

# THE TEACHER-PUPIL RELATIONSHIP

[Lasallian Themes No.61]

## Summary

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## INTRODUCTION

The binomial expression "teacher-pupil" has been the object of very different interpretations throughout educational history. In the Middle Ages the prevalent emphasis was on the teacher, as "magister dixit" reflected more the quality of learning than for virtue or other qualities. The emphasis was shifted towards the child by John-Henry Pestalozzi (1746-1827), the great Swiss educationalist, who created a trend of thought and a pedagogical praxis which continues to-day as child-centred education, and whose ideas have been the inspiration for many modern educational approaches. However, the most modern trends in present-day education situate the validity of educational activity in the relationship created between the teacher and pupil - the possibility and the quality of educational activity is thus dependent on the quality of this relationship.

This modern tendency is no more than a reflection of a deeper philosophical and anthropological development within the person which has led to the realization that integrated growth only occurs within the context of "harmonious relationships with others" and which has led to the coining of a neologism, "**relationality**", to express this orientation. A similar idea was expressed by Ivan Illich who spoke of "**conviviality**", the capacity to live together in harmony as in a banquet to which the whole of humanity is invited.

In the time of De La Salle there was no code which legislated on the nature, extent or characteristics of this relationship with the result that each teacher created his own and imposed his own rules. However, the teaching religious orders were already trying to improve this relationship as were innovators in the education of children. In this context, then, it is surprising that De La Salle, far ahead of his time in this, had developed a theory and a pedagogical praxis in which the emphasis was placed precisely in the relationship between teacher and pupil.

## 1. THE TEACHER IN THE TIME OF DE LA SALLE

*"As for me, I would beg from door to door in order to find a real school-master" (Adrien Bourdoise).*

Around the mid-17th century there was an awareness in France of the lack of good teachers and a desire to find a solution to this problem. It was not that teachers did not exist but rather that they did not respond to the necessity of availability and of self-giving and,

above all, to the requirements of a vocation. The situation at the time could be summarized as follows:

- Religious communities of women dedicated to teaching had quite well-prepared personnel.
- There were also "clerical-teachers" with a confusion of functions and a consequent "clericalization" of their functions in the schools.
- There were also lay teachers - the majority of them in the cities, very few in the countryside doing what they could as isolated individuals. Some of these were private tutors to wealthy families.
- There were also the authorized "Writing Masters", a strong organization established as a powerful Corporation which was to oppose De La Salle's educational project with incredible violence.

With the exception of this last group, the elementary teachers gave the impression of being a diverse and dispersed group, fragile and unstable, and deficient in formation. But it was a group which was rising constantly given the growing demand for education. There were two basic requirements for these teachers: morality and an acceptable standard or, in other words, basic knowledge since, as yet, there were no institutions to prepare them professionally which, in itself, was another of the problems. The school authorities gave the teacher an examination and enquired about his life and habits:

*"...The school-master must be pious and modest, charitable with everybody, an enemy of idleness, of gambling, of hunting and of worldly distractions, he must not be given to the frequent company of women, and must be of great probity..."* (Charles Démià).

As one can see, there is no mention of a single professional skill nor anything to do with the nature of relationships with pupils.

## **2. THE VISION OF THE TEACHER ENVISAGED BY DE LA SALLE AND SHAPED IN THE BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS**

*"The exercises of the community along with school work require a person who is completely dedicated..."* ("Mémorial on the Habit", 1689-90).

*"For this purpose they keep schools so that, with children under the direction of the teachers from morning until night..."* (RC 1,3).

According to De La Salle, the Christian teacher, through his vocation and religious consecration, had to be conscious of the fact that his whole life would be dedicated to the children who were in front of him. He saw Christian education almost as a daily and silent liturgical act of self-sacrifice for the spiritual well-being of the "children of the working-class and the poor". And what were the means which De La Salle offered his Brothers to help them relate in a fraternal and effective manner to "these destitute children dressed in rags, ill-disciplined and with little education"?

### **2.1. The climate of the educational relationship**

Modern psychologists and sociologists place great insistence on the "human environment", the context in which the human relationship occurs and develops, to the point of affirming that this context, more than the contents, creates the "climate" - "the medium is the message", as Marshall MacLuhan asserts. It is clear from the writings of De La Salle that he was very much aware of these "modern" pre-requisites in the art of good communication.

