

REDISCOVERING ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE (2nd part – 2/2)

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C. The primary importance of training teachers.

In order to respond to God's call and to the needs of the difficult times he lived in, the Founder realized that something was absolutely essential: he had to train a stable group of persons, so that they would be really prepared in a variety of ways to undertake the apostolate and be successful in it.

For 40 years, this was for him a major preoccupation and a permanent task. It was his greatest achievement. It was also the key to the success of his work and the reason for it. [13]

Some of the means he used to achieve his aim were the establishment of a novitiate, with adequate provision for teaching practice (*"Persuaded that all the holiness of his Institute depended on the fervour of the novitiate.."* says Blain, 2, p.129, CL 8), his visits to schools, the monthly exchange of letters, the annual retreat, his instructional writings for the Brothers [18], and his 3 attempts to set up "seminaries for country schoolmasters" (Rheims 1686, Paris 1699, St.Denis 1709).

Blain draws attention to the fact that the constant object of the Founder's zeal was the perfection of his disciples. *"He was persuaded that by working at their sanctification he was working also at the sanctification of the poor and neglected children; and that the perfection of a single Brother would bring about the salvation of a great number of souls"* (2, p.363, CL. 8). Merlaud adds: *"When he writes to a Brother in Guise: 'I need to be concerned for you, and you should seek to live differently from the way you live now' it is clear that in his eyes what is fundamental to his Institute is not the schools that are being set up, nor 'the children of the poor' that fill them, nor the learning of their teachers, but the interior perfection, the 'witness of belonging to Christ' that each Brother should radiate to all around"* (p.167).

In order to provide an adequate preparation for the work of the apostolate, there was:

- spiritual and religious training
- cultural and psychological training
- professional and methodological training

The paramount importance of training people, as a **sine qua non** and necessary **condition** for any kind of growth of present-day Lasallian movements, must be given careful consideration in the light of how the Institute was founded.

2.3 His "modus operandi"

"Looking at life with the eyes of faith" and taking the decisions that this entailed, the Founder **lived and worked** in the society of his day.

He is not so much an expert in the theoretical aspects of pedagogy or spirituality, as someone **who produces**, who is practical, consistent, tenacious, realistic and dynamic.

He exemplified a **"loyal independence"**, an expression I find describes in a succinct form the lesson we can learn from the way he worked. It contains an apparent contradiction which, in my opinion, reflects the "permanent struggle" the Founder experienced during the course of his life. This is one of the things about him that has always struck me: his ability to strike a balance between the part of himself that was innovative and decisive, and the part that made him the humble and obedient member of society and of the Church.

This is also, it seems to me, one of the most valuable aspects of his teaching that is most important for us today, and one of the most relevant.

I should like to say a few things about the two elements that appear contradictory:

a) independence

In spite of the age he lived in and his social background, the Founder always proved to be independent and original when faced with well-established ideas and prejudices:

- by his choice of vocation (the eldest son becoming a priest!)
- by his interior freedom with regard to family, clerical and cultural background: he drops down the social and clerical ladder; his mind is not influenced by his studies at school [15]; pressure, even from people in high places, has little effect on him...
- in his educational thinking: language, mixing of social classes, methods, relentless opposition to other groups of teachers [16]...
- in the organisation of the Institute: lay character, strenuous defence of its autonomy, approach to decision-making, the struggle to make a Brother the superior...

One recurring accusation levelled at him is that of **"stubbornness"** in his thinking. Was this the result of his rebellious and uncompromising character, or did it come from the clarity and consistency of his personal vision, the insight of genius, intentional and premeditated unconformity?

His deep and total attachment to the Gospel is the answer.

b) loyal

This is a characteristic which is just as striking as that of independent thinking and behaviour. His fidelity is unshakeable:

- to the **call of God**, prayed about and accepted
- to the **Church** and the **Pope**, especially "in these sad times" as he often said, in the midst of upheavals in the Church in France: Jansenism, Gallicanism, appeal against the Bull "Unigenitus..." [17]

- * to **authority**: with disconcerting humility when it was a question of clear injustice towards himself...

