

THE LASALLIAN SCHOOL: A BROTHERHOOD EXPERIENCED IN LIFE LEADING TO A BROTHERHOOD LEARNED BY EXPERIENCE.

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ABSTRACT

We offer here the text of the conference given within the framework of the Symposium at Rennes, on 13th October, 2011. The author reflects on the pedagogical contribution of Jean Baptiste de La Salle from the starting point of brotherhood in the school. From that starting point, the author asks how the school can manage to become a school of brotherhood.

Key words: school, brotherhood, Christian concept of the person, example, reciprocity.

Introduction

Within the framework of this symposium, I was asked to present to you John Baptist de La Salle as the pedagogue that he was. I have chosen to approach the matter from the point of view of education to brotherhood.

At first, this choice may seem surprising.

- More often than not, with no forethought, the school is perceived by students, and sometimes by teachers, as a place of constraints. There are intellectual constraints, because the ideas of other people have to be absorbed; the spontaneity of personal thought seems to be pushed aside. There are disciplinary constraints because regulations have to be respected, together with the teachers' authority, the hierarchical structures, and study programmes. To say the least, freedom seems to be curtailed in those circumstances. On the other hand, the Brothers' schools were not deemed to be lax; rather they were reputed to have a certain amount of strictness. And yet, no brotherhood exists without freedom.
- Besides, J-B de La Salle was a man of other times since his life unfolded during the transitional period between the XVII and the XVIII centuries. The society to which he belonged was a hierarchical society, divided up into "Etats" (States); and, although bourgeois people became gentlemen, birth very often created social differences which could not be bridged between members of this society.

- On the other hand, he created schools at a time when such an institution was accused among other things of recreating social inequalities, or even of accentuating them, of drawing up hierarchies of talents, of dividing up pupils into categories of good and bad ones. Well, there cannot be brotherhood without equality.

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From these observations, one could pick out the utopian or even anachronistic slant of what I have just outlined. However from this utopia was born an educational tradition which prevails even today and it continues to grow in 80 countries of the world situated on the 5 continents. This illustrates the fact that these values and the practise carried by this tradition meet up with the worries, the expectations of educators, of families, of young people who are geographically and culturally very different from each other.

My presentation will attempt to answer two questions:

- a. Why did J.B. de La Salle place the concern of brotherhood at the very heart of his educational project?
- b. How can brotherhood be shown and be learned at school?

First Part: The roots of brotherhood for J.B. de La Salle

On what should human brotherhood be founded? What led J.B. de La Salle to give it such prominence in his own life and his lifetime work? These are questions I will attempt to answer. What is at play is not, at first encounter, a better knowledge of the initiator of an educational tradition which we call lasallian. Rather, at play are our own reasons to integrate and to promote the ideal of brotherhood in our own lives and in our teaching.

The discovery of a potential

J.B. de La Salle's approach to brotherhood is not ideological at first. Rather, it is the fruit of a life journey and of a lived experience.

One of the central themes in the life of Jean-Baptiste de La Salle is the journey of a man from a brotherhood lived with intensity in his own family to an unexpected social brotherhood in order to build a universal human and spiritual brotherhood. Allow me to explain what I mean.

J.B. de La Salle was the eldest of 6 brothers and sisters. Following the untimely death of his parents, he became their guardian. He assumed that role with care, taking to heart the education of his brothers and sisters, defending their financial and legal interests. He played the role of "big brother".

His meeting with the first teachers turned his life upside down. At the outset, everything separated them: their social class (he said later that he "placed them below his servants"); their education (they were boorish in comparison with the refined education that he had received, so much so that "the very thought that I had to live in their company was unbearable to me"); their culture (he was a doctor in theology, they could hardly read or write); their wealth (he came from the high bourgeois class of Rheims, just like Louvois and Colbert); they were poor wretches always under the threat of poverty

and despised by society¹. However, a few years later, to the great displeasure of his own family, J.B. de La Salle and his schoolmasters took on the name of Brothers to share together their life and their work. This also caused scandal among the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy whose member he was as Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, the place where the Kings of France were crowned. Just think: a priest becoming involved with laymen of the lowest class. 77

For J.B. de La Salle, brotherhood was both handed down and learned by experience. It was handed down within the framework of his family. It was also learned through his choice of life and through conviction. This development was drawn up at the cost of a long struggle against self, against his social milieu, against the prejudice and well established social and religious patterns. Nonetheless, this struggle was to be fertile.

