

DISCERN IN ORDER TO EDUCATE, A LASALLIAN RESPONSE

Diego A. Muñoz León, F.S.C.

Service of Lasallian Research and Resources

Generalate, Rome

dmunoz@lasalle.org

SUMMARY

This article will focus on Circular No. 194, which could not be published due to the outbreak of the First World War, and will re-visit the pedagogical position of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools as it faced the New School Movement and the profound changes in education during the end of the 19th century. This reflection is an invitation to consider pedagogical needs as fundamental for an epistemological dialogue with Christian roots in Lasallian thought.

Key words: John Baptist de La Salle, Brothers of the Christian Schools, pedagogy, modern pedagogy, pedagogical criteria, science of education, child, teacher, discernment, dialogue, needs.

A religious family committed to education

During 2019, the worldwide Lasallian educational family commemorates the death of their Founder, John Baptist de La Salle, who was proclaimed the universal patron of all teachers by Pope Pius XII in 1950. A priest, doctor in Theology and canon of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Rheims, France, at the age of 30 he fully committed himself to forming a community of teachers who were consecrated to education "from morning until night,"¹ and who, along with them, built a network of sound educational communities which gave meaning and direction to the way in which free and parish schools in France were conducted at the end of the 17th century. Based on these schools, De La Salle created a new way of thinking about education.

From the educational model proposed by the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the inchoate educational systems of the Western world began to realize the importance of simultaneous teaching, supported by a systematic and regular method; they understood that the teacher needed training and accompaniment in order to carry out a task that gave meaning to his life; they began

¹ John Baptist de La Salle left a foundational text for the Institute in 1686 which we call the *Memoir on the Habit*. "Those who make up this Community are all laymen without a classical education and possessing but average intelligence." (MH 9) "However, we will not refuse admission to young men who have

to work supported by a concept of childhood, considering the child as a growing human being, in need of protection and guidance.²

More than three hundred years since the foundational event of the Society of the Christian Schools, the current Lasallian Family continues to be present in the educational world with close to ninety-two thousand educators, women and men, Brothers and lay Lasallians, serving more than one million forty-thousand students on five continents. This is no longer a homogeneous community that carries out a regulated life project, as foreseen by John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers with the first Rules of the Institute more than three-hundred years ago. Now it is a large, multi-cultural and even multi-religious educational community, that identifies with and engages in a common endeavor.

This being the reality of the current Lasallian Family, we wonder how Lasallians today, so diverse and global, can carry out a reflection on their *raison d'être* in the world of education – from which come paradigms or perspectives – in order to visualize a horizon that gives meaning to their common project in eighty countries of the world.

Pedagogy in the 17th and 18th centuries

In Europe, starting in the sixteenth century, the new reformed Churches saw the need to train future generations in the reading and interpretation of the Bible. Its counterpart, the Catholic world, typical of the counter-reformation, had taken as its flag the propagation of the truths of the faith through the catechism. Both strategies needed the school as their fundamental, accessible and efficient vehicle. The creation of schools, then, posed new problems: the training of teachers capable of attending to large groups of children in the same classroom, an adequate method of instruction capable of being replicated by others, and a certain professional stability, marked by quality and adequately supervised.

Although the Marxist historians of education deny any importance of the pedagogy of religious inspiration of the 17th and 18th centuries, we join with the voices that consider that the *Pedagogy of Modernity* was born thanks to the efforts of people of faith committed to education. The organization of the Christian schools, had for its purpose addressing to the urgent needs aimed at evangelizing the population, either from the Catholic perspective – the catechism – or from the reformist perspective – the reading of the Bible. The *Ratio Studiorum* of the Jesuits, the *Magna Didactica* of Comenius and the *Conduct of the Christian Schools* of the Brothers of the Christian Schools are three witness-type documents, among others, that amply support this affirmation.

Modern Pedagogy was born, then, in the heart of a Christian world thirsting for answers. Established from the cultural parameters of a new plan for humanity, it was based on rules,

² We start from the study on the birth of pedagogy proposed by Clermont Gauthier and Maurice Tardif (2013), who look at pedagogy as "... a conscious and orderly reflection on the way of conducting and organizing a class" and that came into being as a product of "moral care in relation to childhood and an increase in the number of students and schools "from the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe (page 102).

procedures and evaluations capable of being replicated by stable groups of educators³. Thus, these Christian educators developed manuals for class work; they chose to know their students and to value their individuality; they accompanied other teachers to help them improve their teaching techniques and promoted the students' progress through periodic evaluations. The issues of discipline, vigilance, correction and imitation began to be discussed and systematized. When we read the *Conduct of the Christian Schools*, we come into contact with a school manual born from the experience of a stable community of educators who learned together, over several decades, the art of teaching.

