

TO KNOW, LOVE AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

La Salle and the first Brothers wanted their students to simultaneously learn what they were taught, appreciate it and implement it in their lives. This concept plays a crucial role in the teacher-student relationship. It facilitates learning and overall achievement in Lasallian education. This relationship must be characterized by a balance between firmness and affection which, at the time, was seen through an austere seventeenth century lens. Learning and the appreciation of learning in and of itself, in practical ways, provided students with meaningful content and helped to develop efficient and student-centered methodologies.

Key words: seriousness, tenderness, knowledge, love, exigency, touching hearts, usefulness.

De La Salle's time was a time when the expressing of feelings and emotions was formally repressed, given the context of the era this moderation and balance was a part of modesty. In accordance with *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, a book of good manners written by the creator of the "Christian Schools", the types of relationships proposed between persons were, at the same time, somewhat respectful and ceremonious, in the thinking of the true social manners that etiquette demanded in the time of Louis XIV.

In the world of education, those involved in it today and who deal with current sensitivities and relationship practices would certainly be surprised that in the *Conduct of Schools*, De La Salle and his co-founders insisted so much on the seriousness that the teacher must have when in contact with students, and that on the part of the student an almost sacred respect was required towards the teacher and that the entire second part of the manual is devoted to school discipline. But, those who are impartially attentive will sense that behind that seriousness and the demand for respect and rigorous discipline, there is an educator with personal interest in his disciple, someone whom he loved very well, in the style appropriate to the time in which he lived.

De La Salle did not have present-day principles to use as the basis for affection and emotion in the building of knowledge. In his time, the idea that the affective and

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emotive dimensions were essential in cognitive development had not been developed; nor was it known that knowledge, affection and emotion are more than complementary entities – they are inseparable, intimately interwoven. But above all, when speaking of religious instruction and the commitment of the Christian educator to help students translate into their daily lives acquired knowledge, our teacher and saint not only associated knowledge with affection and emotion, he also associated knowledge, affection, and emotion with the practice of living. In doing this, he made it known that, in order to do well, it is not enough to know about it but it must be loved and appreciated. This is what it means to know its value and to be disposed to pay the price it demands:

The truths which the Holy Spirit teaches to those who receive him are the maxims found in the holy Gospel. He helps them *to understand* these maxims and *to take them to heart*, and he leads them *to live and act* in accordance with them (Meditations for all the Sundays of the Year 44.2).

Just as this Spirit is the one who enlightens everyone coming into the world, he also is the one who *enlightens* the minds of your students and leads them *to love and to practice* the good that you teach them (cf. Meditations 195.3 and 197.1-2).

Holy Spirit, when, by your light, I have *known* the truth, gives me your *love* that I may *practice* it (CE 1.2.2).

Neither did De La Salle know about the idea that, along these same lines, the teacher-student relationship is influential in knowledge acquisition: if the relationship is a positive one, it facilitates learning and it motivates; if the relationship is a negative one, it will make learning difficult or at the very least it will be less effective. Nevertheless, our pedagogue from Rheims sensed and even verified experientially that, in the case of there being no good educational relationships, not only would learning suffer, but also the student's assiduousness in attending classes would be threatened, as well as his staying in school:

The fourth reason why students absent themselves is that they have little affection for the teacher. This is due to the fact that the teacher is not pleasant and in almost every situation does not know how to win the students. This kind of teacher resorts only to severity and punishments, and consequently the children are unwilling to come to school. The remedies for this sort of absence will be for teachers to endeavor to be very pleasant and to acquire a polite, affable, and frank appearance [...] let them do everything to win them all... (Conduct of the Christian Schools, p. 160).

The teacher should not be afraid of conquering or moving the heart of his disciples; on the contrary, he should make the effort to do it in order to gain their trust and affection. Such is the grace of his state. This is one of the miracles that can be achieved (cf. Meditations 43.3; 81.2; 180.3). That idea of conquering hearts, that positive teacher-student relationship helps to contribute to effective learning; it aids in the collaboration in achieving the great objectives proposed by Lasallian education: it is a pedagogical path in order to lead the disciples to live a Christian life. It is a springboard to put them on the path towards God:

...Do you take advantage of their affection for you to lead them to God? You must consider the obligation you have to win their hearts as one of the principal

means to lead them to live in a Christian manner. Often reflect that if you fail to use this means, you will drive them away from God instead of drawing them to him (Meditations 101.3; 115.3; cf. 157.3).

