

**The principles of the
Christian school
(1/3)**

Br Léon Lauraire

Introduction

The word “principle” is certainly not the most suitable one to describe the fundamental thinking behind the Christian school. The Christian school is not the result of some pre-established educational programme, nor is it the implementation of theoretical principles. It took form at the end of the 17th century as a concrete response to the educational and pastoral needs of children from poor families in an urban environment.

After a number of years of searching, of tentative steps and adaptation, in the period 1690-1694, there came about a threefold realisation which gave the Christian school its particular character. What we mean by this is:

(a) that the school is a place where God’s plan is fulfilled, where young people can and ought to discover the love of God through other people. This school John Baptist de La Salle called the “Work of God”.

(b) During this same period, the idea of association was born among the Brothers. The school cannot truly fulfil its mission unless all the adults, the educational team, works really in association to offer a better service to young people.

(c) The third realisation was that the work of education demands a total commitment on the part of the adults, their “whole person”.

A few years later, the “Conduct of the Christian Schools” described in minute detail the organisation and running of this school. If we went no further than that, we would only scratch the surface. We have to look at the other writings of De La Salle to discover

the deep meaning and, consequently, the educational aims of this school and the attitudes of the teachers.

The Lasallian school is not an institution established according to rigid theoretical principles, even if its character can be sketched out on the basis of a few basic criteria. It is a living organism which must remain sufficiently flexible and creative to be able to adapt according to time and place. Above all, it is an adventure shared by the whole educational community which is part of a network of similar establishments. It is an educational community which constantly invents new and better ways to welcome, meet and accompany young people, in order to give them a human and Christian education, despite their difficulties, as well as to help them to find their place in society, in their profession and in the Church.

The actual choice of school structures, methods and means derives from these general aims. No doubt, it is not always easy to achieve this internal coherence between aims and means. In the pages that follow, we shall examine in greater detail the pursuit of this coherence, so as to outline the nature of the Lasallian school, which results more from the convictions and commitments of the teachers and other staff than from a list of principles. What is involved here is a constantly dynamic process.

1. The love of God as a foundation

“God is so good...” (De La Salle, MR 193,1 & 207,1)

This expression opens and closes the series of “Meditations for the Time of Retreat”, which describe in summary form the ministry of the Christian educator. The love of God encompasses both the beginning and the end of his commitment to the service of the young people to whom he brings human and Christian education. God’s loving plan can be accomplished nowadays only through the intermediary of those who already play a part in it and who wish to share it with the young people entrusted to their care.

By prayer, discernment and reflection with the Brothers who were with him in the first years of foundation (1679-1690), John Baptist de La Salle became convinced that the “Christian schools” were not simply the result of a human plan to spread literacy and provide education and instruction which, quite clearly, were sorely needed at the time, but were inspired by God and were “his Work” (Opus Tuum), created to serve as an instrument to bring about his reign of love.

Seen from this point of view, it is easy to understand why he believes that “there is a great need for them”. Even if schooling is provided and given competently by other persons or bodies, it remains nonetheless a proclamation of the Kingdom of God. This is not true only at some specific period of history, but for each successive generation.

This is the significance of the radical commitment made in 1691 (the “heroic vow”). A purely human undertaking would not have justified such heroism. The Work of God, yes. We can affirm, therefore, that the foundation and justification of the “Christian (or Lasallian) schools”, today as at the beginning, is the saving LOVE of God, offered to all men, through the intermediary of other men. It is offered especially to young people and to the poor, through the intermediary of Christian teachers and educators. What is essential is clearly to “preach the Gospel to the poor”, especially when they are “far from salvation”.

The magisterium of the Church, especially in the various encyclicals of recent Popes, has frequently reminded us over the last few years that the proclamation of the Gospel does not take place only and always directly, by explicitly religious instruction, but that it can and sometimes ought to make use of other less immediate sources of human development, liberation and education. Christian educators will perhaps find these thoughts encouraging as they work with young people.

A Christian anthropology

Belief in this saving love, accessible to everybody, casts new light on, and forms the basis of our image of the human person, and explains his dignity and uniqueness. Each individual person is invited to discover God’s love as a gift given to him freely. He can do so

thanks to the action or example of others, such as those who have committed themselves freely to the apostolic ministry of education.

This anthropology involves also a belief in the universal brotherhood of man, which Lasallian educators wish to promote and bear witness to. This explains why the Lasallian school tries to become increasingly a place where there is brotherhood, not only among those who frequent it, but also regarding the world outside, as a witness to the possibility of establishing universal brotherhood. This is its ambition, its utopian dream.

It is important to take into account the human basis of this universal brotherhood. Human and political sciences invite us to do so, by drawing our attention to important values such as human dignity, solidarity, justice and, as a consequence, fraternity and peace. However, there are much stronger motives for all this which are based on faith.

The quality of the brotherhood practised becomes a fundamental criterion by which to judge the authenticity of a Lasallian school. It is not absolutely essential for all the members of an educational community to subscribe explicitly to the Christian faith, but it is important for everybody to act in a way that promotes a spirit of brotherhood, even for humanitarian reasons.

.../...