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THE CONDUCT OF SCHOOLS **A Contextual Approach**

Bro. Léon LAURAIRE, F.S.C.

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Translated from the French by Leonard Marsh, FSC

Bro. Léon LAURAIRE, F.S.C.

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Preface

The oldest currently known text of the *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes*¹ is manuscript N° 11.759 held in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This document is the source of three recent editions:

- the edition of Brother Anselme, FSC, in 1951, published on the occasion of the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of Saint John Baptist de La Salle;
- the edition published as Cahier Lasallien 24 in the collection of the Lasallian Studies publications;
- the edition which is part of the Oeuvres Complètes (Complete Works) of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, published in 1993.²

Some historical landmarks

The manuscript at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris is generally considered to have been composed between the years 1704 and 1706, but it is a copy of a text that could have been developed a few years before. This places it about 25 years after the opening of the first “Lasallian” schools in Rheims in 1679. Let us keep in mind that 25 years represented the average life expectancy in France at that time. In reality, this means that several of the first school masters who had joined the work undertaken by De La Salle had already died or had left the group before seeing the completion of the project that was the *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes*.

¹ *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes* is the original complete title of the work, and each of the words in the title has its own importance. However, for easier reading we will use the word “*Conduite*.”

² References to De La Salle’s works and specifically the *Conduite* are made to the *Oeuvres Complètes* (OC) and to *Cahier Lasallien 24* (CL 24), respectively. References to English translations from the *Conduite* are noted as “*Conduct*.” Unless otherwise noted, English translations from De La Salle’s works are taken from the translations published by Lasallian Publications, Landover, MD, USA, as indicated in the bibliography.

During this long period, the school masters, who were already being called Brothers, were certainly not left to their own devices. The first biographers of De La Salle³ show how he was careful from the beginning to improve the living conditions and the professional quality of his school masters and then to organize what he called the “Society of the Christian Schools.”

In addition, the preface of the text tells us that “this guide has been prepared and put in order (by the late M. De La Salle) only after a great number of conferences⁴ between him and the oldest Brothers of the Institute and those most capable of running a school well, and after several years of experience. Nothing has been added that has not been thoroughly deliberated and well tested, nothing of which the advantages and disadvantages have not been weighed and, as far as possible, of which the good or bad consequences have not been foreseen.”⁵

An original approach

This passage immediately sheds light on the approach chosen by De La Salle and his companions to develop their school project. The direct participation of the Brothers in this reflection process and the indispensable contribution of their concrete experience added further to the observations made by De La Salle himself during his classroom visits.⁶

We are dealing with a *Conduite* by and for the Brothers and school masters, a guide that has to do with the kind of school they wanted to set up for the children of the working class and the poor. The Brothers themselves continuously and thoroughly tested the methods, teaching techniques, structure

³ Brother Bernard, manuscript of 1721 reproduced in CL 4. – Dom Élie Maillefer, manuscripts of 1723 and 1740 reproduced in CL 6. – Jean-Baptiste Blain, *La Vie de Monsieur Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, prêtre, Instituteur des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes*, edition of 1733 reproduced in CL 7 and 8. These and other secondary sources and critical works that have been translated into English are referenced in the bibliography.

⁴ The word “conferences” is taken here in its etymological sense of work in common, in a group. It referred to exchanges and discussions and had nothing to do with academic, formal presentations in the sense we give the word “conference” [or “lecture”] today.

⁵ OC. CE 0.0.2; CL 24, Préface; *Conduct*, 45.

⁶ See the work by Brother Jean Pungier, *Comment est née la Conduite des Écoles* (Rome, 1980).

and discipline, educational activities, etc... The Brothers were the ones who, first individually and then together, evaluated the suitability and the effectiveness of their practices before deciding on what should be kept and what should be dropped.⁷

As a work of school practitioners, the richness of the *Conduite* even today is of special interest only to those who have a similar practical experience of teaching school. To read the work from the standpoint of some educational theory or unrelated pedagogy, or even with some preconceived ideology, is to risk understanding it poorly.

So it was the Brothers themselves who, at the end of a long process of discernment, research and action, were the authors of the *Conduite*, even though they entrusted the composition of the text to Jean-Baptist de La Salle. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to make reference to their work by speaking of the school of the Brothers, and it will thus be a kind of homage to their indispensable contribution.

Yves Poutet expresses the same idea when he writes: “De La Salle was not the sole author. In practice, he masterminded it. He organized it. He brought together the experienced school masters. He was the producer or the orchestra leader but never a soloist or a single actor. It was through an unceasing collaboration that the *Conduite des Écoles* was developed. While still keeping faithful to texts developed in his own lifetime, De La Salle put them together without being authoritarian or dogmatic, and thus he is to be considered at the origin of a pedagogy that is not static but in perpetual progress.”⁸

This method of development is of great interest not only for the end of the seventeenth century but also for today. We have before us an inductive process. First consideration was given to the real situation: educational needs of students (“*écoliers*”), a term habitually used by De La Salle and his contemporaries; the conditions, constraints and means of delivering this educa-

⁷ This process of development does not indeed stop with the composition of the first manuscript of 1706. One needs only to take into account, in particular with the aid of CL 24, the additions and deletions that differentiate the 1706 text from the first edition of 1720.

⁸ Yves Poutet, CL 48, 137.

tion; the possibilities for the future and the choice of a specific purpose for the school. Once these were established, appropriate modalities of instruction and education were set up. Because of such an approach, there was a good possibility of finding an adequate balance between supply and demand. And so the result was an acculturated school.

This is why showing the role of the Brothers is not minimizing the role of Jean-Baptist de La Salle. We know that he was at the origin of a movement, guided its evolution in a democratic way and influenced and formulated its principles. From his first biographers we learn that for forty years (1679-1719) his principal and constant preoccupation was the formation of school teachers and Brothers so that they might be capable of organizing and maintaining their schools. To that end he dedicated all his time, his capabilities and his conviction.

Questions remain

We have sufficient knowledge of how the document developed, but it would be interesting to know also the exact date of the first composition of the manuscript of the *Conduite*. Some indications gleaned from the biographers help us make intelligent guesses, but they do not result in any certainty.

Several authors place the first draft of the *Conduite* in 1694-1695. De La Salle was then in the house at Vaugirard, therefore outside of Paris. Thus, he would benefit from the quiet atmosphere necessary for writing. Furthermore, Blain writes: "After M. De La Salle was satisfied with the body of rules he had set up for the practices and customs of the Community, he considered expanding it with other works which would be very useful to the Brothers and their Schools. Among those works are the *Civilité chrétienne* and the *Instruction sur la Messe*, which tells how to assist at Mass well and how to approach devoutly the sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. Also there were Catechisms of every type, simple ones for the children and more complete and learned ones for the Brothers, which included moral doctrine and pious practices. From these works the teachers of the Christian Schools draw their inspiration to explain the great truths of

Religion. De La Salle also composed his *Méditations* and other books of piety for the specific use of his followers.”⁹

As can be seen, no explicit mention is made of the *Conduite des Écoles*. However, several authors refer to this passage to place at this date (1694-1695) the first composition or the draft of what would become the manuscript we know. Toward the end of the nineteenth century Brother Lucard readily states: “The Venerable De La Salle composes some works and writes his *Rule*. The holy founder profited from the quiet atmosphere he enjoyed at Vaugirard to compose some instructional works for the use of the students and the *Conduite des Écoles* for the training of the teachers. But the instructional work on which he worked with the most care was the *Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité chrétienne...*”. In turn, Brother Aroz writes in his *Répertoire chronologique de la vie de Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*: “1694-1695: M. De La Salle composes the *Règles de la Société*, the *Conduite des Écoles* and the *Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité chrétienne*.” Brother Saturnino Gallego indicates the same, and more recently Brother José-María Valladolid, relying on Blain and Gallego, writes that in the year 1694 “De La Salle also composed other books... *Draft of the Conduite des Écoles*.”¹⁰

Brother Saturnino Gallego also refers to another passage in Blain which definitely speaks about the school but does not indicate a date. In a chapter entitled “[De La Salle’s] zeal for the sanctification of his Brothers” the biographer writes: “John Baptist often went into the classes, partly to see if the children were benefiting from the lessons they were receiving but also to note how the Brothers were acquitting themselves of their tasks, his purpose being to encourage them in the exercise of their ministry. Because he wanted them to be able to maintain good order and conduct in their classes, he undertook to compose a kind of directory explaining how everything was to be done, a task he achieved in such an agreeable and stimulating way that the Brothers

⁹ 1 Blain CL 7, 347.

¹⁰ Lucard, FSC, *Annales de l’institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes* (Paris, 1883). – Aroz, FSC, CL 40.1, 9-47, *Répertoire chronologique de la vie de Jean-Baptiste de la Salle* (Rome, 1977). – Gallego, FSC, San Juan Bautista de la Salle: 1, Biografía, 261 note 48, (BAC: Madrid, 1986). – Valladolid, FSC, *Chronologie Lasallienne*, 129, (Rome, 1994).

have always taken pride in observing it as exactly as possible. Yet, he did not want them to be so concerned about what was only accessory that they neglected the essential. This is why we can see in this book of school rules that although he has dwelt at length on the procedures to be observed for teaching reading, writing, and other such necessary things, he insists particularly on the way the children are to be taught their religion and how to lead a good Christian life. All the saintly priest's devoted care to ensure that the children were trained in piety was not wasted. He had the consolation of seeing the youngsters clearly profiting by the instructions they were receiving, much to the edification of everyone."¹¹

As Saturnino Gallego suggests, we can indeed see in this passage the framework of what will become the *Conduite*. It is a fact that during the last years of the seventeenth century De La Salle composed several of his works. Even if all the dates are not exactly known, deciding on this period of time is very logical. We must remember that the first fifteen years of the Society of the Christian Schools was a period of determining how the Society was to be structured and had its moments of difficulty, doubt and crisis, as the history of its foundation shows us. This rough road ended on a positive note at the beginning of June 1694 with the commitment of perpetual vows made by twelve Brothers surrounding John Baptist de La Salle and the "Chapter"¹² that followed. The content of the vow formula and the decisions that came from the assembly indicate that the Institute of the Brothers had arrived at a clear understanding of its nature, of its purpose and of its particular mode of operation. This essential step called for lived experiences to be consolidated. John Baptist de La Salle joined in by writing the core of his works which were all focused on the personal formation of the Brothers and on the exercise of their work-ministry in the gratuitous school to serve the working class and the poor. The "numerous conferences" of which the preface of the *Conduite* speaks had doubtlessly begun before, but they must have continued during this period. In any case, they took place before the composition of the manuscript.

¹¹ 2 Blain, CL 8, 367-368; *Mind and Heart*, 323.

¹² A chapter is an assembly of all or representative members of the Institute or one of its Districts. [translator's note]

Scope of the *Conduite des Écoles*

Today our principal interest is to understand better the content of a text that was at the beginning of a long educational tradition. In fact, even with the modifications incorporated during the course of the last three centuries, the text remained the reference book for schools within the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (and sometimes outside the Institute) for two centuries. During this period some twenty successive editions have been located. Because it aroused such interest and had so many editions, the text must be considered as one containing material that is rich in pedagogical, institutional, educational and pastoral content. Looking at an even broader picture, it would be informative to study the essential role that the *Conduite* played in the structuring and evolution of the primary school in France, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and doubtlessly beyond.

One clarification must be made. The text of the *Conduite* speaks only of the primary school set up by De La Salle and the first Brothers. We should then clarify that their pedagogical initiatives were not limited to this model alone. We know that these Brothers also responded to special needs, requests and circumstances by putting into place:

- a temporary course of education for young Irish children
- Sunday schools for young apprentices and workers who were not educated but desired to supplement their training
- normal schools for country school teachers
- the complex and very unique “Saint-Yon” project.

The *Conduite* speaks then of a certain type of school institution and of a definite clientele. It offers educational objectives as well as apprenticeships suited to the needs of this clientele. But the other above-mentioned projects would also have a long development and a recognized influence as early as the eighteenth century and perhaps even more in the nineteenth century.

Four complementary approaches

As modern sociology has shown, the school instructs and educates in and for

a given society. If it wants to succeed in its work, it must weigh the structures, methods and means it uses to offer its product according to the needs and the expectations of the society. Sometimes it needs to go as far as accepting societal constraints, be they economic, political, cultural, ethical or religious. During the second half of the twentieth century the following question was roundly debated: Does the school change the society or does the society change the school? This proves to be an interesting question, especially for those who work in the school, but perhaps it is also a pointless question since we habitually observe such a reciprocity of influence that it is quite difficult to identify the influence one has on the other.

This is true for both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is true for the *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes* and for the other pedagogical texts of the same period. It is this complex intertwining of school and society that guides the present study. For this reason we offer to the reader three initial volumes:

The first volume will constitute a contextual approach to the *Conduite*. It is indispensable that at the beginning we situate this work in the context that gave birth to it, precisely so that our own preconceptions and lived reality today do not color our reading of it. Thanks to numerous recent studies, we will avoid anachronisms and are thus better able to comprehend the political, economic, social, cultural and religious dimensions of the Ancien Régime in France. All these aspects had a direct influence on the school for ordinary people set up by the Brothers under the direction of John Baptist de La Salle. The *Conduite* shows evidence of each of these different aspects of the society and the Church of that time.

The second volume will constitute a textual approach. Understanding the context will normally help show the objectives and principal tenets of the education provided to the students of that time. But the *Conduite* is above all a descriptive outline of the daily school practices of the first Brothers. Some readers might rightly wish that these practices were more fully explained and even justified. For this reason it is indispensable to situate the text of the *Conduite* in the entirety of the writings of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, and sometimes to use those writings to explain it. The inspiration, the meaning and the spiritual dimension of these school practices are very

often found in other works of the Lasallian corpus. We believe that the logical center of the totality of the Lasallian corpus is constituted in these three key texts: the *Conduite des Écoles*, the *Méditations pour le temps de la Retraite* and the *Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité chrétienne*. This will become evident, we hope, throughout this study.

The third volume will constitute a comparative approach. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers did not arrive on a school scene that had no background. In fact, there was a powerful movement of founding schools that characterized the second half of the seventeenth century. De La Salle had forerunners and contemporaries engaged in instructing the ordinary people and caring for poor children. He personally knew several of them (Nicolas Roland, Nicolas Barré, Charles Démia, for example) and was acquainted with their projects. As naturally happens in every epoch, he was able to be influenced by certain ideas which were current in the Church and the educational milieu of his time. It will therefore be useful to embark upon a comparative study of the *Conduite* and analogous texts which were contemporaneous or immediately preceded the schools of the Brothers.

A diachronic approach

The three preceding volumes constitute a synchronic approach to the *Conduite*. As we have previously recalled, the initial text was modified during the course of the two following centuries. French society, the role of the state in education, the French educational system and pedagogy in general have all evolved. It will be interesting to see if the evolution of the *Conduite* does or does not reflect these changes. This will lead us to a diachronic study which might span from the date of the first edition in 1720 to the edition of 1903. The beginning of the twentieth century marks an end to these successively reshaped editions. This is explained simultaneously by the dispersion of the Institute of the Brothers in France, the expatriation of its central government and the enforcement of the laws of 1904 against congregations of teaching religious. A second reason is also evident. In an Institute up until then mostly French the *Conduite* continued to be thought out, modified and revised as it related to the French system of education. The internationaliza-

tion of this same Institute at the beginning of the twentieth century doubtlessly did not lend itself to using one single text for so many cultures, societies and different educational systems.

For this reason recent editions do not include anything new, but rather they are a repeat of the original texts of 1706 and 1720, pretty much poorly rendered by successive revisions. These recent editions mentioned in the beginning of this preface do not aim to constitute a common norm for all the Lasallian schools in the world, but rather they form part of the return to origins that took place during the second half of the twentieth century.

Introduction

“The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children, and it is for this purpose the Brothers conduct schools, that having the children under their care from morning until evening, these teachers may be able to teach them to live a good life by instructing them in the mysteries of our holy religion and inspiring them with Christian maxims, and so give them a suitable education.” (RC 1:3)

This extract from the Common Rules of 1718 clearly indicates the purpose and principal function of the school founded by John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers. Although it is not taken from the *Conduite*, this passage can help us understand its general thrust. While it does not specify that a priority is given to “children of the working class and the poor,” this priority is clearly specified in the following three articles of the Rule, and we will see this later.

For those who were involved in the establishment of the “Christian schools” from the very beginning, there was no ambiguity concerning the clientele to be served. It is not sufficient to state this in general terms. In this volume we would like to identify more precisely who these children of the working class and the poor were, in what conditions they lived, what problems or difficulties they may have encountered in their daily life and how the school described in the *Conduite* was able to help them overcome them.

In this first volume we would also like to show the connection there was between the stated educational objectives and the lived reality in the school. We will need to point out in the *Conduite* certain expressions and passages that refer us clearly and succinctly to the realities of end of the seventeenth century. The implications of these passages were no doubt very evident for the first readers and those who used the *Conduite*. Today they need to be explained.

At the same time, these passages show how much the first authors of the *Conduite*, the first Brothers gathered with De La Salle, were conscious of the realities of their time and wanted to develop a realistic and acculturated educational project. These were socio-cultural, economic, professional and religious realities of a specific clientele that De La Salle and the Brothers were conscious of serving.

In the course of this study, we will need to identify this clientele and place it in the totality of the social makeup of the era. John Baptist de La Salle did not leave us a systematic treatise on the society of his times, but a great part of his works makes evident reference to it. The passages of the *Conduite* that we will reference, attest to the fact that he knew well these socioeconomic realities and wished to build a school adapted to them. Conversely, we could say that knowing the particular characteristics of the society and the Church during the Ancien Régime permits us to understand better the place of all involved in the “Christian school” from its beginnings: school masters, parents and children. Even in its minutest details the text takes into account the particularities pertaining to these three groups of persons. In a very eloquent way the text also reflects the political, cultural, socioeconomic and ecclesial society of the time of Louis XIV. Our purpose is not to add another history book to the list of the excellent ones already existing for some decades now and to which we will naturally make reference. The historical realities of the time interest us here insofar as they have an impact on the beginning, the organization and the functioning of the school of the Brothers. Reference to the social realities of the time, in particular to the world of the working class and the poor, is indispensable in order to understand better certain aspects of the *Conduite*. For example, we will refer to the prudent care taken when registering new students, the internal arrangement and organization of the schools, the interpersonal relationship between student and teacher, the disciplinary requirements and the content of the professional, human and religious formation of youth.

These constant references justify, we believe, the order of the volumes we have indicated in the preface. As in all times, the school in the seventeenth century was a reflection of the society. The history of teaching and education

shows this. And the school described by the *Conduite* is no exception to this general rule. We would like to show how the *Conduite* helps us to see how the school of the Brothers aimed to fit into urban society, into the Church and into the educational system of the era, all the while affirming its own special characteristics.

* The school of the Brothers aimed to fit into the urban society of the seventeenth century, with all its structures, values, economic activities and educational needs. This was a society that was grappling with problems, difficulties and very specific crises.

* The school of the Brothers aimed to fit into the post-Tridentine Church. Traditionally, the Church in France played a considerable role that made it practically omnipresent in the daily life of the people. What interests us here especially is the pastoral dynamism shown by the Church during the second half of the seventeenth century, a dynamism of evangelization and catechesis of the people in which the school became an instrument. The care of the Church for the poor was also a reality in which John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers took part in a radical way.

* The school of the Brothers aimed to fit into the educational system already in place. For more than twelve centuries, the Church had the official responsibility for a system of education at all levels. Since the end of the sixteenth century, the Church turned resolutely toward the instruction of the people. It created multiple “Petites Écoles,”¹³ so that we can speak of a proliferation of initiatives at the time De La Salle and his first school masters entered the movement in 1679. However, we have to point out that De La Salle and his first school masters did not care to identify with any type of school whose organization, teaching and methods they did not value. Their mode of operation seems to be to distinguish themselves not by causing opposition but by initiating something better.

¹³ These were the numerous “Little Schools” set up at individual initiative and without administrative connection one to the others. Since a literal translation in English of this group of schools does not describe their prominent role in the early history of the foundation of Lasallian schools, I have kept the French term throughout. [translator’s note]

We are not embarking on a new general study of the seventeenth century or on its whole educational system. To delimit our work and not get too far away from the *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes*, we will use various passages of the text and comment on them with what history explains as the realities of the era.

It should then be clear how the school of the Brothers, despite its newness and its originality, had as its aim to respond precisely to the expectations and needs of its clientele. Even if the word was not in use at the time, the school of the Brothers aimed at acculturation.

PART ONE

**A SCHOOL FOR THE WORKING
CLASS AND THE POOR**

A School in an urban milieu

At the time when John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers began their schools, France had about twenty-one million inhabitants, of whom at least 80% lived in rural areas. The poor in this rural milieu had the same educational needs as the poor in the cities, and they were just as neglected as those in the cities. This was, moreover, one of the reasons for a sizeable rural exodus during the seventeenth century which continued into the following centuries. This resulted in an appreciable increase in the urban population along with a greater economic expansion in the cities.

As we will see later, the “evils of the times” and especially the steep mortality rate due to various factors created fragile households, an unstable population and a critical need for renewal.

Despite all these phenomena, which De La Salle knew so well, he chose to work in the city, and only in the city.¹⁴ However, the city population was proportionately more educated than the rural population, as is shown by numerous studies. One can imagine that De La Salle was attentive to the fact that with the denser population in the city there was a surer and more stable clientele, more constant from one end of the school year to another, whereas in the country rural activities often required children to miss school several months out of the year. So De La Salle, in several of his writings and especially in the *Conduite*, makes it perfectly clear that he was convinced of the necessity of regular attendance for the school to be truly useful for the students.

Other motives certainly led him to this choice. Perhaps because he was himself from the city, he felt more at ease in this milieu. Rheims was an average

¹⁴ See Yves Poutet and Jean Pungier, *Un éducateur aux prises avec la Société de son temps*, in particular pages 61-64, (Paris, 1987).

size city but it had for its time all the characteristics of a city: city walls, citizenry, diversity of economic activity and space dedicated to certain activities. It was also for De La Salle a familiar environment whose workings and educational needs he knew well.

However, his biography tells us that his family had property in the country and that he himself in his youth would frequently spend his vacation in the little village of Brouillet. Therefore, it was not a hostility toward the rural milieu but rather the increased opportunities offered by the city that attracted him and led him to make this choice. If we look at the schools he agreed to found during the course of his life, it was not the size of the city that seemed to have prime importance to him but rather its urban characteristics. We see then the Brothers established in Paris, Marseille, Avignon and Grenoble as well as in Mende, Alès and Les Vans.

As certain parts of De La Salle's biographies will attest, his mind was quite made up and he was almost stubborn in his option for the city. Despite requests from the Duke de Mazarin, he refused to send Brothers to the countryside, to Guipavas in Brittany and to Crosne near Paris for example; and toward the end of his life he begged his successor Brother Barthélemy not to send Brothers to Canada because they would wind up being dispersed in the countryside.

One proof that he did not lack sensitivity to the needs in the countryside was his plan to find a substitute for his own schools in the opening of training centers for country school teachers. But that was an educational project different from his own in that there might be school masters working in isolation and engaged in various different activities, even oriented toward liturgical functions. These were school masters quite different from the "Brothers" of the Institute as he conceived it.

Hesitant to get established in the country but ready to set up in the city, this was De La Salle as we know him from the way he acted and made decisions during his lifetime. We even see a certain haste to leave Rheims to accept in 1688 the offer made to him in Paris with the parish of Saint-Sulpice, for from there he would be able to spread out through all of France thanks to

prestige gained in the capital. Future events would prove it, for one needs only to look at the geographical distribution of the schools of the Brothers at the end of De La Salle's life. Although these schools were located in the eastern half of France, there was no hesitancy nor exclusion with regards to other regions where circumstances led to establishing schools.

It was in fact the city that permitted him to actualize the kind of school he envisaged and gradually fine tuned with the Brothers. This was a school with several classes, two or three in fact, a school that could form a small educational community, put into practice developmental school activities better adapted to the needs of the children, work in concert with the teachers and constitute viable communities. All of this could be done because the cities had easier access than the countryside to the resources necessary for such a project.

So the *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes* describes a school made for the city and all that it entails regarding its number of classes, its organizational principles, the requirements made of its students and their families, its flexibility necessary to operate in such a varied world and even the content of the instruction offered to its clientele.

Therefore, it is indispensable first to take up this urban social reality which we find constantly present in the chapters of the *Conduite*.

Chapter 1 – The Working Class and the Poor in Urban Society

How was this population organized and how did the people live? These are the first questions we are going to ask and which we will endeavor to answer in some fashion. To do this we are fortunate to have numerous recent works on the French population as a whole, on its activities and its way of life. There are also numerous monographs in existence.¹⁵ This renewed interest in a historical era, formerly discredited and disdained, permits us to understand much better such a complex reality.

Traditional stereotypes conveyed by history textbooks are continually being scrutinized. The three “Orders” of the nation, royal absolutism, the omnipotence of the Church and a so-called obscurantism are no longer in favor and have given way to more thorough studies. The obsession with appearances, the flashiness of the court and the splendor of the rich are usefully replaced by a more prudent and better documented approach to the economic, cultural, religious and social realities of the time.

This new approach is particularly interesting for a more proper understanding of the very text of the *Conduite*. Even though De La Salle did not write any specific work on the society of his time, a careful reading of his writings, including the *Conduite* of course, reveals that he had a realistic knowledge of his society and that he took this into account when he developed and set up his school. We do not intend here, no more than he did, to present a complete panorama of the society but only to recall the aspects that naturally had an impact on the clientele and the organization of the Lasallian schools.

¹⁵ Certain of these works are indicated in the bibliography at the end of this volume. There are many others.

1. Officially, a society of three “orders”

For the time being, let us consider the classic presentation of this society as a society made up of three “orders”: clergy, nobility and the third estate. It is possible to define succinctly the principal characteristics of these three orders whose origins and evolution can be traced throughout the centuries preceding the seventeenth century. In reality, this generalized division into three orders does not account for the true complexity of the society and hardly takes into account the clientele of the Lasallian schools from their beginnings. In addition, this division would hardly serve our purpose except to illustrate that the school of the Brothers was directed exclusively to the “third order,” purposely and for such motives, as we will see later, that deal with the French educational system of that era. Meanwhile, let us remember that the third estate constituted the large majority of the French population.

However, since the people naturally placed great importance on belonging to one order, it is appropriate to bear in mind that this hierarchy was based essentially on five criteria which had an impact on one’s frame of mind, self awareness and identity and therefore on social behavior and relationships. These constitutive elements of one’s self awareness were dignity, power, financial situation, esteem and service to the society.

Dignity by itself would be enough to constitute a society of orders since it distinguished the two privileged orders, clergy and nobility, from the third order, which had no dignity in the mindset of that era. This situation was to evolve because of the Revolution of 1789, and we are all familiar with the famous cry of that time: “What is the third estate? – Nothing! What is it called to become? – Everything!” But at the end of the seventeenth century, following its professional activities, its financial situation, its lack of education and its absence of power, the third estate (the people) enjoyed no dignity.

Numerous historians have shown that only the two privileged orders kept and exercised **civil and religious power** at all levels of the society, although from the eighteenth century on, the bourgeoisie, having risen from the common people, mixed in gradually until they confiscated this power for their own gain thanks to the Revolution of 1789. This distinction by orders gov-

erned the nature of the work and the occupations one could take up based on one's belonging to an order and according to the criteria of dignity and suitability for a certain order. To stray from this was to risk a fall in rank.

Throughout the centuries one's **financial situation** had accounted for the progressive separation into three orders, permitting some to get rich at the expense of and to the detriment of others. Thus, the third estate had to contribute to the enrichment of the clergy and the nobility by its work and various taxes it had to pay them. However, financial situation did not favor all equally. The clergy and the nobility in the seventeenth century ran the gamut from the most poor to the very rich. During this time, out of the third estate arose progressively the "new rich," the bourgeoisie. This criterion of financial situation is of special interest to our study since we will be speaking largely about a school for the poor. However, economic poverty did not automatically mean exclusion from a privileged order, and this helps us understand why the situation of economic poverty was not lived interiorly the same way according to one's social standing. It was not yet a matter of social classes in the current sense of the term which defines a class according to the level of its income. Despite the strong sentiment of belonging to one order, this did not stop the "shameful poor" from refusing to be controlled by society and belonging to various orders for fear of being humiliated and losing their own dignity.

Esteem constituted the social side of belonging to an order. Despite any variations or change in one's economic situation, it was essential to fight for and preserve a certain level of social esteem, namely a place in the social makeup, a value, an honor, an esteem bestowed by public opinion, which could be confirmed or withdrawn as the situation warranted it. Many historical documents show that esteem was not only individual, but also applied to social groups, such as various occupations and religious congregations. Public events, such as holidays and processions, constituted good occasions to test the esteem one enjoyed, for esteem was a given that was changeable. It could be lost due to some falling out, some reversal in financial situation or some reprehensible conduct by part of the group. People vied and competed to better their level of esteem, but the public as a whole remained a merciless judge.

A fifth criterion of belonging to an order was that of **service**, i.e. service rendered to or by the society whether material or spiritual. It was, moreover, this notion of “service rendered” that was at the origin of the three orders. The clergy was called the first order of the nation because it took care of the spiritual dimension of the population; the nobility, the second order, was responsible for the security and defense of the people. From these considerations also came the privileges granted to these two orders. The third estate was to provide for the material needs of everyone. In this last one we see a major element of the society, especially since service was more visible, extensive and stable than the preceding criteria. According to one’s social position, one’s state in life or one’s work, one could then serve God, the king, the Church, the people or just some local noble.

This notion of service led to numerous consequences, among which the following one seems important to recall. Depending on one’s service to the nation, it was necessary to prepare oneself adequately and so to attend the proper educational establishments. We will have occasion to be more specific about this later, but let us indicate briefly here that this explains why the children of the nobility and the boys who aspired to the priesthood naturally went to the preparatory secondary schools,¹⁶ universities and seminaries whose purpose, educational programs and methods were aligned to their specific goal. On the other hand, the children of the common people, because of the service they were called to render, were educated in the guilds of the tradesmen and/or in the *Petites Écoles*, which were the people’s schools.

2. Relative importance of the three orders

• The Clergy

Being a cleric at that time was not equivalent to being a priest. One became a cleric with the tonsure, one of the minor orders, sometimes without intending to go further. The tonsure was a condition of obtaining “ecclesias-

¹⁶ In French these are “collèges.” Their clientele included students aged 12 to 15 or 16 and were geared to prepare them for university. For this reason they will be translated as “preparatory secondary schools.” [translator’s note]

tical benefits,” which were not negligible. We must then dissociate the tonsure from the idea of a priestly vocation.

Those who went further, taking the minor orders and the diaconate, constituted the clergy properly speaking, and within this clergy there were important divisions often determined by the social origin of the members. The esteemed position of bishop, abbot of a large monastery and canon of a prestigious cathedral went to the descendants of noble families. These positions provided them with the dignity of their order and also a source of revenue.

Among the canons, within the cathedral chapters, certain titles were usually bestowed. Among those that interest us here in particular are the *chantre* (or *écolâtre* or *épiscol*, according to regional use), which entailed the responsibility of the schools in the diocese. The duty of chancellor gave authority over teachers at all levels, authorizing them to teach. The *théologal* was specifically charged with religious instruction, as was Nicolas Roland in Rheims, friend of John Baptist de La Salle.¹⁷

The titles of curate and parish vicar went to priests of common origin. They formed the “low clergy,” evidently the most numerous. To have a quantitative index of the entirety of the clergy, the following figures reflect the makeup of the clergy at the end of the eighteenth century: 139 archbishoprics or bishoprics, 8,000 to 9,000 canons, 40,000 curates and 50,000 vicars. Compared to the total population, this represents a very small proportion. We must also add to these figures the number of the religious order priests and, to a great extent, religious women, the figures for whom varied greatly according to historians (from 130,000 to 400,000). But it is generally thought that the total number was fewer than 500,000, which is a small percentage.

- The Nobility

The word itself signifies a distinction in the status of persons, elevating those who possess it above other subjects of the king. This was the second order of

¹⁷ These titles have no equivalent in English and are no longer in usage in current French society. Since their functions are explained in the text, they remain untranslated. The title of *chantre*, however, will later be translated as “Superintendent of schools” since a particular *chantre* will figure prominently in the early history of the Lasallian schools. [translator’s note]

the state whose approximate number seems to be between 200,000 and 300,000 persons at the end of the Ancien Régime. This total number constituted a great diversity, including together those born into nobility or who inherited the status, those who became nobles by exercising certain duties in the government, the administration or the army, and those who had bought titles of nobility for themselves or had them transferred to themselves. But one could also lose one's title of nobility and degrade oneself either by not living up to the duties attached to the title or by engaging in activities not compatible with the state of nobility, such as manual labor or certain mercantile professions.

- The Third Estate

“The third state or class of society was at the opposite end of the first two, the clergy and nobility,” wrote Marcel Marion. It brought together all those who did not belong to the privileged orders. It enjoyed no privileges other than exclusive rights in the market place and in the trades. “But within this order there was a hierarchy established according to the dignity of the function exercised. Officers of the law and of finance, university graduates and doctors, lawyers, financiers and business people preceded merchants, pharmacists, laborers and tradesmen. At the bottom of the ladder were the workers or manual laborers in the cities and in the country, vagabonds and the grimy,” according to Cabourdin and Viard.

However, the third estate played an important role at the level of the provincial and general states (or assemblies), although it was not equitably represented according to its demographic importance in the country. It was through the List of Grievances drawn up in the parishes that it could express its needs. Often, in the course of the seventeenth century, the king relied on the third estate to diminish the influence of the other two orders.

Although the expression was not used with reference to the Institute of the Brothers, it was indeed for the third estate that De La Salle and the first Brothers worked from the beginning of their Institute. As the above-mentioned figures indicate, the third estate represented almost all of the French population. Like the two first orders, it was very diversified. By the eigh-

teenth century there were already five categories in the bourgeoisie, followed by those engaged in the arts and the trades and finally vagabonds and beggars. Social mobility existed, but passing from one level to another required much time and often the effort of several generations.¹⁸

3. An urban socio-economic hierarchy

Dividing society into levels and orders is partially artificial and tenuous. The bourgeois were buying titles of nobility (especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), and all the social milieus were represented within the clergy. If natural catastrophes occurred, the socio-professional situations of many persons could change. It is almost as if it were a two directional social mobility with some ascending the social ladder and others falling into lower categories. This phenomenon is particularly important when we want to locate the standing of the clientele served by the schools of the Brothers. To speak of the “working class and the poor” can refer to one particular category, for the working class, especially apprentices and their associates, could lose their job and their income and thus enter the category of the poor. Being poor was neither a profession nor a normal state of life, even if in certain cases this sad situation lasted a long time. It was a situation one desired to get out of, preferably through the top. This was precisely what the school wanted to help do, as we will see, through its programs of education.

Therefore, to take up again the complexity of this society and to situate better the “working class and the poor,” it is useful to make a precise as possible outline of a socio-economic hierarchy. Again this will be a simplified hierarchy. The hierarchy proposed by Benoît Garnot¹⁹ seems particularly illuminating for our purposes. Going beyond the traditional division into three orders, he proposes an urban hierarchy which can be summarized in the following outline:

¹⁸ For more specific information on the three orders, see Cabourdin and Viard, *Lexique historique de la France d'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Colin, 1981) ; M. Marion, *Dictionnaire des institutions de la France: XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Picard, 1989) ; François Bluche et al., *Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

¹⁹ Benoît Garnot, *Les Villes en France aux XVI^e-XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Ophrys, 1989), chap. 2.

A. THE DOMINANT

1. **CLERGY.** High, middle and low clergy; first order of the nation with a great diversity of economic revenue, influence and power.
2. **NOBILITY.** High, middle and low nobility; nobility of sword and of dress; occupies an important social and political place; shows clear inequalities of income and prestige.
3. **BOURGEOISIE.** Expands widely in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; participates little by little in the power and the social, political and economic responsibilities of the society.

B. THE INTERMEDIARY

4. **OFFICERS.** Persons exercising “offices,” positions or secondary duties in the administration, law and police; widely spread positions at the end of the Ancien Régime.
5. **PERSONS OF INDEPENDENT MEANS.** Socio-economic category becoming larger and larger at the end of the seventeenth century and during the eighteenth century.
6. **MASTERS.** These are not school masters, but rather “masters of a trade,” common artisan patrons owning their workshop and shops and often employing some helpers and apprentices.

C. THE DOMINATED

7. **SALARY EARNERS.** Dependant workers, employees either in expanding shops or in the shops of the trade masters; manual laborers with small incomes and tenuous security; called “helpers” in the workplace.
8. **DOMESTICS.** A social group that is numerically large in the cities; plays an important socio-cultural role as intermediaries between the rich and the poor.
9. **URBAN AGRICULTURISTS.** Still relatively numerous within the precincts of certain cities.

10. DAILY WORKERS. Also called manual laborers; laborers without qualifications and subject to fluctuations in economic trends and conditions.

D. THE EXCLUDED

11. NON-VAGABOND BEGGARS. Victims of economic conditions and perils of the times: cold, famine, epidemics, wars, etc.; must be taken care of by the local community; excluded from the real functioning of the society's economy.

12. VAGABONDS. About 10% of the population; a noteworthy social phenomenon and source of social conflict; perceived as a menace to social peace and so usually repressed and not considered "citizens" of the city.

E. THE UNCLASSIFIABLE

13. UNDEPLOYED SOLDIERS. Numerous outside of wartime, without resources, easily assimilated into the vagabonds; cause violent situations and considered dangerous.

14. PROSTITUTES. Constitute a large proportion in certain cities, sometimes estimated at 8% to 10% of the population.

This classification can seem very succinct in comparison with that established by François Bluche and Jean-François Solnon and based on the categories set up for the first head tax in 1695.²⁰

The working class and the poor of whom De La Salle speaks, those who send their sons to the "Christian schools,"²¹ belonged to categories 6 to 11 in our

²⁰ François Bluche and Jean-François Solnon, *La véritable hiérarchie sociale de l'ancienne France: Le tarif de la première capitation (1695)* (Genève : Droz , 1983).

²¹ On this topic read Henri Bédel, *Initiation à l'histoire de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes: Origines 1651-1726* (Rome, 1994), 115-124; Henri Bédel, *Les pauvres au temps de saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle*, AMG, 275/8, 19; Maurice Hermans, *Les pauvres auxquels se vouaient saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle et les premiers Frères*, AMG, 277/2, 14; Yves Poutet, *Cahier Lasallien* 43 (1999) 173-194, 195-231.

table. It is important then to delineate some characteristics of this population which represented at least half of the urban population. The totality of this population, i.e. trade workers and manufacturing employees, and especially manual laborers and daily workers, had none or very little general education. Without the school they had very little chance to approach an upper socio-professional category. In addition, in times of catastrophe or periods of economic recession they faced the threat of unemployment. Their employment was precarious and thus also their source of revenue. Certainly, the “helpers” were relatively better protected by the regulations and traditions of benefit insurance which existed in many guilds, but historians have indicated that underemployment greatly increased during the course of the eighteenth century. Depending on the city, from 25% to 50% of the citizens faced the threat of unstable employment. “Precarious employment appears as the principal characteristic of the lower classes whose members passed back and forth from self-sufficiency to poverty,” writes Benoît Garnot.²²

In addition, the gap between the poor and the rich in urban society was large and continued to increase in the eighteenth century: “Anyone who cannot provide for his own needs and those of his family is considered poor, permanently or sporadically. There is in effect a hierarchy of poverty,” according to Benoît Garnot.²³

To refine our description of the clientele of the schools of John Baptist de La Salle, we would still need to mention the elements of the social urban topology. It is well known that members of the same corps of tradesmen customarily gathered together in certain areas or certain streets of the city. From this we have the contrast between the industrial and poor areas as opposed to the well off areas, including those located around cathedrals, convents and chapter houses. In the eighteenth century this tendency is shown in the clustering of the richest in the center of the city, while the poor lived mostly in the surrounding areas, the outlying districts, outside the city walls.

