

**TOWARD THE
CONTINUING FORMATION
OF THE LASALLIAN EDUCATOR (2/3)**

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To be an effective apostle, the Founder reminded his disciples, required some human as well as some religious development on the part of each Brother. Long before the concept, much less the term, had become popular and widely used, the Saint told his co-workers that they had to become professional educators in the fullest and best sense of this term. And to begin with, this required a Brother to make a conscientious and judicious use of his time. For accepting the fact that his time belonged to God for the service of his pupils, not to himself, he would use it only to do his work or to prepare himself better for his ministry. And never would he forget the account he would have to render to God regarding the use of his time – in school or out of it. (*MSF* 92:3; 114:3; *MTR* 14:1) One profitable way for a Brother to use his time, said the Saint, was to study his religion – as well as the other subjects he had to teach – so as to prepare himself better to share such knowledge with his students. Emphasizing the idea that you can not give others what you yourself do not have, the Founder stressed this point in different ways a number of times. (*MSF* 37:2; 60:3; 120:1; 153:1; *MTR* 6:1) Likewise he insisted that a Brother must know how to share his knowledge with his pupils in such a way as to lead them to live Christian lives. Some evidence of success here would be if the students behaved properly in church while also receiving the sacraments regularly and in a proper manner. (*MSF* 60:3; *MTR* 6:1) And according to De La Salle, another duty of the Brother as a professional educator was to take practical means to know his students so as to deal effectively with each, keeping in mind his character and his particular needs. (*MSF* 33:1)

As far as the Saint was concerned, it was at least as important for the Christian teacher to be a spiritual person, living a religiously centered life, as it was for him to be a competent professional, one well prepared to do his work. And he demanded this in a very forceful way when he wrote:

You are angels sent by God to prepare the way for Him, and to provide the means whereby He may enter your hearts and those of your pupils ... endeavor to resemble the angels by your interior and exterior purity, ... be entirely detached from the pleasures of the body and from sensual delights. ... so that there be nothing left in you but your soul, ... this should be your one care ... applying yourself ... to what pertains to His service and to the care of souls. (*MSF* 2:1)

To do this, he suggests, one must be faithful to the calls of grace regularly and on a daily basis, by taking to heart and practicing the teachings of the Gospel. (*MSF* 84:1.3; 93:3; 99:2) Acting thus would both require and could lead to an extraordinary holiness which could be achieved only by a person who prays and is devoted to prayer. (*MSF* 81:3; 186:1; *MTR* 11:3) In his prayers, said the Founder, the Brother should pray for himself, asking God's help to become the sort of person who can touch the hearts of his pupils. (*MSF* 39:1; 80:2; 98:2; 136:2; *MTR* 4:1; 13:2) At the same time, he should also pray for his students, asking, God that they may respond to his teaching once he has learned what

he is to share with them. (*MSF* 37:2; 78:2; *MTR* 6:1) Likewise, the Christian teacher should seek to acquire and to develop such virtues as humility and poverty, which are appropriate to his state of life, along with a love of poverty and the poor. For then only will he attract the poor students of a lowly condition whom he is called to teach. (*MSF* 79:2; 86:3; 143:3) In their turn, these virtues will help him acquire the patience and selfcontrol so important in his difficult work. (*MSF* 155:2; *MTR* 14:3) Finally, in his work he should strive to be guided only by spiritual, not merely human motives. But this will be possible only if he has filled himself with God through prayer and by acquiring and practicing the virtues mentioned above. (*MSF* 100:2; 132:1; 178:1)

The ideas of the Founder just cited seem to be repeated very emphatically in the current *Rule*: "The vitality of the Institute depends on the quality and the fidelity of each of its members ..." (143) Likewise the personal responsibility of each Brother for his renewal emphasized by the *Declaration* (3.1; 15:1) is brought out very clearly. In brief, constantly the Brother is reminded of what he is called to be and can become, while being urged to live up to this calling. Also, ideas set forth by the *Guide to Formation* (272; 270; 368:1) are very evident in what the Saint had to say. And basic to all of this is the simple statement, " ... There can be no renewal without a renewal in the life of prayer and without a concentrated effort to re-emphasize meditation and contemplation." (*D* 3.2) Yes, the ideas set down in the modern Institute documents are very evident in the writings of the Founder. To a large extent, the former simply repeat what he had perceived as so important and stressed so emphatically some 300 years before.

