

Running a Brothers' school according to their *Conduct of Schools*

[Bro. Alfred Calcutt](#)

Hitherto, the few children who went to school went to a master who was given or had to find what premises he could; his own house, the presbytery, a rented room, the open air, the church porch. Such premises were mostly too small and often filthy. The children were taught one at a time; the others did what they liked, the noisy ones kept in order with the birch.

De La Salle's Brothers taught from the beginning the whole class, and were at least two in a school. They learnt method from Charles Démiá and especially from Jacques de Batencour's *École paroissiale*. He showed how to teach a whole class, but he was dealing with children of the lower bourgeoisie in Paris, who paid a small fee. He nevertheless had a well-organised curriculum. In time the Brothers developed improved school methods for teaching the poor. When the Founder brought out the *Conduct of Schools* in 1705, he wrote in the preface:

"...of discussions with the most senior Brothers of this Institute and the most capable of teaching well, and after an experience of several years; nothing has been set down which has not been well agreed upon and well tried out and of which the advantages and drawbacks have not been weighed, and of which the blunders and bad consequences have not been foreseen as far as possible."

This was twenty-five years after his first schools had opened in Rheims. The remainder of this article outlines very briefly what the *Conduct* expects a school to be, how it should function and for what end. It is based on Bro. Léon Lauraire's *Conduite des Ecoles – approche pédagogique* (Cahier Lasallien 62). Its English translation is by Bro. Allen Geppert.

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When the Founder was invited to open or take over a school it was to be run by at least two Brothers: they always formed a community which might increase as the numbers of pupils increased, if the locality could afford to pay for the upkeep of more Brothers. The rooms they were given may have had to be adapted. In time, the Brothers had uniform regulations concerning a classroom, its benches and other furniture or equipment. Running a class of sixty boys for forty

hours a week for 46 weeks in the year was very demanding. It was also the Brothers' means of educating them. Their aim was to give a thorough human formation and professional preparation as well as a Christian one.

The big change the Brothers made was to begin teaching to read in French before Latin and also to teach whole classes. But it was also to teach penmanship. Teaching calligraphy had become the monopoly of the guild of Master Writers whom the little masters feared. De Batencour, after a first training, referred his pupils "to the famous master-writers." De La Salle and his Brothers, on the contrary, taught thoroughly and painstaking their students the whole training in penmanship. The Master Writers in Paris took De La Salle and his Brothers to court and won, although the Brothers continued. The Writing Masters invaded their schools to check on anyone able to pay fees.

Arithmetic was taught late in the curriculum, so that some never attended school long enough to be taught it. The subject was difficult because of the money system of livres, sols and denier, equivalent to the former pounds, shillings and pence in English money, and because weights and measures varied from region to region. By it the children learnt how to pay for purchases and to calculate expenses if their job required it.

Spelling was not widely taught, but the Brothers taught it in three ways: copying written texts, preferably those of practical use, writing out a summary of catechism lessons, and – a new thing – dictation.

Such graded and thorough teaching, given by competent and devoted teachers gave the poor the chance of professional promotion in a country beginning to industrialise.

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The Brothers' schools were homes of an education in *politeness and civility*. Erasmus in 1530, by his treatise on courtesy for children, began a series of texts on civility that appeared especially in the 17th century. The Church after Trent sought to make of civility an instrument of Christianisation in tempering a society that was still violent. Society came to rely more and more on teachers

to make of 'a little animal a socialised being.' The *Conduct* shows that throughout the school day the children were taught self-control, and that the Master was to be a model: "They will strive to give their students, in all their exterior, a continual example of restraint and of all the other virtues they have to teach them and put into practice."

Late in their schooling, because of its Gothic characters, the children were given to read a manual of good manners. De La Salle brought out his own *Rules of Christian Politeness and Civility* in 1703. It was an immediate success. Three more editions were needed in his lifetime. It was pirated; 176 editions are known by 1955. The word *Christian* shows his aim: "It is a surprising thing that the majority of Christians look upon decorum and civility as a purely human and worldly quality, and that, not thinking to raise their minds higher, they do not see it as a virtue which relates to God, our neighbour and ourselves. This shows how little Christianity there is in the world, and how few people there are who live and act according to the spirit of Jesus Christ. It is this sole mentality, however, which should inspire all our actions in order to make them holy and agreeable to God."

