

**Educational Service of the poor
throughout the history of the Institute (2/2)**

(A reflection in the year of the Father)

Brother Bruno Alpago

But this did not seem to be enough: the Chapter is “convinced that the preservation of the Institute and its usefulness in the fulfilling of its purpose for the public, as well as the enthusiasm of the Brothers in their arduous efforts of their employ, depend on the lessons of piety that they receive during their years of probation, during the formation of young Brothers in the capability that it demands for the good education of children”, and of the good attention to the senior Brothers and those who are ill; this ran into some obstacles; the lack of economic resources of the government of the Institute and all the Brothers being very busy.

To deal with the first issue, the Institute decides on a type of centralization for the earnings of those who are retired, knowing that from the other houses that could not expect to receive more than just crumbs (XVII to XXI). To overcome the second issue, after recognizing that the current state of the Institute would not allow for having students only involved in studies (XXI) but still wanting to have them, it puts a freeze on ten years of openness to new ministries; in that way, “if the necessary money were obtained, the Brothers who had the aptitude for learning would have scarcely made perpetual vows and the money will be devoted only to study for the time determined by the Brother Superior or those who have received his orders in the houses which were suited to this purpose” (XXII); and given that “science which was taught in the boarding schools, such as mathematics and drawing, are advantageous for the Institute and the public, the Brothers who had the aptitude for these subjects will be sent to learn them in the houses where they are taught” (XXIII).

At the time of the Chapter there were no Brothers free to send for studies; but there would be later. Thus, for example, Brother Salomon, son of a businessman from Boulogne, himself the bursar in Maréville, left his responsibilities for another; a man who had been forced to retire introduced Brother Salomon to the field of algebra and geometry, sciences which he would go on to perfect by the sweat of his brow at Saint Yon; from 1782 he is in charge of the young Brothers who would delve into those fields of learning in the Generalate in Melun. In the same decade “the Superior sent to the retired man (from Marseilles) some seven or eight Brothers who showed promise - recalls Brother Guillaume-de-Jesus - Brothers recently professed or at the point of profession, to be directed in their studies by Brother Jubin”, a famous calligrapher about 27 years of age; the young Brothers devoted their time to writing, arithmetic, orthography, catechism and grammar.

St. Yon, Melun, Marseilles; perhaps there are more names to add to the list of these institutions, the forerunners of what would come to be known as the Scholasticate; the Brothers who were trained in them left an enhanced memory of admiration for the immensity of their knowledge. And so the growing undertaking in effect since 1777 came to show results which were filled with hops; the abrupt final blow that the Revolution dealt can only leave one to conjecture at what might have been achieved in later developments.

The resurgence of the Institute (1800-1830).

Within a certain mental concept.

Ecclesiastic and civil authorities praised the Brothers for the education that they offer, gratuitously, to poor youth. They speak of “instruction which is appropriate to the poor class”, the class “instructed with piety” by the Brothers; instruction “based in religion”, that tends to enlighten the public “with regard to their social duties and good morals and make them love their Sovereign and the Christian religion”.

The stress unanimously fell on the advantages that religion, virtue, morals, good manners afforded; the Brothers managed to “reform” the young people who frequented their schools, they “inspired them with a love for work”.

Clearly, next to the religious and moral aspect of the Brothers’ teaching, dignitaries also alluded to other knowledge that was imparted in their schools: praise from a parish priest for the way in which Lasallians formed children “in piety and in the science proper to their state” (understood as the state of the children, sons in poor families); a bishop adds, certifying that the Brothers teach children “elementary knowledge (*les petites connaissances*) in accord with their birthright, fortune and the distinct roles that these children will be able to exercise some day”.

The royal decree of February 29, 1816 expresses the wish of the monarch to supply his subjects with “instruction in accord with their respective condition”.

These are the times that the “state”, the “condition”, are considered to be of divine origin; as kings. Those who are seen as favored by that “established order” have the greatest interest in maintaining it, and they demand that religion come to their defense to conserve it or reestablish it. In the hope of receiving this good service - hope born from good faith or from lack of principle - one ought to find an important motive of the support that Lasallians (and not only them) have received from the poor classes.

Towards the end of 1818, in the midst of the difficulties confronting the Institute because of the competency certificates which the university authorities are demanding in order to allow one to teach, the Superior solicits the opinion of a body of legal consultants in Paris. At the base of their response, these legal consultants express the vision that they have of the Institute and of its purpose, then they read “the Statutes or Rules of the Congregation, and the other pieces and information supplied” by the Superior General or his representative in the capital. And they do this in the following terms:

“The portion of the public to which the [Lasallian] institution should help, is this poor multitude which M. De La Salle embraced completely in his program, and which he found the means to distribute daily bread which was more necessary than material bread, that of religious instruction [...].

“This instruction is that which an intelligent creature, taken from the world in the midst of poverty, need and misery, can receive from religion; its object is to teach one not to covet riches, to respect the divine will that places the poor person in this state of privation so as to exercise virtue and to merit, outside this world, a reward in proportion to the courage that has been displayed.

“To make it known to the children of the poor that they have in heaven an omnipotent father, and to base this knowledge on the certainty of happiness in another life and, at the same time, the hope of some happiness in the present life by means of surrender, patience and the practice of the Christian virtues, such is the proposal that the Founder fixed and that his disciples have learned how to fulfill [...].

“In this instruction, reading, writing, arithmetic only come into play as *exercises* to fill up the hours of class time in a useful way, in order to impress on them the true instruction which the Order gives; only in this instruction is found the *benefit for the poor*: a benefit which their children can receive without reading, nor writing, nor performing arithmetical calculations; but since it is not incompatible with these three things, and can even obtain better results along with them at the same time as offering some resources to the poor in order to earn a living, the Institute has recognized them as *means* to achieve its ends at the same time as being useful to the poor”.

A few days later the same body, required a second time, recalled that the Brothers, scarcely after having abated the revolutionary torment, have reopened their schools “in order to teach the children of the poor to suffer, without murmuring, the inequality of their conditions or their fortune, and to offer them, together with the light and consolation of religion, basic knowledge that might be of use during the course of their laborious life”.

All the reservations having been made, in these words is reflected a mentality which one must consider. Did the Brothers think that way? In order to be able to affirm or deny it would be necessary to provide direct proof; perhaps an analysis of the school texts in use at the time would shed light on this; pieces of correspondence to which access has been possible are silent on the subject. But, could they think in a very different way, given the specific circumstances in which they lived, were formed and fulfilled their mission?

In addition, this is the language of orthodoxy, of priests, bishops, cardinals. Many years later the celebrated encyclical *Rerum Novarum* will teach that within civil society it is impossible to bring everyone to the same level; inequality is imposed by nature and it is useless to fight against nature. And the catechism of St. Pius X will recall the consistent tradition when it affirms that “the tenth commandment orders us to be content with the state in which God has placed us and to suffer poverty with patience when God wants us in such a state [...]. The greatest of all goods is a pure and tranquil conscience, our true native land is heaven [...] and Jesus Christ promised a special reward for those who endure poverty with patience”. •