THE FIRST CENTURY 1679-1792

PRELUDE

1.10 *A Memoir written in Rouen in 1721, two years after the death of John Baptist de La Salle, expresses succinctly what this man had achieved between 1679 and 1719.*

> *Monsieur de La Salle had the idea of setting up gratuitous schools where the children of workmen and the poor would learn reading, writing and arithmetic, and would also receive a Christian education through catechisms and other forms of instruction appropriate for forming good Christians. For this purpose he brought together a group of young unmarried men. He strove to have them live in a way which was consistent with the end of their Institute, and in order to recreate the life of the first Christians . . . he composed Rules for them.*

1.11 The Mission of the Institute

The *Rules*, probably first formulated on a trial basis in the 1680s, were subsequently tested over many years of experience of the life in the communities before receiving some kind of definitive wording and publication, approved by all the Brothers, in 1718. As can easily be imagined, this set of Rules set out clearly in its opening chapter the very reason for the existence of this new society. Three of the articles in particular challenged generations of Brothers by their realism and clarity:

> *The end of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children; it is for this purpose the Brothers keep schools, that having the children under their care from morning until evening, they may teach them to lead good lives, by instructing them in the mysteries of our holy religion and by inspiring them with Christian maxims; and thus giving them a suitable education.* (Chapter 1,3 RC 1718)

> *The necessity of this Institute is very great, because artisans and the poor, being usually little instructed, and being occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and family, cannot give their children the needed instruction. nor a suitable Christian education.* (Chapter 1, 4 ibid)

> *All disorders, especially among artisans and the poor, usually arise from their having been, in 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 by 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.* (Chapter 1, 6 ibid)

One thing is clear from the above three quotations: this group of people who comprise the Institute have come together in response to what they saw as an urgent need, namely, the provision of *"instruction* (i.e., religious instruction in the 17th C context) and a *Christian education"* (i.e. reading, writing, arithmetic, etc.) to poor boys who otherwise would not receive it through the ordinary schools which they might find it possible to attend. Today we are more inclined to see instruction as a general activity within the total process of education.

1.12 Response to needs

This *"response to needs",* in what he saw as the education of poor boys through the "Christian school", is the unifying theme, the *leit motiv*, which can be traced through the 300 and more years since the first schools of the Institute in Rheims. La Salle's concern, expressed so consistently through so many of his writings for his Brothers, is for the *"salvation"* of the students whom he saw always as *"confided to your care."* Yet, he does not limit the mission of his Institute to ensuring that these students have a word-perfect knowledge of the *"truths necessary for salvation,"* important though that is for him and for his contemporaries, by founding a catechetical confraternity of Christian doctrine. Certainly, attendance at the daily catechism lesson, at the longer catechism lessons taught on the eves of feasts and at the special catechism lessons on the *"great mysteries"* taught on Sundays, became a special emphasis in all of his schools, indeed the indispensable condition for being admitted and being retained as a student. But the bulk of the time in the Christian school was spent on the educational tasks of teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, politeness and good manners to the students so that they could find useful employment in their society.

a. Gratuitous schools

Since the Christian school was to be at the service of the "children of artisans and the poor," it was necessarily gratuitous. The poor could not pay. Since it was this uncertainty about payment which often prevented schoolmasters from remaining in their occupation and so threatened the continuity of schools for the poor, the Brothers provided a good, stable but gratuitous school in which the pupils could be prepared for useful occupations. Gratuity was above all an attitude of sharing freely without hope of reward in any shape or form. It was to remain one of the enduring characteristics of Lasallian works in education.

b. Teaching in the vernacular

Teaching pupils in their native French was one of the innovative aspects of the first Lasallian schools. This was a response to the obvious need of those first boys to be able to read and write their own language as an indispensable condition of their gaining employment. So, too, was the practical perspective that included making use of invoices and accounts in arithmetic lessons and the copying of contemporary documents as a part of the writing lessons.