Apart from their value in themselves, good manners would be a help to those school-leavers who could hope for employment in the new better remunerated possibilities and where good manners and civility would be expected.

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Along with and beyond the solid profane formation given in these schools, they were resolutely *Christian* – the name he gave his schools and to his society of Brothers: *Brothers of the Christian Schools*. For him, running Christian schools was the work of God to which he had been called. He and his Brothers discovered by its effects that their work was one of the most important ministries in the Church. He expressed his understanding of this in the sixteen meditations he wrote for his Brothers' retreat and for all Christian teachers.

The aim of his schools was to form genuine Christians, who not only knew their faith but practised and lived it - what he called living the spirit of Christianity. "If you really love Jesus Christ, you will apply yourself will all possible care to impress his holy love in the hearts of the children you form to be his disciples. See that they think often of Jesus, their good and only master; that they speak often of Jesus; that they yearn only for Jesus."

Following the Council of Trent and its catechism, in 17th century France there was a flowering of catechisms to combat religious ignorance and superstition. Each diocese produced its catechism, taught in families if they were literate or had the time, and learnt in the little schools but not necessarily explained. In their schools the Brothers taught the diocesan catechism, but their Founder produced small and large abridgements, and three volumes on the Christian's duties towards God.

Knowing the faith was not enough; the children were taught the Gospel maxims in order to learn to think and live as Christ did. Besides this teaching, attitudes of faith were gradually passed on through various means. Every half-hour the lessons stopped for a short prayer around one of the principal mysteries, beginning with: "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." There was a morning prayer at ten o'clock, during which the Brother gave a brief exhortation. There was daily mass at ten-thirty. Afternoon school ended with a half-hour catechism lesson, followed by a lengthy evening prayer and an examination of conscience and concluded with a hymn.

The aim of the Brother's relationship with the children as he taught was to get them to relate more and more to God: it was to 'touch' or lead them to live by the Gospel.

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The second part of the *Conduct* was taken up with "*establishing and maintaining order in the schools*." Everything was to be uniform in all the schools in order to ensure order. It could be an excessive regimentation, but it made possible for Brothers starting to teach or being changed school to control sixty children and more from an undisciplined, noisy background, lacking civility. The three means given to establish and maintain order were: *vigilance, silence and signs*.

Vigilance is not only a matter of supervision but an educational concern and a spiritual attitude: alertness to see things are going as they should: a part of the Brother's zeal that is therefore peaceful, without agitation, constraint or affectation. It is helpful and patient. "It is not your impatience that will make them improve; it will be your vigilance and good behaviour," the Founder writes.

"Silence is one of the principal means of establishing and maintaining order in the schools." Overcrowded classes, and several levels of learning required silence. Children were not to

avoid sin and to follow Christ. It is remarkable that in a class of sixty the Brothers could get to know each student and to be loved by them. Canon Blain, De La Salle's biographer, writes: "Some in school have been seen...to make a sign to them to come to them as if to say something, and to throw their arms round their neck when they came to embrace and kiss them with tenderness without being able to give any other reason for such an extraordinary action in a school than this: "I love you."...Once a Brother has the esteem and affection of his pupils, he can do with them what he likes." (See my *De La Salle - a City Saint...*, p. 333)

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Coping with absenteeism.

Chapter 16 on this topic is the longest in the *Conduct*. Louis XIV's "Declaration" in 1698 imposing on parents to send their children to school till they were 14, changed little. Of the 20% or so of children who attended school, many truanted. Most little schools were badly run and charged fees. The main cause was a poor family's need to gain a few pence from employing young children. They often saw work in school as a waste of time and were unable to appreciate their children's progress.

Even for such numbers, the Brother in the last month of the school year made out an appreciation of each student under sixteen headings. The Director of the community compared these reports the preceding years and lent them out for three months to the Brother who had that class next year.

