De La Salle: the Mission and the Ministry of the Christian Teacher

Two topics frequently mentioned and discussed in all the writings of St. John Baptist de La Salle are the mission and the ministry of the Christian teacher. However, one of the best – if not the best – presentations of his ideas on these two subjects is found in his *Méditations pour le temps de la Retraite* [Meditations for the Time of Retreat or the *Retreat Meditations* – as they are popularly called.] These sixteen meditations were written during the last years of Saint’s life and first published in Rouen, France, around 1730. As regards their contents, even a quick glance at the table of contents will suggest that this relatively brief work treats essentially of eight different but related topics dealing with the work of Christian teacher, with two meditations covering different aspects of the same topic. And as a rule, the first or odd-numbers meditation in each pair takes a more theoretical approach, while the second or even-numbered one deals with more practical aspects of the same topic. An exception to this general rule might be found in the last pair where there seems to be a reversal of the roles of the even-numbered and the odd-

Note: All references to the *Retreat Meditations* are based on *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, translated by Brother Augustine Loes, FSC. Winona, Minnesota: St. Mary’s College Press, 1975. The meditation and the point(s) are indicated this: 1:1. All references to the other two sets of the Founder’s Meditations are based on the Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, *Méditations*. Région France: Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes, 1982. The meditation and the point(s) are indicated: this M: 56:1-2].
numbered meditations.

However, in general, it also seems that the odd-numbered meditations in this series deal more or even exclusively with the “mission” of the Christian teacher, while the even-numbered ones deal almost exclusively with the “ministry” of the one doing this work. And to avoid confusion, at this time it might be good to indicate what is meant by the words “mission” and “ministry” as they will be used in this paper. By “mission” is meant the specific objectives the Christian teacher has in mind or what he or she hopes and plans to accomplish through being involved in educational work. On the other hand, “ministry” means the activities the teacher undertakes and the means he or she uses to achieve the objectives that have been set for this apostolate. Evidently, the mission will be used in this paper. By “mission” is meant the specific objectives the Christian teacher had in mind or what he or she hopes and plans to accomplish through being involved in educational work. On the other hand, “ministry” means the activities the teacher undertakes and the means he or she uses to achieve the objectives that have been set for this apostolate. Evidently the mission will influence the choice of the activities and of the means used, while the nature of the ministry will be shaped to a large extent by the objectives set by the Christian teacher. And since for the Founder, the mission did determine the ministry, it seems good to begin by discussing this mission as described by De La Salle, particularly in his Retreat Meditations.

The basis of the mission of the Christian teacher is the action and the will of God, regarding which the Saint wrote:
God is so good that He not only brings us into existence by His act of creation but also desires that all of us come to the knowledge of truth. This truth is God himself and all that He has willed to reveal to us through Jesus Christ, through his apostles, and through His church. God desires all of us to be taught this knowledge, that our minds may be enlightened by the light of faith. [1:1]

However,

We cannot be taught the mysteries of our religion unless we have the good fortune to hear about them, and we cannot have this advantage unless someone preaches the word of God. [1:1]

So, “God diffuses...His knowledge throughout the world by human ministers,” [1:1] among them being Christian teachers. And after De La Salle tells the latter, “…God in His mercy has given you such a ministry,” he exhorts them to “gain glory before...[God] by proclaiming His truth to those whom you are called to teach,” while looking on yourself “as the ministers of God and the administrators of His mysteries.” [1:1] Essentially, then, the Christian teacher is called to help realize the design of God in regard to all human beings by worthily teaching his word to the children he or she is called to instruct in the Christian school. However, working to achieve this plan requires the Christian teacher to take account of a number of things, some of which can add to the complexity of this mission and ministry.

To begin with, the teacher must have a correct and Christian perception of the students, for what he or she does or does not do will be determined by this perception of these young people. According to the Founder, this perception should be based both on
what the children are and what they can become. As regards the ultimate destiny of the
children, the holy priest says that while on earth they are called to be and can become “true
children of God,” [7:3] that is holy and conformed to the “perfect man who is
Christ,” [13:3] in eternity they can become “citizens of heaven.” [7:3] In the fullest sense
of the term they are and can become part of the structure of the Church of God. [8:1; 13:3]
The work of the Christian teacher, however, is basic to their achieving this destiny, and as
such it is an essential means “for the building of the church.” [8:1; 13:1] For only if the
children learn and practice the Christian teachings, not just while they are in school but all
throughout their lives, can they achieve this great destiny. [5:2; 6:2]

