

Saint John Baptist de La Salle Forms a Corps of Christian Professional Educators

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Historical Context

In post-1517, in Christian Western Europe, there was a great interest in providing schools that educated poor boys and girls, the children of the working class whose families formed the lowest socioeconomic base of society. Various Protestant churches were engaged in this activity, perhaps because their members were told to learn the teachings of Jesus Christ by reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves. Another factor could have been that, beginning with Martin Luther, various catechisms were provided, in the form of questions and answers, to teach members their religion and to show them how it was different from the purportedly false teaching of the Catholic Church.¹

In time, the Church of Rome also showed an interest in creating and conducting schools to instruct its members and to lead them to salvation. One of the first Jesuits, Saint Peter Canisius (1521-1557), gave significant impetus to this movement. In order to combat the errors set down in the catechism of Luther and in the catechisms of other Protestant groups, and in response to a decree of the Council of Trent that ordered that in each parish there should be one or several teachers charged with instructing the poor gratuitously, Canisius composed three catechisms, also in the question-and-answer format. The simplest of these catechisms, containing 59 questions and answers, was intended for children and the uneducated; knowing how to read was necessary to use this catechism.^{2,3}

As a result of all of this, instructing the mass of the faithful in their religion was given a high priority in the Catholic Reform. In France, however, because of the so-called "Wars of Religion" (1561-1598), it was only after the 1600s that this movement began to occupy an important place in the life of the French Church. Many of the previously established charity schools for boys and girls had suffered greatly during this conflict. Some of the school buildings had been completely destroyed. In other places, where a school had survived, it was impossible to find any financial support for the school or to find and pay a teacher to staff it.⁴

However, if the seventeenth century began as a time of crisis for these schools, there were also forces working to revive them. The flowering of the Catholic Reform in France created a new interest in educating the poor. Under both Louis XIII (1610-1643) and Louis XIV (1643-1715), many prominent Church leaders launched a veritable crusade to provide such schools. Many became involved in this task, such as Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul, Cardinal Richelieu, Grignon de Montfort, Jean-Jacques Olier, and Charles Démià, a task to which John Baptist de La Salle also devoted his life.⁵ At the same time, the "Commercial Revolution," in which Jean-Baptiste Colbert of France played such an important role, led to a growing government interest in creating and maintaining schools.⁶

Schools to Educate, Instruct, and Save the Poor

Among those very devoted to founding, maintaining, and developing the new charity schools was the devout parish priest Adrien Bourdaise, a close friend of Vincent de Paul and Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. He saw the Church's schoolmasters as performing one of the most important tasks in the Church. Having a highly idealized concept of their function and role in the Church, Bourdaise wrote:

. . . it is by means of the teaching offered in the Church schools that we prepare hearts to receive the word of God. The school is the Church's novitiate. It is the seminary of seminaries.⁷

However, a large number of these schools did not live up to the high hopes and expectations. There seem to have been many reasons why this was so, and there seemed to be almost universal agreement regarding one of these. The biggest weakness of the charity schools for poor children, it was said, was the poor quality of their teachers. Since the work was unattractive and poorly paid, often it had to employ only those who were unable to find better work elsewhere. Generally they had no training that would have prepared them for their task, and even those clergy who became involved as teachers in church schools had in no way been trained for this work.⁸ Charles Démia described the results of this as follows:

We see today, unfortunately, the holy and exalted teaching vocation given over to anyone who comes along, just because he happens to be able to read and write. Although these teachers are often in poor health and bad straits and perhaps addicted to vice as well, we do not hesitate to hand over to them the care of our young people. We do not seem to realize that by doing something to help these wretches, we are doing real harm to the public at large . . . No wonder that this occupation is so despised, when it is so often undertaken by people who are miserable, unknown, and of no quality whatsoever.⁹

Several parish priests of Chartres echoed these complaints of the educational pioneer of Lyons. They asserted:

. . . one of the main causes of the indocility, immodesty, ignorance, and the obviously dissolute lives led by the majority of the children in this city . . . is . . . that either there are no Gratuitous Schools for the poor or the schoolmasters . . . who up to now have conducted these schools . . . have no end in view other than earning a livelihood . . . (and) do not fulfill their task for the good of the children. They lack aptitude, zeal, and constancy. It is necessary to find a remedy for so great an evil, and this means obtaining for this city some schoolmasters . . . whose professional qualifications, piety, and zeal will be well vouched for, so that they may educate the young . . . who remain without instruction, do not frequent the schools, run wild, and so are easily perverted and become incorrigible.¹⁰

De La Salle and two of his early disciples saw the effect of entrusting a charity school to teachers of this sort. This was in 1688 when they came to Paris to work in the one surviving poor school

in the Parish of Saint-Sulpice. It is not impossible that the author made the situation look as bad as possible so as to make the accomplishment of his “hero” look as great as possible. But this is what he said they encountered:

The establishment was a regular bedlam, where disorder and confusion reigned. There was no sign of any rule, any kind of discipline or method, so essential when dealing with a large number of students. The doors were open from 5 to 10 AM and from 1 to 4 PM. The children came and went as they pleased.

Nothing began or ended at a fixed time. Everything took place as chance or caprice dictated. . . . Catechism was rarely taught, and never according to any system. Outside class time the pupils gathered in the courtyard and played cards or dice. This gave rise to bad conduct. . . . There was no piety among the students, no good behavior in this assemblage of rowdy children, run by people who had no piety themselves.¹¹

De La Salle and the Schools for Poor Boys

Unintentionally, and as he said unwillingly, De La Salle was led to involve himself in providing schools for poor boys and confronting the problems created by those who taught in these schools. Later on, he wrote:

. . . God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. God did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.¹²

His charitable efforts to help found the charity school for boys, which were a desire of his cousin Mme. Maillefer, were an important factor here. Trying to assist Adrien Nyel to conduct this school had this unintended and undesired effect:

Indeed, if I had ever thought that the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project. For since, naturally speaking, I considered the men whom I was obliged to employ in the schools at the beginning as being inferior to my valet, the mere thought that I would have to live with them would have been insupportable to me. In fact, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted for two years.¹³

Though these men meant very little to him, and he looked down on them from his prosperous middle-class position, De La Salle began to take more interest in them. Nyel was a major cause of this. Though truly pious, very capable of founding and launching a new charity school, and a good teacher, De La Salle was not one to assume responsibility for a group of teachers. His comings and goings to open additional schools created a real problem. Deprived of any supervision, the Rheims teachers became careless; their students became restless. Each teacher

taught in his own way, creating a lack of uniformity that caused yet other problems.¹⁴ The poor human quality of such teachers, joined to their poor performance in the classroom, led to the failure and disappearance of many previous charity schools. It seemed likely to happen once more to these new schools in Rheims.

