

**WORDS OF PRAISE
ADDRESSED TO THE BROTHERS
THROUGHOUT
FRENCH HISTORY**

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Throughout history some prominent people have spoken about the Brothers of the Christian Schools or simply about the Institute. Many times they did it in public interventions of a social or a political type.

This article has gathered only some of the most eloquent references and has situated them in the context in which they were expressed.

● **Bernard-Charpieux, mayor of West Lyon.**

During the government of Napoleon Bonaparte, after the French Revolution, it was necessary to face the reestablishment of many social institutions. One of the most urgent was that of education since the revolutionaries had suppressed many schools and had persecuted Christian teachers and members of teaching congregations, like the Brothers. Ignorance was beginning to dominate in many areas and was affecting the young.

In Lyon, as in other parts of France, a study of how to reestablish the schools was under way. The mayor of the western zone of the city, Bernard-Charpieux, sent to the Minister of Education, Jean-Etienne-Marie Portalis, a proposal which suggested ceding to the Brothers the so-called Petit Collège that the French State had ceded to the city some months before. He did this on "Pluviôse, 14th, XII year" (February 4, 1804.)

Mayor Bernard-Charpieux, after speaking about the educational needs in his area, expressed it this way: *«I have found in the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine (sic) all the necessary elements for the formation of this center. Its success before the Revolution, the austerity of its customs, its generosity and the virtues that are practiced in a profound way by these laudable men, have earned for them appreciation by civil authority and veneration of parents and young people alike.»*... (Rigault, III, 538).

● **A Group of Catholics from Lyon.**

A group of Catholics from the city of Lyon were determined to reestablish the Christian schools and they tried to organize an Association with this purpose in mind. Gathered together in the archbishopric on "Ventôse, 24th, XII year" (March 15, 1894), one of them said: *«The most recommended Institution...after the Seminaries...is that of the Brothers of the Christian Schools...We must encourage them by our support. It's very important to express to them our esteem, veneration and protection by people of good will...It is necessary that men*

whose vocation it is to consecrate themselves totally to gratuitous education, to inspire the fear and the love of God in children and to form them in pure and holy customs, find in you their defenders, apologists, benefactors, partners...» (Rigault III, 538-539).

● **Jean-Etienne-Marie Portalis, Minister of Education.**

In a document addressed to Napoleon, the First Consul, with the date of "Germinal, 15th, XII year" (April 6, 1804), writes: *«Among the establishments that honor religion and country, the gratuitous teachers known as the Brothers of the Christian Schools have the right of protection of the First Consul and they merit an attitude that shows the citizens public and individual satisfaction ... The philosopher (Plato) wanted unselfish teachers who only had the desire to form educated and virtuous students. That is the only ambition of the Brothers of the Christian Schools...they freely consecrate themselves to the gratuitous instruction of the working class and the poor.»* (Rigault, III, 541).

● **Cardinal Fesch, Archbishop of Lyon.**

He was also the Ambassador of His Majesty in Rome and the uncle of Napoleon. He was very interested in the reorganization of the Institute of the Brothers and he sought its approbation, even creating some juridical fiction so as not to pose an obstacle for the recognition of said Institute due to the difficulties of the approval of religious congregations. This was not without some difficulties which can be read in Rigault's third volume (p. 546 and ff.).

The Ministry of Education wrote to Cardinal Fesch on "Messidor, 18th" (July 7): *"I have not forgotten about the Brothers of Christian Doctrine (sic) ...this matter has been held over by decree...so that the norms may be established for the authorization of a religious association...I will use the favorable opinion that you have concerning this Institution."* (Rigault III, 546-547).

The Vicar for the Cardinal, Jauffret, also had contacted the Minister of Education and he took the initiative of convoking all the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Lyon, who were dispersed, so that they might regroup and establish some new Statutes that would respond to the norms of the legal provisions. The assembly was held on "Messidor, 27th" (July 16). The Vicar Jauffret read to the Brothers the Statutes that he himself had composed in the name of the Cardinal Archbishop with the hope that they might be accepted and approbation would then be granted. The reaction that these Statutes provoked, aside from the good intentions of those involved, are entirely another story. But these reactions do not negate the esteem and appreciation that Cardinal Fesch as well as his Vicar had for the Institute of the Brothers.

● **Louis XVIII, King of France.**

During the generalate of Brother Gerbaud new difficulties sprang up against the Institute of the Brothers. The Institute had been reestablished and was on its way to consolidation when some new pedagogical methods were being introduced in France. These methods concerned the use of the Lancaster or mutual method of instruction which was diametrically opposed to the simultaneous method of the Brothers. Underneath the discussion of pedagogical methods and instructional modes lurked the current of laicism which really damaged Lasallian pedagogy. The difficulties

increased as a result of some legal provisions that recommended the use of the mutual method and some city councils had even withdrawn aid from the Brothers schools.