One reason for this is because, as De La Salle indicates, there is yet another side to
these children. At birth and for some time after he sees them more inclined to material
things than ones that are intellectual or spiritual. As a result they are unable to understand
Christian teaching. [5:1] In this matter they experience even more difficulty than do adults.
To overcome such a handicap they need to be taught these truths by individuals who are
aware of and take note of the students’ limitations in such matters. [5:1] Also, they can
accurately be described as “weak in mind as well as body,” and as having “little
understanding of what is for their own good.” [5:3] As a result, they make mistakes, acting
without thinking. [11:1] In addition, they are so inclined to sin that often they seek to
satisfy themselves or to find pleasure by committing it. [11:2]

Difficulties such as the above can be made still more serious when for whatever
reasons these children are neglected – in a sense “abandoned” – by their parents. They then
live in idleness and become so accustomed to doing nothing that later on it is very difficult
for them to acquire good work habits. But more serious still, under these circumstances they can encounter and fall under the influence of bad companions who can lead them to commit many sins. As a result of this, in time they acquire bad habits that are difficult if not impossible for them to correct in later life, if they seek to do so. [2:1; 13:3]

In general, history tells us that this picture of the poor children of seventeenth century France is both realistic and accurate. However, De La Salle insists that in spite of this less than favorable situation, a Christian teacher can help such young people when they are under his care. With his help they can both correct their faults as well as overcome the habits of sin into which they have fallen. He even goes so far as to say it is possible to help those who have preserved their innocence up to this time to continue to do so. [16:3] And giving them suitable Christian instruction is for him an important means of achieving these goals. Particularly this will be the case if the Christian teacher shows a practical knowledge of educational psychology by taking note of the development of the intellectual level of these young people so as to provide them with instruction suitable to their understanding. [1:3; 5:2; 6:1,2; 14:1] And more still will this be so if a specific purpose of this instruction is to bring the students to practice what they have been taught by leading them to do the good of which they are capable, keeping in mind their age and their overall situation. [6:2]

However, while De La Salle called on the Christian teacher to develop an awareness of educational psychology, he also showed that he himself had a practical knowledge of this subject. One example is when he wrote:

Your zeal towards the children you teach would not go very far and
would not have much result or success if it limited itself only to words. To be effective your teaching must be supported by your example…

Example makes a much greater impression on the mind and heart than words. This is especially true of children, …[10:3]

And then he stressed the fact that words will have little influence on children, particularly if the actions they see are not in conformity with the instruction they are given. [10:3]

The Founder gave an example of what this could mean in practice when he discussed poverty and the love of poverty which the Christian teacher was to try to inspire in his poor students. It was by his regular and even his daily actions, the Saint said, that the teacher was to teach the love of poverty and the love of Jesus for the poor. And if, on the contrary, the teacher showed more love for the “rich” or the “advantaged” among his students, his teaching regarding these matters would be quite ineffective, he said. [10:2; 14:1]

In addition to instruction and good example, the holy priest stressed vigilance as a means of helping these youths to become Christian in fact as well as in name. And he saw vigilance as leading to and including correcting the faults and the failings of the students. In the mind of the Founder, in his relations with the students the Christian teacher replaced their fathers and mothers as well as the pastors of the Church. Also, as he indicated, if it was common and even easy for these young people to do wrong, to the extent of developing habits of wrongdoing, correction was a means of remedying this situation. Particularly this was so, he said, in regard to more serious faults they might commit. [11:1, 3]

But once again De La Salle’s practical knowledge of educational psychology
stresses the fact that the manner of correcting is as important or more important than the action itself. Therefore he says, “…human beings, and even children, are endowed with reason and must not be corrected like animals, but like reasonable persons.” [12:1] For the purpose behind correcting a student is, he says, to lead him as a Christian to accept the reproof in a manner pleasing to God, so that it can inspire him to correct the fault in question and then to lead a better life. This can happen, the holy priest said, only if the correction is and can be seen as just, that is suitable to the fault committed. [12:1] On the contrary, “when correction is administered through uncontrolled emotion and without having God in view,” it can have only the opposite effects. It will not lead the student to correct the fault in question, but rather it can create a feeling toward the teacher which can make all his efforts to help the student quite ineffective. [12:3] At the same time, though, the teacher who has the courage to do his job and to correct the students properly will draw down upon himself the blessing of God. Also, because he is doing his duty and doing it properly, he will be recognized as one who has performed an essential if difficult part of his work, in time even by those he corrected and thus led from their evil ways. [12:1]

At this point it might be said that some of what the Founder has to say about the children, particularly as regards their reaction to and reception of corrections, might seem a bit idealistic if not somewhat unrealistic. This could be true. However, at all times the Saint kept in mind that this was the work of God which must be done as such, and that with the help God can give, what seems difficult or simply impossible can become very possible. So he insists that the Christian teacher who perceives the students in this light and acts accordingly will do so only because he or she is a man or woman of prayer.
Therefore he suggests that those students who are at least responsive to the teacher’s efforts and need help the most, should be special subjects of the teacher’s prayers. If this is done, De La Salle seems to have had no doubts that what is not possible humanly speaking will become possible through God’s help. [4:1]