#### *2.1.1. Respect - The Primacy of the person*

When one studies illustrations related to schools and to teachers of the 16th and 17th centuries one never ceases to be surprised at the very frequent sight of some means of punishment either in the hands of the teacher, or very near to him. Consequently, it was a real educational revolution which De La Salle proposed in indicating with striking clarity that:

“Silence, circumspection and the vigilance of the teacher, rather than harshness and beatings, are what establish good order in a class” (CE 15,2,7 = Conduct Part 2, V, 2°). Behind this wise principle was the implicit rejection of the coercive approach to education in vogue at the time along with a re-definition of educational activity on more human and Christian foundations. In consequence, the primary attitude that De La Salle demanded of the teachers in their relations with the poor children before them was respect. Hence, with regard to the Inspectors of Schools, he wrote that they must “take great care to ensure that the teachers do not beat pupils with sticks, hands or feet...” (CE 21,2,20 = Conduct Part 3, V, 2°) while, in a letter of May 1st 1709, he indicated to Brother Robert that it was “shameful to slap pupils. Control your impatience...” (LA 54,10).

What was the basis of this new attitude proposed by De La Salle?

1. Contrary to the general idea that the child was a second-class citizen, having duties but no rights, De La Salle affirmed that “children are gifted with reason and must not be corrected as animals. They must be reprimanded and corrected with justice” (MR 204,1). In this connection it is interesting to read what the Conduct of Schools has to say in the long chapter on the subject of corrections. Teachers were required to use the more formal expressions of “you” when commanding their pupils. Moreover, “... it is important that you never make use of harmful or inappropriate words calling them, for example, “rascal”, “rogue”, “stingy”, “brat”, etc. None of these words should be heard from the mouth of a Brother of the Christian Schools” (CE 15,4,10-11 = Conduct Part 2, V, 4°).

2. The dignity of the baptised sons of God. In the face of the titles of nobility held by the mighty of the earth, De La Salle asserted that these poor children were noble by their baptism; “...The dignity of the Christian stems from his birth given that he is a son of God and that he belongs to Jesus Christ...” (Decorum and Civility 101,1,21).

3. The living image of Jesus Christ. The “preferential option for the poor” was the life option of De La Salle and the first Brothers; “... Honour the poor. May you be moved in faith to do so with love and zeal given that they are members of Jesus Christ” (MF 96,3).

### 2.1.2. Good Example

“Your first duty to your pupils is that of edification and good example. Have you considered that you must be a model for them of the virtues which you wish to inculcate? Have you conducted yourselves as befitting good teachers” (MF 91,3). In Christian educational circles at the time of the Founder there was much insistence on the importance of the “model”. Precisely because of the view that the child was born full of evil tendencies and inclinations there was need to present them with an appropriate “model”, whose qualities they could imitate, as soon as possible. The natural and most appropriate models should be the parents and it was in this fact that De La Salle, at the beginning of the Common Rules of his Institute, situated his sociological and moral discourse in which he described the plight of the “abandoned children of the working-class and the poor” who were deprived of parental example and exposed, in consequence, to the harmful influence of inappropriate “models” – i.e. “bad companions”. This led De La Salle to insist with the Brothers that “those charged with directing souls must possess virtue beyond the normal which will serve as an example to others” (MD 33,2).

### 2.1.3. Personal Knowledge of each pupil

To-day, as in any era, the teacher who does not know his pupils is open to all sorts of errors and this was a fact on which De La Salle placed great insistence; “...One of the principal concerns of those dedicated to instructing others is to succeed in getting to know

them and to understand the way in which each of them acts... This is one of the qualities most necessary to direct those in their charge" (MD 33,1). Similarly, in the Conduct of Schools, he indicated that "you must refrain from punishing children during their first days in school. Before doing so it is necessary to understand their nature, character and inclinations" (CE 15,6,39 = Conduct Part 2, V, 5°, sec 3).

