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Designed by Bz. Joseph Juliano, FSC

The Use of Correction in The Conduct of the Christian Schools

Background & Influences

The 17th century was a time of crisis for traditional elementary education in France. A new kind of primary school teacher appeared, and a new manner of education developed in which corporal punishment diminished, school attendance increased, and French came into its own as the language of education. John Baptist de La Salle was one of the prime movers of this educational reform, and *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes, The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, is the instrument of his success.

Hundreds of treatises on pedagogy were published in the 17th century. The grand career of a philosopher or an essayist such as Montaigne or Fleury was not complete unless it included a treatise on education. The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Reformation converged in agreement upon the importance of primary schooling. Nearly every page of the register of the deliberations of a French town council under the *ancien régime* has to do with questions of education: contracting for a new teacher, levying a municipal tax for education, repairing the roof of the *grande école*, or just setting a date for the distribution of school prizes. The Jesuits had achieved a reputation for excellence in secondary education that was recognized throughout Europe. The convent schools run by nuns of the Ursuline and Visitation orders flourished as finishing schools for wealthy girls. Since the time of Louise de Marillac and Alix LeClerc many women had opted for the innovative non-cloistered, religious community lifestyle emerging in the Catholic Church. Many of these women were committed to the education of poor girls in parish schools, and at the time of De La Salle there were thousands of these teaching “Sisters” throughout France. In general, there was no lack of primary schooling in France when John Baptist de La Salle came on the educational scene.

The weakest element in French primary education, however, was the preparation of its male teachers. Teaching the poor in primary schools was an unattractive, often part-time position filled by those unable to do better elsewhere. A 17th century pamphlet lampooned the superintendent of schools in

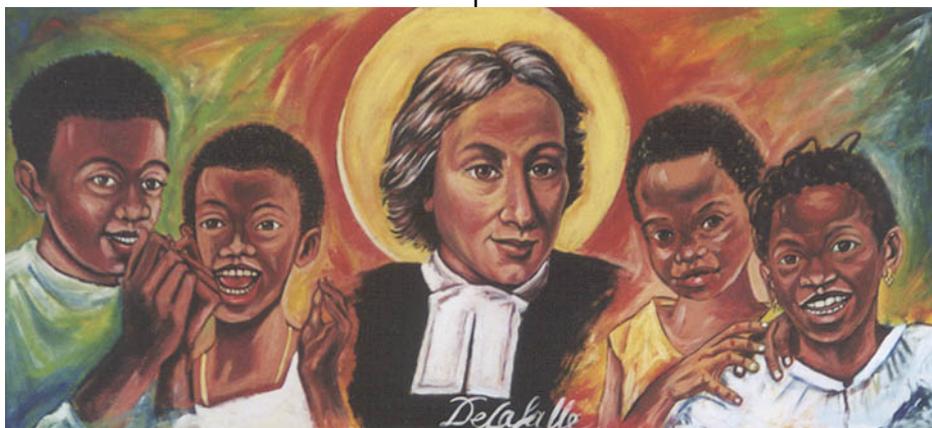
Paris, *le grand chanter*, for employing as teachers a motley collection of “low pot-house keepers, second-hand proprietors, silk-weaver flunkies, wig makers, and marionette string pullers.” Invectives such as these reveal the deep dissatisfaction that the male teachers provoked. Even the clergy involved in education, particularly in rural areas, were neither well-educated nor trained as teachers.

Traditionally, primary school teachers were under the authority of the diocesan superintendent of schools, whose responsibility it was to guarantee that the increase in the number of schools for the poor did not cause financial hardship for the teachers. With Gallican stubbornness, Claude Joly, the superintendent of schools in Paris, carried on a fight in the courts for 40 years to resist the enforcement of the decrees of the Council of Trent to decentralize authority over teachers in the reform of the parish schools. De La Salle was caught in this conflict between the problems of primary schooling for the poor and the forces resisting educational reform.