* * *

²² Garnot, 37-38.

²³ Garnot, 38.

The three traditional orders of French society during the Ancien Régime existed simultaneously. But the criteria that define the hierarchy of the orders and show how people belonged to any one of its categories are very complex and loosely perceived since the concrete situations of dignity, power, wealth and esteem seem influenced by extremely varied forces. The orders do not disappear completely in this melding, but they are sometimes made relative by it. It is sure, however, that neither the members of the nobility nor those of the upper and middle bourgeoisie sent their sons to the Petites Écoles. To do so would have meant a drop in rank, and their ambitions in society were quite different. They wanted to prepare their sons to play an important role in the functioning of the country. The clergy was evidently a special case. Since the middle of the seventeenth century especially, its members were prepared for their duties in seminaries. As we have already indicated, the nobility and the third estate were also represented in the clergy. Their specialized formation was geared more toward preparatory secondary school and the university rather than toward the Petites Écoles.

In fact, the clientele of these Petites Écoles, not only of the schools of John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers, was the third estate and particularly the poor layers of this population. In other words, it is what we usually call the common people, those usually seen in the streets of the city, especially Paris, the most populated of the cities. The capital was evidently the city that captured most the curiosity of historians. Information concerning the capital is therefore much more detailed and concrete. We will often have the opportunity to come back to it. This was the Paris where John Baptist de La Salle and some Brothers arrived in 1688. According to François Bluche,²⁴ there was in Paris a great diversity of wealth, from the *millesoudier* to the *gagne-denier*, the *millesoudier* being the one who was rich enough to spend a thousand *sous* per day, while the *gagne-denier* or *gagne-petit* was the poor man who exercised one of the innumerable small trades and whose income was very precarious, such as second hand dealer, cutler, lock picker, assistant, factory worker and artisan's helper.

²⁴ François Bluche, *La vie quotidienne au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris : Hachette, 1984).

This was one population difficult to control, despite the good organization of the police since Colbert had created the office of Police Lieutenant in 1667. To get an idea of the daily reality in Paris, one would need to read the entirety of Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, published at the end of the eighteenth century and republished in the twentieth century.²⁵ This is a careful and impartial eyewitness report of the reality in Paris in which are found a mine of information and details of the greatest interest.

It is in this context that De La Salle and the Brothers tried to educate the sons of the working class and the poor. We will see how this attempt was made and how it was made not without difficulty.

²⁵ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994).

Chapter 2 - The World of the Working Class and the Poor

“The necessity of this Institute is very great because the working class and the poor, being usually little instructed and occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their children, cannot give them the instruction they need and a respectable and Christian education. Persons are therefore needed to take the place of fathers and mothers to instruct children in the mysteries of religion that they ought to know and in the elementary practices of the Christian life.

It was to procure this advantage for the children of the working class and of the poor that the Christian schools were established.”²⁶

The above quote is taken from the *Rule* of the Brothers of 1705, a date which practically coincides with the manuscript of the *Conduite* which we are studying. The content of this passage provides evidence that the project of the Christian school was clearly defined and its preferred clientele was definite by that date, namely “the children of the working class and the poor.”

Were De La Salle and the first Brothers setting up a clear difference between the working class and the poor? It is not certain, and we will endeavor to show why. The word referring to the working class (*artisan* in French) is relatively little used by De La Salle in the totality of his writings. It is found only 24 times, sometimes alone, sometimes connected, as it is here, with the word for poor (*pauvre*). On the other hand, the words for “poor,” “poverty” and “in a poor way” are found at least 324 times. Since he was in direct contact with the social reality of his time, De La Salle certainly realized that some of the poor were in fact of the working class who were victims of dire cir-

²⁶ *Rule* of the Brothers of 1705, CL 25, 16-17, I: 4-5.

cumstances or economic misfortunes and were among the poor temporarily or permanently. Some of them were required to register as poor in their parishes. To make a clear and absolute distinction between the working class and the poor, already at that time and even more for us today, is doubtlessly an exercise in futility, as numerous historians have shown. For example, let us consider again what Benoît Garnot wrote: "... the line between those who earned a salary and those who were poor fluctuates. Everything depends on the state of the work market. In a time of economic crisis, many people in difficult situations find themselves unemployed and become poor. When the crisis is over and work begins again, the category breaks down temporarily until the next crisis, keeping only those who have become too old to work as well as those who are infirm and sick. No category in the world of work can totally escape poverty, but several professional sectors are at greater risk than others: day workers, weavers, wool carders, stocking and clog makers, porters, etc., i.e. workers with little or no qualifications. The poor are more numerous in manufacturing cities, like Lille and Lyon, than in governmental or business centers. For example, they account for less than a fifth of Le Mans in the eighteenth century but a third of Amiens."²⁷

1. The world of the poor

Numerous authors have proposed their own definition of poverty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To keep close to the historical period we are treating, let us consider the definition found in the 1701 edition of the *Dictionnaire Universel* of Antoine Furetière. The poor person is one "who has no goods, who is destitute and who does not have what is necessary to sustain his life or support his station in society."²⁸ This situation, economic in nature, depended essentially on the work market. Destitution was a direct consequence of unemployment. For Pierre Richelet in his *Nouveau Dictionnaire Français*, the sober definition of the poor is "one who lives with a shortage of food and in need."²⁹

²⁷ Garnot, 38.

²⁸ Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel* (1701).

²⁹ Pierre Richelet, *Nouveau Dictionnaire Français* (Amsterdam, 1709) II:173.

- **How one becomes poor**

How does one become poor? Jean-Pierre Gutton³⁰ believes that in order to determine the threshold of poverty at least four factors must be taken into consideration. But today's historians usually do not have access to documents necessary to verify the existence of the relative weight of each of these elements in concrete cases. The poor of that period were generally illiterate, unable to describe their situation and how they got there. Let us also recognize that they had other pressing and essential survival needs that commanded their attention. With reference to the period known by De La Salle and the first Brothers, the four elements proposed by Gutton are especially pertinent.

The first factor is the number of mouths to feed in a family. We know from other sources that the families of the time were rather large, averaging five to six children in the seventeenth century and four to five children in the eighteenth century. This decrease, according to demographic studies, was less noticeable in the poor strata of the population than in the more favored categories. But it is difficult to know at any one time how many members were in a family and what their respective ages were.

The second factor is the portion of each expense category in an ordinary budget of an unskilled worker or working craftsman. It is certain that the category for food was at the top of the family budget, fluctuating between 70% and 100% according to the day and the time of year since the amount of this expense was not dependant on choice but rather on the exigencies of the economic situation.

The third factor is the ongoing comparison between prices and salaries. The majority of historians support what Gutton says: "There is no day without an expense, but there are days without work and salary."³¹ This constant reality became more crucial in times of bad weather, harsh winters, poor harvests and thus scarcity of grain and an increase in prices.

³⁰ Jean-Pierre Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe: XVI^e -XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: PUF, 1974).

³¹ Gutton, 74.

This is why Gutton indicates employment as the fourth element determining the threshold of poverty. There are times of unemployment, but the most dramatic affect poor workers. Pierre Richelet says the following about this unemployment in his dictionary: "The members of the working class are all unfortunate during this time because they are not working."³² Gutton speaks more precisely on two aspects of unemployment: "The number of working days is reduced by the great abundance of holidays. In Mayence in the eighteenth century there are only 283 working days. But not all working days are days when work is found. Bad weather and sickness sometimes cause long periods of unemployment. When we look at detailed accounts of workers in the building trade, we see that the number of days they actually work is generally between 260 and 290 per year. For farm workers this figure is generally much lower."³³

We cannot then be surprised that the poor are besieged with immediate problems of survival. They frequently confront an insufficient amount of food, the ravages of bad weather and sometimes the lack of permanent housing. It is a state of insecurity, whether temporary or permanent. Unemployment rapidly brings on destitution. Gutton writes: "Above all, the economic crises of the Ancien Régime determine unemployment and underemployment. If the harvest is poor, the work given to daily workers is scarce. The consequences that the crisis has on manufacturing weigh just as heavily on the common people working in shops. For them the crisis means more expensive bread but also more scarce work since manufactured products rapidly succumb to underproduction. In addition, destitution furthers the movement of people out of the rural areas and into the cities, a phenomenon still poorly understood but which seems important and able to modify greatly the work market."³⁴

- **A progression toward doom**

This progression is one which leads from poverty to begging. From the above

³² Richelet, 97.

³³ Gutton, 75.

³⁴ Gutton, 75.

mentioned conditions, it is easy to understand that the poor could save, store or otherwise stock up reserves for difficult times, sometimes not even just for nonworking days. They lived day by day in an extremely fragile economic situation, never knowing what the next day will bring. Their situation could even become so critical that their only recourse was begging.

They could get themselves out of this destitution by themselves. This is an even more compelling reason that explains their inability to instruct or educate their children. By analyzing the registers of hospices, General Hospitals and general almsgiving, historians have identified some social groups especially reduced to begging. In addition to daily workers already subject to the ups and downs of hiring and the work market, there were naturally the elderly, the infirm, the disabled and widows. As they had lost their ability to work, they had no hope of escaping destitution. "At times of great economic catastrophes, a certain number of the poor die. But for the others, those who survive, it is useless to say their condition is terrible. We must ask ourselves how they are able to weather this storm and if these downfalls and collapses are irreversible," writes Gutton.³⁵

A confirmation of a different nature on who these poor are is given us by François Bluche when he speaks of the 22 classes of taxpayers set up at the time of the first head tax in 1695: "The 22nd and last class of French taxpayers in 1695 includes simple soldiers and sailors, simple manual workers and daily workers, the majority of servants, apprentices of craftsmen, shepherds, carters and others in the employ of laborers, farmers and country dwellers; and in the city the young attendants of surgeons, pharmacists, barbers, wig-makers and innkeepers. Assistants and city workers have been forgotten. Doubtlessly, they have been grouped with craftsmen."³⁶

Although classified in the last category, these above mentioned taxpayers

³⁵ Gutton, 75

³⁶ Bluche, *La vie quotidienne au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Hachette, 1984), 274-275. Instituted in 1695, the head tax was a direct personal tax on all the French except members of the clergy who were exempted when they gave a large donation, a "don gratuit." The taxpayers were divided into 22 classes according to the amount of the tax imposed.

were people who had a job and some income. Their lot was more enviable than that of vagabonds, wanderers and beggars. “The least stable position and the worst paid,” continues Bluche, “is that of manual workers and daily workers, in the city as well as in the fields. Compared to the lot of these simple people, the lot of manufacturers is quite enviable.”³⁷

As for those in charge of manufacturing, like master craftsmen and persons who hired temporary or permanent workers, “the most modest jobs and unstable positions are given to manual workers and daily workers who are paid by the day, as their title indicates. These are men...but also women... or even children from six to twelve years of age.... The few pennies per day of remuneration (for children) are gladly added to the salaries of their parents. Their bosses are in no way intending to exploit these children but rather to initiate them into their future trade. They are pre-apprentices.”³⁸ We will see later how much putting these children to work disturbed De La Salle and the Brothers. We will also see that they were quite aware of their role in fighting against this practice.

• Harsh working conditions

Manual laborers were perhaps all too familiar with the many days when work is not available, but when they did work they were subject to terrible work schedules. It is said for example that at the famous factory of Saint Gobain (given as an example at the time) the workers (men, women and children) had to work 14 hours a day, and out of this time had to be found time for meals. In the arsenals the workers worked from 7 o'clock in the morning to 6 o'clock in the evening in winter and from 5 o'clock in the morning to 8 o'clock in the evening in the summer. “The nine hours, the eleven hours or the twelve hours of work must be reduced by two hours for various breaks, one of which is always a stop at the tavern. The tavern is not, however, for getting drunk but for relaxation. It is part of the rhythm of the workday. Any occasion is good for taking a break, to have a drink and to sing....”³⁹

³⁷ Bluche, 275.

³⁸ Bluche, 277.

³⁹ Bluche, 283.

The same type of exhausting work was the lot of the water carriers of whom Louis-Sébastien Mercier speaks: “Water was purchased in Paris. Public fountains were so rare and so poorly maintained that people had recourse to river water. No amount of water could satisfy a bourgeois household. From morning to evening twenty thousand water carriers hauled up two full pails from the first to the seventh floor and sometimes beyond. If the water carrier was robust, he made about thirty trips a day.”⁴⁰ Let us note in passing that this was not potable water. It carried diarrhea or other infectious germs and was thus dangerous to health! Also, it would be easy to cite multiple examples of long workdays. When sufficient artificial lighting was lacking, the beginning and the end of natural daylight determined the limits of the workday, whose duration was flexible in the temperate climates.

- **So much work for so little pay**

Situations were so varied that it is impossible to generalize, and we must make do with a few judicious approximations. Vauban, the famous minister under Louis XIV, during his numerous travels through the kingdom, proved to be a keen observer of the economic reality of the lowly people. He estimated that most of the craftsmen, according to the nature of their trade, earned from 15 to 30 sous per day. But that seems to be an optimistic estimate, for certain craftsmen earned less than 15 sous each working day. François Bluche, basing himself on Vauban’s estimates, suggests the case of a weaver: “This is a man who earns 12 sols when he has woven six alders of cloth in one workday. But there is no work on 52 Sundays and about 38 holidays. In order to give a more complete picture, the author of the “*Dîme Royale*” [“Royal Tithe”] (1707) adds 50 days of frost, 20 days of obligatory absences for trips (fairs, markets, other business), thus 25 days to weave cloth or be sick. Thus, his entire year will be reduced to 180 days of real work, with his actual salary being 108 livres per year, or a little less than 6 sous per day. That is little for a craftsman who has only his arms to work with and is obliged to pay rent for a house, buy clothing for himself and his family and

⁴⁰ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 134-135.

feed a wife and children who themselves are often not capable of earning much.”⁴¹

The authors we have just cited speak twice of child labor. In the mindset of the time, which still quite often considered children as young adults, child labor was a given and became in certain cases a family necessity. Moreover, the *Conduite des Écoles* mentions it several times to deplore it. Let us add the following details given by Jean-Pierre Gutton: “In the society of the Ancien Régime, children are employed very early for various tasks, but the real apprenticeship begins only between the ages of twelve and fourteen. The tendency to start begging is very great before this age of apprenticeship especially when the children are idle. And it is at this age that the Petites Écoles expect to keep the children busy.”⁴²

• From poverty to begging

For the various reasons that we have only touched upon and which related in one way or another to the circumstances of the times, many laborers, craftsmen or poor men were sometimes reduced little by little to the state of begging. As in all times, there certainly existed “professional” beggars, but they constituted a minority. The others, much more numerous, found themselves at a particular point in time forced to depend on the assistance of others. As Jean-Pierre Gutton writes: “From poverty to begging, the difference is only a matter of degree, not of essence. This is a concept that appears essential to bear in mind. You see first that the poor, even if they do not beg themselves, too readily let their children wander around and beg.... Hospital registers or police archives record these unfortunate youngsters from about ten to fifteen years old whom their parents sent begging and who also live on odd jobs and petty plundering. In seventeenth-century France the problem of young poor children begging is so widespread that a movement to create Little Schools has as its principal goal to wipe out this problem of children begging.... It is true that later, when the children reach the age of appren-

⁴¹ Bluche, 280. An alder is an ancient measure of length equaling 1.188 meters. The livre was worth 20 sous (or sols). The sol was worth 12 deniers.

⁴² Gutton, 80.

ticeship, these begging practices are taken up again. It is quite common to find servants and apprentices running away and the only resource these youngsters in breach of contract have is to go begging. That is a standard feature in the life of poor youth.”⁴³

There were two large categories of beggars in the world of the poor: wanderers and those settled in one place. This is not the place to go into detail about the characteristics of these groups nor to describe the fate which was reserved for them by the authorities of the time. For the purposes of our study, let us simply state that the schools of the Brothers addressed the needs of the poor who were settled, who were known and whose names were normally recorded in the registers of the poor in parishes. Many historians have studied this situation. Rather than cite several of them, let us consider again what Antoine Furetière itemized in his *Dictionnaire*: “There is an office of the poor in Paris; a tax is levied on the bourgeois for the poor; commissaries of the poor are established; all this concerns the *Petites Maisons* under the direction of the Procurator General; a General Hospital was opened to tend to all the poor. Before that, we were overcome with the poor who came asking for alms. Beggars and the poor are all called members of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁴ These few lines capture the essence of the situation.

Among the measures taken by the authorities in favor of the begging poor was the opening in certain parishes of gratuitous schools called “charity schools.” We can include among them the schools of the Brothers by virtue of their being gratuitous. We will have the opportunity to show that the *Conduite* makes reference to the Register of the poor, which was well known by De La Salle and the Brothers. Some critical episodes in the personal life of De La Salle and in the history of his schools also support this.

• The poor living in shame

“There are also poor people living in shame, family people who suffer greatly from need and are ashamed to let it be known,” continues Furetière in his

⁴³ Gutton, 79-80.

⁴⁴ Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel*.

Dictionnaire. It is also a fact that the offices of the poor were generally pre-occupied with the fate of those poor people who hid the fact that they were poor and thus did not benefit from the assistance they could have received.

It is this same sentiment of compassion for these poor that motivated De La Salle when he obstinately refused to verify the economic situation of the parents of the children in his schools, despite the pleas of the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice and the violent attacks of the other school masters. He nevertheless had to resign himself to do it, even reluctantly as one of his biographers the canon Jean-Baptiste Blain explains at length.⁴⁵

On this same subject Jean-Pierre Gutton explains the borderline case of peddling, which was a very useful profession and well known in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but which also was very problematic as a source of subsistence. Here is what Gutton has to say of it: "More than any other activity peddling shows how certain trades are not only very precarious but also on the border of begging, even vagrancy.... Small itinerant merchants of earthenware and peddlers of books, almanacs, notions and hardware do not always have a fixed place in which to live. Somewhat like vagabonds, they find room and board for a night in some farmhouse. They will pay their debt with some small object and by reporting some news. Their trade generally is not sufficient for their livelihood and so they are reduced to begging. When the police arrest a peddler, they take an inventory of his possessions. They hardly find anything more than items of small value: rosaries, scissors, combs, sewing material, and very often the inventory ends with these words: 'several pieces of bread.' This last detail is enough to suggest that begging is part of the ordinary resources of many peddlers. Questioning by the police reveals that peddling leads to a life of need and sometimes a life of degeneracy. Recruitment is often done among ruined tradesmen and day workers who have not been able to survive on their own. If sickness strikes a peddler and if he must sell his inventory, nothing will distinguish him from the beggar."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ 2 Blain, CL 8, 34-44; Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publ., 2000) vol. III, chap. v.

⁴⁶ Gutton, 83-84.

A whole fringe of poor people thus lived between an extremely shaky existence and a state of wandering. Begging sometimes became a way of life even when one did not need to do it. The fear of tomorrow and the uncertainty of daily living led one to beg to try to provide oneself with meager earnings. As always in such situations there arose the insane idea that maybe life is better elsewhere. And so we see a phenomenon of migration not only of course from the countryside to the city but also beyond the borders, particularly toward Spain. And so women and children were easily left to themselves. Children had hardly any chance to escape the vicious cycle of poverty-destitution-begging. When they grew up, their only possibilities were to flee, to roam and to beg or, what is hardly any better, to do tedious and poorly paid day work, even to join the army.

It would be easy to multiply examples and quotes from historians on the subject of the poor. The examples we have given above suffice to shed light on the situations not only the Brothers found themselves in but also other school masters at the time. The world of the poor was a massive entity, moving and complex. One little incident could push a family from economic self-sufficiency to destitution and begging. For the masters of the Petites Écoles, it was a loss of students, a loss of resources. For the Charity Schools and for the schools of the Brothers, it could be the beginning of absenteeism or leaving school and thus concrete problems to solve.

But not all workers were victims of this gloomy spiral toward becoming poor. Because they continued to work or because they were taken care of by the support system of their guild,⁴⁷ they escaped the torments of begging. So, let us briefly look at this world of workers.

2. The world of the guilds

“One aspect of city life that is different from country life,” according to Goubert and Roche, “is that in the city social entities within the three orders

⁴⁷ Like the majority of historians, and for greater convenience, we will use the word for “guild” [*corporation* in French] although it did not become part of current usage until after the death of John Baptist de La Salle.

are very clearly distinguished and almost perfectly defined and they are conscious of their status.”⁴⁸

Just as the *Conduite* quite often makes mention of the poor, it just as often refers explicitly to the working class organized in guilds. Before the French Revolution suppressed the guilds in 1791, the world of the guilds was very characteristic of urban society during the Ancien Régime. Guilds constituted an important part of urban society and naturally provided clientele to the Petites Écoles, although not exclusively.

Before showing how the school of the Brothers tried to take into account the particularities of this world of the working class, it is necessary to recall briefly the characteristics of the guilds. Studies on the subject abound, and it is treated in all the works relative to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including those focusing essentially on the school.

• Brief historical overview

The “bodies” or “communities” of trades formed and organized themselves progressively starting in the Middle Ages. It was a simple matter of natural and spontaneous grouping and coming together of workers in the same trade located near one another. That is why it was not rare to find guilds that involved only workers of the same city or of the same region. Because they were first formed spontaneously and were motivated by the need for mutual support, physical proximity and protection, the guilds adopted many different names,⁴⁹ including names belonging to specific regions or localities.

The fact that there were many different words to express the concept of a guild shows the extensive complexity of the workingman’s world which was devoted essentially, but not exclusively, to manual work. The lists of guilds that were established at the end of the seventeenth century are impressive. They describe hundreds of small, different trades, and just as many social groups.

⁴⁸ Pierre Goubert and Daniel Roche, *Les Français et l’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Colin, 1984) I: 60.

⁴⁹ In French, “confréries, charités, fraternités, gildes, hanses, métiers, collèges, communautés, corps, maîtrises, [or] jurandes”.

Having first begun informally and spontaneously, the guilds gradually got organized and adopted structures particularly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then reached their height under the reign of Louis XIV. This coincided exactly with the beginning of the schools of the Brothers. With the general control-based management characteristic of the absolutist state came the continuing and progressively constraining intervention of the local authorities and then of the royal power in the development of the guilds and even in their internal workings.

The links that tied together the members of the same guild were more or less strong, narrow and constraining, depending on whether the trades in question were free trades or “sworn” trades. As Émile Coornaert points out, “The ‘sworn’ trade appears largely as a grouping of tradesmen on an equal footing, united by oath and most often connected to a monopoly. They were a little republic more or less autonomous.”⁵⁰

The same author describes the juridical characteristics of the guilds, namely their moral identity, their oath and the assemblies of their members: “For good measure let us consider successively their juridical characteristics: their identity, their oath, the assemblies of their trades and their powers, the manner in which those sworn members lived and were trained, their corporate jurisdiction and their legal exclusive rights. Next let us look at their technical character: their right of access and their created masterpieces. Finally let us consider at least one economic character, the monopoly.” And the author proposes the following definition: “These common traits permit us to call a guild an economic grouping of almost public right, submitting its members to a collective discipline for the exercise of their profession.”⁵¹

The workers therefore first associated themselves to share their tasks under identical equitable conditions in order to legally guarantee their solidarity. Thus they protected themselves with juridical defenses and organized themselves as a group apart. These four elements started in a spontaneous phase

⁵⁰ Émile Coornaert, *Les Corporations en France avant 1789* (Paris: NRF-Gallimard, 1941).

⁵¹ Coornaert, 43.

and then evolved little by little into conventional verbal statements and then notarized contracts which sometimes even requested public authorities to permit them to associate. In some cases, the authorities themselves created guilds, as was the case in the sixteenth century for the guild of the “Master Writers,” as Claude Joly explains.⁵² This is a case that touches close upon the history of the schools of the Brothers.

Not anyone who desired to enter a guild was able to do so. There were conditions, procedures and a strict checking of admissions. Not always, however. This system of checking was not too concerned with the social level of the candidates, for persons from each of the three orders could be admitted. On the other hand, they were more finicky with moral requirements. The guilds generally steered away from the “defamed” (who had been the object of some condemnation) and “bastards” who did not come from a “loyal marriage.” On the other hand, one had to have the “right of bourgeoisie,” i.e. to have been born in the city or to be able to prove having lived there a rather long time, variable according to the case. By this very fact, migrants, seasonal workers, outsiders and foreigners had a difficult time being admitted. These restrictions presented, however, some positive sides: connecting the guilds with the area in which the members lived, assuring the homogeneity of the members and reinforcing family spirit, all of which were aspects sought after by the guilds.

Admission also generally presented economic and professional requirements for each of the three categories of its members: masters, assistants and apprentices. The price to pay varied according to the category of membership. When a guild wanted to restrict the number of admissions, it raised the conditions of entrance. This was particularly flagrant in the eighteenth century. It involved a complex system of cooptation, governed in part by economic circumstances. In summary, let us cite the words of Goubert et Roche who show a particularly lively trait common to all guilds: “A jealous professional self-esteem, an obstinate faith in having the knack and the secret of the profession, a radical and almost unhealthy opposition to all change or any

⁵² Claude Joly, *Traité historique des Écoles Épiscopales et Écclésiastiques* (Paris: n.p., 1678).

ungodly novelty, a naïve cult of tradition whose excellence and sacred character are almost never cast in doubt.”⁵³

• Guilds at the end of the seventeenth century

At the end of the seventeenth century, the guilds were not simply professional groupings of a juridical nature. Gradually over the course of the preceding centuries, members developed relationships which aimed to create a common soul and a distinct mindset. Arlette Farge writes: “The workshop is a patriarchal place; the master’s authority over the apprentice is comparable to that of a father over his children. Often hired without a contract, the apprentice owes obedience to his master; given room and board by him, he lives in the workshop and at night places his straw mattress near his workbench, unless he sleeps just above the workshop in the loft. He is completely dependent, and yet this status is enviable. He is lucky to find a stable place with a master. Masters exploit him and blackmail with the threat of dismissal leaves little recourse for the apprentice.”⁵⁴

In many of these guilds, especially in the difficult times of economic crisis when unemployment among apprentices and assistants increased, certain forms of mutual support and solidarity were put into place. In the society of the time, known for its violence, insecurity and economic crises, this solidarity became a necessity for the more vulnerable and weak members. This was another manifestation of the quest for security that had prevailed at the formation of the guilds.

But since the Middle Ages, trades, especially manual trades, had developed and improved by distinguishing themselves one from another. They naturally benefited from the new and increased needs of the population, from technological progress in manufacturing and from improvements in tools, as well as from this associated life. These changes explain the state in which we find the guilds at the end of the seventeenth century, the period in which we are interested.

One striking characteristic is the multiplicity of guilds. Here, for example, is

⁵³ Goubert and Roche, 162.

⁵⁴ Arlette Farge, *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard/Julliard, 1979).

what Goubert and Roche write about it: "Everyone belongs to a group and each group has an approved juridical status and is often granted judicial administrative authority. Each group assumes its own religious character, often symbolized by its consecration to a patron saint and communal celebration of religious ceremonies. Each group has its rites of admission and a hierarchy of leaders who can regularly represent the group in court and manage its budget or at least its purse. Each group has its own spirit and is recognized by certain symbols. It fiercely lays claim to its place in a vertical, professional hierarchy which is ostensibly manifested in major urban parades like solemn processions and even in political actions left over from former municipal practices, such as elections of municipal leaders which are often carried out as a body. The rank in a procession and the rank in a vote represent ritually the exact worth attached to the group that votes or marches in comparison to all other groups that precede or follow it. All of this together forms approximately the total picture of urban society as it is perceived by the people of the time."⁵⁵

Marcel Marion gives more detail: "The edict of March 1691 divided the guilds into four classes and set the fees for acceptance as a master in each of these classes. (30 *livres* for the first class in Parliament cities, 20 for the second class, 12 for the third class, 6 for the fourth class and lesser amounts in presidiums, bailiwicks and seneschalsies⁵⁶ with even lesser amounts in small cities and villages.) (Here Marion enumerates the 127 guilds that existed in Paris at that time.) After the edict of August 1776, the list of guilds in Paris is shorter and doesn't show the few inconsistencies present in the edict of 1691.... Here is the list of the 44 guilds then in existence, with the fees for admission as a master in each one.... In sum, one cannot help but subscribe to the very correct judgment of M. Martin Saint-Louis concerning the guilds: "The guild structure which in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries evoked the image of one of those beautiful gothic cathedrals whose wide open entrance and vast naves seemed to call all the faithful to prayer takes form in the eighteenth century as a Bastille in which a jealous and greedy

⁵⁵ Goubert and Roche, 161.

⁵⁶ These are smaller jurisdictions. [translator's note]

oligarchy is entrenched and does not see the wave of besiegers swelling around it.”⁵⁷

Despite their internal organization and the protective mechanisms put in place, the guilds did not entirely escape the jolts of the economy. The guilds had to take into account the evolution of the buying power of their potential clients. They tried by various means to control the market without always succeeding. This watchful fear of what the next day would bring explains the oligarchic side that historians emphasize in the social role of the guilds. They contributed thus in the breaking up of the social fabric. The risk was to constitute a society fixed on traditions instead of opening up to the economic progress that was manifesting itself at the time.

It is not surprising then that in these conditions the workingman experienced unemployment and fell into the category of the poor. “In a family the wife and children of age 8 worked at a half or a quarter wage and in normal times the family salary covered basic material needs, rarely permitted saving and did not leave any hope for a promotion. Wages could be considered at ten *sols* per day at the time of Louis XIV for a man, or 100 to 120 *livres* per year, the equivalent of about fifteen *livres* worth of bread on a good day; double if the wife and two children could work; and when prices were high, two to three times less bread if unemployment did not complicate things. This great vulnerability was dependant on several factors together: family health, the number of young children, and the state of the market and the economy.”⁵⁸

• Non-professional characteristics of the guilds

As Émile Coornaert writes: “The guild was not simply a well oiled administrative assembly line. Its activity was not limited to governing the specific work of a trade. Customs and ways of handling political and social issues were intimately tied to the formation of these communities. This is how they exemplified to the world the individual lives of their members and it also

⁵⁷ Marcel Marion, *Dictionnaire des Institutions de la France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Picard, 1989), “corporation.”

⁵⁸ Goubert and Roche, 164.

showed how they participated in the general administration of the locality where they lived and worked.”⁵⁹

Feast Days and Ceremonies

There were feast days to periodically refresh the mind and the body. Once a year work in the workshops ceased in honor of the trade itself. The feast of the patron saint became a day of rejoicing. Sometimes a public crier would announce it in the streets, a bell in his hand to attract the attention of the inhabitants.

On the day of the feast, starting from the guild headquarters, the guild members, all dressed in their best, formed a procession in the streets with their banner in front. A carnival atmosphere was common with masks and appropriate special clothes. When that was not possible, they would carry the patron saint’s reliquary to the church for a solemn Mass. After that came the banquet and some theatrical presentation.

For the important guilds the entire city was invited to take part in the festivities. Children had a school holiday and alms were distributed to the poor. Within the workings of the guild, it was the day to install new leaders during individual ceremonies resembling real liturgies. This could be thought of as a complete day of relaxation with a religious flavor, but the symbolism went farther. *“In fact, here we find a most important trait of the guild as an institution. It is an ancient heritage... an essential rite commemorating the foundation of the group, which reinvigorated them each time they celebrated it. Tradition maintained it and custom gave to it and to all assembled that same sense of law and order always necessary...,”* says Émile Coornaert.⁶⁰

Other frequent ceremonies

- The funerals of fellow guild members, in which all the members and sometimes their spouses were to take part, were among other guild associated ceremonies. Sometimes secular rites of questionable taste went

⁵⁹ Coornaert, 226.

⁶⁰ Coornaert, 227.

with these religious ceremonies, such as the distribution of wine to those carrying the coffin, which turned out to be everyone along the way.

- Likewise, certain events in the private life of the members were celebrated, such as marriages and births. These all became solemnities celebrated throughout the guild or at least were occasions to have a good time and forget the daily hard work.
- To be sure, the following were also occasions for celebration: graduation to higher levels in the trade, such as the end of apprenticeship, promotion to mastership and the appointment of new sworn members.

*“These are ways the guilds manifested their relationship to numerous diverse groups, not necessarily economic, which originated from the same impetus for association and which perpetuated longtime traditions. Above all, these celebrations served to connect everyone and reinvigorate in them a sense of professional unity throughout the tedium of daily work. Thus was formed the conscience of the workers, impressing on their moral sense a behavior that assured the individuality of their group as distinct in the society.”*⁶¹

We can see how important it was for De La Salle and the Brothers not to cut their students off from these guild events in which their families were involved. Since their future depended upon it, it was necessary that these families be present. Evidently the difficulty arose from each class being composed of students whose families belonged to different guilds. This multiplied proportionately the number of exemptions to grant and absences to permit and then work to catch up. One can imagine that great flexibility in internal organization was indispensable.

Participation in public life

Since they constituted an important part of society, guilds as such had to be represented in certain affairs of public life. Besides, the authorities that had authorized and sometimes animated these guilds had done so not only for their usefulness to their members but also for their own purposes.

⁶¹ Coornaert, 228.

That is why the guilds were in evidence almost everywhere as electoral forces, and they intervened directly in the election of municipal magistrates. Likewise, in fiscal matters they needed not only to pay their own fees but also act in allocating and collecting the taxes paid by their members. They sometimes were even asked to participate in the levying of taxes for an entire district.

Other social responsibilities in the city seem to devolve on them due to the nature of their work and in view of establishing or maintaining certain norms of living together. For example, butchers and fish sellers were responsible for hygiene in the city; blacksmiths for controlling the imports of iron in the city; seed merchants for managing seed supplies; roofers for managing supplies of slate; dyers and metal casters were often expected to supply material for firefighting.

What is perhaps more surprising is the role of merchants and the working class in the area of military affairs. They were sometimes required to wear armor and participate in the city's watch patrol. But this had progressively diminished during the course of the preceding centuries.

*"We must point out here the religious role of these professional organizations which contribute to stabilize their members especially in the area of religious affairs. Their organization takes hold of the entire man.... They (the guilds) also participate as integral parts of urban, lordly and princely States in demonstrations of their collective life. They take part as a body in celebrations, retinues and processions where their sworn members carry the canopy. They have their own role in the staging of mystery plays and are prominent in the reception of important personages."*⁶²

Thus, we can see a true recognition of the social role of these professions. Because they were established on the basis of an economic role, the guilds could not isolate themselves. We might add that they were associated with other social, religious or political organisms which were bursting in their membership, such as the Confraternities and Associations. They took hold of "the entire man."

⁶² Coornaert, 230.

What margin of freedom and advancement did they give to their members? In order to prepare for what we shall say about the school as a means of advancement for the children of the working class and the poor, let us keep in mind what Goubert and Roche have to say: *“Despite gaps in our information, we have no doubt about the economic, social, political and mental dependence of these men (i.e. workers). They are at the mercy of their employers without ever having any guarantee of employment. They are at the mercy of economic fluctuations which they do not understand. They are at the mercy of administrative or repressive powers of every kind, including religious powers in whose workings they never participate except as silent witnesses. They are systematically entrenched in their status since all masterships and workshop ownerships are for all practical purposes passed on from father to son. The few known cases of promotion or simple social advancement come from individual ventures, most often resulting from fortunate marriages with widows of master tradesmen and more rarely from beneficent sponsorships or pious endowments like college or seminary scholarships. Fear, custom, religion and the eternal tranquilizers (alcohol, festivities, oral and written escapist literature) ensure for the upper classes and the State the daily submission of these workers.”*⁶³

3. Conclusion

This chapter begins with a quote from the Rule of the Brothers of 1705. We wish to conclude it with another passage from the writings of John Baptist de La Salle, a passage taken from the *Meditations for Time of Retreat*. After the developments we have just given, this text needs no commentary, for it so well captures the situation and displays precise knowledge of the living conditions of the families of the schoolchildren who went to the schools of the Brothers. At the same time, we can appreciate the appropriateness of the response that had to be given to the needs of these youth. The reader can judge for him or herself.

“Consider that it is a practice only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds as

⁶³ Goubert and Roche, 166-67.

long as they are not able to put them to some work; these parents have no concern to send their children to school because their poverty does not allow them to pay teachers, or else, obliged to look for work outside their homes, they have to abandon their children to themselves.”

“The results of these conditions are regrettable, for these poor children, accustomed to lead an idle life for many years, have great difficulty adjusting when it comes time for them to go to work. In addition, through association with bad companions they learn to commit many sins which later on are very difficult to stop, because of the persistent bad habits they have contracted over such a long time.”

“God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God, where the children are kept all day, learn to read, to write, and their religion, and are always kept busy, so that when their parents want them to go to work, they are prepared for employment.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 464-65; CL 13, 11-12; *Meditations*, 434-35.

Chapter 3 – A School for the Children of the Working Class

Since the schools of John Baptist de La Salle were set up in the cities, they were right in the midst of the guild culture; and the clientele they served was indeed “the children of the working class and the poor.” To simplify, one can say that the duties of educating these children were clearly distributed in the following way. Initial education and the professional future of the child devolved on the family and the guilds. Intellectual formation and, with the support of the pastors of the local church, the Christian and religious formation devolved on the school. Even if we should not artificially separate the areas of responsibility in the education of these children, it does permit us to appreciate better the connection that the school was able to maintain with the parents of the students.

As we have stated in the preceding chapter, belonging to a definite social group was considered essential. Owing to the juridical status of the guilds by which authorizations, privileges and exclusive rights were granted by civil authority, we can see that decisions concerning the education of children went to the parents and their guilds. The government did encourage education for all children, but for many reasons this was ignored or even impossible to carry out. We can then say that the guilds were of prime importance, and rightly so, since within the guilds children found their identity, their first integration into society and a form of security when faced with the ups and downs of life. They even found in the guilds the guarantee of a future.

John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers – as the text of the *Conduite* gives abundant evidence – were too in tune with the needs of people to want to oppose this order of things. They were aware that they could not use pressure, but only persuasion, to convince the parents to send their children to school and keep them there.

As we shall explain in this chapter, John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers were also aware of the limitations of the education proposed in and by the guilds. We are not speaking of the strictly technical aspects, which they did not have the competence to judge, but rather of the stalemate in which they found this traditional system that had become too set in its ways, conservative and blind to the economic evolution in progress. The Brothers were also convinced that the school, as an addition to or a replacement for professional training, could offer more professional possibilities. One needs only to reread the following passage from the *Conduite* to realize this: “The means of remedying the negligence of parents, especially of the poor, is to speak to them and make them understand their obligation to have their children instructed. They should understand the wrong that they do to their children in not making them learn to read and write, and how much this can harm their children, since lack of this knowledge will leave the children incapable of any employment. Then they must be made to realize the harm that may be done their children by lack of instruction in those things which concern their salvation, with which the poor are often little concerned.”⁶⁵

Let us look at the great realistic approach of this passage. De La Salle, who opened Christian schools to proclaim the Gospel and form good Christians, realized that the Gospel “does not speak” to those who are very poor, as long as they are still in their poverty, and that it is better to have recourse to economic arguments. Didn’t he already experience this with his first teachers during the crisis of 1683?

Three paragraphs later, still talking about the students’ absenteeism, we find these forceful words:

“When parents withdraw their children from school to make them work while they are too young and not yet sufficiently instructed, they must be made to understand that they harm them a great deal. To have their children earn a little, they will make them lose a very much greater advantage. It should be explained to them how important it is for an artisan to know how to read and write well. It should be emphasized that, however limited the child’s intelligence,

⁶⁵ OC. CE 16.2.18; CL 24, 186; *Conduct*, 160-61.

*the child that knows how to read and write will be capable of anything. Parents must be urged to send their children to school if not for the whole day at least for the entire afternoon. It will be necessary to watch very carefully over children of this sort and take care of them.*⁶⁶

It sounds like one would have to haggle to get the student to benefit at least from a partial school day. A little is worth more than nothing at all! In reading this text, one also senses a kind of defiance on the part of the school toward the ability of the guilds to take on the duty of teaching reading and writing to children or apprentices.