c. Training of teachers

Besides training his own teachers thoroughly, De La Salle, in response to the needs expressed to him by others, devoted himself three times in his lifetime to training teachers, not members of his congregation, who would be schoolmasters in country areas. His vision was not limited to ensuring the future of his own works but extended to include ways of addressing the lack of any set structures for the training of teachers.

d. Unforeseen needs

In response to the particular needs brought to his attention in the parish of Saint Sulpice in 1698, De La Salle took charge of a group of Irish boys, sons of followers of the exiled King James II, and provided them with lodging and schooling at his main house in Paris. Soon afterwards, and again in response to needs expressed by some former pupils, the first of the so-called Sunday academies, which taught more advanced drawing, arithmetic and accounting *"to young persons below 20 years of age"* was opened. Although this first academy lacked continuity, it was the predecessor of many similar works in later years.

e. The needs of those who were not poor

After the transfer of the center of his Institute from Paris to Rouen in the course of 1705, De La Salle accepted the request of a number of better-off families to open a Christian school as a boarding school for their children. This involved a considerable enlargement of the curriculum to help prepare these young men for a professional career as merchants. Even here, great care was taken that the teaching as such remained gratuitous even though money was received for food and lodging for the pupils. In 1709, De La Salle accepted to enlarge the boarding facilities at Saint Yon in order to assume responsibility as well for the care of young delinquents from better off families, who followed the same curriculum as the boarders, and who could aspire to join them if their conduct was deemed satisfactory. While it is undoubtedly clear that the property at Saint Yon was important in offering De La Salle a site and the financing for his novitiate that was transferred from Paris, it is also clear that he was responding to the expressed needs of families both for the boarding school as well as for the correctional institution.

f. De La Salle's writings meet the particular needs of his followers

In the wide-ranging writings which La Salle bequeathed to his Institute, his principal motivation seems to have been to address the particular needs of his first followers by composing works which would help them in their personal formation. Without Latin, they had no access to the ordinary sources of further education in their society, such as the university. As laymen, they had no possibility of being admitted to study theology in seminaries. Since there were no teachers' colleges as we now understand them, their pedagogical training depended on their own Institute. Read from this perspective, De La Salle's writings address all the significant questions which their profession and state of life demanded of them: orthodox theological knowledge, pedagogical competence, catechetical skills, prayers, hymns and practices suitable for their pupils, a Rule, spiritual teachings and meditations for their lives as members of a lay Institute. In the early years of the Institute, he showed the importance that he placed on continuing formation by occasionally withdrawing Brothers from the schools for some months so as to give a more solid foundation to their religious and professional lives.

g. The need to recognize Christian education as ministry

It is especially in his later writings, most notably in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, that De La Salle developed the theological foundations of education as ministry, based on the application of Saint Paul's writings in 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Colossians and 1st and 2nd Thessalonians:

"… just as he (God) commanded light to shine out of darkness, so he himself kindles a light in the hearts of those destined to announce his word to children, so that they may be able to enlighten those children by unveiling for them the glory of God.

Since, then, God in his mercy has given you such a ministry; do not falsify his word but gain glory before him by unveiling his truth to those whom you are charged to instruct. Let this be your whole effort in the instructions you give them, looking upon yourselves as the ministers of God and the dispensers of his mysteries." (MTR 1,1)

The *order*, *system* and *method* of the Christian school, the emphasis on close relationship between teacher and pupil, is also based on the real needs of the students. *"God has had the goodness."* De La Salle writes, *"to employ you to procure such an advantage for children." (ibid)*

1.13 The Bull of Approbation, January 26, 1725

The formal approval of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by the Church was by the issuing of an official document, in this case what was called a Papal Bull, entitled *In Apostolicae Dignitatis Solio*. In this document of approval, Pope Benedict XIII expresses succinctly its origin and purpose, first of all in the personal vision of De La Salle himself:

"John Baptist de La Salle ... being moved with pity at the sight of the innumerable scandals that spring from ignorance, the source of all evils, more particularly among those who whether crushed down by want, or busy with manual labor in order to gain a livelihood, are not only extremely ignorant of all human sciences for want of the necessary pecuniary means, but, what is more lamentable, are often without the knowledge of the elements of the Christian religion . . . founded an Institute known by the title of the Brothers of the Christian Schools for the glory of God and the relief of the poor ..." (B, Preface)

The 1st article of the Bull states clearly the mission of the Institute:

"That … they should make it their chief care to teach children, especially poor children, those things which pertain to a good and Christian life."

