

Educational Service of the poor
throughout the history of the Institute (1/2)

(A reflection in the year of the Father)

Brother Bruno Alpago

Brother Bruno Alpago, from the District of Argentina-Paraguay, explains how the concept of educational service of the poor has been lived out in the Institute and the meaning that this concept has had at various times, based on his fine study of the sources of our history.

*This book will be published in time for the next General Chapter but we are offering parts of it now to readers of *Lasalliana*, especially those parts which include the conclusions of the various chapters.*

In this preparatory year for the Great Jubilee, this reflection on preferential love for the poor can help us deepen our knowledge of God the Father.

The time of foundation. Conclusion.

It can be said, although it is not absolutely certain, that the foundational process of the Institute opened with the meeting between De La Salle and Nyel in 1679 and closed with the printed edition of the *Common Rules* in 1726. The year 1679 is when all possibilities were open; the year 1726 marks the time in which all - or almost all - the basic "yes's" and "no's" were stipulated for the new Institute. "Yes" to the popular school, to gratuity, to catechesis within the school, to association, to the lay state, to the city; "yes" to the training of lay teachers, to boarding schools; "yes" to the novitiate, to continuing spiritual and professional formation, to an autonomous government; "yes" to the "employ of the school", taken up every day and for a lifetime; "yes" to faith and to the saving ministry of the Church, in adherence to the Pope, in relationship with bishops; "yes" to the coherence of a well-structured body. "No" to the clerical state, to Latin, to shelters; "no" to the country with its corresponding isolation of persons; "no" to clerical dependence, to parish or diocesan influence; "no" to the separation between school and catechetics, to discrimination between rich and poor; "no" to part-time or temporary teaching, to the hope of an employ with more dignity or one which offers a better salary.

The "new company" came into being during the brilliant and bellicose reign of Louis XIV and the tortuous Regency; in 1726 Louis XV, the "king of France and Navarre", was barely an adolescent. The Institute has survived the cold and famine of 1684-85, 1692-94 and of 1709, as well as the euphoria and delusion of John Law's *System*. The Lasallian congregation has had to wade through, incomprehension, misunderstandings, tensions or downright persecution that has involved ecclesiastical authorities, magistrates, police, corporations. Added to the external difficulties were internal problems: jealousy, inconstancy, fickleness, short-sightedness, lack of virtue; death, sickness, juvenile inexperience.

In 1726 not everything was completely in place. But the Institute could be considered to have its back well covered. It was aware of its spirit and its mission; it had the resources to sustain the first and carry out the second; it had proved its vitality and cohesion once its Founder was gone; it had achieved a legal personality and ecclesiastical approval. The several thousands of children who were taken from the streets each day, gratuitously, bear witness to the effectiveness which, **for this world**, could have a **total consecration to procure the glory of God**. The experience of these poor Brothers also shows, for the good of the Church, just how dedicated to the glory of God is the secular task of giving a Christian education to poor and abandoned youth. The search for the glory of God results in a secular effort carried out with competence and effectiveness.

Thus equipped, the Brothers of the Christian Schools found themselves in condition to serve the poor of all times usefully by means of Christian education; and in a more immediate sense, to become the only body devoted in an exclusive and dependable way to the popular education of boys in France during the Age of Enlightenment.

At the end of the Ancien Régime. Conclusion.

Since its approval in 1724-1725 until the revolutionary outbreak of 1789 the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has been steady in the exercise of its mission. Its awareness of being devoted to popular schools by means of gratuitous schools has not ceased to be stated. In order to be at the service of the poor it is enough that the Brothers welcome those who call upon them: the Institute is solicited therefore by bishops, pastors, municipalities; it does not need to seek out the poor since they present themselves in multitudes. It does not appear that this awareness of its purpose will diminish. But there may be a certain type of retreat; the nearly complete absence of the description of the conditions in which the poor and working class live and work raises a suspicion; it is as if the Brothers consider what is found in the fundamental writings to be sufficient in this regard (the *Rule*, the *Bull* of Benedict XIII, the *Meditations* of the Founder) and they see no need to update these items.

Granted that the idea of devotion to the poor as well as providing a useful service was easily adopted, the Brothers begin to ask themselves more and more about the nature and the scope of their vows, in particular (but not only) about that of gratuity; concern for the means relegates the end to second place. At the heart of this concern is the thinking that gratuity is the only means to achieve the end of the Institute, so that whatever dent in the practice of gratuity is capable of provoking the destruction of the Institute; on the other hand, there is the certainty that the maintenance of gratuity guarantees almost automatically the achievement of the end. And in all this discussion, the tone of law is perceived more sharply than that of mysticism.

Two problems, among others, seem to merit particular attention and they are both related to the large-scale devotion of the Institute to gratuitous elementary education.

One problem is of an economic nature: with only gratuitous schools, which with great difficulty maintained the personnel who manned them, the Congregation could not meet its needs: the subsistence of its members, the formation of its personnel, general services; the difficulty was felt in the eighteenth century and finding a solution was not easy; the existence of boarding schools was strongly tied to this fact and there was no qualms of conscience on the part of the Brothers; but it should also be remembered that the superiors of the Congregation were involved in harsh battles for the purpose of obtaining equitable financial arrangements.

The other problem is that of formation: after a rather brief initial period (one year on the novitiate, one year of apprenticeship in the schools), the Institute placed all its hopes in the Brother's continuing formation, a formation that would be carried out within the Institute itself. This system did achieve some outstanding individual successes; but a body which wanted to be provided with formators, leaders, administrators and be on top of new and diverse requirements in the field of educational service felt the need to raise the level a notch.

The General Chapter of 1777 is clearly aware of this and supports the means which it considers adequate and possible; its first eleven decisions deal with the Postulancy and the Novitiate. Then it goes on to describe the minimal characteristics that houses should have in order receive recently-graduated novices (XII), the duties of the respective Directors, looking at their personal and professional traits (XIII), how all young Brothers should apply themselves to their studies (catechism, writing, mathematics, grammar) and the means of sustaining and of evaluating these procedures (XIV, XV, XVI).

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