

**A Reading Guide to the Complete Works
RB: The Rules of Propriety
and Christian Politeness (1/2)**

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The recent publication of CL 58 gives us a good excuse for writing about RB and putting aside for the moment the order in which De La Salle's writings appear in the Complete Works.

A best seller...of bygone days?

For Blain (2.457) as for Maillefer (Re 183), *The Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness (RB)* was the work on which the Founder of the Brothers lavished a great deal of care. From 1703 onwards, it was a best seller for bookshops, going through 4 editions in the lifetime of the Founder, 30 editions before the French Revolution, and 130 editions in the 19th century. And this is not counting the works which used it without acknowledgment or in a form adapted to girls' schools. "It seems as if, after the Bible, the treatises on good manners by Erasmus of Rotterdam and St John Baptist de La Salle headed the list of the most popular books ever printed" (Bertrand Gaumont Flavigny, in the July 1991 issue of *Historia*, quoted in the *Rivista Lasalliana*, 1993, 210).

If we turn to our own times, it is probably true that most of us do not know this book, or perhaps, at the most, have leafed through it. It is a book which surprises us by the strangeness of the characteristics of politeness that it gives (lefthand pages of CL 19) or by certain rules of politeness of a departed age that it includes. We may, of course, have satisfied our curiosity by glancing at the article on **Decorum and Christian Civility** published by Brother Pungier in 1992 in *Lasallian Themes*. This Brother has now written a new work which he has entitled modestly "a first approach", but it will fill three Cahiers Lasalliens!

Freely-used "sources"

The main treatises on politeness used by De La Salle when he composed the RB were identified by Brother Pungier in his article for *Lasallian Themes*. A comparative study of these works in CL 58 enabled him to see how De La Salle's work came into existence and to place it in its socio-cultural, spiritual and pastoral context. We will limit ourselves here to a few examples of sources. Our numbering follows the scheme used in the Complete Works.

The Parish School (1654) prescribes a more difficult book for fluent readers, "a book of politeness dealing with all the duties of children towards God and their parents, as well as with propriety and the practice of good Christian and social behaviour. This book is printed in character (sic) different

from other books" (§ 7). The text of the *Conduct of Schools* (CE 3.9) follows its source so closely that it reproduces even the singular form of "character": "this book contains all the duties towards God and parents, as well as the rules of social and Christian propriety. It is printed in Gothic characters more difficult to read than French characters". (The reason for this was that it was intended as a preparation for the reading of manuscripts). RB does not follow this prescription exactly: it leaves the question of duties to God to other works, in particular, to DB. The Lasallian practice of pupils taking their meal in class comes from the Parish School. It enables the teacher to observe the children "so that he can pick out the greedy and impolite and reprimand them immediately".

RB owes most of its material to Antoine de Courtin's "New Treatise on the politeness practised in France by decent people" (1671), even though the Founder prefers the methodical plan of "The newly drawn-up Treatise on Politeness" by the Anonyme lyonnais (1681), to the unsophisticated and untidy arrangement of the former. While Courtin, following the example of St Francis de Sales, considers that balls, dancing and the theatre can be respectable entertainment, De La Salle condemns them from a very rigid moral point of view (RB 407-411), basing himself on the treatise by Alexandre Varet, a follower of Port Royal: *On the Christian education of children according to the maxims of Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church* (1666).

De La Salle, who is very sparing in his use of simile, uses, in a single page, three out of the four found in *Politeness for Children*: "It is very improper to bend one's back, as if one had a very heavy burden on one's shoulders...Propriety does not allow a person who is walking to swing his shoulders from side to side like the pendulum of a clock...It is very impolite to extend and stretch out one's arms, or to wave them about in one direction or another as women sometimes do when they are angry and insult others" (RB 105-106). We may be surprised to find in RB 253-254 a great many details regarding the quality of meat. These details are taken from *New Politeness* (1660) or from the Anonyme lyonnais. To the latter writer also, De La Salle owes his recommendations regarding fashions: not to follow them when they first appear and not be the last to abandon them (Cf. RB 170).

Brother Pungier explores also the scriptural sources of RB. The translation of the Jansenist Le Maître de Sacy is often used in quotations from Ecclesiasticus or St Paul, and that of Amelote, sometimes for the Gospels.

A book for Christian pupils and teachers

Following the publication of the *De civilitate morum puerilium* by Erasmus in 1530, and of the *Galatées* by Jesuit schools, numerous other treatises on politeness were brought out for the children of the nobility and for the upper classes of European society. At the beginning of the 17th century, there were "missionaries" who went about trying to christianise families by teaching them good manners. De La Salle was part of this movement. He was astonished "that most Christians looked upon propriety and politeness as simply purely human and social attributes, and that, not raising their minds higher, they did not consider it as a virtue in their relations with God, their neighbour and ourselves. It shows how little Christianity there is in the world, and how few people there are who live in it and lead their lives according to the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (RB 1).