Following upon the path taken by the teaching Sisters, De La Salle struggled his entire life to train male primary teachers for both urban and rural schools. The results of De La Salle’s efforts at teacher education indicate only partial success. The training institutes for rural school-teachers that he established in Rethel, Reims, Paris, and Saint Denis during a 30 year period all closed after a few years, primarily due to opposition from the established educational authorities (Writing Masters and Masters of the Little Schools). However, in forming city school-teachers, De La Salle enjoyed considerable success. With the intention of forming and animating these school-teachers with an evangelical spirit and total dedication to the instruction and Christian education of the children of the working class and the poor, De La Salle founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. *The Conduct* is the result of 35 years of collaboration between the educational guidance of De La Salle and the classroom experience of these teachers, who were called

Brothers.

De La Salle did not operate in an educational vacuum, and *The Conduct* was not created *ex nihilo*. His own schooling, his association with friends actively in-



volved in teacher-education reform, his study of the works of earlier and contemporary educational innovators, and, above all, his sharing in the classroom experience of his Brothers, all contributed to the writings of *The Conduct*. As good teachers often reflect the good teaching they received, so it was with De La Salle. His own schooling began at the college of the University of Reims, continuing at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris, and concluded with a doctorate from the University of Reims.

Through his association with his close friend Nicolas Roland, De La Salle became familiar with work of the teaching Sisters and worked to obtain legal approval for the Sisters of the Congregation of the Infant Jesus, who taught poor girls and orphans in Reims. At a chance meet-



ing in the Sisters' convent with Adrien Nyel, De La Salle unwittingly got caught up in the educational reform movement erupting in northeastern France. Adrien Nyel, a dedicated charity school teacher and administrator from Rouen, introduced De La Salle to the problems of establishing primary schools for the sons of the working class and the poor, and together they formed a six-year partnership for the establishment of these schools. Nyel worked at opening schools; De La Salle worked at forming teachers.

De La Salle's spiritual advisor, Nicolas Barré, founded twin congregations of teaching Sisters and Brothers in Rouen and Paris. Barré's teaching sisters flourished; but the Brothers who were established by Barré, and who for a while were sometimes mistaken by the public in Paris as De La Salle's teaching Brothers, quickly vanished without a trace. Despite his own failure to establish a permanent foundation of male teachers, Barré encouraged De La Salle in that very task. When De La Salle was discouraged and

ready to abandon the project, Barré was among those who inspired him to keep going. Barré's pedagogical writings, a rule for teachers living in community entitled *Statutes and Regulations*, and a book of reflections for teachers, entitled *Maximes*, became inspirational works for De La Salle.

De La Salle was also influenced by Charles Démia, the remarkable educational reformer and superintendent of schools in the diocese of Lyon. Démia outlined his teacher reform in *Reglements*, a book of rules for teachers. Despite Démia's influence, De La Salle's organization for educational reform was very different from Démia's. De La Salle envisioned his community of lay teachers in terms of one autonomous, centralized organization serving all of France and deliberately divorced clerical identification and diocesan territorial limitations.

Furthermore, De La Salle was directly influenced in writing *The Conduct* by the work of Jacques de Barthencour, a priest who taught for 18 years in the parish school of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet in Paris. The wealth of De Barthencour's experience was published in 1654 under the title, *L'École paroissiale (The Parish School)*. This book became the official manual for the more than 300 primary school teachers in Paris and was also popular as well in the other cities of France. *L'École paroissiale* was the best that 17th century France could provide for primary education, but it was not adequate to De La Salle's vision of the Christian school. De Barthencour did provide De La Salle with the practical paradigm for *The Conduct*, whose own structure and content are best understood in contrast with that of *L'École paroissiale*.

L'École paroissiale is divided into four parts. Like a seminary manual, the book begins by deducing the theological and moral virtues needed by the teacher "for such a humble occupation." The second part deals with religious instruction: the various catechisms to be used and the method of preparing students for the sacraments. The third part deals with secular instruction: reading in Latin and French, penmanship, Latin grammar, and the daily schedule. The fourth part constitutes a separate student handbook and deals with the rules for writing in French, the four operations in arithmetic, a short

form of the catechism, the rules of politeness, and the rules for plain chant.

In general, De La Salle reversed the order of *L'École paroissiale* and infused the material with a new vision. He eliminated the deductive and somewhat demeaning approach of De Bathencour's work and established practical school experience as the basis of his approach to teacher training. He emphasized a practical orientation to spelling and arithmetic. He transformed education into a group learning event and curtailed the great amount of time spent by the teacher in supervising the solitary recitation of individual students. He held to what was then understood as small class size, fifty to sixty instead of eighty or a hundred students, and identified a strong teacher-student relationship as the key to learning. He eliminated the practices of discriminating against the poor and of disciplining slow students by ridicule, and tempered and restructured the authority of school monitors.