This defiance goes beyond the teaching of basics. It concerned the whole future of these children. Being educated within the single framework of the guild was practically to condemn oneself to live in it, to continue its professional routine, to enclose oneself in a socially restricted group with predetermined parameters and to live in a climate of economic insecurity and precariousness without the prospect of professional development or personal advancement.

Yet, other prospects and other paths to advancement were offered to these youth, particularly in the tertiary sector of the economy. These were roads to advancement whose access was principally the school. We are referring here to the small jobs created by changes in the political, administrative, judicial and economic systems. Nowadays we would call them the necessary support staff. It was certainly just a matter of discharging duties, but these duties were better paid than workmen's jobs and more importantly offered greater guarantees of employment.

Even without the written proof we can be sure that De La Salle and the Brothers during their conferences had reflected collectively on this situation and had concluded that the school was a good remedy for poverty, begging and economic instability. These reflections had led them to praise the necessity of the school for the children of the popular classes grouped under the expression "the working class and the poor." Without this awareness that

⁶⁶ OC. CE 16.2.21; CL 24, 187; *Conduct*, 161.

turned into a conviction we cannot explain the very strong insistence on class attendance, on the guarantees asked of the parents at the time of registration and on the entire mechanism put into place to eliminate absenteeism in their schools. Chapter 16 of the *Conduite*, entitled “On Absences,” constitutes an interesting analysis of and solution to this problem of student absenteeism.

1. The school makes inquiries

In view of offering each student the education that was proper for him, the *Conduite* prescribed that information concerning the student should be gathered right from the moment of registration. That is the object of the second article in Chapter 22, entitled “Information Required When Enrolling Students.”⁶⁷ In the two first paragraphs of this article can be seen some significant details of how it came about. First, the new student had to be presented by an adult taking responsibility for him: father, mother, relative, guardian, etc. Among the information that it says should be collected are “their occupation, address with the street name and number;⁶⁸ the name of the parish to which the child belongs.” At the time these simple indications gave a lot of information. The street and house number and sign immediately gave an idea of the working class area. As we have already briefly shown in Chapter 1, the workers of the same trade would group together on the same street or in the same district and would hang out “signs” distinct to their trade in order to attract potential clients or just the curious. Louis-Sébastien Mercier⁶⁹ criticizes the enormous size of certain signs saying that they block the view and darken the already narrow and gloomy streets.

But the most interesting item for our purposes is found in the third paragraph of the same article: “If this is an older student, the Director shall ask what the parents expect the child to do later on; whether they hope to have

⁶⁷ OC. CE 22.2; CL 24, 257; Conduct, 200-01.

⁶⁸ Here the French text indicates simply house and street, but also adds “enseigne,” i.e. the shop or trade sign which could contain a house number. This detail is important to take into consideration given the identifying character of the guilds in the lives of families and the impact of these signs on the city’s landscape. [translator’s note]

⁶⁹ Mercier, 177-78.

the child learn a trade, and how soon; and the level of proficiency in reading and writing. The Director shall have the student read and spell something in French or in Latin, using a book which is not commonly known, in order to determine whether the student is not simply reciting something learned by heart.⁷⁰

“If this is an older student.”⁷¹ According to the customs of the time, this doubtlessly meant a boy of about twelve years old. At that age one could have him work part time while he was attending school. If not, the parents were likely to take him quickly out of school to send him to an apprenticeship. It was therefore desirable to accelerate his schooling, particularly in writing, so that he could take advantage of it as soon as possible. Since there was no official age to begin school, it was not rare for children to start school near the age of twelve, even if others began before the age of seven. At twelve years old many boys were already working as apprentices or were about to begin. Those who had not been hired by some master tradesman were either looking for unskilled work and became manual laborers or they became unemployed and vagabonds, forming packs with nothing to do and thus succumbing easily to delinquency.

In any case, the school could hardly expect to keep the student beyond the age of fourteen. Thus, it had to adapt itself to his academic level – if there was one! – and to the probable length of his stay in school. This was indispensable, according to the authors of the *Conduite*, in order to design for him a proper schedule and program of studies.

Consequently, “those who shall enroll students”⁷² were called upon to write up a detailed registration form, as the following passage delineates: “When the Superior enrolls students at the Community House for schools other than the one attached to the Community residence, they shall be given a short note of admission to the school. On it shall be listed the name and surname of the student enrolled, the date of the enrollment, the classroom

⁷⁰ OC. CE 22.2.3; CL 24, 257; *Conduct*, 201.

⁷¹ The French text here uses “garçon,” specifically referring to a male student.

⁷² OC. CE 22.1; CL 24, 256; *Conduct*, 199.

into which the student is assigned, the name of the father and mother, or the person with whom the student lives, their occupation, the street name and number and the room, as in the following examples: ‘Jean-Baptiste Gribouval: age 6; residing with his father, Pierre Gribouval, a serge weaver, in a shop on Rue de la Couture;⁷³ registered on October 19, 1706 for the school in Rue Tillois; to be placed at the first line of the first reading chart.’⁷⁴

Here is a quite different example: *“François Richard: age 12, living with his father, Simon Richard, a ticket collector, or with his mother, the widow Richard, a used-clothes dealer, or with his uncle, Jean Richard, a court registrar, in a surgeon’s house on Rue de l’Oignon, in the second room from the front or back; registered in the school on May 1, 1706; to be placed in the sixth level of round hand writing.”*⁷⁵

From this example it is interesting to note some significant details. The names of the father, the mother and the uncle are shown, but the examples given in the *Conduite* are purely theoretical and do not correspond to actual cases. What is essential to remember is that it was indispensable for the school to have a reference to call upon in case of necessity. The professions indicated (ticket collector, used-clothes dealer and court registrar) are indeed occupations of the working class or of the poor. The date of admission (May 1st) should not be surprising either because entering and leaving school could in fact be spread throughout the school year. François Richard entered at age twelve while Jean-Baptiste Gribouval was only six. At twelve years old the new student was an “older boy.” That is why he was put directly into writing, for that seemed necessary, as another passage from the *Conduite* shows: *“If, however, it should happen that there are any who have reached twelve years of age and have not yet begun to write, they may be put in the writing class at the same time that they begin Latin provided that they know how to read French*

⁷³ The name of this street refers to the trade practiced there, i.e. dressmaking and repair. [translator’s note]

⁷⁴ OC. CE 22.1.6-7; CL 24, 256; *Conduct*, 199-200.

⁷⁵ OC. CE 22.1.8; CL 24, 257; *Conduct*, 200.

*well and correctly and that it seems that they will not be attending school for a time long enough in which to learn to write sufficiently well.*⁷⁶

However, “they will see to it that the students do not learn to write until they have reached the age of ten.”⁷⁷ This gap between ten and twelve years of age constituted then a turning point in the life of the students. As we have already said, at that time it was not rare to have students working at a job. The authors of the *Conduite* feared that students might leave school without learning sufficiently how to write, and this seems to indicate that for them being literate also meant knowing how to write. They considered this a skill necessary for getting a job, and thus the school should offer its students the chance to acquire it.

Other examples of registered students appear in Chapter 13, entitled “Records or Registers.” Essentially these examples confirm what we have just seen relative to the variety of ages and the dates of admission. One of these examples, however, merits particular attention. It is the one of “Jean Mulot: accepted on August 31, 1706; [age 16]; Confirmed two years ago; received Communion once since last Easter; son of Joseph Mulot, wool comber; residing in the Rue de Contray, parish of Saint Etienne, at the sign of the Golden Cross, in a shop. He was placed in the third class of writing students, and in the first of reading la *Civilitéé*; should come at 9:00 in the morning and at 3:00 in the afternoon; spent two years in the school of M. Caba in Saint Etienne Street, then eight months in that of M. Ralot, one year in that of M. Huysbecq, and four months at that of M. Mulot, the schoolmaster. He left these teachers because his parents felt he would learn better elsewhere.”⁷⁸

These few lines are interesting because of the apparent instability of this student. In four years – which at the time represented quite a long period of schooling – he left four teachers. The motive cited was the impression that

⁷⁶ OC. CE 4.1.2; CL 24, 42-43; *Conduct*, 72.

⁷⁷ OC. CE 4.1.3; CL 24, 43. The de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation does not contain this item. [translation mine]

⁷⁸ OC. CE 13.1.13-14; CL 24, 235; *Conduct*, 241. The *Conduite* here gives the age of Jean Mulot as 16, but Lauraire’s citation from the *Conduite* does not include this detail of age. However, the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation does include it, but wrongly has it as age 6. [translator’s note]

he was not making progress and that it was hoped he would do better elsewhere. This attitude was doubtlessly not so rare since the *Conduite* mentions it explicitly when it treats absences not attributable to the competence of the teacher. One must not argue with impatient parents who desired to take their child out of school to put him to work. Let us also note in passing that the text does not speak of four successive schools but of four teachers, which thus confirms what usually went on in the *Petites Écoles* of the time, i.e. one teacher equaled one school.

2. The school makes adaptations

In the second chapter of this study we briefly mentioned those customs beyond the professional aspects of the guilds, namely their specific feast days, their processions and pilgrimages. Let us remember that these events had positive goals – and doubtlessly positive effects – to the extent that they reconfirmed in a pleasant way to their members a feeling of belonging, reinforced social togetherness and strengthened the awareness of personal identity. So we cannot exaggerate the social importance of these particular events, especially when they did not become an occasion of rivalry and struggle to be first in place. Even at an early age the children were connected to these guilds events. It was then very important to permit them to continue in this way when they were in school. The evident result was an added complication for the organization of the school.

The *Conduite* speaks explicitly and in numerous passages of this necessary adaptation of the school to the customs of the guilds. Such is the case in Chapter 16 when it treats “regular absences and absences with permission.” “[C]ertain students may sometimes be permitted to absent themselves from school during the week on market days to go to work or on account of their employment. This permission may be given provided that the absence is not in the afternoon and is only for the purpose of going to work and for nothing else.”⁷⁹

We would like to make the following commentary on this passage. The rea-

⁷⁹ OC. CE 16.1.2; CL 28, 180; *Conduct*, 157.

son for absence had to be serious. It was a question of going to work. The occasion invoked, market day, already was a popular tradition in France, a social event in times of economic necessity. But a limitation appears and regularly reappears in the *Conduite*. The student could not be absent in the afternoon. The reason for this limitation is not given in the passage we have quoted, but the *Conduite* explains in another passage that it is because catechism is taught in the afternoon and catechism is the essential lesson of the school day. This paragraph puts forth a general law, so to speak, to grant permissions for absences. The succeeding paragraphs deal with situations and requests that are less clear and, therefore, less important in the eyes of the Brothers. Deciding between refusing or granting permission seems less clear. Here are some examples:

*“It sometimes happens that students ask permission to be absent on Sundays and holy days. Some wish to go on trips or to visit their relatives; others wish to go to some village celebration or to some confraternity. None will be permitted to absent themselves from catechism on Sundays and holy days for any of these reasons.”*⁸⁰

One might think that Sundays and holy days were days of rest. Not so in the mentality of the time and certainly not for John Baptist de La Salle who in another of his works lists everything that a good Christian must do on those days. These reasons for absence thus do not seem essential to the Brothers for the social life of the families and guilds. And Chapter 9 (“The Catechism”) provides the occasion to make the distinction between the school’s adaptation to specific guild requirements and the requirements of class attendance for the good of the children’s education. The limits are dictated both by good sense and in the actual interest of the students. An illustration of these principles can be found in the sixth article of that chapter, which is entitled “*Those Who Attend the Catechism Lesson on Sundays and Feasts*”: “*Outsiders may be admitted to the catechism lesson on Sundays and*

⁸⁰ OC. CE 16.1.7; CL 24, 180; *Conduct*, 158. The de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation adds here the following proviso which is not in the French text: “except upon rare occasions and only when their parents ask it for them.” [translator’s note]

feasts. This is permissible even though they do not attend the Christian Schools regularly on other days.”⁸¹

This opportunity which was offered to older youth already working constitutes another way that the school adapted to the real life situation of the guilds. It would have been improper to interrupt these youth in their professional work, but they could be offered this opportunity for a good religious education on Sundays. A good ten paragraphs are dedicated to this question in the chapter on catechism. To get a better idea of its import one must refer to the project of the catechesis of the people put into effect by the Church in France during the period of the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

Outside of these specific arrangements concerning day students, we also see that it was difficult for the school to go completely against the contemporary custom of pilgrimages and processions. Chapter 16 on absences gets back to these requests for permissions in order to spell out some criteria to guide the decisions of the Brothers. Here are some examples:

“On school days, students will be permitted to go on pilgrimages to places which are a distance from the town and at which there is ordinarily a great concourse of people. This absence will be permitted when they go with their parents and when it is evident that it is only devotion and piety which impels them. *This permission will be given only if their parents ask it for them, but they will not be permitted to go only with other students or other boys.* However, they will not be allowed to absent themselves from school to be present at processions. The exception is the procession of the Blessed Sacrament during the octave of the feast, if it happens to be held in some parish on a day on which school is kept.”

“Students will be permitted to absent themselves from school on the feast of the Patron Saint of the parish in which they live, provided it be a solemn feast celebrated by the parishoners.”

“Students whose fathers follow a trade may be permitted to absent them-

⁸¹ OC. CE 9.6.1; CE 24, 232; *Conduct*, 237.

selves from school on the feast of the Patron Saint of their fathers' trade. However, they will be required to come to school in the afternoon.”⁸²

In order to understand well these few paragraphs, they must be read in light of what we know of the religious practices of the times. We can extract from them this essential idea. For De La Salle and the Brothers it was important to acknowledge membership in a guild and the local Church and thus to reinforce the incorporation of students into these life structures. No acknowledgement was given to personal whims, preferences or false pretexts which students certainly were liable to bring up as excuses for being absent from school.

3. The school prepares students to manage a trade business

We have mentioned why the school did not educate youth for manual work in the crafts. But the school was able to contribute to a better administration and management of these small trade businesses. In fact, master craftsmen and small tradesmen depended more and more on a minimum of reading and writing ability for account ledgers, documentation of all types of transactions, contracts with clients, forms for ordering, purchasing and delivery, loans, claims on debts, IOUs, and various legal certifications, such as donations, acquisitions, collection of rent and transfers of estates.

All this presupposed for them at least a minimal mastery of the three basic skills learned in school: reading, writing and arithmetic. Without these they were dependent on the help of others, perhaps even paying for it. For this reason the *Conduite* states that “the child that knows how to read and write will be capable of anything.”⁸³ This statement confirms that the authors of the *Conduite* had a clear understanding of what went on in the workshops, market stalls and stores at the time, and were conversant in matters of their daily management and the administrative work they necessarily entailed.

On the other hand, a large majority of these written documents which cir-

⁸² OC. CE 16.1.9 to 16.1.12; CL 24, 181-82; *Conduct*, 158. The sentence in italics is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translation mine]

⁸³ OC. CE 16.2.21; CL 24, 186; *Conduct*, 161.

culated in the business world were handwritten and not printed. Reading and understanding them proved very often to be difficult due to the poor quality of the handwriting and thus could lead to misunderstandings and errors in reading that easily wound up in conflicts and legal proceedings.

For a long time these conditions were well known by the public. For this very reason there was established in 1570 a guild of master writers among school-teachers who were legally constituted as specialists in the reading and interpretation of handwritten documents. They were recognized as such and were called upon by the courts as experts in writing. That they had profited from this specialization to obtain certain privileges and exclusive rights, like the teaching of calligraphy and arithmetic, is apropos to our study, for it became a source of conflict with the school of the Brothers in the beginning of the eighteenth century. In 1678 Claude Joly, Superintendent of the schools in Paris, also rose up against the claims of the master writers, for he judged them unfounded.⁸⁴

Our interest now is in understanding how the schools of the Brothers wanted to give access to these handwritten documents to the students who attended their schools. We find an explanation of this endeavor in the first part of the *Conduite*, in particular in the chapters dealing with reading, writing and spelling. These three skills were the reason to study and gradually master the manuscripts called “registers,” which were “papers or parchments written by hand.”⁸⁵

To get a more precise idea of what was involved, let us look again at a paragraph of the chapter on writing relative to the eighth level of round hand: “Instead of copying the alphabet at the beginning of the lesson, the students on this level shall write in rapid small hand on half of the back of their paper at the beginning of each lesson. In the mornings, they shall copy passages from various good books which contain practical material adapted to their age. Every afternoon, they shall copy handwritten texts, also called docu-

⁸⁴ Claude Joly, *Traité historique des Écoles Épiscopales et Éclésiastiques* (Paris, 1678). See especially part III, chap. xx.

⁸⁵ OC. CE 3.10.2; CL 24, 40; *Conduct*, 70.

ments, especially writs, promissory notes, receipts, worker's instructions, work agreements, leases, and notary contracts of various kinds. After they have spent three months copying such handwritten material, they shall, on the two days when arithmetic is taught, write material composed by themselves: personal letters, promissory notes, receipts, leases, worker's agreements, and other things which may later on prove useful to them."⁸⁶

But to achieve this result, learning this skill had to be carefully organized. With the customary attention to detail found in the *Conduite*, the tenth and last article of chapter 3 on reading, describes this organization throughout seven paragraphs. From this text let us take a look at the following. It involves the ninth and last "lesson" (or level of reading). It is like the crowning piece of this skill and of the school program envisioned by the *Conduite*. The preceding lesson concerning civility had already presented an extra difficulty with respect to reading printed texts due to the gothic characters used at that time in all the works on civility.

Learning the Registers presupposes that the school had at its disposal many very diverse documents, which could be grouped according to their authors and within each group according to a progressive order of difficulty. It only makes sense. Usually each author has his own style of writing which one can get used to quickly. By establishing an order of difficulty, it was hoped that the student would easily end up mastering the most difficult and the least clear.

On the other hand, while the preceding levels of reading a printed text involved two or three "levels," i.e. two or three months of work, we see that more time would be necessary for the handwritten manuscripts, perhaps six levels or more, i.e. as much time as necessary for each of the students, if they had the endurance to stay in school during all that time. It is indeed interesting to see the prescribed method for this work. The students had to constantly be active, dealing with the documents, helping each other and checking their progress by reading in front of the teacher. It is a process that began with learning by practice, then being immersed in it, and then making it one's own by virtue of creating one's own similar documents.

⁸⁶ OC. CE 4.4.14; CL 24, 231; *Conduct*, 237.

The passage from the chapter on writing that we have cited above has its equivalents in the chapters on reading and spelling. Thus, reading, writing and spelling reinforced each other with the hope that these newly acquired skills would be assimilated. In this way, the teachers did not want simply to make do with learning that was slipshod, but rather they expected a solid mastery that would truly be useful for later on.

The chapter on arithmetic gives us another aspect of this practical education. Here we are no longer in the world of manuscripts but in the world of computations. “*All the advanced students in whatever lesson they are on will do the examples of their lesson by themselves while the other students do their own examples.* On Tuesday of each week or the first day upon which arithmetic is taught, all the students who are learning it and who are among the advanced students will bring already done on their paper the example for their lesson which the teacher has written on the board for that week. They will also bring some other examples which they have invented for themselves. On Friday, they will bring a certain number of examples from their own lessons as well as from the work of more elementary lessons which they have done by themselves and which the teacher has, according to their capacity, assigned for them to do.”⁸⁷

So that this quote can be clearly understood, we want to emphasize that the word “example,” which applies to the four usual arithmetical operations, designates here types of arithmetic problems that are familiar in the primary classes. Simply teaching the theory of the principles of the four operations was not enough. Teachers had to make sure that they were practical and could be applied to real life in view of solving concrete mathematical situations.

Let us here briefly call attention to the expression “other things which may later on prove useful to them.” The aim was always to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The skills described in the *Conduite* had a utilitarian goal and referred to what in fact was to occur in the world of the guilds. Without saying it explicitly, the school of the Brothers acted as if the students were

⁸⁷ OC. CE 5.0.21-22; CL 24, 72; *Conduct*, 88. The sentence in italics and the previous paragraph are both missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translation mine]

going to become either masters of a trade or office workers. If they became masters of a trade they would inevitably have to deal with written documents. Assistants or apprentices, by their status in the guild, were certainly less involved with written documents. If they became office workers, they would be ledger clerks doing the bookkeeping perhaps in a guild but more probably in one of the new jobs created by the administration, the justice department or the police department. In this case we must then address the school as a vehicle for advancement, which we will do in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 – The School as a Means of Advancement

The preceding chapter gave us the opportunity to show how disappointed De La Salle and the Brothers were when parents would prematurely withdraw their children from school. The expressions they use strongly underscore this disappointment: “they harm them a great deal,” “they will make them lose a much greater advantage,” since a working person who “knows how to read and write will be capable of anything.”⁸⁸

Three centuries later, just knowing how to read and write seems somewhat ridiculous to us. To understand the import of these expressions in the *Conduite*, we should consider them in the general context of France at the beginning of the eighteenth century, i.e. when the country had an illiteracy rate of about 80%. Naturally, the qualifications required for employment were fewer than today. Knowing how to read and write effectively opened up numerous opportunities at a time when both the political and economic development of the country was creating new jobs.

1. Royal power affirms itself

In France the long process of endorsement by the royal power and the State organization began with the reign of Henri IV and his ministers, especially the clever Sully. After a long period of troubles and divisions marked by the wars of religion, peace returned starting in 1596. Both within and without the kingdom, the action of Henri IV and his government would consist in helping the economy by the reestablishment of financial balance, progress in agriculture, the arrival of the first industries and the organization of domestic and foreign trade. At the death of the king, however, there still remained much to be done.

⁸⁸ OC. CE 16.2.21; CL 24, 187; *Conduct*, 161.

The Regency of Marie de Médicis (1610-1617), while the king was still under age, and later the work of Louis XIII himself until 1642 with the help of Richelieu's authority would continue the work already under way. Certainly, all this was not without difficulty due to the troubles caused by the Protestants and the nobles. Yet, these difficulties were borne with perseverance and occasionally under harsh conditions. At issue was assuring that the mind of the State prevail and affirming the absolute power of the king. In 1642, however, the work accomplished was still not on solid ground and needed to be strengthened.

The Regent Anne of Austria encountered even more difficulties in establishing her authority despite the great help of Mazarin. His flexibility, skill and obstinacy managed to overcome many difficulties, in particular that of prevailing over the nobles and officers of the Fronde who directly threatened the king's absolute power.

It was finally up to Louis XIV to make the power of the king prevail. First trained by Mazarin during his childhood and then effectively backed up by great ministers like Louvois, Colbert and Vauban, Louis reinforced his authority and imposed royal absolutism.

Louis carried out his power by means of administrative and judiciary organization, the creation of wealth and resources and by good management of finances. To get to this point, absolutism took the form of a pyramid shape which centered the power in the hands of the king and some close advisors and ministers. This power was made known and spread gradually throughout the entire kingdom thanks to the king's progressively gained grasp on the provinces and all the workings of the society. Legal reform and the finalization of the six great Codes between 1667 and 1685 established a general organization that was methodical and uniform. It took time and all the measures that were settled upon were not always effectively applied. Such was the case with certain decrees concerning the education of children.

This movement was global and generated new jobs which were wide reaching because of the centralization that multiplied positions in the administration, the justice system and the police. This movement has often been ana-

lyzed by historians, and so we do not need to return to it. What is of interest to us here is this vast movement that created jobs, very often “writing” jobs for which only a school could prepare.

2. Beginnings of the industrial era

In the midst of this, Europe was beginning its industrial revolution. In this movement, France was far from being in the lead; but since the middle of the seventeenth century, it was part of the economic process with its manufacturing products. Under the impetus of Colbert, these products needed to be marketed. This minister was one of the ardent partisans of commercial development, both within and outside the country. He was at the origin of the creation of the first great navigation companies. His name is associated with that theory of production and marketing of merchandises which we call mercantilism.

What concerns us here is not so much the economic aspect but the new jobs that industry and trade generated. We are not speaking only of actual manual work in manufacturing products but rather of jobs which derived from managing the process of production and sale of these products, such as secretarial work, record keeping, business operations and accounting. In short, we are speaking of what we have noted in the preceding chapter as constituting one of the principal skills propounded by the *Conduite*. These were jobs that the craft guilds hardly prepared for or not at all. So the school became necessary for the development of these jobs in the service industries of the economy. The *Conduite* gives ample evidence that De La Salle and the Brothers were clearly aware of this role of the school. The aforementioned text shows this and so do the passages concerning handwritten texts which the students had to learn to read and understand.⁸⁹

This economic evolution explains why the number of relatively insignificant “officers” continued to increase, especially in urban society. Within this glob-

⁸⁹ OC. CE 3.10.4; CL 24, 41. The paragraph cited here is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. It deals with the students’ gradual progression from reading easy documents to reading more difficult ones. [translator’s note]

al, protracted movement the main concern of Colbert was to increase the wealth and power of the State. But the minister came up against a rather unfavorable economic situation as well as the prejudices of the nobility and part of the bourgeoisie which disdained manual labor. In addition, it was slowed down by Louis XIV's politics of prestige which invested in extravagant constructions – like Versailles – and by increasing expenses caused by wars, except during the relatively calm period of 1660-1672. In mercantile politics, one must also take other countries into account. Competition was fierce and continued to intensify, especially with England, Holland and the Hanseatic cities.⁹⁰

Although slowed down and weakened, the movement under way would nevertheless continue throughout the eighteenth century.

3. What the “Petites Écoles” could and could not do

Starting with the Council of Trent, the mission entrusted by the Church to the popular schools was to catechize children. Faced with ignorance of religion in general, the task was to provide children with the essence of Christian doctrine, especially so that they would not fall into heresy, particularly Protestantism. That was the overarching goal which did, however, often run the risk of obscuring the human formation of students and the care for their future professional needs.

Therefore, the school was, first of all, a school of Christian doctrine. The essential function of the teacher, even the lay teacher, was to be a catechist. On top of that, came the widespread conviction that truths were to be known absolutely by everyone. Even certain learning tools like alphabet lists and syllabaries,⁹¹ became instruments of Christian instruction.

The clergy and some politicians also thought that the religious and moral education of children, especially of the general populace, could guarantee social order and civil peace and at the same time educate for good manners.

⁹⁰ League of European cities associated for the purpose of controlling trade. [translator's note]

⁹¹ Spelling books in which words were divided into syllables. [translator's note]

This way of thinking explains in large part the rise of the “Petites Écoles”⁹² during the second half of the seventeenth century. They were limited, however, by the weak ability of many teachers. Despite supervision and help from the clergy, not all could provide this religious and moral education.

4. The school remains in need

Other educators of the second half of the seventeenth century also had a clear understanding of the role of the school as guarantor of social order and supplier of labor. One of the best known, Charles Démià, has left us some very illuminating writings, some of which had national repercussions and are therefore particularly important. They give evidence of disorders which were widespread in the cities of the time, especially because of lack of work. “There is no other way to nip in the bud the source of so many disorders and to reform cities and provinces in a Christian way than by establishing “Petites Écoles” for the instruction of the children of poor people. In these schools, with the fear of God and with good manners, children will be taught to read, write and calculate by teachers able to teach these things which will put them well on their way to work in the majority of commercial professions. Only in these schools can you find these basic skills taught to help prepare the way for advancement in the most important of jobs.”⁹³

Like many educators of his time, Démià also explains that the disorders usually arise from idleness and poverty. Instructing and making youth work would remedy the situation. This is how he analyzes the link between school and work: “These public schools would even be like Academies for the improvement of poor children where the impetuosity of youth would be tamed and submitted to reason, where their understanding would be enlightened by the virtues they are taught, where their memory would be filled with the good things they hear and where their will would be stimulated by the examples of virtue they see put into practice...”

⁹² Literally “Little Schools,” they were loosely organized schools staffed by minimally trained teachers. [translator’s note]

⁹³ CL 56, 106-07.

“In this way factories and workshops would be filled, little by little, with good apprentices who would then be able to be excellent craft masters since these schools would teach them the obligation they have to work faithfully and hard. They would also teach them the means they would need to use to sanctify and make their work fruitful by instilling in them a great horror of squabbling and laziness. There would not be so much difficulty in purging the city of disgusting places since idleness and poverty, which are the two sources of sexual prostitution, would be banished. This is so because idleness would be remedied by keeping children busy with their reading and writing, and poverty would be overcome by opening their minds to holy knowledge which would make them industrious to earn their living and ready for the jobs they are given....”

“These schools would even be like employment agencies and market places, so to speak and to use the language of scripture (Mt 20), where the kindest persons would go to select some to employ in their households and others in their business and even some others to advance in the sciences. In short, these little workers could be employed in the vineyard, each one according to their ability and talents which, having been perfected in this Academy of virtue, would make them persons good in behavior, industrious in their skills, clever in business and generally people proper for any work in which they might be employed.”⁹⁴

We must believe that these “reproofs” of Charles Démiea were heeded, for the number of service jobs noticeably increased in the eighteenth century. Thus, Louis-Sébastien Mercier wrote: “These little assistants form a class large in number. They are not expensive. Their fees are eight, twelve and fifteen hundred *livres*. You will even find thirty assistants for one *livre*.... Everything is done with quill in hand. In the most insignificant affair, you need to know how to write and calculate. The entire knowledge of these scribes consists in knowing how to draw up business slips. These assistants know nothing, are familiar with nothing and have no idea of anything. They crunch figures every day automatically.... The assistants who get paid a thousand écus put

⁹⁴ CL 56, 107-08.

on airs and act important. There is nothing more odd than to see them roll up their sleeves to sharpen a quill and to keep doing it several times. It is as if this quill were going to draw the destiny of the State.”⁹⁵

Mercier’s picture is doubtlessly a bit harsh, but at least it shows the rapid development of these new jobs and thus a justification for the development of the schools, for these assistants were indeed the product of the school-learned skills of the time.

5. For De La Salle and the Brothers

Pursuant to this administrative and economic development, society could no longer make do with the education given in and by the guilds. While this education may have provided a good technical preparation for a future trade, it was clearly insufficient in what we call its academic aspects. The sons of the working class then needed another place, one that was well organized, to offer this education which had become necessary, even urgent.

De La Salle and the Brothers knew this. They did not work only toward the religious education of their students, but they also cared for their socio-professional future. By way of illustration, here is a passage from one of De La Salle’s *Meditations on the Principal Feasts of the Year*: “In your work you should unite zeal for the good of the Church with zeal for the good of the state of which your disciples are beginning to be, and one day should be, perfect members. You will procure the good for the Church by making them true Christians and docile to the truths of faith and the maxims of the holy Gospel. You will procure the good of the state by teaching them how to read and write and everything else that pertains to your ministry with regard to exterior things. But piety should be joined to exterior things, otherwise your work would be of little use.”⁹⁶

De La Salle also expresses this same awareness of the “civil” role of the school in his second Meditation for the Time of Retreat. After succinctly describing

⁹⁵ Mercier, 340-42.

⁹⁶ MF 160.3.2; OC. 415; CL 12, 138; *Meditations*, 296. This is from the meditation for the feast of Saint Louis, King of France. [translator’s note]

the all too usual attitude of working people toward their children and the unfortunate consequences that derive from this behavior, he explains that the remedy for such a situation is precisely the “Christian schools,” i.e. his own schools: “God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God, where the children are kept all day, learn to read, to write, and their religion, and are always kept busy, so that when their parents want them to go to work, they are prepared for employment.”⁹⁷

These words did apply to all children. Gratuity opened the doors of the Christian school to all. The educators had to be motivated by a very high degree of disinterestedness. Even the children of manual laborers and unqualified day workers could prepare themselves for qualified and stable jobs thanks to the variety and quality of skills offered by the school, i.e. those skills delineated in the *Conduite*, without however neglecting the catechetical goal common to all of the “Petites Écoles.” The jobs prepared for were clearly those writing jobs created many times over by the economic development already in progress.

But not everyone, especially in the world of the poor and the working class, was aware of this global development in society nor of the necessity for good school-learned skills to benefit from this development. That is what stands out very clearly from several passages of the *Conduite* in which the authors bemoan the ignorance of those parents who sacrifice the long-term benefit of economic advancement for the few immediate gains that do not ensure a future. “He is capable of anything,” says that passage in the *Conduite* with reference to someone who could read and write. Its tone may seem overly optimistic, but it certainly was not so at the time, given the range of professions that solid schooling led to in comparison with the limitations of the professional training provided by narrow minded guilds.

To turn its noble intention into practice, the *Conduite* organized for students in great detail the four skills clearly designed to be useful in the service pro-

⁹⁷ MR 194.1.2; OC. 465; CL 13, 12; *Meditations*, 435.

fessions, namely reading, writing, arithmetic and spelling. Throughout the text, there clearly appears this long-term vision, as we have already noted in texts such as “other things which may be useful to them afterward”⁹⁸ and “have them copy handwritten letters, especially things that can be useful for them to learn to do and which they will need afterward.”⁹⁹

Knowing how to read and write opened the door to numerous professional opportunities at the time. This was the beginning of service oriented education. It involved accomplishing tasks whose prerequisites were not excessive. The more one mastered reading, writing and arithmetic, the more chances one had to get one of these jobs, succeed in it and make a career of it.

Thus, the school provided students from poor backgrounds the means to escape a harsh and precarious economic situation and even to benefit from social advancement. In this way a small social class was born and grew, a class which the economy needed and which was to play an increasingly important role in French society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

6. Conclusion

Nowhere in the *Conduite* is it suggested that a school-based education replace the formation provided by the guilds, nor is it a matter of confusing the two. Nor was it desired that there be competition or conflict. The child would gain nothing by that. The child’s personal future and well being were at the center of the entire Lasallian educational project.

The matter at hand was to find a common ground of efficacious cooperation between the world of the guild – represented by the student’s parents – and the school of the Brothers. The various ways this was carried out were established from the day of registration and could be negotiated on a case by case basis. This certainly does not mean that there were more exceptions to the rules than not, for the school would not be able to function normally otherwise. We have seen that there were indeed exceptions but that they arose essentially from the individual needs of the family or the guild.

⁹⁸ OC. CE 4.4.14; *Conduct*, 237.

⁹⁹ OC. CE 6.0.2; *Conduct*, 90.

When successful, this collaboration between the family and the school constituted a real opportunity for the child. It opened up several avenues for the future. With a school based education, the student could in fact do any one of the following:

- continue the trade of his father, if a craftsman, but with advanced ability to manage the affairs.
- find a job as a secretary or accountant in a guild or manufacturing business.
- apply for a position in public administration, the justice system or in trade according to his preference and the opportunities that presented themselves.
- be a candidate himself to become a school teacher, even in the guild of master writers, after a period of additional apprenticeship.

De La Salle and the Brothers were most assuredly sincere in their desire to educate the children of the working class and the poor. But in providing them all the learned skills described in the *Conduite*, they were implicitly able to encourage their students to look for a socio-professional future outside of the milieu in which they were raised. For the children of poor manual laborers and day workers, this was a plus. For the children of the working class, one wonders if they were indeed aware of these possibilities. Many doubtlessly expected that at the end of their schooling their children would go back into the world of the guilds and make their future there. In a certain sense, were they not misled?

Without reading into the text of the *Conduite*, it was sometimes a matter of a clash between two educational ideologies, two goals:

- Instead of the narrow attachment to the past that characterized many guilds, the school offered a richer future more open to progress.
- Instead of a short sighted goal which could be temporarily satisfied by modest, immediate and not always guaranteed gains, the school presented a long-term perspective by offering solid learning of the basics.
- Instead of the compartmentalized and fixed society characteristic of the guild system, the school made possible entry into a more mobile and

dynamic society, the one created by the political and economic development of the eighteenth century.

Due to their ignorance and their own immediate and sometimes urgent pre-occupations, many parents were not prepared for such perspectives. They were likely to make decisions that could be harmful to the future of their children. As the *Conduite* says, in particular in chapter 16, it was up to the Brothers to enlighten them on these matters and to convince them to let their children continue right to the end of their schooling. Those were the stakes of promoting a school that ensured the advancement of students.

PART TWO

**THE SCHOOL FACED WITH THE
DIFFICULTIES OF THE TIMES**

In order to keep with the objective of this first volume, which is to provide a contextual approach, we are not concerned here with pedagogical difficulties relating to certain students or internal classroom procedures. Rather, we are dealing with the way in which the Lasallian school, according to the very terms of the *Conduite*, was organized in order to fulfill its objectives despite the external difficulties peculiar to the times.

We can easily imagine how in such an unschooled society particular difficulties were sure to have repercussions on the running of the schools. Such difficulties were due to social mindsets and behaviors, situations of poverty that we have mentioned before, ignorance, daily problems of survival, the ravages of epidemics or other common diseases and natural catastrophes.

The desire for true enculturation and entrance into the milieu of the working class and the poor led De La Salle and the Brothers to protect themselves and their students from the unfortunate consequences that these socio-economic and environmental realities could bring about.

In this second part we will confine ourselves to four major difficulties which are repeatedly found in the text of the *Conduite* and which seem to us significant for the transitional period between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These are:

- how to welcome effectively the poorest of students.
- how to change the negative attitude of certain parents toward the schooling of their children.
- how to protect students from the innumerable dangers of street life.
- how to warn of the risks of the “evils of the times.”

In these four areas, we will find that De La Salle and the Brothers were familiar with precise details about the milieu of the people of the time and that they organized their schools to face these facts realistically and effectively.

Chapter 5 – Serving the Poor

As we have already indicated in the first two chapters, innumerable degrees of poverty existed in seventeenth-century society. The aforementioned study on the head tax done by Bluche and Solnon¹⁰⁰ confirms this.

In addition, we are familiar with the Church's effort to open "charity schools" in urban parishes when possible for the benefit of the students most in need. Also, wherever General Hospitals and orphanages were located, there were found projects for the instruction and training of the particularly needy children who were there.

From their beginning, the schools of De La Salle were gratuitous. However, gratuity did not suffice to allow for all the poor students to attend. Since these schools did not have their own revenue, it was necessary to find the means to meet the inevitable expenses, i.e. basically the school supplies indispensable for school activities and the skills that were taught.

If we make a list of all the school supplies that the students had to bring, we see that everyone had to bring a book for reading (a book which changed for each level of reading), material indispensable at the time for writing (plain paper, copy paper, ruled sheets, blotter, goose quills, penknife, writing case), and for spelling a kind of notebook which the *Conduite* calls a "little book." All of these had to be of good quality.

As we can see, this is not much. But it was a lot and sometimes too much for some poor parents who did not have money at their disposal and who were constantly on the threshold of basic survival. Let us not forget that part of the clientele of the Brothers' schools was composed of children whose parents were enrolled in the Register of the poor and thus belonged to the world of beggars.

Such were the situations that the school actually had to face.

¹⁰⁰ Bluche and Solnon, *La véritable hiérarchie sociale de l'ancienne France*, passim.

1. **Gratuity: First Response to Poverty**

• **An economic response**

When he agreed to help Adrien Nyel in his project to found schools for poor boys in Rheims, De La Salle could theoretically choose among several types of schools. Since he had been the friend of Nicolas Roland as well as the executor of his will, and since he had been instrumental in getting official recognition for the Sisters of the Child Jesus, De La Salle was sufficiently informed of the school situation, especially for the common people.

But the initial intention of Madame Maillefer, who had sent Adrien Nyel to Rheims, was ever so explicit. She wanted to open schools for poor boys, just like those that already existed for girls in the city of Rheims. “Madame Maillefer was inspired to provide for the poor children in her native city of Reims the same benefits that she afforded those at Darnétal. She therefore made arrangements with Monsieur Roland, whom she trusted implicitly and who shared her deep piety, to set about starting schools for boys there.... In 1673 the two of them had laid plans aimed at bringing this about, but these had been frustrated by Roland’s death. The generous benefactress did not let his death deter her. Hoping against hope, she resolved to revive the project which, although she did not suspect it, would give rise to the founding of the Brothers’ Institute.”¹⁰¹

Jean-Baptiste Blain continues to say that “Nyel had indeed come to open Christian and gratuitous schools , but his aims went no farther. He had not the slightest suspicion that he was about to lay the foundation of a great edifice and to prepare the way for the establishment of a new religious order.”¹⁰²

It would be necessary to reread the next few pages in Blain to discover the line of thought that ended in the opening of the first Lasallian school in Rheims in 1679. Let us look, however, at the following passage which shows us the intentions of the Founder and situates the schools in the general structure of the schools for the working class of his time: “They discussed the

¹⁰¹ 1 Blain, CL 7, 159-60; Blain, vol. I, 65-66.