Parents and teachers have a special responsibility as teachers of children. "When they give them rules of propriety, they must never forget to teach them to practise them for purely Christian motives that have to do only with the glory of God and salvation. Far be it from them to tell them that they will be blamed if they do such or such a thing, and that they will lose the esteem of others and will be ridiculed. Such an approach would serve only to teach them the spirit of the world and draw them away from that of the Gospel. When they wish them to adopt external practices such as comportment and modesty, they will be careful to induce them to do so because of the presence of God..." (RB 5-6). The same thinking should inspire their dealings with others, who are members of Jesus Christ and living temples of the Holy Spirit.

A spiritual work

"Christian propriety, therefore, is wise and restrained behaviour, demonstrated by words and external actions, for reasons of modesty, respect, or of union and charity regarding the person one is speaking to. Propriety in our dealings with our neighbour is what is politeness properly so called" (RB 9).

The intention of the writer was clearly to turn a school text into a spiritual work. "To support what he said, he used examples taken from the Holy Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church, and introduced Christian humility and the maxims of the Gospel into the smallest practices of propriety and politeness" (Blain 2.457). The biographer provides us here with our first insight into the meaning of RB: the decent person that is described in the 252 pages of the work "is first of all a Christian disciple of Jesus Christ, respectful, certainly, of the practices of his age and aware of the required responses regarding persons, places and times; but first of all he is respectful of God in whose presence he knows he is, and to whom he has to respond. His responsibility is that of a lay person, of a "secular", as the text says, but of one who is conscious of being the bearer of a mystery conferred on him by the sacraments of initiation of the Church, and which they continue to confer day after day: he is a child of God, a member of Jesus Christ and his tabernacle, and the temple of the Spirit. All his exterior actions, even those inspired or imposed by propriety and politeness, must speak of this mystery, translate it, in a manner of speaking, and manifest it" (CL 58, Foreword).

The literary choices of De La Salle

On the basis of De La Salle's treatment of his "sources", CL 59 will try to show what options were available to him. What follows is drawn from the soon to be published material which will form part 2 of Brother Pungier's work. "What he chose not to use is worthy of as much attention as what he borrowed. Often even, his choice not to use material indicates convictions all the more profound because they were opposed to current thinking" (Brother Poutet, *The 17th century and Lasallian origins*, I.9). This observation regarding De La Salle's attitude towards the institutions of his day plays a part especially in the way in which he uses his "sources".

"When one speaks, one should always use only words that are respectable, normal, understandable and suited to the subject one is speaking about, and not special or affected words. One should avoid in particular incorrect expressions,

which are not French and go against the purity of the language [...] However, one should avoid also a kind of corrupt French which some people often use" (RB 583). Unlike his sources such as the Anonyme and Courtin, De La Salle avoids using the grammarian term "barbarisms" or, reflecting the Parisian view, speaking of "provincial dialects".

The socio-cultural choices

For whom is the text of RB intended? This book on politeness "for the use of the Christian schools" seems, as we have seen, to be intended for «the children of artisans and of the poor», who are taught there, and for their teachers, all of whom belong to the lower classes. One needs "to look at oneself and consider what one is: a person who is inferior to others is obliged to show submission to those who are superior to him, either by birth, occupation or quality. He must show them much more respect than he would to someone who was his equal" (RB 14). As soon as manual work is mentioned, or any activities that are not raised in status through service of the King, the Law or science, the division in the French society of the day becomes apparent. "A peasant, for example, must give greater signs of exterior respect to his lord than an artisan who is not in his service. This artisan, however, must show much more respect to this lord than a gentleman who comes to see him" (id). And "if, at table, there is a person of high quality who is not wearing a hat for the sake of comfort, he must not be imitated, as this would be excessively familiar" (RB 185). But "when one of our friends asks, or some person to whom we owe respect, orders us to cut short the ceremonies [...] we must do so, so as not to be unaccommodating" (RB 640). The social distinction is clear: the friend "asks", the person who is owed respect "commands"!

Like many of his contemporaries, De La Salle does not dispute the social hierarchy of his times. La Chétardye, the parish priest of St Sulpice, had the following to say in his Instructions for a young lord, or the definition of a gentleman: "Although one must be civil, one must not treat everybody equally. There is nothing more just than subordination". We have here a view of the world created by God, willed by God, which has become crystallised into a mentality and an ideology: the natural world like the world of man is essentially hierarchical. In politics, just as in religion, a Christian must recognise and accept subordination: to the King and, ultimately, to God. Most of the time, De La Salle seems to consider his readers to be those who have very few people "below them". An inferior must be aware of "the distance which separates him" from those "above him" in order to show them his respect and submission in the established manner.

Hierarchy comes into play in the family liturgy of saying grace at table (RB 220-221). The order given is: ecclesiastic or deacon, head of the family, a person with a higher rank than the others, woman, child. Regarding precedence, when two or three are walking together during recreation (RB 364-376), as the Brothers used to for many years during their "recreations of Rule", all spontaneity in a person is suppressed if he is not "the most highly considered of the group". Hierarchy comes into its own in particular in letter-writing: "There are three sorts of letter, depending on the person one is writing to. For, according as one writes to a superior, an equal or an inferior, the letter has to have a special style and manner" (RB 618).

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