Now, briefly, it might be good to summarize the more significant and relevant ideas of the Founder as regards the children to whom the mission and the ministry of the Christian teacher are directed. To begin with, these young people are called to live Christian lives in this world and to attain eternal happiness in the next, goals they can achieve. At the same time, though, they are inclined to do wrong. Therefore, neglect of their education as well as the evil influences to which they are exposed can both make it difficult for them to live such Christian lives and easy for them to do what is wrong. However, Christian teachers aware of the moral situation of these children as also of their physical, intellectual, and spiritual limitations, can help them to fulfill their Christian vocation. And the means available to the Christian teacher are instruction, good example, vigilance, and prayer, all used to support and to enhance each other. [See also Regles Communes (1718), II, 7.]

Finally, it seems appropriate to note that if De La Salle took a realistic view of the children who were to be educated in the Christian school, he was more optimistic than pessimistic in what he said about them. In no way did he preach “a doctrine of despair” – one reflecting the ideas of the Jansenists who were so numerous and so influential in his day. Likewise, while calling them to a sanctity possible in their situation, in no way did he require “an impossible degree of perfection” from them. He saw the difficulties of the
mission and the ministry he was describing but considered them to be difficulties that could be successfully confronted and overcome with the help of God. [See W.J. Battersby: De La Salle – Saint and Spiritual Writer. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950, pp. 100-101.]

Against this background, now we can examine in more detail the “mission” of the Christian teacher as proposed and described by St. John Baptist de La Salle. As was said earlier, the essence of this mission is to help bring to salvation those children whom God has created for and called to salvation. [1:1,3] And because it is God’s purpose in creating them, it will not be thwarted due to human ignorance, indifference, or lack of effort. If those who naturally speaking should do this task refuse to do it, or are unable to perform it, God will find others who are willing and able to do it and then call them to do his work in this matter. The Christian teacher is before all else one called to this mission, one called to do the work of God in this matter. [1:2,3]

As far as the Church is concerned, instructing its young members so that they can become Christians in fact as well as in name is a most important work. It is a most necessary way, if not the only way, of building up the People of God. [7:1] To support what to some might seem an inflated description of his work and that of his disciples, De La Salle cited the example of Jesus himself in this matter. Then he mentioned the commission he gave to his Apostles and which they carried after Pentecost, the work done by Peter, Paul, and all other apostles, and the work of various early Saints as well as of Saints and other holy people throughout the ages who esteemed this apostolate and devoted themselves to it. [7:1,2,3] From what has just been said, the Saint hoped that the Christian
teacher would perceive both the importance of this work as also what a great honor it is to be associated with all these individuals by being chosen by God to do this work for his Church. However, this call from God also imposes a number of obligations on the one who has been called by God. One of these is to become knowledgeable about what one has to teach, particularly the truths of the Christian religion. [7:1]

Another obligation of the Christian teacher resulting from his call from God is to become a cooperator or co-worker of Jesus. Basically this is required because, addressing his disciples, the Founder said:

All your care for the children entrusted to you would be useless if Jesus Christ himself did not give the power, the quality, and the energy that is needed to render your care useful. [3:3]

Then, recalling the parable of the vine and the branches, the Saint reminded them that only in and through Jesus and by His Spirit can they do the work of God and do it effectively. The more you are transformed by and with him, the more effective, he says, will you be doing this work. [3:3]

This is so, says the Founder, because of the nature of the work you are called to do. Though all have been redeemed by Jesus, the salvation of any individual, he reminds his disciples, requires that individual’s personal participation. So essentially the task of the Christian teacher is to lead each of his students willingly to seek to share in this salvation, something which is above all else a spiritual work. [3:1] Only a spiritual man or woman can hope to do this, as the Saint says:

…you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ…you must act as
representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you
and to receive your teaching as if he were teaching them…[3:2]

To do this the Christian teacher must frequently give himself “to the Spirit of Our Lord to
act only under his influence and not through any self-seeking.” [3:2] Or, to put it in other
words, could it not be said that an essential part of the mission of the Christian teacher is to
put on Jesus Christ by becoming holy and by striving toward Sainthood?

