

**ST JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
and SOLIDARITY  
(1/2)**

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**SOLIDARITY** is a word that is frequently used nowadays. But is it perhaps used too easily?

It does not figure in the Lasallian Vocabulary. And yet, what it refers to and the attitudes it gives rise to, cannot be said to be lacking in the life of St John Baptist de La Salle, or in the work he undertook with the Brothers. As time went on, over the years, they decided that solidarity should exist, both in the classroom and in their "society". It offers Lasallian schools today an example of a lifestyle that they could well adopt.

**1. PRACTISE SOLIDARITY:  
A DAILY APPROACH TO EDUCATION**

**1. SHARING WITH THE POOR**

Breakfast followed morning prayers. The Brothers considered it to be an exercise the children should take part in by bringing with them "every day breakfast and a snack" (Conduct, p.7). The teachers wanted to teach them in this way "to eat with wisdom, modesty and in a proper way, praying to God before and after the meal" (Conduct, p.8). This enabled the pupils to notice that others lived more poorly than themselves. And so, they were invited to share:

*"A small basket will be put in a particular place in the classroom, into which children, if they are so inclined, can put any bread they have left over, so that it can be given to the poor... Those who have bread to give will raise their hand showing the piece of bread they have to give, and the pupil in charge of collecting alms will go around and collect it. Towards the end of the meal, the teachers will distribute the bread to the poorest children" (Conduct, pp. 7 & 8).*

**2. GO FORWARD TOGETHER**

The Brothers in those days had between 50 and 60 pupils in their classes. The rooms were a far cry from what we are used to nowadays. Under such conditions, it is understandable that working in small groups, in the modern sense, could not be envisaged.

All the same, the Brothers devised a way of organising their classes so that they became places where there was activity, training in helping one another and, in fact, the first steps in solidarity. The Conduct of Schools makes a number of practical suggestions to teachers:

**Give priority to the more backward:**

*"The most backward pupils will always be made to read first, beginning with the easiest lesson and ending with the most difficult" (Conduct p.18).*

**Ask some pupils to help the others:**

*"The teachers will come to an arrangement with the Brother Director with regard to those it would not be convenient to move up to the next course...because it is necessary to keep some pupils behind in each course or part of a course who can read well, so that they can help the others and serve as a model, and in this way help them to express themselves well, to pronounce letters, syllables and words very distinctly, and to observe the pauses properly... They will ensure that these pupils are happy to stay down in the course or part of the course in which they are" (Conduct, pp. 22-23).*

**Help new pupils to fit in:**

*"When a pupil joins a course, the teacher will not fail to give him a companion for a few days and according to his needs. This companion will help him to get used to following in his book while the others read, by following himself and by making the pupil follow in the same book" (Conduct p.30).*

*"They should be placed next to a pupil who works well, so that they can learn from his example and by practice to do likewise" (Conduct, p.167).*

**Encourage pupils to help one another:**

*"The Inspector will take care also to seat pupils in such a way that, as far as possible, he puts a beginner in writing next to a good writer, or to one in the next stage up from his; a pupil who has trouble in making the right strokes next to one who finds it easy; a pupil who finds it difficult to sit and hold the pen properly next to one who has mastered the technique, and so on, so that pupils can learn by example" (Conduct, p.265).*

*"He will make sure that pupils are given places in class in a prudent and planned way. A light-headed and silly pupil should be placed between two serious ones; a dissolute one should be put by himself or between two pupils whose piety is solid; a pupil who likes to chatter between two pupils who are quiet and pay attention, and so on" (Conduct, p.263).*

**Train them to be responsible:**

This is one area of school life to which the CONDUCT OF SCHOOLS devotes much space. In all, more than 18 pages deal with "school monitors".

*"There will be a number of monitors in each school who will do a variety of different tasks which teachers cannot or ought not to do themselves" (Conduct, p.204).*

To ensure there was an atmosphere of discipline and hard work in their large classes, the Brothers devised a scheme by which pupils played an active part in school life. While this

meant that the teacher was freed at times from performing certain physical tasks, its main value was to get poor children, who used "to live freely like vagabonds" (Med. 194,1), to become used to accepting important responsibilities suited to their age. In this way, a true sense of responsibility could be built up in class.

The CONDUCT lists the tasks that should be entrusted to pupils. There are 14 in all. It spells out what the tasks imply, and indicates what qualities are required in order to fulfil them properly.

A number of these monitors can have assistants to help them. And so, in a class of 60 pupils, more than a third can be directly involved in the organisation of the life of the group. For example:

- \* in the organisation of work: "Bench leaders". (p.244)
- \* regarding the behaviour of pupils: "The Inspector and supervisors". (pp.210-211)
- \* cleanliness of the classroom: "The Sweepers". (p.214)
- \* the expression of Christian life: "The Reciters of prayers" or "The Minister of Holy Mass". (pp.205 & 242)
- \* care for the very poor: "The Almsgiver". (p.243)
- \* materials used in class: "The Distributors and Collectors of paper and books." (pp.213 & 247)
- \* concern for absent pupils: "The Visitor of absent pupils". (p.245)
- \* the school "guard": "The Key-holder". (p.217)

When you think of the life that had been led by these pupils before, you cannot help admiring the educational ambitions of the Brothers for associating them with the efficient running of their classes. Is not this an invitation to us today to rethink the way in which we encourage pupils to take an active part in their own education? Do we not sometimes worry about having to leave a class to work by itself for a short time? But what have we done to prepare them for this?

We may have some misgivings on reading about the role attributed by the CONDUCT to the "Boy Inspector" who has to keep watch on his companions while waiting for the teacher to arrive:

*"The inspector must direct all his attention and efforts towards being watchful and to being aware of all that happens*

*in the classroom, while not saying anything nor leaving his place."*

But have we thought of the way in which the teacher had trained him to fulfil this responsibility, by requiring him first of all to be the pupil on which all the other pupils were going to model themselves?

*"He must be convinced that he is appointed not only to keep a careful watch over what happens in the school, but especially to be a model so that others can learn to base their conduct on his" (Conduct, pp.210-211).*

The responsibility entrusted to the "visitor of absent pupils" is not one of the lightest:

*"In each class, there will be two or three pupils whose duty it will be to check on the attendance of pupils living in a number of streets in a certain part of town which will be assigned to them.*

*At the beginning of the next school session, each visitor will report to the teacher, telling him what he had learnt at the home of the each absent pupil, what was the reason for the absence, whom they spoke to, and when he had been told that the boy would come back to school.*

*The visitors will always speak to the father or mother of the absent pupil or to someone sufficiently old and who they can be sure knows the reason for the absence of the pupil, and who will tell the truth. They will always speak to people very politely and convey the teacher's greetings" (Conduct, p.245).*

The responsibility of the "key-holder" also is onerous. Every evening the teacher leaves him with the keys to the school:

*"The key-holder will make sure that he is waiting at the school gate every morning before 7.30, and before 1 o'clock in the afternoon. He is forbidden to give the school key to any other pupil.*

*This pupil will also be responsible for looking after everything in the school and making sure no one carries anything away. He must be chosen from among those with the most regular attendance at school and who never miss it" (Conduct, pp.217-218).*

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