

SAINT DE LA SALLE – PATRON OF TEACHERS

When, in 1950, Pope Pius XII responded to the suggestion that teachers all over the world should have their own patron saint, one whose life and example would inspire them in their daily work among children and young people, he offered them one of the great pioneers of education, a Frenchman, Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

At the time when only privileged children, whose parents could afford to pay fees, went to school, he made it possible for boys, whose parents were struggling poor, to receive basic instruction in schools where reading, writing and arithmetic were taught, and a good Christian education provided. But, much more than this, he saw how necessary it was to have competent teachers, and spent his life providing them. In doing so, he became the father of teacher training and the founder of a teaching Order, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, now generally called De La Salle Brothers. He was not an academic theorist, but a practical organiser.

His gentleness and sensitivity came from the refined upbringing he enjoyed in the cosy atmosphere of a loving family, sufficiently well-off to be insulated from the hardships of the seventeenth century, and intensely Christian in its understanding of life. His father was a magistrate of the Presidial Court of Rheims; his mother, as can be imagined, loving and busy, with seven children to care for; she was of the Moët family, a name that evokes vineyards and champagne. They lived near Rheims Cathedral in a mansion called "La Cloche", which happily has survived the bombings of wars.

He had the privilege of a good education during his eight years at the "College Des Bons Enfants", which might be translated "School for young Gentlemen", a short walking-distance from home. A few months before he left school, not yet sixteen, he was made a Canon of the Rheims Cathedral Chapter, with a healthy benefice to cover his training for the priesthood.

Many might be surprised to hear De La Salle called the father of teacher-training. Before his day, and even stretching back to medieval times, the idea of preparing teachers for their work had been considered. But these were simply armchair considerations, and, of course, with classical pupils in mind, not children of working-class parents. No one had given a real thought to training teachers for Charity Schools.

De La Salle saw clearly that the children who came to Charity Schools simply had to have good teachers or the whole purpose of these schools would lose its meaning. In his practical way, he started with the schoolmasters in Rheims. They were as raw as could be imagined. Blain, a writer, and friend of De La Salle, describes some of them as "illiterate men, without education, without ability to express themselves, without manners, incapable of conversing agreeably..." De La Salle rented a house for them and gave them meals in his own home. He drew up a daily timetable for them, with morning and night prayer said together. He helped them to educate themselves, gave them much of his time, joined them for meals, and encouraged them in their work. They were laymen, family men, interested in making a career out of teaching. After one year De La Salle brought a house for them and moved in himself. There he trained them to teach young children. It was a residential teaching centre. They emerged as trained teachers, prepared and able to face a class of boys, and handle them effectively.

Some of them resolved to make education in schools for the poor, not only their life's work, but their life's mission, and to set about it, not as individuals, but as a group, as a Community of Brothers, with vows and a distinctive dress. From this Community a world-wide Religious Order of teaching Brothers developed. Others sought employment on their own. Of these, De La Salle wrote: "they remain one or two years until they are taught singing, reading and writing thoroughly. They have full board and lodging and laundry. They are then placed in a village school for a period of probation, and, once they are employed they have no further connection with the community apart from friendly contact. They do not wear any special dress and so are not distinguished from other people..."

Word soon spread that De La Salle had set up a centre where men were being trained as teachers for Charity Schools, and that a Community of Teaching Brothers was available to staff them. What was interesting, was the growing idea of teachers being trained together under the guidance of a responsible person, and the concept of a number of schools having a reserve of schoolmasters to serve them. Almost cer-

tainly, they were the first group of lay people ever to be specifically trained to teach. The venture is an important landmark in the history of education, and this establishment can well claim to be the world's first teacher training institution. There were two others founded by De La Salle, some years later, both in Paris, one in the parish of St Hippolyte in 1699, the other at St Denis in 1709. Both had schools attached where the students in training could do their teaching practice under supervision. There they learned from experienced Brothers how to manage a class, the value of quiet in the classroom, how to ensure it gently, how to teach the basic subjects, how to maintain discipline and yet maintain a happy classroom atmosphere, how to teach the boys their religion and encourage them to pray, how to encourage them to be well-mannered and polite. These teaching-tips were eventually put together and published in the "Conduite des Ecoles", or School Management.

"La Conduite des Ecoles" is, and will always be, one of the great educational classics of all time. Its place among them is assured, not only by the practical topics it discusses, but because it appeared so early, in 1705, when the Charity School movement was just beginning to win sympathy and attract benefactors. The title is not easily translated into English. It is to do with running schools for boys of junior age, roughly 6 to 11, but it is not so much to do with the administrative running of schools as with practical matters of the classroom. The author is De La Salle himself. But he would be the first to admit that the content was gleaned from the thoughts of other writers and particularly from his own Brothers' experience. He wrote it, not for the general public, but for his hard-working Brothers. He was thoroughly acquainted with actual classroom conditions and the problems of teaching lively boys of varying ability, and inability. He offered practical answers to practical problems at a time when contemporary writers expounded their theories in general terms. This is what makes the book a classic.

De La Salle devoted his life to educating boys from the poorer families of France, and was personally responsible for founding around thirty schools for them up and down the country. This is an impressive record on its own. Yet, though the general demand, at the time, was for basic instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic and catechism, he went further, when the need arose. In Calais and Boulogne he set up maritime schools where seamanship was taught. In Paris, at the request of King James II of England, he started a school for the sons of Irish soldiers and friends who had followed him into exile. In Rouen, he founded a boarding school, St Yon, for the sons of the rising middle class, whose future careers were likely to be in

commerce and industry, and who therefore needed a practical form of education which the classical schools could not provide. Besides the basic subjects, the school taught geometry and architecture and draughtsmanship. Later a more comprehensive curriculum evolved. In 1867, the Government Report to the Corps Legislatif referred to St Yon: "It is to De La Salle that France owes, if not the original idea, at least the first working establishment and a prototype of secondary technical instruction. From the first attempt there emerged a teaching which, if it had been generalised, would have advanced by a whole century, the organisation of specialised education".

School discipline at St Yon was excellent, so much so, that parents sought to solve their family problems by sending their difficult sons to board there. De La Salle met the challenge with extra supervision, even arranging for these boys to have their meals with the Community. His success impressed Camus de Pontcarre from the Municipality who persuaded De La Salle to do something for delinquents. The outcome was a centre where youths, who were bound over by the magistrates, were boarded, and schooled in the basic subjects, and given a practical course in horticulture and farming.

The name De La Salle is symbolic of all that is enterprising, practical and caring in Christian education. His fame is timeless and international, his dedication and humility universally acclaimed. A teacher, a trainer of teachers, founder of a Religious Order of teachers, and now the Universal Patron Saint of Teachers.

Brother Charles Gatt

Prayer

In your providence, Lord God,
You chose St John Baptist De La Salle
to educate the young in Christian faith.
Raise up, Lord, in the church of today
teachers who will devote themselves wholeheartedly
to the human and Christian education
of our children and young people.

In your providence, Lord God,
you chose St John Baptist De La Salle
to be the Patron Saint of Teachers.
May we,, who teach, be inspired by our Patron,
to live completely in your love,
and bring our children to know and love you truly.