To prevent this, De La Salle stepped in and took charge of their teachers. In time, he had them come share his house where he gave them a structure and required them to follow a fixed daily schedule and a rule of life. From the start, it was apparent they belonged to a quite different world and fully worthy of the lack of respect and the disrespect in which they were held. De La Salle was not only attacked by his social class for this move, but some of his relatives even decided that some of his younger siblings could not share their residence with his new associates.¹⁵ In time, De La Salle took another step, renting a house in which he then lived with the teachers. Soon after, a new development followed. To ensure their effectiveness as teachers and their ability to live a life worthy of their calling, he required them to practice some basic Christian virtues. Also, he set a daily schedule they were to follow so as to be able to do their work.¹⁶

Possibly all or most of these Rheims charity schoolteachers would or should have recognized that, naturally speaking, De La Salle was providing them with a good life style. However, they also saw that it required a very regulated way of living. This was so contrary to their previous style of life that soon they could or would not endure it. Seeking the freedom to which previously they had been accustomed, they left the house and abandoned their work in the schools. Also, De La Salle had found it necessary to send away several of the men who had shown little aptitude for their teaching task. So, in just six months, he was finding it necessary to replace nearly all the teachers Nyel had left him to conduct the Rheims schools.¹⁷ At this point then, it seemed these charity schools for poor boys would fail and disappear simply because of a lack of the teachers needed to conduct them.

However, this did not happen. For if some people of a certain social and economic standing had objected strongly to De La Salle's work with the charity schools and his involvement with men of a low social order, other men reacted quite differently. While two men from the original group remained with him, a few young men with a good Christian background, some education, and some talent for the work joined him. Soon, then, his corps of teachers was larger than it had been before. So, not only did the work continue but out of it emerged a new and different religious Institute in and for the Church.¹⁸ Though, of course, this happened slowly, while the Founder and those who became his religious sons were learning as they went along.

Since men were always needed to replace those of Nyel's teachers who had left or been sent away, soon after joining the group, a young man was sent to teach a class. Though this was quite normal at the time, often he was now exercising a profession about which he knew little or nothing. Frequently such a new teacher found himself struggling along, doing rather poorly at his work, facing a demanding task for which he had not been prepared. A lack of any rules or any teaching principles to guide him only added to his difficulties. One result was his failure to teach his students their religion and how they were to practice it. Also, teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic can seem quite easy for those who have never tried to do this, but the new teacher often found that just knowing these subjects was not all that was required of him. Likewise

managing a classroom is a difficult art, requiring natural ability and method. Doing this also required mildness, great patience, gravity, and calm, all while learning to speak as seldom as possible.

So, an individual lacking previous experience as a teacher who showed an absence of these qualities would find his best efforts very unsuccessful. At the same time, he could find himself dealing with boys lacking self-discipline who would not readily follow any rules restricting their freedom. Establishing the order required to control such boys was not easily done. Often efforts to do this led to complaints from the students that attracted the sympathy and support of their parents. Coming to their sons' defense, they complained about the teachers and the school.¹⁹ Rather quickly, De La Salle saw the cause of both of the problems encountered by his new and well-intentioned but inexperienced teachers.

A Solution to the Problem of Inexperienced Teachers

The Founder learned once again that the biggest problem facing elementary schools, such as those for poor boys, was the lack of training that led to the unsatisfactory performance of teachers. He realized something had to be done about this situation. Training and forming his new followers as competent teachers was absolutely essential to ensure the survival of these badly needed schools, much less any expansion of the work. His success in his existing schools eventually led to requests to open similar schools elsewhere. But he delayed doing this until his new disciples were adequately trained as teachers. In time, because he accomplished this goal he became known as “a priest of great piety” who had trained and prepared teachers to conduct charity schools for poor boys that could and did give a good “Christian and human education” to those attending them.²⁰ But this would take place only sometime in the future. However, as De La Salle went about creating his corps of Christian Professional Educators, his religious sons did set about successfully conducting the elementary schools so desired by those engaged in the Catholic Reform then underway in France.

When the Founder involved himself in the charity schools for poor boys, there was already available a well-known manual for teachers in French primary schools. This was the 1654 edition of a work by a priest in Paris, Jacques De Betancourt, stationed at the parish of St. Nicholas du Chardonnet. It was based on his 18 years of teaching in its charity school. As Brother Anselme D'Haese and others have noted, Betancourt's manual was a source for De La Salle's manual for his disciples entitled *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*. Both manuals deal with the same topic in significantly different ways.²¹ One of the most important differences was that De La Salle's manual was not based on the experience of a single individual. Rather, it was based on his observations along with the ideas and the experiences of his early co-workers. And in his last years, he finalized this work by drawing on notes sent him by these active schoolteachers. This point is well made in the *Preface* to the first printed edition (1720):

. . . This guide has been prepared and put in order (by the late M. De La Salle) only after a great number of conferences between him and the oldest Brothers of the Institute and those most capable of running a school well, and after several years of experience. Nothing has been included that has not been thoroughly deliberated and well tested, nothing of which the advantages and disadvantages

have not been weighed and, as far as possible, of which the good and bad consequences have not been foreseen. . . .²²

The *Conduct* was introduced into De La Salle's school system and followed by all the teachers. A manual of practical pedagogy, it established a standard method of teaching in all his schools. Through it, the use of the Simultaneous Method of teaching was introduced into these elementary schools along with the practice of teaching the students in the vernacular French language rather than in Latin as was customary at the time.²³ It helped those who followed it to become good and efficient teachers.

Starting from "the ground up," the *Conduct* helped a teacher through the day, giving him a known and fixed daily schedule, while providing information about good classroom management and instructions on how to teach various subjects. It also called for a "psychological" approach to the students, seeking to ensure their steady progress. At the same time, it showed how to maintain discipline and good order among the pupils, while seeking to develop a community spirit among them. Most important, at that time, it showed a lay person how to teach the Christian faith to those in his care, while leading them to practice their religion. Along with this, it fostered a prayer life among the boys that could help them develop life-time habits of prayer. Finally, all of the above, was part of a terminal program designed to help these members of their socioeconomic class to develop work skills they could use to support themselves and their families.²⁴ A practical manual for teachers, as well as the work of a brilliant theorist, the *Conduct* does not stand alone. It is complimented by two other Lasallian works, De La Salle's *Common Rules* and his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, which show its author as a Christian mystic.²⁵

Equally important, or maybe more important still, De La Salle established a system of school administration to see that his disciples followed the directives in his manual of practical pedagogy and to help them do so. The title of the Brother holding this position in each school was "The Inspector of Schools." This was a full-time position, in many ways similar to that of the principal or chief administrator in a modern school. And if a community or group of Brothers living together provided teachers for several schools, their Director or the religious superior of the group could have one or more assistant "Inspectors" to help in this task. The Inspectors would work under his direction and report to him on a regular basis. The basis of an Inspector's position and authority was found in both the *Common Rules* and the *Conduct*. The authority of the Inspector and how the teachers were to relate to him was clearly stated in both works.²⁶