¹⁰² 1 Blain, CL 7, 160; Blain, vol. I, 66-67.

means of getting the project started successfully. After a careful examination, it was agreed that De La Salle's proposal was the safest and indeed the only feasible one. 'The best and perhaps the only way to get these Christian and Gratuitous Schools off to a good start,' he said to them, 'is to safeguard them from all opposition by placing them under the protection of a pastor zealous enough to assume responsibility for them, discreet enough to avoid publicity, and generous enough to support them. Since as pastor he has a right to provide for the religious instruction of his parishioners and since his position as pastor authorizes him to appoint teachers to instruct them in Christian doctrine, nobody would venture to interfere with him or with the schools.'¹⁰³

As we see, there was no doubt in De La Salle's mind about the choice for gratuity.

- **A model which already existed**

John Baptist de La Salle was not the first to create gratuitous schools for the working class. Schools for poor girls, sometimes called "day schools," were run in connection with nuns' convents and were gratuitous in many cases. Charity schools, opened in certain parishes, constituted a form of aid for needy families. Orphanages and General Hospitals, which were part of the plan to aid the poor, provided gratuitous instruction for the children staying there. This was the direction taken by the schools opened by Adrien Nyel and John Baptist de La Salle.

What was at the beginning a natural choice became very quickly a strong and irrevocable conviction which De La Salle expressed in the *Rule* of the Brothers and several times over in other writings. This conviction would be all the more strengthened as the schools of the Brothers encountered difficulties with other kinds of schools of the time, the "Petites Écoles" and the schools of the Writing Masters, which were not gratuitous.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ 1 Blain, CL 7, 163-164, Blain, vol. I, 71.

¹⁰⁴ We will return later to this. Some very interesting additional material can be found in Georges Rigault, *Histoire Générale de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes* (Paris: Plon, 1937), vol. I, part 1; Henri Bédel, *Origines: 1651-1726* (Rome: Études Lasalliennes, 1994) 5: 33-37, 119-124 ; Bruno Alpage, *L'Institut au service éducatif des pauvres* (Rome: Études Lasalliennes, 2000) 7: 7-52.

Without directly opposing these gratuitous schools, Claude Joly¹⁰⁵ did not look on them kindly, not only because they could take students away from the non-gratuitous “Petites Écoles” and thus cause financial hardship to the teachers, but especially, it seems, because they were outside his authority as Superintendent of schools.¹⁰⁶ Parish priests ensured the opening and the control of the schools and were not about to let go of them.

That is why Claude Joly entitles the third part of his work *Against the projects aimed at the Grammar Schools, now called the “Petites Écoles” of the city, outlying areas and suburbs of Paris.*¹⁰⁷ Throughout the thirty-one chapters which compose this third part of his work, the author tries to settle his affairs with various school initiatives which began and developed outside of his control. Among his targets he named certain women’s teaching congregations, the Writing Masters and the charity schools, to which are devoted chapters 11, 12 and 13. His argument rests on the fact that if the desire to instruct the poor has a long history, the charity schools constitute a recent development. While the priests of old “engaged in charitable works [under the authority of the Superintendent], some of those who do so at present want to do it only with independence” and they seem to ignore “that former Superintendents of Paris did not neglect to provide for the instruction of poor children, and there is still evidence of this and it should be made known.”¹⁰⁸

Claude Joly’s work appeared in 1678. De La Salle’s schools were not targeted since the first one began the following year and the Brothers did not arrive in Paris until ten years later, and fortunately so since they would doubtlessly have not escaped the Superintendent’s criticism. In this way the Brothers’ schools in Paris escaped Joly’s sphere of authority.

¹⁰⁵ Joly, *Traité historique des Écoles Épiscopales et Éclésiastiques* (Paris, 1678).

¹⁰⁶ The title given here is that of “Grand Chantre.” Traditionally a clerical dignitary, the “Grand Chantre” was choirmaster at the episcopal cathedral. When referring to Joly, Blain frequently associates the title with that of “écolâtre,” ecclesiastical Superintendent of schools in a diocese. [translator’s note]

¹⁰⁷ Joly, 303 ff.

¹⁰⁸ Joly, III: 388.

- **Serving the poor: The sharing of bread**

Welcoming the neediest of students required a realization of the material conditions in which they lived. We have already approached this aspect, but it is necessary to enter into greater detail in order to understand better their three major concerns, namely food, clothing and shelter.

Food. This problem was more crucial in the seventeenth century and at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and became less so afterward. It affected city dwellers more than rural dwellers. In the city, however, the variety of food was greater. Markets were better stocked with meats, cheeses, fowl, vegetables and fruits. These products came from the country, outlying areas and even the city itself. But the supply was very vulnerable to poor harvests, for it was rare to find stocks saved up for an emergency or loss of money.

These products were difficult to acquire by the poor and by those who earned the bare minimum. This is why the amount of food consumption depended on each person's means. Bread was the essential food. Much more rarely was it meat, which was too expensive for people of little means. Bread constituted the basic food of the poor. When they could, they ate it in great quantity. This was bread dipped in a soup made of water, oil and at best cabbage, turnips, beans or peas.

Those of better means bought and ate meat from time to time, whether it was pork (the more popular meat) or fowl or beef for the rich. Fresh fish was rare and very expensive and did not interest many eaters. Often they had just salted cod or herring. Salt, although it was rationed and subject to taxes, was an essential element for food. Pepper and mustard still remained very rare. These observations have led some historians to divide the urban population into two large categories: those who ate grain and those who ate meat. Being more precise in their study, some historians think they can pinpoint the dividing line between the two categories at the level of assistant craftsmen.

As for drink, we must emphasize that, contrary to what one may think, water was not used except in case of necessity, for it was often polluted and had poor quality and bad taste. However, water carriers made up a large group in the cities. Without water people turned more readily to wine or beer. The

year's allotment was consumed, for stockpiling these drinks was not yet the custom. So we should not be surprised to notice already at that time a rather widespread instance of alcoholism. And one would need enough money to treat oneself to wine or beer, which the poor did not have. But the richest began to get interested in newer products, such as coffee and chocolate.

Shelter. Until the middle of the eighteenth century the traditional urban house was still often constructed of wood or cob, but stone houses were appearing and becoming more numerous for fear of fires. Royal decrees encouraged stone houses and finally required them. These houses often had a narrow front, several floors and one or two rooms per floor. The ground floor usually housed a shop or a store, while the bedrooms were on the upper floors. These places were often adaptable even for the working class and served, at the same time, as living quarters and workshop. The poor generally lived in one room where the whole family crowded in together.

These houses were generally dark, damp, unhealthy, cold and foul smelling because of poor ventilation. Plumbing was non-existent or inefficient; the courtyard or street took its place! No wonder streets were sometimes described as smelly cesspools. The social ladder determined where you lived: the higher up the stairs, the more destitute you were. Upper rooms were simple and uncomfortable garrets. People were segregated by districts, which formed a kind of topology according to trade groups.

The change in urban living space could be seen especially during the second half of the eighteenth century. Stone and brick were used more and more, tiles were placed on roofs and streets were redone and paved. These transformations in living space, along with the increase in population and the disappearance of the fear of invasions, brought about the dismantling of the city walls. Instead of being closed in on itself to protect its privileges, the city gradually opened itself to its surroundings. But up to this period the two terms that best characterize urban living space are promiscuity and unhealthiness. We will get back to some consequences of this situation.

Clothing. At the time, a certain hierarchy was based on appearances. Fashion had already existed in French society. It came from the city and more partic-

ularly from the king and the court. Since fashions changed rather quickly, this gave birth to a craftsmanship of luxury. Outmoded clothes trickled down the social classes, for they were often given by the rich to their domestic servants, who sold them after using them to craftsmen and other wage earners. Thus, belatedly the common people could also follow fashion.

This hierarchy in dress went from extreme poverty to overabundance. Inventories of wardrobes provide information on this subject. Beggars and vagabonds made do with rags that were found, stolen or given to them. The destitute wore second hand clothes or clothes received as gifts. Wage earners made do with fabrics of poor quality and generally owned only one set of clothes. Master craftsmen could own two or three sets of good quality clothes. Domestic servants fared best, for they benefited from the clothing given to them by their employers. The upper middle class and the aristocracy owned a lavish wardrobe, sometimes elegant. Appearances had to be kept. It was essential to preserve one's rank in society, which was also shown by one's adherence to the rules of decorum and politeness.

We have been able to see how the working class and the poor fit into these three areas. Since the insecurity of their fate made it impossible to improve the conditions of where they lived, the school of the Brothers focused on the other two dimensions of poverty lived on a daily basis, as certain stipulations of the *Conduite* testify. The solutions it suggests are quite moderate, but they bear witness to a real care for the poor.

- **Lunch and snacks**

*“Teachers should take care that the students bring their breakfast and afternoon snack with them every day unless they are certain that the students cannot afford to do so.”*¹⁰⁹

This passage from the *Conduite* clearly confirms that some students could not bring even a piece of bread to eat. This could have been only at certain times, or it could have been a permanent situation. The most direct way to

¹⁰⁹ OE. CE 2.1.1; *Conduct*, 52. The clause in italics is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translator's note]

ascertain their situation of destitution was to check the register of the poor in the parish.

The following paragraph in the *Conduite* stipulates that the teacher “will not permit them to bring meat, and if someone does bring some, he will have him give it to the poorest who do not eat meat at home.”¹¹⁰

That is a detail that reveals the ordinary economic level of the students of the Brothers. The clause “if someone does bring some” indicates clearly that this was the exception. These students were not “meat eaters.” Continuing with the text, we can assume that students could bring something other than bread: “Teachers will also take care that students do not throw either nuts or shells on the floor, but will have them put them into their pockets or into their bags.”¹¹¹

The entirety of chapter 2 of the *Conduite* is interesting for the details it gives on the real life of the poor. Some prudent advice for the teacher can even be found. For example: “The teacher must be careful not to accept as an excuse that students do not bring bread because their parents do not let them lest they be obliged to give their bread away at school. Students should not be obliged to give bread to the poor since doing so should be entirely of their own free will and done for the love of God.”¹¹²

Since taking lunch and a snack was an exercise aimed not only to satisfy the need to eat – in fact the students could do it at home – but also to educate them in decorum and politeness, it was essential that all participate in it. Because it was necessary to meet the needs of those who had not brought anything to eat, article 3 of this chapter speaks of the collection made for the poor (the collection of bread) and of the way to organize its distribution.

“During the breakfast and the afternoon snack, one of the students, who shall be the first in the bench which is at the front, shall have a basket before

¹¹⁰ OE. CE 2.1.2. CL 24, 8. This item is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translator’s note]

¹¹¹ OE. CE 2.1.3; CL 24, 8; *Conduct*, 52

¹¹² OE. CE 2.1.6 ; CL 24, 8; This item is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translator’s note]

him for receiving bread for the poor. Any who shall have brought plenty of bread will be able to give some piece of it or what they have left after having had sufficient to eat. The teacher, however, shall see to it that they do not give so much of their bread that there is not enough left for themselves....”

“Those who have bread to give will raise their hands, showing at the same time the piece of bread which they have to give, and a student who has been appointed to receive these alms will collect them....”

“In each class, a student shall be appointed to gather the alms, that is, the bread to be given to the poor during the breakfast and the afternoon snack....”

“Teachers shall put in charge of this duty someone who is pious and shows affection for the poor, and, especially, not inclined to gluttony. Almoners shall not be permitted to give out any of the bread or anything else to anybody whatever, and especially they shall not be permitted to take something for themselves from what the basket contains....”¹¹³

These few quotations can go without commentary. They clearly show care for the economically poor. The procedure for sharing took place in a serious and orderly fashion. We are not sure how many there were of these poor students unable to bring bread. We can reasonably estimate that they were in the minority because, if not, the system would not have been able to function as described. Or else, those who did bring bread would have had to bring it in large quantities.

Let us look at some other significant details. The collection was a regular occurrence, even daily, which seems to indicate that poor students could be found in all the classes all year long. These needy children were the sons of the settled beggars of whom we have spoken at the beginning of this book. They normally had access to the general alms of the parish as well as to the charity schools or, in any case, the gratuitous schools like those of the Brothers. We can also emphasize that the Church’s recommended duty of giving alms to adults is here applied to children. In addition, the *Conduite*

¹¹³ OC. CE 2.3.1, 18.3.1 and 18.3.5; CL 24, 15 and 243; *Conduct*, 235, 52, 250.

stipulates: “Teachers shall prompt them from time to time during the actual time of the breakfast, to that act of charity, either by some example or by some appealing reason, which will rouse them to this action out of goodness of heart and with affection for the love of God.”¹¹⁴

This exhortation must, however, respect the freedom of each individual. It was not an obligation; but since everything took place in public, it was important to see to it that there be a balance between real freedom and the pressure that could result from a spirit of competition. The text also insists on the necessity of a serious consideration of the impact of this gesture of charity through which the school wished to educate the student to a sense of sharing, to pity toward the poor and to solidarity with them.

2. Aid to poor students: school supplies

• Meager resources of the gratuitous schools

In order to understand better the aid in the form of school supplies, we should briefly recall how the “Petites Écoles” of the time functioned financially. In their non-gratuitous schools, the Writing Masters and the teachers of the “Petites Écoles” eked out their livelihood by charging tuition from the parents. The situation was rather complex due to the great disparity of schools.

In the gratuitous schools, the system was that of “endowed foundations.” Before opening or taking charge of a school, it was necessary to know who was going to provide the salary of the teachers. Concretely speaking, the “endowing founders” of the school had to have at their disposal sufficient capital so that the income could respond to the needs of the teachers. This is the system that De La Salle adopted when he asked from the founders of his schools 150 livres per year for each of the Brothers employed in them. Initially, he had thought of using his personal wealth to endow his schools and thus provide for the economic security of his teachers who were indeed worried about their future. In addition to fearing that the work would not

¹¹⁴ OC. CE 2.3.2.; CE 24, 18; *Conduct*, 235.

last, they feared sickness, old age or other professional unforeseen difficulties. Since they were unmarried, they did not have a family capable of responding to their needs when necessary. They expressed these fears very candidly to De La Salle. This is why the biographer Jean-Baptiste Blain says that “[t]he first idea which occurred to the pious canon was to use his inherited wealth to found the schools. What better use could he make of it?”¹¹⁵

Blain continues by summarizing De La Salle’s reasoning: “If De La Salle destined his wealth for the endowment of Christian and Gratuitous Schools, he would have fulfilled all of his aims: 1) his action would have been directed entirely to the spiritual advantage of the poor; 2) it would have reassured his disciples and made them proof against the temptation which troubled them and which, like a gnawing worm, was secretly undermining and weakening their vocation and their good dispositions; 3) it would have reduced them to silence, and thanks to his heroic example of detachment, it would have authorized him to give them lessons about perfection in regard to poverty and renunciation of all things; 4) it would have effectively deprived him of his goods and, in so doing, would have made him truly like his poor followers....”¹¹⁶

As he would customarily do before making an important decision, De La Salle proceeded to prayer and advice for discernment. Father Nicolas Barré, his spiritual advisor, dissuaded him from endowing his schools and steered him toward a more radical solution: complete abandonment to Providence. His idea of endowing the schools himself changed right there.

Consequently, those who depended on De La Salle’s teachers provided for their livelihood. But this did not include the fees needed to run the schools. Since they did not receive tuition fees from the parents, the schools had extremely limited resources at their disposal, except for a small part they deducted from the teachers’ salaries. Financial or material aid to poor students was then very limited. As all teachers and school administrators know, any institution comes with operating and capital expenses, however small.

¹¹⁵ 1 Blain, CL 7, 189; Blain, 108.

¹¹⁶ 1 Blain, CL 7, 190; Blain, 109.

• Requirements made by the school

In the schools of the Brothers, the parents were not required to regularly pay tuition fees; but they nevertheless had to provide their children with the necessary tools for their work. De La Salle and the Brothers were conscious of the fact that the poorest parents were not able to meet these expenses. So there had to be some means to come to their aid. In this area also it is necessary to distinguish the *Conduite*'s rather firm general rules from the practical exceptions to the rules.

To clarify these things, let us make an inventory of the school supplies deemed essential. They have to do with the principal learned skills.

For reading: “When a student is admitted to the school, the students and the parents must have all the necessary books, including a prayer book if the student knows how to read; and if not, a rosary, so that the student can pray during holy Mass.”¹¹⁷

This requirement is taken up again in the chapter on the learning of reading: “All students of each lesson will have the same book and will have their lessons together.”¹¹⁸

For writing, the necessary material was more complicated and doubtlessly more expensive, especially for the exercises that had to be regularly redone. This evidently was due to the writing techniques of the time. Chapter 4 of the *Conduite* describes this material in detail and puts particular emphasis on its quality in view of the good results expected in writing exercises: “Teachers will take care that the students always have white paper for school use. For this reason, they will instruct the students to ask their parents for more, at the latest when they have only six white sheets left. They will also take care that if any student has been negligent in bringing paper, he not take away the paper he has written on until he brings in white paper. All the students will bring to each writing period at least half a quire of good paper....”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ OC. CE 22.3.1; CL 24, 258; *Conduct*, 201.

¹¹⁸ OC. CE 3.1.11; CL 24, 18; *Conduct*, 58.

¹¹⁹ OC. CE 4.2. and 4.2.3. CL 24, 43; *Conduct*, 72.

This requirement of quality naturally brought with it an increase in expense. Yet, this was part of the educational values they wanted to instill in the students. That is why the next paragraphs in the *Conduite* insist on the care that each student had to take to conserve paper, including the “officers of the writing class” who had to neatly store it in a chest and handle it carefully when they redistributed it to the students at the beginning of the writing lessons. Similar requirements were made regarding “pens and penknives” and the writing case, for “[a]ll the writers will also have writing cases in which to put their pens and penknives.” And not any writing case would do, but “the longest that can be found in order that the students will not be obliged to cut their pens too short. This would prevent them from writing well.”¹²⁰ In addition, students needed blotting paper, and beginners who could not make a straight line needed ruled sheets of paper. In short, there were several small items which had to present financial difficulties to the children of manual laborers, beggars and the most poor.

In arithmetic, students had to have paper for the various exercises which apply the rules of the four basic operations. Therefore, the teacher “will see that all who are learning arithmetic copy their examples on Monday morning at the beginning of the writing lesson or on the first school day if there is a holy day on Monday. For this, each must have a notebook of white paper folded in quarters.” *“Beginners will do their example on their paper after the student in the level just above has done his.”* “On Tuesday of each week or the first day upon which arithmetic is taught, all the students who are learning it and who are among the advanced students will bring already done on their paper the example for their lesson which the teacher has written on the board for that week. They will also bring some other examples which they have invented for themselves. On Friday, they will bring a certain number of examples from their own lessons which they have done by themselves and which the teacher has, according to their capacity, assigned for them to do.”¹²¹

¹²⁰ OC. CE 4.2.14; CL 24, 45; *Conduct*, 73.

¹²¹ OC. CE 5.0.6, 5.0.20 and 5.0.22; CL 24, 69 and 72; *Conduct*, 87, 88. The item in italics is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translator’s note]

Even more paper was needed for spelling exercises, which basically consisted in copying “handwritten letters” or “what they have remembered from catechism lesson.” “For this purpose, they must have a notebook, which they will bring to be corrected Tuesday and Friday or any other day on which arithmetic is taught.”¹²²

And lastly, they needed the catechism book. The Lasallian school began at a time in the Church when there was a multiplicity of catechisms. These were condensations of Christian doctrine coming out of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) for the Christian instruction of the faithful and particularly of children. De La Salle himself dedicated much time and care to the creation of a catechism for school children. In addition to his three treatises entitled *Duties of a Christian toward God*, he authored two summary versions for use by school children.

But the dioceses in France had also published or adopted their own catechism. As the Lasallian schools spread throughout several dioceses and in deference to the bishop of the local diocese (the one responsible for the religious formation of his diocese), the *Conduite* also makes provision for studying the catechism of the local diocese. Whichever catechism he studied, the student had to learn it by heart and recite it in front of his teacher or, if not the teacher, the parish priest. In several passages the *Conduite* repeats that each student must have a catechism book for his use. Chapters 1 and 9 make this clear, but here let us quote this one passage from chapter 9, “The Catechism”: On all Sundays and holy days “the students will assemble during the half hour preceding the time for catechism. While they are assembling, they will question one another in pairs on the diocesan catechism, as in the repetition during breakfast and the afternoon snack. The teacher will indicate those who are to question one another and repeat the catechism at this time.”¹²³

• Types of aid to the poor

In order not to penalize the poorest of the children and not to discourage

¹²² OC. CE 6.0.2 and 6.0.3; CL 24, 73-74; *Conduct*, 90.

¹²³ OC. CE 9.1.15 and 9.5.2; CL 24, 99, 107, 108; *Conduct*, 111.

their parents as they faced these expenses, the Brothers took various measures to assist them. They can be divided into two types which also overlap: general measures affecting all students and particular aid given at certain times.

– General Measures

These general measures have to do basically with supplies for school work itself, as the following passages show:

In the third part of the *Conduite* concerning the “vigilance of the Inspector of Schools” it is said that he must see to it “[t]hat there are books for every lesson, with as many as necessary for the poor who have none of their own” and “[t]hat there should also be enough writing paper for the impoverished writers who have none of their own....”¹²⁴

Consequently, in the second part of the *Conduite* we find the results of this vigilance on the part of the Inspector, particularly in the article concerning the “officers of the school.” Article 11 of this chapter is dedicated to the “distributor and collector of books.” It stipulates that “there shall be a certain number of books used in each lesson which are to be loaned to the students too poor to buy any books. In each class, a student shall be assigned to distribute these books to those whom the teacher has designated.” The rest of this paragraph indicates that in each class a list of these poor students is to be drawn up. And to avoid any mistakes, the distributor is to foresee the number of books needed, keep them in good condition and if some are ruined, tell the teacher immediately. “The Distributor of Books shall know the number of books available in each class for the use of poor students.”¹²⁵

– Particular Aid

The chapter entitled “Rewards” mentions this type of aid, which consisted in not just lending books but in giving them to poor students who were particularly deserving. This is one example of a general system to help encourage students to work. “The things which may be given as rewards will be of

¹²⁴ OC. CE 21.1.5 and 21.1.6; CL 24, 250; *Conduct*, 192.

¹²⁵ OC. CE 18.11.1 and 18.11.2; CL 24, 247; *Conduct*, 254.

three different degrees: (1) books; (2) pictures on vellum, plaster statuettes, such as crucifixes and images of the Blessed Virgin; and (3) pictures on paper and engraved texts.” Putting books first on the list seems to indicate that it was the most valued reward, doubtlessly because it was the most costly. What exactly were the items given as rewards?

“Books will be used only as extraordinary rewards. They will be given only by the Director after the Director has examined those whom the teacher considers worthy of receiving them.

“The books which may be given as rewards will always be religious books, such as *The Imitation of Christ*, spiritual dialogues, books explaining the truths of religion, and other books containing salutary maxims.”¹²⁶

“Hymn books, prayer books, diocesan catechisms, and other books that are used in the Christian Schools may be given only to poor children. These will not be given to those who are able to buy them.”¹²⁷

These passages mention two categories of books, those which are directly useful for class activities and others which can be used for Christian formation and reflection. They could also be used as the beginnings of a small family library for adults as well as for students insofar as they could read. But what is essential is that they were primarily distributed to poor students.

• Clothing

De La Salle began his work as endower of the “Christian schools” during a period characterized by some tragic but fortunately temporary circumstances of destitution and famine. This had led him in 1683-84 to renounce the greater part of his wealth to aid the poor by distributing food and clothing to them. But it was difficult to keep doing this throughout all the schools of his Society.

The *Conduite* indicates, however, that in addition to caring for school sup-

¹²⁶ In this item, the *Conduite* names these books in addition to *The Imitation of Christ*. They are the *Sages Entretien*s, the *Vérités Chrétiennes*, the *Pensées Chrétiennes*, the *Pensez-y bien and adds* “etc.”

¹²⁷ OC. CE 14.1.14, 14.1.7, 14.1.8, 14.1.9; CL 24, 138-139; *Conduct*, 133-34.

plies De La Salle and the Brothers were just as attentive to the clothes worn by their students, not because they could meet their clothing needs but so that they could integrate this aspect of the person into their project of education for decorum and civility. To be sure, they did not require students to wear luxurious and expensive clothing, which was beyond the financial reach of the poor. This did not excuse the students from cleanliness and a certain dignity or civility in their manner of dress. Here are some significant sentences from the *Conduite* on this matter.

Among the duties of the Inspector at the time of accepting a student, it is mentioned “[t]hat students should wear clean clothes, and should not come to school if they are not suitably and cleanly dressed; that their hair should be properly combed and free of vermin; that teachers insist on this of the students in their own class, especially those who are most lacking in cleanliness; that students never come to school barelegged or wearing only a shirt, and that if they do, they will be punished and sent back home.”¹²⁸ Decorum and civility required it, but so did hygiene and the risk of contamination, as we shall see later.

Once admitted to the school, the student had to continue caring for his hygiene and cleanliness. Except in an unusual case, this was neither to disturb his progress in school nor that of the class. For example, let us look at the following two passages included in the chapter entitled “Absences”:

“No student will be permitted to be absent from school to go and buy clothes, shoes, a hat, or to take care of any other such need unless it appears that it is absolutely impossible for the parents to take care of these needs at a time other than school time, as can happen sometimes in winter.” This passage clearly shows the awareness that the Brothers had of the working conditions of the working class and the poor who had to leave home and stay out all day to find work. Since the normal workday schedule was dependant on daylight, the allusion to winter is quite understandable. “Nor will the students be permitted to be absent from school to look after the house, to carry a message, to have their clothes mended or for any other such thing unless it

¹²⁸ OC. CE 22.3.6; CL 24, 258; *Conduct*, 202.

appears that the matter is indeed necessary and cannot be put off to another time.”¹²⁹

These two passages from the *Conduite* are also interesting for the details they give on the concrete conditions of the life of the working class and the poor. But the school did not consider it to be within its province to care for the housing and the clothing of the poor. Except in unusual cases, the school intervened only in what it considered its own domain, namely school supplies. The aforementioned texts clearly show that the care for the poor was continually in the mind of these educators.

In concluding this chapter, we would like to emphasize the contrast there was between the treatment of the poor and the students who were better off. Just as the *Conduite* prescribes great compassion for and aid to the poor, so does it show what it requires of the rich. Parents who had the means were expected to provide their children with the supplies necessary for them to profit from the education provided, as is shown in the following passage: “No student with [rich] parents should be allowed to come to school beyond the first day without having the books needed for the lessons, or if in the writing class, without paper and an inkstand to do the writing.”¹³⁰

It is surprising to find the expression “with [rich] parents” in the text of the *Conduite*. It is indeed the only time that the word “rich” is found in the whole work.¹³¹ This shows a certain diversity of situations in the clientele served by the school. But this wealth was not necessarily enormous, if one thinks back to the economic situation of the working class and the poor. However, another passage alludes to the potential of certain parents who

¹²⁹ OC. CE 16.1.14, 16.1.15; CL 24, 182 [translation mine]. Unfortunately, the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation ignores the emphasis the *Conduite* puts on the disapproval of these excuses for absence by leading the reader to believe that such excuses are accepted as the norm with the proviso of parental intervention.

¹³⁰ OC. CE 22.4.5; CL 24, 259; *Conduct*, 203.

¹³¹ The de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation uses the word “wealthy” to translate the French “riches.” The word “riches” is in fact used one other time in the *Conduite* to prescribe that the Inspector of Schools should see to it that “teachers apply themselves with as much, or even more, affection to teaching the poor as to teaching the rich” (OC. CE 21.02.12; *Conduct*, 194). [translator’s note]

eventually would have been able to pay the teachers: “That parents neither give any money to their children nor allow them to have any, however little it may be; this usually being one of the main causes of misbehavior.”¹³²

¹³² OC. CE 22.3.9; CL 24, 258; *Conduct*, 202.

Chapter 6 – Convincing Reluctant Parents

Poor parents encountered financial problems in providing their children with schooling, even in a gratuitous school. This is clearly evident in the text of the *Conduite*. In many cases, at an age when the child could normally go to school, he also could be part of the work force and thus provide his family an appreciable extra income. We have already seen in the first part of this study that having children in the work force in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was normal and not unusual.

As long as parents were not intent on registering their children in school, the school was powerless in changing their attitude toward their children. Edicts and decrees from the government encouraging the education of all children were all too often uninformed and out of touch with the real life of the people. Thus, they went unheeded. In addition, the society still had persons, sometimes well known, who did not seem very eager to encourage general schooling for the people. Generally, their motives were self serving and specious. Instructing the people, they thought, was to empower them with an awareness of their condition and an access to knowledge that might turn them away from the material tasks to which they seemed destined. Although not the majority opinion, such an attitude lasted throughout this era. It did nothing to encourage poor parents who were hesitant to make an effort to send their children to school.

Several passages from the *Conduite* indicate very clearly that De La Salle and the Brothers were faced with this problem. How could they keep all these students in school when the parents were not convinced of its usefulness? They tried to answer this question in several ways. Regular attendance and the completion of the entire school program seemed very important for the future of the children of the working class and the poor. In this brief chapter we would like to shed light on this point.

1. Skepticism toward school

It is an enduring fact still evident nowadays in certain places that adults who have not themselves benefited from schooling rarely come to understand the need or usefulness of school for their children. That is what happened in France at the end of the seventeenth century when about four-fifths of the country's population was still illiterate. The chapter on "Absences" in the *Conduite* gives us some very clear ideas of this situation and an initial analysis of these attitudes and mentalities. As always in the *Conduite*, which is made up of the practical experiences of the Brothers, these are real life cases that were encountered during the course of the first years of the Institute.

The following passage summarizes almost entirely the main factors of the attitude of parents: "Parents are the fifth principal reason for absence. Parents either neglect to send their children to school, or do not take much trouble to make them come or be assiduous. This difficulty is quite common among the poor, either because they are indifferent to school, persuaded that their children learn very little, or for some other trifling objection, *or because they make them go to work.*"¹³³

• Indifference or lack of understanding

For the father or mother who had known only manual labor, time spent in class could easily seem wasted and not profitable. It might not be seen as real work and could easily be called idleness. Parents could likewise have difficulty understanding that schoolwork could be tiring and that its results could accrue only after some time.

This lack of understanding was even deeper when a parent was engaged in hard work that was absolutely necessary and urgent for survival. Without a doubt, De La Salle and the Brothers realized very quickly that this was the case with some parents of their students. Parents hesitating and even changing their minds led to withdrawing their children prematurely from school.

¹³³ OC. CE 16.2.17; CL 24, 186; *Conduct*, 160. The clause in italics is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arandez translation. The French text has this misnumbered as the second principal reason of student absence. [translator's note]

De La Salle and the Brothers found that very harmful. Therefore, we read in the chapter on “Absences” these two significant passages:

“The teacher will speak with the parents several times, and explain to them how important it is that their children come to school assiduously and how it is otherwise almost impossible for them to learn anything, since they forget in one day what they have learned in several.”

“[A]n effort must be made to attract the children of people like this and win them over by every possible means, which can often be done with success. Ordinarily, the children of the poor do as they wish. Their parents often take no care of them or even idolize them. What their children want, they also want. Thus, it is enough that their children should want to come to school for them to be content to send them there.”¹³⁴

Here is seen an ambiguous attitude on the part of the parents. They could be indifferent to school, but they also let themselves be easily steered by their children. We will come back to this. Motivation was not very strong, but it could have good results in certain cases.

- **From persuasion to coercion**

“The means of remedying the negligence of parents, especially of the poor, is to speak to them and make them understand their obligation to have their children instructed. They should understand the wrong that they do to their children in not making them learn to read and write, and how much this can harm their children, since the lack of this knowledge will leave the children incapable of any employment. Then they must be made to realize the harm that may be done their children by lack of instruction in those things which concern their salvation, with which the poor are often little concerned *since they themselves do not have religion.*”¹³⁵

This passage paints a harsh but particularly realistic picture of poor people.

¹³⁴ OC. CE 16.2.35 and 16.2.20; CE 24, 187; *Conduct*, 163, 161. The French text has this as the responsibility of the Inspector rather than of the teacher. [translator’s note]

¹³⁵ OC. CE 16.2.18; CL 24, 186; *Conduite*, 161. The clause in italics is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translator’s note]

But what is most surprising is found in the second part of the quotation which focuses on how much importance De La Salle and the Brothers put on the school as a means of professional advancement for the poor even to the point of omitting the school's highest goal which was the evangelization of children. They knew which arguments could appeal to the parents.

However, persuasion is not always efficacious. The conviction of De La Salle and the Brothers was so strong that they did not hesitate to have recourse to pressure: “[S]ince this class of poor are ordinarily those who receive alms, a list should be given to the parish priests of all those who do not come to school, their ages and their addresses. This is done in order that no alms be given their parents and that they may be urged and obliged to send their children to school.”¹³⁶

Since they kept gratuitous schools in the vicinity of the charity schools, De La Salle and the Brothers knew perfectly well the means used within the parish system to get aid to the poor and to beggars.¹³⁷ However, the measure called for in the *Conduite* seems quite severe, even surprisingly so given the fact that De La Salle had been greatly indulgent toward the poor. Depriving parents of aid could have dramatic consequences. This was a struggle between a particular need on the part of the poor and the structure to get that need met. How difficult to separate the two!

- **Negligent parents expecting results**

In no way do we mean to blame poor parents who were impatient with slow progress in school. There was hardly any time to spare in their daily life. You

¹³⁶ OC. CE 16.2.19; CL 24, 187; *Conduct*, 161. The French text here mentions twice that these measures are taken so that no alms be given to the parents. It also stipulates that not only the parish priests receive this list but also the Sisters of Charity and it says that the list should include the parents' names and the name of the parish where they reside. This is additional evidence of the leverage the *Conduite* prescribes. [translator's note]

¹³⁷ Lauraire here indicates that the preceding text's reference to the Bureau of the Poor, the “Bureau des Pauvres,” and the charity system shows the Brothers' awareness of these means to withhold alms. There is no mention of the “Bureau des Pauvres” in the preceding text nor in the entirety of the *Conduite*. One can reasonably assume then that the list that was mentioned was part of the mechanism established by the “Bureau des Pauvres.” [translator's note]

had to work to survive. They were easily inclined to think that months or years spent in school were a waste of time. This reaction is understandable when we realize that they were never used to planning their life in the long or mid term. Immediacy is what guided them. It is interesting to note the difference in attitude among well-off or rich parents who sent their children to secondary school or university. As the documents of the time attest, for these children years of study could continue on apparently without any problems. Parents did not depend upon these students to provide extra financial help for their families.

It is surprising to see that the indifferent or reluctant parents of the clientele served by the Lasallian schools were also impatient and critical when they had the impression (doubtlessly false) that the program of studies was dragging on. They expected quick results, and they would deem school useful only when they saw quick results.

“If parents complain that their children are learning nothing or very little and if this makes them want to withdraw their children, these steps must be taken to obviate that difficulty. First, no teacher should be put in writing class who is not able to teach writing. Second, no teacher should be put or kept in school who is not able to perform his duties well and teach well the students entrusted to him.”¹³⁸

Could anything more be done to satisfy the parents? As we read this paragraph, we can understand better the entire stance of the *Conduite* to make the school effective. We can also see the concern De La Salle brought to the initial formation of the teachers. This was also a way for the school to look at itself and not impute all the wrongdoings to the parents. Other passages in the *Conduite*, in particular in the chapter on “Corrections,” hark back to these basic requirements made of the teachers themselves.

- **Shortsightedness**

Without minimizing the importance of problems facing families and with-

¹³⁸ OC. CE 16.2.22; CL 24, 188. These particular steps are missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translator’s note]

out calling into question the sincerity of parents, we can affirm that repeated absenteeism or the premature withdrawal from school was a terrible departure from what was expected. History tells us, however, that absenteeism was a real curse for the Petites Écoles of the seventeenth century, their students and also for a great number of their teachers.

De La Salle knew that under these conditions it was very difficult to conduct a serious school program. Ever conscious of this problem, he and the Brothers were even more frustrated because these conditions ran counter to their educational project. The professional, social, human and Christian education they wished to give their students required time, punctuality and regular attendance. That is why the *Conduite* does not just mention the problem, but it attempts to analyze its causes and suggest solutions. To illustrate this it would be necessary to look at all the chapters of the second part which treat registers, awards, corrections, absences and school officers. The third part also covers all matters relative to the Inspector of Schools. A school that suffers from a high rate of absenteeism is a school that does not function well. Not only the absentees but also all their classmates suffer as a result.

Regular attendance seemed so important that De La Salle tried to find an answer to the potential absence of teachers. Not that the Brothers absented themselves on a whim, but they too could have to be absent due to illness, perhaps even unexpected death as is shown by the early history of the Institute. With this possibility in sight and for the good of the students, De La Salle had the custom of naming an extra Brother in his schools who would be ready to step in and cover when the regular teacher was absent.

Thus, the effectiveness of the school became the best response to the impatience of some parents. The conversation with the parents, initiated from the moment of the child's registration and reviewed each time a problem arose, permitted the Brothers to identify the reasons for absences and to make parents responsible for the attendance of their children. But this proved to be sometimes insufficient and required sanctions to be issued.

2. Compensating for the weakness of parents

Although absenteeism posed problems to schools and teachers, it was not a new phenomenon for the seventeenth century and so it was not surprising to the Brothers. Its consequences were certainly troublesome for the teachers, but measures could be found to eradicate it. That is what must have happened since the 1720 edition of the *Conduite* makes no more mention of students who visit absentees.

Another difficulty existed which can seem surprising to us today. It concerns the parent-child relationship that turned out to have negative repercussions for teachers as well. This came at the end of a long evolution of the notion of childhood which numerous historians mention.

• A significant evolution

Philippe Ariès describes the emergence of the concept of childhood in this way: “In medieval society, which we are taking as a starting point, the idea of childhood did not exist. This does not mean that children were neglected, abandoned or looked upon with contempt. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children. It means consciousness of the peculiarities of childhood which essentially distinguish the child from the adult, even a young adult. This consciousness did not exist. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant attention of his mother or his nurse, he belonged to the society of adults and was not looked upon differently.”¹³⁹

More recently Neil Postman adds the following explanation: “Partly because of the difficulty in surviving childhood, adults were not able to have the emotional involvement with children we consider normal today. The predominant idea at the time was to have a large number of children with the hope that two or three would survive. With this in mind, people could not allow themselves to spend too much time with their young ones.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Philippe Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Seuil : Paris, 1973), 134.

¹⁴⁰ Neil Postman, *Il n'y a plus d'enfance* (INSEP : Paris, 1983), 40.

The small child did not count much, even at the beginning of the seventeenth century. When a newborn died, the death was often not even registered. The same conclusions are borne out by studies on abandoned children or children left in childcare. However, this indifference or lack of sensibility toward children began to disappear in rich families at the end of the sixteenth century.

