

The Lasallian Heritage Series

The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility

Volume 1 ★ number 4

Assigned by Br. Joseph Juliano, FSC

Les Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité chrétienne, written between 1694 and 1702 and first published in 1703, is a unique Lasallian document. As a book of decorum and civility which attempted to provide religious motivation for customs in 17th century French society, it has obvious historic, social, and moral value. As a classroom reader originally intended for use by boys in the Brothers' schools, and as a book which had a wide readership even outside the schools for almost two centuries, it is of educational interest. *Les Règles de la Bienséance* is one of the most popular school books on politeness in the history of education and among the most widely read of De La Salle's writings. It is significant for the light it sheds on the personality of John Baptist de La Salle, revealing him as a person of great sensitivity and refinement. The historian Georges Rigault described this book simply as "the work of a gentleman and a saint ... , a basic document of our history."

Part I

Les Règles de la Bienséance, first published in 1703, appeared during the sunset of the Splendid Century in France, the end of the 72-year reign of Louis XIV, and in "the midst of the crisis of the European conscience (1680-1715)," described by the historian and social commentator Paul Hazard in his classic work, *La Crise de la conscience européenne*, published in 1934. Both the crisis, the effects of which are still felt today, and the refinement characteristic of the reign of the Sun King are reflected in this work of De La Salle, which provides an accurate if small-scale image of both.

According to Hazard, one of the most significant symptoms of this 35-year crisis of the European conscience was the disappearance of the "gentleman," the person of culture and refinement. It is neither out of place nor pretentious to consider De La Salle's book a courageous effort to preserve and to perfect that type of human being by giving

decorum and civility a religious motivation. Very early in the preface of *Les Règles de la Bienséance* De La Salle noted "how little true Christianity is found in the world and how few among those who live in the world are guided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ."

De La Salle sought to revive the concept and the reality of the gentleman, the person who acted with decorum (*bienséance*), a self-controlled modesty and propriety even when alone, and with civility (*civilité*), an evangelical courtesy practiced in the presence of others.

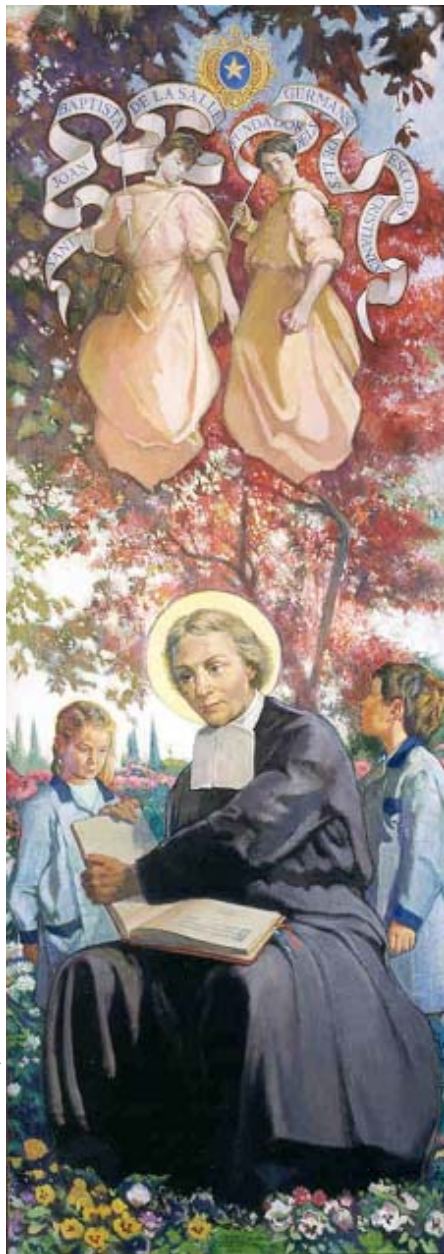
The many details of decorum and civility which De La Salle described show that he was concerned with refinement in all its forms, and that to make his point he was willing and able to describe how the most common details of daily living should be carried out.

