

CATECHESIS AND JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE'S SCHOOLS

«De La Salle wanted schools that were well-run... He wanted teachers that were skilled in imparting secular and religious knowledge, and able to educate hearts and minds.

His writings:

- The Conduct of Schools,
- The Duties of a Christian to God,
- The Rules of Christian Politeness and Civility,
- Instructions and Prayers

reflect this concern for pastoral care and education.

The Founder was able to see an area of neglect, with all its ramifications –and there lies his genius– and to offer an efficient remedy.

What the Founder of the Brothers wants to raise up are true Christians, true disciples of Jesus Christ. This goes much further than teaching the catechism. It affects a person's whole life».

(Jean Baptiste de La Salle: Le Message de son catéchisme, p. 18, Brother Jean Pungier).

I should like to show in this article how the present-day approach to catechesis in France reflects closely that of John Baptist de La Salle.

1. A CATECHESIS FOR THE PRESENT DAY

Its aims were redefined by the French Bishops' Assembly in Lourdes in October 1979.

This assembly stated its views and laid down guidelines regarding the mission, spirit and requirements of present-day catechesis in an official **Reference Handbook**.

It lays stress on the following points:

- the Christian message and the way it is expressed in the teachings of the Church;
- the cultural and pedagogical situation in which Christian initiation takes place in present-day France.

The catechesis of children is seen as part of their initiation into the Church, and as such it is a particularly heavy responsibility in present circumstances.

Article 31 of the Reference Handbook makes the following statement:

«Teaching catechism implies that there is somewhere where the child can experience the life of the Church.

Teaching catechism gives access to the "documents of the faith" by means of which a man can become part of the Covenant between God and his people.

Teaching catechism has a sacramental structure. Sacraments reveal and are the active gift of God who frees man and makes him share his life.

Teaching catechism leads to conversion and to a way of life that is transformed by faith.

Finally, teaching catechism leads to the celebration of the Christian mystery and to feasts of the faith.»

John Baptist de La Salle's aim was to "form Christians", who would be "truly" so, "living by the very spirit of Jesus Christ in all things." This is not a small undertaking...

I think this is also our task nowadays. It is not simply a question of imparting knowledge, but of leading children and young people to make a profession of faith as members of a community of faith.

This can be accomplished only if we adapt our teaching methods. We cannot simply use one method or other.

John Baptist de La Salle was well aware of this. That is why he insists on actual Christian experience. He wants to meet "the crying needs of the craftsmen and the poor..." He is constantly searching for teaching methods that are perfectly adapted to the Christian message.

And this is exactly what the 1979 Reference Handbook asks of us in article No. 32:

"A religious language that is adapted to our times. An approach which is part of a catechesis that is integrated into the life of the child..."

2. CATECHESIS - SCHOOL - PARISH

The catechetical renewal in France has helped us to rediscover what makes up a **Christian community**, that is, the place where catechesis takes place, and where the child can discover the real image of the Church.

School or parish? Catechesis? School as part of the Church's pastoral set-up? It is not simply a question of organisation. It rather depends on the existence, dynamism and acceptance by a community of believers.

Our Catholic schools will be credible only if we form real communities of believers. That is, if they are places where young people and adults are recognised and respected as they search for God...

It is important that there should be close cooperation between schools and parishes, in general pastoral terms, and especially as far as the choice of catechetical texts is concerned, and regarding the training of catechists.

It is not a question of trying to impose uniformity or finding one solution for all problems. I think that schools and parishes should seek a basic consensus together with regard to diocesan pastoral policy and regarding the great differences between various situations.

Let us go further: the responsibility of the school and teachers does not end with catechesis.

What is important, as John Baptist de La Salle points out, is that "the school be well run".

As Christian teachers, we have to question ourselves as a matter of urgency about the way we teach. Does it prepare the way for proclaiming the Gospel? Does it lead our pupils to lead an interior life?

Our schools will be truly Christian if the secular side of our teaching prepares the ground for the acceptance of the Lord and his Word.

We have to make our schools willing to take part in the pastoral work of the local Church.

Let us end by quoting the words of John Baptist de La Salle in his 15th Meditation for the Time of Retreat (3):

«You can expect yet another reward which God will give you in advance in this life if you devote yourselves generously to your duty and, if through zeal and the grace of your state, you know how to strengthen your disciples in the Christian spirit. This is the very special satisfaction you will experience when they grow up and you see them living honourably and reverently, far from any unjust association, and performing good deeds. For the teaching you gave them is not a mere matter of words, but accompanied by a great abundance of grace for those who respond well, which will maintain them in the practice of good. Their perseverance in the faith will be a great cause of joy for you when you call to mind the way they show their faith and the results of the lessons you gave them, realising that this makes them dear to God and places them in the number he has chosen.

What a joy it will be to see that they have received the word of God in your religion lessons not as the word of men but as the word of God powerfully at work within them, which will be apparent in the honourable lives they continue to live.»

Brother Dominique Rustuel