The general change is gradual and becomes apparent at the end of the seventeenth century, even in poor families. Philippe Ariès expresses it this way: “A new idea of childhood appeared in which the child’s innocence, gentleness and funniness make him a source of amusement or relaxation for the adult. We can call this phenomenon endearment.¹⁴¹ At its origin is a feminine sentiment, one proper to women responsible for the care of children, such as mothers and nurses.... It is important to note that at the end of the seventeenth century this endearment was not limited to persons of quality who, on the contrary, began to abandon it under the influence of moralists.¹⁴² It was denounced among the common people. John Baptist de La Salle in his *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes* states that children of the poor are especially poorly raised because they do only what they want, their parents do not take care of them (but not because of negligence) and they even idolize their children and want exactly what their children want.... With the moralists and educators of the seventeenth century we see another idea of childhood forming ... which influenced the entire educational system until the twentieth century, in the city as well as in the country, in the bourgeoisie and in the common people. Concern for childhood and its particular qualities is no longer expressed in terms of amusement or playfulness but rather in terms of psychology and moral interest....”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Here Ariès uses the word “mignotage” and places it within quotes. As an invented word, it is essentially untranslatable into English. A noun formed from the adjective “mignon” (cute), the word signifies a practice of treating a person in a certain way because of personal qualities of cuteness. It is here translated as “endearment.” [translator’s note]

¹⁴² The moralists were seventeenth-century French writers who reflected on societal customs, human nature and the human condition. Among them were Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Bossuet and La Fontaine. [translator’s note]

¹⁴³ Ariès, *L’enfant*, 135–40. See also E. Becchi and D. Julia, *Histoire de l’Enfance en Occident*, vol. I, passim.

At the end of the seventeenth century the two ideas, this endearment and a moral interest, appear along with a new element, interest in hygiene and physical health, which we find ever present in the *Conduite*. Care for the body was not ignored by moralists and educators. The sick were cared for, especially to avoid contagious diseases which frightened the people. We will get back to that later. Philippe Ariès writes that according to the moralists of the time “a body lacking strength was inclined to weakness, laziness, concupiscence and all the other vices.”¹⁴⁴ Let us conclude our survey of this evolution by quoting a passage from François Bluche: “From 1680 on, the child has gained a new and enormous status to which the *Dictionnaire Universel* can attest. The word ‘childhood’ is found constantly within the context of familial affection. Of course, because of actual situations, the *Dictionnaire* does not mince on words like the whip, the ferule, the rod, and smacks...¹⁴⁵ Two axioms justify these means of pedagogical repression: ‘A father must punish his children’ and ‘A teacher punishes his students.’ But affectionate words abound and are used by parents easily moved by tenderness, especially among the bourgeoisie and the common people: ‘mon poupon, mon petit poupard, ma mignonne, mon petit coeur, mon petit bouchon.’¹⁴⁶ Other formulas are used to attenuate a reprimand: little rascal is softer than shitty brat!”¹⁴⁷

This passage is of interest because it connects two apparently distinct and antithetical aspects, family endearment and the harshness of corporal punishment at school. This was in fact the dilemma confronted by De La Salle and the Brothers who tried to resolve it in the important chapter on “Corrections” in the *Conduite*, to which we will return in the second volume of this study. Perceived more and more as a human being different from an adult, the child as weak, unknowing, dependant and no longer a miniature

¹⁴⁴ Lauraire does not give documentation in Ariès for this quote. [translator’s note]

¹⁴⁵ Here Bluche indicates that the French word for “smacks” (“clagues”) is of base usage.

¹⁴⁶ These are expressions of endearment impossible to translate across cultures. Literally translated, they are “my baby doll, my chubby little baby doll, cutie, my little heart, my little cork.” [translator’s note]

¹⁴⁷ Bluche, *La vie quotidienne au temps de Louis XIV*, 134. Here Bluche uses the word “merdaille,” a pejorative term in less than decent usage that contains the French word “merde,” shit. [translator’s note]

adult deserves appropriate treatment with care, attention, help, affection and love. But given the context, it is not surprising that some parents have gone beyond the limits and shown more weakness and laxity than a love that is at the same time tender and tough.

- **The *Conduite*'s response to this situation**

De La Salle and the Brothers were not unaware of these changes, nor were they opposed to them. But they also had to face difficulties caused by the volatile feelings of some parents, especially to ensure the regular attendance of students and the good order of the class. To that end, they designed a plan to avoid or resolve these problems:

An essential educational principle: As the *Conduite* says, one must always “treat children with both gentleness and firmness,” and at the same time reflect on “what must be done so that firmness does not turn into harshness and gentleness into languid weakness....so that one can be firm to attain one’s goal and gentle in getting there, all the while showing great charity along with zeal....for if a school is to be well ordered, corrections must be rare.”¹⁴⁸ These words are taken exactly from the chapter on “Corrections.” Notable is the care taken to express the right balance between firmness and tenderness so that the teachers do not fall into the excess or lack of balance observed in some parents and considered as educationally counterproductive for the children.

An initial tacit contract: Chapter 22 on “Enrolling Students in School” gives complete details on everything that must be required of parents who come to register their children. We immediately see that the parents or a legally authorized and credible substitute had to be there at the time of registration. In this way, they were informed of what the school expected of them with respect to the education of their child. To be sure, this initial contract was not always respected. Other meetings with parents to clear up matters, or even to issue a warning, would be necessary to settle the matter of students missing school. De La Salle in his writings, especially in the *Duties of a*

¹⁴⁸ OC. CE 15, passim. This is the chapter entitled “Introductory Remarks on Corrections,” *Conduct*, 135 ff.

Christian, always affirms that the prime responsibility for the education of children belongs to the parents and that the teachers play only a substitute role. It is no surprise then that the school should confront parents with their responsibilities whenever necessary.

• **Continual difficulties**

The chapter on “Corrections” picks up on these continuing difficulties. Certain children had been raised in too lax a manner, and they were not to be corrected because the punishment would not have its intended effect. Several items in this chapter are listed under the heading “On children tenderly and gently raised and who are called spoiled children and have a gentle and timid disposition...”¹⁴⁹ “There are some parents whose manner of bringing up their children is to give them all that they ask. They never contradict or oppose them in anything, and they almost never correct them for their faults. It seems that they fear to cause them pain, *and when they fret about something, the parents, especially the mothers, do everything they can to soothe them and put them in good spirits. They show them great tenderness on every occasion*, and so they cannot suffer that the least correction be administered to them. Such children are almost always of a gentle and peaceable nature. For that reason, it is ordinarily better not to correct them. It is ordinarily better to correct their faults by some other means, such as giving them some penance that is easy to perform, preventing their faults in some skillful manner, pretending not to see them, or admonishing them gently in private.”¹⁵⁰

The language of these quotations can seem quite normal for our day. However, it is important to take it in the social context of the time when the methods of correcting used in the family and in the society were much harsher. The importance of these passages from the *Conduite* is precisely to remind us how difficult it was for the school not to keep to the practices in

¹⁴⁹ This heading is rendered simply as “Gentle children, Newcomers, Special Cases” in the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. *Conduct*, 148.

¹⁵⁰ OC. CE 15.6.27-28; *Conduct*, 148-49. The section in italics is missing in the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translator’s note]

effect at the time. Any attempt to be different would become a source of even more difficulty.

3. Conclusion

In several of his writings, especially in the *Conduite des Écoles* and in the first of the *Meditations for Time of Retreat*, John Baptist de La Salle deplores the fact that certain parents take little care of their children; but he does not put the blame on them since conditions of poverty are the cause. He clearly sees the harmful consequences of this situation and is distressed by it. At the same time he considers the Christian School as a remedy for all these evils, as is expressed in the following paragraph from the *Conduite*: “There are some children to whose conduct their parents pay very little attention, sometimes none at all.... They have no respect for their parents. They are disobedient. They grumble at the least thing. Sometimes these faults do not come from an evil disposition of heart or mind; they come from their having been left to themselves.”¹⁵¹

Dealing with such students required understanding, patience and indulgence. Acting severely would have little effect unless it was supported by agreement among teachers, school principal and parents. This is what is proposed in several paragraphs of chapter 15 on “Corrections.” Taking the place of the parents completely would not be a good solution, for that would not address the prime source of the difficulty. On the other hand, too frequent and excessively severe corrections would wind up undermining the authority of the teacher and could turn the child off to school. It would be for De La Salle a real catastrophe, for the student’s future necessarily hinged on his education in school.

Therefore, the two difficulties which we bring out in this chapter are closely intertwined. They both have their origin in the family, whether because the family was distracted by the development of certain attitudes or because it was not prepared to educate its children for and by a good experience in school. Strangely enough, do we not find similarities with today’s society and families?

¹⁵¹ OC. CE 15.6.11; CL 24, 160; *Conduct*, 146.

Chapter 7 – Avoiding the Dangers of Street Life

John Baptist de La Salle was born and raised and spent all his life in a city; so he knew what urban life was like. Although he came from a well-off social milieu, he was able to observe the surprising picture of life lived in the urban street. Apparently, this experience developed in him a great sense of prudence and caution with respect to the potential risks a child might encounter while moving about in the city. These are suggested briefly in several passages of his writings and most especially in the *Conduite des Écoles*. The Brothers certainly shared the same fears and doubtlessly had direct experience of them with their students, as is shown by the preventive measures put into place for the benefit of the students.

Before describing these measures in detail, it is necessary to provide some background. What peril was lurking in the streets at the time? Many recent historical studies help us grasp this complex, bustling, noisy and dangerous reality.

1. A Picture of Street Life

Various works have been written which describe street life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Charles Démiá, De La Salle himself and, somewhat later, Louis-Sébastien Mercier were among the writers of the period. Current historians such as Arlette Farge, Nicole Gonthier, Robert Muchembled and François Bluche work from documents of the period, especially those of police and judicial archives, and thus provide us with ample information, details and anecdotes. The city that influences historians most is Paris. As the most important city, it accentuates the urban phenomenon and doubtlessly presents some unique characteristics. But Paris is of special interest to us because it is there that De La Salle lived several years and that the Brothers held several schools from 1688. Everything that has been written about Paris is perhaps not entirely applicable to all the cities in France

where the Brothers were located, but these cities present similar characteristics of the urban setting on a different scale.

The following passage of Arlette Farge summarizes the general characteristics of what could be seen in street life: “The street is one of the essential scenes of life in Paris. With all its liveliness, noise, familiar characters, celebrities and hurried passers-by, as they are gawking, funny looking and gaping curiously, with its shops and cafés, its popular theatres and itinerant entertainers, the street is one of the curiosities and charms of Paris. It is a continuous show, diverse and free.”¹⁵²

It is easy to get into a lot of detail. The street was a place of strolling and permanent movement where a colorful crowd abounded. There could be found the idle and curious onlookers as well as travelers just passing through. Paris, capital of the kingdom and the largest city, attracted numerous tourists, the poor looking for daily work, numerous itinerant tradesmen and the usual beggars and workers whose income was too small to get a room or a house. All this gives the impression of a swarming crowd not only because of the sheer number of people but also because of an apparent disorder and lack of direction of movement. People passed each other, called out to one another, stopped and chatted or else they rushed around unexplainably.

Even physically speaking, the street had nothing pleasant to recommend it, as is seen in this brief description of Louis-Sébastien Mercier: “When air does not contribute to one’s health, it kills.... Poorly designed and narrow streets, houses so tall they block free circulation of air, butcher shops, fish stores, sewers, cemeteries, they all pollute the atmosphere, give off impure particles, and make the stuffy air heavy and unhealthy.”¹⁵³ In addition, the author reminds us that streets were rarely paved and that dust and mud piled up. He even goes as far as to say that “Paris is the dirtiest city in the world.” We let him take responsibility for that opinion.

¹⁵² Farge, *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, passim.

¹⁵³ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 114.

Despite these and other disadvantages, the street had an irresistible attraction for the population, particularly for the common people and the poor: “The Paris street at the end of the Ancien Régime is a space that is not chosen. It is a space that is occupied only because there is none other to be had. It is a space to live in. There is no other space for the poor, those who are preoccupied with daily subsistence day and night. The street is for them their life, the space where they walk and find shelter, the space where their destiny sometimes plays itself out.... Relegated to those who have neither power nor possessions, the street is more than a passageway; it is an inevitable way of existing. You take the street to look for work or to sell some scrap to someone worse off than yourself. The wherewithal to live is found outdoors, and that is where are mapped the steps of those who have no place to hang their hat.”¹⁵⁴

This is what De La Salle is speaking about, especially in the second *Meditation for the Time of Retreat*, when he mentions the parents of poor students who are forced to look for work outside the home and must therefore leave their children alone during the day.

The street was also an open space, a mixture where it was difficult to separate the private from the public since both came together and overlapped. As we have said before, poverty, gloominess and the unhealthy conditions of living spaces make them uninviting places to live in during the day. The necessity of finding work, the need for an artisan to display what he had crafted and the hope to sell one’s crafts at a better price, all were reasons that brought people out into the street. And this was even more true for the poverty stricken but not so for the bourgeois or the rich who stayed in their beautiful residences or went around in carriages. The street was the place where destitution, begging, abandoned children and even suicides were found. “The street is the refuge of those who have never earned anything and who have been forced to lose the essential rights of life, the right to love and to live. They stretch out their hands to beg, pawn their tattered belongings, abandon a child of a few months on the street corner, or else they go

¹⁵⁴ Farge, 19-20.

over the side of a bridge to try to finish it off in the waters of the Seine.” Depending on whether they were migrant or local beggars, their sad search ended either in a hospice, a hospital, a prison or in the General Hospital, which is another way of speaking of a prison. The prison and the hospital “place solid walls around decay and misfortune. These are visible places that hide those whom society prefers to forget in order to make its own surroundings livable. These are visible places where assistance and punishment merge into morbidity.... Housing and the street mix together without being able to determine exactly where private space begins and public space ends.”¹⁵⁵

The street resembled an immense work site with its continuous display of market stalls, workshops, shops, merchants and itinerant workers. For craftsmen there was more light outside, which is why they put their workbenches in the street. We cannot even speak of sidewalks since they did not exist. The result was an indescribable mix of activities, and sometimes in surprising places. “Even work has the street for its witness and its companion. The workshop flows over onto the sidewalk, the shop is connected to the street, the back of the shop connects to the back yard, petty tradesmen set up in every corner of a house or around fountains and in niches of a church. Shop boys come and go doing their errands and bringing messages, while water carriers run up the stairs and retailers block the way to get a better sale.... Work is not limited to enclosed spaces and does not keep apprentices or assistants in one spot. Work is either mobile or it finds its outlet in windows or doors that open onto the street.”¹⁵⁶

All this activity was even more concentrated and noisy in certain parts of the city, namely the markets, the bridges or the port when there was a river as in Paris. Even paintings of the period, normal proportions notwithstanding, exaggerate the space of these waterways and river ports. They want to emphasize their main economic role because numerous shipyards with their loading and unloading activities were located there. This attracted very many

¹⁵⁵ Farge, 56.

¹⁵⁶ Farge, 36-37, 51.

workers looking for employment as well as curious onlookers. These were places where many day workers were hired, so many porters and manual workers were needed. The same phenomenon was seen around the city gates since cities were still surrounded by walls.

Another type of activity should be mentioned, namely that of itinerant tradesmen. They are of varied types: day workers and manual laborers, street vendors, cutlers, resellers (who sold items the rich did not want any more), charlatans, smooth talkers, animal keepers and displayers of magic lanterns, to say nothing of water carriers and peddlers. Concerning water carriers, Louis-Sébastien Mercier writes: “Water is purchased in Paris. Public fountains are so rare and so poorly maintained that people have recourse to river water. No amount of water can satisfy a bourgeois household. From morning to evening, twenty thousand water carriers haul up two full pails from the first to the seventh floor and sometimes beyond. A water delivery costs six *liards* or two *sols*.¹⁵⁷ If the water carrier is robust, he makes about thirty trips a day.... Informers wage war on peddlers, the likes of whom traffic the only good books that can be read in France and are consequently prohibited. They are horribly mistreated....”¹⁵⁸

To read Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris* one very quickly gets the impression that almost nothing finds favor in his eyes. He seems cantankerous. But the negative aspects which he likes to emphasize have the advantage of showing us the shortcomings of the city. It is also the case with markets and cafés. He describes them in this way: “The markets of Paris are dirty and disgusting. It is a chaos where all the commodities are piled upon each other every which way.... The surroundings of the market are impassable.... The noise and the tumult are enormous.... Fish stores pollute the air.... There are six to seven hundred cafés, the normal refuge for the idle and an asylum for the indigent.... They warm themselves there in the winter to economize on wood at home.... In general, the coffee served there is bad and badly burnt. The lemon drink is dangerous and the liqueurs are unhealthy and taste like

¹⁵⁷ Monetary units designating very small sums

¹⁵⁸ Mercier, 134, 158, 181, 186.

ethanol. But the average Parisian, who looks at appearances, drinks everything, devours everything and swallows everything...”¹⁵⁹

Paradoxically, the street environment was for many a space of security. Staying alone at home was not only unpleasant but could also prove to be dangerous. Without witnesses or defenders around one could be attacked in broad daylight by especially violent, skillful and unscrupulous thieves. Of course, if the house was empty, the risk of theft was greater; but at least the risk of physical harm was avoided. Consequently, it was just as good to take refuge in the middle of the crowd where risks were fewer, potential protection was nearer and mutual concern was more easily communicated. “For those who live in precarious conditions, the street is a refuge by itself. They occupy it without shame and try to make it provide everything they hope to get from it. They expect to benefit from its economic resources and also its share of pleasures and personal encounters. The city acts like a mirage deluding with its wealth and durable goods, but your riches would be found in the mutual care of friends.”¹⁶⁰ This mirage also had its effect on people in the country, especially during times of want and famine. That was when the rural exodus was strongest, such that two-thirds of the population of Paris was made up of recently arrived migrants. But at that time, as always, the mirage did not deliver its promises and increased the number of homeless and destitute.

This influx of unknown persons resulted in attempts to chase out strangers and itinerant beggars. Some cities had a corps of “beggar chasers.” During the night, the “watchman” was responsible for seeing to the security of the city dwellers. “Security in Paris during the night is the work of the watchman and two or three hundred informers who beat the pavement and recognize and follow suspects. It is during the night that the police make all their arrests.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Mercier, 134, 158, 181, 186.

¹⁶⁰ Farge, 21.

¹⁶¹ Mercier, 164.

- **The street as place where many children live**

Let us look at this last aspect of street life, for it brings us closer to the situation of the schools and the *Conduite*.

“In the streets of Paris lives a whole crowd of wandering children, young and old. They are like a shapeless mass, wrapped up and abandoned in the corner of a church or in the recess of a wall. These are lone children on the sidewalk or along the banks of the Seine. First there are those who have lost their way and their parents in the maze of the streets or whom a guardian has forgotten. Wandering around without a care, the child easily gets lost in the instability of the street. Sometimes he flees of his own accord.” These children were rather numerous but doubtlessly fewer than the newborn who were purposely abandoned at night. The police often had to tend to them and, when they did not know where to bring them, they generally left them off at the General Hospitals. The older ones sometimes had been thrown out by their parents or had run away, or else their parents had decided to emigrate without taking them along. The causes seem the same as those that explain the abandonment of the newborn. Some parents believed that these children could manage to survive, especially by begging or by getting small paid jobs. Of course, they had no chance to go to school, unless they were adopted or taken from orphanages. We also note that some of these children, after some time, were reclaimed by their mothers when they found better living conditions. “The abandonment of children, although quite frequent, is nonetheless heartbreaking. People do not really get used to this type of dramatic separation which they sense is inevitable. Sometimes they are moved to a charity which is as pure as the abandonment is desperate.”¹⁶²

2. Dangers of street living

The dangers of street living were often unexpected, always sudden and sometimes mortal. Some dangers were moral dangers rather than physical. The *Conduite* makes reference to all of them.

¹⁶² Farge, 62-66. See also François Lebrun, *La vie conjugale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Colin : Paris, 1985), esp. chap. 5.

The street was a place of disorder, noise and violence. “Whether one is a foreigner or French, the reaction is the same. The city of Paris brings out fear and panic. The city attacks its visitor who knows he is unable to get a handle on this all engulfing mania in the city.”¹⁶³ The violence could be in the form of sexual encounters,¹⁶⁴ impromptu encounters, brutal attacks showing the extent of force between individuals, screaming and verbal insults and provocations. Even on a feast day one could find every sort of violence, sometimes of a contrasting nature, such as noisy expressions of turmoil and injustice as well as manifestations of solidarity in outbursts and even spontaneous riots.

“The young bring the same passion they show in their playing games to the celebration of feasts or festive rites. Jousts, carnivals and hullabaloo are more apt to involve single and young men. Their passion, determination and brazenness unleash their most condemnable instincts. Their excess in words and gestures, their taste for pranks and their audacious acts get free rein.... No one can think he is exempt from violence in his own home. Overcrowding in mostly cramped lodgings makes domestic quarrels inevitable. The absence of intimacy and the constant pressure of more or less hostile close living breed an atmosphere favorable to all kinds of excess.”¹⁶⁵

This violent tension seems to be fueled by urbanization itself – or lack of urbanization – in poor neighborhoods. Louis-Sébastien Mercier has a description of the horrors of the Saint-Marcel district, one of the worst in Paris. He describes narrow and winding streets with their many hidden nooks, shadows cast by corbelled balconies and dark areas especially at nightfall. He mentions numerous provocative prostitutes fueling sexual violence, a passion for gambling, occasional traffic accidents with carts and carriages, taunting and swearing, challenges and unfinished quarrels. All these made the street a theater of confrontation and often violent struggle.

¹⁶³ Farge, 17.

¹⁶⁴ Here Lauraire parenthetically mentions that “rape and mating out in the open are mentioned.”

¹⁶⁵ Nicole Gonthier, *Cris de haine et rites d'unité: la violence dans les villes* (Brépols : Paris, 1992), 48, 91.

Another unexpected source of annoyance was the signage which Louis-Sébastien Mercier describes: “Signs are now placed on the walls of houses and shops whereas before they used to hang on long iron poles so that in windy weather the sign and the pole were in danger of falling on passers-by in the street. When the wind blew, all the signs creaking together knocked against each other, which made like the wailing sound of a bell out of tune, really unbelievable for anyone who has never heard it. In addition, these signs cast great shadows at night, which made the weak light of street lamps useless. These signs protruded and were mostly colossal in shape. They gave the impression of a crowd of giants viewed by the most shriveled people of Europe. One could see the likes of a sword hilt measuring six feet high, a boot the size of a *muid*,¹⁶⁶ a spur as big as a carriage wheel, a glove that could hold a three year old child in each finger, monstrous heads, arms equipped with fencing foils the width of a street....”¹⁶⁷ Even making allowances for the exaggeration, we can imagine the dramatic sight that these signs created and the fear that caused such violent and tense reactions.

Nicole Gonthier proposes a categorization of sorts to describe the usual kinds of urban violence, starting with scuffles, settling personal affairs, duels, villainous crimes financed or provoked by theft, aggression against watchmen or police, gaming violence, rape, verbal violence and revolts. The following passage summarizes this background of violence, often more spontaneous than planned. “Promiscuity, going to bad places, the dangers of the street, excitement in gambling, all easily cause aggressive reactions. Therefore the principal characteristic of urban violence is its spontaneity. Guns are shot suddenly, and those accused explain it away by resorting to the heat of anger that put them out of their senses. They even interpret the suddenness of the attack as being the ‘work of the Enemy’ (the devil) who alone is able to transform their personality so rapidly.” Even certain social gathering places like taverns, saunas, public baths and brothels could bring about violence. Even feast day celebrations! The same author explains this violence with a list of

¹⁶⁶ An ancient measure

¹⁶⁷ Mercier, 177.

dangerous social categories. “Those who have lost their social status, beggars, vagabonds, abandoned children, the crazy, the sick, all represent an at-risk population which can be led to commit reprehensible acts just by seeing the rich lives of others. In reality, the marginal are more often found among the thieves than among the violent. In any case, within the context of social and economic crises they increase the ranks of professional criminals, thugs, abusers of women and slick dealers who band together to terrorize certain cities...”¹⁶⁸

Weather, location and chance could bring about violence. Such was the case with poorly organized and controlled feast day celebrations and the madness that went with the carnival. Violence also occurred at the entry points to the city when entry taxes were collected. These were places easily susceptible to trafficking, fraud and prostitution. The police were on guard there, but their presence was a contributing factor to exacerbate any hidden aggression.

We can surely say that violence was “one of the main components of daily life.” And this violence was a characteristic of people of little status. In addition to the dangers and the filth, the thefts and the robberies, scuffles were daily occurrences, for “the people resolve their conflicts right away with their fists, by kicking or with the instruments of their work.... Anything is good for hitting: sharp instruments, bottles, wooden stools, pruning hooks, casseroles, cauldrons, roasting forks....” Such violence can offend our current day attitudes and sensibilities. Violence was shown especially where money was found and exchanged: the home, the market, the workshop, the cabaret, the tax collecting booth. Drunks got violent more easily and cabarets were known as dangerous places.¹⁶⁹

In addition to violence, the danger presented by public debauchery was an area of concern for educators and those concerned with morals. It was everywhere. De La Salle showed great concern about it since he desired to protect his students from it, as we will see later. The cabaret easily became one but not the only setting for this debauchery. “The cabaret seems to belong to the

¹⁶⁸ Gonthier, 111, 97.

¹⁶⁹ Farge, 123-25.

common people quite simply because it is the extension of the activity on the boulevard, the normal result of this life lived outdoors where privacy has no place. The tavern is both a closed and an open space, a gathering place for people who have no other place to go to be together.... It is a violent reflection of the brutal conditions of life and the desire to live.... People sing, dance and play cards. Suddenly, there is a gesture or insult and it all turns bad.”¹⁷⁰ Even women went to the cabaret and could become the object of a brawl. No scoundrel is refused entrance, for this place is his. Since wine was made all over France at the time, wine was more readily available for drink than beer. Alcohol rapidly fired up feelings and urges.

Another form of dissipation was game playing by children and youth in the streets. By their illicit practices, they could present a moral danger for all including students. “Children play a lot in the street and everywhere, of course, whether it be on the stairway, outside on the square, near the well in the courtyard, in the alley, behind the shops or right in the middle of the street. They play, do everything that is forbidden and get in the way, which often angers pedestrians and incites bitter disputes among parents. Urban space is their world; and they transform it, using it as they wish. Even less than adults, they do not separate the public from the private.”¹⁷¹

What we have just said leads us to see that life lived together outdoors gave rise to constant **promiscuity**. “Finding a place to live in, or looking for one, means worrying about getting a shelter that in any case does not even let you escape the dangers of the street. People with housing are found everywhere. Deficient housing is found everywhere. It is impossible to set a boundary between the sidewalk and the buildings next to it. It is as if housing spreads out into the street and sidewalks just extend into the entranceways to buildings.” Inhabitable space was basically an open space. “Housing opens not only onto the street but even more so into the housing of neighbors, with promiscuity at every turn that incites indiscretion and dissension. Secrets are transparent and so are others’ misfortunes. As such, no secret can be respect-

¹⁷⁰ Farge, 73-74.

¹⁷¹ Farge, 70.

ed. Everything is said and seen on the stairway and in to the courtyard. Everything is heard behind the door and near the well in the courtyard. Everything is public, obscenity as well as indecency. Families piled one upon another try their best to reduce intrusion onto others. But in the final analysis at all hours of the day this flow of people, which no roof can really cover, spills out into the street.... Quarrels in the neighborhood are evidence of what housing for the poor is like and what it means to occupy the street. In the final analysis, the street is a place of relative freedom, of activity and leisure, and as such it is better than living in an attic with its nauseous odors and unprotected from evildoers who are even poorer than those who live there.”¹⁷²

With so many things going on, the danger was very real that people could wind up in accidents, sometimes accidents at work. There were “bodies, sometimes mangled or deformed, weakened by illness, unsafe working conditions and unhealthy housing.... Bodies have no defense against illness. The flu or more serious epidemics quickly sap the energy of each person, and it is often because of weakness that people live poorly in the street in the first place.... The poor are more at risk than others.”¹⁷³ Therefore, some collapsed from exhaustion in the street or in a cabaret. But an accident could happen at any place, while at the workplace or while strolling around, nor did it spare children and students. “Walking around Paris is ‘going on the attack’ and being attacked. But these are attacks of unequal proportions because people of little status are involved, of course, but more so than the bourgeois.”¹⁷⁴

These were unforeseen and hopefully rare situations. This is what Louis-Sébastien Mercier has to say concerning butcher shops: “Blood trickles down the streets. It coagulates under your feet and makes your shoes red.... Sometimes a steer, stunned by the blow but not knocked out, breaks its bonds and furiously escapes from its death den. It flees its executioners and

¹⁷² Farge, 26, 32-33.

¹⁷³ Farge, 42-43.

¹⁷⁴ Farge, 46.

knocks into everyone it comes in contact with who would cause its death. It spreads terror.... Women and children who are in its way are hurt. And the butchers who run after the escaped victim are as dangerous in their brutal chase as the animal driven by pain and rage.”¹⁷⁵

The most dangerous places in Paris are listed as well. The finger is pointed at the Seine, for “it is a place where the law is disobeyed, where it is easy to conceal a good number of unadvisable activities behind the hubbub of the comings and goings of the ports. Indispensable as a supply route to Paris, the river with its congested banks attracts a large crowd and causes numerous accidents.” The author of this passage continues to explain that it was a dangerous place especially at night and that boats collected bits of human bodies and limbs, and that the dead were brought to the lower jail of the Châtelet, the morgue at the time. The author proceeds to tell that some medical students conducted clandestine dissections which were still strictly forbidden. “Doctors, anatomists and students have no qualms about throwing everything into the water after their clandestine medical experiments. The river often takes on the characteristics of a mass grave.” The river naturally attracted many workers, both men and women: laundresses, water carriers, ferrymen, men who steered and retrieved floating timber, to say nothing of clients of the inns set up on the banks of the Seine. “Anything can happen on these dangerous river banks where so many money earners and workers cross paths and where much petty illegal trafficking is stealthily conducted. In addition, there reigns a specific criminal practice, namely on the water’s edge where petty prostitution mixes with brawls and theft of laundry. A poorly organized police force never manages to clean up the situation on the river banks nor can it even lighten the unending deadly traffic.... Amidst this whirlwind of activity, the man steering timber slips without making a sound, the laundress leans over too far to retrieve her washing stick that has gone adrift, the water carrier sinks in the water too far, the drunkard does not know where his swollen legs have taken him and there is an accident.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Mercier, 113.

¹⁷⁶ Farge, 48, 49, 51, 52.

Perhaps the police were powerless, and perhaps they were not always honest by concealing many accidents or misdemeanors. Concerning the Lieutenant of police, a very powerful man at the time and whose history some have treated, Mercier writes: “All the scandalous misdemeanors are hidden and smothered as well as all murders which can frighten and attest to the lack of vigilance on the part of officials charged with the safety of the capital. Victims of suicide are buried by order of the police after they are taken down from the noose and the official report is made, and this is done quietly. If the list of suicides were published, it would be appalling. Accidents that happen on the streets of Paris, whether from public vehicles or falls from roofs or in buildings, are likewise buried in silence. If a faithful account were kept of all these individual calamities, the fright would make this superb city be looked upon with horror.”¹⁷⁷

From the same author, let us draw attention to the following passage entitled “Watch out! Watch out!”: “Watch out for the carriages! I see a doctor dressed in black going by in a coach, a dance teacher in a cabriolet, an arms teacher in a trolley¹⁷⁸ and a prince racing by with six horses at top speed as if he were out in the country... I saw the catastrophe of May 18, 1770¹⁷⁹ caused by the crowd of carriages that blocked the street, the only passage open to the prodigious flow of people who were thronging to the pitiful illumination of the boulevards. I nearly lost my life.... I was run over three different times on the street and was on the verge of getting pummeled alive. So you can say I have the right to blame the barbarous luxury of these carriages.”¹⁸⁰

In her commentary of the same episode of May 30, 1770 on the occasion of the marriage of the Dauphin, Arlette Farge writes: “Cabs and carriages ... took control of the passage despite the orders of the police, and their entrance in great numbers caused panic and paralysis; 132 deaths and hun-

¹⁷⁷ Mercier, 170.

¹⁷⁸ Lauraire here specifies parenthetically that this is a “large cart with two or four wheels.”

¹⁷⁹ Lauraire here specifies parenthetically that this was “really May 30.”

¹⁸⁰ Mercier, 107-08.

dreds of wounded were rounded up in haste on the street. The street, after all, belonged to the strong hearted.”¹⁸¹

3. Protecting Students from the Dangers of the Street

At least four times a day, students would dive into this complex and dangerous world of the street. Not only were accidents to be feared, but also to be feared was the bad example these students saw in the street. Morning and afternoon they went back and forth between home and school. Add to that their daily trip to and from church. De La Salle and the Brothers saw in all this a serious problem for their young students who were weak and inexperienced and yet were exposed to so many scenes obviously opposed to the decorum and civility they wanted to inculcate in them. The *Conduite des Écoles*, therefore, presents a whole forceful plan to protect the students from all these potential dangers. The school building itself was not shielded from the inquisitiveness and carelessness of the population. Therefore, the school building is included in this preventive and protective plan.

- **Keeping the school clean**

To understand this aspect better, it is important to understand how the buildings of the Petites Écoles in the seventeenth century were laid out. Many of them had not been specifically built to be schools and looked like ordinary buildings. There was one locality, or several for the Lasallian schools with several classes, opening directly onto the street through one or several doors. In Lasallian schools, because classes were right next to each other, interior doors permitted passage from one to the other. This was not just arranged as a convenience but rather because it was necessary for the operation of the school, according to the requirements of the *Conduite*.

These schools opened directly onto the street. What kind of street? The following are some descriptive details from Louis-Sébastien Mercier: “There is no convenience for people on foot, no sidewalks.... The lack of sidewalks

¹⁸¹ Farge, 82.

makes almost all the streets dangerous.... A wide stream sometimes cuts a street in two so that passage from one side of the street to another is disrupted. At the least shower, shaky bridges need to be set up.”¹⁸² The same author, as we have seen, also speaks of the blood that trickled down the streets of Paris, the dirtiest city in the world. The street was often a veritable dump because of everything that was thrown into it. Inevitably the students brought in under their shoes all kinds of trash, filth and “animal crap,” as the *Conduite* says. One of the major concerns then was to maintain the cleanliness of the classrooms. For example, here is one of things that the Inspector of Schools had to attend to on his visit: “That there is no dirt or caked mud¹⁸³ on the floor of the classrooms, and floors are scrubbed from time to time; that the window panes are always kept clean.”¹⁸⁴ Decency, cleanliness, brightness, hygiene and thus civility, these were the watchwords.

Consequently, to maintain the cleanliness of the classrooms, “officers” are named to take care of them. These were the “sweepers.” “After having removed the benches, the Sweeper will, if it is necessary, sprinkle the floor of the classroom. The student will then sweep the room and carry out all of the rubbish in a basket to the designated place in the street. The Sweeper will then replace the broom, the basket, and the other things that have been used back in the place where they are ordinarily kept.”¹⁸⁵

- **Separating the school from the influences of street**

After what we have said about the promiscuity, curiosity and carelessness of the period, it is easy to see that the school as well had to protect itself from such inopportune interruptions so that both students and teachers could work without disturbance. Consequently, even though the school had several doors opening on to the street, only one was ordinarily used;

¹⁸² Mercier, 62, 108, 110, 112.

¹⁸³ The French text here has the words “boue” and “crotte,” which are more properly translated as “mud” and “animal crap.” In addition, when the French word “boue” (mud) is used in seventeenth-century texts to describe street conditions in early modern French cities, it is a euphemism for animal and human waste disposed of in the street. [translator’s note]

¹⁸⁴ OC. CE 21.1.12; CL 24, 251; *Conduct*, 193.

¹⁸⁵ OC. CE 18.12.2; CL 24, 214; *Conduct*, 176.

and it was under constant vigilance. This is why the *Conduite* gives two paragraphs to the office of “doorkeeper” and five to the office of “keeper of the key.”

“In each school, there will be only one entrance door. If there is more than one door, the others, which the Director will select, will be closed and always kept locked.” Obviously, present day rules of security were not in effect in the seventeenth century! The doorkeeper was responsible for peace and quiet in the class. He was in charge of opening and closing this door each time that anyone knocked and asked to speak to the teacher or anyone else. Therefore, he had to screen the visitors since the only ones allowed to get into the classroom were the teachers, the students, and the parish priest. Thus, we have the following practices: “When someone knocks at the door of the school, the Doorkeeper will at once open it quietly, *as little as possible and for just as long as he needs to speak to* and answer the person who is knocking. After having again bolted the door, the Doorkeeper will notify the teacher who has been designated as the one to speak with visitors.” Thus, any curious, idle people and visitors without purpose were kept out. Therefore, this doorkeeper was chosen with great care “from among the most diligent and the most regular in attendance at school. The student should be sensible, reserved, well-behaved, silent, and capable of edifying the people who come and knock at the door.”¹⁸⁶

Keeping the school protected and separate from the influences of the street was accomplished by locking the doors during the night. This was the task of the “keeper of the key,” the fourteenth of the jobs, who had to open the school in the morning and early in the afternoon when the students were assembled in front of the school and the teachers were still in the community house. “In each of the schools that are not near the house, a student will be put in charge of the key that opens the entrance door. He is to be very exact in being there every day at the time when the door must be opened and when the students begin to enter, which is in the morning before seven-thir-

¹⁸⁶ OC. CE 18.13.1, 2, 5, 10. CL 24, 215-17; *Conduct*, 176-77. The portion in italics is missing from the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation.

ty o'clock and in the afternoon before one o'clock. In view of this, the student should not live too far from school."¹⁸⁷

• **Doing away with violence**

Violence took place in the street all the time and almost everywhere. Its causes are not difficult to see: rough manners, the use of force instead of talk to settle disputes, hidden aggression resulting from intolerable living conditions and inner tension resulting in violence. This well-known sequence of events of one thing leading to another is not peculiar only to the seventeenth century, but it was much more extensive at that time. This passage from Louis-Sébastien Mercier is an indication: "The common people seem to be a body separate from the other Orders of the State. The rich and powerful who go about in grand style with their retinues have the barbarous right to squash and mutilate the common people in the street. A hundred victims per year die under the wheels of carriages. Indifference to this kind of accident shows that everything is believed to be second only to the pomp of the rich and powerful."¹⁸⁸

Some students were victims of this violence, others were its causes. Such behavior was contrary to the fraternal relationship that De La Salle and the Brothers wanted to develop in them. Therefore, the *Conduite* defines preventive and coercive measures to do away with violence in the schools in the hopes of preventing it by punishing students who fight. "Those who have been fighting will be corrected in the same way."¹⁸⁹ If two or more were involved, they will be punished together. If it was a student and another child who is not of the school, the teacher will ascertain exactly who was at fault. The student will not be corrected unless the teacher is very certain that the student was at fault. Teachers will act in exactly the same way with all other

¹⁸⁷ OC. CE 18.14.1; CL 24, 217 [translation mine]. The de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation has simply: "The Keeper of the School Key will be at the door of the school punctually every day, mornings before 7:30 and afternoons before 1:00."

¹⁸⁸ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, 62.

¹⁸⁹ That is by asking God's pardon "while kneeling in the middle of the classroom" and "even by imposing a penance on themselves." (OC. CE 15.6.2). This latter penance is omitted in the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. [translator's note]

faults committed outside of the school. If the students have been fighting in the school, they are to be punished as an example, and they must be made to understand that this fault is one of the gravest that they can commit.”¹⁹⁰

• **Fear of the influence of women**

Women and girls were evidently among the crowd that walked through the streets. After his reflections and observations, Louis-Sébastien Mercier comes to these conclusions. More boys than girls are born, but more men than women die. Women live on the average one year more than men; and “thus there is one-ninth of a difference between the final fate of men and women in this capital, which the common people call a paradise for women, a purgatory for men and a hell for horses.”¹⁹¹

There was a great presence of women in the streets; and it was certainly visible, for the same author dedicates several chapters to it. One after another he describes women of the opera, public women, courtesans, kept women, unmarried women, married women and gallantry with respect to women. He also speaks of “certain pretty women who put into place traps to trick simple people and foreigners.” He groups them with schemers and then speaks of what happens in the cafés. “Women who work in cafés are wooed and always surrounded by men. They are in need of a higher degree of virtue to resist the frequent temptations of those who solicit them. They are all very flirtatious, but being so seems to be an indispensable attribute of their job.”¹⁹² It is also worth reading the delightful picture he paints of streetwalkers whose charm and provocative traits were guarantees of success in their work. In other parts of his work, he treats marriage and adultery in terms that leave no doubt about the morals of the period.