De La Salle's efforts were directed originally to the working class and the economically poor but were eventually adopted by the *nouveaux riches*. His ideal - at once clear and uplifting - can be summarized as a simple and God-centered program to integrate the Gospel into all of life. The practices of decorum which he advocated he saw in the light of the spirit of faith, and those he condemned he saw as incompatible with Christian morality.

Hazard noted that when the Italian courtier disappeared as exemplar and guide, the French gentleman succeeded him as the model of good sense, perfectly adjusted to society. The ideal gentleman personified the acceptance of the existing religious, political, and social order and showed how all citizens could find their places without disorder and without revolution, so that all could be happy, or at least contented. Though a mixture of many contrasts, the gentleman

was so well-adjusted that he represented a perfect harmony between common wisdom and social grace, between the needs of the soul and the demands of the body.

The gentleman lived politeness, refinement, and bal-



ance. He avoided all excess, even in doing good, and was never disturbed over anything, except the possibility of losing honor. He trained himself through a constant discipline and a determined vigilance to excel at the difficult task of keeping himself under control. The gentleman, with a discreet heroism, controlled his inclination and expressed himself only in harmony with the best of his society.

We find a portrait of this gentleman in most minute detail in rules of politeness set down by others besides De La Salle. However, De La Salle emphasized the Christian motivation and purpose for the life of the gentleman, and he sought to restore the ideal of the gentleman to compatibility with a life of Christian faith. De La Salle's emphasis was in direct contrast to that of De Fontenelle Bayle, Saint-Evremond, and other free-thinkers, some of them his contemporaries, whose aim was to eliminate the supernatural completely and follow only the light of reason proposed in the writings of Descartes.

De La Salle sought instead to limit the impact of rationalism on the Christian School, and he believed that a code of decorum and civility could be an excellent aid to the Christian educator involved in the work of preserving and fostering faith and morals in youth. He believed that while good manners were not always the expression of good morals, they could contribute strongly to building the established customs and thereby protecting the established social order; he envisioned them more deeply as expressions of a sincere charity. In this way the refinement of the gentleman would become a restraint on and an antidote to self-centeredness, the root of individual moral transgressions as well as the collec-

tive evil in human society.

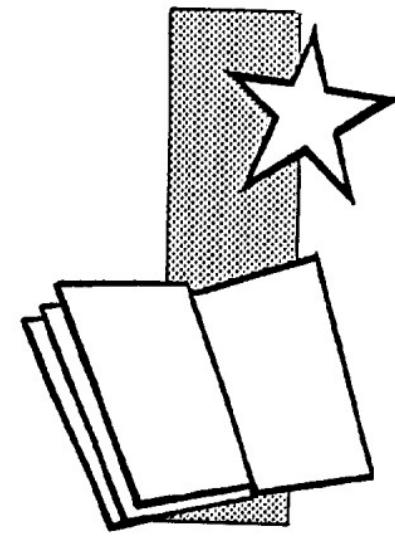
How successful was De La Salle in achieving his goal, and what was the impact of his work? On this point the historian Georges Rigault suggests that the Christian who followed all the directives set down in *Les Règles de la Bienséance* would be well on his way to achieving the ideal of the gentleman. And even if that person lacked some of the social graces, he would not commit any grave faults or be guilty of any serious improprieties. Then Rigault adds:

And during the 18th century, it was from this work of M. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, priest, doctor of theology, and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian School, that the children of the people in France learned how to live as individuals who had a certain education and who took the Gospel to heart.

Roger Chartier in *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* notes:

In point of fact, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle quite scrupulously respects the social differences that determines conduct. Appearance must indicate not only the divine part of man or of the qualities of his soul, but also his rank ... Even as they claim to teach a modesty identified with the law of God and a sense of propriety that is sincerity and charity, La Salle's *Les Règles de la Bienséance* are also a training in social order and an introduction to a world in which gestures of civility are to express clearly understood social relations. It is not enough, then, to act in conformity with one's own condition; we must judge, in each situation, the respective social quality of other people so that difference between them can be respected accurately.

