

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

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De La Salle and the social structure of his days

"Knowing as we do the pastoral concern of the Founder of the Brothers for the children of the artisans and of the poor, one would expect a more critical attitude on his part regarding the town-dwelling society of the France of his days" (CL 59). Brother Pungier sees some explanation in a sentence from the meditation for the feast of St Cyprian: "When we have voluntarily embraced poverty to imitate Jesus Christ, we love as he did those whom God allowed to be (in the French text "made") poor" (MF 166.2). De La Salle gives no theological justification for this affirmation, which was commonly accepted in his days.

One of St Augustine's sermons entitled "To what extent and for what purpose should one give alms" explains the reason behind the existence of the rich and of the poor: "The Lord made the rich to help the poor, and he made the poor to put the rich to the test". Jansenist writers such as Arnould and Nicole show that, since original sin, the primitive equality of people is no longer possible: inequality has become necessary, one could say, and Christianity does not suppress it, but maintains spiritual equality among people. Also it indicates the various duties of each social rank and recognises the usefulness of the distinguishing marks of this social hierarchy. If we are shocked by this, we should think of what we say to justify private property.

We do not know whether De La Salle shared these ideas fully, but they fit in well with some of his affirmations. And so we find that the first pages of RB lay stress on the fundamentally equal relationship that baptism establishes among all Christians (21), and later pages affirm equally unambiguously that it would be "indecent" for a merchant to dress like a noble (164). Pride...is a disordered desire to rise above the rank which was prescribed for us by the order of God, or taking pleasure in this rise in rank" (DA 214.1.1). De La Salle tones down the language of his source (Le Coreur) by adding "disordered" but agrees with him that the established order is a divine order.

Moral choices

P. Bénichou, in his "Morals in the Golden Age" (1988), distinguishes three different types of morality in this age: a heroic morality, which opens up a path from nature to greatness and defines the conditions for this; a strict Christian morality which condemns all human nature to nothingness; and the morality of society, which is both without illusions and without anguish, which refuses to confer greatness on us but does not deprive us of our confidence". This could be

symbolised by the three writers: Corneille, Racine and Molière.

RB contains traces of an aristocratic view of human morality: some souls are base, others are noble. Of the 14 times that baseness, base minds and base hearts are mentioned, 13 do not seem to come from De La Salle's source (see, for example, RB 17, 133 and 513). There are also well-born persons, well-born children. Here also this is the language of the author of the RB and not of his "sources" (see RB 26, 51, 65, 235, 385, 496, 512...).

RB says astonishingly little on the subject of fallen nature, a topic favoured by pessimistic theologians. The use of "what is natural" refers 8 times to the physical constitution of a person, 5 times as the opposite of counterfeit, artificial, and 3 times only to fallen man with his tendency to seek satisfaction by seeing everything (RB 62), to act in a completely human way (44), to seek pleasure in drinking and eating (203). When he speaks of friendship, De La Salle lays great emphasis on the need to keep the secrets of a friend (485). He uses Si 27, 23-24 to support his views, and the Gospel gives him a model in the friendships of Jesus (422).

Regarding the morality of the "decent man" (*honnête homme*), RB accepts it only when it does not hide moral or spiritual compromise. The pages on truthfulness in conversations are De La Salle's own and are somewhat rigid in tone (RB 407f). The Wise Man, St Paul and sometimes Jesus Christ are quoted when it is a question of telling the truth (481), refusing to use ambiguous words (483), not taking part in indecent conversations (501). He is intransigent, as we have already seen, in his condemnation, mirroring a current trend in the Church of his day, of entertainments which are not allowed "either by the laws of religion, or by the rules of propriety" (405).

The sense of Christian vocation

"It is a question of propriety and modesty to cover all the parts of the body, apart from the head and the hands" (RB 121), "and to hide what nature does not wish to be visible. This is what one should always do through respect for the majesty of God whom one should always have before one's eyes" (154). As Brother Pungier says, the "source" gave as a motive for this modesty respect for the majesty of a God who sees you (Rules of propriety for children). It is not simply a question of "preserving the treasure of purity", but also of "preserving for oneself at the same time the true honour of being a member of Jesus Christ and consecrated to his service" (146). Apart from the moral requirement, there is a mystical choice (see also sections on the temple of the spirit, the tabernacle of Jesus Christ: 6, 122 and 166).

Lasallian catechetical work is based on a "plan to form Christians and give them the means to lead a life worthy of their state and of the name they bear" (DA 0.0.1). RB originated from the same pastoral observation that too many Christians are only so in name and lead their lives according to the spirit of the world and not according to the spirit of Jesus Christ. "Since he [the Christian] is of noble birth, because he belongs to Jesus Christ and is a child of God, who is the Sovereign Being, he must not have or show anything base in his exterior appearance. Everything about him must seem noble and great and reflect in some way the power and the majesty of the God he serves and who gave him his being" (RB 21).

Children in Lasallian Schools

Children in Lasallian schools are called by their baptism to live according to this mystery: "Your mission does not consist in making your pupils Christians, but rather in making them true Christians. This is all the more necessary as it

would avail them but little to have received baptism if they did not live according to the Christian spirit" (MF 171.3). In Instruction III "On the Sacrament of Baptism", the children learn that, through this sacrament, they have become "Christians, children of God and of the Church, members of Jesus Christ, living temples of the Holy Spirit" (DB 3.3). In RB, a Christian is a confirmed person, who is aware of the gift he has received and of the obligations it entails, as for example, when he receives a blow (RB 54) or when someone objects in his presence to Christian maxims and the teachings of the Gospel (565).

