

TWELVE QUALITIES OF A GOOD TEACHER

Brother Charles Gatt

This brief commentary on the "Twelve virtues of a good teacher" of St. John Baptist de La Salle, was written by Brother Charles Gatt, in the year of his death, for the teachers of St. John's College, Southsea, England, May 15, 1992, as a handout for De La Salle's feast day.

Several members of staff have expressed the feeling that there is a call for written material on the educational thoughts of the Founder, De La Salle, 1651-1719. This handout is a response.

In an Anthology, called the "Recueil", published in Paris in 1717, De La Salle lists twelve qualities which, ideally, every good teacher should have. It is his own choice, made in the setting of the early eighteenth century, for teachers of boys; aged about six to thirteen. His list of "top twelve qualities" is interesting in that context, and is, perhaps, not without relevance to teachers in the junior and secondary schools of today. Here it is.

1. Poise

De La Salle uses the French word "Gravité", which, like Poise, embraces a notion of weight, composure, assurance, dignity and "presence". His meaning is made clear in various writings, when he puts us on our guard against "undue haste, shouting, loud laughter, emotional outbursts, slamming doors"; and when he encourages us to win respect by acting with reserve and dignity.

2. Calm

The ideal classroom atmosphere, most conducive to work, in De La Salle's mind, was one of calm and quiet. Boys were expected to refrain from talking, and teachers were to be economical with words. In this climate of "silence" boys would be more attentive, and schoolmasters more effective in their teaching. A grim picture, it would seem. But, in the Lasallian tradition, the emphasis was on "stillness and peace", as opposed to "noise and disorder", rather than on strict silence itself.

3. Humility

This is an unfashionable quality today. Yet, understood in De La Salle's vocabulary, it means being modest, unostentatious, not seeking to impress, unassuming. It reflects gospel simplicity. It is no bad thing for a teacher to admit, at least to himself, or to a colleague, that he has made a mistake. There are times when we can do well to swallow our pride. At the same time, humility flowers into courtesy, and into respect for our pupils.

4. Common Sense

Common sense is a typically English expression, with a meaning easily apprehended: down to earth, level headed, of sound judgement, being shrewd, sensible, reasonable, acting with foresight. De La Salle uses the French word "Prudence", a steady quality to serve us, whatever the circumstances. Teachers will recognise its relevance in their work.

5. Wisdom

Acting wisely, and with discernment, requires a degree of acumen, circumspection and vision, with sufficient background knowledge to make sound judgements. A wise old bird. Ever since Old Testament times Wisdom has been looked upon as the greatest of the virtues. A great gift in a teacher.

6. Patience

No teacher would quarrel with this, though some might contend that a touch of impatience is not without its value. But, certainly, a teacher who manages to keep cool, and composed, and even-tempered, especially when dealing with difficult children, is the better educator. There are times when we have to show forbearance, times to be persevering, and times when we have to turn a blind eye.

7. Self-control

In the real world of teaching, much happens that is exasperating. De La Salle knew that, not only boys could be trying, but conditions and events too; and, for good measure, colleagues and parents as well. His writings, particularly his "La Conduite des Ecoles", ask teachers to control themselves, and to show self-discipline and restraint, when they are annoyed or provoked. He knew it was not easy.

8. Gentle

De La Salle wanted his teachers to be gentle and to act like gentlemen. His concept of a gentleman, courteous, refined, amiable, kindly, is attractive. These very words paint a portrait of De La Salle himself. He insisted on good manners, and expected his teachers to do the same. To help them, he published a book for their use, under the title "Christian Politeness", which sets out a code for schoolboy behaviour. All this lies within the meaning of the word "douceur" which De La Salle uses to describe the gentle teacher.

9. Dedication

One of the highest compliments paid to a teacher is to call him dedicated. We think of him striving for academic excellence, preparing lessons, correcting work, encouraging effort, available for extra curricular activities. De La Salle uses the word "zèle", a blend of keenness, enthusiasm and warmth, but expressed in practical terms of cheerful involvement.

10. Caring

The first duty of a caring teacher, in De La Salle's mind, is to be vigilant. He insisted that, in the classroom, on the playground, before and after school when boys are on the premises, a teacher has to be present. A watchful eye can prevent vandalism, damage and bullying. In his book of Meditations he discussed the story of the Good Shepherd caring for his sheep, to highlight the responsibility of teachers.

11. Prayerful

Here we have a quality that can only be understood by those who see meaning in prayer: a raising up of the mind and heart to God. With Him, teachers think of their pupils and pray for them, and stand ready to do whatever they can to prepare them for life.

12. Generous

There is something special about teachers who are unselfish, unstinting in their giving, and who do not measure their efforts. We often have glimpses of it in teachers who give many unpaid hours to drama, music and games, to reading round their teaching subjects, to class preparation and out of school activities. The appreciation they win and their influence, is immense, and the affection of those whom they inspire, is life long.

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This list of twelve qualities of a good teacher appears in the "Recueil" without any introduction, and has no commentary. It is thrown in as if it were the doodle of an idle moment. Perhaps it was. If ever we have an idle moment, and are inclined to doodle, we might make up our own list. It would probably overlap De La Salle's to some extent. The result might surprise us, and not be without interest. ●

Brother Charles Gatt, author of this article, died recently. In publishing this piece, we remember him with veneration and we express our gratitude for his zeal in the field of the spiritual and apostolic formation of lay teachers in our educational establishments. May Our Lord grant him the crown of glory.