An Inspector had numerous duties. He was to see that each classroom was properly equipped for the activities that took place there, that it was kept clean, and that it had the janitor's supplies required for this purpose. As was necessary, he would take responsibility for a school's relations with the ecclesiastical and other authorities, as well as with its benefactors. In addition, he would work to see that students maintained good relations with a school's neighbors, avoiding offending them in any way. Keeping in mind the facilities in which De La Salle often had to set up a school and how it was supported, this was a very important task. It could require time and skill from an Inspector, while at times being quite demanding as far as he was concerned.²⁷

Among an Inspector's academic duties were the following: 1) For each school and each of its classes, he set up its curriculum and the time schedule to be followed by each Brother, keeping in

mind the number of his students, their academic levels and needs, ensuring the best use of each day's time; 2) He assigned each new student to a particular class, keeping in mind his academic level at the time; and 3) He determined a school's monthly exam schedule and supervised these tests so as to determine which pupils should be promoted on the basis of their performance.²⁸

On a daily basis, an Inspector had important relations with and duties toward each teacher in his schools. First, he would supervise the teachers to help them teach effectively, particularly the beginning teachers. At the same time, he was to ensure that a Brother always had what was needed to do his work well. On the other hand, he would see that each teacher followed the regulations set down by the Brother Director of his community. In addition, he would see that all classes began and ended on time, with the full time being devoted to each lesson. And, if the students were required to read during a given lesson, he made sure that they did not go too slow or too fast, nor read too softly or indistinctly. The Inspector was also to watch to see that when relating to his pupils, a Brother did not prefer any of them to the others for any reason whatsoever. Most important, the Inspector was to make sure that the daily catechism lesson was given on time, covering its assigned topic and devoting full time to explaining it, while including material found only in a catechism text that was approved by the Church. In connection with their religious instruction, the students would attend daily Mass. Every care was to be taken to see that they acted with piety and modesty during this service. All new students were to be taught their prayers so that they could participate in the prayers said in school, as well as in the liturgical services they attended. Finally, he was to make sure no Brother accepted any gift from any student for any reason whatsoever. Nor was any teacher to show undue familiarity or special friendship to any boy by giving him a gift or a special favor.²⁹ In these ways, an Inspector would see that there were well-run classes in each well-run school.

Aware of the poor opinion most people had of the schoolteachers who taught in the charity schools, De La Salle probably realized he was making high demands of those who were joining him in his work. He was also aware of two other things. One, he observed that there was a lack of Christian values and living habits in the teachers Nyel had engaged to work in his Rheims schools. In addition, were the serious faults Démiá and the Chartres clergy had pointed out in these kinds of teachers. This insight must have been reinforced by what he saw of the conduct of the teachers whom he was asked to replace in the Saint-Sulpice school. The second insight was De La Salle's awareness of the problems faced by the young men of good will who had joined him to work in this task.³⁰ He saw that he had to set about helping his co-workers develop the Christian and human traits they needed to become the Christian Professional Educators who alone could improve the quality of the charity schools for boys and ensure their survival.

A Noble and Honorable Profession

To begin with, De La Salle and his first disciples were entering into an association whose main and only function was to give children – often far from salvation – a Christian education that would lead them to live a good life. To do this, they would have to give them a suitable education by which they could learn the truths of faith that would lead them to follow Christian maxims.³¹ For, it was the lack of such an education that led them to live disorderly lives rather than to live them as God wanted. Because of his desires in this matter, God was not indifferent to their situation. And to remedy it God takes the necessary means, including providing them with

schools and teachers who will give the boys the instruction and directives that otherwise they would not receive.³² This is the task you are undertaking, De La Salle tells his religious sons, and you should see it as a favor of God, a great grace to you. Therefore, you should fulfill God's plan by making him known to these children who are members of the socio-economic base of their society.³³

Again, aware of how many people, including many good Christians, saw this work, De La Salle went out of his way to show its important role in the Church of God. For he reminded his disciples that it was Jesus Christ who called them to their work while the Church honored them by assigning them to do this work for young people.³⁴ Therefore, he added, yours is a work that is honorable in the sight of God, for if it is considered lowly and unimportant by some, it is a way of strengthening the Church and giving it a solid foundation. As such, then, it can do great good in a Christian society regardless of how some people look at it.³⁵ At the same time, moreover, pastors, fathers and mothers entrust their sons to those doing this task, seeing them as doing a work they cannot do or do as well.³⁶ Lastly, he said, his disciples should remember their predecessors in this work. They included Jesus Christ himself, Saint Peter, Saint Paul, and many of the Church's early bishops as well as Saint Jerome who said that teaching children their religion was a great honor for anyone called to do this.³⁷ Therefore, having consecrated yourself to God to carry out this apostolate, you should gladly take the responsibility to do it as well as possible.³⁸

At the same time, though, he said they were required to prepare themselves well and thoroughly to do their work in and for the Church. Two expressions he coined and used to describe his religious sons are ones that certainly called on them to do this, for he called them "ambassadors" and "ministers" of Jesus Christ. As such, each was to represent Christ to his students who were to see Christ in their teacher and receive his instruction as coming from Christ himself.³⁹ Because he had this status, a Brother was to show a great love of God, acting only for his glory. This was a challenge the Founder gave to each of his religious sons, while saying it should affect and be reflected in his daily life.⁴⁰ At the same time, he also suggested the means by which a Brother could achieve this status.

As soon as new and more religiously oriented associates joined De La Salle, he sought to lead them to acquire the virtues he saw as proper to their state.⁴¹ He called on each of them to live a good life, guided by faith, and in conformity with how God wishes them to live.⁴² At the same time, they were to be guided by the spirit of Christ and become faithful imitators of Jesus.⁴³ This required them to be men of prayer, asking Jesus' help so that they could be full of zeal for the work of the Church.⁴⁴ De La Salle knew his religious sons would face difficulties, even on a daily basis, as they tried to carry out their apostolate, so, a Brother was to be a man of hope, daily making a gift of himself and his work to God. Then confiding himself to God and abandoning himself to God's care, he would be able to make the hard choices required of him even in the face of disappointment, lack of progress, and what often seemed to be insurmountable obstacles.⁴⁵ To some, then, it might seem he called these teachers not only to holiness of life but to a life of sanctity. A reading of what one author terms his mystical work, *The Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, which was closely connected with the *Conduct*, definitely seems to make such a call while enjoining his disciples to respond to it on a daily basis.⁴⁶

All of the above was one way in which the Founder called on his associates to prepare themselves for their important work of building up the Church of God, but there were also other ways he stressed for them to do so. In keeping with a custom of the times, an essential element of the Catholic Reform in France was to provide daily catechism lessons for poor children in the charity schools. So unlike the situations lamented by D emia and the parish clergy in Chartres, or the one he found at the Saint-Sulpice school when the Brothers first came to Paris, De La Salle's educational plan included a well-organized daily catechism lesson.⁴⁷ Therefore, De La Salle emphasized a Brother's daily obligation to be an effective catechist on a number of occasions.⁴⁸ With this duty went the teacher's obligation to study Christian doctrine continually so as to know thoroughly the religious truths he must share with his pupils.⁴⁹ Fully aware as he was of the religious controversies that plagued France during what is called the Splendid Century, he also thought it necessary to ensure that only orthodox Catholic doctrine was taught in his schools.⁵⁰ So, long before he issued his *Testament* and *Last Recommendations* to his religious sons in April 1719, he had called on them "to be always entirely submissive to the Church" and "never being at variance in anything with Our Holy Father the Pope and the Church of Rome."⁵¹ For he had instructed them:

. . . to be governed . . . solely by faith and the words of Jesus Christ . . . shun novelties; follow the tradition of the Church; accept only what she accepts, condemn what she condemns; approve what she approves, whether by her councils or by the sovereign Pontiff. Render her prompt and perfect obedience in all matters.⁵²

In practice, this meant:

. . . teach only the common doctrine of Jesus Christ and . . . abide in all things by what the Church teaches . . . in the catechisms approved by her . . . (in) those approved or adopted by bishops . . . united with the Vicar of Jesus Christ.⁵³

For it was in this way that they would lead their pupils to become "true Christians and docile to the truths of faith and the maxims of the holy Gospel."⁵⁴

New Teachers and the Desired Qualities to be Developed

De La Salle remembered the difficulties his new more fervent disciples experienced when they began their careers as teachers in his first schools.⁵⁵ At that time, he had perceived some human defects that caused their problems as well as some human qualities required of good and successful elementary school teachers. A hand written document found in the Archives of the Department of Vaucluse (Avignon) and attributed to the Brothers of the Christian Schools of that city has the title "Training of New Teachers."⁵⁶ It lists and describes the bad habits or defects to be avoided by a teacher. These include personal habits such as Thoughtlessness, Agitation and Restlessness, Sluggishness and Slackness, Torpor, and the Tendency to Discouragement, Lack of Concentration or Over Concentration, as well as Talking Too Much. Also to be avoided in relations with one's pupils were, on the one hand, Familiarity, Sentimentality, and Particular Friendship, and, on the other, Antipathy toward Certain Pupils, Harshness, and Severity or Impatience toward some or all of the students. An Inspector would observe those teaching in

each of his schools, particularly the beginners, to see if any of them had some of these failings so as to show him how to correct them and encouraging him to do so.⁵⁷ At the same time, he would point out and explain to a teacher certain qualities he should have and seek to develop. Some personal qualities would include attention to oneself, reserve shown in serious, thoughtful, and modest behavior that produced decisiveness, authority, and firmness. Qualities that should characterize a teacher's relations with his students included a winning manner, zeal, vigilance, a facility in speaking and expressing oneself clearly so that the boys could understand him, and a professionalism that these qualities would give him.⁵⁸ Clearly, then, De La Salle saw that to provide young people with "a human and a Christian education" required a teacher possessing and showing certain desirable human qualities as well as a deep religious spirit. And now, how was this Christian Professional Educator to carry out his apostolate?

A rather complete description of "a human and a Christian education" is given thus:

Education is the deliberate and systematic influence exerted by the mature person upon the immature through instruction, discipline, and the harmonious development of the powers of the human being, physical, intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual, according to their essential hierarchy, by and for their individual and social uses, and directed toward the union of the educand with his Creator as the final end.⁵⁹

Reflection shows the relationship between this definition of education and what the Founder said was to be the educational approach in his schools, the spirit that should guide it, and its ultimate objective. For regarding the above he asserted:

The spirit of this Institute consists secondly in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear of God, inducing them to preserve their innocence if they have not lost it and inspiring them with a great aversion and a very great horror for sin and for all that could cause them to lose purity.

To enter into this spirit the Brothers . . . will strive by prayer, instruction and their vigilance and good conduct in school to procure the salvation of the children confided to them, bringing them up in piety and in a truly Christian spirit, which is according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel.⁶⁰

Now to begin with, the Founder had worked hard to provide the "mature person," the one who was to have and show "an ardent zeal for the instruction of children," but what did he say about "the immature," "the educand," and the "children"? In one place, he wrote:

People are naturally so inclined to sin that they seem to find no other pleasure than committing it. This is seen especially in children, because their minds have not developed yet and they are not capable of much serious reflection. They seem to have no inclination than to please their passions and their senses and to satisfy their nature. This is why the Holy Spirit says it is as if folly is tied to the neck of children.⁶¹

And elsewhere he adds, “children at birth are like a mess of flesh. Their minds do not emerge . . . except with time, and become refined only little by little. They need good guides . . .” and “children whose minds are more dull . . . are less free of their senses.”⁶² However, De La Salle did not only express this negative view of those boys that his religious sons were to teach.

Quite forcefully he told them they had committed themselves to God for those they instructed and so they were responsible for their salvation.⁶³ This, he insisted, should determine how they dealt with these young people. To begin with, they should love all of them tenderly without becoming overly familiar with any of them. And, if they manifested any preference, it should be for the “poor,” who should include those with whom it was most difficult to deal.⁶⁴ A teacher would do this because he should see all those in his charge “as the children of God himself,” while recognizing and honoring Jesus present in them, any appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.⁶⁵ Such a perspective would inspire in the teacher the sentiments of tenderness, kindness, and charity that sought to win the affection of his students, not for his own sake but to lead them to God. Here they would imitate saints like Dominic or Francis de Sales. From the latter, a teacher could learn that, if at times, he had to show a father’s firmness toward one who misbehaved, he should join to it a mother’s tenderness so as to lead him to God.⁶⁶ Also, this could require special treatment of an individual student, thus taking note of his different situation or needs. For always, one of a Brother’s goals should be to form individuals, who after they left his school, would become useful members of their society.⁶⁷ Acknowledging how important it was to know how to read and write was to these members of the socioeconomic base of their society was always to be kept in mind. So, a boy, who because of his age or some other circumstances would be able to attend school only briefly, was to be given extra help in developing these skills and receiving special treatment for this purpose.⁶⁸ In all these ways, De La Salle saw the human as well as the spiritual potential in these boys, often described by their contemporaries as far from salvation. De La Salle and his Brothers sought to provide the human as well as the spiritual help each boy needed to realize his potential.

A Deliberate and Systematic Influence on the Young

Unlike the charity school in the Paris parish of Saint-Sulpice prior to when the Brothers took it over,⁶⁹ De La Salle’s schools did exert a deliberate and systematic influence on their pupils. They did this by means of their prayer life, instruction, vigilance when necessary joined to correction, and the good example of their teachers who took means to influence and guide the physical, social, intellectual, aesthetic, and religious aspects of the lives of those entrusted to their care.⁷⁰ Now, how did they go about doing this?