De La Salle also frequently reminded the Brothers that once they had prepared themselves both as professional educators and as effective ministers of the gospel, they were to exercise their zeal toward the "poor, abandoned orphans", the children God called them to instruct, (*MSF* 37:3) with certain very definite ends in view. And perhaps his best statement of the educational objectives of the Christian schools, the specific goals his disciples should keep in view, is the following:

Your mission requires you to labor for the good of the Church and that of your country. Your pupils are already members of the State, and will soon be endowed with full citizenship. You will work on behalf of the Church by making them true Christians, submissive to the teachings of their faith and to the truths of the gospel. You will contribute to the good of your country by teaching them to read and write and all that pertains to your functions. ... (*MSF* 160:3)

Once again it might be noted that the Saint, having seen how children whose education was neglected by their parents became a liability to and a burden for society, perceived the Christian schools as providing a remedy for this undesirable situation. (*MTR* 2:1) But he also stressed the spiritual dimension of the schools' impact, describing their work as most necessary for the Church and essential for building up the people of God. (*MTR* 7:1.2.3; 8:1) Now, how did he see this task being accomplished?

According to the Founder, the first and basic means is teaching the students their religion, with a view of imparting to them the Christian spirit so that they can "become true children of God." (*MSF* 67:1; 115:3; *MTR* 2:2; 7:3) Yet the Saint saw this more as a good beginning rather than as the end of the task. Religious instruction, he insisted, should seek not just to impart a knowledge of the Christian faith, but to lead to its practice in accordance with the age and situation of the students. (*MSF* 60:3; 91:3; *MTR* 2:3; 6:2) Great emphasis was to be placed on training the children to behave properly in church, particularly when assisting at Mass, and to receive the Sacrament of Penance in such a way as to help them live a truly Christian life. (*MSF* 92:3; *MTR* 4:1.2) At the same time, to complement these positive activities, the

students would also be encouraged to avoid bad companions who could be an occasion of sin for them, as well as sin itself which they would be taught was the greatest evil. (*MSF* 33:3; 56:2; 60:3; 67:1; *MTR* 6:3; 10:1.2)

The briefest reflection must lead to the conclusion that the Saint had set lofty as well as difficult objectives for his disciples. Very much aware of this, he sought to motivate them for their task. To begin with, he described their essential but not highly esteemed apostolate as a special gift of God while asserting that those who are called to this task are gifted by God in a special way. At the same time, he linked their performance of these tasks and their striving to achieve their objectives to their own salvation. There was no better way for them to assure their own salvation, he said, than by working to help save their students. (*MSF* 67:1; *MTR* 9:1; 13:2) And finally, he reminded his disciples of the obligation they had assumed to devote themselves "unreservedly to the Most Blessed Trinity, to extend Its glory as far as possible" while describing their work for the salvation of their students as an important means of doing this. (*MSF* 46:3)

While pondering these ideas, a modern reader might notice how accurate is the recent statement which mentions "two aspects of De La Salle's charism: his ability to discover the needs of the time in which he lived and his power to create structures that could respond to them." For he was calling on each Brother, "As both a person and an educator to face up to the challenges of the modern world ..." - whether during the Age of Louis XIV or on the eve of the twenty-first century. (*Guide* 286; 268:2) And from a vantage point so many years later, it does seem that the Founder, much better than many of his contemporaries, both perceived the new world produced by the religious division of Europe as well as the Age of Discovery and the Commercial Revolution that accompanied it, while devising means to help the masses become full and effective members of this new society. This he did by among other things telling the Brother "to find God's work in whatever he does for the advancement of human civilization and culture." (*D* 41.3) For the Saint told his disciples to exercise their zeal in practical ways - both in view of the life that was to come and of this life.

