

The Conduct of the Christian Schools, written in 1706, gives a “nuts and bolts” approach to De La Salle’s vision laying out the areas of importance as well as the means to achieve them. The ideas stated here are taken from Brother Leon Lauraire’s publication Conduct of Schools: An overall plan of human and Christian education. The Conduct of Schools develops five themes:

1. A school for young people
2. A school that is relational
3. A school for life in society
4. A school for the poor but open to all
5. A school that promotes interiority

A School for Young People

De La Salle and the first teachers had the chance of being able and being obliged to invent a new type of school that was different from those already in existence. Their approach was pragmatic and inductive, born of the needs of young people, as they perceived them, and proposing solutions.

The purpose of these various procedures is to establish an educational relationship characterized by lucidity, trust, cordiality and affection. De La Salle uses powerful language – love, affection, tenderness – to characterize this relationship. It removes at the same time all weakness, sentimentality and compromise, so that the relationship can be an opportunity for a process of identification.

To aid in this process two attitudes were needed on the part of the teachers: formation and commitment.

For De La Salle and the Brothers, formation was not simply one of the possible options: it was an essential responsibility and a constant concern, so much so that it occupied all the free time of the Brothers outside school time. Each one had to strive daily to improve his competence to the point that he became excellent. In fact, the pupils occupied the time, energy, concern and even the daily prayers of their teachers.

By entering the “Society of the Christian Schools”, each one was conscious of the fact he was committing himself in a radical way to the service of the working class and the poor. It was a commitment to which he felt called: it was his vocation.

Today, the teaching profession is still considered to be a vocation. It implies therefore a commitment.

The Founder and the Brothers believed that teaching children was above all a question of the heart, and that it was essential to establish bonds of affection and cordiality with all the pupils. From this conviction was born a pedagogy which was essentially preventative.

Prevention takes place also in the educational relationship wanted by De La Salle. This relationship goes beyond simple interest and becomes reciprocal love. In the final analysis, it is on this that preventative pedagogy is based. It is not a way for the teacher to protect his authority, or to avoid disorder in the classroom. Instead, preventative pedagogy seeks to protect the pupil from anything that can damage the integrity of his person, disturb his work, or make him make bad choices regarding his life.

De La Salle stressed that the quality of vigilance is the teacher's duty as seen in a letter written to Brother Robert in 1708: "Supervise the children carefully, for there will be no order in the school except insofar as you are watchful over them. That is what assures their progress. Their improvement will not be brought about by your impatience, but by your vigilance and prudent behavior".

Understood in all its wealth and depth, vigilance is still for Lasallian educators today the royal road to educate young people in true personal freedom and responsible independence, in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

A School that is Relational

In his 33rd Meditation, St. John Baptist de La Salle uses the parable of the Good Shepherd to give a brief course in practical teacher-pupil relationships highlighting two components: the Lasallian teacher tries "to know all his pupils individually" and understand what is below the surface, for empathy, and therefore, for a real dialogue.

The educational relationship is not one way. It is a verbal or non-verbal exchange between teacher and pupil. By its very nature it is reciprocal. "Love the pupils", "win over their heart" and "touch their heart" are expressions used by De La Salle. This establishes between them and us a bond of trust, makes dialogue possible, makes the sharing of confidences easier, and makes educational accompaniment possible.

The educational relationship, therefore, is not only "relational" in nature. It involves an approach on the part of the teacher that is multi-faceted, that reflects

each teacher's person, lifestyle, competence, convictions and ability. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, the sheep hear his voice, and the shepherd speaks with authority.

A School for Life in Society

De La Salle believed that pupils must be able to interact with society in a manner appropriate to the times. For most, this was something they must learn. In his *Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, De La Salle wrote: "Christian decorum is, then, that wise and well-regulated conduct which governs what we do and say. It arises from sentiments of modesty, respect, union and charity towards our neighbor. It leads us to give due regard to proper times and places, and to the persons with whom we have to deal. Decorum practiced towards our neighbor is properly called civility."

For De La Salle, the profound reasons and basis for decorum and civility went far beyond the social conventions governing politeness, beyond good breeding and courtesy: they were rooted in the depths of human nature. It was based on a Christian anthropology which created modesty, respect, union and charity among people. It was the inspiration for the impulse, the conviction and finally the freedom in social behavior which leads to charity and love for one's neighbor.

When we consider the enormous difference there was in the 17th century between the lifestyle of the common people and that of a cultured and rich minority, we can see the extent to which the Lasallian educational program for the children of the working class and the poor was ambitious. Such a program enabled them to enter and feel at ease in the world of the bourgeoisie, a class that often boasted of its good education.

A School for the Poor but Open to All

John Baptist de La Salle was not the first to create gratuitous schools for the common people. He became very quickly convinced that schools had to be gratuitous, and he never changed his mind. The working class and the poor did not have the necessary resources to pay the schoolmasters. Generally living on the subsistence level, they had to ensure first of all what was essential, that is, food.

Their only hope was to find a gratuitous school kind enough to admit their children. De La Salle was aware of this situation and tried to provide a solution. Distributing goods to the poor was an ad hoc solution: teaching them, on the other hand, contributed to their socio-economic advancement in the long term.

As a consequence, he forbade all forms of fee-paying to the community as a whole, and all sorts of presents or gifts to individual Brothers. Not to accept, not to receive anything from pupils or parents became another principle. The fundamental criterion here was to bring salvation in a way that reflected the gratuity of God in Jesus Christ. To proclaim the Gospel gratuitously had to be the greatest source of pride for teachers.

For Lasallian teachers, what causes more concern: to be poor in material goods, or to be poor “in humanity” - a poverty we see everyday in many countries? This is a sensitive question to which there cannot be one single answer.

A School that Promotes Interiority

The Conduct of the Christian Schools describes the components of a holistic education of pupils. It reflects John Baptist de La Salle’s strong conviction [vision] that the basis for such an education lies more on the level of motivation and conviction, than simply on that of repetition of external forms of behavior. What is most important is interiority.

The aim of the reflection was the formation of an individual conscience, encouragement of personal reflection and interiority, and to modify or acquire moral and Christian personal behavior.

The bell-ringer had a little bell. At the hours and half-hours, he rang it to attract the attention of the class or of the whole school. Immediately it rang, the teacher and pupils stopped whatever they were doing, and the teacher said: “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God”, and the pupils answered: “Let us adore him”. There followed a moment of recollection together, which the teacher brought to an end with some pious invocation.

De La Salle writes, “These will help the teachers to recollect themselves and recall the presence of God; and it will serve to accustom the pupils to think of God from time to time, and to offer God all their actions, and to draw upon themselves God’s blessings”.

The question deserves to be asked: what practical means do we use to develop interiority in young people at the various stages of their school career?

According to St. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers, silence is another means of teaching interiority. “Silence is one of the principal means of establishing and maintaining order in school”. Silence also has a social aspect:

by creating an atmosphere conducive to work, it indicates a concern for others, and a true respect for them. Lastly, silence has a spiritual component.

Silence is not an absolute in itself. Under certain conditions, it can lead to interiority. Interiority can allow for both the movement of examination of conscience as well as the process of discernment. In fact, it served to reinforce the sense of one's responsibility in the conduct of one's own life.

To teach interiority to children would be most beneficial for them, for their quality as human beings, for their spiritual equilibrium and their true freedom. And most beneficial for life in society.