This is quite a different picture than the one he paints of women who stripped children of their clothes, a risk that young students could be exposed to. “These women strip children to seize their clothes, a theft which is as atro-

¹⁹⁰ OC. CE 15.6.3-4; CL 24, 158; *Conduct*, 145.

¹⁹¹ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, 66.

¹⁹² Louis-Sébastien Mercier, 188.

cious as it is bizarre. These women have candies and cheap children's clothes all ready. They watch for the best dressed child; and in no time at all, they grab some good linen, silk, silver buckles and substitute for it some shabby shirt."¹⁹³ This example shows us the extent to which extreme poverty can lead.

To get back to the presence of women and girls, let us remember that historians are in agreement that a considerable amount of prostitution existed in the cities, particularly in Paris where the provocative behavior of some tens of thousands of prostitutes was in evidence. This fact, coupled with the moral ideas of many churchmen and moralists, to say nothing of ancient beliefs concerning women, contributed to reinforce a certain mistrust of encounters with women as they moved about. Society, in general, kept careful watch over encounters of the young of the two sexes. We must add to this the reality of promiscuity experienced in family life itself. Public rumor for a long time had been mentioning cases of incest; and from the sixteenth century on, those in civil power right up to the level of the king had taken very severe restrictive measures to eradicate these practices. Since this was a rare situation, these decrees had to be reread from the pulpit periodically.

John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers were aware of these realities. Several passages of the *Conduite* attest to this as they make reference either to family situations or to encounters in the streets during vacation times. Here are some passages that show this at great length. At the time of registering students, the following must be made clear. "That students are not to go swimming during the summertime, this involving great risk to purity; that they are not to slide on the ice or throw snowballs in winter; that they not associate regularly with girls or with dissolute companions, even if merely to play with them. That students are not to sleep with their fathers or mothers or any of their sisters, or any person of the other sex; that, if the child does so, the parents should be urged to stop this; and that if necessary, the local parish priest should be advised, in order to take the necessary steps to set the matter right."¹⁹⁴ "Those who have been guilty of any impure act or

¹⁹³ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, 1208.

¹⁹⁴ OE. CE 22.3.7-8; CL 24, 258; *Conduct*, 202.

have used obscene words will be punished by the same correction. Those who have been playing with persons of the opposite sex or who have been frequently in their company will be seriously warned the first time. If they persist in this fault, they will likewise be severely punished.” This punishment consisted in being expelled from school, which was the highest form of punishment for the authors of the *Conduite*. “Teachers will often seek to instill into their students a great disinclination for the company of these persons¹⁹⁵ and will urge them never to mingle with them. Even if they are their relatives and if they are sometimes obliged to converse with them, however young they may be,¹⁹⁶ let it be always in the presence of their parents or of some sensible elderly person.”¹⁹⁷

Thirty years before, Charles Démia was saying something similar in the text of his *Remonstrances* (Reproaches): “If a good education is so necessary in schools for poor boys, it is just as necessary for the glory of God, the public good and schools for poor girls. This sex has even greater need to be sustained by virtue since their weakness is great and their happy end depends on a good beginning. What do you think is the origin of disorders and jealousy in homes, so many infamous places in cities, so many children abandoned in hospitals and so much public debauchery? It is because we have not given enough attention to the education of girls. They have been left in ignorance and have therefore fallen into idleness, then lying, unruliness, fickleness and finally destitution, which is what usually causes the downfall of this sex’s sense of decency. ‘Haec fuit iniquitas sodomae, otium filiarum, ejus mendacium, furtum, adulterium inundaverunt,’ says the prophet.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Here the French specifically says “the company of girls.” [translator’s note]

¹⁹⁶ Here the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation adds “let it be very rarely.” [translator’s note]

¹⁹⁷ OC. CE 15.6.6-7; CL 24, 158-59; *Conduct*, 145-46.

¹⁹⁸ Charles Démia, *Remonstrances*, in CL 56, 106. Démia paraphrases and apocopates Eze 16:49 which is rendered in the Latin Vulgate as “ecce haec fuit iniquitas Sodomae sororis tuae superbia saturitas panis et abundantia et otium ipsius et filiarum eius et manum egeno et pauperi non porrigebant.” The Douay-Rheims Bible translates it as “Behold this was the iniquity of Sodom thy sister, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance, and the idleness of her, and of her daughters: and they did not put forth their hand to the needy, and the poor.” [translator’s note]

The feminine sex was almost totally excluded from school. It is true that coeducation was forbidden and would remain so until the second half of the twentieth century. The Lasallian school was essentially a male world. The students were urged to cultivate other friendships outside of school. “That the students keep away from bad companions, and that they very carefully avoid the company of girls; that they go with virtuous, reserved, and polite companions who can benefit them by their example and conversation...”¹⁹⁹ To be consistent the school also closed its doors to adult women, with one exception. “They will not allow either girls or women to enter for any reason whatever, unless it is to visit poor children and they are accompanied by the pastor of the parish, some priest delegated by him, or some other priest responsible for the care of the poor of the city.”²⁰⁰

• **Acting politely and with good manners**

The attitude of the Lasallian school toward life in the street was not just preventative or restrictive. Its goal was to be educational. One would need to go to De La Salle’s entire *Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne* to clarify the previously quoted passages of the *Conduite* or those which follow. Decorum required certain kinds of behavior in the street: “When walking in the streets, you must pay attention to walk neither too quickly nor too slowly. Going too slowly is a sign either of lethargy or of negligence. It is, however, more unbecoming for you to walk too fast, for this shows a much greater lack of self-control. It is not proper for you to stop when in the streets, not even to speak to someone, unless there is some need for doing so, and even then you should not linger.”²⁰¹

This is why the *Conduite* in turn says that students “will not be permitted to amuse themselves by playing and running in the vicinity of the school during this time [i.e. while waiting to enter] nor to disturb the neighbors in any manner whatsoever. Care will be taken that they walk with decorum into the street in which the school is situated and that while waiting for the door to

¹⁹⁹ OC. CE 21.3.8; Conduct, 198.

²⁰⁰ Règles Communes, 9.20; CL 25, 40. Rule and Foundational Documents, 49.

²⁰¹ OC. RB 209.1.604; CL 19, 237; Rules of Christian Decorum, 136.

be opened they stop there in such good order that those who pass will be edified.”²⁰² The desire is evidently that such behavior be also adopted in streets that are not in the vicinity of the school. But in order to accomplish this, appropriate means needed to be taken. Monitors were appointed who were responsible for observing what went on and for reporting it to the teacher “without the others being aware.”

The key word is “edification.” The public was to be edified by students who had not only acquired practices of politeness and civility, but also who show them by example. Such was the objective of the veritable ritual which describes the assembly of students in the street: “Care will be taken that they do not assemble in a crowd in the street before the door is opened and that they do not make noise by shouting or singing.”²⁰³ And in the article entitled “Leaving for Mass; Deportment on the Way,” the *Conduite* describes in detail the deportment of the teachers as well as that of the students: “Teachers will see to it that all leave the school in silence, with great decorum and reserve, *and without making a sound....* Teachers will watch very carefully over the students at this time. It would, however, be best if the students are not aware of the extent of the vigilance over them.... Teachers will take care from time to time to warn the students in the school, while they are preparing to leave or while the students of the other classes are going out, concerning the manner in which they should walk on the street and behave in the church, and of the edification which they are obliged to give their neighbor. Teachers will urge the students to good conduct through Christian motives. They will also make the students understand that they will be more exact to punish lack of restraint and the faults that are committed on the street and in the church than those which are committed in school. The reason for this is the scandal which students would give those who might see them there.”²⁰⁴

We can imagine these children or young adolescents lining up two by two, in silence, with a distance of four paces between the rows and reciting the

²⁰² OC. CE 1.1.4; CL 24, 2; *Conduct*, 48.

²⁰³ OC. CE 1.1.3; CL 24, 2; *Conduct*, 48.

²⁰⁴ OC. CE 8.1.0-12; CL 24, 85-86; *Conduct*, 97-98. Portion in italics is omitted in the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation.

rosary. What a contrast with the picture we have painted of the realities of life in the street! This requires gradual training and extreme watchfulness at the same time. “When the students go home after Mass, they shall be dismissed two by two. This is the same as the way in which they went from the school to the church. The Director, the Inspector of Schools, or one of the teachers who has been charged with this duty will stand at the door of the church and see that the students do not play or make any noise on the way. The teacher will take note of those who do or who stop on the way. All the students will always walk two by two in the streets and in the church, the pairs always being at least four paces away from each other. This will avoid noise and confusion.... *Teachers will keep to the same procedures they use to maintain order when they dismiss students from the school.*”²⁰⁵

Since the teachers cannot go far from the school, “there will also be certain Monitors or Supervisors for the streets, especially for those in which many students live. They will watch how the students of the district to which they have been assigned behave when returning from school. There will be supervisors in each district or important street. They will watch everything that takes place and will at once notify the teacher of it in private.”²⁰⁶

Several other passages in the *Conduite* treat the behavior of students in the streets. The recommendations are an indication of the fear felt by these educators. Chapter 10 of the *Conduite*, entitled “Dismissal of School,” has much to say on this topic. Without adding more quotations and thus running the risk of being constantly repetitious, let us simply summarize the totality of these recommendations made to the teacher. The teacher assigned to watch at the street door “will see to it that the companions do not leave each other and that in the street they do not throw stones or shout *or run*, and that they disturb no one *and always walk in silence.*”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ OC. CE 8.6.1-6; CL 24, 93-94; *Conduct*, 102. The portion in italics is omitted in the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation.

²⁰⁶ OC. CE 18.7.14-15; CL 24, 213; *Conduct*, 175.

²⁰⁷ OC. CE 10.3.4.; CL 24, 109-14; *Conduct*, 114. The portion in italics is omitted in the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation. Curiously, the de la Fontainerie/Arnandez translation adds to the list “that they do not approach too near to each other.”

4. Conclusion

The contrast is so strong between the prescriptions given in the *Conduite des Écoles* and the realities of street living that it is easy to wonder if such a plan had any chances to succeed. Thanks to the first biographers of John Baptist de La Salle we can get an idea of the period between the first years at Rheims and the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Canon Blain dedicates a few pages to the reaction the people of Rheims had when they saw De La Salle's teachers and the Founder himself for the first time in the street. Their dress was unfamiliar and doubtlessly seemed strange to them, but this did not justify the cruel treatment they inflicted on the teachers. Let us reread this passage of Blain: "People pointed the finger of scorn at them. They were escorted with raucous cries amidst scenes of a near riot. They were mimicked in public, and whoever invented some new outrage upon them thought he had done something very clever indeed. Jeers and hoots accompanied them wherever they went. Passersby stopped in the streets to take part in the taunts hurled at them. Artisans left their tasks unfinished in their shops to join in the merriment. Street urchins made up a new game: following the Brothers and yelling after them. The mob found pleasure in covering them with abuse; everybody enjoyed playing tricks on them and laughing at their expense. The same farce began anew every day. When the Brothers walked to and from school, they were accompanied there and back with vilification. They were lucky when they got off so easily; often they were spattered with mud and pursued by those who threw stones at them until they reached the door of their house."²⁰⁸ Of course, Blain is speaking of the teachers and not of the students; and we must allow for Blain's choice of words, but we can still compare this picture with the one we have just described relative to the students. We can also compare what the same biographer says some chapters later when he speaks of the opinion of Godet des Marais, bishop of Chartres, who had obtained Brothers and sang the praises of their work in his city. "The most outstanding and visible change that the Gratuitous Schools brought about in the children at Chartres was an

²⁰⁸ 1 Blain, CL 7, 242-43; Blain, 187.

extraordinary modesty in church.... The sight of the Brothers leading them in a humble and recollected posture impressed them even more than the lessons they had heard.... Bishop Godet des Marais was so delighted over such an edifying change in the young people brought up in the Christian Schools that he conceived a great desire of profiting from this situation to reform the entire city on a rather important point.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ 1 Blain, CL 7, 374; Blain, 378.

Chapter 8 – Surviving the “Evils of the Times”

“From pestilence, famine and war, deliver us, O Lord.” This invocation could not have been more appropriate to the needs of the people at the time of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his contemporaries.

To appreciate the extent of the difficulties experienced by the general French population, the school population and especially the common people between 1680 and 1720, we need to focus on several unique aspects of that period which are termed by various current historians as the “evils of the times.” But these “evils” extend well beyond the above mentioned period. We are focusing on those four decades because they also correspond to the foundation of the first Lasallian schools. In these evils of the times lie hidden some very concrete realities with their dreadful consequences for the population.²¹⁰

The causes of these catastrophes can be divided into three groups:

- External and objective causes related to specific climatic phenomena and the devastating effects of the forces of nature.
- The tragic incapacity and disastrous consequences of ignorance in the fields of science and medicine. Those engaged in the study of science and medicine did not have the theoretical or technical knowledge to foresee, prevent or check these evils. Throughout the entire Ancien Régime progress and innovation in these areas were stifled by numerous beliefs and outdated traditions, unsubstantiated religious prohibitions and unchangeable ancient practices.
- Human malice occasionally added to the difficulties posed by natural causes. The drive for profit motivated speculators and this brought with

²¹⁰ See for example the works of Jean Delumeau and Yves Lequin, Pierre Chaunu, Marcel Lachiver, Françoise Hildesheimer and Le Roy Ladurie which are replete with facts and hard data on the “evils of the times.”

it more expensive food products for daily consumption, thus condemning numerous poor people to beg, starve and even die. The thirst for power drove governments to undertake wars that were useless, long, costly and devastating to the local people. The ravages that occurred on the battlefield caused the death of innocent people and sometimes the destitution of their survivors. To this we can add in France itself, especially throughout the seventeenth century, the numerous events of urban and rural violence, revolts and crimes caused by destitution, injustice and exasperation. Scuffles and murders were not rare. And finally, military expenses brought on the imposition of new taxes.

1. Climatic phenomena: minor glacial effects

Since the sixteenth century, Europe had been experiencing a general climatic cooling. Contemporary climatologists speak of minor glacial effects or a minor glacial age. In itself the expression conjures up abnormally low temperatures and long, harsh winters. This phenomenon extended well beyond the beginning and the end of the forty-year period of our study. It began in the sixteenth century and went right through the middle of the nineteenth century. Thanks to the invention of the thermometer and the curiosity of several observers, current historians have at their disposal hard numerical data concerning temperatures, especially at the beginning of the eighteenth century.²¹¹

This rough climate was particularly in evidence during the course of certain winters; and De La Salle, the Brothers and their students' families had to face them. The temperatures recorded were abnormally low, but they do not seem to be unbearable. What caused the harm was that poor people did not have the material means to protect themselves from the cold. They would have needed more clothing, heating and houses better waterproofed and insulated against the cold. But they did not have the financial means.

²¹¹ See especially Marcel Lachiver, *Les années de misère: la famine au temps du Grand Roi (1680-1720)* (Fayard : Paris, 1991) and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire du climat depuis l'an mille* (Flammarion : Paris, 1983).

During these prolonged winters, the autumn seeding, which was the most common, rotted to a great extent. This would yield the basic foodstuffs for feeding the population. Without bread it was impossible to live and work. The poor consumed a great amount of bread because they had nothing else to eat, especially in the city. Weak or small harvests made survival until the following year problematic and had an impact on the next harvest which was hoped to be better.

Just as the rigors of winter were feared, so were the unending and excessive rains of spring and summer, for they also caused grain to rot and harvests to fail. “Summer’s rain,” writes Le Roy Ladurie, “is the downpour and means the grain will rot. Inversely, a dry summer, harmful for animal breeding, is favorable for the cereals of winter and spring.”²¹² Fortunately, climatic phenomena did not affect the entire country in the same way. It took a long time – up to the second half of the eighteenth century – for the government to be able to institutionalize and provide aid, thanks to a better delivery and distribution of seed. From this was born a new form of national solidarity which put an end to famine and shortage of food.

- **Fire, earth and water**

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the four forces of nature weighed heavily on the destiny of the population. Over the space of time, mankind has tried to understand and control these forces with the help of theoretical discoveries and with recourse to actions aimed at warding off disastrous events which are neither able to be foreseen nor completely understood.

Such is the case with earthquakes of varying intensities that occurred during the course of these two centuries. People were struck with fear and readily saw in them some divine retribution. The Church generally encouraged this thinking: “People are powerless before these events which they can neither understand nor control, and they are just as powerless before climatic phenomena whose regularity and effects they are generally familiar with but

²¹² Le Roy Ladurie, 97.

whose intensity they are not always able to predict.”²¹³ They knew that long cold spells and storms could result in death. Lightning impressed them. All this seemed to them to be manifestations of God’s anger.

They also feared water that rotted harvests, inundated the earth and their homes and sometimes carried them away. As an example of ignorance, they continued, however, to rebuild in susceptible areas.

The great London fire of 1666 had a great impact on people’s attitudes. The fear of this scourge was still in people’s memories in the eighteenth century, particularly since fires were not rare because they were caused by nature, chance, accidents and sometimes human malice and vengeance, if not just negligence and carelessness. Numerous fires distinguished these two centuries. Specifically in the eighteenth century eight are recorded in Rennes, four in Fougères, three in Landerneau and several in Dinan.

The physical consequences of these fires were horrible, especially for the poor who lost their meager possessions and their homes without the hope of rebuilding them. Fortunately, in many cases evidence of creativity, solidarity and generosity was shown. Concrete measures were taken to ensure that reconstruction was more solid: thicker stone walls, sloping roofs, better water drainage. The State required regular and frequent chimney sweeping. “The struggle by Louis XIV and his successors against scourges and natural catastrophes consolidated the ruling political powers against private interests. The struggle against fire made the most progress since fire resulted in the greatest consequences. Fire destroys but ensuing construction can change the urban landscape. Change is little if one only builds new buildings where the old ones were, but change is greater if the authorities seize the opportunity to remodel the city, redesign squares and streets and build new public edifices. Destructive fire, an urban calamity, is then the occasion of a new beginning.”²¹⁴

• Ignorance and disorganization

We cannot forget that the seventeenth century marked the first scientific rev-

²¹³ Delumeau and Lequin, *Les malheurs du temps*, 368.

²¹⁴ Delumeau and Lequin, 382.

olution in many fields, even if it had not yet reached all levels of society. This was a revolution crafted by Galileo, Descartes, Pascal, Harvey and especially Newton, among others.

Certain areas of human life and activity were not touched by this progress. Such was the case with agriculture, for example, due to ignorance which was in part responsible for periods of food shortage. The soil was there, like today; but its yield remained much too weak, especially for a continuously increasing population. In this context originated the idea of “a too full world,” which can make us smile today when the population has tripled. And in this context the theories of Malthus took root.²¹⁵

The second area in which scientific ignorance brought about regrettable consequences was the field of medicine whose distant origins are well known. In schools of medicine, which were already several centuries old, instruction was kept traditional and taken from Hippocrates and Galen who remained the masters and the required sources of reference. It is true that the Church closely oversaw medical practices and was anxious to preserve the integrity of the human body. This was an effective roadblock to medical progress, and skirting this roadblock meant a courageous transgression of what was prohibited.

What a liability at a time when all of Europe fell victim to deadly epidemics such as leprosy, smallpox, tuberculosis and especially the plague! True surgery did not begin until the beginning of the eighteenth century and later appeared the Academy of Surgery (1731), the Royal Society of Medicine (1776) and the Institut de France (1795).

Fortunately, some progress in therapy had been made since the Middle Ages. However, people did not have much confidence in doctors; and doctors in the country were consulted only rarely, and even then generally too late. The list of grievances of the French Revolution denounced the lack of effectiveness of doctors. “A large part of the population believed in the practice of

²¹⁵ Malthus was an eighteenth-century demographer and political economist whose “principle of population” led him to predict that population would outrun the food supply. [translator’s note]

removing spells and to do that had recourse to sorcerers, healers, charlatans and the saints as well as to miraculous remedies sold at the fairgrounds,” writes Robert Vial.

Vial continues: “Self-medication with herbal teas, poultices and suction cups was practiced in all families. The increase of winegrowing made alcohol a versatile medicinal tonic.... From the beginning of the eighteenth century, the acquisition of knowledge of medical care moved from the lecture halls of medical schools to the important hospitals where students took part in clinical internships under the guidance of their mentors and dealt with the sick first hand. This practice of learning at the bedside of the sick, where all care was given including operations, was made official by the opening in 1794 of the Hôtel-Dieu de Paris and the establishment of the first chair of clinical education in the school of medicine.”²¹⁶

The whole period from 1680 to 1720 was particularly cold, as we have said. But certain authors like Marcel Lachiver²¹⁷ emphasize the three winters of 1683-84, 1693-94 and 1708-09 (“the great winter”) as even more treacherous. They marked temperatures of -4° F (-20° C) in various regions of France, including Paris. In speaking of 1693-94 Lachiver refers to hundreds of thousands of famished poor along the roads of the kingdom, victims of a terrible famine. The price of bread had increased four or fivefold. He speaks of a million and a half victims out of a population of twenty million. The winter of 1708-09 was also long and harsh. Rivers were frozen; the countryside was like a field of ice, and houses were like iceboxes. All this affected the poor, first of all.

Doubtlessly, these are the types of calamities that the *Conduite des Écoles* refers to in the following passage: “No other prayers will be said in school; there will be prayers on no other occasion than those which are indicated in the present Article. Nothing will be added to the prayers indicated in the present Article without the orders of the Superior of the Institute. In case of

²¹⁶ Robert Vial, *La chronologie de l'histoire de la médecine* (Gisserot : Paris, 1995), 49-51.

²¹⁷ Marcel Lachiver, *Les années de misère*. He speaks of the three harsh winters of 1683-1684, 1693-1694 and 1708-1709.

some public necessity or for some other occasion which concerns the needs of the Institute, the Superior may add the litany of the Blessed Virgin or some other short prayer at the end of prayers, and for a specified time only.”²¹⁸

This measure may appear ridiculous. The objective of the *Conduite des Écoles* was not to analyze the evils of the time; but this passage, like many others we will see, is evidence that the students and their teachers were not shielded from these calamities. This prayer was also part and parcel of the thinking and practices of the day. In addition, the first biographers of Saint John Baptist de La Salle give us copious explanations of what he himself and the Brothers had to endure. We will return to this.

2. Food shortage and famine

• Undernourishment, famine and destitution

Despite the progress made in the field of medicine, the causes of death did not disappear, even after the plague was eradicated. Other epidemics were rampant. Many people, especially in the country, lived in subhuman conditions which themselves caused sickness and numerous deaths. Doctors beginning to go around rural parishes were alarmed by the destitution they found in homes.

This was an appalling destitution which was a consequence of insufficient food or a poorly balanced diet, deplorable hygiene and stubborn prejudice which hindered the delivery of medical care. Prescribed remedies were often ignored or taken without regularity. Preference was given to emetics, laxatives and bleedings which were dangerous and caused excessive weakening of the body’s organs.

Preventive measures were not readily accepted, even basic hygiene, isolation of the sick and healthy diets. It was very difficult to convince the people since

²¹⁸ OC. CE 7.3.9; CL 24, 80; *Conduct*, 94-95. The context of this prescription is the death of a teacher in the town or of a student in one of the classes in school. The only prayers to be said on these occasions are the *De profundis* (Psalm 129) and the prayer *Inclina Domine*. [translator’s note]

they carried an age-old mistrust of doctors. Obstinate in their way of life, they would rather rely on their usual charlatans. In a work on the evils of the time, Delumeau and Lequin cite the evidence left by an eighteenth-century doctor from which we take the following passage: “On my first visits to the sick I found the majority of them lying on straw and several exposed to the ravages of the air. Not being able to clean themselves, they were left to lie in their own mire. The foul air they were breathing added greatly to the danger of their sickness and became a source of infection for those who got near them. Contagion spread noticeably. The fear of getting sick warded off neighbors and relatives. Money did not persuade those who needed it the most. I offered ten times more than I would have given in any other situation to help clean some houses, but neither my overtures nor my offers could persuade anyone.”

A large proportion of the population lived in destitution, on the brink of survival. Close quarters, undernourishment and filth all spread epidemics. Changing this situation would have been an immense task. “Such are the new evils of the times. The Lord seems to have finally heard the age-old prayer and delivered men from the plague, famine and war. But the scourge of destitution, that mythical hydra with a hundred faces, is still with us.”²¹⁹

• Food shortage and keeping alive

Poor harvests continually caused lack of bread, especially in the cities. Various recent studies have analyzed the consequences of these periods of food shortage and do seem to agree on the subject. The consequences most frequently shown are the following:

- Families were ruined by the excessive price of bread.
- Wheat was withheld until its price increased sufficiently and then speculated upon. This contributed to impoverishment until the administration fixed the maximum price and the authorities arranged free distribution or sale of bread at reduced prices in emergency cases.
- Food shortage and famine increased the mortality rate.

²¹⁹ Delumeau and Lequin, 365-66.

- Regional migration toward the cities, already lacking in resources, increased notably.
- Families on weak financial ground fell into poverty or destitution or resorted to begging and sometimes vagrancy.
- Other families joined in urban uprisings, popular movements or farmers’ revolts.

These awful consequences would not be mitigated until the eighteenth century thanks to economic development and the organized distribution of grain. Food shortage had an impact on the economy as a whole, particularly evidenced in the general poor sales of craftwork and manufactured goods, underproduction, unemployment and a comparatively high death rate. On May 6, 1694, the financial administrator of the Champagne region wrote to the general auditor: “The calamity is even more horrible in the villages. Here is where most of the manual laborers are unable to find any more work, or at least so little work that they cannot buy enough bread for themselves and their families. They go for entire days without eating a piece of bread, reduced to living on bran and roots which they cook with a little salt.”²²⁰

• **John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers in this context**

The Brothers, both in community and in the school, had to confront these difficult times. The *Conduite* does not give us any direct information on this, but only alludes to it. However, the biographies of De La Salle himself, written by Maillefer and Blain, do give us some insight.

As for the winter of 1683-1684, we know that this was the occasion for De La Salle to give up the greater part of his property. Maillefer says that in 1684 “[a] food shortage was so severe that all in the kingdom were reduced to the utmost misery.... He sought out the poor to give them alms in their own homes to help them overcome the shame of their situation. This famine, which was most serious, did not make him hesitate in his charity. On the contrary, he gave away everything, reserving nothing for himself.”²²¹

²²⁰ Delumeau and Lequin, 346.

²²¹ François-Élie Maillefer, *La vie de Monsieur de La Salle* (1980 ed.), 103-04; *Two Early Biographies*, 57-58.

In 1693-1694, the Society of the Christian Schools increased. It was present in several cities and especially in Paris where De La Salle himself had been in residence since 1688. Maillefer recalls that during that winter the Brothers lacked the basic necessities of life and the price of bread had increased four-fold. “In this same year there occurred a famine which reduced De La Salle’s community to extreme poverty.... On one occasion, far from being discouraged when the community lacked even bread and had little hope of getting any, De La Salle urged his Brothers to be patient. In this sentiment they went to the refectory for a meal of a wretched, thin soup made from herbs which served as their nourishment for the whole day. They thanked God as though they had eaten a full meal. During this time the Brother in charge of provisions looked everywhere for enough food to keep the community alive. Often he could obtain only a small bit of black bread. De La Salle had this divided among the Brothers without taking any himself, but they refused to touch it unless he took some also. When the Brothers of the community of Paris heard of the desperate straits to which the Brothers of Vaugirard were reduced, they sent help at once, but the Brother bringing the food was waylaid by robbers who took everything. He finally arrived at Vaugirard, chagrined because of what had happened to him. De La Salle, seeing him so troubled, said to him, ‘God be blessed. We will simply have to look for more.’ This was done, but meanwhile the Brothers were obliged to wait until evening to have some little nourishment.”²²²

Since the text of the *Conduite* had been written before 1709, it could not reflect what happened during the long winter of 1709; but Maillefer’s biography does describe it. “The great famine that afflicted France that same year forced De La Salle to transfer his novitiate from Saint Yon in Rouen, where he could no longer find the means to maintain it, to Paris, where resources were more abundant than in the provinces. He looked for a secluded house where he might set up his novitiate, but despite the good will of many of his friends who wanted to help, he suffered greatly. God blessed the patience with which he and his Brothers endured the hardships to which they were

²²² Maillefer, 153; *Two Early Biographies*, 87-88.

reduced. They were so poor that they lacked absolutely everything. They no longer had bread, and the baker who usually looked after them would no longer give them anything, for they had no money to pay him.... However, because the community suffered so much during this famine, several Brothers fell sick. Some became victims of scurvy caused by their poor diet, and several were soon in their last extremity. De La Salle gave them every care and by his own devotion and that of the famous physician Helvetius brought them back from death's door.”²²³

3. Formidable epidemics

*“A sickness that sows frightful seeds,
Sickness that heaven's anger framed
To be fit punishment for earth's immense misdeeds:
The plague (for evils must at last be named),
With power in one day to flood deep Acheron,
Now struck the animals full force.
And though not all would die, all will to live was gone.
When death is nigh, why struggle to delay its course?”*
(La Fontaine, “The Animals Stricken with the Plague”)²²⁴

Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695), careful observer of his day and particularly skilled at describing its dominant features, summarized in these few verses a major aspect of the mindset of the seventeenth century. For several centuries Europe had been dealt a blow by the terror of murderous epidemics. Much more recently Jean Delumeau²²⁵ has given an in depth analysis of the causes, the workings and the consequences of this fear.

²²³ Maillefer, 239-40.; *Two Early Biographies*, 140.

²²⁴ Craig Hill, trans., “The Animals Stricken with The Plague,” *Beasts and Citizens*, 13 June 2007, <<http://www.beastsandcitizens.com/animals.htm>>

²²⁵ J. Delumeau, *La peur en Occident, XIV^e-XVIII^e siècles* (1978); *Le péché et la peur: la culpabilisation en Occident, XIII^e-XVIII^e siècles* (1983); *Rassurer et protéger: le sentiment de sécurité dans l'Occident d'autrefois* (1989).

• The plague and other epidemics

After leprosy which had scarred the Middle Ages, the plague ravaged Europe from the fourteenth century until the beginning of the eighteenth century. An effective campaign was organized under the reign of Louis XIV to curb and finally check this scourge. In the meantime, this recurring epidemic disease constantly affected the population; and its spread occasionally peaked causing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of deaths. Some historians have determined the major dates of these sharp increases and have tried to estimate the number of victims. Pierre Chaunu²²⁶ for example suggests the following dates and numbers of persons fallen victim to the plague:

- 1618-1632: 750,000 to 1,500,000
- 1649-1653: 220,000 to 330,000
- 1660-1663: 1,000,000 to 1,500,000
- 1693-1694: 2,000,000 to 3,000,000 or 10-15% of the population (worst year of famine associated with the epidemic)

These crises diminished sharply in the eighteenth century, although we must add the victims of the “long winter” of 1709, the plague in Marseille from 1720 to 1722 and the last great food shortage (but not epidemic) of 1738 to 1742.

The measures taken gradually to fight against epidemics were to compensate for the inability of medicine to understand and cure the plague. It is not surprising then that these measures were external to the sickness itself. Here are some examples: closing the city gates, turning back outsiders coming from suspect or contaminated regions, expelling beggars and vagabonds thought to be carriers of epidemic diseases, isolating immediately those known to be sick, opening places to care for the sick outside the city walls. This basically concerned the cities and had little to do with the fate of the rural areas. At the end of the seventeenth century the government decided to use the technique called “the line,” which consisted in using a row of troops to isolate

²²⁶ Pierre Chaunu, *Un futur sans avenir: histoire et population* (Calmann-Lévy: Paris, 1979), 120-22.

contaminated areas, thus preventing people from leaving and entering. This technique, when well used as in 1720, limited the number of deaths. But it did not protect the contaminated regions. In 1720 Marseille and Provence had 50,000 deaths out of 100,000 inhabitants, not counting those who died during the two following years. Jean Delumeau and Yves Lequin came to this conclusion: “The centuries-old scourge would not reappear in western Europe. So, it does seem that its disappearance can be explained in large part by the increasingly efficacious measures everyone together took to curb the scourge, notably by quarantine. This was especially true from the time when the government itself organized these measures in the second half of the seventeenth century.”²²⁷

This struggle against the spread of the plague had some unexpected effects. Pierre Chaunu describes the plague of 1720 in this way. “The situation in Marseille, Provence and Languedoc accounts for 220,000 deaths from 1720 to 1722 and was due to a relaxing in the supervision of Marseille, which the Regent managed to correct with his forceful action. This victory was the fruit of extended good sense. Good oversight and a careful look at the medical profession resulted in a victory of the thesis holding that contagion and not bad air was responsible for the spread of disease. The municipal government in the fifteenth century ordered sectors to be divided and closed off, and in the sixteenth century the state took it over. Then the monarchy’s administration made this measure voluntary and awarded financial compensation for compliance. The voluntary division and closing off of sectors also hampered the flow of economic resources and was the direct inverse of the slow opening of flow for economic resources, which could ward off food shortage but also favor the spread of germs.”²²⁸

Rural areas were affected even more by other epidemic sicknesses, such as dysentery, smallpox, typhus and pulmonary disorders. Since the time of Louis XIV and Colbert, the central government became aware of its responsibilities and asked its financial officers to take charge of public health in

²²⁷ Delumeau and Lequin, 356.

²²⁸ Chaunu, 122.

their jurisdictions. Gradually doctors believed they could fight against them. Among them one name stands out, Adrien Hévétius, the very doctor who cured John Baptist de La Salle. He was a Dutch doctor who had practiced in Paris since the 1680s, became the king's doctor, cured the Grand Dauphin, earned a good reputation and introduced an effective remedy for dysentery. In 1710 he suggested to the king that he fight against disease, especially in the rural areas, by putting together boxes of remedies that contained 353 doses able to combat numerous possible sicknesses. At the same time Louis XIV “touched with compassion for the poor sick of the countryside who were dying mostly because of lack of care” gave the order that “every year there be sent to the financial officers of the provinces a great deal of Dr. Hévétius's remedies to be distributed by order of the aforementioned financial officers to their subdelegates who in turn distribute them to the Grey Nuns, surgeons and other intelligent persons in the cities, burgs and villages of their departments.”²²⁹ When Hévétius died in 1727, his son Jean-Claude took up his work. This general project gave rise to the appointment of a “doctor responsible for epidemics” in each financial sector (1750) and then the creation of the “Royal Society of Medicine” (1776).

• De La Salle and the Brothers deal with epidemics

Like everyone else, students and their families were affected by epidemics. We do not have data concerning the last two acute crises of plague (1693 and 1720), but nothing suggests that these families were not as susceptible as any other.

What we do know, however, is that four Brothers were victims of their devotion to the sick during the last epidemic, two in Marseille and two in Mende. This is Brother Lucard's description: “Marseille and Mende had no more Brothers at that time. On May 25, 1720 a merchant ship, the Grand Saint-Antoine, coming from Tripoli had brought the plague to Marseille. This scourge spread wildly and quickly. In September one hundred fifty priests, religious as well as secular, had already perished caring for plague victims.

²²⁹ Delumeau and Lequin, 357-58.

Msgr. de Belsunce was a model of devotion and charity. God appeared to be touched by the prayers of the people of Marseille, since in 1721 there were few deaths. But in 1722 the plague broke out again in the month of May and ravaged the city with a vengeance. It even crossed the quarantine barrier designed to confine its spread to the affected area and migrated right up to the mountains of Gévaudan. The Brothers, rather than fleeing like the Jansenists and a part of the population gone mad with fear, followed the example of the Capuchins, the Discalced Carmelites, the Jesuits and other holy priests and remained at their post to care for the sick. The two Brothers in Mende, Henri and Nicolas, died. Brothers Lazare and Saturnin were also stricken by this scourge in Marseille. Brother Saturnin got better; but just as he started his convalescence, he went back to caring for plague victims. He was stricken again, and his heroic charity was rewarded with a holy death.”²³⁰

• *The Conduite des Écoles* and sicknesses

Rather than speaking of the great epidemics, the *Conduite* speaks of some of the many common discomforts that could affect the students. The purpose was to protect the entire school from contagion or not to aggravate the small infections that came from lack of cleanliness and hygiene, which was often the situation in places where the poor lived.

The Brothers were in no better position than the doctors to remedy the different diseases which students could contract. The first measures to be taken then were preventative, by isolating at least temporarily students who had come down with contagious illnesses. When enrolling new students, the Brothers had to find out if they were carriers of these germs: “... if there are any physical defects or illnesses, especially scrofula, skin itch, epilepsy, or some other infirmity which might be communicable. This is something that must be carefully investigated. If there is some bodily ailment, the Director shall find out whether this will cause frequent absence.” In the article concerning children who “cannot be enrolled” the text says: “No child shall be accepted if the child suffers from some communicable disease, such as scrofula, skin rash, or major epileptic seizures, no matter the reason. If it should

²³⁰ Lucard, FSC, *Annales de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes* (Paris, 1883) vol. I, 427-28.

happen that any student already in school contracts one of these infirmities, the Community House’s doctor shall be asked to examine the child. If the malady is of this type and is curable, the child shall be sent home until the child recovers.” Seeing to these health precautions is also one of the duties of the Inspector who is in charge of placing students in their classes: “The Inspector shall take care to assign the places in an orderly and prudent manner. Those whose parents do not take good care of them and who have lice are to be kept apart from those who are clean.”²³¹

Sickness was certainly part of the daily realities of the school, as we can see from the following passages taken from the chapters “School Officers” and “Absences.” “From time to time, the Visitors shall call on the sick students from the area for which they have been given charge. They shall do this according to the instructions given them by the teacher and even on their own initiative. During the visit, they shall console the absentees and urge them to suffer their illness patiently for the love of God. They shall then inform the teacher of how the sick are, and whether they are getting any better.... A Visitor who learned that an absentee from their neighborhood is ill shall go to see the sick student, and earnestly ask to be allowed to do so, saying that they have come on behalf of the teacher who sent them to inquire from what the absentee is suffering and how the absentee is getting along.... [T]he teacher who receives the absentees and excuses their absences is to require their parents to bring them back, and to receive no student back in the school who has been absent without first knowing and investigating well the reason given for the absence.”²³²

What is perhaps more unexpected is that the *Conduite* speaks of students’ infirmities with respect to “corrections” by use of the rod. This is a matter of noncontagious illnesses and infections that do not prevent students from coming to school. Care still needed to be taken not to aggravate their condition by keeping to the precautions for the use of the rod, which consisted

²³¹ OC. CE 22.2.3; 22.4.4; 23.1.6; CL 24, 257, 259, 263; *Conduct*, 201, 203, 207. In seventeenth-century France epilepsy was considered a communicable disease.

²³² OC. CE 18.9.7; 18.9.9; 16.3.4; *Conduct*, 252-53, 162.

in striking the student at fault on the palm of the hand. It was forbidden to strike the hand which was used to write and also the hand that showed any wound or infection. “[Punishment with the rod] should not be given to those whose hands have some damage. A different penance²³³ should be imposed on them, for it is necessary to foresee the injuries that might arise from this form of correction and to try to avoid them.... In punishing students teachers must be very careful not to strike them on any place where they may have any sore or injury, lest it worsen, and not to strike so hard that marks may appear.²³⁴... In respect to those who are sickly, it is important that they should not be corrected.²³⁵ This is especially the case when the correction might increase their ailment. Some other means of correction should be used with them, or a penance be imposed on them.”²³⁶

Hygiene, cleanliness, precautions and compassion are the words which can sum up the attitude of the Lasallian school toward sicknesses.