In the case of J.B. de La Salle it showed its fertility with the growth of a profession - that of schoolmaster - to which he conferred the seal of nobility. It resulted in the creation of a network of institutions at the service of children who had been deprived up to that time.

His example showed therefore that brotherhood was not spontaneous. It required effort, break ups, overstepping the conditioning resulting from our cultural, social and religious roots and background.

1. A certain vision of Man

The fundamental element of this vision is that every human being is perceived as having infinite value. J.B. de La Salle was a Christian. For him Man draws his value from his relation to God, whether he is aware of this fact or not. In fact this relation entails two fundamental aspects whose initiative is God's own: Man has only to recognise them.

- According to Genesis, man is "created in the image of God". Now, in the Christian idea of God, which is at the heart of J.B. de La Salle's faith, the essence of God is a relation. In theological terminology we say that God is Trinity, unity in three persons linked by love. It is not by chance that when the Brothers make their commitment they address themselves to God as Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Brotherhood is one of the expressions of the wish and the need for love which are the elements of this resemblance to God in every human being.
- The second aspect of this relation between man and God is that God identifies himself with every single human being, especially the least among them, writing to the Brothers, J.B. de La Salle said: "*Recognise Jesus under the poor rags of the children you have to instruct: adore him in them, love poverty and honour the poor...; for poverty must be agreeable to you who are responsible for the instruction of the poor*"².
- To speak of poverty as being agreeable is somewhat surprising. In fact, it cannot be agreeable unless, for a man who is a victim of poverty, it is perceived as a way of reaching out to the poverty of a God who lived and ended his human life as a poor among the poor, an outcast

¹"This use of the term (schoolmasters) is open to contempt, very often the function is fulfilled by wretches, unknown individuals, worthless people" (Charles Demia) – Mentioned in *The Conduct of Schools. A Comparative Approach* – Leon Lauraire – Collection Cahiers lasalliens n.63, p. 63 – Rome 2011.

² Meditations on the Principal Feasts of the Year 96.3 in *Meditations by John Baptiste de La Salle* (1994, Christian Brothers Conference).

among the outcasts. In the eyes of J.B. de La Salle, brotherhood with those who do not belong to his privileged world finds therein all its meaning and strength.

2. *A certain concept of education*

All pedagogical and educational innovation is founded upon a certain concept of education which draws attention to this or that particular need of the young and is translated in attitudes and practices. What salient points in education will make J.B. de La Salle particularly sensitive to the subject of brotherhood in the life of the school, for the adults as well as for the youngsters?

Here are some points I would like to emphasize in particular.

- The conviction that **there cannot be education unless all the person's aspects and the life of the young are taken into account.**

This vision of school training is not self-evident. Some would consider the pupil as a “learner”, in other words an intelligence to be formed, a head to be filled with a body of knowledge. Others consider the school as a place of refuge to which the outside world must not have access; where the pupil must leave behind the essential elements of his personal life: his convictions, his searching questions on life, his family culture, and his interpersonal relationships.

For J.B. de La Salle the school must aim at an education of the whole person: intelligence, body, mind, heart. That is the reason why the apprenticeship to brotherhood finds its place there. In a society which was very compartmentalized, very stratified from the social and cultural aspects, the school must have appeared to him as the melting pot of a more fraternal society. Later we shall see the concrete ways he implemented, some of which – in particular free scolarity – brought him a lot of troubles from those who supported a corporate model of education rooted on privilege.

Today when we hear talk of “a breakdown in the social ladder” and talk of communitarianism, are we so far from this type of compartmentalized and stratified society?