All this was built from the perspective of faith; for the believers of the 17th and 18th centuries it was not enough just to believe; it was necessary to know the truths of the faith in order to achieve salvation. For that reason, the school was indispensable, and without it human beings ran the risk of being condemned for eternity. Hence the urgency of John Baptist de La Salle, theologian, for his Brothers to understand that Christian schools were part of God's plan for humanity. In his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* all of these ideas are expounded upon as responses to an active faith that is committed to the finality of society and the Church. For Lasallians, Christian formation was an instrument of salvation, that is, an essential part of their educational plan, thus collaborating in the formation of future constructive generations.

Admire the goodness of God in providing for all the needs of his creatures, taking the means to procure for all humanity the knowledge of the true good, that is, what concerns the salvation of their souls. Offer yourselves to God to help by assisting the children entrusted to you as much as he will require of you (Meditation 197.1).

The Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the laicization of society

Seventy years after the death of John Baptist de La Salle, the events that sparked the French Revolution were triggered. During that time, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was consolidated as a recognized society, first by the French State (*Letters Patent*, 1724) and second by the Catholic Church (*Bull of Approbation*, 1725); the Rule was adapted to meet the canonical guidelines of the Church (1726) and all the texts of the Founder were published. The Institute continued to grow in number and reaffirmed itself as a stable and regular community that served an ever-growing network of Christian schools within the kingdom of France. A tenuous school was maintained in Rome and another in Switzerland.

But the Institute's presence was not exempt from criticism. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Philosophers of the Enlightenment would attack the free and popular school. For them, the economy of the kingdom needed, for its growth, the labor of the peasants and poor, and not enlightened people who left the plow and manual labor. They totally rejected the idea of the social promotion of the poor.

³ From the beginning of his experience in Rheims, De La Salle took care to improve significantly the parish schools that lacked competent teachers. This "competence" involved the development of new teaching strategies based on teacher training and support (cf. Poutet, 2001, p. 373).

Coupled with this rejection, French society was becoming more and more anti-clerical, and this was associated with anti-monarchism, in a complex plot where even Jansenism, already known by De La Salle in his time, had deepened its political debate. Rousseau with his work *Emilio* (1762) was radically opposed to an education based on faith; he affirmed that the child was born good and had to be left to his free will to reach his full development. He was moving away from a Christian anthropology that viewed education as a necessity to remedy the consequences of original sin in children and which promoted the vocation of the teacher as a witness of Jesus Christ in school.

In a climate of increasing political tension, typical of the late 18th century, the French monarchy expelled the Jesuits from their territory (1762); later, the French authorities of the revolutionary times proclaimed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790) and suppressed the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1792). French society at the end of the century needed to commit itself to making reason and progress its humanizing horizon.

The pedagogy proposed by the Brothers of the Christian Schools tried to survive in the midst of this French political storm. At the beginning of the 19th century, once again recognized as specialists in primary education, the Brothers were incorporated by Napoleon into the Imperial University. Little by little they rebuilt their communities and were growing exponentially: the educational needs were enormous inside and outside of France; in fact, the Institute in the time of Brother Philippe as Superior General (1837-1874), extended to more than forty countries.

The Brothers tried to live outside of the political discussions, but could not absent themselves from the educational debate, especially when the Third French Republic, starting in 1880, began to develop a set of laws where Religious would eventually be expelled from public schools. The set of Ferry Laws on free, secular and compulsory education marked a new era for the Institute and its network of schools.

Bearing in mind that it was in the 19th century when the first industrial revolution, Marxism, socialism and secularization broke out (the latter as a state project), we can understand how the Brothers of that century took special care to systematize their experience, to write pedagogical and didactic works and tried to deepen their educational thinking which, because it came from the time of the Holy Founder, required a reinterpretation when faced with new currents of thought.

Dialogue with the New School and the 20th century

Perhaps understanding the dialogue of the Brothers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the new pedagogical currents can give us insights into how to take on similar challenges at this current juncture. To advance in this reflection, we will use Circular Letter Number 194, written by Brother Imier de Jesus, Superior General, dated August 15, 1914, which could not be published due to the beginning of the First World War.