Every effort was made to develop the students’ prayer life. With this in mind, the Founder told his religious sons their first and principal duty was to teach each of them their morning and evening prayers and the Mass responses. The prayers in question were the Lord’s Prayer, Hail Mary, Apostles Creed, and the Act of Confession in French and Latin. To help them do this, he composed two works, *Exercises of Piety to Be Performed during the Day in the Christian Schools* and *Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass, Confession and Communion*. Through them, he provided the prayers that the boys were to learn by heart and recite, along with the devotional activities a Christian could have as a personal prayer life after he had finished his schooling. To help the students learn these prayers, during the morning breakfast and the

afternoon snack, the boys were required to take turns reciting these prayers, beginning with the simpler ones and going on to the more difficult responses for Mass.⁷¹

In addition, regular recitation of these prayers formed a part of each day's school activities. Two students in each classroom were appointed to lead their companions in their prayers, holding this position for a month, and alternating between leading the morning and afternoon prayers. These boys were two of the School Officers, listed first in this roster, which is found in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, to show the importance of their position. Chosen from among the most advanced members of the student body, they had to know all the prayers perfectly. Also, these pupils were to be known for their good behavior as well as their reverence and ability to lead the prayers in a pious manner. Every effort was to be made to rotate this position among as many boys as possible. But, if few qualified pupils were available, the two prayer leaders could hold this position for more than one month.⁷²

The recitation of prayers occupied a considerable part of each school day. And, every effort was made to close the morning sessions with a Mass that all the students attended. To make attendance at Mass a time of prayer, means were taken to help the boys who could not read well enough to recite the rosary during this time, but those who could read well enough were to follow the prayers of the Mass in French, of course, and not in Latin. Means by which teachers were to know how to have the students go to the church, behave properly there, and leave in a proper manner were also indicated in great detail. On Sunday, mornings and afternoons, in a school group, the pupils attended a parish Mass and then the parish Vespers service.⁷³

No effort was spared to develop the student's personal spiritual life. Unlike many of his contemporaries, De La Salle encouraged the young people to receive Communion as often as possible when they attended Mass. For, in addition to daily recitation of the prayers they had learned while in school, he proposed frequent Communion as a means of helping a Christian lead a good life, one pleasing to God.⁷⁴ Also, a teacher was to be a model for his students during prayer time, showing them by his posture, modesty, and reserve how a Christian should pray.⁷⁵ And having explained to their students the purpose of the Mass and how to assist at it, they were to strive to help them attend Mass as they should. With this in mind, a Brother would remember he did not assist at Mass with his pupils only for his own personal devotion but also to help them make this a prayerful experience. Placing himself so as to observe his students' behavior during this time, the teacher noted, if necessary, what, at a later time, he would have to call to the student's attention. On the other hand, neither during prayers nor while in church at Mass was a Brother to correct a student unless it was absolutely impossible to avoid doing so at these times.⁷⁶

Instruction through good teaching had an important place in De La Salle's schools. In a real sense, it was student-oriented or student-centered instruction. It seems that a boy could be enrolled in one of his schools at any time, not just at the beginning of a new school year. The Inspector or Director of a given school enrolled a new pupil in what might seem like a formal and highly organized manner that required his parents being present to provide a significant amount of useful information about him. At this time, they were given specific directions regarding what their son had to do as a student in the school. Any boy who applied was not automatically admitted, and there were several good reasons why a boy might be refused

admission.⁷⁷ If he were admitted, he would find himself following a job-oriented program. Through it, he would be prepared to take advantage of some of the job opportunities in business and government then opening in France because of the economic activity initiated by Louis XIV's great minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert.⁷⁸ This would be a useful means to foster the social mobility of a boy whose family formed the socioeconomic basis of the existing society. In time, the Founder said, it would be a source of joy for a teacher when he saw his former students leading good lives while also being able to provide adequately for their own families as useful and good citizens of their country.⁷⁹

A school with two or more classrooms might have pupils on several different levels in each room. A boy's educational level and previous performance determined to which room and to which group of students he would be assigned. Also to help his initiation into what was then a different type of learning situation, a newly enrolled boy was seated next to an experienced student who would help him quickly fit into the program of studies there.⁸⁰

The pupils were offered a limited but, in a sense, a complete enough program of studies. In addition to catechism, it included reading French, reading but not studying Latin, spelling, arithmetic, and writing. Great emphasis was placed on this last subject, which De La Salle said will make a child capable of anything, "while lacking this skill greatly harms a person."⁸¹ Unlike the chaotic situation existing in the Saint-Sulpice school that De La Salle more-or-less inherited, De La Salle's schools were to be orderly places well suited to instruct their students. In each, there was a schedule known to teachers and pupils alike.⁸² Also, by his conduct and attitude, the teacher was to maintain a very serious atmosphere most conducive to learning. Avoiding any levity or playfulness with any of the students, the educator was not to act so as to repel his charges but rather in a way to show and maintain the seriousness of what was being done in his classroom.⁸³ There was another practical reason for his acting thus. Usually a Brother had to teach in a building never designed for or intended to be used as a school. And no matter how hard the Inspector tried to discharge his duty in this matter, no classroom was perfectly suited for such use.⁸⁴ In addition, it might be over-crowded with sixty or more boys working in cramped conditions. To avoid overtiring a Brother to the detriment of his health, maintaining order and strict silence in a classroom was of great importance. Also, such a situation was very helpful for ensuring that the students would be attentive to their lessons, study well, and learn the subjects they were being taught.⁸⁵

The Primacy of Vigilance

For his part, the teacher was to take the means to see that all the boys acted in a quiet and orderly way, carefully following the subject taught, and helping their fellow pupils by correcting another boy's error when called upon to do so. One of the important tasks of the Inspector was to see that each Brother followed these directives in his classroom.⁸⁶ In addition, at least once a year, each Brother was called upon to examine for himself how carefully he was regarding these matters. Such questions as "have you carefully followed the schedule for your daily classes?" and "have you taught well all the different subjects in the program?" could lead a teacher to evaluate seriously his performance.⁸⁷ Taken together, all these things were used to help form a mature person who, by becoming a Christian Professional Educator well suited to accomplish the tasks

demanding of the charity schools, could “deliberately and systematically influence the immature persons” entrusted to his care.