- to his **Brothers** it is enough to recall one example: the group of Brothers that ordered him to return to Paris on April 1st 1714 could count on his loyalty to them...

- to the **pupils**: together with God and the Brothers they make up a circle of unbounded love. Their salvation, their spiritual and social well-being, their dignity [18], are the leitmotiv of a life dedicated to them.

This balance between independence and loyalty/fidelity should, in my opinion, be closely linked with "the way of perceiving history" with which we started. In this the Founder found the spiritual energy to be at the same time an innovator and traditional, open to the future and rooted in the past, flexible in the means used but immovable as to the substance, tender and demanding, always ready to start again [19]... hard work that lasted 40 years [20].

The example of his life is still very relevant at the present time because of the moments of crisis, doubt and anguish (especially in the 1712-14 period) that the difficult maintenance of this balance brought him: he is seen to be fully human and of mature faith.

Is it not the same balance between the dynamic innovative leap forward and an unshakeable loyalty to our roots that is asked of us today, at a time which is no less difficult for society, the Church and the Institute?

For me, this "**university of life**" would be enough to make me understand the present-day relevance of the Founder, but one cannot ignore the whole body of teaching he has left us in his writings, and which helps us to have a deeper and clearer insight into his person.

In fact, in the same way as actions give substance to words, so words cast light on actions and help us interpret them. In

any case, the body of writings available to us is the normal way to renew contact with his person.

[13] This was the crucial problem for schools at the time of the Founder. Many were acutely aware of its existence, but he was the first to resolve it. "His great merit was without doubt to found a society of men who had the "vocation" of a teacher, who were trained for the work, who were totally available for it, and for whom it was a permanent profession. This is without doubt more important than this or that specific innovation he may have contributed to pedagogy" (M. Sauvage, "Catechese et laïcité", p.453).

Cf. also my series of articles on "La scuola come ambiente educativo" which is being published in the *Rivista Lasalliana*, 4/1989, 2/1990...

[14] In particular, the Rules, the Collection, the Meditations, the Conduct of Schools, the Duties of a Christian, the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer...

[15] Cf. Callego, op.cit. Vol.1, pp.44-48, for the details of the organisation of courses in the College des Bons Enfants where the young De La Salle spent 8 years. Y. Poutet writes: "Eight years at school in continuous contact with classical authors served to stimulate his intelligence, develop his memory, make him learn ways of reasoning, strengthen his will and mind, even if the future will show us that they left no trace in the mind and heart of John Baptist".

[16] Noteworthy is his passive resistance in the face of the pronouncement by the education tribunal of Paris which wanted to force him to discriminate between pupils. Where the rights of children were concerned he was obdurate: he appealed against the decision to gain time, and in the meanwhile, "he neither paid the fines, nor gave up the schools. And, above all, he did not send any pupils away, and did not make the slightest enquiry about their financial situation". (Cf. Callego, op.cit. pp.375-376).

[17] Cf. in particular the "Testament" (CL.8, p.173), Letter 65, and Med.106.2.

[18] Med. 96.3: "You should learn to recognise Jesus beneath the rags of the poor children whom you have to teach. Adore him in their person...Faith should lead you to acquit yourself of this task with zeal and affection, since the poor are the members of Christ".

The immediate influx of pupils in unmanageable numbers whenever a new school was opened was the proof of this. In this connection Blain writes: "Little children, who were not yet at school, would leave their mother while walking in the street and run up to Brothers, shouting happily: "The Brothers, the Brothers..." (Life of the first Brothers, CL.8, p.100).

[19] The biography by A. Merlaud stresses this particular point. On p.197 (Italian translation 1981), he highlights how, after so many difficult experiences, "few men would still be on their feet, their gaze steady, their grasp firm". De La Salle was one of these.

[20] While speaking with two very close friends, Gense and La Cocherie, in autumn 1716, De La Salle allowed himself to make a very human remark which says a lot about the sufferings his life had brought him: "If God, while showing me all the good this Institute would accomplish, had also shown me the troubles and crosses that this would involve, I would not have had the courage, and I would not have dared to touch it with the tip of my fingers, let alone undertake it" (Blain 2, p.358, CL.8).