From the nature and importance of the mission of the Christian teacher stems his
obligation to have and to manifest a great zeal in his work. Here it might be good to recall
that for the Saint, zeal was the second aspect of the spirit of his Religious Institute,
associated with and flowing from its first spirit, the Spirit of Faith. [Règles Commune, II:
1,7] And as regards the Christian teacher and his mission, he says that “God demands that
you fulfill it with an ardent zeal… For this is the work of God and whoever does God’s
work carelessly is cursed.” [9:1]

Some visible results of this zeal will be the love the Christian teacher shows for his
work, the devotion he shows for the glory of God, and the desire he has to lead the
students from sin to salvation. His zeal will also lead him willingly and patiently to accept
the difficulties and sufferings resulting from his work, even making him willing to suffer
death itself in order to accomplish the task he has undertaken for God. [9: 1,2,3] In
addition, zeal will lead him to do all these things with a disinterestedness which seeks only
to accomplish God’s will in all things. [9:3] To put it another way, the Christian teacher
must desire to be a shepherd of souls, like the Good Shepherd of the Gospel. For De La
Salle this was a very important idea, one to which he returned a number of times,
particularly in his Méditations pour tous les dimanches. [M: 33, 56]

According to the Founder, the mission of the Christian teacher also requires him to become a visible Guardian Angel for his students. In keeping with his awareness of the nature of children and the obstacles to salvation which they encounter, De La Salle attached great importance to this aspect of the mission of the Christian teacher. [5: 1,3] Reflecting what he had said previously about the call to holiness the Christian teacher had received as well as the zeal which should inspire the teacher’s actions, the holy priest said that the one instructing youth must become in a sense like a Guardian Angel in order to fulfill this portion of his mission. [5:1] The teacher who accepts this call will easily recognize that instructing the children is only a good first step toward leading them to salvation, but cannot by itself lead them to become worthy Christians. In addition, they need help to avoid faults and to overcome the obstacles to their salvation so that they can practice what they have been taught and then live worthy Christian lives. Watching over the children as their visible Guardian Angel will make it possible and even easy for the Christian teacher to give them the good example and the direction they need to have. [5: 2,3]

Try as he may, a Christian teacher must accept the fact that he will not succeed all the time with all the children confided to his care. So, as the Founder reminds the teacher, in spite of his best efforts some of the young people will not only commit numerous faults but at times seem to enjoy following the bad inclinations which lead them to sin. Unchecked, such conduct can cause them to develop bad habits which will not easily be overcome in later life and thus become a cause of their eternal damnation. The Christian teacher therefore must respond to such action on their part by correcting them with
prudence as well as with gentleness and patience so as to lead them to live up to their Christian calling.  [11:2]  Because, while performing their functions in school, Christian teachers take the place of the fathers and the mothers of the children as well as of the pastors of the Church, their mission imposes on them a serious obligation to correct those under their care.  [11:1,3]  While doing so, the purpose of the teacher should be to correct the student, not simply to punish him for his misconduct.  [11:1]  In acting this way, the teacher should see himself as imitating both Jesus in his dealings with the Pharisees as also Paul in his response to certain faults of the early Christians of Corinth.  [11:1]  And among the things which should inspire the Christian teacher to heed this admonition of the Saint, “Be careful, then, not to allow considerable faults in them [the students] to go by without remedy,” [11:1]  would be an awareness that correcting the students is essential to his mission.  For, he says, God will ask the teacher to give a special account of how he has acted in this matter.  And the Saint then cites the example of the high priest Eli who was severely punished for failing to correct his sons as showing the importance God attaches to this matter.  [11:1,3]

In brief, then, the Christian teacher has been called by God to do an important work in and for the people of God, his Church.  The man or woman who accepts this mission and desires to live up to it must be a cooperator with Jesus Christ in the very work he did while on earth and wants us to continue in his place.  First and foremost, to be able to perform this mission effectively the Christian teacher must become holy, like Jesus Christ himself.  Then and then only will he be zealous in his work, knowledgeable about what he has to teach, and watchful over his charges, whom he will be able to teach by his example
as well as his words. Now, after one has accepted this mission, what is the ministry that results from this, or what the Christian teacher must do to accomplish the objectives Jesus has in view when he calls a man or woman to serve him and his Church in this special way?

Basically the ministry of the disciples of St. John Baptist de La Salle is a school ministry. He saw his co-workers as involved primarily in this apostolate when he wrote, “The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a Society in which profession is made of teaching school…” [Règles Communes, I: 1] The school ministry is given this importance because of what it makes possible and what the Saint hoped to accomplish through it. Without the availability of these educational institutions, De La Salle asserted that children, particularly those who were poor, would be neglected and allowed to run free. Idleness of this sort would not help them to develop any work skills, so that when they were old enough to work, to support themselves, and to contribute to the family, they would be unable to find any meaningful work and unwilling to work if they found any job opportunities. Rather it was more likely that having met and fallen under the influence of evil companions, they would have acquired bad habits which would be corrected only with great difficulty, if at all, in later life. [2:1; see also Règles Communes, I: 3-6] The Christian school can provide a remedy for these evils by serving as a place, if not the only place, available to such poor children where they can learn their religion along with such useful skills as reading, writing, and arithmetic which can help them become useful citizens of the state as well as worthy Christians. [1:1; see also M 160:3]