In order to achieve this pre-requisite of personal knowledge of each pupil, the Christian School of De La Salle established a methodology in the form of Registers or Forms which constituted a reliable data-bank of personal information which followed the pupil throughout the education progress in the school since admission, progress by levels and lessons, the principal elements of his character, temporary absences and their causes, and even behaviour outside of school (cf. CE 13,4,3 = Conduct Part 2,3). What is striking here is the surprising "modernity" of these criteria.

#### 2.1.4. Tenderness

One of De La Salle's greatest educational innovations consisted in replacing the general atmosphere of fear which prevailed in the elementary schools of his time with an environment of acceptance, tenderness and love. From the outset he recognized that respecting and knowing the child was not enough - to transform the child required that the child be surrounded by a climate of tenderness. The effect was immediate and spectacular and it was a shock to the educational climate of the elementary schools of his time. So vital was this principle to the Christian School of De La Salle that he incorporated it in the Rule of the Brothers; "...The Brothers will tenderly love their pupils" (RC VII, 13). To recognise oneself as loved and to be able to love are two spiritual experiences which carry immense transformational and purifying potential for the person and, especially, for the child and such experiences, in themselves, apart from many other reasons, explain the immediate success of the Brothers' Schools: before being organizational and academic successes they were a success in human relationships. In his biography of De La Salle, Blain recounts an incident which has not received much commentary but which indicates the healthy effect of this relationship of respect and mutual love between teacher and pupil; "... One has seen children in the schools making a sign to the Brother so that they could approach him in order to speak to him; and, then, putting their arms around his neck, kissing him tenderly, without any further explanation of this unusual gesture other than saying: "It's because I love you!" (Blain 2, Appendix p. 101).

In the midst of the austere spiritual vocabulary of the 17th century it is striking that De La Salle employed the word "tenderness" (tender/tenderly) 79 times in his writings, especially in his Mediations; "...You have to teach these destitute children daily. Love them with tenderness, following the example of Jesus Christ in this..."(MF 166.2) This tenderness was to be converted into an educative love which was manly, demanding and freeing and which, in the pedagogy of De La Salle's school, took on a particular characteristic – i.e. preventive education or, putting it another way, protecting the child from his own weakness and from the dangers of his environment: "... Substituting for parents and for pastors, you are under the obligation to watch over the children in such a way that you will have to give an account of their souls..." (MR 203,3). This expression, "To watch over the children", is a very characteristic expression of De La Salle that appears frequently in his writings. He justifies this insistence by saying to the Brothers that "... God has honoured you by entrusting the education of children to you and, particularly, the care of their souls. It is this that He had most at heart when He made you guides and guardians of these youngsters..." (MR 203,3). The intensity of this care would be an expression of zeal which, for De La Salle, was the passion for the glory of God and the well-being of children, and which he indicated as one of

the essential components of the authentic spirit of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This educative love had two characteristics:

A. A love for all without distinction: "...The Brother should not have particular affection for any pupil..." (CE 21,2,13 = Conduct Part 3, 1, 2°).

B. A love which involved firmness rather than weakness: "...If you use the firmness of a father to draw them or remove them from evil, you must also have the tenderness of a mother..." (MF 101,3).

#### 2.1.5. Gratuity and Disinterestedness

In the thinking of De La Salle, gratuity was never to be reduced to an economic or financial aspect but rather referred primarily to a consecrational dimension of self-giving to God and to poor children without asking anything in exchange for this. Why did De La Salle place such great insistence on this? Because it would always be a basic condition for evangelization and, therefore, for the ministry of Christian Education. It would be the concrete expression and reflection of the gratuitous, loving gift of God to man in Jesus Christ whom the Brother represents and for whom he is called to faithful witness; "...What a great joy it is for you to be able to teach the truths of the Gospel to your disciples purely for the love of God..." (MR 207,2). And elsewhere "... Be on your guard against all human attitudes in your dealing with children. Have pure intentions in your work, similar to those of Jesus Christ..." (MR 196,3). As a sign of this disinterestedness, De La Salle was very insistent that the Brothers received absolutely nothing from the pupils or from their parents; "...They should not receive anything either from the pupils or from their parents, or from any other person, for any reason whatsoever and they should not keep anything belonging to the pupils..." (CE 21,2,15 = Conduct Part 3, 1, 2°). As if this was not enough, he went on to indicate that "if, for whatever reason, they took something from the pupils, it must be returned at the end of class..." (idem).