The 5th article reiterates the importance of gratuity and specifies how to implement it:

"… that the said Brothers teach children gratuitously and that they receive neither money nor presents when offered by the pupils or their parents."

The 17th article indicates the balance that is to be maintained between their teaching of school subjects and their role as catechists:

> *"That the Brothers not only teach the children reading, writing, orthography and arithmetic but that they chiefly imbue their minds with the principles of Christianity and of the Gospel … and other things necessary for salvation."*

What this official approval did was to recognize not only the legal existence of the Institute within the body of the Church but, more importantly, to validate its educational mission as a particular contribution to the overall mission of the Church.

1.14 Remaining faithful to De La Salle's vision

The first century of the Institute's schools up to the time of the suppression in 1792 during the French Revolution affords us many examples of how this "responding to needs" remained a dynamic principle. By forming schoolmasters through their particular methods, based on the *Conduct of Schools*, the Institute provided individual teachers for country and city parishes as well as for the early schools of the Sulpicians at Montreal. The particular difficulties and needs of various parts of France stimulated great creativity in adapting the curriculum of the school to the needs of pupils who would go to sea (Calais, Vannes, Saint Malo), to the particular problems of those isolated areas where the Church campaigned to convert the children of Calvinists to Catholicism, to the development of more advanced training in methods of keeping accounts. The prohibition on the teaching of Latin, which was to provide the target for so many of the attacks and jeers of the *philosophes*, seems to have been an important factor in maintaining the practical focus of the Institute's schools and so continuing to make the schools accessible to the poor and drawing its major clientele from among the poor. The pioneer work with boarding schools and with the custodial care of delinquents, begun at St. Yon in De La Salle's lifetime, was continued and extended to eight such institutions before 1792.

Three documents left by Brother Agathon, Fifth Superior General, illustrate this fidelity. The first was his second circular letter to the Brothers in 1785, the development of *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Master*, left simply as a list by De La Salle. This text shows a deep knowledge and understanding of the foundation principles of the Institute. So, too, does Brother Agathon's letter of April 10, 1786, where he questions the Brothers seriously about the *"Public Contests and Examinations"* which had become traditional in many of the schools and which he felt risked favoring the more gifted pupils to the detriment of the others, reminding the Brothers that *"the finality of Christian and Gratuitous schools . . . is to bring up pupils in a Christian manner."* Brother Agathon's spirited defense of the Institute during the French Revolution in the document presented to the National Assembly in 1791, is a model of clarity and brevity which insists on the historical fact that:

> *"Their schools are completely gratuitous; they never receive anything, either from the parents or the pupils; . . . It should not go unnoticed as well that they offer a quite notable present to the Nation each year by forming more than one hundred teachers for the instruction of the poor youth of the different cities to which they are sent."*

In responding to some particular objections leveled against the religious congregations in general, Brother Agathon insists on the education of the poor:

> CONCERNING THE INSTRUCTION OF THE POOR
>
> *"It is certainly not for the Brothers of the Christian Schools to make known to the Nation the importance of children of the ordinary people being able to acquire religion, customs and some openness of spirit, of becoming accustomed from an early age to obedience, to rules of behavior, to being kept busy, according to their age and their position. Such things, by keeping idleness and the possibility of learning vicious habits at a distance, dispose them more easily to the different professions that they need to take up. In the lowest class of the people the majority of fathers and mothers lack the time and talent that are needed for their children's education. It is obviously useful for artisans and tradesmen to know their religion, and to be able to read, write and calculate …"*

There is no difficulty in recognizing the historical continuity between the mission of Christian Education here defended by Brother Agathon and the origin of the mission of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Unfortunately, the legal existence of the Institute in France was terminated from 1792 until 1805. Only a small group of Brothers in some of the Papal States and in Rome continued to exist officially.