

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

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What also might make his company attractive and desirable is what he does and does not do. Respect for his dignity as a Child of God and a desire to honor his Baptismal commitment will influence his choice of topics of conversation. Desiring not to dishonor his soul, the words he uses will show both great control and much discretion on his part. (85, 116) Thus he will find it easy to avoid contradicting others and disputing over trifling matters, actions which offend against politeness while discrediting a man and more so a Christian. (125 – 26) Though conscious of his position and the respect which is his due, and while trying not to offend others in any way, he himself will suffer injuries and avoid taking offense, all in keeping with the Spirit of the Gospel. (55) Sociable as he is, though, the Christian will know when not to go along with what is being done. Just as he avoids using certain language or discussing certain topics, he also avoids improprieties such as songs which "might lead to impiety,... glorify loose living, or ... contain expressions and words suggesting it is an honor and a great pleasure to drink to excess." (92) He has the courage to practice Christian decorum and civility no matter what the occasion or what some might think or say about him.

Aware of current customs and fashions as well as of the requirements of living with others, the Christian will try to conform to the former and to fulfill the latter without in any way offending against religion and its teachings. By doing this he will also become and show himself a "gentleman" in the fullest and best sense of this term. For consciously or otherwise he will be living up to the standard set by De La Salle, that we should "never take pleasure in anything that might cause pain to anybody." (85) Long before Cardinal Newman said it, the Founder seemed to have the idea that "It is almost a definition of a gentleman to say that he is one who never inflicts pain." (*The Idea of a University*) At the same time, he seemed to agree with the seventeenth century ideal that a gentleman is one who "pleases others in order to please one self." Against this background it is easy to under-

stand why the Founder placed so much emphasis on things the gentleman would not do as well as things he would do.

In this relations with individuals and groups the gentleman would correctly perceive and accept his place. He would not put himself forward by trying to claim, much less demand, a place higher than that due him. If anything, he would gracefully accept what some might think is a place lower than what he deserves. (60 – 61, 130) In his conversations he would avoid saying anything which might mislead his listeners or give the idea he is speaking for the benefit of one or a few of his audience while concealing something from the others. While speaking clearly and frankly, he will not be disturbed or show anger if anyone refuses to accept the accuracy of his statements. (111) Much less would he try to amuse himself at the expense of others, by causing them pain through what he says, or by taking pleasure in the misfortunes of those present or absent. (85 – 86) And as a guest at a meal in the house of another, he would never think of finding fault with what was served or how it was served. (69) In brief, on such an occasion he would act so as to make things as pleasant as possible for all who might be with him.

On the positive side, De La Salle seems to suggest that it is certain unusual situations that arise which can be the real test of the gentleman. No matter how carefully people plan, embarrassing situations can arise which cause particular difficulties for the host or the one responsible for the gathering. He says that the gentleman who perceives the situation will take suitable means to deal with it while trying to attract as little attention as possible to what has happened. (30) Likewise, when someone is ill it can be necessary to discuss his condition in some detail so that the proper remedies can be found. However, this should be done only to the extent it is necessary, with as few people as possible, and in as accurate and refined language as possible. (39) In everything, then, what the gentleman says and does will be calculated to avoid offending anyone while making things as agreeable as they can be under the circumstances.

Whenever a group of people come together someone has to take the lead and see that things get done. In such instances, in what are essentially indifferent matters the gentleman should graciously conform to the wishes of others. (105) If circumstances force him to assume the leadership, he should try to make suggestions rather than give orders to others. (53) His purpose should be to find ways of indirectly leading people to do what is appropriate for the occasion. For instances, if large amounts of food have been prepared for a repast, he might encourage other guests to help themselves to generous portions and to enjoy the good meal their host has provided for them. (63) Contributing in such ways to the success of a social event can please others while making it pleasant and enjoyable for the gentleman himself.

To please others while not offending them in any way seems to require a basic respect for those who are present in a particular situation. De La Salle emphasized the necessity and the importance of this respect as well as how it can be shown in practice. (144) For instance, he suggests the host himself should take care of his guests, doing various things for them and not calling on his servants or allowing them to perform certain services for them. (134) Likewise, when speaking to or communicating with people with whom he has regular or frequent contact, such as his parents, the gentleman will not forget the respect he owes them. This respect will always be shown in how he speaks to them

whatever the occasion or how he addresses them in any written communication. (124, 139) When anything is done regularly or repeatedly, or if we encounter the same individuals almost on a day-to-day basis, it is easy to forget our manners. Familiarity might not breed contempt, but it can lead to real carelessness on the part of an individual. De La Salle sees the gentleman as one who does not offend against civility in these situations.

