

«DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN I»:
ITS READERS.
2. THE STUDENTS

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Introduction.

It happens in literature that a work destined for a certain reader ends up, without the author intending it, in the hands of someone else. For example Don Quixote, with all its rich vocabulary, polished style and deep philosophy, difficult for children to manage, has been read in Spanish classrooms for centuries. It is the same with "Platero y yo" written by the Nobel prize-winner Juan Ramon Jiménez. The "Duties of a Christian" by St. De La Salle is in the same category.

The students are not mentioned in the "Duties I"

Internal evidence of the book shows no reference either direct or indirect to students young or old. When De La Salle does write for these, he specifically names them or refers to them. For example in "Duties II", in the part about examining oneself before confession, he asks: "Which are the usual faults a STUDENT can commit against a teacher?" (182). Then "Duties III" for the Feast of St. Nicholas has: "What should STUDENTS do to honour St. Nicholas and celebrate his feast?" (293)

On the other hand "Duties 1" makes no reference, not even once, to the terms student, school or teacher. Neither is there mention of student-teacher relationships. How can we explain this, if the treatise was written for them? There is no justification in the theory that "Duties I" was not written for students, either because of the absence of their name or because of other reasons.

Pedagogical reasons

De La Salle knew the limits of the students who attended his schools. He knew his catechism was quite beyond them. Moreover the text in continuous paragraphs was not suitable for learning by heart. To this must be added the subtle arguments of some of the chapters, which according to one of his critics were unsuitable for children. Can we suggest that De La Salle was thinking: "If it is beyond them now, later on they will understand"? This was a current argument in

those days. Let me try to answer this question by some historical data, which will raise further questions.

Hypothesis

In De La Salle's day students learnt reading through Diocesan Catechisms. In Montpellier's catechism we read: "We hereby order masters and mistresses to teach their students reading through this catechism" (Order: Montpellier Catechism). Diocesan catechisms were generally beyond the comprehension of primary school children who just read them mechanically.

With this general statement in mind, what did De La Salle intend for his classrooms? Was his answer "Duties I"? Was De La Salle, when he wrote "Duties I", thinking of filling a need in his schools? If so, why?

- * The text book with its continuous paragraphs, was better for learning reading than as a question-and-answer text.
- * It allows for a more personal, pleasing and flowing presentation of doctrine.
- * A certain difficulty in understanding the text and the length of the volume prevent learning by heart, and require greater effort from the students.
- * When they are older, they will understand what they learnt as small children.
- * The whole family gets to know the catechism through the children.

The answer to the hypothesis is therefore affirmative. De La Salle had provided the students through "Duties I" with a successful method of learning.

De La Salle's Biographer Blain.

In my previous article in an earlier issue of *Lasalliana* (28-8-A-125), I quoted Blain as follows: "He wrote catechisms of all sorts, small ones for the students and bigger and fuller ones for the Brothers (vol 1, p 341). This is another indication that the doctrine in "Duties I" was not meant for the students.

"Duties I" as a reading book (the facts)

The true account of what happened gives us the proof: "Duties I" was used as a reading book in the Brothers' classes and in other schools in France for a century and a half. This is confirmed by the history of "Duties I". How can one otherwise explain that during the lifetime of De La Salle, when the Brothers numbered around one hundred, there were three editions of "Duties I" each of several thousand copies? The answer lies in the fact that the volumes did not remain only on the humble desks of the Brothers' students. Reliable sources like Georges Rigault, Fratel Dante and Yves Poutet confirm that, when the "Conduct of Schools" talks about the reading book they call "Treaty on Christian Instruction" they are referring to "Duties I".

From the time of Brother Timothy right up to that of Brother Pablo Basterrechea, there have been plenty of Superior Generals who have recommended "Duties I" as a reading book in class. To save time, I shall give just the following: Brother Agathon recommends it for the fourth

class, and in 1810 Brother Gerbaud writes: "We are sending you two reading books: the psalter and the Duties of a Christian. Then Brother Joseph says: "Use as a reading book in class the life of Jesus Christ and the Duties of a Christian." (1897). In circular 234, Brother Imier de Jesus again insists that the Duties of a Christian should be read. Brother Nicet Joseph told me himself that his own mother had used the Duties of a Christian as a reading book when she was at school.

Antoine Sylvère, in his autobiographical novel "The call of a child from Auvergne" writes how the "Duties of a Christian" was in daily use as a reading book. These valuable judgements are indisputable.

Duties I and Christian Life.

If the reader having noted the above has any doubts, we refer him to article 22-9-A-97 in Lasalliana. We enumerate in it twenty-two supplements added to various editions of "Duties I". These supplements are for primary school users of the book. Let me name a few now as examples: Exercises of piety; Prayers to Our Lady; Morning and evening prayers; Acts of Faith; Prayers for Communion; Christian practices; Rules of politeness, etc.

Approval of "Duties I"

The many approvals of "Duties I" give the historian some valuable evidence. In the present instance those referring to schools and students are plentiful. The approval of the Bishop of Fribourg in 1796 can stand as a example of others: "The "Duties of a Christian" has gone out of print, and as it has been used from time immemorial in our Diocesan schools, we not only give our approval for its reprinting, but we also recommend it to mothers and fathers and to school masters and mistresses as the best book that can be placed in a young person's hands."

The wide and varied use of "Duties I" in schools.

"Duties I" with its thousands of readers, was for nearly two centuries a source of income for publishers, printers and book sellers. I have taken the following facts from the book sellers catalogue in the Bibliothèque Nationale of France. They give evidence of very varied use made of "Duties I" in schools inside and outside France:

* 1813, Megard bookshop includes it among books of "piety and theology"

* 1818 Lefort, 1838 Pélagau, 1863 Martial Ardant, 1867 Thibaud-Landriot advertise it as "a book which can be given as a prize in seminaries, grammar schools, colleges and training colleges for young women".

* In 1821 and years following, Moronval include it in their catalogue as "a volume used in Christian boys and girls schools."

* The general catalogue of 1832 counts "Duties I" as one of the "French and foreign books prepared officially for Catholic children", and it has the official stamp of the Ministry of Public Education.

* In 1838 Périsset and Co was selling "Duties I" with other books of religious instruction, lives of the Saints and books of piety.

* A few catalogues list "Duties I" with books called "classics": "Classics for the use of Christian Schools, approved by the Council of Public Education". cf Mame de Tours 1855; Périsset Frères 1860; Martial Ardant 1863; Eugène Ardant 1870, Thibaud-Landriot 1877...

* Martial Ardant advertised it in 1867 with "books needed to enter primary school".

Can we therefore doubt that "Duties I" was part of the life of a student?

Conclusions

In addition to the conclusions the reader can make for himself, allow me to note the following:

1. To judge by the internal evidence of the treatise, we cannot say that it was written directly and expressly for the student.
2. The content is beyond the comprehension of students who went to the Lasallian Schools at the time of De La Salle.
3. For sociological and pedagogical reasons, right from the first edition, it filled a gap in reading material in Lasallian schools. After a short time it was adopted by public schools in France, as is shown by the numerous approvals by the Ministry of Public Instruction.
4. This use in all kinds of schools explains its many reprintings, more than 300 in fact; publishers, printers, booksellers number around 100, and the towns in France where it was published number some 50.
5. Perhaps the reader can reflect on the Christian influence of the "Duties of a Christian", since those who read it in our estimation were over a million. ●