De La Salle made religious instruction the heart of his school and created a simple, uniform curriculum and the method for use in all Lasallian establishments. In a notable change he joined a small, radical movement by teaching reading directly through the French language instead of the almost universal method of using first Latin as the model.



Finally, *The Conduct* needs to be complemented by De La Salle's vision of teaching as a Christian ministry. The vision is presented in *Meditations for the Time of Retreat (Cahiers Lasalliens, 13)*. In his last years, De La Salle gave an expression to the evangelical dimension of a teacher's life in these meditations. They provide a profound and personal synthe-

sis of his own life in teacher education. Perhaps nowhere else in the history of education has such an exalted and spiritual conception of the teacher been developed in richer detail. These meditations are 16 religious reflections on a new kind of teacher-student relationship, which is based on love and mutual respect. De La Salle calls the teacher to a tender, fraternal, and concerned conversation. The teachers are invited to see themselves as called by God to touch and to win the hearts of the students, to be like an older “brother” who guides them, and to act as a guardian angel entrusted with protecting the physical and moral welfare of these young people. The teacher’s love, “as gentle as a mother and as firm as a father,” is to be understood as the visible sacrament of the love of God for each child.

The Conduct prescribes the practices which follow upon the images described in *The Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. The teachers, no longer called “Masters” but “brothers,” apply themselves to acquire an attractive, affable, and approachable appearance. They put themselves within reach of the students and speak to the children on their own level. They do not use clever words; every word is clear and easy to understand. They are sympathetic with the vulnerabilities of the young and the difficulties of growing up; and they are concerned for the mental, physical, social, and moral development of each student.

The above adapted from The Introduction by Edward Everett, FSC from *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.

Introductory Remarks on Correction

An Overview

The correction of the students is one of the most important things to be done in the schools. The greatest care must be taken in order that it may be timely and beneficial both for those who receive it and for those who witness it. For this reason, there are many things to be considered in regard to the use of the correction which may be administered in the schools and which will be discussed in the following pages. This will be done after the necessity of joining gentleness to firmness in the guidance of children has been explained.

Understanding the Time & Setting of the Text

It will be sufficient to observe what is practiced today in various countries or what we learn from the history of education, to be convinced that the idea of school discipline and recourse to certain punishments depend essentially on what is practiced in this sphere among the people in general and particularly in the family.

The school cannot but help being a reflection or echo of society and its mentality. To mention this is not to render a value judgment. It is important that there be homogeneity between the school’s system of punishment and that of society. If not, the child would be disoriented or would favor attending the institution which he feels is the most favorable. It can easily be verified that a permissive society engenders a school



with liberal discipline; a liberal milieu brings about a let-them-do-as-they-please school atmosphere, etc. Thus, the concept of authority and the ways this authority is exercised are revealed. It is the education of the child’s personality which comes into play here.

The Conduct does not escape this school-society relationship. The history of education and the scholastic iconography of the 17th century often present us with teachers as possessors of a discipline which they are supposed to exercise without weakness. Their main teaching aid is often the whip or the rod, symbols and instruments of their authority. “Corporal punishment” is taken for granted, but it can be substituted for by

an arsenal of reprimands, punishments, penances, dismissal, etc. It even seems that certain teachers abused these sanc-

“If it is desirable that a school be well regulated and in a very good order, then punishments must be rare.”

tions to the point of discouraging students from attending their classes regularly. The rough character of certain pupils, the poor organization of the school, the occasions of mutually dragging out the time between one lesson and another, etc., were, without doubt, excuses for such conduct. It would be hypocritical to be shocked today by an authority which seemed to be so natural to the parents of the period.

It is, therefore, in such a context that the chapter “On Corrections” in *The Conduct* must be read. However, the topic must have preoccupied the authors of this work because they devote no fewer than 40 pages to it, after having only 2 pages “On Rewards.”