However, this educational institution must be more than a place where “children
be kept in school for most of the day and be kept busy.”  [2:2]  To say the least, De La Salle required the school to have quite specific goals towards which it was working. First and foremost, according to the Saint, it was to be a place in which the children are to be brought up in “the Christian spirit.”  To achieve this, first the students were to be led to avoid sin and to acquire virtue.  But also they were to be brought to pray at the designated times in school and in church – while behaving properly in these places, and to practice the teachings of their faith and the Gospel maxims necessary to salvation which they have been taught.  All of this the Saint summarized as their acquiring the Christian spirit which is opposed to that of the “world.”  [2:2,3]

Much has been said and written regarding the Founder’s success in his school work which contrasted so strikingly with the failure of a number of his predecessors and contemporaries.  And most of what has been said has centered on his work with the teachers, which simply reflects his idea that the teachers are the “key” to any well-run and effective school.  In this regard, what he wrote about “How to Make your Ministry Useful to the Church” presents a good example of his ideas on the importance of the Christian teacher as a person.  And to become the kind of teacher De La Salle desired to have in his school, he made it clear that an individual had to be knowledgeable particularly in the area of religion.  Prayer along with the reading and studying the truths of religion were for him first and basic steps in this process.  [8:1]

But the teacher was not to stop with knowing his religion, he was also to practice it by becoming a model of the Christian virtues he taught in view of leading the students in their turn to practice them.  [8:3]  For while directing and encouraging his students to lead a
Christian life in keeping with their age and situation, their teacher also had to show them how to do this. And if anything, his practice of these virtues is even more important that his teaching about them, for only his example will make his teaching effective. [8:2,3] In addition to this, and in spite of the Jansenist ideas so widely circulated and accepted at the time, De La Salle did not hesitate to suggest another means by which the Christian teacher could perform his ministry more effectively. This was through the reception of the Sacraments, which the Saint did not see as a reward for a good life but as a means of leading a good life. Therefore, he recommended that those students who had not yet received Confirmation be prepared to do so that they could receive this Sacrament. But above all, he recommended that all the students be well prepared to receive the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Then, once this had been done, they should be encouraged to receive these Sacraments regularly and even frequently. [8:2; see also M 56:3]

If according to the Founder, the positive side of the ministry of the Christian teacher is leading the students to live a Christian life, the negative side – equally necessary – is the destruction of sin in the lives of the children entrusted to his care. [10:1] Working toward this objective is to be a mark, if not one of the outstanding marks, of the zeal of the Christian teacher. And for this purpose, De La Salle seems to require an awareness and a knowledge on the part of the teacher. So, in spite of his emphasis in other places on how his disciples should flee from the “world” and avoid contact with it, [for example, see M 174:2,3 and M 182:1,2,3] the Saint seems to say that to be effective a Christian teacher must be aware of the conditions under which the children live, the temptations to which they are exposed, and the sins they can be led to commit along with the vices they can
acquire. Because he accurately perceives this situation, the Christian teacher can better work to lead the students from this evil and to practice the good opposed to it. Using some “modern” terminology, the Saint might be said to want the Christian teacher to “challenge” the society of which he and his students are a part and to promote a “counter culture” which rejects and opposes its way of life. [10:1,2] In matters such as this the Founder shows himself very relevant to us today.

Having made these points, the holy priest returns to one he had emphasized previously. He does so when he says:

Your zeal towards the children you teach would not go very far and would no have much result or success if it limited itself only to words. To be effective, your teaching must be supported by your example. This must be one of the chief characteristics of your zeal. [10:3]

Then he cites the example of the Apostle Paul as well of Jesus himself to support his statement. And showing his practical knowledge of child psychology he goes on to say:

…Example makes a much greater impression on the mind and heart than words. This is especially true of children, since they do not yet have sufficiently capacity for reflection, and ordinarily model themselves on the example of their teachers. They are led more readily to do what they see done for them than to carry out what they hear told to them, particularly when the words they hear are not in harmony with their actions. [10:3]

These words of the Founder might lead some people to recall the more recent and often quoted words of Pope Paul VI: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than he does to teachers, and if he listens to teachers it is only because they are witnesses.” At the
same time, these words might lead us to perceive more fully a fact mentioned previously, that the ministry of the Christian teacher assumes a personal striving for perfection, a quest for sanctity.

