

**FROM THE MEDITATIONS
FOR THE TIME OF RETREAT**

**DE LA SALLE'S IMAGE
OF THE STUDENTS**

Brother Gregory Wright

One of the best – if not the best – presentations of St. John Baptist de La Salle's ideas on the mission and the ministry of the Christian teacher is found in his **Méditations pour le temps de retraite – Meditations for the Time of retreat** or the **Retreat Meditations**, as they are popularly known. Among other things, these sixteen meditations set forth the Saint's image or concept of the students whom his disciples were called to instruct. For the Founder, this was a matter of some importance, for he realised that what a teacher would do or not do would be determined in large part by his perceptions of these young people. What follows, then, represents an effort to summarise and to synthesise some of the holy priest's more significant ideas on this subject.

For De La Salle, a correct and Christian perception of the students should be based both on what these children are and what they can become. As far as their ultimate destiny is concerned, he 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) while 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) However, the work of the Christian teacher is basic to their achieving this destiny, and as such it is an essential means for building the Church. (8:1; 13:3) For only if the children learn the Christian teachings and practise them, not just while they are in school but all throughout their lives, can they achieve this great destiny. (5:2; 6:2)

This is so, De La Salle says, because there is yet another side to these children. At birth and for some time thereafter he sees them as more inclined to material things than to 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 adults. To overcome this handicap they need to be taught these truths by individuals who are aware of the students' limitations in this matter and who take practical note of them. (5:1) Also, they can be accurately described as being "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 because they act without thinking. (11:1) In addition, so inclined to sin are they that often they seek to satisfy themselves or to find pleasure by committing sin. (11:2)

Difficulties such as these can be made more serious still when – for whatever reason – these children are neglected or even in a sense "abandoned" by their parents. Then they live in idleness and become so accustomed to doing nothing that later on it is very hard for them to acquire good work habits - if they ever try to do this. More serious still, under these circumstances often they encounter and fall under the influence of bad companions who lead them to commit many sins. One result of this can be that they acquire bad habits that are difficult if not impossible to correct later in life. (2:1; 13:2)

In general, history tells us that this picture of the poor children of 17th century France is both realistic and accurate. However, De La Salle insists that in spite of this less than favourable situation, a Christian teacher can help such young people when they are under his care. With his help they can both correct their faults and overcome the habits of sin into which they have fallen. Also, he asserts that those who have preserved their baptismal innocence up till then can continue to do so. (16:3) And for him, giving them instruction in their Christian faith is an important means of achieving all these goals. Particularly this is so if the Christian teacher shows a practical knowledge of educational psychology by taking note of the development or the intellectual level of these young people so as to provide them with an instruction suitable to their understanding. (1:3; 5:2; 6:1,2; 14:1) And still more will this be so if a specific purpose of this instruction is to bring the students to practise what they are being taught by leading them to do the good of which they are capable, keeping in mind their age and their overall situation. (6:2)

Here it might be said that if De La Salle called on the Christian teacher to develop an awareness of educational psychology, he himself showed that he had a practical knowledge of this subject. An example of this 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)

Then he stressed the fact that words will have little influence on children, particularly if the actions of the teacher contradict the instruction he gives them. (10:3)

The Founder gave an example of what this could mean in practice when he discussed how the Christian teacher must try to inspire his poor students with a love of poverty. It was by his regular and even by his daily actions, the Saint insisted, that the teacher would teach them the love of poverty and the love Jesus has for the poor. But if on his part 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 his instruction and good example, the holy priest also stressed the vigilance of the Christian teacher as a means of helping these youths to become Christians in fact as well as in name. And for the Founder, this vigilance should lead the teacher to correct the faults and failings of his students. This was because in his relations with the students, the teacher took the place of their fathers and mothers as well as of the pastors of the Church. So like them he had the duty of helping the students to overcome the bad habits they had developed as well as to correct any faults they might commit, particularly in more serious matters. (11:1,3)

But in all this De La Salle's practical knowledge of educational psychology stresses the fact that the manner of correcting is as important if not more important than the correction 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 he says the purpose in correcting a student is 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, said the Founder, 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 towards the teacher which can make all his efforts to help the student quite ineffective. (12:3) The teacher, however, who has the courage to do his job by correcting his students and doing it properly will draw down upon himself the blessing of God. Also, because he is doing his duty and doing it properly, he will be perceived as one who has performed an essential if difficult part of his work. And in time his efforts will be appreciated - even by those he led from their evil ways by means of his corrections. (12:1)

Some might find what the Founder says about the children and their reactions to and acceptance of correction a bit idealistic if not somewhat unrealistic.

However, it should be kept in mind that the Saint always saw this aspect of Christian education and the entire work of his schools as first and foremost the work of God. And he felt with the help God gives those doing his work, what seems difficult or simply impossible can become very possible. And he always said that the teacher who shared his image of the students and acted as he directed would do so primarily because he was a man of prayer. With this in mind, he suggested that those students who were least responsive to the teacher's efforts and needed help the most, should be the special subject of the teacher's prayers. De La Salle seemed to have no doubt that if the teacher did this, what is not possible humanly speaking would become possible through God's help. (4:1)

Now briefly, it might be a good idea to summarise the ideas of the Founder regarding the children to whom the mission and the ministry of the Christian teacher are directed. To begin with, he saw them as called to live Christian lives in this world and to attain eternal happiness in the next, goals he saw them capable of achieving. At the same time, though, he saw them as inclined to do wrong. Therefore, neglect of their education as well as the evil influences to which they are exposed can 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 fulfil 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 **Règles Communes**, 1718: II,7)

On the basis of the ideas presented above, now it seems possible to reach several conclusions. To begin with, while De La Salle took a realistic view of the children who were to be educated in the Christian schools, his tone was more optimistic than pessimistic. 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 the students to a sanctity possible in their situation, in no way did he require "an impossible degree of perfection" from them. (See W.J. Battersby: **De La Salle - Saint and Spiritual Writer**. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950, pp. 100-101.) So while seeing and describing quite accurately the difficulties inherent in the mission and ministry of the Christian teacher, he depicted them as difficulties that could be successfully confronted and overcome with the help of God. All in all, his image of the students was such as to encourage the Christian teacher as well as to challenge him in his work.

Nota: All references to the **Retreat Meditations** are based on **Meditations for the Time of Retreat**, translated by Br. Augustine Loes, FSC. Winona, Minnesota: St. Mary's Press, 1975.