4. Wars and their Consequences

The *Conduite des Écoles* makes no mention of war. This is to be expected since the schools of the Brothers were never directly affected by the ravages wrought by battles. During this time, the battlefield was generally confined to certain localities. However, the numerous and long wars waged under the reign of Louis XIV certainly had indirect consequences on the population in general and also on the parents of the Brothers’ students. The reality was that out of the fifty-three years of Louis XIV’s reign twenty-seven were years of war.

²³³ As a different penance, the French text here also suggests use of a different instrument, the cane (“les verges”). [translator’s note]

²³⁴ Here the French text adds that it should not be done so softly that the student does not feel any pain (“quoique d’ailleurs il ne faille pas le faire si mollement que l’écuyer n’en ait aucune peine”). [translator’s note]

²³⁵ Here the French text is precise in saying that they should not be corrected if the place on which they should be corrected has an ailment, presumably the hand (“On ne corrigera pas ceux qui auront quelque incommodité à l’endroit où on les voudra corriger”). [translator’s note]

²³⁶ OC. CE 15.1.11; 15.4.14; 15.6.37; CL 24, 147, 156, 166; *Conduct*, 139, 144, 149.

Revisiting all these years of war is of little significance for our study. Let us simply look at the harmful social consequences which these wars produced. They were responsible for additional destruction and misery for the regions involved as well as the continual devastation of harvests, the ruin and pillage of homes and fires in villages and agricultural fields.

Except for unusual expenses, families had the duty to house and feed soldiers, both the soldiers of their own country by order of the King and sometimes those of the enemy under constraint.

Those deserters who were wounded and demobilized soldiers at the end of their duty were a real threat to the population. They were armed, accustomed to violence, and often became antisocial, beggars and vagabonds. They also continued to engage in violent attacks, rapes and pillages. Inhabitants feared their presence or their simply passing through. They therefore were an added element of insecurity and danger, especially in the cities where they fled and lived as unemployed parasites.

More importantly, these wars sapped the Royal Treasury and resulted in new taxes for a population that was already overwhelmed with taxes. We know that excessive taxation was dreaded and unbearable, especially when collectors came to exact their taxes. From this resulted the peasant revolts to which have already made reference.

The following passage will serve to illustrate these harmful economic consequences: “The consequence was a constant growth in taxation by the increasing existing taxes and creating new ones. Created in 1695 for the duration of the war, the poll tax was effectively abolished in 1698 after the peace of Ryswick, but it was reestablished in 1701 just before the war of the Succession of Spain. It was still in force in 1714 and continued up until the Revolution. The tax called the ‘Dixième’ was created in 1710 during the most tragic time of the war and was abolished in 1714. It reappeared with each new conflict and was abolished again in 1749 at the end of the war of the Succession of Austria only to give way to a new tax, the one called the ‘Vingtième.’ In addition, these new taxes were for one and for all in principle, but in reality they were in many

cases either forgiven or subject to exemption. In this way, wars increased considerably the weight of taxes on the shoulders of the poorest and the largest population.”²³⁷

5. Death on the Prowl

Three paragraphs in the *Conduite* speak of agony and death. This concerns not only death outside of the school striking people in the neighborhood, but also the eventual death of a teacher or a student in the Lasallian school. This may seem strange in itself today, for who in our day would think of incorporating into an educational plan the measures to take when a member of the institution dies? But at that time it unfortunately was not simply a matter of an unusual occurrence. Death had become familiar to the population, for it was ever present, near and frequent. The history of the first years of the Institute of the Brothers gives evidence of the death of several young Brothers. The death rate was massive at the end of the seventeenth century, and the following is an example of prescriptions given in the *Conduite* on the occasion of death:

“Whenever in the school is heard the sound of the little bell which warns that the Blessed Sacrament is being carried to some ill person, all the students will kneel down. Each student will use this time to adore the Blessed Sacrament, until the teacher makes a sign to rise.

“When one of the teachers in the town dies, the psalm which begins, *De Profundis*, will be said for the repose of the teacher’s soul. This prayer will be said on the first three school days after the teacher’s death. It is to be said at the end of prayers, both in the morning and in the evening before the Benediction. The leader of prayers will say one versicle, and the other students will say the next. When the psalm is finished, the leader will say the collect which begins, *Inclina Domine*....

“When a student of one of the classes in a school dies, the psalm which begins, *De Profundis*, and the collect which begins, *Inclina Domine*, will be

²³⁷ Delumeau and Lequin, 332.

said at the end of the evening prayer on the first school day after the death, provided the student be at least seven years old.”²³⁸

• Birth Rate

The demographics of the seventeenth century showed a birth rate more than three times greater than that at the beginning of the twenty-first century. An average of five to six children per family was common. This decreased slightly during the eighteenth century to an average of four to five children. Despite a very high mortality rate, the population statistics by age could be graphed as an almost perfect pyramid. We also see that the average number of births was appreciably higher in the social categories of the poor.

If a woman’s fertility was between the ages of twenty-five and forty, then we see that breast feeding was the primary cause of decreased birth rate, for it brought about a temporary sterility in the majority of undernourished women. Sometimes social customs were a determining factor, such as stopping conjugal relations during a breast feeding period of two years. Some documents of the period have led historians to verify that when a child was stillborn or was to die within the first year, the mother was likely to become pregnant again sooner. Natural causes resulted in sterility in some couples. A notable proportion of women became prematurely sterile due to poor conditions during childbirth or frequent infections. Figures show that among those women who married young, many became sterile at around the age of thirty to thirty-five.

On the other hand, because of the considerable mortality at all ages, many couples were broken up by the death of one of the partners. For example, it has been calculated that in the eighteenth century in certain localities more than half of the marriages lasted less than fifteen years and more than a third lasted less than ten years. We must also take into consideration the decrease in birthrate during the eighteenth century due to several methods of contraception. However, this applied more to the well-off than to families of the working class and the poor in whom we are especially interested. On a pos-

²³⁸ OC. CE 7.3.6-8; CL 24, 79-80; *Conduct*, 94.

itive note, we must connect this decrease in number of children to a change in mindset and attitude toward children. People wished to have fewer children in order to be able to care for them better, to educate them better and to provide them with a more comfortable life.

This attitude may seem to contradict the increase in the number of abandoned children. This was abandonment of children in the strict sense of the word, abandonment with many different causes but nevertheless often tragic. In these cases the child was left in the hands of a third party or in front of a hospital or in a public area such as the street, at a church's doorstep, at a convent or where a rich family could find him. Abandonment was generally anonymous, especially when it involved illegitimate children. The number varies according to the region; but the annual total increased constantly during the eighteenth century, especially in the main cities. By way of example, it has been shown that in Paris the number of foundlings changes from 305 before 1650 to 6,703 on the average during the decade 1770-1780.

• Death rate

The death rate is another crucial characteristic of the period. It was three times higher than today. The average life expectancy at the end of the seventeenth century was only 25 years. It reached 29.6 years at the end of the eighteenth century. Despite some exceptional cases of extraordinary longevity, living into the eighties and nineties was very rare. People at age 50 were considered old. These figures must be qualified, however, since the averages are greatly affected by a very large rate of death among children.

The ordinary death rate represents 50% of children's deaths before the age of 20. Risk factors abounded, especially among the poor. Lack of food, epidemics, accidents, too poor working conditions, lack of proper hygiene, unhealthy living conditions, ineffective medical facilities and personnel all contributed to causing such a rate of death. Among the well-off, life expectancy was appreciably greater.

The death rate of children is explained mainly by accidents both in the cities as well as in the rural areas. It is also affected by the regular outbreaks of measles, chickenpox, whooping cough, mumps and even diphtheria, dysen-

tery and smallpox. One must consider separately the times of the great epidemics of plague which caused what historians group under the category of demographic crises.

While means of contraception seem to have been quite effective since the beginning of the eighteenth century, it is clear that progress made in the fight against the death rate had been slow and uncertain. If an improvement was made in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, it certainly had taken a long time to verify it.

• **Death in everyday life**

Several historians have been interested in the people's attitude toward death. They conclude that death had become like a familiar companion with its frequent reminders especially in the city where the funeral bell could be heard almost daily and public executions were relatively frequent. People were hardened against this spectacle of death, and even the death of little children did not seem to distress them. Parents did not get too attached to their children for they feared losing them, and their death was accepted with a certain degree of indifference like any other fatality.

The Church reminded people that life was a preparation for death. This is why people dreaded so much an accidental or brutal death that was unforeseen and unexpected. Death was to be a gradual, slow and conscious process in order for it to become a “beautiful death” that crowned a Christian life, for on this decisive passage from life to death depended an eternity that would be happy or unhappy. These beliefs motivated the powerful to desire a death in public view during a ceremony that attracted many people, for the dying man should serve as an example to his contemporaries by confessing his sins to gain entrance into paradise and then partake a dignified and peaceful eternity. This would not always be easy. Thus arose the need to prepare oneself during life with the aid of one's confessor or by reading works on the subject. Even those condemned to death, if they were “well born,” made it their business to die with dignity.

It is useful to remember this brief insight into death because it also concerns the Brothers who died young and John Baptist de La Salle himself who was

surrounded by the Brothers at the time of his death at Saint-Yon on April 7, 1719. And how many deaths of parents or students could have occurred during the forty years of the foundation of the Institute from 1679 to 1719?

6. Conclusion

This picture of the “evils of the times” can appear somber. Its aim is to put us into the lived reality of the historical context. The Brothers, their students and their students’ families did not live in a bubble that protected them from all these dangers. Throughout the years in the everyday life of the school, they were faced with these difficulties and had to bear their consequences.

However, some glimpses of hope appeared as early as the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The epidemic plague of 1720 was the last in Europe, not because it could be treated but because it was confined by a better administrative program, stricter controls and improvements in hygiene. There were still harsh winters during the eighteenth and even the nineteenth centuries, but paltry harvests did not bring on more of the same catastrophes thanks to improvements in communication and forceful administrative measures that could avert food shortages and famine. The result was a better storage of grain, a more equitable distribution of the fruits of the harvest and a heightened sense of solidarity.

At the beginning of the long reign of Louis XV, France experienced years of peace with some prosperity. Progress in the sciences, including medicine, helped to better control and ward off endemic and epidemic diseases. This was to the benefit of the students and the teachers in the Lasallian schools that continued to develop after the death of their Founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

PART THREE

**A SCHOOL SECURES ITS
OWN IDENTITY**

When John Baptist de La Salle founded his school, the educational world was already developing. Since the end of the sixteenth century and thanks to several factors to which we will return, the education of the children of the common people in a school had expanded rapidly and its results were already noticeable in 1680.

Since the second half of the sixteenth century, girls had been given the right to an education. Even more significant than this was that the Church and the civil authorities had become aware of the urgent necessity to educate the common people. Only a few disagreed. As for the Church, this was one of the movements proposed by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). With the Church playing a large role in this education of the people, the movement spread beyond the Council's propositions, especially in the south of France.

The whole movement was marked by several pioneers and innovators who played an outstanding role and whom history has enshrined in memory. In particular, these were the founders and foundresses of women's teaching orders. Among others, we would like to cite Pierre Fourier, Vincent de Paul, Jacques de Batencour, Charles Démià, Nicolas Barré and Nicolas Roland, all of them predecessors of John Baptist de La Salle. Along with these pioneers must be included the work of the clergy in general and the Church hierarchy who, especially during the second half of the seventeenth century, worked to promote, organize and control the creation and operation of the *Petites Écoles*.

This was not always an easy task. It was necessary to navigate and establish one's credibility in an educational system that was complex and fragile. It was not easy to delineate the boundaries between the many individual initiatives and the various kinds of schools that were recognized.

But novelty and diversity were not always synonymous with quality and quantity. Their merit was simply to provide alternatives. We cannot forget that a very great majority of the population (about 80%) around the 1680s was illiterate. Work in this area was not lacking and there was room for all kinds of good will. But still lacking was a clear definition of the kind of contribution that was needed for this work.

It is this specificity of the Lasallian school at its beginnings that we would like to present briefly in this third part. We will try to show how this school fit in and identified itself with respect to the teaching authority of the Church, the school system already in place, the culture of the time and the world of the teachers in the *Petites Écoles*.

Let us make it clear right away that the *Conduite des Écoles* in expressing this identity does not do it by criticizing the other types of schools which could be compared to it, like the Charity Schools, the *Petites Écoles* and the schools of the Writing Masters. All of them, each in its own way, was already speaking to the needs of the popular clientele that De La Salle and the Brothers were addressing. The Lasallian school affirmed itself by defining its objectives, its programs, its structures and its pedagogical methods. While doing this, it more or less stepped on the feet of other popular schools; and we recognize this. It would undergo hard times and be snubbed at the end of the seventeenth and at the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. Yet, its identity would be affirmed; its model would take consistent shape; and in the long run, it would be established as an authoritative reference in the history of the elementary school in France.

Chapter 9 – Identity in the Church

As soon as he was informed of Madame Maillefer's plans and as soon as he consented to help Adrien Nyel in his initiative to open charitable schools for poor boys in Rheims, De La Salle concerned himself in 1679 with making these schools fit in with the Church in Rheims and having them accepted by the religious and civil authorities. The first biographers, who were closely familiar with De La Salle, have left us an account of his thoughts and the steps he took.²³⁹

The situation was that all levels of education in France had been a Church matter for more than a thousand years, and no one could open a school without the authorization of Church officials and this was backed up by certain sanctions.

1. Historical Role of the Church

The role of the Church goes back to the end of the fifth century, when the Roman Empire in the West broke up under the barbarian invasions. With the Empire also disappeared the educational system that it had put in place. Numerous studies on the history of education in France have explained these tentative beginnings and the historical stages of the evolution of the new educational system that was initiated by the Church and controlled by it until the French Revolution.²⁴⁰

When the Roman imperial structures disappeared, the Church remained the only unified and organized force able to reestablish a new system of teaching

²³⁹ Bernard, CL 4, 21-31; Maillefer, CL 28-38; Blain, CL 7, 159-168; Two Early Biographies, 284-91, 31-39; 1 Blain, 65-78.

²⁴⁰ Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité* (Seuil : Paris, 1948) ; Louis-Henri Parias, et al., *Histoire générale de l'enseignement et de l'éducation en France* (NLF ; Paris, 1981), vol. I ; Claude Joly, *Traité historique des Écoles épiscopales et ecclésiastiques*, parts I-II ; *Pédagogie chrétienne et Pédagogues chrétiens ; L'Église et l'Éducation : mille ans de tradition éducatives*.

and education. From that time forward, it acted as a substitute for a state that was non-existent. But the Church essentially had as its goal to satisfy its own need of providing personnel to accomplish its work of evangelization throughout Europe. Thus, it needed a greater pastoral staff that was carefully prepared. For this reason, school was for and of the Church; and this explains the general thrust, the content taught and structures and clientele of these schools.

Without going into the details, we must recall the three kinds of schools which began at that time and evolved into more or less important structures during the following centuries. During that time we see the beginnings of cathedral schools, parish schools and cloistered or monastic schools. We could even speak of small seminaries, but “they were only medieval universities in embryonic form.... As we see it, these different categories of establishments were like professional schools for the formation of monks and clerics. However, because of the disappearance of the ancient schools, these Christian establishments began admitting children who were not destined for the ecclesiastical state.”²⁴¹

Throughout the following centuries and up to the time that concerns us in this study, we can follow the evolution of these schools as they take on importance and considerably enhance their project of education. The evolution of the Church and the culture, and its administrative, political and economic needs called for new programs. Thus, from the seventh century, we see the reappearance of a kind of secondary education based on the Roman system with its “liberal arts.” This development was responsible for the subsequent birth of the medieval universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

These changes were made in keeping with the civil authorities but always at the initiative and under the control of the Church. This explains why the regional and general councils during that long period often took up the question of the school and took measures to assure its development. At the same time that it was creating schools, the Church, thanks to the work of monas-

²⁴¹ Antoine Léon, *Histoire de l'enseignement en France*, 14.

tic scribes, continued to make a great contribution to the preservation and transmission of culture until the time of the printing press.

In like manner, we see the Church, including the Church of Rome, working to assure the effective operation of educational establishments regardless of their level. To do this, the hierarchy (the Pope) named representatives to visit universities and secondary schools. Bishops in their dioceses named supervisors in charge of the schools.

Despite what we have just said, up to the end of the fifteenth century the Church as well as the civil states did not foresee the education of all people. We will return to this in subsequent chapters. Only a small minority could benefit from the advantages of an education. The common people were generally excluded. To summarize, we quote here the reflections of Alexandre Rey-Herme: “If our analysis is accurate, the Church, which always was concerned with the formation of its priests and monks, did not take during the first fifteen centuries of its existence any initiative to create any institution for boys and girls called to ‘live in cities, in households, at court, and who because of their social status are obliged to live a life in common.’ Perhaps the Church considered this not to be its mission. Without a doubt, these lay people gradually invaded educational structures which had neither been intended nor wanted for them. This basic misalignment could only result in consequences that were prejudicial for both sides. With the Holy Spirit and the development of society on their side, the Jesuits in the sixteenth century and the women’s communities of Pierre Fourier, Vincent de Paul, Barré and Sainte-Beuve a few years later became acutely aware of the situation and tried to remedy it.”²⁴²

- **Decisive Thrust of the Council of Trent (1545-1563)**

The educational institutions of the Middle Ages experienced a crisis during the fifteenth century. This resulted in part from the mixture of its clientele. All students did not have the same aspirations or the same expectations. The Reformers were the first to become aware of the need to “reestablish the

²⁴² Alexandre Rey-Herme, *L'Église et l'Éducation*, 34.

schools.” At the same time, they hoped to remedy the mediocrity of the parish clergy. This first thrust proved to be a challenge for the Catholic Church and, in particular, for the Fathers of the Council of Trent. This Council was greatly concerned with the formation of the clergy but also with all people whose ignorance of religion it recognized. The work of this Council was enormous, but let us consider only that the education of poor people was conceived as a work of charity and as a means of proselytizing and also of thwarting the expansion of Protestantism in several countries of Europe. This is why the Council asked that a school be created in each parish. “Luther (1483-1546) was the first to see obligatory education as the indispensable condition of an authentic Christian education. At a time when numerous schools in the east and the south of France were affected by the new religion, the Council of Trent decided to create in each church a small school whose teacher, tutor or principal, chosen by the bishop, would teach poor children gratuitously reading, writing, grammar, singing and arithmetic.”²⁴³

Pursuant to these decisions, all of Europe saw a reorganization of the educational system at the end of the sixteenth century and all during the seventeenth century. Oversight of the educational policies and the operation of universities was reinforced. In line with the model espoused by the Jesuits, Schools of Liberal Arts were formed for the education and moral formation of youth from well-to-do families. At the same time, the Charity Schools, the Petites Écoles and the schools of the writing masters were constantly expanding. This occurred in France especially during the second half of the seventeenth century. The movement even extended to the education of girls, which was a great innovation for the time; and thus several women’s teaching congregations were formed as early as the middle of the sixteenth century. This expansion was uneven, however, and varied according to the country and the region. It also depended on the initiative and awareness of Church and civil authorities. The Church’s influence in its works is shown by the fact that the great women’s congregations were founded by members of the clergy.

²⁴³ Léon, 31.

We must add that the educational thrust given by the Council of Trent had as its primary goal the religious education of children rather than a solid secular education. These schools remained faithful to their origins as “schools of the Church and for the Church.”

The goals of these schools were essentially religious goals: “The child was imbued with religious formation throughout his education. Every class day began and ended with prayers recited in common. In principle, children attended Mass each day monitored by their teacher who also took them to church for the Office of the Hours on Sundays.” The idea was that attendance at school was an excellent opportunity to preach morals to children and, through them, to the whole family. “For harmonious living in society, religious education was effectively imbedded in the larger framework of moral education. The school, more so in the city than in the country, was a place where children were readily given tasks equal to their abilities. In this way the school could combat laziness, get young people used to work, and force them into the regularity afforded by a schedule. Attendance at school thus contributed to an individual’s personality by cultivating habits of order and work which are basic to the needs of society as a whole. This role of the school as a directive and stabilizing force was just as important as the moral standards which were communicated by the school’s principal, whether through teaching catechism or through his general conduct as a teacher.”²⁴⁴

In reading these two passages, one would think one is reading from certain chapters of the *Conduite des Écoles* or from De La Salle’s 194th meditation.

In addition to teaching catechism, teachers were to educate children in matters of civility that touched not only on moral conduct but also on social practices.

Reading was another item that seems always to be taught in these schools since reading was a necessary condition for studying catechism. Many historians who have studied the development of the school have shown its basic orientation toward the religious education of the people. Other educational

²⁴⁴ Parias, vol. II, 432.

activities were justified only insofar as they were related to Christian formation. This fact is important to note since it is here that we can draw a comparison with the Lasallian schools of the end of the seventeenth century.

• **The school in the hands of the Church: Regulations enforced**

The directives of the Council of Trent are reflected in the decrees and rulings that appeared in France during the seventeenth century. Brother Yves Poutet has gathered together from the *Mémoires du Clergé* some very significant texts which we quote here:

“The oversight of the schools was not secular but ecclesiastical.... There were communities established by letters patent of the king under the authority and inspection of the bishops to teach young people gratuitously.... Schools for boys were to be run by men and schools for girls by women without the possibility of boys and girls being enrolled in the same school.... In keeping with the royal declaration of February 1657, which was upheld in March 1666, any teacher had to get authorization to teach from his bishop or from the bishop’s delegate. An exception was granted only to communities governed by special regulations.... The county executive does not need to be informed of school matters since the Superintendent and the parish priest alone have jurisdiction under the authority of the bishop.” (Decision of the Parliament of Amiens, January 23, 1680)²⁴⁵

Yves Poutet continues to explain the slippage which took place at the end of the seventeenth century that enabled the schools to escape the sole control of the Church and gave greater involvement to the civil authorities in setting up and financing schools. In the life of De La Salle we see the Founder from 1682 on when he founded the school at Reithel and almost constantly thereafter, dealing with civil authorities and in agreement with Church authorities in order not to cause any difficulties or conflicts. “The royal decree of December 13, 1698 called for schools to be formed in all places that did not yet have any, and it authorized cities to tax their inhabitants to provide 150 livres as an annual wage for male teachers and 100 livres for female teachers.

²⁴⁵ Yves Poutet, *Le XVII^e siècle et les origines lasalliennes* (Rennes, 1970), vol. II, 56.

The police was called upon to pursue truancy and to pick up stray students and bring them to class. Attendance at school was made obligatory until the age of fourteen. Although education was kept under the jurisdiction of the Church, it had all the earmarks of being closely connected to the public domain. Fines were imposed on parents who did not comply, and those who protested were even more so targeted by these fines. But families refused to pay since they counted on a lengthy and interminable process to avoid the sanction. Thus, the king declared on October 16, 1700 that fines would be paid in supplies. There was no way out of it. The ruling nevertheless was still religious and even inquisitional in nature. Decrees were couched in terms of Masses, catechism and prayers. No wonder then that it became necessary to teach reading and even writing to those who needed it or would eventually need it.”²⁴⁶

But these administrative and coercive measures rarely had any effect because the necessary attitudes and mindsets were not yet formed. Means taken by the administration to enforce these measures clearly proved to be insufficient, especially since money was lacking.

2. Two Possible Paths for De La Salle

John Baptist de La Salle’s writings and his life sufficiently testify to his unswerving attachment to the Church. When he met Adrien Nyel in 1679 and when Nyel explained to him that his purpose for coming to Rheims was to open gratuitous schools for poor boys, De La Salle’s immediate reaction was that of a man belonging to the Church, more precisely the Church at Rheims whose mindset, administrative inner workings and potential he intimately knew. He had just recently experienced the difficulties that he had to overcome in getting the necessary authorization to open new schools. In fact, as the executor of Nicolas Roland’s will, he had to take steps during 1678 to obtain both diocesan and civil approval on behalf of the Sisters of the Child Jesus. This experience taught him to be prudent and wise.

²⁴⁶ Poutet, vol. II, 56-57.

Theoretically, to open the schools desired by Madame Maillefer, De La Salle and Nyel could take two paths:

- Either they could set themselves up with the [diocesan] Superintendent of Schools in Rheims and enter the system of the Petites Écoles, but this did not seem to be exactly what Madame Maillefer intended in her wish for gratuitous schools;
- Or else they could adopt the status of “charitable schools” for poor children, as was the case elsewhere. As we have already explained in chapter 5, we are speaking of gratuitous schools whose opening and operation depended on the parish priests. The immediate question was to know who were the priests in Rheims who would be amenable to accept this initiative.

We have already mentioned that it was this second path that De La Salle and Nyel chose. The first biographers, especially Blain, reconstructed the path of discernment they followed with the utmost discretion before bringing their choice to the priest from the Parish of Saint Maurice for the first school and then to the priest from Saint Jacques for the second school.

This original purpose was to become the model for other Lasallian schools opened in various cities, with a few exceptions like the temporary course for young Irish students and the project at Saint Yon. The basis of Lasallian schools was clearly stated later in the *Rule* of the Brothers. They were to be gratuitous schools for poor boys and thus very much like the charity schools.

These schools were very much schools of the Church and for the Church where the education was focused on forming young Christians, as we shall see. Looking at the matter after the fact, we can see that by taking this option for gratuitous schools, De La Salle and the Brothers were able to escape the control exercised by the Superintendent of the diocese, particularly with respect to being able to appoint and transfer teachers. They were free to expand beyond the authority of the Archbishop of Rheims, which was the case some years later when schools were opened in Paris and in the surrounding areas of Rheims. This choice, at least implicit, embodied a perception of the Church on a large scale. In fact, as he would show during the fol-

lowing forty years of his life, De La Salle saw himself as part of the universal Church, even though Rheims, the city where kings were crowned, enjoyed a certain prestige. Adopting the system of the charity schools was to enter a relatively autonomous system with respect to the organization of the Society of the Christian Schools, its freedom to choose where schools would open, the internal formation of its members, the pedagogical methods it used and the transfer of its teachers. This was not unheard of since women's teaching congregations were already operating on this model. But we must recall that the Society of the Christian Schools, which was born from this option for the poor, was the first of its kind for men.

But this choice did not prove to be easy, as was shown later by the confrontations that arose due to a misunderstanding by certain members of the clergy and hostility on the part of teachers' guilds. This is not the place to go into the details of the legal proceedings and confrontations which marked the work of John Baptist de La Salle at the beginning of the eighteenth century, especially in Paris. By reading the aforementioned work of Claude Joly, especially the third part, we can get an idea of the hostility that reigned between the charity schools, as well as the schools of women's congregations, and those controlled by the Superintendent. One gets the clear impression that Claude Joly looked askance at these schools that escaped his authority. One would hope that all the Superintendents throughout France would not be as vindictive as the one in Paris!

In his work on the seventeenth century and Lasallian origins, Brother Yves Poutet studies at length De La Salle's attitude toward the guilds and professional organizations of his time. He dedicates a good fifty pages to this subject. Let us simply look at this paragraph: "The question for De La Salle then was to know if the members of his community would function like the writing masters, the teachers in the Petites Écoles, the teachers in the charity schools, parish assistants, hospital teachers, religious... Finally, he had to align his work to the guild system which was one of the essential elements of the social structure of the time. Conflicts ensued."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Poutet, 77.

3. The Lasallian School as Part of the Church

Despite periodic opposition from certain members of the clergy (parish priests, Superintendents and even bishops), De La Salle always showed a fearless fidelity to the local and universal Church. When he was persecuted in one place, even to the extent of his schools being ruined or brought to court and himself sentenced, he was ready to go elsewhere.

For him it was never a question of going against the Church's hierarchy or of distancing himself from the Church although his initiatives were not always deferential to the ways and privileges acquired by other types of teachers. We shall return to this in the next chapter. His fearlessness was bolstered by his inner, deliberate and unshakeable conviction that he and all the members of the Society of the Christian Schools were called by God to teach the Gospel gratuitously to the poor and not-so-poor children who came to his schools.

So there was absolutely no thought of operating at a distance or outside of the institutional Church. This stance is clearly and repeatedly seen in his writings and translated into action in the *Conduite des Écoles Chrétiennes*.

• A School to Build Up the Church

De La Salle's schools aimed to build up the Church, i.e. to form young, "true Christians." This is especially shown in his *Meditations for Time of Retreat* (#199 and #200) which are entitled "Care for the education of youth is one of the duties most needed in the Church" and "What must be done to make your ministry useful to the Church." This is why the expression "true Christians" appears several times in his writings. Here we find the epitome of the goal set by the Council of Trent to establish schools for the people. To accomplish this general goal, the schools of the Brothers, as shown in the *Conduite*, provide the following for the children of the working class and the poor:²⁴⁸

- Daily prayers at various intervals throughout the entire school day.

²⁴⁸ See chapters 7, 8 and 9 of the *Conduite des Écoles Chrétiennes*.

- Daily catechism lessons which vary in length from 30 minutes on regular days to 60 minutes on the day before a holiday and 90 minutes on Sundays and feast days.
 - Real training in civility throughout the entire school program characterized by practical application and not only reading about it.
 - Along with this Christian education went other daily activities specific to the Lasallian school: morning reflection, regularly recalling the presence of God, a recollected attitude, evening examination of conscience and even spiritual hymns which closed the school day.
- **A School Incorporated into the Structures of the Church**

Forming true Christians meant getting them used to living as a Church community by participating in the activities of the parish or tradesmen's community, living in conformity with diocesan regulations and being open to the universal Church. It is easy to follow these three dimensions of Christian life in the activities prescribed by the *Conduite des Écoles*.

– *The parish dimension*

Naturally this is the most evident aspect in the *Conduite des Écoles*. From the beginning it was decided that the “Christian and gratuitous” school of the Brothers came under the authority of the parish. It needed to be attentive to the wishes of the parish priest and participate in the life of the parish community. Even if it accepted children from several city parishes, the school had to incorporate itself into the life of the parish where it was set up.

The students therefore went to daily Mass in the church of this parish, including on Sundays and feast days when they even attended Vespers.

As we have already explained, on Sundays and feast days children from outside the school were gathered for catechism lesson. Thus, this answered to the wishes of the Council of Trent that the parish teach religion to those youth who have not been taught.

As another example of the school's incorporation into the parish, we must add the opening of Sunday schools like the ones in Paris starting in 1699.

Although these schools experienced difficulties, they did show a real care for the uneducated youth of the parish.

Finally, this sense of parish and respect for the authority of the parish priest explain the right of the priest to enter the school whenever he wanted to visit or accompany persons responsible for the Bureau of the Poor. Likewise, the priest's authority in matters of morals could be invoked when he was needed to intervene for certain families in cases of moral danger.

– *The diocesan dimension*

The Council of Trent had reflected at length on the function and responsibilities of bishops. It had reaffirmed their duty to reside in their dioceses, but it had especially emphasized their responsibility with regard to teaching doctrine to all people in their dioceses. In particular, they were to take care to develop and supervise the doctrinal content of “catechisms” that would eventually be published. Bishops were to provide for the editing, publication and distribution of catechisms in schools and parishes. Several very interesting historical studies exist on this matter of the catechism.

Direct contact between Lasallian schools and bishops was doubtlessly rare. In addition, we know that De La Salle was thoroughly involved in the process of catechesis required by the Council of Trent. He wrote and published the *Grand Abrégé* and the *Petit Abrégé*, which were condensations of Christian doctrine and equivalent to diocesan catechisms. However, out of respect for the official doctrinal authority, the catechism studied by the students of the Brothers was the one from the diocese in which the school was located, as is stated in chapter 9 of the *Conduite des Écoles*.

– *The universal Church dimension*

We cannot forget that De La Salle founded his schools at a time when the Church in France was torn between several religious currents: Gallicanism, Ultramontanism, Jansenism, Quietism and Protestantism. These tensions were particularly intense during the last twenty years of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century. De La Salle even experienced a few difficult situations and had to sometimes take sides. Solicitations, accusations and even calumnies arose from the Jansenists in Marseille, the

appellants of the Bull *Unigenitus* and Gallicans, not to mention that the royal government asked him to take charge of schools in the Cévennes for the purpose of converting Protestants.

Despite this, De La Salle's teaching on the Church, his attitudes and his actions all showed him as consistently ultramontane, i.e. closely united to the papal authority of Rome. As a sign of this commitment, he sent two Brothers to Rome as soon as he could right at the beginning of the eighteenth century. As he said in his will: "First, I recommend my soul to God and, next, all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools with whom he has associated me. I urge them, above all else, always to show entire submission to the Church, especially in these evil times, and to give proof of this by never separating themselves in anything from our Holy Father the Pope and from the Church of Rome, always remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to ask God for the grace that their Society might always be entirely submissive thereto."²⁴⁹

4. Going beyond

School instruction and Christian education for poor children fit squarely into the post-Tridentine project. Ignorance in religious matters on the part of the faithful had attracted the attention of the first Reformers and the Fathers of the Council and was considered the scourge of the seventeenth century. De La Salle and the Brothers in turn were aware of this and set up their schools to remedy the situation. For them also the Christian school was to be a breeding ground for Christians. The Christian school did fit very well into the existing structure of the charity schools but not because it was content with what the charity schools were offering to the students. This is clearly seen in the situation at Rheims beginning in 1679. It was a matter of improving what already existed.

Of course, the idea was to catechize but not by having students memorize

²⁴⁹ OC. p. 63; CL 26, 286; *Rule and Foundational Documents*, 205. Although the English translation of "auxquels il m'a uni" uses the word "associated," it is better rendered as "to whom he has united me." [translator's note]

theoretical summaries of Church doctrine. In De La Salle's own words, that material would be "doctrinal truths" which have hardly any effect on anyone's living and cannot really lead them to salvation. Christian education of children entailed instilling in them "practical truths" or the "maxims" of the Gospel.

To show this, we would like to quote from several of the *Meditations for Time of Retreat*. In fact, to do justice to them, one could comment on the general dynamic thrust of these sixteen meditations. However, we will here limit ourselves to certain of them that speak for themselves:

"In order to bring the children whom you instruct to take on the Christian spirit, you must teach them the practical truths of faith in Jesus Christ and his maxims of the holy Gospel with at least as much care as you teach the truths that are purely doctrinal. It is true that there are a number of doctrines which are absolutely necessary for us to know in order to be saved. But what would it serve to know them, if we did not take the trouble to practice the good to which we are bound since faith, Saint James says, without works is dead....

"Is your main care, then, to instruct your disciples in the maxims of the holy Gospel and the practice of the Christian virtues? Have you anything more at heart than helping them find their happiness in these practices? Do you look upon the good that you are trying to achieve in them as the foundation of all the good that they will practice for the rest of their lives? The habits of virtue that are cultivated in oneself during youth encounter less resistance in corrupt nature and form the deepest roots in the hearts of those in whom they have been formed."²⁵⁰

"To be saved it does not suffice to be instructed in the Christian truths that are purely doctrinal. As we have already said, faith without works is dead; it is like a body without a soul; consequently it is not sufficient to help us achieve our salvation."²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ De La Salle, *Meditations for Time of Retreat* (#194), 436.

²⁵¹ De La Salle, *Meditations for Time of Retreat* (#197), 441.

As we have said above, regulations on the Petites Écoles recommended giving priority to religious aspects (catechism, Mass, prayers, etc.) to the detriment of a secular and human education. We can state that De La Salle, in a certain sense, reversed this perspective. The true Christian he envisaged was modeled on the construct of a balanced human being. We can subscribe to what Brother Yves Poutet wrote: “Contrary to the anti-Protestant stance of the edict of 1698, it was not the religious domain that ruled but rather the incorporation of a program of secular studies. A complete cycle of studies had to be gone through in order to equip the student with the basics required to enter into professional life. Some did it before age fourteen; others needed more time. Rather than conforming to a preset program of levels, it was up to parents and teachers to determine the length of the school program for the greater good of each student.”²⁵²

However, we must qualify the position expressed here by Brother Yves. Regardless of the length of time spent on secular studies, Christian education was provided for the children throughout their entire school program, for that was indeed the fundamental objective of De La Salle’s schools.

5. Conclusion

We can clearly state that De La Salle and the Brothers demonstrated their constant desire to incorporate their schools into the Church’s post-Tridentine structures of evangelization, even if they took some liberties with the system already in place. But the objective remained one of building up a new Church.

Building up the Church for De La Salle was not limited to hierarchical circles, although this was supported by the Council of Trent. The Church he wanted to build up was indeed the Church of the people of God, the Church as it was lived every day; and this comes out of the totality of his writings.

To attain this goal, it was necessary to form young people who were convinced, lively, active and thus disposed to bring their dynamism to the life of

²⁵² Poutet, 58.

this Church. Thanks to such an education which could sustain the Christian throughout his life, one could attain the final goal of everyone in the Church, salvation itself. This is what comes out of the last two of the *Meditations for Time of Retreat* (#207, #208), which hint at the parousia.

Yet, a good religious or Christian education is possible only when it builds on a solid human education that is integrated, not a separate preparatory education for something else. This is why the *Conduite des Écoles* provides for a unified and integrated program of skills that focuses at the same time on the body, the professional life, personal relations, civility, moral values and religious or spiritual formation.

This global and integrated thrust marks the specificity or identity of the Lasallian school and makes it stand out among the popular schools of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries even when this identity was occasionally difficult to maintain.

Chapter 10 – Identity in the School System

The Council of Trent was not the only Council to put a strong emphasis on the education of the people. From the end of the fifteenth century, favorable circumstances led to the creation of the Petites Écoles. There was a kind of common awareness that the people needed to be educated. Reasons for this were not only religious but also political and cultural. It was to offer people a better human development and to control them better.

These various circumstances have been studied by numerous historians. For our purposes, we would like to look at them briefly in order to be able to understand better the educational system in France at a time when De La Salle got involved in this enterprise of educating the people.

Some elements of the situation have already been mentioned in the previous chapter, but they merit more detail. It remains clear that this development was carried out under the control of the Church, occasionally with difficulty and sometimes not at its own initiative. At the end of the eighteenth century, schools for the people were quite varied and very numerous everywhere; and the Lasallian school had to find its place in this system.

1. Principal factors of this development

- **Abundance of printed material**

Chronologically, the earliest factor was the invention of the printing press and the spread of printed material in Europe starting in the middle of the fifteenth century. For the first time in the history of humankind, teachers and students had at their disposal the tool for their work of increasing knowledge. Although the spread of printed material was slow, it did not stop advancing during the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In speaking of the expansion of schools and the spread of printed material, one cannot forget to mention how peddlers aided the process. They were

typical of the time with their familiar presence among the people as they rendered their services. It is well known that in addition to the goods they carried from one place to another they very quickly started to carry various printed products, such as pictures, pamphlets, small books and religious pictures.

Certainly at the beginning, this printed material was not accessible to all the clients served by peddlers since they did not know how to read. The peddler himself in many cases was not in a position to help them since he was not literate. But one could find almost everywhere a “public reader,” someone who was able to render this service. As far as the increasing trend toward education is concerned, these printed materials acted first as a means of enticement since they roused the curiosity and the desire of people before they could read. This was a quite natural psychological reaction. The desire to have direct access to printed matter resulted in the desire to learn how to read. To do this, one could often count on the help of other people, but it very quickly became clear that learning how to read was accomplished more rapidly and efficaciously in school.

Consequently, from the end of the fifteenth century, printing became a means of educational improvement and created a new relationship with things written. Anyone who wanted to take part in new social activities had to master reading and writing. They had to be able to write a letter and express themselves in writing. If not, they ran the risk of being limited to an obsolete way of doing things. Thus, a strong need for education in school made itself felt.