... Republished many times during the 18th century, these rules were perhaps one of the most efficacious agents for the implantation of elite models of comportment among the lower echelons of society. While they Christianized the foundations of civility, the rules also offered to a large juvenile audience from many levels of society norms of conduct that were new, constraining, and demanding.



Part II

Les Règles de la Bienséance is also of interest as a Lasallian pedagogical document because, in addition to being a book of politeness, it was intended to be a classroom reader used by the children, and it reveals some of De La Salle's genius as an educator. According to Blain, an early biographer of De La Salle, it was "of all the writings of the holy priest ... the one to which he gave the most care."

Contemporaries of De La Salle who wrote on politeness, with rare exceptions, showed little concern for the arrangements and the organization of their material. This disorganization usually diminished the usefulness of the text as a didactic work. De La Salle, however, paid much attention to the organization of his material.

In *The Conduct*, his principal work dealing with the theory and the practice of education, De La Salle gave the Brothers clear directions on teaching reading and on the particular texts to be used. A student was taught systematically, progressing from less difficult to more difficult readers, mastering each satisfactorily before going on to the next. Only the students on the 6th or 7th level, those proficient in reading French, were to use *Les Règles de la Bienséance*. And since these students were at the same time learning to read and write manuscripts, this work was printed in a Gothic typeface, which is similar to handwriting and more difficult to read.

The historian and educator Ferdinand Buisson calls attention to other practices



which show the value of the way *Les Règles de la Bienséance* was used as a reader:

De La Salle required the students to explain what they had read. He sought a reasonable method of instruction ... The teacher must have carefully read and studied in advance the material the students would be asked to read ... Above all he was to question the students to determine whether they could apply to themselves what they had read, something they could do only if they understood it.

Another feature of *Les Règles de la Bienséance* which indicated De La Salle's practical knowledge of the way children learn is both the detail and the repetition in the text, traits which would be tedious in a book intended only as a treatise on politeness.

Part III

In addition to its interest as a pedagogical work, *Les Règles de la Bienséance* is significant as a Lasallian document because of the light it sheds on De La Salle himself as a person of refinement, "a gentleman and a saint."

Les Règles de la Bienséance reveals De La Salle was a man of energy and virility. The practice he encourages require considerable discipline and self-denial, as well as a solid understanding of what is required if one is to be civil and refined. We can be certain that before he proposed these numerous rules to others De La Salle had practiced them himself. He was born into a wealthy family with a long tradition of refinement; he was not one of the *nouveaux riches*. He himself learned the rules of decorum and civility from his upbringing in a Christian family and a disciplined education during his formative years. Having required a sense of refinement almost imperceptibly from his earliest years, he considered it to be inseparable from Christianity and was perfectly at ease in writing about it. So, while neither boasting of his background nor denying it, De La Salle could set forth the basic rules of propriety quite naturally. Further, a major guiding force in his life was the awareness of the presence of God, which led him to submit to what he perceived to be proper and right.

De La Salle's early biographers did not make good use of *Les Règles de la Bienséance* when trying to understand De La Salle himself. As a book of politeness, it was considered only as an impersonal treatise intended for the use of students and not as a work which could enhance our perception of De La Salle as a person. But this book is an integral part of De La Salle's writings, and even if it is not the same kind of work as, for example, his *Method of Interior Prayer*, or *Meditations for Sundays of the Year*, it deserves to be studied by those who wish to un-



derstand De La Salle. In its own way it reveals both the saint and the man.

Les Règles de la Bienséance shows De La Salle to have been very much the refined person of his time, one deeply influenced by the dominant characteristics of his culture and society, a good example of the person of decorum and civility as conceived by his contemporaries and as described in this text. It reveals De La Salle as a saintly gentleman, integrating in his own life the Gospel faith and the norms of society and culture.