What was happening in the educational world of that time? By the end of the century, in North America and Europe, a movement to renew schools was being developed based on questions that arose from reality. In fact, since 1889 some interesting initiatives came into being; for example, the school of Abbotsholme of Dr. Redie (1889) and the school of Bedales of Dr. Badley (1893) in

England; the educational homes in the field of Dr. Lietz (1898) in Germany; l'École de Roches by E. Demolins (1899) in France; and the University Primary School of Dr. John Dewey (1896) in the United States. These schools began shaping a movement based on the primacy of individual freedom and action. Above all, the pedagogical pragmatism of Dewey, taken on by George Kerschensteiner in Germany, undoubtedly opened the door to the development of the pedagogical ideas that between 1900 and 1907 initiated new active methods; of these we could name Montessori, Decroly, Kilpatrick, Parskhust (Dalton Plan) and Washburne (Winnetka System).⁴ In this atmosphere of a boiling pot of pedagogical ideas, Brother Superior General Imier de Jésus, proposed the creation of a Pedagogical Bulletin for the Institute, and the renewal of the pedagogical studies of the Brothers.

By August 1914 the Institute had already composed a series of pedagogical treatises:

- *Éléments de Pédagogie pratique* (1900); *Directoire pédagogique à l'usage des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes* (1903);
- *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes* (1903), a new edition;
- *Méthodologie de l'Enseignement de la Religion or Manuel du Catéchiste* (1908);
- *Manuel de Pédagogie à l'usage des Écoles catholiques* (1909);
- *Catéchistes des Petits Enfants* (1910);
- *Méthodologie de l'Enseignement de la Lecture* (1911) (see Circular 194, pages 4-5).

Brother Imier de Jésus recognized that the term pedagogy was, at that time, an innovative word. In fact, he wrote the following:

Fifty years ago, the word "pedagogy" sounded pretty bad in some countries. Ignorance and contempt gave it a kind of narrow and stubborn pedantry. Today there are fairer ideas on that point. Few topics have inspired as many works as pedagogy (Circular 194, page 14).

Likewise, he invited the Brothers to recognize "the pedagogical superiority of our Founder" (Circular 194, page 20):

Most especially, a Brother of the Christian Schools finds joy in finding out that his Founder and Father is among the initiators to whom we owe the most fruitful initiatives in primary education. And knowing it in a general way would not be enough for a Brother; he should study in detail how the firm reason of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, together with his tenacious energy, broke with the habits and inveterate routines that dominated and immobilized the popular school of his time. (Circular 194, page 19)

Brother Imier de Jesus recognized that pedagogy was undergoing, with great speed, important changes in Europe and America:

⁴ This summary was taken from the doctoral thesis of Diego A. Muñoz León entitled *Democracy and authoritarianism in the Venezuelan school* presented in March 2006 at the Central University of Venezuela (cf. pages 115 - 116).

These transformations, initially slow, became faster and more general in the second half of the nineteenth century. If the school of 1850 closely resembled that of 1780, the differences are much deeper between the primary pedagogy of 1910, for example, and that of 1850. (Circular194, page 21) 54

Faced with an environment so given to innovation without proper criteria, Brother Imier de Jésus insisted on the wise experience of the Institute, to avoid, as there has been, "...excessive and fleeting infatuation, outrageous reactions, hasty conclusions, imprudent destruction and deplorable mistakes (Circular 194, page 24).

He proposes, in fact, a list of some pedagogical initiatives that were critiqued by experience:

- the excessive use of monitors, within a Lancasterian type of school model (*école mutuelle*) that sought to replace simultaneous teaching; this experience was rejected by the teachers themselves (cf. Circular 194, page 24);
- the supremacy of physical culture, which placed the discipline of bodies over intellectual and moral formation, proposing it as the ideal means for educating the spirit and customs (cf. Circular 194, page 25);
- overvaluation of certain specialties of the program to the detriment of fundamental studies, without considering a certain hierarchy in the order of knowledge (cf. Circular 194, page 25);
- the promotion of a culture centered only on facts, that undervalues the development of abstraction, and that becomes "... a kind of pedagogical positivism that materializes teaching" (cf. Circular 194, page 25);
- "the suppression of constant and progressive effort" that induces a notable decrease in educational results in the school (cf. Circular 194, page 26);
- school programs that exceed the intellectual assimilation capacity of the students, and that need to be revised and adapted, to prevent them from becoming merely memorization exercises (see Circular 194, pages 27-28);
- the struggle against "bookish" teaching, which proposes the suppression of school textbooks (cf. Circular194, page 29);
- the abuse of dictation and orthographic revision exercises, which occupy many hours of class, but whose abandonment has serious consequences in the formation of students (cf. Circular 194, page 30); and finally,
- the exaggerated abstract and grammatical teaching of living languages, which has generated in return a direct method that does not satisfy everyone (cf. Circular 194, page 30).