Another way in which the Educator would accomplish his task was through his vigilance with regard to his students. De La Salle was fully aware that any Brother could find himself dealing in a classroom with 60 or more boys, from a variety of backgrounds and situations, who often had yet to learn any form of self-discipline. To prevent disorder and to create a situation in which teaching and learning could take place required definite action on the part of their teacher. Later historians of education who see the teacher’s vigilance as a form of repressive surveillance were largely ignoring the situation that existed in the 1700s in France.⁸⁸ An important way of creating an atmosphere in which teaching and learning could take place required maintaining as much silence as was possible in a classroom. Setting the example, the teacher spoke as seldom as possible during the day’s lessons, except during the catechism lesson. Thus, he would go far to maintain the desired silence among his students.⁸⁹ Also, the teacher would always know where each of his students was. Boys might be allowed to leave the classroom to attend to the needs of nature, but only one at a time. And to do this required that he have the necessary permission.⁹⁰ Another important task of the Inspector was to see that the teachers he supervised faithfully followed these directives. However, he would do this only in cooperation with each teacher while always stressing the latter’s obligations in these matters.⁹¹

A vigilant teacher was likely to observe some misconduct on the part of one or more of his students and find it necessary to correct the erring ones. And during the “Splendid Century” – as the 17th Century in France is known – many people seemed to see this as one of a teacher’s most important duties. As a result, any teacher was expected not only to correct his pupils but do so in a most forceful manner. This led to a harsh and even brutal system of education in which no student was exempted from such treatment. As a boy, even Louis XIV had been subjected to copious doses of corporal punishment. Therefore, many, if not all schools, would have fit the description Montaigne gave of one such institution:

‘Tis a real house of correction for imprisoned youth. Do but come in when the pupils are about their lessons, and you shall hear nothing but the outcries of the boys under execution, with the thundering noise of their pedagogues drunk with fury. A very fine way this is to tempt tender and timorous souls to love their books, with a furious countenance and a rod in hand.⁹²

However, contrary to the practice of the time, discipline as prescribed by De La Salle in the *Conduct* and the *Common Rules* is mild. In fact, the Founder sought to eliminate all forms of corporal punishment from his schools; but his early disciples were not ready for such a break with the common practice of the time. So he had to seek means to change their thinking and conduct in this matter.⁹³

A More Mild Spirit of Correction

De La Salle’s position regarding correction was clearly stated when he said frequent correction did not help a school but rather was a source of disorder that did nothing to maintain good teaching conditions there. He called on his religious sons rather to take the means to avoid any

student misbehavior that could create the need for punishing one or more of them.⁹⁴ Chapter V of the *Conduct*, seen by some as approving the harsh physical punishments common in the schools of that time, was more a subtle dialogue in which the Founder sought to foster this attitude of vigilance among his disciples to avoid the necessity of punishment.⁹⁵ Also, De La Salle made it a point of the Rule that the Brothers should watch over themselves so as to avoid creating situations in which it would be necessary to correct a student.⁹⁶ By the time they took control of their first school in Paris, the Brothers were trying to follow this directive. Their less harsh treatment of the boys was perceived and criticized. However, when it became evident how much better they were in teaching the young people who flocked to this and other schools they opened, no more criticism of this sort was heard.⁹⁷

This development did not mean that De La Salle said that none of the pupils ever needed to be corrected. For he has written: “People are naturally so inclined to sin that they seem to find no other pleasure than in committing it . . . especially children . . . have no other interest than to please their senses.” Then after saying that, he adds: “The Holy Spirit says folly is tied to the minds of children and correction is the way to cure them” and “those who guide children must reprove them . . . to make them return from their wicked way.”⁹⁸

However, he does ask when is such guidance and correction required? Definitely he insisted that dissolute conduct and serious faults such as lying, fighting, theft, impurity, and indecorum in church require correction. Also, continual negligence during classes and a refusal to do the assigned school work are errors that needed to be corrected.⁹⁹ However, there are also faults requiring correction that should be dealt with only later, unless it is absolutely impossible to postpone doing so. These included faults during the catechism lessons, prayers, and while the students were in church.¹⁰⁰

Other limits were placed on corrections, probably with a view toward avoiding the harsh physical punishment of the pupils common and accepted at the time. Each school was to have a switch and a rod on hand for use in correcting its students. But they were to be used only by the Brother in charge of a school and only, if possible, with the permission of his local religious superior. Beginning teachers, as well as very young Brothers, were more limited still in the use of these instruments for correction.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, each Inspector was to take the means to see that these directives were faithfully observed in the schools that he supervised.¹⁰²

At the same time, every effort was made to develop a frame of mind among the Brothers that would limit their inclination toward correction and how they would administer it. Each was to watch over and control himself so that he would not give way to impatience, anger, or passion so as never to correct a student when it was unnecessary or to do so in a harsh manner.¹⁰³ At the same time verbal abuse of a student, addressing him in an unbecoming way, was to be avoided. Any physical striking, much less kicking of a student, was also to be avoided. Inspectors were to be most careful that things of this sort never happened for, then as now, they could have serious consequences for a school and a teacher.¹⁰⁴

Other steps were also to be taken to avoid creating situations like that described and criticized by Montaigne. Establishing and maintaining good order in one’s classroom, while ensuring that the boys were in their places and doing what was prescribed at the time, would certainly create

situations in which correction was unnecessary. Insisting on regular and exact observance of all regulations and not allowing slight deviations to happen would also be very helpful in this matter. If a teacher was to establish his control of his students, in a good way, this would certainly be a means of making sure that misbehavior and corrections were quite rare.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, a teacher who shows a harsh attitude, is too demanding, or who pushes his students too hard will probably create unnecessary discipline problems; and if these lead to too rigorous punishments, they will certainly make frequent corrections necessary.¹⁰⁶ So all such conduct should be avoided. On the other hand, a teacher who shows gentleness and patience along with prudence in administering correction will encounter little student misbehavior that requires correction. Here again, joining a father's firmness to a mother's tenderness when dealing with the students will have good results.¹⁰⁷

De La Salle indicated, at great length, how a teacher could show these traits.¹⁰⁸ A child should always be corrected as if dealing with a reasonable person for, De La Salle insisted, a correction is useless if it did not lead a boy to amend his ways. With this in mind, he said it must be seen as charitable, just, suitable to the person and the fault, moderate, and above all pleasing to God while done in his presence. At the same time, on the part of the one corrected, it should be accepted so as to lead him to do good.¹⁰⁹ Keeping these things in mind, the Founder said there are both persons who should not be corrected and situations in which correction should not be administered. Showing his mastery of practical educational psychology, he mentioned in this category those who are too young, very quiet, or new in a school and, to these he added, those who were bold, insolent, stubborn, heedless, ill-bred, or self-willed, all of whom would most likely not profit from any correction.¹¹⁰

De La Salle insisted that, in no way, should a teacher do a parent's task by correcting a boy at his request. If a boy seems to feel that he is not "liked" by his teacher, he should also not be corrected, as here again, it will not be helpful in any way. Finally, a correction that would not be useful to the one receiving it or one that would cause disorder in the school should be avoided.¹¹¹ In many of these situations, he suggested that penances might be more useful than corrections. These could include removing a class officer from his position. It might also mean giving a boy something to memorize and recite correctly or to put in extra time in school. For De La Salle, there were many ways of calling a student to order and improving his conduct.¹¹² In conclusion, the Founder certainly did not desire that his disciples be negligent as regards the conduct and behavior of those confided to their charge.