And so the creator of the Normal School insists that his disciples have, towards children, love, charity, tenderness, "very special affection" (Meditation 80.3; 101.3; 133.3; 137.2; 173.1; 179.1; 189.2): "The Brothers will love their students tenderly (Common Rule 7.13; cf. Meditation 166.2).

In comparing the figure and the role of the teacher with Jesus the Good Shepherd, De La Salle recalls that in the task of education,

...what is needed [...] is that great tenderness be shown by them for those entrusted to their care. This is what leads the sheep to love their shepherds and to delight in their company, for there they find their rest and comfort (Meditation 33.2).

Obviously, what is meant here is not an abstract type of love, purely sentimental, but a kind of concrete love, expressed in audible words, in sensitive gestures, and in effective actions: welcoming, paying attention to what is going on in the student's life, recognizing and appreciating his effort, encouraging and supporting his growth, appropriate questions... By the way, Don Bosco wrote a letter in 1884 in which he said: "It's not enough to love young people; also needed is for them to feel they are loved" (Braido, 1989, p. 141). This is an aspect which De La Salle, almost two-hundred years before, had also said in a different way, presenting tangible love as evidence of zeal, which is the interest and the creative action on the part of the teacher for the good of the student: "Act in such a way through your zeal that you give tangible proof that you love those whom God has entrusted to you" (Meditation 201.2).

That kind of love does not mean the absence of firmness in demands or capitulation when faced with impulsiveness or deviant behavior. This is consistent with the correct exercise of authority that the teacher is invested with and it is expressed through that authority. However, it is about preserving an appropriate balance in this exercise as well as when dealing with the student in general: "Firmness cannot degenerate into harshness, nor can kindness degenerate into weakness and laxity" (The Conduct of the Christian Schools, p. 136). This must be the case at all times, even in the most delicate cases when "love" must be made manifest by "exactness"; for example, at the time of the correction itself. "Why don't you do it like the Brothers do? They do not punish us in this way," said a child while crying in front of his mother who was punishing him uncontrollably (Blain II, page 102).

In speaking of the teacher as a guarding angel for his students, De La Salle's words are reminiscent of what a teacher, Janusz Korczak, practiced in 1942 as he accompanied his students to the gas chambers at the Treblinka extermination camp: "Your zeal must go so far in this that in order to achieve it, you are ready to give your very life, so dear to you are the children entrusted to you" (Meditation 198.2).

We must add to all of this that the little ones whose hearts De La Salle's teachers are invited to move are, in the great majority, the poor. They are the material poor, since their parents cannot pay the teachers; they themselves, besides getting free studies, cannot pay for books either and many of them cannot bring the necessary supplies to

school nor money for breakfast or lunch; they walk around dressed in rags and, eventually, they are even authorized to miss school to buy clothing, shoes, hats and other similar necessities. They have nothing to present to their teachers "except their hearts, willing to receive" your instructions (Meditation 194.1; Meditation 96.3; The Conduct of the Christian Schools). They are also intellectually poor. As De La Salle says to his teachers, those who come to you do so "in the middle of the night" which, "says Saint Augustine, symbolizes their great ignorance" (Meditation 37.2). Spiritually, they are:

...like poor, abandoned orphans. In fact, though the majority of them do have a father here on earth, they are still as if they had none and are abandoned to themselves for the salvation of their souls. This is the reason God places them as if under your guardianship (Meditation 37.3).

They are also poor affectively. Fiévet (2001), while studying the clientele of the Christian Schools, observed:

The austere spiritual vocabulary of the 17th century notwithstanding, John Baptist de La Salle, especially in his *Meditations*, returns 222 times to the term *kindness* and 78 times to the term *tenderness* [...] In the harsh world that was his, in families in which many children did not experience the tenderness of their mothers (due to her premature death or successive stepmothers), living in a type of relationship whereby the child felt loved and knew how to return love, was, without a doubt, one of his most profound hopes (Fiévet, 2001, pp. 146 - 147).

