

**SOME THOUGHTS  
ON THE PLACE OF  
THE CONDUCT OF SCHOOLS  
IN OUR PROCESS OF RENEWAL  
(2/3)**

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### 1. THE FOUNDING CHARISM IS INSTITUTIVE

If we describe in general terms how the Founder and the Brothers responded to a given situation, we can say that together they established a school: they created a situation where the balance was always fragile and delicate. For the children of the artisans and the poor, this school was the expression of the love of God that the Brothers' community had first made its own.

The whole history of the beginnings is like a two-way movement between the school and the community, and the community and the school. Mr Nyel's group of teachers was there only for the school. It was the quality of the school that inspired St La Salle to form them into a community. This community, in its turn, transformed the school completely so that it became "the work of God" for poor children.

For the Founder and the first Brothers, the primary aim was not the praise of God, nor the straightforward proclamation of the Word of God, nor even a desire for community life. Doubtlessly all these were an integral part of their life, but they were first and foremost "Brothers of the Christian Schools", brothers to the children who came to them: they expressed their faith and zeal at school.

They bore witness by living a structured evangelical life which they created "together and by association". "The existential identity of the Brother in community is inseparable from his mission. The mission of the Brother, the finality of the Institute, take on a concrete form in the pastoral work of the school, for which the children of the artisans and the poor had a great need" (Miguel Campos, CL. N 45, p.225). And so it is easy to understand the exceptional position occupied by education and schools in the first Rule and the various formulas of vows. It is easy to understand also the Conduct of Schools becoming a "rule of life": *"They will teach their pupils according to the methods prescribed and universally followed in the Institute"* (Rule, Ch. 7,2); and how De La Salle was able to write to a Brother Director: *"your exercises and your schools, that's all you have to concern yourself about"*

(quoted in Rigault I, p.447). The Brothers' school is an effective sign of God's salvation for these young people: "the Gospel there is not a past event or a holy book, but the active wisdom of God, rescuing young people from darkness through the ministry of the Brothers" (Miguel Campos, CL. N° 46, p.87).

It should be noted at this point that the Conduct of Schools expresses only one educational approach, the tentative steps of a missionary in the world of education. The Conduct offers a solidly organised structure, an institution, even if it is constantly renewed. It is truly the expression, the visible sign of the presence of God in the community. Br. Barthélemy's introduction to the first edition of 1720 expresses this idea admirably: *"This Conduct was compiled and arranged only after a great deal of consultation with the most senior Brothers of the Institute, and the most proficient in school work, and as the result of many years' experience. Nothing has been included which has not been agreed upon and tried out. Nothing is included unless its advantages and disadvantages have been weighed up and, as far as possible, its good and bad consequences foreseen. The Brothers will, therefore, make great efforts to observe carefully what is prescribed for them, persuaded that there will be order in school only to the extent that they are careful not to neglect any point. They should accept this Conduct as coming from God, through the intermediary of their Superiors and the senior Brothers of the Institute"*.

From the very beginning and throughout the history of the Institute, the Conduct has been "a means of salvation" adopted by the community of Brothers in the service of the artisans and the poor.

And so the mission of the first Brothers expressed itself concretely through a structure adopted by the community. This structure was not monolithic, for it included such things as primary schools, Sunday schools for apprentices, teacher training schools and institutions for delinquent youth. This structure was not rigid either, for it was constructed by the Brothers as the days went by. The structure was an "expression" of the community; it was the fruit of each Brother's experience and the manifestation of his faith and zeal.

This institution was the place where the "children of the artisans and the poor" found the Good News being put into practice, through the presence and work of the Brothers in the educational structures they had created.

I think that association for "conducting together and by association gratuitous schools" involves creating, maintaining and using actively a "means of salvation" - the Gospel - in the lives of poor people.

### 2. A SPECIAL FORM OF COMMUNITY

This "association for..." dimension gave the Brothers' community a special dimension that made it different from other religious communities in the Church at that time. What I was going to say - more directly - was that we created this special dimension; it is what the community promotes in the world of education: "doing" and not "being" characterises our community. This implies, as one can easily understand, that it has to be demanding.