How to deal with each one "depends on the knowledge and discernment of spirits – something you must often and ardently ask of God, as being one of the qualities you need most for the conduct of those you are charged with." The Brother's attitude is a sort of empathy, a willingness to want the boys to improve, the effort to arouse a willingness to change for the better. It is a sort of intuition to be asked for in prayer. Of their relationship with their students, De La Salle tells the Brothers: "Do you have these sentiments of charity and tenderness for the poor children you have to bring up? Do you profit by the affection they have towards you to lead them to God? If you have towards them the firmness of a father to withdraw and remove them from disorder, you must also have for them the tenderness of a mother to win them over and do for them all the good that depends on you."

The constant living of this attitude produced affection and trust in the children and made it possible to 'touch' their hearts – to lead them to

The Brother in charge of the school had to bring home to them the harm they did their children from not having them read and write. If necessary and if they had signed on with the parish poor board, the Brothers requested that alms should be lifted till the parents sent their boys to school. The *Conduct* blames Brothers who easily give permission to be absent or tolerate truancy: others will try the same. 'It is better to expel them and have fifty attending regularly than a hundred who are continually absent.' But rather than end their teaching, and ruin their future, some are allowed to be absent certain days, or come every day at set times. But the Brothers studied the causes of truancy. Children used to living most of the time on the streets were tempted to go back to its freedom. As a remedy, the Brother would give them a function in the class; this might give them a liking for the school. He "shows them much affection for the good they do and rewards them for very little, which should be done only for this kind of individual and light-headed ones." Incompetence or severity in a new master will drive some from school. Numbers in the class need to be tailored to his capacity and the Brother Director needs to follow him very carefully.

Dealing with absences had short-term and long-term aspects. The parents of new boys were strongly reminded of the need for punctuality and attendance. Two or three reliable boys in each class were chosen to enquire at the homes of the absent at the end of school, to mark absences in a book and report back. To encourage them, they were given a little reward each month. They should encourage those easily absent to attend, and the same if they meet one in the street. A truant must be brought back by one of the parents or relatives; the Brother Director will be firm with the parents but tell them how to prevent these absences. To deserve rejoining his class, a boy may have to sit several days on the 'careless' bench.

Long-term dealing with truancy aimed at working for good results so that parents and children would see that school was worthwhile. They should be helped and encouraged. They should not be advanced to a higher grade unless they are quite ready for it; otherwise they get discouraged. The more able help their neighbours. Simple rewards were given for overall behaviour to encourage them to do so with affection. School texts might be given to the poor.

The effort against truancy had its results, for the 1720 edition of the *Conduct* makes no mention of visitors of the absent. Parents were coming to appreciate more the value of schooling with the Brothers.

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Accompanying a boy throughout his schooling began with seeking information from the parents when they first bring him to school as to home background, his general behaviour, if he had been to other schoolmasters and why he had left; his knowledge of the catechism; if he is twelve and over, what his parents intend for him. This is entered into the admissions register with the grade assigned to him. If he is leaving at fourteen, a suitable grading and timetable is worked out for him. He is assigned his class, his lesson and his place, and put next to someone who can help him to adapt quickly.

The Brothers worked out eight grades for reading; those in each grade were divided into 3 orders: beginners, average, advanced; for Latin, only beginners and advanced; for writing eight orders of progress for round hand, five for bastard hand. To be able to cope at their own level led to being advanced in the monthly tests – to experiencing success and so encouragement and satisfaction.

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Apart from the catechism lesson, the children, once they had been shown how to begin reading or writing, went through a series of exercises individually or as part of a group in silence, except when a boy was called upon to read. Whenever such a boy made a mistake, it would be easier for the teacher to correct him; but it was educationally better for the Brother to call upon a good reader, who will not simply correct the one syllable, but repeat the whole word distinctly. This *mutual aid* was a mark of the Brothers' teaching method. When a boy was new to a reading level, he was put for a few days with another boy who would show him how to read, "both holding the book, on one side, the other on the other." When moved to the next higher level or 'order' of writing, a boy is placed next to one who is well advanced in that level or is in the one higher; if he finds the pen movements awkward, next to one who finds them easy; and so on.