Given this documented experience, the Brother Superior General invited the Brothers not to be carried away by novelty and to exercise a critical spirit: "Would it not be more just, more prudent and less uncertain to preserve what the past has bequeathed us for good, – the inheritance is rich – and to add to it the new contribution of more truly scientific methods?" (Circular 194, page 31)

Pedagogical criteria for Lasallian thinking in 1914

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Brother Imier de Jesus in Circular 194 reaffirmed the foundations of the Christian anthropology of his time. Defending the supremacy of faith as a criterion to educate human beings in an integral way, he reaffirmed the importance of the supernatural in the school. "The child belongs to God who created him." (Circular 194, page 32) Therefore, the child and the adolescent must be guided from a notion of human freedom, handled with wisdom, through "...supports, of prudent limitations that supplant their lack of strength and constancy." (Circular 194, page 33) Perhaps, thinking in more contemporary language, this criterion reminds us of the basis of the doctrine of the protection of children and adolescents which is the foundation of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

What criteria does the Institute propose at that time in its dialogue with the world of education?

- "... to remain firm in the general and traditional principles that dominate the science of education, always guided by the rules of reason clarified by the light of faith" (Circular 194, page 34);
- "... the educator must be a person of his time, that is, he must adopt effective improvements that will enrich the pedagogical experience, insofar as they are included them in the class he directs." (Circular 194, page 34);
- "Wanting to ignore the movement of current pedagogy, to lock oneself in some sort of memory of a glorious past, would lead one to be condemned to immobility and consent to decay." (Circular 194, page 34);
- "Our pedagogical traditions reaffirm, in fact, two elements: one is lasting and intangible – the Christian principles of education and the fundamental methods of teaching; the other, subject to change, includes the school programs of a particular era or a country, with procedures that facilitate exposure and the study of various specialties" (Circular 194, page 35);
- What should remain intact? "...our traditions concerning simultaneous teaching, catechetical methodology, vigilance, discipline and emulation..." (Circular 194, page 35).

What is, pedagogy from the Lasallian perspective, understanding that we are talking about the Institute in the context of 1914?

Pedagogy, understood as the science of education, consists of "... the methodological study of the aims that should be proposed in the natural and supernatural development of the child, and of the appropriate means toward these ends." (Circular 194, page 35)

- "What pedagogy studies is, on the one hand, the child from his nature as a person, his life and his richness as a baptized person, his strengths and weaknesses, his great achievements, as well as the obstacles he receives and that make him fail, at least sometimes, in the face of the demands in which he is surrounded..." (Circular 194, page 37).
- "... on the other hand, it is the teacher with his duties and the qualities that allow him to fulfill his work well, his heavy responsibilities and the merit of his dedication; in short,

they are the methods and procedures of teaching, with their logical justification for the various specialties of the school curriculum" (Circular 194, page 37).

- "As a moral science of the human and supernatural development of the child, pedagogy is based on philosophy and theology. The first one borrows the exact theoretical and practical data about human faculties, their operations and their culture, about the ways of teaching with logic and reasoning correctly; – the other one receives principles of the Catholic faith and the rules of morality according to the Gospel." (Circular 194, page 38).

What are the consequences of this complex pedagogical knowledge, which considers both nature and grace to be present in the child?

- "The better you know the rules and requirements of the human and supernatural development of your students, the more you will conform your educational activities to their benefit." (Circular 194, page 41)
- "We are not born educators; it is a matter of theory and practice together ... The experience of the practical does not dispense one from studying the science of education; conversely, the teacher's study of theoretical science does not replace the practical aspect, but it illuminates it, guides it, justifies it and, if necessary, modifies one's orientation. It gives the educator a thoughtful skill, based on his studies, his personal aptitudes and the experience of the best teachers." (Circular 194, page 44)
- "Professional ability is one of the traditions of the Institute, due to the grace of your vocation and by the participation of each one in a common experience. Our texts on pedagogy, while providing sufficient space for theoretical considerations, are rich especially in the details and advice which are usable in the direction of classes." (Circular 194, page 45)
- "You will therefore study with ardent intelligence and with religious discernment, to avoid any assertion, any doctrine, any educational ideal which cannot be admitted by you." (Circular 194, pages 47-48)
- "The pedagogical ideal deviates according to the philosophical, moral and religious errors of certain authors. Some use a kind of irreligious positivism, others a dangerous liberalism that is a practical denial of true principles; for many the foundation is the child's adaptation to the social establishment that surrounds him and for a great many others the foundation is in submission to purely rational moral rules separate from the foundations of faith." (Circular 194, page 48)

The fundamental reference is, without a doubt, Jesus Christ. "Let us stick to our educational principles; they are the true ones. Along with Fenelon, we believe that 'the main thing that we must put before the eyes of children is Jesus Christ, the author and multiplier of our faith.' And from Saint John Baptist de La Salle we have received our ideal: to elevate our students in piety and in a true Christian spirit, that is, according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel." (Circular 194, page 48)

The pedagogical needs of Circular 194 as read by Lasallians today

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Perhaps we could re-read Circular 194 trying to decipher the pedagogical needs that the Brothers harvested at the end of the 19th century.