- The conviction that the **educational task is only possible when a relation of the heart has a place between the adult and the young person.**

This conviction entails two aspects:

- a. The school must be a place where the young are happy to attend.

The first Brothers were confronted with the problem of absenteeism. In 1698, King Louis XIV published a “Declaration” which ordered all parents to send their children to school up to the age of fourteen. It was at age that the apprenticeship scheme with professional bodies started. Those who showed negligence in the matter were to be punished by fines or heavier penalties by the judges.

This attempt at making schooling compulsory met with failure because of different factors which it would take too long to describe here. Confronted with the problem of absenteeism, the

Brothers reflected on the causes. One of them, in their view, was that children were not “fond of school”. That signifies that in the school, relations were stamped with too much authoritarianism, by the harshness and sometimes the contempt of schoolmasters towards their pupils and parents alike. Consequently, the style of relation set up in the school appeared as a determining factor for the presence of the young in school.

J.B. de La Salle did not hesitate to introduce the concept of affection in pedagogical relations; it was not to be banal nor sentimental affection. In the Rule which he wrote for the Brothers he recommended: “*They shall love all their pupils tenderly. However, they shall not become familiar with any of them and they shall not give them anything through friendliness but only as a reward. They shall show equal affection towards all their pupils, even greater affection for the poor rather than for the rich because they are made responsible much more by their Institute for the instruction of these ones than the others*”. (Common Rules 7, 13 and 14). One expression returns frequently in his writings (35 times): it’s a question of “*winning the hearts of the pupils, of touching their hearts*” above all.

- b. This climate of affection, J.B. de La Salle and the first Brothers put it in the category of brotherhood, a brotherhood which concerns relations between adult as well as relations between adults and youngsters, and also between youngsters themselves.

The name which the masters assumed for themselves demonstrates this amply, because they became aware of the type of school they were called to create and to lead. One biographer who knew J.B. de La Salle explained the meaning: “*This name (Brothers) teaches them the excellence of their work, the dignity of their state, and the holiness of their profession. It tells them that , Brothers among themselves, they owe each other reciprocal signs of a tender friendship, yet spiritual at the same time; considering themselves as the eldest brothers of those who come up to them for lessons, they must exercise this ministry of charity with a charitable heart*”³ (*Cahiers Lasalliens* 7, p.241).

The link established here between the brotherhood within the educational team, which for J.B. de La Salle was the community of schoolmasters, and also the brotherhood at the heart of the relation between teacher and pupil derives from another of the Founder’s conviction: no education is possible unless the adults give the example of what they are teaching.

▪ **To educate is to do what one says.**

The theme of exemplarity recurs very often. Unless the schoolmaster or the educational team practice what they attempt to teach, they are wasting their time: “*You will persuade them much better through the example of wise and modest behaviour than by all the words that you could tell them*”⁴.

For example, J.B. de La Salle considered that « *silence is one of the main ways to establish and maintain order in the schools* »⁵.

³ Blain – La vie de Monsieur Jean-Baptiste de La Salle – Rouen – 1733 in *Cahier Lasallien* 7, p.241.

⁴ Meditation. 33.2, in *Meditations by John Baptiste de La Salle* (1994, Christian Brothers Conference.

⁵ *Conduite des Écoles*, p. 120. In *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* (1996) Lasallian Publications.

But how do you go about obtaining silence? He warns: *“It would be of little use if the Master tried to (make) maintain silence if he did not keep silence himself; he will be able to teach them this practice better through example than through words, and the teacher’s silence, more than anything else, will create order in the school, providing him with the means to watch over himself and over the pupils. That was the reason for the introduction of the signals in the Christian schools”*⁶.

The same goes for brotherhood. How do you establish it, how do you educate others to brotherhood if among adults, (teachers, parents, personnel in service or in administration...) there prevails a climate of jealousy, of indifference, of rivalry, of hostility? Brotherhood is not decreed; unlike freedom or equality. It is built up slowly, through actions, attitudes, words which make up so many examples.

