

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

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Let us now consider some pedagogical aspects.

We suggested earlier that a useful approach to the reading of this work by De La Salle would be to try to **discover the principles** on which his schools were based. One could do this and accept them for what they are; or one could temper what is felt to be extreme about them; or one could develop those that are simply stated and apply them to modern conditions. Or one could leave them in their historical context and consider them as giving insight into the 18th century.

Some principles should be **accepted as they are**, even today. They constitute the basis of the Conduct. For example: the fundamental importance of a truly Christian education: *“Not only does God will that everyone come to the knowledge of truth, but he wants everyone to be saved. He cannot truly desire this without providing the necessary means, without giving children the teachers who will assist them in the fulfilment of his plan”* (MR 193,3). The principle that the rudiments of learning - reading, writing, arithmetic - must be thoroughly taught; the principle of taking great care over preparation of school work, over explanation, application and assessment. In other words, the fundamental principles of **paedagogia perennis**.

At first sight, De La Salle seems to favour **logical methods** to the detriment of psychological ones. But, of course, all logical methods have to include a certain amount of psychology, and vice versa. The quality of the teacher and the secret of his success are revealed in his ability to use the right amount of each. On the other side of the Atlantic, this is summarised as follows: *“To teach John Latin to have to know John first, and then Latin”*.

Even without formulating his approach in clear and rigorously scientific terms, De La Salle, relying to a large extent on his intuition, reveals a remarkable psychological acumen (*cf. Part II, Chap. V, art. 6*). For example, he says pupils entering the schools should be given an entrance exam (*cf. Part III, Chap. II*). Among other things, he obliges his teachers to keep a **register of the qualities and defects** of pupils (*cf. Part II, Chap. III, art. 4*), that is, to write what is known today as a **psychological/pedagogical profile**. The Conduct gives also as a model 2 pupils who were in class 4 at the school on rue Saint Placide, Paris, in 1706. The 3rd Chapter of Part 2 is devoted completely to registers or files. It mentions 6 kinds.

All this, as well as his acute observations and wise recommendations regarding punishments, responsibilities and absences, shows how De La Salle and his first disciples took care to to know their pupils as well as was possible. Only ignorance or prejudice could make a person say that in Lasallian schools pupils were treated simply as numbers.

And what is more, the classes referred to in the Conduct were not homogeneous: they included pupils divided up into groups, and each group had to reach a clearly defined standard each month. Those who were learning reading were divided up into 9 orders; those who were learning writing, into 8 for round hand, and 5 for Italian script. Each order was divided in its turn into 3 levels: beginners, intermediate and advanced (see chart).

Each month, the Director or the Inspector promoted pupils from one level to another, or from one class from another. When a pupil was to be promoted, De La Salle recommended that *“he should never be put into a level for which he is not yet ready...Age should not be a deciding factor, nor the fact that the pupil is big, nor that he has been on the same level for a long time. The only factor to take into account is his ability”*.

De La Salle shows that he prefers the analytical or **deductive method**, consisting of questions and answers, and suggests breaking down large difficulties into smaller ones. He says, in other words, that **we need to analyse**. Nowadays, we do not leave things there: we say that some additional steps are necessary: that is, after analysing and explaining, we need to summarise everything in a formula, in a rule, in a definition; we need to **make a synthesis**. The structure of a good lesson consists of an initial vague synthesis which, after detailed analysis, becomes a final precise synthesis.

The *Conduct* insists a lot on the **silence** of the teacher and of the pupils: it is right to do so for obvious reasons of order and discipline. However, there are times when one or other of the two needs to speak, to express their personality. In order to learn to speak well, it is evidently necessary to speak.

Writing is both a technique and an art at the same time. For the *Conduct*, quality was most important. In modern schools, however, there is more stress on legibility and speed, that is, on both **quality** and **quantity**.

As for **severity, punishments and formal behaviour**, all these can all be left behind in the 17th century. Nowadays, even while insisting on proper language and respectful attitudes, these should be characterised by cheerfulness - *“The human plant*

is the one which needs most sun”, Michelet used to say - and affectionate obligingness, which makes the teacher stoop down lovingly to his little (and even not so little) charges. He needs to reach down to them in order to raise them up to his own level.

