

**ST JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
TEACHES FREEDOM
(1/2)**

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"Men almost always follow paths already traced out. A prudent person should as a consequence choose paths already taken by great men and imitate them" (Machiavelli)

I would not say "imitate them", but rather "be inspired by them".

Education can be considered from various angles. One of the most rewarding angles is that of freedom. The acquisition of freedom is the aspiration of individuals and the dream of nations. Let us take the example of the people of Israel. After their years of slavery in Egypt, they wandered about the desert for 50 years, trying to become a nation with its own ideals and with laws that expressed these ideals. They conquered territory so that they could feel free. The Bible speaks also of the efforts of the Israelites as individuals to acquire interior liberty. The wisdom books, in particular, show their interest in acquiring a set of satisfactory personal values. "By wisdom a house is built, by discernment the foundation is laid" (Pr. 24,3). "Better patience than pride" (Qo 7,8). "God examine me and know my heart, probe me and know my thoughts; make sure I do not follow pernicious ways, and guide me in the way that is everlasting" (Ps 139,23-24).

The New Testament calls upon us constantly to acquire freedom. St Paul writes: "My brothers, you were called, as you know, to liberty" (Ga 5,13). St Paul was clearly speaking about basic freedom, that is, about tranquility and interior peace which come from harmony between conscience and life, as Jesus taught us.

St John Baptist de La Salle witnessed the deplorable situation of children and young people in his own times. He did not see schools simply as a means to transmit knowledge. Far from it! He saw them as education centres, where pupils could acquire interior and social freedom. Without a minimum of instruction, a person is the slave of his ignorance. He is easily exploited and does not contribute as much as he could to the well-being of his family and of society.

The educator from Rheims offers us, ahead of his time, a glimpse of liberation theology, in the sense that the latter includes all forms of thinking about faith that are opposed to oppression.

De La Salle is like a Moses committed to wresting children and young people from the oppressive ignorance of Egypt in order to lead them, through education, to the Promised Land of virtue and knowledge.

The conquest of interior freedom

Children are egocentric and a prey to instincts and instinctive tendencies. They gradually acquire a reasonable amount of control over the forces that imprison them, and those that govern their personality. St La Salle wrote: "It can be said that children at birth are like a bundle of flesh. Their minds do not seem to emerge from matter except with time, becoming refined only little by little" (Med 197,1).

1. To facilitate the acquisition of this mastery over themselves, De La Salle calls for an educational atmosphere, that is to say, an atmosphere that is conducive to this basic task.

On the way to school, the pupil must become used to not running, playing and jumping, but rather to preparing himself to enter the classroom in a calm manner. Such an interior attitude will be a good preparation for following the lesson properly. Moreover, such behaviour before school is of itself a precious part of the learning process. "When pupils enter the school, they will walk so quietly and calmly that they cannot be heard" (Conduct, 1.1.7).

What about the teacher? He must approach the school like someone who is prepared to undertake an extremely important task. A gesture, a word, can have a decisive influence on a pupil's life.

"They will walk with great reserve, in silence, without hurrying, showing great restraint in their movements and in the use of their eyes" (Conduct 1.2.2). An almost sacred solemnity!

What are the pupils to do while waiting for the teacher to arrive? Supervised by one of their companions, they are to revise the things they still do not know well enough (Conduct 1.1.14). A suggestion of self-government in the autocratic age of Louis XIV.

The way in which the teacher enters a class contributes to the maintenance of a calm and recollected atmosphere.

A moderate use of words is another contributory factor to an atmosphere conducive to education and study. St Augustine wisely remarked that a teacher

should not "teach in order to speak", but "speak in order to teach" (De Magistro N 26).

Whenever possible, a teacher uses signs rather than words, so as not to disturb the atmosphere of study in a class (Conduct 11.1.2, 12.0.3). When he speaks, he does so quietly (Conduct 11.3.10).

There are other conditions that help to create an atmosphere conducive to study:

Not putting up with latecomers "except for a good reason" (Conduct 1.1.17).

Judicious seating arrangements for pupils: an easily distracted pupil next to a hardworking one; a talkative one next to a silent and attentive one.

The close attention the teacher gives to all his pupils (Conduct 3.1.19).

2. Having a method is important in order to restrain or promote the freedom and initiative of pupils. De La Salle is in favour of promoting them. He keeps a tight grip on the reins, however, till such time as his pupils show they have reached the stage when they can use their freedom properly. *"Be assured that in this way pupils will make more progress in one month than they would otherwise in 6"* (Conduct 4.8.10).

The teacher will not do for the pupil what the pupil can do by himself" (Conduct 4.9.8).

Apart from getting practice, the pupil will have the satisfaction of developing his own skills or abilities, with the approval of his teacher.

Although there are times when the teacher gives an explanation to the whole class, most of the work done is individual, helped by the teacher or by more advanced pupils (Conduct 4.9.6).

The division of subjects into "lessons" or modules makes simultaneous teaching easier and gives an incentive to pupils to work by themselves according to their ability and at their own speed. Pupils can move on to the next "lesson" once they have mastered the preceding one (Conduct 24.2.1).

Among the various pieces of advice given, we can pick out the following: a pupil must never be promoted unless he has reached the required standard; *"otherwise he would be put in a position where he would never learn anything"*. While the prospect of promotion can be an incentive, premature promotion can lead to discouragement and even to the abandonment of studies.

Seating arrangements of pupils must take into account their ability level: a lazy pupil next to an intelligent one who can help him occasionally.

3. De La Salle frequently mentions the danger of the children remaining "ignorant", that is, with very limited horizons and a restricted ability to act in everyday life. This is a form of poverty which affects personal and professional life.

This explains his efforts to make all children go to school.

Among the various jobs and positions assigned to pupils there is that of "visitor of absent pupils". When a member of the class was ill, these visitors would make a friendly visit to him from time to time. And *"they will take steps to encourage those, who play truant often to be more assiduous"* (Conduct 18.9.15).

De La Salle goes further, and says even that these "visitors" should strongly urge those pupils who never come to school to attend (id).

To cut down absences and attract children to school, De La Salle indicates a number of practical rules (Conduct 16.20s).

He goes so far as to accept pupils who can attend school only a part of the time. They can be taught what is essential. To achieve this, they can be moved from lesson to lesson even if they are not ready. These are called promotions "through necessity". To free one hand of a prisoner is better than to leave him with both hands tied.

Although as a general rule he was demanding, he had an almost maternal tolerance for parents who were in a hurry to send their children quickly off to work, and who did not understand the importance of education. He told them to send their children at least for an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon, or even better, all afternoon (Conduct 16.1.3). One can imagine the juggling with arrangements that this imposed on teachers who had to cope with this floating population. De La Salle advised: *"Special attention should be given to these pupils and special care taken of them"* (id).

And what about teenagers who could not sign up for either regular lessons or for a few hours a day? The wise educator had made provision for these also. In 1688 he opened a Sunday school for them, which ran classes on Sundays and feastsdays for two and a half hours. *"It is easy to imagine the good done by this new kind of school which was so necessary for young people without work"* (Blain I, p.289).

The beauty of a park, whether it belongs to the locality, a town, a province, or a country depends on the care taken over each individual flower.

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