In summary, the climate of the educational relationship in the Christian School envisaged by De La Salle, in demanding an availability and self giving from the teacher which was both constant and total, took on the liturgical significance of religious consecration and sacrificial offering. As such it was understood by De La Salle himself; "... It is, in truth, to make a sacrifice of your own life, to use it only in his service..." (MF 70,2) while, elsewhere, he wrote; "...You must consecrate to him completely and give your life, if it were necessary, in order to carry out your duty. Is this how you act? Do you find such generous attitudes within yourself?..." (MR 135,2).

## 2.2. The contents of the educational relationship

Having thus created a bridge, through mutual affection and acceptance, what was the purpose to which De La Salle put it?

### 2.2.1. *To propose a style of life impregnated with the values of the Gospel*

De La Salle summarized this objective in a phrase which was very common in his day; "... Instill in the children the spirit of Christianity which gives them the wisdom of God..." (MF 194,2). One could not be more precise with so few words. Elsewhere he wrote; "... to inculcate Jesus Christ in the hearts of children and to communicate to them the spirit of God..." (MF 80,2).

Christian education, in the Lasallian School, begins with the faith witness of the teacher and develops through four convergent objectives:

1. To know God through faith
2. To adore him through prayer and sacrifice
3. To obey him through the observance of his commandments and by avoiding sin
4. To love him through the grace which he gives us in prayer and the Sacraments ("Duties of a Christian towards God and the means of accomplishing them" - Preface).

The methodology of Christian initiation employed by the teachers in the schools organized by De La Salle is interesting but an analysis of that theme goes beyond the scope of the present work.

### 2.2.2. *The basics of culture*

From the beginning of the Italian catechetical movement, as later with the French movement, aspects of elementary formation showed concern for the Christian education of children. The popular Christian School was the concrete result and expression of this effort in favour of an integral formation of the child and De La Salle's schools were organized on this model. With the exception of catechetics, what was given in these schools was an "apprenticeship" in basic skills such as reading, writing and counting rather than "teaching". At that time such an apprenticeship opened many doors to self-improvement, as the Conduct of Schools indicated when inviting the Brothers to convince parents not to "...withdraw their children from the school when they were too young in order to put them to work..." giving, as the reason, that "... one must make them see the importance that knowing how to read or write has for a working class person since through it, no matter how unintelligent they may be, they are capable of everything..." (CE 16,2,21 = Conduct Part 2, VI, 3°). However, in the Christian School as envisaged by De La Salle, this "secular" learning was not a simple pretext for teaching the Christian faith - it had its own specific contribution as is apparent with total clarity in this question of De La Salle:

Have you taught those secular subjects such as reading and writing , which you are obliged to teach, with as much care as possible? If you have not done so you will have to give a strict account to God..." (MF 91,3).

At the end of these preliminary reflections one may ask what were the means which De La Salle offered to his Brothers in order to guarantee the solidity and permanence of this optimum educational relationship which he sought? What follows are some of the means which he offered:

1. A life of prayer, asceticism and control of oneself.
2. A community of educators who helped each other, shared their educational experiences and evaluated their pedagogical work: "... not to leave a Brother alone in class before he has been trained by a Brother with much experience..." (CE 16,2,12 = Conduct Part 2, VI, 3°).
3. A preoccupation for a good initial formation and for establishing a plan of permanent formation: "... Afterwards, you must withdraw to devote yourselves to reading and to prayer with the aim of assimilating in depth the truths and the maxims which you wish to inculcate..." (MR 200,1).

4. The effort to adapt oneself to the mental and cultural level of the child: "... Children are simple and, for the most part, lacking in education; they require that those who are helping them to save themselves do so in a very simple way so that all the words that they use with the children are clear and easily understood..." (MR 193,3).
5. The equilibrium between tenderness and firmness to which we have referred earlier. De La Salle promoted a school with quality: "that the school should function well" was one of his reiterated phrases. He had such a high regard for the importance of the Christian school that he wanted to optimize its possibilities at all levels - for example, at the academic or organizational levels. Consequently, this was not a question of "occupying" or "entertaining" pupils in class. On the contrary, it went directly to the central objective of his educational project – i.e. to form an adult Christian, an honest citizen, useful to himself and to others as a result of this "pastoral urgency" he wanted a serious tone to characterize his Christian school and the results of this were very soon apparent.

