

A Day in a Charity School of “The Splendid Century” June 1994

Among French institutions that suffered during the “Wars of Religion” which ravaged the country after 1562 were the charity schools for poor children. When around 1590 peace was restored under Henry IV, many school buildings no longer existed. In other areas it was impossible to raise money to support any surviving poor schools or to find teachers to staff them. (Rigault: 15). However, the restoration of peace also brought the full flowering of the Catholic Reform in France, one aspect of which was renewed interest in the Christian education of the poor. Under Louis XIII (1610-1643) and Louis XIV (1643-1715), Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul, Cardinal de Richelieu, Grignon de Montfort, M. Olier, Charles Demia, and John Baptist de la Salle, among others, launched a veritable crusade to found schools for the poor. (Rigault: 24; Barnard: 1; Daniel – Rops: 337-40) One of the biggest problems facing these educationists was the lack of qualified teachers, a situation La Salle did most to remedy. In addition to opening some twenty or thirty schools for poor boys and making basic changes in their curriculum and methods of instruction, he also founded a Catholic teaching order – the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools – to insure an adequate supply of trained teachers for his schools. During the latter part of the “Splendid Century,” from about 1680 to 1719, these religious educators taught school with great success in Paris, Avignon, Chartres, Rouen as well as other French cities. (Blain: I, 370-73, 380-83, 389-98; II, 11-14, 17-23, 45-49, 50-55). At the same time, though, if certain of La Salle’s ideas and practices signal him out as a pioneer of modern popular education, his schools were quite different from the elementary schools of today. This fact will become quite apparent as this paper describes a typical day in one of these educational institutions.

If during the seventeenth century children of “better” families had ample enough educational opportunities children of the working class and the poor did not. (Barnard: 3-5, Leaud and Glay: I, 140) La Salle sought to remedy this deficiency by opening schools for the “poor” – youths deprived of the goods of this world and often more unfortunate still from a moral point of view. Some of these young people had been abandoned from a very early age by their parents, both of whom had to work. Growing up in the slums of the larger urban centers, there they learned every kind of vice. Uninstructed in secular subjects as well as their religion, later in life they could not find any honest employment – if they were interested in doing so. At the same time, they acquired bad habits, which it was difficult if not impossible for them to correct in their later years. Removing these children from the streets and giving them some instruction was basic to remedying these evils. (LaSalle 1718: 2; Mongredien; 29-30, 36, 120, 131, 150; Blain: I, 32-33, 42, 45-46, 287) Such was the background of the students in La Salle’s schools and a factor, which influenced many aspects of these institutions.

A second factor influencing the operation of these schools was the buildings in which classes were held. Usually they had not been designed or built for educational purposes, but for use as residences, stores or workshops. Seldom were any major alterations made when such a structure became a school. (Rigault: 35, 57, 59-60) This could create problems for masters and students alike, when, for instance, it was impossible for pupils to enter or leave their classroom without passing through another room where a lesson was being given. Then the teachers had to exert considerable effort to avoid noise and confusion during school time. (D’Haese: 8) Depending on the size of its enrollment, a Christian school had from two to six such classrooms, each containing

numerous pupils who required instruction on at least two and sometimes more level. (D'Haese: 23, 26-27, 250-51, 319)

These classrooms were sparsely furnished and almost austere in appearance. The teacher had no desk, only a chair, and during school time he was required to remain at his place, either sitting or standing. Basic furniture for the use of pupils was rows of benches. Also, every classroom had one or more teaching aids, such as charts containing the alphabet, the vowels, syllables, maxims to be copied during penmanship lessons, and the rules for simple arithmetical operations. Large enough to be seen at some distance, each chart was fastened to the wall near the benches destined for those students who used it. Rooms in which penmanship was taught had tables for writers which contained a number of irremovable lead ink wells, so spaced that each could serve two pupils. These rooms also contained one or more cabinets for storing the pupils' paper and the models from which they copied when these were not being used. A crucifix and pictures of the Most Blessed Virgin, St. Joseph, and the Guardian Angel were the only decorative objects in each room. Finally, a small hand bell used to indicate the times for prayers during the day completed the furnishings. (D'Haese: 28-30, 39, 48-52, 71, 299-300, 304).

