

THE CONDUCT OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS A READING GUIDE (1/3)

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It would be difficult to understand **The Conduct of the Christian Schools** without the help of some preliminary remarks:

A. This work reflects, on the one hand, the educational thinking of the society of the early 18th century and, on the other, the specific purpose De La Salle had in mind in founding a religious congregation devoted exclusively to the Christian education of *the children of the artisans and of the poor*.

B. It must not be seen as a work on modern methodology: methodological practice varies and depends on many factors, such as the times, places, teachers, pupils, curricula, social requirements, and so on. **The Conduct** has aged: it is no longer “*fashionable*”; certain details and directives are simply now a matter of historical interest.

C. The purpose of the **Conduct** was eminently practical. It was written for primary school teachers who had had no training of any sort. Its purpose was to provide them with certain procedures to follow and with guidelines; and to enable them to acquire, as rapidly as possible, very simple pedagogical notions which were very precise and detailed.

D. Beneath these outmoded appearances, however, there are educational guidelines, directives and concerns which are surprisingly rich and modern. It is these aspects we should like to highlight. It could be a real voyage of discovery for us.

Basically, the questions De La Salle tried to answer can be reduced to the following two:

1. How to make schools attractive, promoting salvation, and accessible to everybody, instead of being synonymous with punishment, beatings, and of little or no benefit;
2. How to give *status* to the teaching profession.

De La Salle sought to respond to these questions in the following ways:

A. By creating a *new type of school*, organised in such a way as to respond to the real needs of children and which, because it was gratuitous, was accessible to everybody;

B. He invented a completely new category of *teachers*, who were *religious but not priests*. Teaching was to be their *apostolic ministry*. For De La Salle’s religious, however, teaching did not consist in exercising a profession: it was something much more important. The *Brothers* were not intended to form a kind of guild comparable to that of the writing masters. In a word, the school acquired a soul, whose moving force was apostolic zeal, and whose aim was *salvation*.

The Conduct devotes considerable space to whatever in the daily programme promotes the salvation of the sons of the artisans and of the poor:

- * the school day is filled with acts of piety: prayers together, recalling the presence of God, morning reflection, recitation of the rosary, attendance at Mass, daily catechism lessons, etc.;
- * the texts used, whether for reading or writing, are always taken from the Holy Scriptures or from edifying books;
- * zeal and good example - which today would be called *witness* - are moral obligations for teachers in all their dealings with their pupils.

De La Salle wishes his teachers to share in God’s saving plan for humanity. He wishes them to bring it about by their tireless efforts and zeal. He lays this great responsibility on them, and they will have to render an account of it to God. These are the ideas which we find described in the innumerable directives of the **Conduct**. De La Salle expresses these same ideas in a more systematic form, and in more philosophical and theological terms, in his classic text: *The Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (Christian Brothers Conference, USA, 1994).

The Conduct of the Christian Schools, the “**Magna Carta**” of the Lasallian schools, is, like Gaul, divided into three parts:

- * The first part consists of 11 chapters divided up into articles. It deals with classroom practice from the beginning of the school day to the end.
- * The second part consists of 8 chapters divided into sections and articles. It deals with the means to use to establish and maintain order and discipline in school and in class.
- * The third part, according to what is announced in the *Preface*, should describe the duties of the *inspector* of schools (a new position created by Lasallian schools), the duties of those training new teachers and what they should do to ensure that the latter carry out well what is prescribed for them, the qualities they should have or should acquire, and the duties of the pupils. Un-

fortunately, Ms 11759, dated 1706, in the National Library in Paris is incomplete and includes only the first chapter of this third part, regarding the duties of the Inspector. Regarding the duties of *those charged with the training of new teachers* we have to rely on what Brother Agathon Gonlieu (1731-1798) wrote in the Preface to an edition of the *Conduct* he had published a few years before the outbreak of the French Revolution. He writes: “*We were busy with this work (the new edition of the Conduct) when, by chance, we came across a manuscript dated 1696. When we discovered that it was full of the founding spirit of our Society and of maxims which have always been used in the training of Brothers for school, we felt we could do nothing better than to reproduce here all that it contained, which was all the more valuable as it came from the original source...The part which includes the Guide for Formators of new teachers and the section on Inspectors of Schools is as old as our Society. It is a collection of norms which have always been taught*”.

The Lasallian school according to the *Conduct of the Christian Schools*

It would be useful at this point to get an overall idea of what a Lasallian school was like at the time of the Founder. If we follow what the *Conduct* says, a typical school would be as follows:

Each school had at least two classes of 50 to 60 pupils each. Often the classes were even larger. Each school had a person in charge called a **Director**. Sometimes the Director delegated this authority to an **Inspector**. If several schools depended on the same community, the teacher in charge of the top class would deal with routine school affairs and report back to the Director or Inspector.

As far as the age and ability of the pupils were concerned, classes were no different from our modern ones. There was a reception class, in which the rudiments were taught, and one or more writing classes. Other factors which determined the class a pupil attended were available space and materials, the ability of the teacher, and the ability and needs of the groups of pupils. The Director or the Inspector decided what should be done.

Pupils were required to be in class before their teachers and to work in silence till he arrived: they studied their catechism, revised their reading lesson, trimmed their goose quills.

School opened at 7.30 am, but the teacher arrived only at 8. In the afternoon the same thing happened: the pupils arrived at 1 pm, and the teacher at 1.30 (*see N°1*). At 8 am, the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* was recited. After the prayer, all the pupils were required to have breakfast in school. There were two reasons for this: 1. To teach the pupils to pray before and after meals; 2. To teach them good table manners (*N°26ff*). Pupils who had brought a lot of food and who wished to make a sacrifice, would give some of their food to the food-collector, and the teacher distributed it to the poorer pupils (*N°68ff*). In the meantime, two pupils recited morning or evening prayers, or the Mass responses, or catechism questions and answers. This was the daily recitation.

After breakfast, lessons began. In the 17th and 18th century, the word “**lesson**” meant basically reading, as its etymology indicates. Each pupil read in turn, either letters of the alphabet (*N°111ff*), syllables (*N°125ff*), entire words (*N°131ff*) or sentences (*N°137ff*). More advanced pupils read from the **Rules of Christian Politeness** (*see N°175ff*), printed in gothic characters, or from manuscripts called **registers** (*N°179*). While this was going on, other pupils were doing **writing** exercises (*N°213ff*). The teacher would intervene, using his **signal** (*N°549*) to make pupils correct their own mistakes, to make pupils correct their companions, to correct mistakes himself or to reprimand distracted pupils.

Morning prayer was normally recited towards the end of the morning, followed by a short reflection. After that, the pupils were taken to the nearest church for Mass. Pupils who could read followed Mass in a prayer-book, called *Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass*, written by De La Salle in 1707. Pupils who could not read recited the rosary.

The afternoon was normally spent writing, reading from the Rules of Christian Politeness or from Registers and, twice a week, learning **arithmetic** (*N°301ff*). The last half hour, that is, from 4 pm to 4.30 in summer, or from 3.30 to 4 pm in winter, was taken up by the **catechism lesson** (*cf. all Chap. IX, part 1*). All the pupils of the school followed this lesson together. This lesson and prayers were the only time they came together like this. The lesson began with a hymn - De La Salle published a collection of these. The lesson itself consisted mainly of questions and answers, short explanations and sub-questions. The teacher ended the lesson with an example and an exhortation.

The afternoon snack, like breakfast, was eaten at school. Evening prayers followed, and then the pupils went home, walking two by two through the town (*all Chap. X*).

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