

**SOME THOUGHTS
ON THE PLACE OF
THE CONDUCT OF SCHOOLS
IN OUR PROCESS OF RENEWAL
(1/3)**

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(These reflections, prepared in 1980 and published in "Action Educative" Number 15, are still current today. Several people have recommended that they be made available to a wider audience and that is the reason that they have been reproduced in LASALLIANA.)

When we speak of the "Conduct of Schools", we are, of course, speaking of a book. In this article, I wish to speak, not only of this book and its contents, but also of the place it has in the origins and history of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and of the importance of that place in the founding charism.

In fact, the place held by the school in the foundation of the Institute is something that is very obvious and inescapable, and which puzzles the Brothers.

Its important place in the founding documents of the Institute - the Rule and the various formulas of vows - is really surprising. (There are also constant references to it in the spiritual writings of St John Baptist de La Salle).

In fact, about a quarter of the Rule deals explicitly with teaching: behaviour towards pupils (ch.7); reprimands (ch.8); relationships of Brothers with others (ch.9); school time (ch.10); the Inspector of Schools (ch.11); Latin (ch.28). Chapter 1 - "Of the Purpose and Necessity of this Institute" - is most explicit on this subject. And the subject is taken up in detail in the first Meditation for the Time of Retreat. We shall return to these later.

Given all this, it is not surprising to find the Founder prescribing in chapter 29 - "Daily Exercises" - the reading of the Conduct of Schools at table before morning classes (article 11). In the same way, in the chapter on recreation, he suggests as a topic for conversation "the obligation that the Brothers of this Society have to acquit themselves well of their duties in school, to teach children well, to teach them cate-

chism well, to lead them to piety, and to do everything well" (Art. 30, ch.6).

The various chapters dealing with the vows are likewise solidly rooted in the daily lives of the Brothers in school. In the very demanding chapter on Poverty, the Founder nevertheless is careful to state that "the Brothers who teach writing" can keep in their possession the instruments necessary for their lessons (ch.17/4). Obedience to the Brother Director - who is also headmaster - is extended also to others who are in charge: the Brothers "must be submissive to and united with the Brother Inspectors or the senior teacher in the school, according to what is written in chapter 11" (ch.18/6). (Chapter 11 deals with the Inspector of Schools). Finally, the chapter on Chastity does not fail to mention the reserved behaviour needed when dealing with parents and pupils (ch.19/7).

When St John Baptist de La Salle speaks of the vows of gratuity and association in chapter 18 of the Rule, we find the same ideas and insistence as in chapter 1 and in the formula of vows:

"By the vow of teaching children gratuitously and conducting schools by association, one undertakes to devote all one's efforts to teaching children well, and to bringing them up as Christians; to spend all the time allocated to this subject; to ask nothing from pupils or parents, nor accept anything from them as a recompense or present, or for any other possible reason" (art.8).

"The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a society in which profession is made of conducting schools gratuitously...The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children, and it is for this reason that it conducts schools" (ch.1, art.1 & 3).

The 1694 formula of vows takes up the same ideas in a simplified form:

"And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, promise and vow to unite myself and remain in society with (he names his Brothers) to conduct together and by association gratuitous schools".

Brothers do not form a society or associate with one another for the sake of doing so: the Brothers' community is not an end in itself, and in the Founder's writings, association is always directed towards something external to which the Brothers are sent. The Brothers' mission is expressed concretely, not simply as a personal commitment to educational work, or as the promotion of such or such educational values, but by means of "gratuitous schools", which St La Salle and the first Brothers considered to be the most suitable means and structure to cater for the needs of the children of the "artisans and the poor". "It was in order to procure this advantage for the children of the artisans and the poor that the Christian schools were founded" (ch.1, art. 5).

This important historical fact is puzzling for us today, as is our present formula of vows, which continues to use the same expression: "I promise to unite myself and to live in society with the Brothers of the Christian schools, who are associated to conduct together and by association schools for the service of the poor".

It is puzzling for us also because we know how stable the school-community link has remained - and sometimes very stubbornly so - throughout the history of the Institute: Brothers' communities founded schools, ran them, provided head-

masters for them, and decided the educational approach to be used.

In fact, the importance attached to the school (or to educational establishments) and to the community-school link is hardly questioned before the post-war period. As the Declaration says, this questioning "*is not contrived. Most of the time actual situations give rise to them*" (Decl. 512). The evolution of society, the Church and the Institute have made this question a crucial problem.

More or less everywhere, the State has become increasingly interested in education: private schooling has become more difficult to maintain. Moreover, society is becoming more and more fragmented, less and less homogeneous, and less capable of supporting the burden of private institutions. In this connection also, there is in the Church a certain amount of very negative thinking regarding institutions and especially Christian schools. At the same time, the power structures of our schools have been radically changed by the increase in size of our establishments and the reduction in the number of Brothers working in them. In France, an additional factor is the various reforms and the existence of contracts. Finally, research into the life and mission of the Brother, and the preferential option for the poor, force us to think about the nature of our work.

As a rule, how did the Brothers react to these changes and the questions they raised? Their reactions were various: these ranged from those who would not let go of schools to those who opted out on an individual basis. Nowadays, quite often, you hear it said, without much analysis of the present state of education, that fidelity to the Brother's vocation involves the school. Whoever opts out of school is unfaithful, and this desertion is the source of all our problems. On the other hand, there is a more or less public condemnation of schools, often for very generous reasons to do with serving the poor who have no access to our schools. They say that the school is part of the current social stagnation and they are going to join other movements or organisations which work for the good of the poor. The description of these two trends is, of course, a caricature and, as a consequence, inexact, but it does represent the views of many Brothers in the face of present-day changes in the Institute. And even if brotherly love maintains mutual tolerance, mutual antagonism is never far away.

And so, in the two first centuries of the history of the Institute there was a very important factor - the very strong link between the Brothers' community and educational establishments, which were normally schools. Changes in society and in the Institute's position in the Church have created a new situation, often seen as dualistic: educational work or other forms of apostolate.

Is there a solution to these present-day differences? I would say there is, and it can be found in the various elements of association in the founding charism: sharing resources, ideas, suggestions; taking responsibility for decisions; adoption as a community of the "means of salvation" for the benefit of children and especially the poor. It is this, I believe, that the General Council meant when it said: "*The Rule and the Declaration maintain that, in a general manner, a Brothers' community is institutive, that is to say, it contributes, together with the other partners of the educational community, to the creation and animation of institutions, schools and other educational establishments*" (Circular 408, p.83).

The subtle phrasing of these ideas is interesting:

- because it keeps the idea of an institutional purpose while going beyond the sterile distinction between school or not school;
- because it expresses for us the dynamic nature of the Brothers' community. The term "institutive" expresses two ideas:

- * constant progress, constant rethinking, while "instituted" means a goal that has been achieved;
- * a goal towards which one moves, that is, an institution which expresses in concrete terms a collective process and decisions.

It is along these lines that I would like to offer some thoughts and observations about the following:

- the fact that originally the Brothers' community was "institutive" (of schools mostly);
- the nature of community, if we admit that this "institutive" function forms a part of the founding charism;
- the criteria that the Conduct of Schools can offer us today.

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