All the teachers in La Salle's schools were members of his religious order, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Its distinctive trait then as now was its non-clerical character, and its members called themselves "Freres" or "Brothers." To safeguard these religious from the temptation to become priests and then abandon their work in the schools, La Salle forbade them to learn or to teach formal Latin grammar, or to make any use of Latin if they were familiar with this language. (La Salle 1718: 1-2, 71) Their primary apostolate was to conduct charity schools for poor boys, mainly on the

elementary level. To make it possible for these youths to attend their schools, they taught gratuitously, receiving neither tuition nor gifts from the pupils or their parents. Since teaching of itself is not an apostolate, the Brothers were to make it one by the spirit of faith with which they approached and performed this task, and by the end they had in view in their work, the Christian formation of the youth entrusted to their care. (La Salle 1718: I 4-5, 12-13, 14)

During “the Splendid Century” the only secular subjects taught in elementary schools were reading of Latin, writing, and basic arithmetic. At the same time, in keeping with the spirit of the age, all elementary as well as secondary education was decidedly religiously oriented. (Barnard: 2; Leaud et Glay: 103; Compayre: I, 237) As their program from other charity schools of his time:

They [the Brothers] shall teach the students to read, 1st, French, 2nd Latin, 3rd. letters written by hand, and to write. They will also teach them spelling and arithmetic, all as is prescribed in the First part of the Conduct of the Schools. They shall, however, make it their first and principal care to teach their students the morning and evening prayers, the Pater, the Ave, the Credo, and the Confiteor, and the same prayers, in French, the Commandments of God and of the Church, the responses for Holy Mass, the Catechism, the duties of a Christian, and the Maxims and practices which our Lord left us in the Holy Gospel...

On school days the Brothers will conduct the students to Holy Mass at a nearby church and at a convenient hour. (La Salle 1718: 12-13)

The only important change here was teaching the pupils to read French first and, only after they had learned French proficiently, to read Latin. But this did not include the teaching of formal Latin grammar, only the correct reading and pronunciation of this language. And once decided upon, this carefully thought out innovation became an essential feature of the Christian Schools. (Rigault: 306, 587; Blain: I 374-76)

Reading was the “key” subject taught in La Salle’s schools, and a student’s reading ability determined his standing or grade level. First, pupils learned the alphabet and how to read syllables. Next after mastering a number of readers of increasing difficulty, pupils learned to read manuscripts written in long hand. On each level, depending on their progress, pupils were rated as beginners, average or advanced. Proficiency in reading also determined a student’s admission to writing and arithmetic classes. (D’ Haese 22-32, 44-45, 47, 72, 97)

La Salle’s most important innovation was replacing the individual method then in vogue in all elementary schools by the simultaneous method long in use in secondary schools and the universities. (Rigault: 35, 57, 69-60) Use of this method was prescribed thus:

They [the Brothers] shall pay continual attention to three things in school. 1st, during the lessons to correct all the words which the student who is reading pronounces incorrectly, 2nd, to make all those who read at one time follow in the same lesson, 3rd, to have the students keep silence exactly during all the time of school.

They shall teach all their students according to the method which is prescribed and which is universally practiced in the Institute and they shall not change anything in it or introduce anything new into it. (La Salle 1718: 12).