As indicated above, De La Salle saw the Christian teacher as a visible Guardian Angel of his students, and the zealous teacher would be ready to accept this role in regard to the young people entrusted to his care. To do this, first the teacher would have to prepare himself as fully as possible for his ministry. This preparation would begin with a serious study of the religious truths as well as of other things he had to teach the students and would be followed up by regular “up-dating” in his fields of teaching. But more important still, he would also become a man of prayer so as to learn from God himself what he was to teach the children about their Creator. [6:1] Then would he really be ready to share his knowledge of God with the students as a means of helping them to turn from the evil to which they are attracted and instead to do what is required so that they can lead Christian lives. In this way the students will be made aware of the sanctity to which as Christians they are called while being both helped and encouraged to strive toward it. [6:3] In this matter the Founder set high standards for the students while calling on his disciples to challenge these children to live up to them. But he did not underestimate the difficulty this might entail or what he was asking of his disciples. For he said, “Your zeal must go so far . . . that you are ready to give your very life . . . [for] the children entrusted to you.”

Also, according to the founder, the zeal of the Christian teacher was to manifest itself in a special way in the vigilance he showed with regard to his students. And one result of the vigilance inspired by this zeal could be the realization that some students
required correction as well as encouragement on his part. [6:2.4] As was emphasized when discussing the mission of the Christian teacher, De La Salle regarded correcting the students when circumstances required it as one of the most serious obligations of the teacher. [11:1,2,3] However, it can also be said that the Founder considered it equally important to administer correction only in the proper way.

For the holy priest, correcting a student had and must have only one purpose, leading the individual to turn from what was wrong and sinful to what was right and pleasing to God. Going even beyond this, by what he did in this situation the teacher should also aim to win over the student and lead him to correct himself. [12:2] As an example of such an effective correction, he cited that administered to King David by the prophet Nathan, which led the king to admit his fault and to mend his ways. [12:2,3] This teaches us, he said, that “It would be of little value to issue reproofs and corrections, if those giving them did not take the necessary steps to make them properly . . .” [12:1]

As we said previously, the starting point for any correction must be an awareness that the student is a reasonable human being who must be corrected accordingly. Because he perceives the student thus, the teacher will try to help the one who needs to be corrected. And to do this, first he must recollect himself so as to act only by God’s Spirit and with great wisdom. The he will find it possible to act justly, showing the student what is not proper in his conduct and what he needs to be corrected. At the same time, he will be prepared to administer a correction that is suitable to the fault in question, neither doing more or less that is appropriate. Also, before giving the correction he will be able to determine whether at this time the student is ready to accept the correction, or whether it
will be necessary to dispose the student to accept correction before administering it. Ideally, the student would be corrected only when he is ready to accept the corrections as the means by which God wants him to remedy the fault in question and avoid it in the future. [12:1] In all this the founder might sound as if he is to idealistic and asking too much of human nature, in the case of the teacher as well as of the student. On the other hand, his purpose might be present an ideal toward which the Christian teacher can strive – even if he does not achieve it on every occasion.

At the same time as he said these things, the Saint did insist that excessive zeal, impatience, anger, or any manifestations of annoyance or bad humor by the teacher would render correction ineffective and to no good purpose. And he went so far as to say that if the teacher felt himself being influenced by such emotions, he should defer the correction until he was able to administer in a manner that could help the student. [12:1,2,3] Having thus made the point that correcting a student while one is angry or while not keeping God in view only renders this action ineffective, De La Salle still said the teacher should not fear to correct a student if he was ready to do it properly. For then, said the holy priest, the correction could be effective, that is helpful to the one receiving it. At the same time, the teacher would be appreciated by those who saw him acting thus, even the student who was helped to improve his conduct as a result of the teacher’s action. On the contrary, though, those who failed to correct their students because at times it is an unpleasant task, or one that is difficult to do well, would be blamed even in this world for failing to do their duty. But more important still, they would be punished by God because of their failure in a very important aspect of their work. [12:1,3].
Now, before developing the two other ideas of the Saint which refer to both the mission and the ministry of the Christian teacher, it might be good to re-state in a few word his main ideas regarding the ministry. Essentially, the ministry of the Christian teacher is to be exercised in a school setting. There the students are to be taught the Christian faith as well as various secular subjects. Religious instruction is to be giver priority since the primary objective of the school is to lead the students to live Christian lives. In addition to this instruction, the teacher will also strive to achieve his goal by means of his good example. And at the same time, the zeal which inspires the teacher will make him vigilant in regard to his students so as to help them avoid any wrong doing. However, this vigilance will also make the teacher aware of when it is necessary to correct a student while his zeal will dispose him to do it efficaciously. Briefly, these are the more important elements of the difficult but necessary ministry of the Christian teacher as set forth by St. John Baptist de la Salle.

