

**A READING GUIDE  
TO THE "COMPLETE WORKS"  
N° 1: THE RULES (1/2)**

**Br Alain Houry**

The Complete Works of St John Baptist de La Salle begin with a collection of Rules: Common Rules, the Rule of the Brother Director, the Memoir on the Habit and various personal writings which include "the Rules which I have imposed upon myself".

What value did these often very detailed regulations have for the first Brothers and for the Founder? What is their significance today for the Brothers and for others? To what extent can one consider John Baptist de La Salle as the author of these different texts? Why is their numbering sometimes interrupted?

The purpose of this introduction is to attempt to answer these and other questions.

**RC THE COMMON RULES OF THE BROTHERS  
OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS**

**1. A prescriptive Rule.**

Let us begin by examining the plan of the RC:

Ch. 1	"Of the purpose and necessity for this Institute"
Ch. 2	"Of the Spirit of the Institute" (the type of person that it requires)
Ch. 3-6	Its "exercises" providing continuing formation
Ch. 7-10	"School rules"
Ch. 11-15	"Of the way the Brothers are to behave" in their relations with others
Ch. 16-21	The virtues the Brothers must practise
Ch. 22-26	"Rules regarding the good order and the good running of the Institute"
Ch. 27-32	Regulations for various days
Ch. 33	Appendix: formula for the "renewal of vows"

Let us note straightaway that the *Rules* and *exercises* are not restricted to community life (See LA 34,4; CE 1; R 10,2,26).

The reader may be put off somewhat on reading this text which to many people will seem to be a **straightjacket**: certain expressions seem to discourage any kind of initiative

(eg: RC 7,3): everything is reduced to asking Brother Director for permission! Prohibitions are particularly numerous regarding recreations (RC 6), correction (RC 7) and even in dealing with the virtues such as poverty (RC 17), chastity (RC 19), obedience (RC 20) and silence (RC 20,9). This approach reflects the way virtues were presented in the "Duties of a Christian" as being the "opposite of vices and sin" (DB 2,17,1).

The prescriptions regarding politeness (RC 21 but also 12 and 14) and really the whole text reflect the "Grand Siècle" (the age of Louis XIV) and are terribly dated: we are very aware of the cultural distance that separates us from it. It would be obviously a mistake to give in to the temptation of rejecting the RC as a whole because of that. The Rules have an essentially practical aim, speaking as they do of exercises, behaviour and regulations. Their literary style is largely that of a set of regulations. Nowadays, we would speak of "internal regulation".

Apart from those in chapters 1 and 2 (RC 1 and RC 2) which describe the mission of the Institute and the spirit which should inspire its members, the articles that say *why something has to be done* are far and few between. The articles that do so are all the more valuable, and it is best to begin the reading of the RC precisely with them.

Leaving aside chapters 1 and 2, here are some articles which give a "motive".

RC 4,1: The Brothers of this Institute must have a great love for the holy exercise of meditation...which is the one most capable of drawing down God's blessing on all the others [exercises].

RC 7,1: The Brothers will run gratuitous schools everywhere, and this is essential for their Institute.

RC 7,13-15: They will love all their pupils tenderly...They will show equal affection for all the pupils, more even for the poor than for the rich because they are much more entrusted with the former by their Institute than with the latter.

RC 12,3 and 9: The Brothers will always see God in the person of their Director and they will be careful not to speak to him except as to one invested with God's authority...When they render an account of their conduct to the Brother Director, they will do so with the disposition and view that they are doing so to God who knows the depths of their soul.

RC 13,1 and 6: The Brothers will have a cordial affection for one another, but they will not give anyone a sign or indication of special affection, through respect for Our Lord whom they must honour equally in all as being animated by him and living by his Spirit...in view of the esteem they have for them and the respect they have for God residing in them.

RC 16,1-3: The Brothers must apply to themselves and take as the underlying reason for their regularity what St Augustine says at the beginning of his Rule: that those who live in community must love God above all things and then their neighbour...The Brothers will have a special esteem for everything regarding regularity...God attaches special graces to it.

RC 20,1-2 and 8: The Brothers will make sure and will be careful never to obey except with a view and motives inspired by faith. They will be careful to leave everything at the first sign from Brother Director with the view that it is God himself who calls and commands them...They will do nothing

without permission...so as to be sure of doing God's will in all things.

RC 22,7: [Sick Brothers] will take care to endure their illness patiently, recalling frequently the patience of Our Lord Jesus Christ and that of the holy martyrs, so as to be able to imitate them.

To take the matter a step further, we need to examine the "law-making" activity of the Founder.

