

**THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
(1/2)**

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**Paper read at the French-speaking session
on the Shared Mission, July 11th 1996**

Introduction

At the request of the organising committee of this session, I have come here to share with you, in all simplicity and in a spirit of service, my experience as a teacher of religion working with young people. I shall try to explain how I find inspiration for my daily work in St John Baptist de La Salle's convictions regarding what an educator should be like. I shall describe also how I try to make my pastoral activities a "ministry", in the way envisaged by St John Baptist de La Salle.

1. A teacher of religion working with young people

When I describe my work as "educating young people in the faith" I realise my profession is no ordinary one. To be an influence on the spiritual growth of a young person is an important contribution to his personal development. I was fortunate enough myself to be influenced in a very positive way by a number of adults when I was a young person, and their example played an important role in the choice of my vocation. In the course of the last few years, I have come to know the Founder a little, and have come into contact with his writings on the Christian educator. Many of his ideas confirm my own convictions as an educator, and I have chosen to speak about some of them, found mostly in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat.

The educator is called to enlighten hearts, and to make the truth known.

"He himself kindles a light in the hearts of those destined to announce his word to children, so that they may be able to enlighten those children by unveiling for them the glory of God. Since, then, God in his mercy has given you such a ministry, do not falsify his word, but gain glory before him by unveiling his truth to those whom you are charged to instruct" (MR 1,1).

De La Salle's words express very well what I believed when I initially felt called to be an educator. I wanted to be with young people and witness to my faith in Jesus. In this way I thought I could help them to discover some meaning in their lives, and to live in the joy and freedom of the children of God. To enlighten hearts means to help young people to live really in the light, to do good, and to be "blessedly" happy! To help a young person to recognise the truth and to live according to it, means to lead him along the path to freedom.

Even though it is not always easy, I also want my **will to correspond with God's plan**. "The grace that Jesus merited for us effects our salvation only insofar as our will is brought to correspond with it" (MR 3,1). I offer two concrete examples to illustrate this idea.

* When I first began organising pastoral activities at the Villa des Jeunes, I used to worry a lot about how many groups would come to use the centre. Would there be enough? What could I do to make more come? I faced these problems from a human angle and with a fair amount of anxiety till one day I said to myself: "Paul, whether groups come or not doesn't depend on you, but on your Lord. Just make sure you do what you have to, and let the Lord take care of what belongs to him". Since then, I have faced this aspect of my work with great peace and serenity. This has helped me to understand that the Villa des Jeunes is not the work of man, but the work of God.

* The other example shows how I try to be a "minister" who adjusts his life to the will of his Lord. What I shall describe took place at the Villa des Jeunes in 1982 and had to do with the La Relève movement which was started up in our diocese. In an attempt to attract adolescent boys and girls to the centre, we organised a weekend with the theme: "The grains of wheat". No one came. The following week we received a La Relève badge through the post, showing a sheaf of wheat. We saw a sign from the Lord in this small event. We set about learning more about the La Relève movement. One thing led to another, and we finally began our activities in March 1983. The movement is intended for the 15 to 17 age range. Initially, young people come for an introductory weekend, run by young people who have a certain seniority in the La Relève. After the weekend, the new members join a local La Relève group which meets once a fortnight. The meetings are run by two people whose programme for the group had been previously vetted by some adults who supervise the group (a couple and a spiritual director). During the meeting, there is always a time for recollection and listening to the Word of God.

My own typically human reaction was to think that everything would fold up after that first weekend. It all looked so complicated. I was afraid there would be criticism regarding some of the emotions generated by the experience. I said to myself that young people probably didn't like what had happened. And yet, we have just celebrated our 50th weekend, and the movement is

stronger than ever. I now know that La Relève is the work of God, and I try to the best of my ability to serve the Lord in this movement by serving young people.

The educator is a man of prayer and a student who seeks to discover the views and intentions of Jesus:

“You must, then, devote yourself very much to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry...In reading the Gospel, you must study the manner and the means he used to lead his disciples to practise the truths of the Gospel...You must also enter into his purposes and his goals” (MR 4,1,2,3).

I am convinced that prayer must be at the heart of the life of an educator. I pray every day, but my prayer consists more in “winks” to Jesus than in properly structured meditation. I pray at home, in my car, at the Villa with the pastoral team, with the group I am asked to run. I pray also with the members of the Cursillo community to which I belong. (The Cursillo movement was founded in Spain, and the La Relève is modelled on it). I like to celebrate also with my Christian community. All the same, I should like to give more time to meditation each day, to spend more time in silence and contemplation as a way of making my bonds of friendship with Jesus more intense, to study what God says to me through his Word, and to discover what he wants of me.

St John Baptist de La Salle invites the educator to provide the means which will enable young people to grow as persons and as Christians.

Lasallian education is practical education, not divor-

ced from life: Make “known to children the truths of the Gospel, which you have been chosen by God to announce. You must teach them how to put these truths into practice” (MR 6,2). Even if Villa des Jeunes is not a school, we often ask ourselves: “How can we help young people to live their lives? How can we become part of their world? How can we lead them to discover the truths of the Gospel and model their lives on them?” We try constantly to be more creative in the way we suggest to them practical ways of taking responsibility for their lives and of growing both humanly and spiritually.

Regarding the influence De La Salle has on my profession, I should like to finish by recalling something he said which struck me forcibly. He invites us to come close to the hearts" of young people. **“You carry out a work which requires you to touch hearts”** (MD 43,3). This expression occurs frequently in the writings of De La Salle. I too am convinced that in order to help a young person to grow in the faith, it is good to build up a personal relationship with him. When his heart is touched, a young person agrees to allow himself to be challenged, to question himself, to go further. Even if I see them only for a few hours, I always try to make sure that each one of the youngsters feels he is welcome, recognised and appreciated. I speak to them individually, I often ask them questions, I give them my attention, etc.

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