The high opinion which the Saint had of this ministry might explain at times he seems unable to praise the work of the Christian teacher adequately. Example of how on occasion he seemed to be carried away regarding this matter are when he wrote:

. . . look upon this work entrusted to you . . . as one of the most important and most necessary . . . in the church. For you lay the foundation for the building of the church when you instruct children . . . [7:1]

Or again when he asserted:

. . . you must have an altogether special esteem for the Christian education and teaching of children, since it is the means of helping them become true children of God and citizens of heaven. Such teaching is the very foundation
and support of their religion and of all the other good that takes place in the
church. [7:3]

And he even describes it as the preferred work of Jesus himself when he said: “. . .
teaching was the first ministry Jesus Christ gave his holy apostles.” [7:2] But just as the
Son of God, when he returned to heaven had entrusted this priority task to humans, he
continues still to do so, for “God diffuse the fragrance of His knowledge throughout the
world by human ministers,” and those so called should look upon themselves “. . . as the
ministers of God and the administrators of His mysteries.” [1:1] Taken together, all these
statements seem to justify his conclusion, “ This Institute is very necessary . . .” [Règales
communes (1717), I,4]

However, at the same time the Founder cautioned those so honored by not
hesitating to state, “ . . . this is the work of God and whoever does God’s work carelessly
is cursed.” [9:1] And the seriousness of the account this task involves is described thus:

This is what St. Paul brings to your attention, when he says that those
who have been made leaders of others must render an account for them to
God. He does not say that will render an account of their own souls, but of
the souls of those for whom they responsible, . . . [13:2]

Both of the last statements can serve as an excellent introduction to what the Saint had to
say regarding the account the Christian teacher must be prepared to render to God.

The basis for this account, says the founder, is that first and foremost Christian
teachers “are co-workers with God in His work,” and “He is the One Who has given you
the ministry your exercise.” Therefore, when “you appear before the judgment seat of Jesus
Christ, . . . you will give an account . . . of what you have done as a minister of God and
This is true to such extent that “On the day of judgment you will answer for them [your students] as much as you answer for yourself,” and “God will begin by making you give an account of your own . . .” [13:2] This is so, said the Saint, because children are at once valuable and precious in God’s sight as well as vulnerable and easily led to do wrong and endanger their salvation. [13:3]

Now, what is the nature of the account the Christian teacher must give and with what it is concerned? Aware of the talent God has given him, as well as of the mission and ministry which God has entrusted him, the teacher must be prepared to use his talents, employing them to the fullest in his apostolate. And he must expect to render an account to God regarding both whether he has used the talents given him as also how well he has used to them. [13:1]

One of the most important ways in which the teacher is to use his talent is in instructing his students in the Christian faith, a work most necessary for building up the Church. [13:3] Doing this well will require that the teacher become the type of person who can and will do God’s work, among other things becoming a person who is very zealous to do God’s work. One sign of this zeal would be how the teacher strove to acquire and to practice such suitable virtues as wisdom, seriousness, self-control, and a readiness to spend himself in his work. [14:3] At the same time he had to relate properly with the students, not favoring the “rich” or those naturally more attractive over the “poor” or those less attractive, humanly speaking. Also, relating properly with the students would require the teacher to avoid any familiarity with any of them. Conduct such as this would be easier, said the Saint, if the teacher was inspired by and acted only in view of God, not for any
human motives. So becoming a suitable instrument for doing God’s work would require the Christian teacher to develop and to act only through motives such as these. And naturally, all of these things would be covered in the account God would demand of the Christian teacher. [14:1,3]

Instructing the students being such as important part of the teacher’s work, evidently it required careful preparation on the part of the one doing it. And this applied not just to the religion lesson, but to all the subjects taught. To do this the teacher would have to make good use of the time available for preparing his lessons, all of them. Particularly, such careful preparation would help him to give a religion lesson suitable in every way to the students, keeping in mind their age living conditions, and so on. And once again, the one entrusted with this mission and ministry had to be prepared to render an account to God as to how had done all these things. [14:1]

However, the Founder recognized that a knowledge of their religion by itself would not make the students into true disciples of Jesus Christ. Then had to practice what they had been taught, with the teacher leading and encouraging them in this practice of their Christian faith. What had been accomplished here would be quite evident when one observed how the students recited their prayers, assisted at Mass, and received the Sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist. So how well the teacher had led his students to practice their religion would also form a part of the account he would have to render to God. [14:1]

But the Christian teacher could not stop with showing the students what to do and encouraging them to do it. He also had to observe then vigilantly, seeing both what they did and how well they did it. In this matter the Saint was very demanding. For him this was a
full-time job requiring the teacher to observe the students in church and as far as possible outside of school as well as when they were in school. And he said that any teacher who was negligent in any of these matters should expect to have a serious account to render to God for such failings on his part. [14:2] From this duty of vigilance, he added, would naturally follow that of correction. For if the students were not living the Christian faith they had been taught, the teacher who was aware of this situation would have an obligation to correct their feelings in a proper and effective manner. Already it has been noted how serious the Saint considered this matter to be and what account he said a teacher would have to render if he failed in his duty. [11:1]