Class officers "to carry out a number of different functions that the Masters cannot or should not do themselves" were named on the third day of school, taking the advice of the Brother Director (headmaster). Fourteen such offices involved 30 to 40 students. Changes among them and from year to year could mean that most boys had a chance to be nominated. They fostered responsibility, solidarity and conscientiousness. They had to be carefully chosen; for instance, the 'inspector' needed to be one of the first arriving, and note all that went on in school in the Brother's absence, the Brother acted carefully on what he reported; two serious boys called 'supervisors' checked on the 'inspector'. The boy with the key to the school door had to arrive on time. The bell-ringer had to ring very punctually for the beginning of school and for the prayer at hours and half-hours. A sweeper in each class swept the room every day after morning school. In the writing class, one or two boys were in charge of giving out and collecting the writing sheets.

These and other 'officers' helped the class to run, and to promote devotedness to the school. They made it easier for the Brother to keep contact with the class. These were not monitors.

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The question of corrections (punishments) takes up forty pages in the *Conduct*, thirty-five of them being a study of the problem. "To improve those we guide," writes the Founder, "we have to behave towards them in a manner that is gentle and

firm at the same time.” Much of the trouble arises from the attitude of the teacher. A master’s behaviour becomes unbearable when he imposes too tough ‘penances’ (things to do for having misbehaved) “arising often from his lack of discretion and judgment, for it often happens that the pupils have not the strength of body or mind to carry the burdens that often crush them. Secondly, when he gives orders harshly and imperiously ... Thirdly, when he insists too much on a boy doing something ... and he is not given time to calm down. Fourthly, when he is as exacting for small things as for bigger ones. Fifthly, when he rejects out of hand the reasons and excuses of the children. Sixthly, “when, not having a good look at himself, he does not know how to sympathise with the weaknesses of the children...seeming more to move and act on an instrument deprived of feeling than on a created being capable of reason.”

The thought behind punishment at the time was that human nature is inclined to evil; children, lacking reflection, are easily led astray; wrongdoing is sin; punishment is meant to drive evil from the person and produce conversion. The Brothers were meant to create a relationship with the children based on respect, love and tenderness in order to touch and win over their hearts. “You need to have two qualities in your relationship with them. The first is gentleness and patience. The second is prudence in your reproofs and corrections.” (*Meditations for the time of Retreat the use of all persons engaged in the education of youth...* Meditation 11)

Children “do many things without thinking ...reprimands and punishments give them an opportunity to think about what they have to do...Make sure you do not let considerable faults go unpunished.” If you want a school to be well ruled and in good order, corrections must be rare. You must use the strap only when necessary (only once or twice, rarely three, on the palm of the hand); you must strive to see that this necessity is rare. Correction by birch or whip must be much rarer...only three or four times at most in a month.” This means that the children were rarely punished, most never. “It is the silence, vigilance and restraint of a Master that establishes good order in school, and not harshness and blows.” “You must study how to act with skill and ingenuity to keep the children in order, without hardly ever using correction.” A Brother first coming into teaching was not allowed to use the birch for a year, or not till he was over 21. Punishment “should manifest a father’s gravity, a compassion

full of tenderness and a certain gentleness that is, however, lively and effective. It should appear in the master who reprovcs or punishes that it is a kind of necessity and through zeal for the common good, that he acts in this way.” He is dispassionate and so does not damage his relationship with the rest of the class.

So, corporal punishment was used. But the most usual corrective action in the school was through ‘penances’ or something to be done that will lead them to reflect and change: “The use of penances will be much more usual in school than corporal punishment.” Examples: if a boy comes late, he must be among the first all next week; if a boy does not follow the reading, he has to hold up his book to his face for half an hour; if he has not worked well at his writing, he is given a few words or sentences to fill a whole page with neatly at home. “One of the most suitable penances and of the greatest utility is to give the pupils something to learn by heart.” It was never meaningless copying.

What mattered most was the Brothers’ pastoral attitude. In his fourth meditation for teachers he writes: “When you encounter some difficulty in the guidance of your disciples, when...you observe a reckless spirit within them, turn to God with confidence. Earnestly ask Jesus Christ to make his Spirit come alive in you, since he has chosen you to do his work. Consider Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd of the gospel seeking the lost sheep...Ask him for the grace needed to bring about the conversion of the hearts of those in your care.”

Canon Blain, writing De La Salle’s life in 1733, says: The Brothers have found teaching with hardly ever using punishments so worthwhile that they are beginning to make it a law to banish them entirely from their schools.” They were finally banished by the Brothers’ General Chapter of 1787.