The individual method had at least two major disadvantages. It seriously limited the number of pupils one teacher could instruct. At the same time, since the other pupils had little or nothing to do while waiting for their turns, often they became disorderly. By adapting the simultaneous method to primary education, La Salle made it possible for each of his disciples to instruct relatively large numbers of students. Among other things, this reduced the number of teachers required for the charity schools. At the same time, it

also eliminated one cause of many of the disorders in these schools. (Rigault: 578-80) Two important characteristics of La Salle's school were their high pupil-teacher ration – a result of his adoption of the simultaneous method of instruction – and the relatively short time many of the pupils spent in school. (Blain: I, 375; II, 251-57, 4*-95*; D'Haese: 51-52) To keep this schools true to their purpose and to help maintain the order that was essential if teaching and learning were to take place there, La Salle minutely prescribed what was to be done in them and at what time. He set forth these regulations in the Conduct and the Common Rules, where he insisted that no change was to be made in the exercises of the school day or the method of performing them, and that nothing new or different was to be introduced into the curriculum or the daily schedule. (D'Haese: 5; La Salle 1718: 12) The only latitude allowed the headmaster of a school was when the number of pupils reading or reciting daily in one section or sub-division in the same room was very small or extremely large. To make sure there was no waste of time on one hand, or, on the other, that all the students had a change to read or recite everyday, the time assigned to their lessons could be shortened or lengthened accordingly. (D' Haese: 23, 260) With this single exception, uniformity in the sequence of lessons and the time devoted to each was the order of the day in all the schools.

As La Salle insisted frequently and most emphatically, the primary purpose of his schools was the Christian education of their students. To do this required first giving the boys a rudimentary knowledge of their Catholic religion, and then leading them to live according to its teachings. (La Salle 1718: 2; La Salle 1922: 641-42, 643-44, 388, 489, 562-63, 231, 673, 323, 698, 208). While influencing everything connected with the schools, this goal had a special effect on their teacher-pupil relations. To begin with, the

Brother was required to have a real and deep affection for his pupils as a group and for each individually. Without becoming familiar or improperly affectionate towards them, he was to manifest real interest in and concern for his “scholars.” (La Salle 1718: 14) In addition, he was to set the tone for his classroom by the manner in which he conducted himself there. He was to inspire his pupils to keep silence and act in a modest and serious manner in school by his own good example. Particularly during prayer time was he to influence the conduct of his students by this means. Finally, his careful supervision of the pupils at all times and in all situations was to help them to do what was required of them throughout the school day. (D’ Haese: 24, 118, 123; La Salle 1718: 12, 17-18)

While emphasizing the affection his disciples were to show their pupils and how they were to inspire them to practice virtue by their good example, La Salle recognized that the size of their classes and the background of the students created a need for discipline in his schools, and that at times a master would have to correct his pupils. With all, though, he stressed using positive means rather than negative ones such as correction to establish and maintain order in his schools. (D’ Haese: 117) In connection with this, La Salle regarded silence on the part of masters and pupils alike as basic to any order in a school. So here he desired the Brothers to take the lead, directing and controlling their classes through signs rather than words, so as to create an atmosphere of silence which would be conducive to work. (D’ Haese: 125; La Salle 1718: 19-20) Other positive means the Founder suggested were knowledge of the students by their master, a judicious use of rewards for achievement, assigning many routine classroom tasks to the students, regular attendance by all students, and consistency on the part of the

teacher in his dealings with the young people, and constant vigilance on the part of each Brother. (D' Haese: 117, 145)

La Salle regarding correcting the pupil's faults as a necessary compliment of this vigilance over the students. This correction, he indicated, could take several forms, a verbal admonition, a task to be performed, or physical punishment. (D'Haese: 148) Correction, especially physical, was a last resort, and when administering it the master was to be disinterested, just, moderate, unemotional, prudent, and silent. The student on his part was to accept it willingly, respectfully and quietly. (La Salle 1718: 16-17; D' Haese: 153, 155-159) The Founder desired to avoid the extreme physical punishments for which many contemporary schools had become notorious. Also, to avoid doing more harm than good, he forbade the Brothers to punish their students during prayer time or the religion lesson. (D' Haese: 83-84) If these measures, then regarded as relatively moderate, failed, La Salle desired that rather than inflict more extreme punishments, the Headmaster would expel the offending student from the school – both for his own good and that of his fellow pupils. (D' Haese: 148)