But these were not the only difficulties. There also were the problems of getting the approval to teach, obtaining certification for teachers and the approval to give exams, the problems with military service, etc.

Brother Gerbaud turned to royal arbitration and offered the monarch four articles which contained the nucleus of the difficulties that the Institute was experiencing.

King Louis XVII did not like to make quick decisions and he did not accept indirect influences that some tried to make to him. Therefore he took his time thinking about this issue and his thought was reflected in a letter from the mayor of Alençon to the prefect of Orne on December 16, 1818. According to that letter the monarch had said «*not to interfere in the Brothers' exercise of their duties*» (Rigault IV, 385). More than an order this was a desire and Brother Gerbaud took advantage of it in order to obtain the justice required in such a situation.

● Felicitas Lamennais

This French priest and polemist, the brother of Jean-Marie Lamennais, founder of the Brothers of Christian Instruction, was famous throughout the kingdom for the force and passion of his writings.

In the midst of the strong fight for the Lancaster method which was triumphing over the Christian schools, such as those of the Brothers, he wrote a pamphlet in 1819 entitled "*About the attacks directed against the Brothers of the Christian Schools*".

His voice joined the voices of other ecclesiastics who had already defended the Brothers. But he expressed himself in an extremely energetic way: «*We are threatened by seeing one of the most beautiful institutions that the great century has left us disappear from our France...Soon the people will search in vain in our very midst for those men, the object of their respect because of the austere gravity of their customs, their love, their kindness and their humble self-denial in one of the most impressive charitable works*» (Rigault IV, 393).

His brother, Jean-Marie de Lemennais, also wrote another pamphlet against the Lancaster method which indirectly defended the Brothers and his own Institution of Brothers of Christian Instruction, which he founded (Rigault, IV, 393, n.2).

● Guizot, Minister of Instruction

In the midst of a fierce struggle by some social forces in favor of and against a Christian education, the minister François Guizot had many interventions relative to the Brothers. In one of these interventions he expressed himself like this: «*For the past 15 years, the clergy has done much for the primary education in France...It has founded and maintained many centers...There is one example known throughout the world: the Brothers of Christian Doctrine (sic); it is impossible to deny that (their schools) have multiplied and that they are doing much good because they have employed the best methods and that, in a word, they have played an important role in the progress of education*» (Rigault, V, 87).

● Pablo Lorain, promoter of primary teaching.

Pablo Lorain was one of the key people for the establishment of primary instruction in France. He collaborated with various ministers, above all with Guizot. In his activities he was more or less lucky in some circumstances and in the end his luck permitted him to play a key role in the reform of French education. In a work entitled "*Sketch of primary instruction*" he wrote about the Brothers like this: «*One sees in the street a man dressed in a strange way who sometimes provokes laughter from the malicious passers-by; he does not respond and lets the joke roll off his back. He is seen with the rosary in his hand leading the children that he is in charge of to church in the morning in order to teach them to begin the day with a holy work ...In the classroom where he teaches as well as outside the classroom, whenever he is preparing for the lesson, he concentrates completely on his duties...Such is the life of the "ignorantin" Brother: the dissipations of the century, the pleasures of family life, worry about the future, vane desire for fame do not worry him. The Superior sends him and he goes; whenever obedience calls him, he is ready. He fulfills his ministry with the same zeal that he would have if he were expecting fame or fortune; nevertheless, school revenue does not even pass through his hands. Could the greatest successes affect a man who has even given up his name?...*» (Rigault V, 113).

● Alfonso de Lamartine, politician and writer.

Amidst the same pros and cons concerning the Christian school, the Parliament debated about suppressing the financial help to the schools of the Brothers. One of the delegates, Alfonso de Lamartine, made his voice heard in the hall: «*While the public is asking for more education for the working classes, and while everywhere and in opinions of all kinds there is agreement about the necessity for public instruction...what is being asked of us here? That we cast aside those men who do nothing else but vow to dedicate their lives for the propagation of gospel morals?; men who ask for nothing but for freedom for their own self-denial, the right to freely sacrifice themselves, or for a price that cannot be paid by this world, to teach the poor classes? And what does this request say but that it violates all freedom, all free will, even that within the heart and conscience of a father of a family? Sirs, if those who support Vitre had visited the regions that we call barbarian, if they had been in Turkey, they would have seen that the tyranny there is no less...*» (Rigault V, 115).

There could be many other quotations, dozens or perhaps even hundreds, of celebrated people during the years that followed the French Revolution. It was a time of bitter fights with regard to the school and in one form or another with regard to Christian and lay education although disguised in various trappings. The Institute of the Brothers, guided by the Spirit through its Superiors, was in the eye of a hurricane. Almost always its evangelical work and human promotion was recognized. The cited texts bear witness to this. ●