Part IV

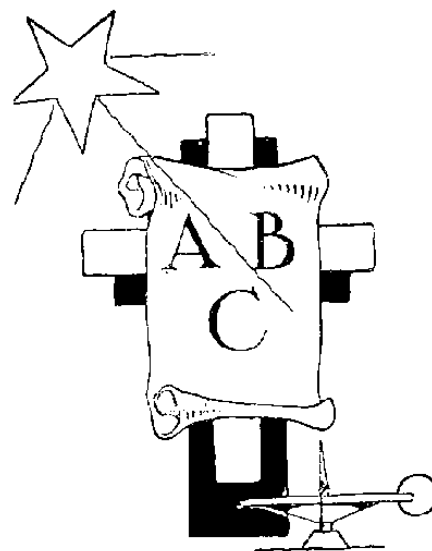
After an extensive study of books on politeness for children, Alcide Bonneau, a 19th century scholar, declared that the true source of most of these books was a text by the 16th century Dutch humanist, Erasmus. However, after seeking to establish an actual, direct connection between the work of Erasmus and that of De La Salle, Bonneau concluded, "The author of *Les Règles de la Bienséance*

does not seem to have made use of the text by Erasmus. His was an original work."

Although Bonneau was not able to trace any of De La Salle's ideas even indirectly to Erasmus, *Les Règles de la Bienséance* is not the original work Bonneau believed it to be. Recent research indicates that De La Salle relied extensively on several books published between 1649 and 1685. As was customary at the time, De La Salle did not identify the many direct quotations which he culled from his sources, but contemporary books on politeness were the source of almost all of his material. It is in the adaptations and additions that he made to the borrowed material, and particularly in the motive that he provided for acting with refinement and civility, that De La Salle's originality is revealed.

In his opening observations in the preface, De La Salle sets out the religious motivation which he proposes to the reader:

It is surprising that most Christians look upon decorum and politeness as merely human and worldly qualities and do not think of raising their minds to any higher views by considering them as virtues that have reference to God, to their neighbor, and to themselves. This illustrates very well how little true Christianity is found in the world and how few among those who live in the world are guided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Still, it is this Spirit alone which should inspire all



our actions, making them holy and agreeable to God.”

De La Salle insists that parents and teachers should teach the many details of politeness in a manner that will motivate children to be courteous and civil not through worldly ambitions or fears, but by an awareness of “the presence of God.” “In other words, children should do these things out of respect for God in whose presence they are.”

When teaching children and training them to observe the practices of decorum that refer to their neighbor, teachers should urge them to show others those signs of consideration, honor, and respect appropriate to members of Jesus Christ and living temples of God, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

De La Salle believed that Christians motivated by the awareness of the presence of God, and acting out of respect for themselves and for others, would “live like true Christians, for their exterior behavior will be conformable to that of Jesus Christ and will correspond with their Christian profession.”

Throughout the text, De La Salle also reinforces this motivation with citations from Scripture on living and early Church writings.

De La Salle’s emphasis on living in the presence of God and acting in view of God and in union with Jesus Christ gives *Les Règles de la Bienséance* a special quality and an originality which distinguishes it from other works of the same genre and the same historical period.

Part V

Les Règles de la Bienséance was frequently reprinted and regularly reedited during the 18th and 19th centuries, and certainly it can be regarded as a best seller, possibly among the most frequently reprinted and most extensively read books on politeness in the history of education.

De La Salle had, of course, no intention of imposing on posterity the rules of politeness of the Splendid Century. No doubt, he would have been quite astonished if someone had told him that his work, which first appeared in 1703, would still be read in 1875. Perhaps it

survived so long because, as Ferdinand Buisson noted,

It is a short work, flexible and without pretensions, and at times, even naïve, but admirably suited to those for whom it is written. It goes without saying that it is based on religion, but at the same time it contains some of the best lessons regarding human morality.

The preceding was cited from the Introduction to John Baptist de La Salle’s *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* edited by Gregory Wright, FSC.

