

WHY READ THE RULES OF CHRISTIAN DECORUM AND POLITENESS (1/2)

Brother Gregory Wright

As part of its ongoing program of making available the Complete Works of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, in late 1990 the Regional Conference of the Christian Brothers of the United States and Toronto published the first English edition of the Founder's Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité chrétienne – The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility, a translation of the original edition (1703). Also, since the appearance of Cahier lasallien n. 19 in 1964, a very readable version of this edition of the work has been available in French. So now a large number of Brothers around the world have ready access to this work.

However, the appearance of the first English edition of this work might lead some to ask why anyone would publish a book of politeness that is nearly three hundred years old, or why they should read this particular work of St. John Baptist de La Salle. One answer to these questions might be that this volume is as relevant to us today as it was to the Christian educators of the Splendid Century. For in it the Founder showed certain characteristics of himself as a person which exemplify a spirit we should try to imitate and convey a message we should take to heart. Among other things, what he had to say and his manner of saying it show De La Salle to have been keenly aware of the milieu in which he lived and in which he sought to apply Christian principles to the situations he encountered so as to be a gentleman in the practical and the best sense of this term. Now, what are some examples of this?

French society in the days of Louis XIV comprised very definite and distinct classes in which each individual had his place, inferior to some, superior to others, and equal to still others. Fully aware of this situation, the Founder accepted it along with its implications regarding decorum and civility. (48, 49, 105) Also, he perceived how members of the same class could be

quite different, some acting "properly", others "improperly," as far as he was concerned. For instance, he noted that some decorated their hair with feathers or flowers and their ears with earrings. Others wore wigs, as was the custom at the time, but wigs more suitable for women than for men. He showed his disapproval of such things. (11, 14) At the same time, he perceived that customs, acceptable or otherwise, could change, but the fashions based on them were still important aspects of human living at any given time. (49) Likewise he saw that many people needed to get together so that gatherings for various purposes could not be avoided. (98) Once again, in the Age of Louis XIV, French was still very much of a living and a developing language. In this situation he saw real advantages to associating and conversing only with those who spoke clearly and correctly so that one could learn to communicate effectively as well as in a polite manner. Choosing one's friends and acquaintances was a matter of great importance as far as he was concerned. (27, 28) However, he also recognized that a group gathering, particularly when it included or centered on a meal, could present practical problems. For serving those present would require respecting the different ranks and tastes of the guests. In his own way, De La Salle tried to suggest some simple solutions to these problems. (66 - 67)

The Founder also accepted both the necessity and the advantages of relaxation and recreation of the proper kind. (84) Still he recognized that activities of this sort were not without their dangers. What were termed relaxing and friendly conversations could hurt our neighbors because of the thoughtlessness of the speakers as regards their choice of subjects. Or they could offend God when what some called efforts to entertain others led to the use of vulgar language or even to attacks on Christian virtues and values. (113 - 116) Great care, he said, was required in these matters. Likewise, he noted, a friendly game of cards could lead to displays of anger and avarice rather than help the players to relax. (89 - 90) In another area, games intended to provide bodily exercise could offend against decorum, he said, if the players became too intense or did not remain properly attired while participating in them. (91) Likewise, popular or "mass" entertainment such as that provided in the theatre or more so on the streets could be very much opposed to decorum. A polite person would find little relaxation in such improper activities. (95 - 96) All these things had to be kept in mind, said he, and suitable precautions taken even when trying to satisfy a real human need.

At the same time, he noted, that when people come together some individuals can show their bad side, knowingly, intentionally, or otherwise. One can become almost childish by neglecting the more important things and becoming lost in details. (134) Another can become a busybody, prying into everyone else's affairs in a way that does no good for himself or others

and which is certain to give offense. (99) A third person still can show himself to be excessively self-centered by trying to make himself the only subject of conversation. (119) Or the person who can sing or play an instrument might not know when to stop. Then, whatever his intentions, he no longer provides entertainment for others. (93) So, as De La Salle clearly indicated, people are people. And whenever they come together for whatever purpose, great care must be taken by all concerned to make their gatherings a success.

Lastly, while much of what has just been said seems to refer only to those who were "better off" or even doing quite well in life, the Founder was not unaware of what in seventeenth century France was called "The Base of the Pyramid." He knew there were families which lacked adequate bedding so that children of both sexes and all ages, at times in large numbers, had to share the same bed – something of which he strongly disapproved. (45) And he recognized that there were poor people who to keep warm had to cover themselves with their clothing when they went to bed at night. (47) Whatever his background and family situation, John Baptist de La Salle knew much about his contemporaries in seventeenth century France. The *Caracteres* of Jean La Bruyère is not the only work that gives us good insights into the people of the Splendid Century. Our own Founder adds to our knowledge of this subject in his writings, perhaps more so in *Christian Civility* than anywhere else.

Having described people as they are or can be, warts and all, De La Salle also accepts the fact that life as it is requires encounters with them as well as more or less extensive contacts of various types. Since these cannot be avoided, he calls upon his readers to make the best of them. Doing this, he suggests, requires first and foremost a Christian perspective. This he sees as the basis for "that wise and well-regulated conduct which governs what we do and say" and which should be "practiced toward our neighbor..." (4) Neither of these should be looked upon "as merely human and worldly qualities" but rather "as virtues that have reference to God, to their neighbor, and to themselves." Likewise, parents and teachers should teach children to observe

these rule of decorum "only through purely Christian motives, which concern the glory of God and one's own salvation." (3) And this last suggestion he repeats frequently in connection with many different situations.

Respect for one's body, he asserts, should be the basis for decorum and the civility that follows from it. And a Christian respects his body, he adds, because it is the living temple of God and the chosen tabernacle of Jesus Christ. (36) An awareness of the honors conferred on him helps the individual to decide what to do and not to do, so as to maintain the dignity he enjoys. (39) At the same time, though, the Christian knows he is inclined to sin, which he does commit from time to time. This leads him to accept certain limits on his conduct and to impose others when necessary. (46) And as a Child of God, he strives to put his soul and spiritual things before the body and material things. (50) This attitude will have some practical effects on his life and will influence his actions, even some of which are most common and ordinary.

Eating and drinking are basic human necessities which De La Salle accepts as part of life. At the same time he says they can provide many occasions of acting in an unchristian as well as an impolite manner. (57) In his efforts to avoid offenses of one type or the other, the Christian will set the tone for the meal by the blessing which precedes it. As circumstances require, he will join in the blessing or even lead it on occasion. (60) Then in both how he eats and drinks and how he relates to the others at table with him, he will try to act and react as a Christian should. (58) Among other things, a meal shared with others can provide an opportunity for conversations. Truth, sincerity, prudence and discretion should characterize the speech of the Christian. Also, it will be distinguished by the charity it shows for the neighbor along with respect for God and the things of God. (109) A Christian, then, will see the need to initiate those gatherings which bring people together as well as to respond to some invitations he might receive. (97) In each instance he is neither anti-social nor unsocial. Rather he can be the perfect host or guest because of the principles which inspire his relations with others.