The following is the dilemma that is faced by De La Salle and the first Brothers who produced *The Conduct*:

- How to establish sufficient discipline in school to have the good order necessary for serious work;
- At the same time, how to avoid any abuse of punishment which would so discourage pupils that they would quit school.

This discipline also contains various considerations regarding the personality of the child; respecting him as a child of God, touching and winning his heart, making him see the punishment as being just and accept it as **coming from God**. For this reasons, the 40 pages in *The Conduct* contain an abundance of explanations and precautions which clearly try to show how to prevent devious conduct on the part of the students so they do not have to be punished. It is interesting to recall briefly the scope of this reflection. It remains strongly instructional for us today.

A Brief Description of Possible Punishments

In view of assuring order and maintaining discipline in the class, *The Conduct* proposes to teachers five kinds of sanctions for possible trouble makers: “The faults of the children can be corrected in

several different ways: 1. by reprimands; 2. by penances; 3. by the ferule; 4. by the rod; 5. by expulsion from school." It goes without saying that using numbers three and four are out of the question when dealing with student correction today.

As one of the principal rules of the Brothers is to speak rarely in their schools:

- the use of reprimands ought to be very rare,
- it seems even much better not to use them at all;
- threats should be used only with great circumspection.

Expulsion from school, the supreme punishment, ought to be rare and justifiable.



How Not to Punish

It seems that it is the teacher who is the cause of the frequency of corrections in the class because of the way he conducts the group, how he exercises his authority, and by showing mediocre teaching methods. This is why *The Conduct* affirms:

To avoid frequent punishments, which are a source of great disorder in a school, it is necessary to note well that it is silence, restraint, and watchfulness on the part of the teacher that establish and maintain good order in a class, and not harshness and blows. A constant effort must be made to act with skill and ingenuity in order to keep the pupils in order while making almost no use of punishments.

Other means are likewise pointed out:

- Do not always use the same method, for you run the risk of having the pupils get used to them;

- if a threat is given, it is necessary to punish without pardon, for simple threats would not be effective;
- and threats should usually be by signs, although it might be possible to speak to certain pupils in a strong manner in view of intimidating them.

Punishments

Punishments should play a curative role and even sometimes a preventative one. They should never be given without ridicule, should not be limited to mere words, and should be administered with disturbing the silence or good order of the class, and without wasting time.

The penance which would be the most appropriate and the most useful is to give the students something to learn by heart.

The careful circumscribing of corporal punishment could make us unaware that the most usual corrective action in the school was through "penances." These consisted in something to be done, not to "make up" for the misdemeanor but to correct it.

The use of penances will be much more usual in school than corporal punishment; they put off the student less, hurt the parents' feelings less and are much more useful. The aim is to humble them and put them in the disposition of heart to correct themselves of their faults; they will be medicinal and proportionate to the faults the students commit, so that they may help to make satisfaction to God and be moreover a preserving remedy to prevent them failing afterwards.

The punishment was meant to fit the crime, but in no vindictive way. One of the most suitable penances and one of the greatest utility, is to give the students something to learn by heart. It was never something meaningless.

In order to be useful to the students, punishment should be accompanied by the following ten conditions:

- pure and disinterested, that is to say, administered for elevated and religious motives;
- inspired by pure charity; "He who loves well, chastises well;"
- just, and should appear in the eyes of the pupil;
- appropriate to the fault committed;

- moderate, that is, neither too light or too strong;
- given and received calmly;
- prudent and free from any subsequent anger by the pupil;
- voluntarily accepted by the pupil who recognizes his fault;
- respectful on the part of the pupil who receives it;
- silence, both on the part of the pupil and that of the teacher.

The needs prerequisite to each punishment are, then, very numerous. Before punishing, we must take these into consideration and we should recognize that punishment should be a last resort and one almost impossible to avoid. It is likewise significant to note the religious and moral components which enter into account. In the 17th century, in the schools, one meted out punishment as exercising God's authority. Those who broke the laws were indebted toward God because they had compromised their own perfection and also gave bad example.

On the personal level, it should be understood that correction ought to show the self-mastery both of the one receiving it and of the one dispensing it. The subjective elements of the desire for revenge, anger, passion, or indignation and resentment, should never come into play. This self-mastery is one of the essential objects of education, in particular in the search "of good manners and Christian politeness," as the title of another work of De La Salle indicates. Hence, the punishment should never sever the good relationship between the teachers and the students, nor their mutual affection.

