

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

Bro. Noel Bois

3. CRITERIA FOR AN ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONS?

We could stop our considerations here and leave it to communities to find concrete answers to this question. From "new beginning to new beginning", seeking the will of the Lord together, communities would find creative adaptations and new formulas. This would in fact be more logical in our fragmented society than trying to create models like the Conduct of Schools of the 17th and 18th century.

All the same, I think that in the absence of a model we can suggest some criteria which can help communities plan their way forward. The first idea that comes to mind is to go and look at the Conduct. For the first Brothers, it described a very specific structure and a very original institution. The Conduct of Schools means gratuitous schools for poor children, schools devoted to the Gospel and Christian life: everything flows from these two aims.

● The poor

- they are accepted without payment and there is no segregation;
- they are known as individuals; their background, family, and social situation are also known;
- they are looked after from morning till night; their age is taken into account, as is the pace at which they work at their various subjects. In order to achieve this, they are divided up according to achievement groups and are re-assessed monthly;
- they are prepared for life, and for their professional life without being encumbered with Latin, and trained in reading and counting by suitable exercises;
- they are trained for life in society by collective teaching, by being given a whole range of responsibilities within the life of the group, and taught social behaviour through the Rules of Christian Civility and Politeness.

● The Gospel

- The Good News is an active element in this gratuity, in the same way as the love of God for the world is gratuitous;
- The Good News is an active element in teaching methods that are directed to the liberation of these "poor and abandoned" children;
- The Good News is announced each day by means of the reflection and catechism;
- The Good News is celebrated by Mass, by the various prayers during the day, and by the recall of the presence of God.

This brief survey doubtlessly suggests some ideas. However, I think it would be difficult, if not pointless, to try to transpose the Conduct, since the present-day political, social and home context is so different. Moreover, such a transposition would contradict totally what we said earlier about the institutive character of communities: they must work out for themselves how they are going to live today.

However, if we turn to the teaching of St John Baptist de La Salle and to the Church's writings on religious life, we can find a certain number of guidelines that can help us plan our way. All charisms of religious life are a grace given to the world "in order that the construction of society may always be rooted in the Lord and directed towards him". This is the nature of the Church, sent to man as a sign announcing future happiness. In a world that is indifferent and atheistic, a religious must first and foremost show how the Church delights in the Lord, how God is more important than ever. And so the institutions in which Brothers express their vocation must be as open as possible to communion with God, must be the most "porous" to his presence. "A community of Brothers must be built upon faith, so that its very existence gives witness to the God whom the Brothers have been sent to reveal by their teaching" (Decl. 26,4). This does not mean only that the community must allocate time to God daily for contemplation and praise. This does not mean only that the Brothers' school must set aside time for God, catechism and mass! It means that the whole apostolic commitment of the community itself must try to express this fundamental dimension of all religious life. But how?

One expression of the Founder's, not given perhaps the attention it deserves, may hold the answer for us. In the formula of the vows, he uses the expression "gratuitous school" (and not Christian school), and speaking elsewhere of this gratuity, he says: "it is essential for your Institute". What is essential is not the school. What is essential is that it should be accessible to the children of the artisans and the poor, and established for them. Here, the Founder touches upon the evangelically radical nature of religious life: "Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor" (Lk 7,22). For De La Salle, the fact that the poor are being taught and the Good News is being announced to them is a sign of Emmanuel, God with us. This is the context in which his spiritual teachings should be understood:

"You are under the obligation to instruct the poor. You should therefore have a great tenderness towards them"

and supply their spiritual wants to the best of your ability, looking upon these children as members of Jesus Christ and as his much loved ones. The faith which animates you should lead you to respect Jesus Christ in their person, and should make you prefer them to the rich ones of earth since they are the living images of Jesus Christ our Divine Master" (Med. 80,3).

We find again here the profound theme of the Conduct of Schools and, I think, the double criteria of our community commitment.

On the one hand, "concern for the poor ought to lead to the gradual modification of some of the programmes we are now conducting and to the complete transformation of some of the others" (Decl. 31,1). Is what we "have", what we "create" a sign of the gratuitous love of God for the little and the poor?

And on the other hand, if the work of the community (even for the poor) is only social work, human work, without any other dimension, how will the Good News be revealed? Perhaps we are so devoted, so much involved in the work, that the gratuitous presence of God is no longer felt. Perhaps we are in such well-organised social, economic and financial situations that there is no room for gratuity, and for risks associated with faith.

We do not have to wait for the ideal opportunity in order to act. We do not have to move away from our own charism, and scatter all over the place. We do not have to do everything that there is to be done in the world of education: we have our own speciality. We have to work out a suitable secular and religious teaching approach for the situation in which we are, and for situations we can work in. We have to create the most suitable and effective structures for "proclaiming the Gospel to the poor."

We must commit ourselves in a practical way and with greater determination, and without knowing where all this will lead us, to this institutive view of structures - which are always provisional - of evangelisation. Our double criteria are those of the Founder:

- * How is our community serving the poor?
- * How is our community proclaiming Jesus Christ?

In the light of this, the community programme takes on meaning. Year after year, on the basis of these two criteria, the community completes, as it were, the words of the Rule:

"The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children. And it is for this purpose...."

In this way, the Conduct of Schools will be re-written in a new way. ●