## 2. Rules based on practice.

From the moment the young canon De La Salle started looking after the first young teachers recruited by Adrien Nyel to run schools for the poor in Rheims - this was in 1679-1680 - he undertook to complete their human and spiritual formation. In 1681, he lodged the teachers in his own house and, in 1682, he went to live with them elsewhere. Subsequently, in response to their apprehension regarding the future, he gave up his privileged position in the Church and in society in order to share their situation. In this way he was able to stabilise the Brothers in their vocation.

It was during the process of establishing the *Community of the Christian Schools* that De La Salle was led to draw up a rule of life in imitation of other religious communities.

"But before writing his *Rules* - or his *Regulations*, as his biographers more than once called them - De La Salle had already practised with the Brothers the exercises of a community life" (Br. Maurice Auguste Hermans, CL 25,4).

It would be useful to read the long footnote on this same page. In it, the founder of the Cahiers Lasalliens, basing himself on the works of the biographers of J.B. de La Salle, sees three stages in this process:

1682: the exercises; 1694: the Rules; 1717-1718: the final revision of the Rules.

We include a summary of this page for those who do not have a copy of CL 25 close at hand.

Around June 24th 1681, De La Salle witnessed the departure of almost all of Adrien Nyel's teachers. *And then, at the end of the first six months, at the beginning of 1682, new candidates came forward. They not only had suitable qualities for teaching and were pious, but they were also disposed to live in community. It was then that a real kind of community began to be formed in the house. It was also at the beginning of that same year that the exercises, as they were then called, began to be practised, and these are the same as are practised today (1721) in all the houses of the Institute (Brother Bernard, 47).*

It would seem that *The Practice of the Daily Regulation* tells us basically what was practised at the time, even though the copy we have dates from 1713. Many of the prescriptions contained in the Practice were included in the *Common Rules*, especially those in the final chapters (27-30).

In the months that preceded June 1694, the Rules appeared for the first time in a fixed form (Maillefer, Ms. Rheims [1740], 105-107). First the Brothers in Paris and Vaugirard were consulted, then all the Brothers gathered for the annual retreat at Whitsun 1694. *At the end of the retreat,*

*he presented the collection of his Rules, which were read and approved unanimously.*

The copy we possess dates from 1705, but it seems clear that it reproduces mainly, if not exclusively, the 1694 text mentioned above. In any case, the biographers do not mention any revision before 1717.

## 3. Rules drawn up by the community.

The Founder of the Brothers was not an armchair legislator, even if he isolated himself, prayed and fasted in order to put himself into the right disposition for setting down in writing the practices of the Community and the significance of their living together. Blain writes: *The Holy Founder wished his disciples to consider the Rules as having come down from Heaven, to have for them the respect, attachment and fidelity due to the orders of the Most High (CL 8, 324).*

It is clear in what sense these Rules "came down from Heaven": it was through the intermediary of the Community, which was sensitive to the calls of the Spirit and the charism of the Founder. Blain shows the role of the living community in the drawing up of the Rules, when he reports De La Salle's words to the Brothers at their first assembly: *"Your heart will recognise its own work in the book that will be composed, and the laws it will contain will appear pleasing to you, because you yourselves will have drawn them up" (CL 7, 232).*

John Baptist de La Salle is the author of the Rules, not primarily as the one who drew up the articles, but rather as the one who, living out daily the mission of the Institute with the Brothers, discovered with them the type of life and work that this involved. If we follow the process he went through, we will find his spirit in it. If not, we run the risk of finding a text that is dead, since it is separated from us by a cultural gap of three centuries.

The text published in the *Complete Works* is the one that was sent on October 31st 1718 by Brother Barthélemy (Joseph Truffet), the Superior General, to the Brothers at Troyes (See RC 34). The Assembly for Brother Directors held at St Yon, near Rouen, on Trinity Sunday 1717, had accepted "for the general good of the Institute" to elect a Brother to head the Institute. The Assembly had gone on to revise the Rules and had asked De La Salle to put the finishing touches to it (Maillefer, Ms. Rheims [1740], 273).

It is interesting to note the constant consultation between the Brothers and their Founder. He it was who had provided them with the first outline draft in 1694. In 1714, the Brothers deliberated without the Founder being present, but they asked him to check the fidelity of their perception of his founding charism.

It was not only the Founder, but the first Brothers also who were the authors of the Rule. In a talk given to SIEL, Brother Michel Sauvage showed that even the students to whom the Brothers were sent were involved in the process. In this way the Community organised its structures with a view to the salvation of these students. We should be aware of all this as we study the RC.

... / ...