- One last reason which places brotherhood at the heart of the lasallian project is that for J.B. de La Salle, **school must form pupils in the “spirit of Christianity”**.

It is not just a question of teaching the truths of the Christian faith through the Catechism. It is about children integrating those truths into their way of life. Now, at the heart of the Christian project is brotherly love. That is the reason why J.B. de La Salle insists on the interpersonal formation of the pupils : *“Let them be kind; let them have affection for each other, forgiving each other as God forgave them through Jesus Christ. Let them love each other as Jesus Christ loved them. Is that the way you have instructed your pupils up to now? Are those the maxims that you have inspired them? Have you shown enough vigilance in their regards and zeal ardent enough to encourage them to practice them? Make all your efforts to be faithful to this in future”*⁷.

In a very different context, can we not say that, today, this education in relations which are respectful, calm, fraternal remains topical? The incidence of violence, even inside schools, invites us to take into account this urgent educational matter.

This last observation leads me into the second part of my presentation.

In the lasallian tradition how can the school become a school of brotherhood?

Second part: The means of brotherhood

It is not sufficient to set out objectives in order to achieve them. One must take the means to do so. Which does Jean-Baptiste de La Salle and his first disciples advocate?

1. A personalized and reciprocal knowledge

The two adjectives have their importance and call for a quick commentary.

⁶ Idem, p. 123.

⁷ *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* 198.3, p.445.

- The “*Conduct of the Christian Schools*” insists on the fact that the schoolmaster must be concerned about knowing personally each of his pupils, even though he would often have 60 to 80 of them in his classroom.

This idea of necessity is expanded in a Meditation on the parable of the good shepherd who “knows his sheep and his sheep know him”⁸. A Lasallian school could not work on anonymity. This knowledge is all the more important especially as the master must adapt himself to each pupil and not the other way round. “*This must be one of the main cares of those who are employed in the instruction of others, to find out how to know them and also to discern the manner one has to behave in their regard: for, some require more gentleness whereas others need more firmness. With some you need to show a lot of patience, others need to be pushed and to be stirred. It is imperative that some should be reprimanded and punished in order to correct them for their shortcomings. There are some over whom you need to watch constantly to prevent them from losing themselves or from going astray*” (Med. 33.1).

With the psychological knowledge of the times (which was that of the moralists such as La Bruyère and his Characters) the Brothers tried to draw up the character profile of their pupils, by listening attentively to them and by observing their behaviour carefully. Each of the teachers, in his classroom, was asked to write out a synthesis on each pupil during the last month of the school year (at that time in the month of august!). He noted down what he had perceived of the personality of each pupil: his character, his classroom behaviour, his qualities, his apparent shortcomings, the responsibilities he had been able to assume, his relations with his family. The aim was clear: it was about “*learning to know the pupils and the way he [the teacher] needed to conduct himself in their regard*”. Some could object that such approach could be risky because of the subjective element it comprised. To get round this difficulty it was planned that the findings had to be cross checked during the course of the school year. That role befell the Director of the school. He “*will keep all the registers and will pay special attention to compare those of the preceding years with those of the following years, those that came from one master with those of another master who took the same class with the same pupils, to see whether the reports matched or were different, either as a whole or in some particular matter*”⁹.

Do we not detect a similar preoccupation in the drawing up of a report book which would accompany the pupil during his school years and which would be used to determine a common basis of core of knowledge, (“*the development of each pupil, skill by skill could appear in a document which would accompany the child during his school career*”) and also marks given for his school life, on the condition that the latter be drawn up intelligently by the teachers and the educators, and not according to marks gained for school subjects.

- Reciprocity exists: pupils must be able to know their teachers: “*Jesus Christ said that the sheep must know their shepherd in order that they follow him*”¹⁰.

Certainly, pupils have an empirical knowledge of their teachers; but, sometimes, this knowledge is very refined: 30 pairs of eyes end up by penetrating through appearances. A teacher would find it very difficult to dissimulate his personality, his mannerisms, his personal values, his ideas. Neutrality is an illusion.