The Power of Good Example

However, in place of the harsh punishments so favored by many of his contemporaries, the Founder favored yet another way of leading the boys to behave properly. He insisted that this was the good example of their teachers. He told his religious sons quite forcefully that their example must support their instruction, or it would be ineffective and useless.¹¹³ In connection with this idea, he insisted that a Brother's good example that was edifying for his students was his first duty to them. He was to lead them to live Christian lives by how he himself lived and acted. This was because only a virtuous life, not one guided solely by human feelings and passions, was the way to lead others to live properly.¹¹⁴ Consequently, religious, along with human, modesty should always characterize the Brothers' dealings with their students. Their

gestures, language, and all their actions would best show their pupils how a Christian acts and reacts in all situations.¹¹⁵ A teacher's conduct, De La Salle said, thus became an important and necessary means of helping his students become good as well as Christian members of society. The book the students used for reading during the last stages of their stay in one of the Founder's schools was also intended to help them develop their social skills. This was his book of politeness, *The Rules of Christian Civility and Decorum*.¹¹⁶ Through it, they were introduced to decorum, the wise and well-regulated conduct governing what we do and say, keeping in mind the time and place as well as the people with whom one is dealing and civility which is "decorum practiced toward our neighbor."¹¹⁷ Building on the actions of his students' parents, a Brother was to present civility and decorum as virtues having reference to God, our neighbors, and ourselves.¹¹⁸ Such conduct was to be based on the fact that a boy sees himself "of noble birth" as belonging to Jesus Christ and being a child of God. His body is then seen as "a living temple where God wishes to be adored in spirit and in truth, and as a living tabernacle which Jesus Christ has chosen as his dwelling place."

This view of oneself should lead the boy to respect himself.¹¹⁹ The boys were also taught to be good neighbors to those who lived and worked in the vicinity of their school. This was both very practical and necessary. Most often a school was located in a building neither designed nor intended for that purpose, and maybe it was leased on a yearly basis. If the boys disturbed the neighbors, the school could be forced to relocate; and this might not be easy or convenient to do. So, boys who arrived before the school was opened for the morning or the afternoon sessions, were asked and enjoined to avoid doing anything to disturb or to offend their neighbors.¹²⁰ They were also asked to show good manners, as well as Christian modesty, by not satisfying "their natural necessities in the street since this is contrary to decency and modesty." Even though this was quite common at the time, it could create a bad impression regarding those attending the school.¹²¹

Students were also asked and encouraged to act in socially proper and acceptable ways in other matters. During the so-called "Splendid Century," cities in France and elsewhere were least successful in maintaining cleanliness of their streets. Laws were enacted to keep the streets clean so as to protect the public hygiene, but their citizens happily and completely ignored these laws. One reason for this was the existence of numerous tenements which housed large numbers of families and which lacked any sort of sanitary arrangements. As a result, all household filth of every description was flung out of these buildings onto the street. Paris, where the Brothers' schools were long associated, was probably the dirtiest of French cities, and its populace took pride in this fact, while stubbornly resisting all sanitary regulations. Its streets were, therefore, said to have a foul odor so strong that it could be smelt two miles away when approaching from any direction. The mud on its streets could put an indelible stain on any clothing it touched.¹²² In spite of this situation and this attitude, De La Salle demanded personal cleanliness of the boys attending his schools. Their teachers were to give them an example, keeping their own clothes clean and wearing them with a suitable dignity and modesty. No boy was allowed to attend school if he was bare legged or wearing only a shirt, but rather he had to be suitably dressed, wearing clean clothing.¹²³ Likewise, the school was to be kept properly clean. During the morning and afternoon, the boys ate snacks together to teach them good manners. At these times, they were not to throw anything on the floor. Anything that could dirty their classroom was to be removed. A student officer was assigned to clean his classroom once a day at noontime, while if

necessary two or more of these officers would cooperate to remove any trash from the building.¹²⁴ By all these means, the Founder was seeking to help boys who might need such help to develop proper social habits and the practice of personal cleanliness.

Describing the academic program he prescribed for his schools, De La Salle wrote:

. . . They will, however, make it their first and principal duty to teach their pupils the morning and evening prayers, the commandments of God and of the Church . . . the catechism, the duties of a Christian, and the maxims and precepts that our Lord left us in the Holy Gospel.¹²⁵

Religious Instruction as the Main Task of the Schools

In this way, De La Salle made religious instruction the main task of the schools he created. Therefore, a Brother had the obligation to ensure that every boy entrusted to his care learned all that a Christian should know as regards both the teachings and the practice of his religion. For this was the way in which the students would be brought up in a Christian spirit.¹²⁶ The Founder knew that even some nominal Christians of his day would not consider this an important function of his schools. However, his religious sons were to see it as one of the most important ways for building up the Church, strengthening it and giving it a firm foundation.¹²⁷

With this in mind, a Brother would seek to prepare himself as well as possible for this task. To do so, he had to learn well the Christian faith he was to share with the boys. This required that he constantly study the teachings of Jesus, mastering them and the Gospel maxims the boys were to learn and practice. Of course, while doing this he was to teach only approved Church doctrine as taught by those bishops in full union with the Pope and the Church of Rome.¹²⁸

To do this, the Brothers provided a full program of religious instruction for their pupils. The daily catechism lesson lasted a half-hour, while the one on the eve of the weekly holiday lasted a full hour and the one on a Sunday or feast lasted an hour and a half. All students in a school were obliged to attend all the catechism lessons. No boy was accepted or could remain in a school if he did not attend all the lessons, on Sundays and feast days, as well as on school day.¹²⁹ And these lessons were different in an important way.

A teacher was encouraged to speak as seldom as possible and only in a low tone during his other lessons. He was to use the approved signs to direct and control his pupils while having another boy correct any mistake made by a student. However, he was to speak at length during the catechism lesson, and during the reflection and examination of conscience that ended each day's activities.¹³⁰ This did not mean the lesson was a lecture delivered by the teacher. Rather, it took the form of a series of questions and student answers along with sub-questions based on material previously covered that led into the topic of the new lesson. During all of this time, a Brother would try to use only simple words and expressions easily understood by his students. He would also make his questions and the required answers as short as possible.¹³¹

At the same time, every effort was to be made to attract and hold the boys' attention, leading each one to apply himself as completely as possible to the lesson through which he could learn

the Christian teaching with which it deals. If one boy could not answer a question or gave a wrong answer, care was to be taken not to hurt his feelings. Reproving a student or correcting his misbehavior was to be avoided at this time with the matter being dealt with later on.¹³²

De La Salle sought not only to help these boys often seen as far from salvation to learn their Christian faith, he also sought to have a boy practice it – not only while he was in school but for the rest of his life. To conclude each catechism lesson, a Brother was to indicate some ways by which a Christian could practice the points covered in the lesson. This was to be done by means of a carefully planned series of questions requiring appropriate student responses. Whenever possible, answers given by the boys were to be used to indicate how, at this time in their lives, the students could practice this aspect of Jesus' teachings.¹³³ Using all these means, their teacher would strive to give his pupils a complete as well as a practical instruction in their Christian faith.