At this time it might be good to make another point regarding the account the Christian teacher would have to render to God which the founder did not fail to include in his discussion of the topic. To begin with, all that has been said up to now regarding this subject might seem very negative and even quite discouraging. If we stopped here, that would only be too true – while also misrepresenting the Founder’s total thinking in this topic. For De La Salle had several helpful suggestion for the Christian teacher who might have become so fearful regarding this matter as even to abandon this mission and ministry rather than to expose himself to such an accounting before God. For one, he encouraged the teacher to acquit himself well, as well as possible, of these duties, working as hard as he can to procure the salvation of the pupils entrusted to him. If you act this, he said, you will have little reason to fear the judgment of God in this matter. [13:3] At the same time, he encouraged a process of regular an even daily examination on the part of the teacher, a serious seeking after self-knowledge. The purpose of this, he said, was for the teacher to
become aware of and to correct those faults which could detract from the quality of his work and thus expose of him to a severe judgment on the part of God [13:1; 14:1] Positive ideas such as these are evident as any negative or threatening ones in what the Saint wrote about the account the Christian teacher would have to give to God.

But more important still, the Saint did not end his lengthy and profound discussion of the mission and the ministry of the Christian teacher on a negative note. On the contrary, his conclusion is very positive. The titles of the last two meditations in this series are, “The Reward that Those Can Expect Even in This Life Who Have Taught Children and Fulfilled This Duty Well,” and the “The Reward that a Brother of Christian Schools [the Christian teacher] Can Expect in Heaven if He is Faithful in His Ministry,” These two meditations are unique among the Saint’s writings, both because of the ideas they contain and the manner in which he expresses them.

He begins the former meditation with this statement, “God is so good that he does not leave unrewarded the good work that is done for Him and the service that is rendered to Him especially for the salvation of souls . . even in this world.” [15:1] Then, basing himself on the parable of the talents as found in Matthew and Luke, De La Salle says the reward of the Christian teacher will have two aspects – an abundance of grace and an extended ministry with a greater facility for accomplishing it. Also, the Saint says that accepting this task for God and doing it well assures the salvation of the teacher himself. [15:1] But in addition, even in this world the Christian teacher has the happiness of seeing God well served by his pupils, both while they are in school and afterwards when they become good citizens of the state as well as good Christians by living according to the teachings of their
faith. The awareness of how he helped bring this about will contribute to the happiness which is a part of the teacher’s reward in this life. [15:2,3]

When discussing the reward reserved for the Christian teacher in heaven, De La Salle uses the quotation from the Book of Daniel, “Those who instruct many in Christian justice will shine like stars for all eternity. (Dn 12:3)” [16:2] But before that he asserted,

. . . your happiness in heaven will be greater than what will be enjoyed by those who have worked only for their own salvation. It will, in fact, be much greater in proportion to the number of children you have taught and won over to God. [16:1; see also 16:3]

And taking a very positive view, the Saint said that on the day of judgment the children the Christian teacher has instructed well and to their profit will be the source of his glory. [16:1]

Developing this idea still further, he said that the Christian teacher will have the happiness of seeing many of his former students in heaven while perceiving how he helped make this possible. And he even pictures the teacher and his former students holding a happy reunion in the presence of God Himself. [16:2] Then the Founder describes in a very touching way how the Christian teacher who might have been fearful because of the account he would have to render to God because of the mission given to him and the ministry he undertook will find that his fears were unfounded. For the presence of God he will have joy of hearing those whom he led to heaven reminding Jesus of the good their teacher had done for them. The Saint then concludes saying:

All of them will join in asking Jesus Christ to grant you a favorable judgment, praying him not to delay in putting you in possession of the happiness you procured for them by your work and concern. [16:3]
Because the Founder finished on such a note it is possible to conclude this study as follows. De La Salle did not understate the importance of the mission of the Christian teacher. He gave it an important role in building up of the People of God while also stressing the great demand it makes on the one who accepts this mission. Likewise, he clearly indicated the difficulty of the ministry flowing from it, a ministry calling for a great zeal on the part of the teacher, which would be manifested in the instruction, the vigilance, the good example, and the prayer it would require of him. Because this work is so important for God and his Church, it had to be done well, and whoever devoted himself or herself to this task would have to answer to God for how well this ministry has been carried out. But at the same time, a Christian teacher who lived up to this calling could expect a great reward even this life and more so in the next. Thus, if the holy priest challenged the Christian teacher to become very holy, even a Saint, so as to fulfill this ministry properly, at the same time he promised a great reward to whoever responded to this challenge. So on the one hand the Founder called on his disciples to lead and encourage their students to achieve the holiness they could and should attain. At the same time, though, he sought to show his disciple how they might best perform these tasks while trying in every way possible to encourage them to do their work as well as they could in view of the reward it would merit for them.

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