The morning session in one of La Salle's Christian schools usually lasted three hours, from 8:00 A.M. to 11:00 A.M. Interestingly the Brothers who taught in many a school were among the last or even the last to arrive there. For it was a pupil entrusted with this important task who unlocked the school building at 7:30 A.M. Other students were admonished not to arrive before this time as well as not to make loud or unnecessary noise while entering the building or going to their respective classrooms. Students had a half hour to assemble, and once a student was in the building he was to remain quietly in his place, studying his religion or some other lesson. An older and

reliable pupil, chosen by the Brother in charge, saw that these regulations were observed. Some time before 8:00 A.M. the Brothers, who lived away from the school, arrived together, and each went directly to his classroom. When the teacher entered the room, all pupils arose respectfully and remained standing until he sat down. Then they sat down and continued to study quietly while the master supervised this activity and occupied himself by reading the New Testament. (D' Haese: 7-11) When a pupil was admitted to the Christian Schools, he and his parents were told that neither tardiness nor absences on his part – except rarely and for good reasons – would be tolerated. Pupils repeatedly tardy or absent were expelled, and those with excused absences or tardiness were denied promotion to advanced sections. This insistence on exact and prompt attendance usually assured that at the designated time all pupils would be in their places, ready to begin the school day. (D' Haese: 9-10)

At 8:00 A.M., as the school clock struck the hour, a pupil in each room began ringing a hand bell, and all the other students knelt by their places and folded their arms. When the bell stopped ringing, the prayer leader in each room began morning prayer in which all the other students then joined. (D' Haese: 11) Immediately after prayer the students are breakfast together in the classroom. This consisted of some bread which each boy was required to bring to school everyday, and which was to be eaten only at this time. During the meal study continued. Certain students recited various prayers, or responses from the catechism which were being covered during this week's lessons. Hearing these repeated at this time helped the other pupils to commit them to memory. (D' Haese" 12-14) Taking breakfast together had a dual purpose, teaching the students good manners and leading them to practice charity. Each master supervised his charges

very carefully while they were eating, and when necessary showed them how to do so properly and in a polite way. Toward the end of the meal, a boy who had any bread left over could put this in a basket passed around by the student collector of alms, who then gave it to those boys who had nothing or very little to eat. Voluntary giving of alms taught these poor students both to practice charity towards others even less well-off than themselves while doing this in a proper if restrained manner. For the Brother was to make certain a boy had had enough to eat before he was allowed to give any of his bread as alms. (D' Haese: 13, 19-21).

Around 8:30 A.M., master and pupils began the reading lesson, which as a rule lasted until 10:00 a.m. In the Christian Schools students learning to read were divided into nine groups, those learning the alphabet, those learning syllables, those learning to read by syllables, those learning to spell while reading, those who could read without spelling, those who had mastered all the mechanics of reading, those reading Latin, those reading the book of Christian Politeness, and those reading letters written by hand. Pupils on several different levels, but not necessarily on all levels, would be found in a single classroom. Students in the first two groups all read together, while those in more advanced groups formed different sections. Depending on his proficiency, a student in groups three to seven was classified as a beginner, average, or advanced. Students in group eight were divided into two sections, those in group nine, into six sections. During the reading lessons the Brother watched to make sure the pupil reading pronounced words distinctly and correctly. Emphasis was on acquiring the skills required to move up to a higher level of work, not just on completing an assignment or a course. (D'Haese: 22-23, 32-34).