While doing all that was connected with his daily catechism lesson, as well as all his other activities on a given day, a Brother was, first and foremost, to see himself called by God to a ministry designed to lead his pupils to salvation. He was to accept the fact that, in time, he would have to give God an account of his stewardship in this matter. It would cover a number of points. Had he taught the boys their religion well, keeping in mind their age and scholastic ability? Did they pray as they should during each school day? How did they participate in Mass and other church services? How did they behave themselves outside of school time? Had he neglected some of his students because they were troublesome or made themselves unattractive in other ways? Finally, did he teach all his other classes well so as to attract and retain these young people to whom he was to give a human as well as a Christian education?¹³⁴

De La Salle certainly made it clear what he expected of his religious sons, both as persons and as teachers. By living up to these requirements, they became a corps of Christian Professional Educators, well prepared to exert a deliberate and systematic influence on the children of the working class and the poor whose families formed the socioeconomic base of the French society of their day. This was accomplished by developing the physical, social, intellectual, aesthetic, and religious facets of their students' lives. It was through their prayers, vigilance, corrections, and good example – joined to the instruction given – that they were able to influence their pupils in these ways. They, thus became, the group of teachers qualified to remedy the deplorable situation in the charity schools of France, conditions described by Charles Démia, Jean-Baptiste Blain, and some of the parish clergy in Chartres.

A Great and Important Contribution to the World of Education

So, what did the Founder actually accomplish? Writers studying the history and development of education in the western world see De La Salle as having made great and important contributions in this area. Certainly, he had not been the first to perceive, because of the poor quality and performance of their teachers, the problems that plagued charity schools for boys. While other men of good will in France had failed when attempting to remedy this situation, he devised and used the means required to succeed.¹³⁵ Unlike Charles Démia in Lyons, whose work in this area did well for a while but did not long survive his death, the Founder was more successful. He

created a corps of teachers that survived long after his death in 1719, and still today continues successfully educating children.¹³⁶

One author, seeing him as a product and a stimulus of the French Catholic Reform, describes De La Salle as “the father of modern pedagogy, a title shared with several others associated with the Protestant and Catholic Reformations.” Another author says that through his “proper technical training of the teachers, De La Salle performed a role almost comparable to the *Spiritual Exercises* in the spiritual sphere.”¹³⁷ In different ways, all these authors clearly see him as creating the “Corps of Christian Professional Educators” so badly needed for the elementary schools of this time.

Among other things, he did this by establishing practical school experience as the basis of teacher training.¹³⁸ It is here that his educational classic *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* played a most important role. It showed a new teacher how to follow a pattern learned from the experience of earlier successful teachers. Thus, it is said, he did for the primary school what the Jesuits had done for the secondary school. *The Conduct* was for these schools what the famous *Ratio Studiorum* was for secondary education.¹³⁹ By following it, the elementary school teacher became a Christian Professional Educator and acquired a new status. For as Friedrich Brug said of the Founder, “He raised to a position of honor the hitherto despised profession of schoolmaster.”¹⁴⁰

In their own ways, a number of the Founder’s contemporaries gave similar testimony regarding his achievements in this area. The parish priests of Chartres, who deplored the sad state of the local charity schools for poor boys, proposed a solution to this problem. They said, “We have learned that there is in Paris a priest of great piety who has undertaken to prepare and train young schoolteachers.” In effect, they were saying that if we entrust the conduct of these schools to De La Salle’s religious sons, our problem would be solved.¹⁴¹ In 1700, a priest from Calais witnessed the good order and proper behavior of the students some Brothers were bringing to the Saint-Sulpice parish church for their daily Mass, and he decided to have them open a similar school in that city. The Institute was asked to open its first school there, so that the Brothers could do for boys in Calais what they were doing for those in Paris.¹⁴²

The good work the Brothers were doing under very difficult conditions in their school in Darnétal came to the attention of Msgr. Colbert, Archbishop of Rouen. Because of what he saw them doing, he decided to ask them to take over the charity schools for poor boys in Rouen. This they did in 1705.¹⁴³ Finally, the good work being done by the Brothers in Calais attracted the attention of the Bishop of Boulogne, several of his priests, and some pious laymen. In 1710, their interest and efforts made it possible for De La Salle to open in that city the last of the schools he founded. This school was immediately successful in a number of ways.¹⁴⁴

However, the most interesting evaluation of the Founder’s work might have been given by some laywomen in Paris. This happened at the beginning of 1706 due to the attacks made by some local schoolmasters on the Brothers’ schools in the Saint-Sulpice parish and the failure of M. De La Chétardie to defend them. As their response, and with the Founder’s permission, the Brothers simply closed the schools and left the parish. Almost immediately, the pastor was forced to give in to a demand of the pupils’ mothers. Now deprived of the good influence of their teachers, they

said the boys quickly “showed themselves ignorant and unmanageable, misbehaved and lacking in seriousness.” Since the schools had closed, the mothers said, “all these unfortunate consequences were becoming obvious.” De La Chétardie was forced to agree to undertake the defense of the Brothers and promise to protect them from future attacks. Only under these conditions did the Brothers return to the Saint-Sulpice schools.¹⁴⁵ Unintentionally, these distraught mothers had given a powerful testimony to how De La Salle’s newly created corps of Christian Professional Educators was contributing to building and shaping the Church.

One of the main goals of the post-1600 Catholic Reform in France was to find “the means of preserving Christianity in the souls of the common people.”¹⁴⁶ The Corps of Christian Professional Educators that De La Salle created showed themselves to be a powerful instrument for accomplishing this task. His work and contribution is well summarized in the following statement:

. . . It was very difficult to find good teachers and no one seemed interested in training them . . . the charitable schools for boys were in a very poor shape . . . St. John Baptist de La Salle did not create the elementary school; neither did he create the charity schools. But for both he provided good teachers and methods.¹⁴⁷

Thus, John Baptist de La Salle established an educational tradition with accompanying practices that his religious sons and their associates continue to follow throughout a large portion of the world today.

Notes

1. Ellwood P. Cubberley, *The History of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), 344.
2. Cubberley, 344-345; Edward McNall Burns, *The Counter Reformation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Anvil Original / Van Nostrand Company, 1964), 39.
3. Jules Herment, *Les Idées pédagogiques de Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle* (Paris: P. Letheilleux, 1932), 5.
4. Georges Rigault, *L'oeuvre pédagogique et religieuse de Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, tome I de *Histoire générale de l'Institute des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1937), 15.
5. Rigault, 24; H. C. Bernard, *The Port-Royalists on Education* (Cambridge: University Press, 1918), 1; Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Seventeenth Century*, Vol. II., trans. J. J. Buckingham (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1965), 337-340.
6. Cubberley, 345.
7. Herment, 15-16.

8. John Baptist De La Salle, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, trans. F. de LaFontainerie and Richard Arnandez, ed. with notes by William Mann (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1996), 21; Michel Sauvage, “The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle” in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, ed. Robert C. Berger. (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1991), 231.

9. Sauvage, 231-232.

10. Jean-Baptiste Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, the Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, trans. Richard Arnandez, and ed. Luke Salm (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000), 372-373.

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