He observes modesty all the time through respect for the presence of God of which he keeps himself aware (6). The "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God" is part of the educational process to make the child do all his actions for purely Christian motives (3). At school, the pupils will be induced to enter their classroom with great respect because of the presence of God (CE 1.1.9). When a Christian wakes up in the morning he should repeat the words of St Paul: "the time has come: you must wake up now...the night is almost over, it will be daylight soon" (RB 137 quoting Rm 13, 11-12). A Christian follows the Word of God and the example of Christ especially when he is insulted (RB 195-196) or he visits someone (RB 418 and 422; see DB 4.6.8), not simply through mechanical imitation, but in order to "profit" from the mystery he contemplates "and receive from it the spirit, the grace and the fruit that Our Lord wishes" he should draw from it (EM 7.179), and so live in interior conformity with Jesus Christ.

And so when we speak of propriety and Christian politeness, we are speaking of relations, of relations with God, with others and with oneself. If the word "faith" is not used in RB (except in 487, in good faith), the reality it represents is very much present. To look at God is to look with faith: He is the God of Revelation, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is for us the God of Majesty, the only Living and True God worthy of respect, praise and glory, the God of our hearts. It is through faith that I discern what I am: son of God, brother of Jesus Christ, temple of the Holy spirit...and a man burdened with sin; and also what others are: sons of God, brothers of Jesus Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit.

Taking secular values seriously

This view of faith has also a historical and cultural dimension coloured by its understanding of the early Church and the 17th century Church in France, with its references to St Francis of Sales and St Jeanne de Chantal, and to sacred canons and to the theological, pastoral and spiritual thinking of the time. The differences between this culture and our own are clearly seen in the long disquisition of the "ears of a Christian" (RB 30), or in the justification of certain times for retiring and rising (136). Should we therefore conclude that RB refers to a bygone age, that of the "decent Christian", and that it has nothing to offer us? This might be true if we were speaking of a "Book on politeness based on Scripture" rather like Bossuet's "Politics based on Holy Scripture".

Brother Michel Sauvage has shown us clearly that, on the contrary, Lasallian politeness recognised fully the values of the secular world: "by devoting a whole volume to set out [the rules of propriety]; by going into the innumerable details regulating the way to dress, to eat, to bear oneself, to visit others, to write letters, etc., the Apostle of Jesus Christ, the doctor in theology, shows clearly that he recognises the value of these rules which, by their nature, are intended to regulate

our lives here below. Moreover, in defining these rules, the Saint does not follow a deductive process, deciding, for example, on rules more or less arbitrarily on the basis of scriptural references. He bases himself on current practice, knowing full well that this practice varies from place to place and that consequently some of these rules have no absolute value. [...] By conforming in this way to the current practice of his day and society, does he not recognise that, despite their relative nature, these rules have real value" (Catechesis and the Laity, 674-675).

Important texts to study further

Brother Pungier concludes CL 59 by suggesting lines of research based on four important texts. He suggests also other Lasallian texts which will throw light on the four he has chosen. And so the very 17th century portrait of the Christian who is aware of what he is before God and before others (RB 21) can be read in parallel with EM 8,193,6-7; 6,167; 10,231; 4,138,3-5; 2,48; 2,39f and 8,193,5. Two of the RB texts (122 and 166) really come to life when they are read in conjunction with "Act by which we recognise that our body has become the Tabernacle of Jesus Christ, and our heart his Shrine, by his dwelling in us" by communion (CL 17,278 = I 6,30): one can appreciate more fully the nature of the respect a Christian should show his body, whatever the socio-cultural ways in which this relationship is expressed elsewhere.

"To live and to allow oneself to be led by the spirit of Jesus Christ" (RB 2) in all one's actions is a Pauline expression which throws light in particular on the Act of desire to receive Jesus Christ and his divine Spirit in Holy Communion (I 6,13): the Eucharist renews in us the effects of baptism and confirmation, the Spirit "regulates all the movements" of our heart, "moulds all our passions", "leaves in us the inclination to do only good". Finally, Brother Pungier recalls the beautiful prayer in the Instructions on the Sacrifice of the Holy Mass (I,1,8,39): "My God...I shall never please you till I am bound by affection to other people". This expresses very well the atmosphere of RB.

A book that needs to be re-read and studied

CL 60 will contain a new edition of RB. Each passage will be accompanied by the corresponding source text as shown in CL 58, as well as by references to the explanations and commentaries contained in the first two volumes. In this way we will have at our disposal a relatively complete piece of work well-worth reading. Of course, we cannot simply read this book from an "archeological" point of view, seeking to discover how the Christians of the time tried to live the Gospel personally and socially in their everyday lives. However, this first question brings to mind a second one: How can we Christians of the 20th, and soon, of the 21st century, live according to the Gospel in the various situations of our lives?

RB will not give us a direct answer to our questions, nor will any other writings of the past. In several sectors of the Institute attempts are being made to bring back forms of Christian education in social relations, and it is worthwhile to follow developments in this work. A fresh look at RB can spark off our creativity by showing us to what extent it is possible to inspire the children of the artisans and of the poor with the Christian spirit in their everyday relations.

Our gratitude to Brother Pungier for producing a marvelous means of taking a fresh look at this work. •