### 3. THE PUPIL IN THE EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIP

When one speaks of the educational relationship between the teacher and pupil in the Christian school envisaged by De La Salle there is one essential reference - his Meditation on the Good Shepherd for the second Sunday after Easter (MD 33) - where he gives a masterly description of the attitudes of both. In his commentary, De La Salle highlights the fact that "the sheep must know the shepherd" and that when he devotes himself to the sheep the result is that "... it arouses in them love of the shepherd, creating a sense of pleasure in being in his company since they find rest and relief in it..." (MD 33,2). De La Salle also hoped that "the sheep would listen to the shepherd and understand him because his instructions were consistent with their capacities" (MD 33,3). "To take pleasure in his company" is certainly a felicitous expression which appropriately reflects the effect of the moral and affective proximity between teacher and pupil which alone makes possible a productive educational dialogue.

The Conduct of Schools is another work of De La Salle in which suggestions of this relational type also appear as in, for example, the chapter on absences of the pupils from school; thus, for example,

"... Children who absent themselves from school through fickleness will be encouraged to come to school more by winning them over through goodness than by correction or harshness..." (CE 16,2,5, = Conduct Part 2, VI, 3<sup>o</sup>). Or, elsewhere,

"...The fourth reason why pupils miss school is because they have little attachment to the teacher because he does not know how to win them over or to encourage them..." (CE 16,2,15). And, finally,

"...The solution to this type of absence lies in the attempts of the teachers to make themselves very kind, presenting themselves as affable and open... doing everything for all pupils so as to draw them all to Jesus Christ..." (CE 16,2,16).

One cannot end this theme without making allusion to a simple and ingenious device of non-verbal communication which was used in De La Salle's schools from the beginning – i.e. the "signal" - and which had much to do with the tranquillity and economy of energy which marked the daily life of these schools. It consisted of two small pieces of wood which were linked together so that when the teacher pressed one against the other it made a very clear and distinct sound: thus,

"...With the aim of favouring the observance of silence, a great number of signals have been devised in the Christian school..." (CE 12,0,2 = Conduct Part 2, II).

The second chapter of Part 2 of the Conduct is entirely dedicated to the use of this "signal". Each sound or gesture made with it had a specific meaning and, as such, really constituted a code of non-verbal communication which was very useful and practical, bearing in mind that, at that time, there were between 60 to 100 pupils in the classes. Another means of communication was by means of the teacher's own bearing. The Conduct indicates various examples: for example,

"...To indicate to a pupil that he should fold his arms the teacher will look directly at him with his own arms folded at the same time..." Or, again,

"...To indicate to a pupil that he should join his hands the teacher will join his own hands and look directly at the pupil. In a word, in these and in similar situations, the teacher will do the same thing that he wants the pupils to do while looking directly at them..." (CE 12,4,1 et 5 = Conduct Part 2,11, 4°).

## **CONCLUSION**

As we have seen, De La Salle was unsparing in providing teaching resources to maintain a physical and spiritual proximity between teacher and pupil in his Christian schools. However, it is evident that the greatest element in this encounter was the reciprocal love between the teacher and his pupil. Far from being a love which stifled or bound, it was a liberating love which was a sacramental sign of the liberating love of God:

"... As teachers of the children whom you educate you have the responsibility to take all possible care to help them achieve the liberty of the sons of God which Jesus Christ attained for us through his death..." (MR 203,2).

It was De La Salle's desire that the sign of this authentic liberating love in the teacher would be his constant dedication to the integral progress of his pupil:

"... Children are the most innocent members of the Church and, normally, the best disposed to respond to the influence of grace. It is the desire of the Lord that you commit yourselves to make them holy so that in all things they grow to full maturity in Jesus Christ who is their head... so that they can partake of the promises of God through Jesus Christ..." (MR 205,3).

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