Students who had learned to read French perfectly next learned to read Latin out loud by reading the Psalter or collection of psalms. These pupils were not taught formal Latin grammar, a subject which probably most of the Brothers were not prepared to teach, but only how to pronounce the words correctly. The most advanced students read from the book of Christian Civility, which was printed in special Gothic characters to resemble handwriting, and from manuscripts written by hand. La Salle established uniformity in the reading lessons on all levels by indicating how many lines or pages students on a given level were to read each day. This helped the Brother in charge of a school to determine how long it would take the pupils on a particular level to complete their daily reading lesson. Under this system, only relatively few of the students in a classroom would be actually engaged in reading at any given time. How then did the others occupy themselves while not reading? Advanced readers who were in formal penmanship classes used this time to practice writing, devoting at least one hour every morning to this subject. Less advance readers used this time to study their other lessons by copying material they were supposed to commit to memory. (D' Haese: 34, 37, 44-46, 52-53, 237)

When the reading lessons ended at 10:00 A.M., the Brothers then prepared to conduct their charges to a nearby church for Holy Mass. Before leaving, teachers and pupils concluded the morning class session by reciting some prayers together. Then under the supervision of the Brothers they boys filed from the school in a quiet and orderly fashion and proceeded to church. If at all possible Mass began at 10:30 A.M. If there was no Mass available at this time in a church located conveniently close to the school, the students would be taken to Mass at an earlier time. In this case the reading

lesson would be interrupted when it was time to go to church and resumed when the pupils returned to the school. Then shortly before 11:00 A.M. the Brother would end this lesson, have the students recite their pre-dinner prayers, and dismiss them from the morning session (D' Haese: 85, La Salle 1718: 13).

Daily Mass was not just a religious exercise integrated into the school day, it was the high point of the morning session, and its proper performance was a matter which received the most careful attention. Having left the school in a proper fashion, the pupils proceeded to church, took their assigned places, and tried to participate in this liturgical act in a becoming manner. Those who could read followed the prayers of the Mass with the priest, while those who couldn't recite the rosary during this time. The Brothers supervised the pupils and their activities most carefully, sparing no effort to have all things done in a fitting manner. When Mass was over, the pupils quietly left the church in an orderly manner. (D' Haese: 87-93)

Following the midday break, the school building was reopened at 1:00 P.M. just as it had been opened at 7:30 A.M. During the next half hour the students returned and reentered the school building as they had done earlier in the day. Then, sometime before 1:30 P.M., each Brother arrived in his classroom and occupied himself as he had done prior to the morning session. At 1:30 P.M. prayers were said and the afternoon session began. The last lesson of the afternoon, religion, began at 3:30 P.M. in winter and at 4:00 P.M. at other times, so usually there was a two or two and a half hour period for other lessons. The most important lesson taught during this time was writing, though on some days time was devoted to reading or arithmetic. As during the morning session,

pupils not following a specific lesson at a given time occupied themselves by copying material to be committed to memory. (D' Haese: 11, 23, 52, 78, 96).

Instruction in arithmetic, the first lesson given in the afternoon on days when it was taught, took several forms. First, students learned to read both Roman and Arabic numbers. Second they learned **the basic rules for simple arithmetical operations.** **Third, they learned** addition, subtraction, multiplication and division by performing these operations. Since this subject required writing skill, only those who had made progress in writing took arithmetic. Usually this lesson lasted a half hour on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, ending around 2:00 P.M. At other times and on other days, however, pupils spent some time copying the rules of arithmetic they were learning and using (D' Haese: 40-41, 71, 72, 74-75).

After 2:00 P.M. more advanced students had their formal instruction in reading Latin or French and then busied themselves in writing. During this time less advanced students read for a second time. Students learning to write were promoted to more advanced sections as they became more skillful in this subject. La Salle regarded writing as a basic subject, specifying that two hours a day were to be devoted to it, even if this required abridging the time of other lessons or omitting them entirely on certain days. Quality, however, was always placed over quantity. So while a student was required to copy two pages a day, the Founder insisted that these were to be done well (D' Haese: 23, 47, 52-53).