This has always been clearly expressed in the Rule, and a comparison between the the first Rule of 1705 and that of 1966 is quite enlightening:

## 1705

"The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children. It is for this purpose that it conducts schools so that, with the children in their care from morning till night, they [the Brothers] can teach them to live well, instructing them in the mysteries of religion and teaching them Christian maxims, and thus give them an education that suits them".

## 1966

"Aware of God's plan to form one people out of all races and nations, the Brothers work to build a society animated by the love of Christ; at the same time they promote the growth of the Church. They do this by the ultimate witness of their community life, their teaching, and all their other educational work."

The purpose of the Institute remains identical. In 1705, the means to achieve this purpose was conducting schools. Nowadays, the witness of the community is expressed "by their teaching and all their other educational work". It should be noted that the French text of the Rule does not say: "by the ultimate witness of their community life" and "their teaching and their other educational work". Instead, respecting quite rightly the "institutive" aspect of the founding charism, it says that community witness is expressed "by their teaching and other educational work". In this way, the Brothers' community acquires more clearly defined characteristics.

I use the expression "acquires more clearly defined characteristics" to show that we do not have to preserve something that is "instituted": we have to build and constantly adapt. Association is a creative function of a community seeking to respond to the needs of young people in need of salvation. Taking as a starting point existing situations, where an institution - most often a school and, more often than not, with its great ability to create inertia - already existed before the arrival of the community, one is tempted to characterise the relationship between communities and schools as something imposed. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to see how one can be the expression of the other. And so we speak of separating the school from the community because, in practice, the former has purely and simply swallowed up the community. And quite naturally, the community feels the need to breathe more freely and rediscover its own identity.

And yet, what we have to rediscover is the relationship between community and school. The alternative is a community without an identity.

We have to rediscover the primary relationship which made the school the visible sign, the expression of the life of faith and zeal of the Brothers. And I do not think it is enough to say the community supports the mission: it has to support a community mission, because otherwise, by mission one could understand "personal mission". Where this is so, the community tends to be simply a place where there is fraternal life and where Brothers ready themselves for their per-

sonal mission. However, if the mission is a community one, if a group of us is "sent", "together and by association", if we make ourselves publicly responsible for this commitment, generally speaking, we end up by having an "institutive" community. This is something, I think, that is inevitable and necessary in the socio-professional world, the lay world which is ours, with all its political, economic and social implications.

It is not at all easy to rediscover this relationship between the community and the school. It is easier to give up and be a simple cog in the world of Christian education. It is easier to "escape alone" to other people's apostolates, retaining only the "Lasallian spirit" of the founding charism. On the other hand, it is not a question either of holding on to schools for their own sake: it is rather a case of being "institutive" in the schools in which we are present, and being "institutive" regarding new undertakings. And this implies exploiting association fully; it implies "uniting oneself and living in society" in order to be creative. This implies that the community has on all levels - local, Regional and Institute - the capacity and structures to achieve this purpose.

Please understand what I am saying. By insisting on one aspect, I am not saying that it will solve all problems. For example, it does not imply uniformity, suppression of tension, an end to personality clashes and disagreements about the apostolate. On the contrary, association implies tension: views are not necessarily shared, people work at a different pace, and there will always have to be people in charge. All this is a part of association, which is regulated, however, by obedience (the two original vows). It does not imply either that this process is not nourished by the personal faith and zeal of each of the Brothers. There cannot be association in community without a missionary purpose rooted in the mystery of God's salvation in Jesus Christ, in the contact with those who are "far from salvation". And even if there should be no separation or "difference", it will always be difficult to achieve a balance between apostolic commitments and the spiritual and fraternal life that is necessary.

Community, however, exists for something other than itself. This brings us back to our founding charism: *"From 1694 onwards, the vow of association was always considered as entailing two obligations: that of supporting the work proper to the society, that is, the schools; and not charging fees: the text of the formula of vows consists in 'maintaining by association gratuitous schools'".* (Br Maurice Auguste, CL. N 11, p.191). If we transpose this "community programme" to our own days, we have to update the Founder's formula by means of new "means of salvation":

*"The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children. It is for this purpose... (that we wish to do this or that, and make a success of this or that together)...so that children may learn to live properly as Christians".*

The community programme is a collective commitment to find and to employ present-day means to bring about a true evangelisation of young people and especially of the poor. In practical terms, this amounts to re-writing the Conduct of Schools for life.

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