Punishing with Discernment:



This chapter on punishments also contains an article concerning "Children who should not be punished." It is an attempt at a psycho-pedagogical differentiation, which was the result of prolonged observation and the experience of the Brothers who re-edited *The Conduct*.

There are five faults which ordinarily must not go without punishment. 1. Lying, 2. Fighting, 3. Stealing, 4. Impurity, 5. Poor behavior in church.

The Conduct next gives some explanations of each of these five "vices." Still, it can be easily seen that these deal with "relational" conduct and not with personal conduct: these failings concern either students or God. Here again, the idea of "good example" reappears as it does so often in *The Conduct*. Each student, as well as the teacher himself, must unceasingly give good example in his relations with others and in the worship he is called upon to render to God. It is for this reason also that penances or punishments should be given and administered publicly, for they have an "exemplary" value. It is precisely this exemplary value which justifies the unbending attitude expressed above.

On the contrary, the psychological observation ought to dissuade one from punishing certain students if it is judged that the punishment would be ineffective or even would lead to negative consequences for the child. Thus, one should avoid punishing:

- stubborn and ill-bred students who could be brazen, insolent, haughty, or frivolous;
- the stubborn who resist or murmur;
- excessively timid children and those who are meek, dull, or pampered by their parents;
- children who are sick, the smallest ones on the class, new-comers who are not yet familiar with the set-up of the school.

Definitely, here we run the risk of having a large numbers of students "exempt" from punishment. It is very interesting, in the context of the period in which *The Conduct* was written, to examine the reasons which are given each time to justify these exemptions. It shows that the teacher ought to develop, through a series of empirical observations, what we would call a psycho-pedagogy.

Faults to be Avoided in Punishments

Still, sometimes necessity obliges a teacher to correct certain students. However, in view of avoiding any abuse, error, or over-haste, it is fitting that certain rules of prudence be respected. On reading *Article 4 On Corrections*, one can see more than fourteen elements to be taken into consideration: (the original list has been edited to keep up-to-date with modern pedagogy. One element - Not exceeding the number of blows - would not be a wise punishment in today's society.)

- Judge whether or not the punishment will be advantageous for the student and his companions.
- If possible, and after consulting with the Director (Administration), see if the punishment could be deferred.
- Be sure the punishment will in no way be harmful to the student concerned.
- Be sure that it does not lead to disorder in the class nor cause such bitterness at home that the child will quit school.
- Examine yourself to be sure that you are not led by a certain aversion or lack of esteem for the one about to be punished.
- Do not correct after the student has shown a lack of respect or out of spite.
- Do not talk to the students too familiarly when meting out punishment nor use language which is too domineering.
- Do not use any words which are injurious or unbecoming.
- Do not use any other punishments than those planned.
- Moderate your anger and do not strike the student.
- Do not make any swift punishment, nor when moved by anger or impatience.
- Do not permit or allow any unbecoming posture, etc.

It is quite evident that the teacher who respects the prerequisite conditions, who exempts certain categories of students, who has enough self-mastery to respect the above rules, should not have too many occasions for punishing!

In Conclusion

The wealth of precautions very evident show that the teacher ought to really examine himself when he finds himself confronted with the question of punish-

ments. The essential thing is the conducting of the class and in the affirmation of a serene and balanced authority. I do not think that anyone could speak about the first Brothers having a repressive pedagogy, for the Preface of *The Conduct* exhorts them in the following way:

The Brothers will apply themselves with great care to being faithful to observe all that is contained and prescribed for them herein, persuaded that they will have order in class only to the extent that they are exact in not omitting anything, and that they receive this book as being their gift from God, through the instrumentality of their superiors and principal Brothers of the Institute."

The preceding information was adapted from a series of articles first published in English in the periodical entitled *Lasalliana* under numbers 02-A-12 through 09-A-47. The author is Brother Léon Lauraire, FSC, who was at the time, Secretary for Education for the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Casa Generalizia, Rome, Italy. Additional material from the work of Brother Dominic Everette, FSC, and his thesis: *John Baptist de La Salle's Conduct of the Christian Schools: A Guide to Teacher Education* has been added to Brother Lauraire's work.