The lesson in religion often referred to as the catechism lesson because of the textbook on which it was based, was the high point of the afternoon session and the entire school day. For providing instruction in the Christian faith was La Salle's primary reason

for founding and maintaining the Christian schools for boys, the work to which he devoted his life. On ordinary school days this lesson lasted thirty minutes, while on Wednesday – the eve of the weekly holiday – it lasted an hour. Also, if on certain occasions no classes were held in the afternoon, all the morning lessons were shortened sufficiently so that each Brother could teach religion for a half-hour before either dismissing the students or taking them to Mass (La Salle 1718: 13; D' Haese: 96). Every student on every level in every class was required to be present for this lesson. Older boys who could attend school only for a short time and who did not yet know how to write were allowed to devote almost the entire day to practice penmanship. But even they had to take part in the religion lesson. Also, while for weighty reasons certain pupils might be excused from the morning session, all students had to be present during the afternoon session when the lesson in religion was taught (D' Haese: 13, 52-53, 182-183).

Because of the importance placed on this subject, the Brother-Director or local religious superior in each house determined the material to be covered in the religion lessons to be taught each week. Depending on the difficulty of the material and the ages of the students, he indicated a longer or shorter amount of material to be covered for a given week and then sub-divided this into individual daily lessons. Each Sunday afternoon the Brothers also gathered their pupils together for an additional lesson. **Part of this time was devoted to reviewing the material covered the previous week and to presenting it as an integrated unit. Also, during the lesson** given on the eve of the weekly holiday, half the time was devoted to a review of the principal mysteries of the Christian faith, and at this time the students might cover this material yet again. Though usually each classroom contained pupils on several different levels, based essentially on

their reading ability, all followed the same lesson in religion. However, depending on each pupil's age and grade level, the extent to which he would be required to master a given topic could vary. (D' Haese: 97-98).

The objective in teaching the students their religion was not just to instruct them in their faith but to evoke a commitment to Christianity and to Christian living on their part. Out of respect for the Word of God which was being communicated to them at this time, they were required to be on their best behavior and to be most attentive to what was taught during this lesson. But they were not to be only passive receivers of this instruction. The Brother would question them on the material covered, and this dialogue was intended to make the Christian faith more meaningful to these young people. On his part, the master strove to gain the attention of his students, and by using this question and answer method help in effect to make this knowledge their own. His manner at this time was to be friendly and agreeable, but not familiar. And if a student misbehaved, he was to defer punishing him so as to maintain the proper atmosphere during this all important lesson (D' Haese: 101-105).

At 4:30 P.M. during the most of the year, but at 4:00 P.M. in winter, the religion lesson ended, and the students then sang a religious hymn which was followed by evening prayers. Once prayers began, the Brothers started dismissing their pupil, beginning with the lowest class and the youngest students. These boys left their places quietly, two by two, and filed out of their classrooms and the school building. One Brother also left his class to position himself so as to see that all was done in the prescribed manner. Once on the street, the boys were required not to loiter around the school building but to go directly to their homes. When all their pupils were gone, the

Brothers departed in their turn, after having seen that everything was in order and that the school building was properly locked for the night (D' Haese: 111-115).

The Christian schools founded by John Baptist de la Salle were intended to satisfy a particular need in a particular situation. Part of the genius of the Founder was that their salient features marked them as admirably suited to remedy a situation which many of his contemporaries as well as he deplored, but for which only he and a few educational innovators sought a suitable remedy. They were gratuitous schools, open to all boys without exception, so that no parents could use their poverty as an excuse for not sending their sons to these institutions. Their use of the simultaneous method and of a rather rigid system of discipline made it possible for relatively few Brothers to instruct the numerous students attracted to these schools. By emphasizing French rather than Latin they offered instruction more suited to the socio-economic standing of their clientele. Finally, their entire program of studies, secular as well as religious, was well suited to making their students first useful citizens of their country and in time future citizens of Heaven. Because of his educational work and the results it achieved, La Salle ranks high among the innovators in the field of popular elementary education. However, he made significant changes in the charity school of his time, not just for the sake of being different, but in order to help these institutions better meet the needs of the "Splendid Century," the society in which they functioned and which they sought to serve more effectively.

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