When we speak of "needs" we intuit the same founding process that De La Salle and the first Brothers experienced at their beginning in Rheims: it was the pressing educational needs of the children of artisans and the poor that motivated this emerging community to organize themselves and to come up with a plan and to take it on in common. They looked at everything with the eyes of faith, always with the desire to offer an effective school, capable of creatively contributing to a future for their students. From these needs arose the pedagogical convictions that transformed not only the lives of those teachers but also the journey of a network of schools that did not die with their Founder.

From the reading we have made of Circular 194 we suggest some fundamental needs, and express them in more contemporary language:

- The need to go deeply into – as an educational community – the exercise of *pedagogical discernment*, promoting dialogue between the Lasallian tradition received over three centuries and the challenges of education today. It would not be merely a question of re-reading again the foundational Lasallian texts, but also of understanding the educational journey lived out by the Brothers at each stage of the Institute's history. Local and national stories could have a special place in this pedagogical discernment; they would undoubtedly help us to better understand the present time in which we live.
- The need to construct a *contemporary anthropology* that enriches the reflection on and practice of the protection of the rights of children and adolescents from the point of view of the school, in dialogue with philosophy and theology. In this sense, we could recapture the deep meaning of Christian "discernment" and use the multi-disciplinary nature of pedagogy as a tool for reflection and action. The Brothers of the late nineteenth century, living with the theological limitations of their time, based their educational plan within an anthropology that had not yet adequately delved into the consequences of the incarnation. Today, being the post Vatican II community that we are, we need to continue to interpret for the educational community the richness of Baptism, the concept of People of God-Communion, ecumenism and the lay Christian as transforming forces in today's world and Church. There is no doubt that we would be promoting a new theology of education (Perhaps knowledge should remain in separate compartments, or can we already assume the richness of multi-dimensional knowledge?)
- The need to strengthen the *theory-practice development of the teacher* especially by participating in an environment of association, where knowledge can be discerned and shared, which requires an ongoing process of formation. It is about promoting the dignity of the teacher, the teaching vocation in the Church and in society, with a voice and a commitment on the part of authority in the face of the challenges that involve the formation of the citizens of our global village; this, not as an isolated project, but carried out as a

community with its own strength. We are just now beginning to sense the consequences of Lasallian association as a creative dynamic.

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- The need to promote the Christian life of the baptized who attend the Lasallian school. The current Rule (2015), in statute 17.2, reminds the Brothers that they must help the baptized to be disciples of Jesus Christ; in order to do this, they need to accompany them on their journey of faith, fraternity and service. It also reminds them of some essential strategies: to help them develop a personal relationship with God, to establish a life-giving relationship with his Word, with the liturgy and the sacraments and, above all, to prepare them for social commitment. It urges therefore, a renewal of catechesis, with a methodology consonant with the culture of men and women of the 21st century.
- The need to find *original ways to evangelize* when the Lasallian school is located in countries that are strongly pluralistic or secularized. Also, Rule 17.2 invites us to strengthen the witness of Christian presence and fraternal relationships among Lasallian teachers; to promote experiences such as those of giving gratuitous service, common prayer, interreligious dialogue and knowledge of the story of Jesus. In addition, there is the need to maintain dialogue with the non-Christian world, strengthening a common platform of cooperation with teachers of other religious beliefs and traditions using education as a basis; in order to do this, it is important to work in recapturing and promoting human dignity, solidarity among human beings and their integral development as persons.

The dialogue between Lasallian pedagogy and contemporary pedagogies remains a pending task. Perhaps it is time to think about a pedagogical epistemology, of Lasallian inspiration, that is, of Christian roots, that can help in this process.

The Brothers, on the threshold of the First World War, sensed that the world was changing rapidly and that they needed to discern the pedagogical heritage they had received in order to face new challenges. Today, not only the Brothers, but the entire Lasallian Family, are living through a change of era that challenges us to raise new questions and to respond, in the midst of increasingly growing uncertainties. If there is anything that we can recapture from the pedagogical history of the Institute, it is the idea that we have always allowed ourselves to be questioned by our own context, for the purpose of continuing to provide a school "that always runs well."

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