Now what means would the Brothers use to show their ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear of God? The first means, prayer - both for their students and themselves - has already been discussed at some length. In addition, they would make use of instruction, good example, and vigilance along with correction - when the students committed faults which made this action necessary. (*Rule* 16-17) And each of the above was given some attention in the Saint's two sets of meditations.

In the popular mind schools are often seen primarily as places where necessary knowledge and skills are passed on from one generation to the next, from the old to the young. To some extent De La Salle concurred with this idea and described his schools as institutions in which the young learned reading, writing, and other things useful for them in later life. (*MSF* 160:3; *MTR* 2:1) But this was not the only, much less the most important, instruction to be given the students. First and foremost he saw the Christian schools as the place where the students would learn their religion, as he asserted very clearly when he wrote:

... This is the chief reason why the Church has confided them to you. You should consider yourself as a depository of the faith which you have to impart to those confided to your care. Such is the treasure which God places in your hands, and of which you are the steward. (*MSF* 61:2)

To accomplish this task, the Brother was to teach religion every day, for the full time indicated, and in a manner suited to the age and intellectual capacity of his students. Also, he was to do so in a way which showed that he considered religion the most important subject he taught and that he felt pri-

vilaged to be a minister of the gospel to young people. (*MSF* 33:3; 65:2; 79:3; 92:3; *MTR* 5:1; 7:1; 8:1; 14:1) The Saint also insisted that the Brother must teach his students what he termed "the practical truths of faith in Jesus Christ and the maxims of the gospel..." (*MTR* 2:3) And the purpose of his teaching their religion to the students was to lead and to inspire them to practice what they learned during their catechism lessons. Unless this instruction had such an impact on their lives, he saw it as useless and to no purpose. (*MSF* 91:3; *MTR* 2:3; 5:2; 6:2)

During the seventeenth century, ignorance of the Christian faith among the working class and the poor as well as their children, which led to their failure to practice their faith, was not the only problem facing those who wanted to help effect the salvation of the masses. Some Frenchmen openly challenged the teaching authority of the Church and the Pope by spreading false doctrines among Christians on all social levels. (*MSF* 5:1) Both to help remedy this situation and to help the Brothers avoid going astray in their teaching of religion, De La Salle wrote:

... Leave learned disputes to the learned, and leave it to them to refute heresies and confound heretics. As for us, let us keep to the common doctrine of Jesus Christ, and 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, and let us never take the liberty of dogmatizing on the difficult points of religion. (*MSF* 5:1)

As good as his word, the Saint opposed one common Jansenist error of his age when he told the Brothers to encourage their students both to confess and to communicate frequently "in order to keep their consciences free from sin." (*MSF* 56:3) And he took another position different from that of the Jansenists when he called on his disciples to inculcate a tender devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin among their students as a sign of their love for Our Lady. (*MSF* 146:2) As a practical means of doing this, he prescribed the daily recitation of the rosary in school so that the students would learn how to recite it properly while acquiring the habit of reciting it on a frequent and regular basis. (*MSF* 150:3) These directives of the Saint make two points very clear. Teaching the students their religion was given the first place in the school. But at the same time this was no mere intellectual exercise. By prescribing practices such as these, the Founder was establishing a tradition, later on stressed in the *Declaration*, of a catechetics concerned with persons, aware of the situation in which the young people lived, and seeking to prepare them to live as effective Christians in their milieu. (*D* 4.3)

Religious instruction, however, was not the only means De La Salle wanted his disciples to use to achieve their educational objectives. He also placed great importance on their good example when he wrote:

Your zeal towards the children you teach would not go very far and would not have much result or success if it limited itself only to words. To be effective, your teaching must be supported by your example ...

This is also the way that Our Lord acted, of whom it is said that he began to do and then to teach. ... (*MTR* 10:3)

And again when he asserted:

Since you are expected to bring about the sanctification of your pupils, you ought yourself to possess holiness in an uncommon degree, for you have to communicate it to others as much by your good example as by the words of salvation which you address them each day... (*MSF* 39:2)

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