⁸ *Meditations for All the Sundays of the Year*, 33.

⁹ *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, chapter 13, article 4.

¹⁰ *Meditations of All the Sundays of the Year*, 33.

But, for both parties this knowledge must unfold in a climate of respect, without a definitive judgment; it risks forming a human relation which would not be dictated only by the relation of authority, nor by the difference in age or knowledge. A relation of a brotherly type presupposes accepting a certain amount of freedom and equality at a given moment.

2. The largest welcome possible

J.B. de La Salle is a pragmatic man. He is not an ideologist, contrary to the attitude that is found in educational milieu sometimes. That is why his pedagogical ideas, his educational concepts have evolved, have broadened over the years with life experience. But, there is one point on which he never wavered and never compromised: that is, gratuitous schooling. However, that resulted in those who, till then, enjoyed the monopoly to the writing apprenticeship, in particular calligraphy: the corporation of Writing Masters to bring a suit against him.

Why was he adamant on this subject, refusing to receive fees including from those who could have contributed to the running of the schools? *The essential reason, it seems to me, was that education to brotherhood was at stake.*

In fact, for the poor, free schooling was the guarantee of their presence in it: parents could not refuse instruction for their children, claiming insufficient funds. As far as the rich were concerned, free schooling was a guarantee of the masters' freedom: parents could not claim that by paying for schooling they had rights that the poor did not enjoy.

We find once again the republican triad: freedom of teachers, equality of pupils, therefore the possibility of establishing a brotherhood (fraternity). In fact, J.B. de La Salle who was not a revolutionary knew through experience how different milieu can be close to each other and yet be impenetrable. We see it confirmed every day of our life. In the school, he saw a possible common meeting point where parents with different financial circumstances would be united in one common concern, the education of their children; where children from different social classes would attend school side by side.

In a totally different context, which concerns contemporary Egypt, Sister Emmanuelle says nothing different about the lasallian schools which are well known to her: *"What I love about the Brothers is that they have a deep love for the children; respect for the child, the poor child, they are the children's friends. In Egypt, the impact made by the Brothers' schools is very strong indeed. They enjoy universal influence which touches Christians as well as Moslems. When very young children have been friends in an atmosphere of respect for all religions, they are marked for life".*

Nowadays, unfortunately most of the lasallian schools are not free as a consequence of historical circumstances. However, many of the schools try to be open to the greatest possible number of pupils, in keeping with the intentions of J.B. de La Salle.

As for the gratuitous nature in education, it can take different forms within a school; it can touch teachers as well as parents: for example, by the time given to activities, or listening to individuals, or even to personalized help.

3. Apprenticeship in mutual assistance and sharing

Brotherhood is expressed in solidarity; that is shown in mutual assistance and sharing. In the way he directs his classroom, the teacher is invited to resort to it in different ways:

- In a lesson on Reading skills, a more advanced pupil can be asked to help a pupil who is less advanced: *“As soon as a pupil joins this particular lesson, in order that he can get used to following while the others are intent on reading, for a few days and according to how much need is required, the teacher will assign to him a companion who will teach him the way to follow the reading, and he will make him follow, both will hold the book, one on this end the second on the other”*¹¹.

This practice may surprise, it may even leave us in doubt: the promotion of a pupil to a higher level is unhesitatingly delayed in order that his companions may benefit from his help. Such a decision may be taken *“either for their personal good because they are too young, or for the good of the class for this lesson so that there may remain some who will be able to assist the others and (the masters) will organise it in such a way that those pupils will be pleased to remain in the order (the level) of the lesson in which they find themselves. They will even entice them with some form of reward, either by offering them some assignment (responsibility) like for example sitting on the first bench, making them understand that it is better to be top or among the top pupils of a lower level of class than the bottom of a more advanced class”*¹². We are far from the promotion to a class to benefit the age of the pupil or in order to be rid of a troublesome pupil.

