

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PRESENT TRANSLATION

*The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher* [*Les Douze Vertus d'un bon Maître*] by Brother Agathon, fifth Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from 1777 - 1795 is, in my view, after the monumental text we know as *The Conduct of Schools*, the most significant work in education in the Lasallian heritage. Some 100 years after the first schools, it affords a kind of benchmark by which to judge the fidelity of the Institute to the founding vision. This significance is primarily because of the inherent value of the text itself, but also because of its wide diffusion outside of the Institute. Translated from the original French into Italian in 1797 and into English, Spanish, Dutch, and German during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the work was a major text in many Catholic Teaching Colleges until the 1930's.

### **Addressed to the Brothers.**

The work was addressed to the Brothers in 1785 as the first printed circular letter at a time when, novices included, there were close to 1,000 members of the Institute. It was, according to Brother Agathon's original preface, a complement to an earlier letter in which Brother Agathon had reflected on the religious duties of the Brothers. The writer takes the twelve virtues, listed by John Baptist de La Salle both in the manuscript *Conduct of Schools* of 1706 and in the *Collection of Short Treatises* of 1711, but without any further development. The fact that Brother Agathon was working in the 1780's on an updated version of the *Conduct* [the manuscript of which we possess] to meet the diversified needs of the Institute 100 years after the first school in Rheims, may have been the spur which led to his launching this new work.

In the same preface, Brother Agathon insists on following "*the plan given us by M. De La Salle*" and "*in accordance with his principles and maxims.*" After discussing the possibility of another order for the twelve virtues, Brother Agathon explains that "*we felt that we should follow the order that M. De La Salle himself considered proper to indicate to us.*" He does, however, add to the text a postscript, "*some reflections on the conditions which he (De La Salle) calls for so that correction may be salutary both to the one who inflicts it, and to him who receives it.*"

If the text is redolent in so many ways of "*the principles and maxims*" of De La Salle, it is enriched by what Brother Agathon has drawn from his own experience and "*from the most reliable authors.*" In fact, the principal "other" source is the *Traité des Études* of Rollin (d.1743) from whom, a century or so later, the Institute was to adapt the *Prayer of the Teacher before school*.

### **Brother Agathon himself.**

Brother Agathon himself, "*le grand Supérieur*" as the historian Georges Rigault called him, tried vainly to save the Institute from extermination in the suppression of all Religious Communities in 1792 during the French Revolution, was imprisoned in three different prisons, and finally released to die alone in 1798. In the meantime, his text had reached the Brothers community in Rome where an Italian translation was made in 1797. A subsequent edition - that of Marietti in 1835 - became a favorite book of Saint John Bosco during his time as chaplain to the Brothers' school at Santa Barbara in Turin. The Irish Christian Brothers produced the first English translation in Dublin in the 1840's. The text was translated and

introduced into Spain some 25 years before the Institute opened its first communities in Spain. The incorporation of the text as a kind of appendix to the *Conduct of Schools* may have contributed to its never attaining the same independent importance in France as it did in other countries, although it should be noted that it was included in at least seventeen separate editions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Readers of the text, besides noting the vigorous direct style of the author, soon realize that they are reading the work of a man who has had a broad experience of the classroom and has long reflected on the heritage received from M. De La Salle and the first generation of Brothers.

Indeed, Brother Agathon as a teacher is known to us as the author of a treatise on arithmetic and another on double-entry accounting. He had taught both mathematics and navigation as part of the specialist work offered by the Brothers to French naval officers at both Vannes and Brest. His reputation for good judgement and his ability at synthesis had brought him as secretary to the General Chapter of 1777 where, to his great surprise, he found himself proposed as Superior General.

### **A Traditional Christian understanding of Virtue.**

Virtue has been defined as “*conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality.*” Virtues, therefore, are the practices and habits which are followed out in accord with these principles. Four natural or cardinal virtues - prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance - are seen as the “hinges” on which other virtues can be cultivated. This concept of virtue is discussed by Socrates, found in Plato and Aristotle, adopted by Roman writers, and taken over by such distinguished Christian writers as Saints Ambrose, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. The Christian writers add the so-called theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, giving preference to the greatest of the three - charity, or love.

While Greek thought saw the virtues as somehow innate to the nature of mankind, the Christian writers attributed them to God’s revelation through Christ. Virtue is always the just balance between excess and defect: [*virtus in medio stat*]. Virtues can be acquired by the cultivation of regular actions which build up to a habit. [*habitus*] While modern psychology may have certain reservations about too mechanistic an approach to the cultivation of virtue, certain kinds of learning experiences, e.g., learning another language, are based on such an approach.

### **Some editorial notes.**

I have been able to make use of two different translations of this text, one done by the late Brother Oswald Murdoch (Australia) and the other by Brother Richard Arandez (New Orleans-Santa Fe), but have allowed myself a certain latitude in modifying certain expressions and sometimes whole sections so that they may be better understood by contemporary audiences.

The basic French structure of the text has been maintained, especially in the use of the semicolon to indicate the subordination of ideas. While this is not the same way as the semicolon is used in English, the logic and force of the original text is better preserved by than by breaking up the text with periods [full stops].

Secondly, although the French makes regular use of the word “*enfants* = *children*” and “*élèves* = *pupils*” to describe the young people in the classrooms which Brother Agathon and

the Brothers knew in the late years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I have settled for the word “students” so as to make the most appropriate connection with the young people in Lasallian schools today - except where it has seemed important to indicate a particular emphasis of the original text. By the 1780's, the Brothers had eight Boarding and Correctional schools on the Saint Yon model. Their pupils were no longer simply children who remained only for two years to learn the elements of reading, religion, writing, and arithmetic, but often adolescents or young men who may have already had six or seven years of schooling.

Thirdly, since this is a translation of an original work in which Brother Agathon wrote for the Brothers of his day who taught boys only, there has been no attempt to change his original way of speaking about boys and young men, or of addressing only teachers who were male. I think all Lasallian teachers, nevertheless, will make the necessary adjustments as they come to appreciate the wisdom and practical importance of this great Lasallian text.

Brother Gerard Rummery

12<sup>th</sup> February 1998