

The Conduct of Schools in its context: the Poor

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Brother Léon Lauraire's recent four volumes in the series *Cahiers Lasalliens*, numbers 61, 62, 63, and 64, are a very thorough study of the *Conduct of Schools*, the remarkable guide to running Christian schools that was the result of the combined experience of St De La Salle and his first Brothers. The first volume studies the *Conduct* in context; the second the text itself; the third will compare it with similar contemporary texts; the fourth will consider how it evolved till 1903, after which circumstances were very different.

The following is an outline of the poor for whom the Brothers worked and the schooling they developed to bring them out of their poverty. It was both spiritual and material.

"The artisans (working class) and the poor"

"Consider that it is a practice only too common for artisans and the poor, to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds..." (*Meditations for the Time of the Retreat*, Med. 2)

'Artisan' here does not mean an independent craftsman, but someone employed by a master craftsman to work in his workshop, a dependent worker or journeyman in other words, whose employment depended on the state of the economy. Or he may be in theory an independent serge-weaver, a master-weaver certified by his guild, but reduced to providing on a home loom cloth of various weaves from the raw material provided by a bourgeois fabricant. All these, working for a pittance, were too busy to look after their children. These children roamed the streets. They may be sent by their parents to beg. They might find a little job or do a little thieving. In hard times their parents were sacked and themselves reduced to poverty and begging. 'Poverty' meant the state of not having enough to live on, the result of being out of work. The Founder sees little difference therefore between 'artisans' = 'working class' and 'the poor' = 'those out of work' and dependent on the parish.

De La Salle first met this working class in his home town of Rheims, in other towns in Champagne as he was asked to start a school there, and especially in Paris, then elsewhere. He discovered that insecurity of employment was the principal characteristic of the lower classes, who moved alternatively from being able to cope, to poverty. ("La précarité de l'emploi apparaît comme la principale caractéristique des classes inférieures, dont les membres passent alternative-

ment de l'autosuffisance à la pauvreté." (Benoît Garnot, *Les villes en France au XVIe-XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles*; Paris, 1989.) He and his Brothers see the ignorance of the children and the bad habits they get into, and they see the need of a Christian education, a training in civility and planned courses of reading, writing and arithmetic up to the age of fourteen that will prepare them for jobs that will take them out of their poverty.

Children from 6 to 12 years might be taken on by master-weavers, for a variety of small or temporary jobs, as pre-apprentices, the daily few pence they got adding to the family wages. This employment of young children was accepted, since children at the time were considered as young adults and the family needed their work. Real apprenticeship began between twelve and fifteen years. It was the period from 6 to 15, when children often had no work that, as he says:

"These poor children, accustomed to lead an idle life for several years, have great difficulty adjusting when it comes time for them to go to work." (MTR, 2) "All disorders, especially among artisans and the poor, usually arise from their having been in their childhood left to themselves and badly brought up. It is almost impossible to repair this evil at a more advanced age, because the bad habits they have acquired are overcome only with great difficulty, and scarcely ever entirely, no matter what care may be taken to destroy them, whether by frequent instructions or the use of the Sacraments. As the principal fruit to be expected from the institution of the Christian Schools is to forestall these disorders and prevent their evil consequences, it is easy to conceive the importance of such schools and their necessity." (Rule, 1705)

In spite of various forms of help (poor relief committee, parish poor board) it is clear that they did not keep children off the streets. Some parishes set up charity schools for one or two years for those children of the parish certified as poor. In the parish of St Sulpice in Paris, Jean-Jacques Olier founded eight charity schools. After thirty years, only one remained, badly run, when the Founder and two Brothers moved there in 1688. The problem was the usual one of lack of trained and permanent teachers.

Workers, to be able to practise a craft, were enrolled in guilds which originally developed spontaneously for mutual support and protection and then became

well-organised. They perpetuated distant traditions and the sentiment of professional solidarity; they obtained privileges and rights from the civil authorities. Workers were dependent on their employer, with no guarantee on their work. Between 12 and 15, a boy began his apprenticeship, fed by the master and sleeping in his workshop. He had no chance of promotion, since the workshops and masterships were virtually hereditary. Fear, habit, religion as well as alcohol and festivities guaranteed the submission of the workers. In periods of economic crisis they lost their jobs.

It was essential, in a town, to belong to a guild. Decisions concerning the training of children were made by parents and their guild. There the child found its identity, beginnings of social integration, security and guarantees for the future. The Brothers would not take a stand against this set-up. All they had was persuasion to get the parents to keep their boy in school and follow the courses given by the Brothers, which would open the way to better situations. For within a guild, its craft had become routine, blind to the current economic evolution. The school could offer more professional openings through its training. The *Conduct* says:

“The means to make up for the negligence of the parents, especially the poor, will be first of all to speak to the parents and get them to understand the obligation they have to have their children taught, and the wrong they do them by not making them learn to read and write; how much harm it can do them, that they will be practically incapable of anything for any job for not knowing how to read and write. More effort should be given to make them understand this rather than the harm that the lack of instruction can do them in the matter of their salvation, which affects the poor very little, being themselves without religion.”

The Founder, setting up schools to bring up children in the faith, is aware that the faith does not appeal to those in poverty, and so he confines himself to economic arguments.

The *Conduct* further on says:

“When the parents withdraw their children from the school too young or insufficiently taught, to put them to work, they must be shown that they will do them much harm and that to get them to earn very little, they will lose a much more considerable advantage. For that, it must be pointed out to them the result for a worker to be able to read and write, since, even with little intelligence, if he knows how to read and write he is capable of any job. The parents must be urged to send their children either one hour morning

and evening, or all the afternoon. This kind of student needs watching over particularly and taken care of.”

This is a kind of bargaining: anything rather than nothing for the student to have a better chance of a future other than being tied to a working routine and a limited social group with limited hope of personal advancement. Under Louis XIV, political, administrative and judicial changes and new businesses required secretaries, messengers. These were better paid than working for craftsmen and offered better guarantees of employment. They required literacy, hence the school. France was also beginning to develop its industry and commerce. Besides the increase in manual work in factories, administration concerning production, sales, transport including by sea (navigation companies) called for a vast increase in secretarial work, keeping registers, accountancy. Even master craftsmen and small shopkeepers could not do without account books, proofs of transactions, contracts, order forms. This required a certain literacy, without which the master would have to employ and pay someone. The courses the Brothers gave in reading, writing and arithmetic made their students “capable of everything”– they had assurance of a better job than poorly paid weaving.

The Brothers developed three meticulous courses in reading, writing and spelling that prepared the boys for studying and getting to write out themselves handwritten papers or records “especially: writs of summons and seizure, agreements, receipts, estimates, leases, taking on workers and various contracts.” After three months, they practise at writing out such records themselves. The Brothers provide the school with a great variety of documents to be worked on; a boy can get help from his neighbour and read out his work to the Master. The same method of procedure is applied to writing and spelling. For arithmetic, the students work on problems given them with practical applications, and they learn to make some themselves.

Helping the poorest in school.

Although the parents had no fees to pay, they had to provide reading books, a prayer book, writing paper, quills and knife and a box to keep them in, transparent paper and blotting-paper; a small book of blank paper for arithmetic; a spelling exercise book; and a catechism. To help the poorest, a number of copies of the required books and sheets of paper were kept in the classroom. It is not said who provided them – the Brothers out of their small salary, or benefactors.