

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

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The conquest of social freedom

1. The uneducated person has an extremely limited view of the world, and of things and events. He is imprisoned by this limitation. There are, of course, people who have never been to school and yet who have educated themselves in the school of life. However true this may be, the majority of people are incapable of achieving in this way the standards required of them by the society in which they live.

St John Baptist de La Salle wanted the children of working class people to have the same sorts of advantages as he had had as the son of a wealthy family.

He was distressed to see so many children running wild in the streets while their parents struggled to earn enough to support them. That is why he wanted the pupils to be in class at certain times in the morning and afternoon. In this way they could be looked after all day long by committed teachers (Rule 1705, Ch.1). Instead of assimilating, as if by osmosis, all the bad habits of wayward or perverted companions, they learnt at school how to behave well and acquired useful knowledge. De La Salle wanted parents to see the advantages of education for the future of their children. At least they ought to learn how to read and write (Conduct 16.2.18). He thought that elementary education ought to be compulsory. He even prescribed sanctions for parents who did not send their children to school (id.)

2. By taking an active part in the learning process as well as in the day-to-day running of the classroom, pupils became capable of taking on their responsibilities at home and in society. De La Salle thought along the same lines as the Romans: "*Non scholae sed vitae discimus*". We do not educate for school but for life. As Eugène Dévaud, the Swiss education expert,

said: primary school is not an option like secondary education: it is concerned with the business of living. The basic course of studies, once known as primary education, included reading, writing, arithmetic, drawing, singing and catechism.

In addition to the job given to more trustworthy pupils of supervising study before the teacher arrived, there were 14 other jobs entrusted to pupils. We have already mentioned the "visitor of absent pupils". There was also the porter in charge of opening and closing doors, someone else to give out books, to sweep the classroom, and so on. In this way, pupils learnt to take responsibility, to help one another and to be aware of the needs of others.

3. In Rouen, not far from the estuary of the Seine, De La Salle founded a senior secondary school, with an extensive and varied course of studies, which opened up vast new horizons for the students. The elegant chapel built by the pupils and teachers can still be seen in this town.

In addition to this school, there was another one for the rehabilitation of young people with behavioural problems and for minors sent there by the courts. The historian Beaurepaire, speaking of this kind of institution in France, stated that the treatment meted out there "remained within the limits of paternal correction". Study, reading, work, personal counselling and religion were among the means used to promote interior freedom in these kinds of prisoners, who were the victims of their temperament. They were like wild stocks that needed to be grafted to become fruit or ornamental trees.

4. There were so many pupils, town districts and small towns, that De La Salle felt incapable of responding to all the requests to open schools.

His imagination led him to set up a "seminary" for schoolmasters, for the purpose of training laymen in the spirit which inspired the Brothers and brought them the success that was so admired.

When all is said and done, pupils who received a good moral training and a solid education were prepared to face family, professional and spiritual life. They felt freer in the complex world of social and professional life.

The educator must acquire freedom

A school does not depend in the first place on teaching materials, school buildings or its location, but on the teachers. They are the most important factor. A school is worth what its teachers are worth.

St John Baptist de La Salle wanted teachers who were really men, who had a strong character, who were educated and zealous, who had spiritual motivation but whose feet were firmly on the ground.

1. For De La Salle, the profession of a teacher and educator was not an ordinary one. He was convinced it was God who called people to this work (Med 201,1). It was a "holy employment" (Med 110,1). The educator was responsible for his pupils in the same way as St Joseph was responsible for the child and teenager Jesus. "*It behoves you also to have an uncommon degree of virtue and piety*" (id).

The educator collaborates with God, takes the place of parents, is his pupils' guardian angel, and is of great benefit to his country. "*Your mission requires you to labour for the good of the Church and that of your country. Your pupils are already members of the State, and will soon be endowed with full membership*" (Med 160,3).

However, even though the profession of a teacher is one of the most important in the Church (Med 155,1) and even has "*consideration...in the eyes of God*" (Med 143,3), it "*is esteemed and honoured only by those who have a truly Christian spirit...but has nothing brilliant about it in the eyes of men, and indeed is often humiliating for those who are in it*" (Med 113,1 and cf Med 155,3).

The situation has changed little since then for primary and middle school teachers. Some years ago, a young university graduate was asked what his job was. He answered: "*I'm just a teacher*".

If we just consider the work, the state of the profession and the salary of teachers, they certainly deserve our pity. Why did they become teachers? Either, they did not know what a low rating their profession had in spite of its importance, or they joined with their eyes wide open because they were masochists or were incapable of doing anything else. In either case, they deserve our commiseration. If they want honours and respect, they will have to take up professions where these things are possible. And yet the words of Jesus are still valid: "*The labourer deserves his wages*" (Lc 10,7). St Paul adds: "*If a man has work to show, his wages are not considered as a favour but as his due*" (Rm 4,4).

2. Educational love

St John Baptist de La Salle considers the work of a teacher as a sort of "spiritual paternity" (Med 157,1; 116,2). Fatherhood is above all an expression of love. **Edward Spranger** (1882-1963), an eminent professor at the universities of Leipzig, Berlin and Tübingen, described the basic feeling of the educator for his pupils as "*educational love*". He said that it was "*a demanding but disinterested love. The justification for this relationship (between teacher and pupil) lies on the metaphysical plane, that is to say, in the belief in the absolute value of one's demands*".

St John Baptist de La Salle tells his teachers *to love their pupils* (Med 166,2). He also says they ought to show them the firmness of a father and the tenderness of a mother (Med 101,3); and that they ought to be disinterested (Med 92,3). The love of a teacher for his pupils ought to be such that he is prepared to give his life for them (Med 198,2).

Utopia? No, this is the ideal proposed to us by the Gospel. The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep (Jn 10,11). De La Salle is a convinced Christian, that is, he faithfully follows Christ and is committed to living according to the Gospel. If certain Lasallian recommendations seem strange to us, it is because we have lost some of our fervour.

Conclusion

St John Baptist de La Salle's dream was to have teachers concerned for the human and spiritual well-being of children and young people, and whose greatest joy in life was to work in a profession that was so little appreciated by society. He dreamt of teachers who would attract children and young people to school and who, filled with an immense love, would go to their help. He dreamt of teachers who would do their utmost to enable each and every pupil to develop his human and spiritual personality as far as possible, because they were convinced that by doing so they would turn many little hells and purgatories into little corners of Heaven. ●