Encounters with others can create situations in which it is both normal and necessary to praise others and to receive compliments from them. De La Salle sees doing both as providing occasions for showing our respect for those with whom we have such exchanges. When he is praised by someone of a higher social rank than he, the gentleman might show his respect for this individual by silently accepting the compliment. A few appropriate words of response rather than silence might be more suitable when one receives praise from a person who is his equal. (121) Complimenting another whatever the occasion might be is as difficult as receiving the compliments of others and responding to them in the proper way. In any case, what the gentleman says and how he says it will both show that he speaks sincerely and from the heart. (122, 129) Also, when someone else is praised in his presence, the gentleman will find some way to show he shares the sentiments that have been expressed. And certainly he would never act in such a way as to suggest he doubts that the compliment is deserved. (122) In all this as in so many other things the gentleman will show himself to be a sociable person. He will be seen as one who knows how to please others, one who goes out of his way to be agreeable and pleasant to those with whom he associates.

A careful reading of *Christian Civility* would quickly show that these are not the only characteristics of its author or the most important ones manifested in this work. Rather they are some that are easily perceived and which can be discussed at some length. But more important than showing some characteristics of its author, this work expresses a "spirit" or conveys a "message" which permeates it. Both of these are worthy of some consideration.

In his meditation for the Feast of St. Louis (25 August), the Founder asserts: «Your mission requires you to labor for the good of... your country. Your pupils are already members of the State, and will soon be endowed with full citizenship...» (M 160: 3) Perhaps these words addressed to Lasallian educators are more true today than they were when the Saint first wrote them. However, working for the good of a society requires among other things as complete a knowledge as possible of that milieu, its customs and fashions, its good and bad aspects, as well as its ways of doing things. De La Salle had and showed such a knowledge of the Splendid Century. His effectiveness as an educationist and an educator as well as the popularity long enjoyed by this "best-seller"

of his might owe much to this fact. Now, some three centuries later, the Saint might be telling us that we need to become knowledgeable about our milieu. No more than he are we to approve of it entirely or adopt all its fads, but we should see this as a means of becoming more effective apostles in the time and place in which we are working

«... since all our actions should be holy, there are none which should not be done through purely Christian motives,» wrote De La Salle in the "Preface" to *Christian Civility*. (3) A modern reader, particularly one who has studied the Scriptures as they are presented today, might find some of this volume's Biblical references a bit strained, or some of the Scriptural arguments he uses to support certain things either inappropriate or unconvincing. But to do so might be to miss the more important point. As Christian we are called to follow the teachings of Jesus and to conform our lives to his maxims. De La Salle shows this is as possible and practical for us today as it was for him during the Age of Louis XIV. Wherever we are and whatever we are doing, we can take a Christian perspective and be guided by Christian motives. As much as the *Meditations*, the *Collection* or what are usually termed the "spiritual writings" of the Saint, *Christian Civility* calls us to do this while suggesting how it can be done.

«Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself,» insists the Founder in his *Retreat Meditations*. (MTR 3:2) Again, perhaps more than ever this is required of today's Lasallian educator. However, even one who is most successful as a teacher might ask if the Saint has not set too high a standard, one almost beyond human reach. For his part, De La Salle reaffirmed this notion countless times in various ways and without underestimating the difficulty of achieving this ideal. Still a Lasallian educator aware of the people with whom he is working and the setting in which he and they live, enlightened and guided by Christian motives based on the Scriptures, and striving to be a gentleman—one who causes no pain and pleases himself by pleasing others—will be taking a big step toward representing Jesus Christ as his ambassador and minister. Listening to the message and acquiring the spirit of *Christian Civility* can help us do these things. And then we will become more effective apostles in our classrooms. At the same time we will witness to Jesus and attract others to him. And lastly we will inspire young men to join us so as to share our ministry and help continue the work of Lasallian education. Yes, reading this work, pondering it, and taking it to heart can be of great value to us as well as to the work of God which we are doing.

N.B.: All references to *Civilité chrétienne* are taken from: John Baptist de La Salle. *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Politeness*. Trans. by Richard Armandez, FSC. ed. by Gregory Wright, FSC Romeoville, Illinois: Lasallian Publications, 1990.