- Mutual assistance can also be material. That is how at midday, with discretion, a pupil is given the responsibility of collecting food from those pupils who have quite a substantial amount for lunch, to share what they would like to donate in order to feed those who haven't got any food to eat. The person who is given this duty, (this responsibility) which was officially recognised was called the “aumonier” (the almoner).

So, gradually, by being beneficiaries as well as helpers, pupils would experience the fruits of solidarity which directed them towards a style of relation where brotherhood must have its place.

4. Apprenticeship in responsibility

Even though this concern was found with other educators of the period, in particular Jacques de Batencour and Charles Demia, this is a strong point of the Lasallian pedagogy, namely to encourage pupils to be responsible for themselves and responsible for others too. This can only happen if, within the school, the pupil is offered the opportunity to take on responsibilities. This is why there is mention of “officers of school” in the Conduct of Christian Schools. Fourteen such “offices” (responsibilities) were planned. I am not going to list them all here. I have already mentioned the “office” of the “aumonier” (almoner). Let me mention that of the “The Visitor of Absentees” who was responsible for a given area of the town and who would visit when a pupil was absent. Another one was the “keeper of the key”, who was responsible for opening up the school in the morning.

¹¹ *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, chapter 3.

¹² *Idem*, chapter 3.

Those responsibilities were given by the teacher who must show evidence of discernment so that the duties given be adapted to the qualities and skills of the child; this assumed, therefore, good knowledge of one's pupils and also taking into consideration the opinions expressed by other teachers to whom the pupils were well known.

These responsibilities reflected several concerns:

- To allow the teacher to be available for the pupils by unloading him of some of the tasks which would prevent him otherwise (classes numbered between 60 to 80 pupils!).
- Allow pupils to take part in the smooth running of their school, making them feel active members rather than passive customers.
- To develop among them the spirit of responsibility and professional conscience since each pupil in charge had to give an account of how he responded to the trust placed in him.
- To establish relations imbued with solidarity and peace in the classroom by making them aware that the common good entails personal commitment.
- To enhance self-confidence which is can only be gained through the exercise of responsibilities.

We can wonder nowadays, how the school can manage to allow children to exercise responsibilities at a time when our present society tends to recommend the avoidance of any risk by invoking the principle of caution. Well, making someone responsible entails accepting to run -with him and for him - the risk of freedom which cannot be severed from any responsibility.

I think that one of the flaws of our times is to have uncoupled the inseparable duo of freedom and responsibility, and to suggest that freedom does not go hand in hand with responsibility. Very early on in the history of mankind, "Am I responsible for my brother?" objected Cain when God asked where his brother Abel was.

Conclusion

The time has come to draw a conclusion.

J.B. de La Salle and the first Brothers placed brotherhood at the heart of the education project, a brotherhood which was learned by experience because it was firstly experienced in a place which seemed hardly suitable to it, in principle.

They did it in the name of their personal convictions. We may be unwilling to share these convictions. However, we cannot – today even less than previously- avoid asking the question: how does one manage in order that brotherhood does not remain a vague feeling imbued with nostalgia, a hollow word in a motto of which, unfortunately our country boasts about, hardly a credible ideal. How can education, how can the school form a human being for whom the word brotherhood carries the flavour of a desirable goal and a lived experience?

These questions are still relevant today. Recently, Louis Gallois, the leader of the EADS was asked about his political convictions. This was his answer:

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I am first and foremost a republican... You smile, but it is rather restrictive. Everybody claims to be a republican, but it is not so obvious: when we speak about freedom it is OK. When we speak of equality, things are already not so good. When the matter of brotherhood arises, things are not going at all well. I wish to see a republic founded on citizens who are educated and who play a full role in the city¹³.

Evidently, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle was not a republican. But, to educate the young on brotherhood was for him a requirement; because he was aware that no society can survive unless others are considered capable of offering the possibility of creating human brotherhood.

Rennes, 13th October 2011

¹³ Le Point [magazine] – n. 2035 – Thursday 15th September 2011 p.98