17th century. For example:

– **The School Timetable.**

Classes used to start at 7 a.m. and finish at 11, to start again at 1:30 in the afternoon and carry on until 5 p.m.

– **The Holidays.**

The weekly holiday was on Thursday afternoon. The summer holidays were from 17th until 30th September.

– **The daily Mass was obligatory.**

– **Breakfast** was not eaten at home but in the school. There was a twofold idea behind this: on the one hand, the child was meant to learn to take food according to the rules of politeness and civility, and on the other, to help the poor. Those who wished could put some of their breakfast in a basket, which was kept for this purpose, for the benefit of those who had nothing to eat.

– **Deprivation of food** was a "frequent punishment". The children were encouraged to undergo this deprivation in order to get them used to the idea of fasting in Lent when they reached the age when they had to fast, viz., 21 years.

– **First Communion** was received between the ages of 12 and 14 years. It was customary to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation before this.

– **Processions.**

The teacher and his pupils had to take part in these. It was customary for both religious and civil authorities to come together to take part in these processions. There were two main ones: the Feast of the Ascension and the Feast of St. Roch whose protection was sought against epidemics and rabies. However, there were many other processions, especially in the various parishes in the cities.

With regard to those who took part, it was a kind of

"fashion parade": the grand gentry in their carriages, the ladies' colourful outfits, the associations with their badges.... The whole thing was a spectacle.

It was quite common that inter-parish rivalry led to confrontations during processions, and that some children attacked those in the rival parish by throwing stones at them. Watching how the teacher meted out punishment, in public, to the unruly was not something that anybody found odd.

– **At the Sunday Mass.**

When it was time for the sermon, it was usual for the children, led by the teacher, to go out to the porch to have a sandwich and to come back in when the priest had finished speaking. Adaptation to child psychology?

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This superficial outline is an invitation to have recourse to the original book, from which I have taken these words as a connecting link: "Just as the heart is the principle of life, so is the teacher the heart of the school when he is animated by the spirit of God". He must be adorned with the theological and cardinal virtues as well as with profound humility which is the foundation of all these. ●

NOTES

(1) Louis Aubery was in contact with De La Salle, to whom Aubery handed over the school at Moulins when he was already advanced in years. This was in 1709 when he was 80 years old. He died in the odour of sanctity. Cf. **Saturnino Gallego**, "Vida y pensamiento de San Juan Bautista De La Salle", Madrid, 1986, Vol. I, pp. 427, 462.

(2) Cf. **Yves Poutet**, "Le XVII^e siècle et les origines lasalliennes", Vol. I, Rennes, 1970, p. 350. And also: "Jean-Baptiste de La Salle aux prises avec son temps". Cahiers Lasalliens N^o. 48, Rome, 1988, p. 4ff.

(3) Ambroise de Paccory was imbued with the spirit of St. Nicolas de Chardonnet. Cf. **Clément-Marcel Martinais**, "Le Diacre Ambroise Paccory". Lasallianum N^o. 18, Rome, 1976, p. 29. Mathieu de Beuvelet, who was a close acquaintance of De La Salle, belonged to this seminary.

(4) **G. Rigault** (Cf. "Histoire de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes", Vol. I., pp. 45-49) makes an excellent analysis. Cf. also LASALLIANA, dossier 19-4-A-75, which makes a study of the differences between "L'École Paroissiale" and the "Conduite des Écoles", p. 37ff.

Cf. **Yves Poutet**, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 350; Vol. II, pp. 29, 299, and **Jean Pungier**, "Comment est née la Conduite des Écoles", p. 37ff.

La Salle did not intend to replace "L'École Paroissiale" with the "Conduite des Écoles", but to bring to perfection, based on the practices in his classrooms, the Regulations and Methods which Bathencour's work put forward.