This has to do with the presence of affection in the teacher-student relationship. But the quality of that presence also has influence when you talk about the relationship of the student with knowledge, which is oriented by the teacher. The quality of this affective student-knowledge relationship depends upon various factors. One of the fundamental ones is the perception that the student has, or does not have, of the meaning, the usefulness of the learning that is being proposed to him. If such reception is positive, it will be a motivating factor, it will encourage him and commit him to the learning process, and he will want to master his studies.

The meaning and the usefulness of De La Salle's school in general and of the curriculum within it in particular, is one of the most obvious things in the Lasallian educational program.

In the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools "education that is appropriate to children" is what is taught. The works to which De La Salle committed himself did not come about as the result of lucubrations done while sitting at a desk; they were the precise response to realities and they offered solutions to educational and pastoral needs.

What De La Salle wrote about with regard to punishment can be practically applied to the overall set of things that are demanded of Lasallian students: "Whatever is not useful should not be imposed" (The Conduct of the Christian Schools, p. 154).

That criterion begins functioning in the selection of subject matter to be developed. It is not about teaching just anything. Lasallian teaching is not impractical. There is no

"decoration" for the student, no matter how brightly it might shine. What is taught must be useful in the poor person's life.

Examples:

First, instead of beginning to read in Latin, they began to read in French:

Reading French is of much greater and more universal use than reading Latin. What use will reading Latin have if they will never use it in their lives?...when they begin to teach children how to read in French, at least they will know how to read when they leave school; and knowing how to read French correctly, they will be able to instruct themselves... (Meditations 1; 6.1; 8.1; 8.2).

Secondly, on reading level nine, that is, the ceiling of that type of material, they read registries, and special types of registries. Why? Because "reading them is of great use to the students" (The Conduct of the Christian Schools, p. 71) because of the fact that registries were manuscripts and a great proportion of what was read in those days were manuscripts.

Thirdly, orthography and the eighth writing level would serve to have them copy practical things which would serve the students throughout their lives:

The way of teaching them how to write would be to have them copy certain manuscripts, above all those who learning would be useful and that they would need later, such as promissory notes, receipts, work contracts, reservations... (The Conduct of the Christian Schools, pp. 79-80).

Added to this type of concrete practice, useful and significant content for the students, was often the theoretical argument on usefulness and meaning. In the case of teaching religious matter and the living out of religion, on top of this practical knowledge the students would need to know certain truths, even theoretical ones, as well as how to live truths out in a practical way, or maxims, in order to be saved (Meditation 194.3). With regard to good manners, the motivation that encourages them to practice these is also of a religious nature, a trait that was not strange at that time of the history of Christianity: decorum is needed with oneself and respects for others due to the God's presence in people, since they are members of Jesus Christ and living temples of the Holy Spirit and animated by Him (The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility, page 4). But with regard to the reading and writing content, the motivating insistence is of a human nature, a purely human nature: both are indispensable for the children of artisans and the poor who wish to make progress in their lives; if they do not know how to read and write, they are "practically never going to be suitable for any work"; if they do know how to read and write, no matter their intelligence, they will be able to "do anything" (The Conduct of the Christian Schools, pp. 251-253).

It is known that a positive relationship of the student with the teacher and the perception, on the part of the student, of the significance of that which is being studied – for life – along with factors such as an adequate methodology, significantly reduce discipline problems. In the Lasallian case, the safe and affective relationship of the students with the teachers certainly was one of the reasons that Blain affirmed (Morales, 1990, p. 274) "De La Salle and the first Brothers worked a miracle, for their epoch, in that children 'loved school and wanted to be there'..." And the care taken that students

were aware of why they studied certain subjects lead them to study useful things for their own life contributed to the fact that, according to Furet and Ozuf (1977, p. 92). De La Salle's "Christian School" "represented, in the eyes of the middle class at the time, as the model of the useful school." Its success "illustrates the social pressure and demands of the time for a better organized school, one that is more effective and socially useful."

It is hoped that the affective relationship and the concern for responding to what teachers need, along with the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching, will continue to be a source of much success for the education practiced in Lasallian schools.

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