Trying to discover the *modernity of the Conduct*

Truth has no age. This is true of the *Conduct*. If we ignore some outmoded methods, develop certain of insights, and extrapolate some directives, we arrive at methods which are truly astonishing in their modernity. We insist on this important aspect, because it ought to be revalued.

Today we hear it said with insistence that education must prepare the student for life, and that brilliant explanations should be replaced by student activities. Pupils should *learn by doing*, as the saying goes. It is time to get rid of auditorium-like classes or museums, and replace them by laboratory-schools or workshops. No more book-learning, but only practical things connected with everyday life.

If we except catechism lessons, which consisted more in questioning than in explanations, there were no lessons properly so called in Lasallian schools. The teacher was a serious and prudent guide, who directed the work of the pupils.

We should note also that the best pupils had the task of helping their weaker companions with great personal dedication. They were even asked to stay down in a lower class a little longer in order to help the others: *“The teachers will ensure that these pupils are happy to stay down. They can even make use of some reward to persuade them to do so”* (cf. Part I, Chap.III, sect. 2).

Nowadays, it is said that pupils should take part in running their class; that they should be given all kinds of small jobs and responsibilities, entrusted, proposed or suggested by the teacher, or freely chosen by them, which, it does not matter. De La Salle did the same thing. One of the most interesting chapters of the *Conduct* is the VIIIth of Part 2, which deals with **“responsibilities in school”**: *“In schools, many pupils will be given the task of performing many and various tasks that teachers cannot and ought not to perform”*. There were 14 of these tasks.

“When we read this chapter, we are given the impression that the Lasallian school was like a small kingdom, in which the teacher, the undisputed sovereign, governed through his officials and ministers, and that the pupils worked above all by themselves” (Br Emiliano, RL 1956, N°4).

Nova et vetera - new things and old - these are the two words that could be written in the margin of De La Salle’s book on pedagogy.

If this great pedagogue were ever to return, there is no doubt that he would make sure he examined all the new pedagogical and didactic discoveries, try them out carefully, and adopt those he found useful, just as he did in his own days. *“In fact, De La Salle, who was a genuine innovator, would not fail to accept today new methods which were adapted either to the culture in which the teachers lived, or to the profound changes in the life of society, or to the progress of the human sciences. In this sense, the Conduct, in its 26 successive editions, while keeping intact its fidelity to its original spirit, underwent profound changes...De La Salle had foreseen and welcomed the possibility of making modifications, based on discussion, comparison and reasoning”* (S. Scaglione, *Le edizioni della Conduite des Ecoles dal 1720 al 1965*, R.L. 1991, N°3, p.156).

We cannot end an article on the *Conduct* without mentioning two other works closely connected with it: the *Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness* and the *Duties of a Christian*. These three works are complementary because they were composed as part of a coherent and organic plan.

“The writings of the Saint give us the impression that they are all closely connected with his ascetic-pedagogical work, and are characterised by the complementarity and interdependence that links them together. And yet, these three texts seem to have even a formal unity, given that they are used simultaneously in the Lasallian school: the Conduct of Schools guides the teacher in his choice of methods; the Duties of a Christian tells him what religious teaching he has to impart; and the Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness, which constitutes for him at the same time the subject he has to teach, and the religious and civil precepts the pupils have to practise” (Br Emiliano, RL, 1957, N°2, p.243).

Let us conclude with the words of Brother Emiliano, a well-known Lasallian scholar, and the founder and director of the Rivista Lasalliana. We have quoted him before and we fully agree with what he says here:

“This enables us to situate the work - the whole work of St John Baptist de La Salle - in the movement described as “the return to the Gospel”, that was the basis of the reform of the Church pursued by the Council of Trent, and which sought to restore the place of people in society by saving them from misery and ignorance, and by making sacred again sacramental and liturgical forms (parish life, public worship, religious vows, the discipline of penance and the sacraments)...Let us place the holy Founder side-by-side with St Francis de Sales (1567-1622), whose work, however, seems to be more restricted to the ecclesiastical and monastic domain; with St Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), who relieved misery everywhere, seeking souls in tortured bodies; with St John Eudes (1601-1680) and St Louis Grignon de Montfort (1673-1700), who renewed Christian piety, bringing it back to the solidity of faith and good works; and with many others from his country who lived at more or less the same time as himself” (Op. Cit., p.254). •