Obviously we do not presume here to analyze all the effects of printing, one of which we ourselves enjoy today, namely the passage from a civilization based on oral communication to one based on communication by the written word. Let us simply bear in mind that, as far as education is concerned, printing played at least a three-pronged role. It increased the desire for schools. It made available to schools the tools necessary for learning elementary skills. It played a broader and more lasting cultural role by increasing the number of written texts for the individual educational improvement of each person. All this is evidenced in the different publications that came to light

at the time, such as the *Bibliothèque Bleue*, the first Dictionaries and later the Encyclopedia.²⁵³

• The Protestant Reformation

The first Reformers, more than sixty years after the invention of the printing press, realized immediately the possibilities that printing offered them, especially to spread their teaching in assemblies and in schools. Thus, Luther, Melancton, Zwingli and Calvin quickly encouraged the opening of schools. For them, learning how to read became the quickest path for their followers to get direct, personal access to the Bible as a source of inspiration for all. Literacy became the basis of a personal and solid faith for which the believer could render an account. In the same vein, Luther, Calvin and others were the first to publish catechisms. The Catholic Church's catechisms came later.

Thus, school activity coming from a religious movement was first of Protestant origin because of the primacy of the individual reading of the Bible, a personal link with God and the source of prayer. Wherever Reformed Protestants settled (and we are thinking particularly of France), they quickly opened schools, academies and even universities. Calvin wanted children to be well instructed from their earliest age in view of strengthening their faith. The faithful themselves grouped together to provide themselves with schools. They became very attached to them and, in times of trial, defended them with vigor.

In addition to providing access to Sacred Scripture, the Protestants saw the school as a means of improving city management by playing a social and political role. "For a city," writes Luther, "safety²⁵⁴ and force constitute the most beautiful and greatest of prosperities and are found in the number of citizens who are educated, intelligent, honorable and well bred and who then

²⁵³ The *Bibliothèque Bleue* ("Blue Library") refers to printed brochures circulated in the countryside for the common people. They were inexpensive, printed on inferior quality paper, and had a blue cover. They were distributed by peddlers and contributed to forming the mindset of the people. [translator's note]

²⁵⁴ Parias's citing of Luther here in French uses the word "salut," which in its religious sense denotes salvation. [translator's note]

can amass, conserve and use well a city's treasures and all its goods. Even if there were not any such thing as a soul and if we did not need schools and languages because of God's Scripture, there would still be enough reason to found the best schools everywhere for boys and girls. This is so because we know that the world, in order to satisfy its temporal needs, requires men who are able to govern a country and its people and women who are able to bring up a family and manage a household."²⁵⁵

Melanchton expresses the same opinion: "In a well-managed city, there is above all a need for schools to instruct children, who are the breeding ground for the city. It is a grave mistake to think that one can acquire solid virtue without instruction. No one is able to govern public affairs without a knowledge of literature, which contains all manner of directing a city."²⁵⁶

• The Catholic Reform

We will not repeat what has been said in the previous chapter about the role of the Catholic Church in the field of education. We will simply add some specific points which partially explain the expansion of schools for the people.

This expansion began precisely in a climate of competition that arose due to the success of the Protestant schools. This atmosphere of competition lasted until the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685. Since this new decree also forbade the Protestant schools, Protestants emigrated; and with their departure many educational institutions also disappeared. The state invited the Catholic Church to work for the return of Protestants to Catholicism, especially by means of schools and religious instruction. We note here in passing that, at the time, this reform was referred to as a so-called religious reform and that it was expected that wanderers would return to the fold even by harsh means.

The Brothers, moreover, were invited to participate directly in this crusade of conversions. They did so when they opened schools in Alès (1707) and in Vans (1711).

²⁵⁵ Martin Luther, quoted in *Parias*, vol. II, 182-83.

²⁵⁶ Melanchton, quoted in *Parias*, vol. II, 184.

The Catholic hierarchy could count on many powerful means of support to develop its project of education. Let us briefly cite these:

- direct aid from the royal power and various local administrations
- the very influential work of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement²⁵⁷
- the work of numerous new women's congregations. More than thirty were founded in the seventeenth century
- active assistance from parishioners in certain places, especially in villages.

We must not forget the Petites Écoles of Port-Royal, which operated outside the hierarchy but within the Church.²⁵⁸ They were opened in 1637 at the initiative of the Abbé of Saint-Cyran and closed by public authority in 1660. Thus they had a brief existence. In addition, they were limited to the region of Paris and concerned only a small number of children and teachers. At first glance, this seems to be a modest and limited operation; but their influence lasted well beyond the time they were in operation, for the quality of the way they were organized and the way they taught had a lasting effect. Since they were inspired by Jansenism and Augustinianism, they owed their impact and their renown to persons well known in the Jansenist movement in France. Among them we find Saint-Cyran, Arnauld, Nicole, Blaise and Jacqueline Pascal, Maître de Sacy and Jean Racine.

To conclude this section on the role of the Catholic Church, we would like to consider the following two passages which emphasize its importance and its meaning:

“Both the Protestant and the Catholic Churches found themselves in an atmosphere of religious rivalry, and they also had the goal of a serious evangelization of the Christian population. Thus, they very quickly saw the importance of the book in their pastoral ministry and were very favorable

²⁵⁷ The Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement (Company of the Blessed Sacrament) was a “congregation” of laity and priests that was founded in 1629 by Henri de Levis, Duc de Ventadour. Its goal was to assist charitable works and also to combat the rampant libertine spirit of the time. Its excessive zeal and the veil of secrecy under which it operated prompted its dissolution in 1665. [translator's note]

²⁵⁸ On this subject see Frédéric Delforge, *Les Petites Écoles de Port-Royal* (CERF: Paris, 1985).

toward education, which they also saw as the catechetical means for a better moral, intellectual and even spiritual training of youth.”²⁵⁹

“We also see a clarification of the function of the Church in the enterprise of education. The Church provided the majority of the teachers and formed them. It shaped public opinion on the need for schools. We must add that it contributed its money to the cause. From the income collected in contributions, the French clergy diverted a part toward needy projects and for the upkeep of the schools.”²⁶⁰

• Renaissance Humanism

As an important event throughout all of Europe, the Renaissance gave rise to a new humanism whose consequences spread wide and had a lasting effect on the education of the people.

Through the rise and spread of the book, modern science could now develop and give rise to the scientific spirit. From this also arose a new concept of what it meant to be human, first that of the humanist and then that of the *honnête homme*²⁶¹ of French classical literature. A product of one’s culture, one had to subscribe to a true discipline of the body, proper decorum and civility, and a certain studied refinement in dress and in language. Education of the mind came through literature, esthetic and ethical values, comprehensive knowledge and openness to the works of ancient and modern authors. Another characteristic of the Renaissance was an openness to the education of women both on the intellectual level and on the emotional and social levels as well.

We must emphasize, however, that since this humanist influence favored more the secondary schools than the popular schools, it was partial to a more elitist culture. The humanists with their wide-reaching ideas were especially looking to form a social class that would be able to govern society and

²⁵⁹ Parias, vol. II, 386.

²⁶⁰ Jean de Viguerie, *L’Institution des enfants* (Calmann-Lévy: Paris, 1978), 66-67.

²⁶¹ The concept of the *honnête homme* represented the ideal social human being in the seventeenth century who was unpretentiously cultured and sociable and never given to extremes. [translator’s note]

become its moving force. But their openness of mind contributed to reinforce the general climate favorable to the education of all and the emphasis on the individual. In this sense, they had a positive influence on education and on the decisions of certain local political leaders.

• Civil Powers

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the school reaped the benefit of the rivalry of the churches; but it also aroused the interest not only of local civil powers but also of higher levels in the government. Two articles from an ordinance of 1560 concern the teaching of children:

- Article IX: In each cathedral or collegiate church, a canon's stipend will be reserved to support a teacher who will teach children gratuitously.
- Article X: This article stipulates that income from all associations be used to support schools.

This royal support does not falter during the seventeenth century and even after, as is shown by various decrees and ordinances that are promulgated during this period. Even the creation of a general alms for the poorest of people was part of this aid to education through charity schools and orphanages.

Not to be outdone by the central government, various local governments and municipalities that were in the process of getting organized through the impetus of the royal power but still enjoying great autonomy also wanted to open schools for the benefit of their constituents. This occurred especially in the southern part of the country where church-related schools were farther apart and also after the Protestant schools were suppressed.

Finally, some individuals who were particularly generous or very interested in education and who themselves were descended from the clergy or the bourgeoisie took part in the creation of schools.

2. A Small Controversy

Throughout the seventeenth century therefore we see a fivefold movement favorable to the education of the people. Add to that the many individual initiatives which contributed to bring to fruition these needed projects.

There was not absolute agreement, however. In the midst of these convergent efforts, some voiced their opinions to bring attention to the dangers of mass education of the people and thus opposed it. Their arguments were voiced although they hardly seem consistent.

At the end of his life, the famous Cardinal Richelieu wrote in his testament: “Since the knowledge of literature is quite necessary in a republic, it is certain that it should not be taught indiscriminately to everyone. Just as a body with eyes on all its parts would be monstrous, so would a state be if all its subjects were learned. Pride and presumption would be as commonplace as disobedience. The commodity of literature would absolutely destroy the commerce of merchandise which fills states with riches. It would ruin agriculture, the true mother that provides for her people; and it would not be long before it devastated the training ground of soldiers who are trained under the crudeness of ignorance rather than under the refinement of knowledge. It would finally fill France with quibblers more apt to ruin individual families and disturb the public peace than to procure any good for states.... For all these reasons, politicians want a well-governed state to have more teachers in the trades than teachers in the liberal arts who teach literature.”²⁶²

Briefly then, as Diderot will indicate later, a peasant who knows how to read and write is harder to oppress than any other. The economic argument seems the strongest in this opposition to education. There is already a fear of a kind of parasitism whereby educated people would refuse to take up manual labor, which would be harmful to the social body due to a lack of a workforce.

This always remained the opinion of a small minority and was typical of the affluent who were concerned with preserving their privileges and their comfort. To this, Charles D emia responded in this way: “Some might say that the schools are useless, and therefore also teachers, especially in the country where ignorance and the rustic life serve to help laborers and soldiers make a living. To this we respond that if the study of Latin and even writing did not cause such a good effect, would it not be the same with reading, espe-

²⁶² Political testament of Richelieu (1640), cited in Parias, vol. II, 387-88.

cially at an age when children are not able to work the land. This would make them more docile, more assiduous in their work and more disposed to virtue, which never spoils anything... Means have been found to make good captains for the army and good priests for the clergy by establishing academies and seminaries to form those destined for these positions. And means have been found to make wise, hard working and industrious subjects for His Majesty by establishing schools.”²⁶³

3. The Urban School around 1680

“An elementary school everywhere, in the city, in the outskirts, even in the country, this is the will of the king as well as the desire of bishops worthy of the name. Legislation is providing it, and successful initiatives abound. At the end of the reign, the results are conclusive. We can state without mistake: ‘Obligatory schooling dates from Louis XIV and not from Jules Ferry.’”²⁶⁴

If this had not yet become a reality, it was at least the noble intention of the authorities. As for putting this project into place, it still ran into too many difficulties; and the average rate of literacy, which was at 21% at the end of the seventeenth century, would be only at 37% at the time of the French Revolution.

• Inequalities and differentiating factors

The statistical information we have for the end of the seventeenth century must be qualified taking into account several criteria which we will treat briefly. The date is particularly important to us because it corresponds generally to the opening of the first Lasallian schools, and several differentiating factors show the real situations that De La Salle and the Brothers encountered. They are six in number:

- Northern France and Southern France

The distribution of the literacy rate revealed by the survey of Maggiolo in 1879 shows a map of France with many contrasts. Northern France is

²⁶³ See *Cahier Lasallien* 56, 160-61.

²⁶⁴ Viguerie, 86.

clearly more literate than southern France because of economic and cultural reasons due to France's proximity to countries like England, Holland and the German states. This difference increases even more so during the eighteenth century.

- Linguistic Differences

On the whole, the difference between the north and the south coincides with the boundary between the area of the “Oil language” (*langue d’oil*) and that of the “Occitan language” (*langue d’oc*).²⁶⁵ The explanation for this is simple. The language of instruction was French; and the school spread the use of the “Oil language” to its students who already were using it outside of school. In the south, the area of the “Occitan language,” the conditioned reflex of rejecting standard French also played a role in the dynamics of education. This was a fact recognized by the people of the time and by historians. The first Brothers of the Christian Schools had to face this situation when they opened schools in Provence, the Occitan region, namely in Avignon, Marseille, Mende, Alès and Les Vans. De La Salle made mention of this difficulty in a letter he wrote to Brother Gabriel Drolin, who was then in Rome: “[W]e need men from this region [Marseille] on account of the difference between the language here and that of France.”²⁶⁶

Here is a more explicit observation from the time of this linguistic situation: “The Occitan language is the language of the people and even the language of well-bred and cultivated persons in this province. It is the first language that comes to mind. And this is the language they use more readily as they deal with a friend or talk casually with their servants and when they do not have to please a superior or worry about offending a stranger. Standard French, which they consider out of place except in seri-

²⁶⁵ These terms designate respectively the medieval Gallo-Romance language of the central and northern part of the country and the dialect used in Provence. They are so termed because of the words used for “yes” in those areas, oil and oc. The “Oil language” was considered standard while the “Occitan language,” more similar to Catalan, was culturally defined and identified with the popular music and literature of the troubadours. [translator’s note]

²⁶⁶ De La Salle, *Lettres*, #30.2; *Letters*, 111.

ous matters, has become for them a foreign, “ceremonial” language, so to speak; and they force themselves when they need to use it.”²⁶⁷

- Cities and the Countryside

From the beginning of this study, we have indicated why De La Salle chose irrevocably to work in the city. City people had more of an opportunity to find schools, and we will see this a little later. Although rural people formed the greatest majority of the population in the country, unlike their city counterparts they suffered from complete absence or scarcity of schools due often to insufficient financial resources or to a weaker quality of teachers. Therefore, the literacy rate between rural and city people was very unequal; and this is what explains the low general rate of literacy, one fifth of the population!

- Economic inequalities

For the reasons which we have already shown at the beginning of this study, the rich had a clear advantage over the poor when it came to education. The poorest did not go to school at all, whether in the cities or in the country. Despite all the efforts that were made during the seventeenth century, as we have just seen, the majority of the poor were excluded from education. Goubert and Roche have summarized the situation in this way: “At the bottom are found the completely illiterate, day workers and manual workers, workers in the cities and in the fields, who see no reason to be educated. In between, the ability to sign one’s name shows a social order of being a professional, a client, a rich person or someone who knows how to maneuver in society. The small shop owner and worker on the verge of independence cannot do without the basics. Many are the important laborers and rural farm owners in southern France who must be able to sign their names. In all, the social profile of literacy in seventeenth-century France clearly parallels the dominant social groups, with women and people in the country lagging considerably behind.”²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Boissier de Sauvages (1755), quoted in Goubert and Roche, vol. II, 208.

²⁶⁸ Goubert and Roche, vol. II, 203.

- **Boys and Girls**

As we have already said, attention to the education of girls came well after the education of boys. With the very great openness toward teaching girls since the Renaissance, numerous congregations of religious women as well as lay women teachers have dedicated themselves to it courageously. But attitudes and behavior have not generally evolved very quickly. For many families, it was normal to send the boys to school; but such was not always the case with the girls. The Maggiolo survey showed that for adults in 1690 71% of the men were illiterate while 89% of the women were illiterate. The difference is considerable, but it would continue to diminish.

- **Protestants and Catholics**

For the reasons previously indicated, the survey brings out a greater rate of literacy among Protestants. In 1690 this situation was unfortunately temporary because all the effects of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes had not yet been felt.

In 1679, the date of the opening of the first Lasallian school in Rheims, literacy training of the ordinary people was already under way, to say nothing of education and evangelization. As the Lasallian schools gradually defined and affirmed their own identity, they brought their contribution to this work in an urban context for the benefit of underprivileged social classes, the working class and the poor. But they had to carve out for themselves a place in the school system that was already in place. This would not be as easy as it would appear.

- **Various types of schools in 1680**

It was by luck that Claude Joly published his work²⁶⁹ in 1678. Of course it dealt essentially with Paris, which was a special case; but it does give us interesting insights into all the cities. By reading the whole work, one can make the distinction between several kinds of schools. There were schools opened by individual initiative, sometimes even on a whim, for we already see some

²⁶⁹ Joly, *Traité historique des Écoles Épiscopales et Éclésiastique* (Paris, 1678). This work, especially in the third part, provides invaluable information on the educational situation in Paris a few years before the arrival of the Brothers in the capital. We refer to it in the following paragraphs.

pedagogical charlatans. There were also schools organized and controlled by Church authorities or the guilds, with which De La Salle and the Brothers had to contend in order to define their own identity.

We will not speak here of the Schools of Liberal Arts or of the Universities. These belonged to a different educational world, had different objectives and methods than the Petites Écoles and were foreign to the education of the ordinary people. Nor will we dwell on the “small classes” of society that the secondary schools aimed to create so that young students might learn reading before beginning the specific program of education in the liberal arts. Moreover, these children belonged to a clientele different from those of the popular schools. With some very rare and few exceptions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these were not the sons of the working class and the poor.

- **Proliferation of individual initiatives**

In the third part of his work, Claude Joly speaks of individual schools, difficult to keep under his control but nevertheless sometimes controlled, that we would like to mention. We especially want to keep them in mind since they exemplify the complex and widespread educational activity that characterized the end of the seventeenth century.

- “Schools that teach only boarders”

Without explaining clearly why or how certain teachers received authorization, the author speaks of those who held a small boarding school for children “of quality,” young in age, somewhat delicate and not being able to go to the preparatory secondary schools. In these boarding schools they were given an education; and Claude Joly presumed to have the right to authorize them since they did no harm to the other schools.

- “Schools of teachers with special permission”

The difference between these and the preceding schools seems to lie basically in the fact that their clientele was not as delicate or well-off and that these schools could accept half-boarders since it would be to the detriment of the Petites Écoles of the neighborhood if they did not. But the Superintendent Joly proclaimed that he was within his right to grant such

permissions. Since he knew these teachers, they could not evade his authority. And this is what counted!

- The Masters of Arts

It was not the same for the Masters of Arts who taught without permission in the city of Paris. We might say that they were freelancers who managed to evade the restrictions and control imposed by the diocesan Superintendent. Some had not perhaps received the Master of Arts degree but were looking to teaching as a way of earning a living, for these schools evidently charged tuition. Did they have a strong clientele? This depended, without a doubt, on their success and the worth of their professional competence.

- “Unauthorized tutors”

As the author says, these were those who coached students who already attended class in the preparatory secondary schools. They had neither applied for nor obtained authorization from the diocesan Superintendent. Today we would speak of special after-school classes. In fact, such a tradition could be found in the boarding schools or “pedagogies” of the Middle Ages that housed young students from outside the city. What obviously irritated Claude Joly was that he could not have any guarantee concerning the “faith, doctrine and morals” of these teachers. We will return to this in the next chapter of this study.

- “Charlatans”

The title of the chapter 24 seems to suggest the word “charlatan”: “Against those who teach without the permission of the Superintendent of the Church of Paris, saying that they are not running Petites Écoles, but who teach literature and foreign languages.” According to Claude Joly, they did not have permission; and they presumed the right to create a school: “They give themselves the honor of establishing themselves as teachers independent of any Superior.” They presumed to teach Latin, Greek, German, Italian, Spanish, oriental languages and “literature,” which did not mean anything precise. In Claude Joly’s judgment, they were often presumptuous ignoramuses who bragged about their individ-

ual methods as being faster and easier. The author himself wrote about “this charlatan spirit which must always be distrusted.” It is easy to believe Joly when one reads a century later this description by Louis-Sébastien Mercier of “Free Courses”: “On street corners you see Free Architecture Course, Free English Course, Free History Course, Free Literature Course, Free Courses in Geography, French, Spelling, etc.... The lesson is short, and the complaints are very long. All these teachers teach you perfectly what you already know. Despite the individual method they have all dreamed up, there is nothing new in their material. You go down the staircase; and you forget the street, the teacher and his method. You remember it only when you again see on the corner that untruthful sign Free Course. The time you waste there is assuredly the most costly in the world and worth much more than money.” From the beginning, this so called teacher “asks you to compensate him for all the trouble he has gone to in twenty years for the sake of teaching people.”²⁷⁰

- “Truant Schools”

The term “truant schools”²⁷¹ was applied for the first time in a decree of 1554 to schools that open without authorization and in hidden places: “The Court enjoins the Superintendent of the Church of Paris to order that, except for the Petites Écoles now and in the future intended by the said Superintendent for this city of Paris, there be no more truant schools formed. This is to obviate the consequences that could arise by giving wrong and injurious doctrine to little children.”²⁷²

The allusion to Protestants is clear. At the time Claude Joly was writing his work, this type of school was already in place. They had multiplied since the Reformation when Protestants, just to be prudent or because of fear of sanctions, tried to send their children to clandestine schools. But

²⁷⁰ Mercier, 238-39.

²⁷¹ The term in French is “écoles buissonnières,” a term used today only in the expression *faire l'école buissonnière*, to play truant (hooky). In using this expression, the decree emphasized the clandestine nature of these schools since the word *buissonnière* derives from the French word for bush, *buisson*, where anyone could hide. [translator's note]

²⁷² Alfred Franklin, *Écoles et Collèges depuis les origines* (Castells: Paris, 1988), 187-96.

the phenomenon was not only a factor of the Reformation. It also occurred because teachers tried to escape the control of the Superintendent and literally hid in the bushes in the country, in the thicket near cities or even in out-of-the-way streets. Since the 1554 decree concerned them, it was reissued in 1628.

• Other types of schools

Other types of schools also existed in the city of Paris at the end of the seventeenth century, and these were even more numerous. Claude Joly also goes after three types of these schools:

- Charity schools which we have already mentioned several times. He is not happy that they were opened by parish priests without the authorization of the diocesan Superintendent. He explains that in the past it had been different but that now the priests were doing as they pleased even when they consulted their parish council on this matter. Although these were church schools, he feared they would take away from the clientele of the *Petites Écoles*; but this does not seem probable.
- Schools run by religious congregations. In chapter 14 he states “[t]hat nuns cannot properly run a school for girls without getting special permission from the Pope.” The truth is that he held it against them that they neither asked for nor obtained his authorization. And he had no qualms about blaming certain congregations by name: the Ursulines, the Congregation of Notre Dame, the Daughters of the Cross, and the Vincentian Sisters of Charity. It is true that these religious congregation schools operated outside diocesan structures.
- The schools of the Writing Masters. The author dedicates six chapters to this guild, which usurped special privileges for teaching writing and spelling. He claims that teachers in the *Petites Écoles* are just as capable to teach these two subjects. Chapter 23 strongly opposes the coeducation that certain Writing Masters allowed: “Writing Masters should not be permitted to teach girls to write, and women school teachers are correct in asking the court to sanction the opposition voiced by the Archbishops of Paris to Writing Masters teaching any girls in their schools.”

- Finally, only the Petites Écoles find favor in Joly's eyes. His entire work is a long defense of the authority of the position of diocesan Superintendent. This includes not only him but also Superintendents of other dioceses. At the same time it is a defense of the "grammar schools," a term they were then using for the Petites Écoles and which he uses over and over again. Their origins go back to the high Middle Ages; and they never disappeared although they experienced a considerable weakening before the flourishing of the seventeenth century. In Paris attempts were made to establish at least two of them in each district, one for boys and one for girls. Alfred Franklin counts 316 for the city of Paris, 157 for boys and 159 for girls. According to the same author, still others should be added: 80 charity schools, gratuitous schools for the 284 children in the parish choirs of the city, the 17 "convent schools" for girls, and the 140 schools of the Writing Masters.

These figures are impressive. It is true that Paris was the largest city in the country. Its population was between 450,000 and 500,000 inhabitants. It would be difficult to find a comparable density of schools in other cities of the kingdom.

Is there any place in all of this for the schools of the Brothers?

4. The Lasallian School Finds Its Place

The number of schools in Paris is relative because we must remember that in the great majority of cases a "school" represented one teacher and one group of students. The number of schools then corresponded to the number of teachers. With the exception of the charity schools, these schools charged fees. The teachers had to earn their living by charging tuition. It was in their interest to increase the number of their students or at least to retain them.

Apparently a city as important as Paris had a large enough number of children to provide each teacher with a sufficient quota of students. In fact, many poor families did not send their children to school; and the rich orientated their children directly toward preparatory secondary schools. The fact that tuition was charged limited even more the number of social cate-

gories that were sufficiently well-off to pay the teachers. This is what De La Salle is saying in his 194th meditation.²⁷³

It is easy to see that in such a context the new teachers were not welcome; and this included the Brothers wherever they established themselves, especially in Paris in 1688. “Not welcome” is even a euphemism. As competitors and even with the best of intentions, the Brothers threatened or endangered the situation of the teachers already in place. They too wanted to find a clientele, and they did not totally draw their clientele from different social classes. This fact is amply shown by the violent acts of opposition manifested in Paris toward the schools and the very persons of the Brothers shortly after their arrival.

To understand the context better, we need to look at the school of the Brothers described in the *Conduite* as it stands with respect to the other schools we have just described. We can immediately set aside the schools with special permission, boarding schools, truant schools, tutors, Masters of Arts, and language and literature schools, all of which we have indicated above. And since De La Salle himself was very respectful of the Church’s opposition to coeducation, it is not a question here of treating schools for girls. As a matter of fact, the school of the Brothers needed to find its place among the charity schools, the Petites Écoles and the schools of the Writing Masters.

• The School of the Brothers among the Charity Schools

In conformity with its origins and the intentions of its founders, the Lasallian school, as we have indicated above, was very much like the charity school. It took up certain basic aspects of the charity school, but was different from it in other respects.

- The Lasallian school was first a gratuitous school. “This is essential to your Institute,” writes De La Salle twice for the Brothers in the *Rule* itself and in one of his *Meditations*.

²⁷³ This is the second of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* entitled “The means that those responsible for the education of children must use to procure their salvation.” *Meditations*, 434. [translators note]

- It was linked to the parish priests to whom the Church had given the responsibility to open schools for the poor, support them and defend them if need be. Alfred Franklin writes: “At the beginning the priests had sought the approval of the Superintendent. Then they did not bother to do so. The number of these schools increased rapidly, for each priest soon was anxious to have at least one for his parish. Because they were gratuitous, they became considerable competitors with the local Petites Écoles.”²⁷⁴

But the Lasallian school also was different from the charity school in two ways:

- The Lasallian school would not restrict itself only to the poor who were listed as such in the parish registers. De La Salle and the Brothers wanted to proclaim the gospel to all without distinction, taking refuge in the words of Saint Paul which state that the gospel must be proclaimed gratuitously. Even if they were in fact in the minority, students who were better off could at the same time benefit from the evangelization, the instruction and the education given in the schools of the Brothers.
 - The Lasallian school offered a much wider educational program, not just a third-rate education for the poor. On the contrary, since the school was the only hope of advancement for the poor, it had to offer them an education that was solid and thorough. The entire content of the first part of the *Conduite des Écoles* produces proof of this.
- **The School of the Brothers among the Petites Écoles**

Several similarities can be shown. The Lasallian schools, like the Petites Écoles, were intended for a popular clientele, despite some slight economic differences which would qualify this statement. In theory, they both offered similar programs; but this depended on the ability and education of the teachers, as we shall show in the next chapter.

Yet, two reasons for friction developed very quickly between the two types of schools; and they originated in the school clientele served. Different from the

²⁷⁴ Franklin, 125.

charity school, the Lasallian school accepted students who were better off economically; and that alone put it into competition with the Petites Écoles that charged fees. They were thus in a position to attract some of their students. The teachers in the Petites Écoles very justifiably felt wronged by this, saw it as an injustice to them and revolted. After rivalry came suspicion, then anger and then attacks on property and attacks in court. Alfred Franklin writes: “The teachers then brought their grievances to the Superintendent, their supreme leader. They complained of the wrong caused by the schools opened by the priests, informed him that many children had deserted their classes to take their place in these havens²⁷⁵ where they received all their elementary education without charge.”²⁷⁶

Some other differences:

- The two types of schools were not under the same administrative authority, although both the diocesan Superintendent and the parish priests belonged to the clergy.
- The Lasallian schools included several classes, which required small groups of teachers to be formed who could work together. The teachers in the Petites Écoles, even when they had an aide, generally worked alone.
- With John Baptist de La Salle – and we will return to this later – the teachers were trained, prepared for their profession and constantly guided in their work, while the teachers in the Petites Écoles were more left to their own devices.
- The Brothers were not stationed in one particular parish, or in one particular diocese. They accepted mobility and could effectively be changed from one diocese to another as needed by the openings of Lasallian schools or for the good of the network. In this way, they did not lose their job. But for the teacher in the Petites Écoles, if he was given to changing jobs, it was at his own risk and peril. He was not certain to find easily another job. This is not an unwarranted supposition since several histori-

²⁷⁵ Lauraire here adds parenthetically “N.B. This clearly refers to the charity schools, but the text applies exactly to what happened to the Brothers.” [translator’s note]

²⁷⁶ Franklin, 125.

ans emphasize that there was a strong instability with the teachers of that period.

- **The Schools of the Brothers and Those of the Writing Masters**

The basic point of comparison is in the content of the education offered by the Lasallian schools and those of the Writing Masters. This would quickly become a source of conflict. Of course, this is not to forget the difference between the gratuity of the Lasallian schools and the school fees charged by the Writing Masters.

On an administrative level, we also find that the Brothers, despite the tight local bond they had with the parish priest, enjoyed a great autonomy in management, which gave them flexibility, freedom and mobility. Because of this, we can speak of an autonomous organization, which, moreover, hardly pleased some members of the clergy but which the Brothers managed to preserve despite several periods of agony such as from 1712 to 1714. We are speaking of an organization of association which might resemble a guild in certain respects in that it was not yet a canonically recognized religious Institute.

On the other hand, the Writing Masters clearly constituted a guild, as we have explained it at the beginning of this study, a guild which began in 1570 with the letters patent of Charles IX. Their corporate statutes gave them the right to teach writing, spelling and arithmetic, which Claude Joly contested. In fact, they went further and claimed the exclusive privilege of teaching these subjects, a privilege which according to them no other schools could enjoy. According to Alfred Franklin, in 1578 “they forbade the Superintendent to let writing, spelling and arithmetic be taught in his schools by anyone other than the members of their guild.” From this resulted a lasting struggle arbitrated not without clashes by the Châtelet Court (biased toward the Writing Masters) and the Parliament of Paris (biased toward the school teachers). The events of this struggle lasted until the eighteenth century. Let us simply consider the terms of one decree of the Parliament in 1661: “The authority of the Superintendent over the teachers in the Petites Écoles was recognized and confirmed. But this authority did

not extend to the guild of the Writing Masters, which was declared independent of Church authority.”²⁷⁷

From the standpoint of similarities between the schools of the Brothers and those of the Writing Masters, let us remember that in the two cases the teachers were well trained professionally. For the Brothers, this took place in the novitiate and during the first months of teaching practice, with extended time in continuous formation. For the Writing Masters, the guild itself administered contests, organized the training program and assessed it with rather difficult examinations. Here we find the system of the guild membership electing its own members, as was prevalent in the period.

The rivalry began with the subject skills offered by the Brothers in their schools. We must say that De La Salle and the Brothers apparently knew nothing of the exclusive privileges of the Writing Masters. This is shown clearly in the first part of the *Conduite*.

On reading the *Conduite*, we do see that what it proposes encroaches clearly upon the exclusive privileges claimed by the Writing Masters, as follows:

- Concerning reading: Lesson 19, which concerns handwritten documents, or “Registers,” can be considered as stepping into the area of the “certified” Writers who specialized in the interpretation of such documents especially as experts in the courts.
- Concerning writing: This is clear also, and this is what the Writing Masters particularly contested. The Brothers did not want to limit their students to spontaneous and unedited writing, which would be accepted by the Writing Masters. The Brothers’ students spent a great deal of time having their students master calligraphy, both in round-hand writing (8 levels) and in slanted round-hand writing (5 levels). In fact, they could become calligraphers and participate in the contests of the Writing Masters and give them competition.
- The same thing in spelling and arithmetic, even though it seems that these skills were not emphasized as much.

²⁷⁷ Franklin, 117-18.

Briefly stated, the competition was there. That is why Alfred Franklin writes: “The Superintendent of Notre Dame, the direct head of the Petites Écoles, assumed control over teaching in Paris, reserving for himself an absolute monopoly to the exclusion of any other individual or body whether civil or ecclesiastical. To establish this control, he fought almost at the same time:

- against the clandestine schools, called truant schools.
- against the guild of the Writing Masters.
- against the schools authorized by the university.
- against the schools opened by nuns in their convents.
- against the charity schools created by parish priests in their parishes and **by the Brothers of Saint-Yon** (namely, the Brothers of the Christian Schools).²⁷⁸

Some lines later, in his list of these struggles, the same author adds: “The Superintendent won a greater victory in another struggle he waged against the Brothers of the Christian Schools....The Writing Masters, the teachers in the Petites Écoles and the Superintendent gathered their efforts to overcome this so formidable competition. They created difficulties of all types for the Brothers of the Christian Schools.”²⁷⁹

We find an account of these confrontations throughout the biography of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the history of the Brothers. Naturally, we cannot list them here in their entirety. The most dramatic ones occurred between 1698 and 1712 and comprised both legal actions and damage to property. The year 1704 was when they all came to a head.²⁸⁰

• **The Brothers amidst these difficulties**

When De La Salle accepted to take charge of schools for poor boys in

²⁷⁸ Franklin, 109.

²⁷⁹ Franklin, 127-28.

²⁸⁰ On this topic see the first biographers of De La Salle and the chronologies established by Brothers L. Aroz (CL 40.1) and J-M Valladolid (Lasalliana #31), Lucard (*Annales de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes*, vol. I) and Georges Rigault (*Histoire Générale de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes*, vol I.)

Rheims in 1679, the Petites Écoles had already been developing in France for a century and principally on terrain De La Salle chose himself, namely cities. The growth was not only in the number of schools but also in their diversity and creativity.

De La Salle and the Brothers took a different path than the others and did not simply follow the flow in an already existing model. They did this not to stand out at any cost nor to start competition with the teachers already practicing. Rather they did so to answer better to the needs they perceived in society, and especially in the world of the working class and the poor. This is why their behavior, like that which later appears in the *Conduite des Écoles*, bore no marks of aggression, but rather it was a testimony to a benevolent neutrality, which, however, would not bring them peace. The Lasallian school, a “Christian and gratuitous school,” stuck consciously and deliberately by its identity.

The third part of the *Conduite* gives us several passages which help us appreciate their attitude toward the other schools. They were accused of drawing students from other schools, and this competition was not accepted. What was it really? It seems that they were aware of being within their rights but did not assess the harm that this could cause.²⁸¹

To show this, let us look at the second section of the chapter entitled “Enrolling Students at the School.” The quote is somewhat long, but it merits inclusion here:

“Students who have attended other schools shall be admitted only when the reasons why they left those schools are made known.

“If students left the schools they were attending through an exaggerated liking for change, their parents should be made to understand how harmful this is to their children. They should make up their minds not to let their children change schools any more. They should be warned that, if the children subsequently leave our school, they will not be readmitted. If the children

²⁸¹ For the quotes that follow, we refer to the third part of the *Conduite des Écoles*, especially chapters 2 and 3 in the *Oeuvres Complètes* or in CL 24.

have left the other school merely because they have been corrected justly, the parents must be told that they should not listen to the children's complaints against the teacher. If they had been wholly innocent, they would not have been corrected. Parents should be willing to have teachers correct their children when they are at fault; otherwise, they should not send them to school. Students who have left a school because of having been badly taught or because in some way teachers were in the wrong, should be careful not to blame but rather to try to excuse teachers as far as possible.

“If a child had been badly taught, for instance, made to write before knowing how to read, or made to read before knowing how to spell or even before knowing all the letters, the Inspector of Schools shall call the parents' attention to these deficiencies and indicate to them the remedies which must be applied. For instance, the child must first be taught the alphabet, to spell the syllables, and to read, before being made to write. What had been omitted in the previous instruction should be pointed out. Prudently, the Inspector of Schools should help the parents to understand the importance of this method, without which a student would never learn anything even if the child came to school for ten years.

“A student of this kind, whose parents are unwilling to follow the system proposed to them, should not be accepted. If they cannot or will not listen to reason on this score, one might propose to them, as a last resort, a three-month trial period. They shall be shown that the foundation of reading depends on knowing the letters perfectly, knowing how to spell, and knowing how to read syllables distinctly. Without this, it is impossible for a child ever to read anything with understanding and not by rote.”²⁸²

That is the way that particular section of the *Conduite* puts it. We can briefly state that the schools of the Brothers did accept students who had left their previous school, and this could give reason for the other teachers to complain. For the *Conduite* to speak of it, this flow of students must have been noticeable and continuous. But we also see that the Brothers were not at all eager to accept these students. On the contrary, they show caution, insist on

²⁸² *Conduct*, 204-05.

involving the parents in this decision to change and are rather suspect of this clientele. This text also shows a great respect for and certain solidarity with the other teachers, and at the same time a solid confidence in the Brothers' own pedagogical methods. Consequently, if the students left the Petites Écoles or the schools of the Writing Masters, it is not because the Lasallian school tried to lure them away. The children themselves or their parents decided to come and try out the Brothers' school. Although we do not know their true motives, we can suppose that they expected to gain something from it.

The following section of the same chapter in the *Conduite* indicates, moreover, that the flow of students was not one way. It speaks of “[s]tudents who have already attended our schools and who have left of their own volition.” In this case also, caution was key at the time of registration. There was even a greater hesitation since it was recommended that the Inspector let himself be persuaded, that he withhold his decision for a time, and that he warn the student and his parents that the child could be readmitted only once. If it happened again, “they would not be readmitted at all.”

In addition, the schools of the Brothers did not lack a strong number of students. In the following chapter of the *Conduite*, it is specified that “[t]he number of students in each class will be about fifty or sixty. In the schools where there are more than two classes, the number of students will be able to be larger in the middle class than in the first or last class.” A quick calculation leads us to believe that these schools admitted from one hundred to two hundred students, which was quite sufficient.

5. Conclusion

With certainty and based on the first biographers of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, we can state that it was the quality of the school that attracted the parents and the students to the schools of the Brothers. This was a quality based on effective teaching of skills, for the parents were above all looking for this characteristic in the school, as we have indicated in Chapter 6. The effectiveness of the school stemmed from its organization, from the order and discipline that reigned there and from the methods of work that were used. But

the school was effective not only in academic matters. According to De La Salle's biographers, the parents and the entire population also appreciated the moral education, the visible changes in the behavior of the students and the depth of religious instruction provided by the Lasallian schools. This also was a result of the personal quality of the teachers and their overall exemplary life.

Despite the difficulties we have discussed, the Lasallian school continued to grow even during the lifetime of its founder. It affirmed its identity by introducing into the schools innovations which were quick to be used throughout the school system, thus making this school the prototype of primary education in France.

We will return to a more thorough treatment of these innovations in the next two volumes of our study. Let us now point out briefly some of these innovations which were sometimes simply a methodical use of previous teaching practices and which went counter to the customs then in practice.

- Use of French instead of Latin to learn reading and other skills and subjects.
- Practice of simultaneous education judged more effective than the individual instruction still very often practiced in the other schools.
- Division of students into homogeneous groups to facilitate a rigorous and detailed progression in acquiring skills.
- Progression based on certain pedagogical principles of the time, like giving priority to reading as the first of the skills to be learned because it forms the basis on which other skills are built.
- A very important place given to decorum and civility in the educational process. Of course, this facet of education was a given in all schools; but for De La Salle and the Brothers, it became a central theme of education.
- A very important place given to the teacher in the school. This involved the teacher's initial and ongoing training, his continual work as part of a team in the periodic evaluation of the running of the school and his total involvement in the service of the students.

Of course, in some of these areas the Brothers were indebted to certain of their predecessors or contemporaries, as is generally the case in the history of

educational systems in the world. This will be the object of the third volume we anticipate. So, if the Lasallian school did stray in large measure from practices in force at the time, it nevertheless did not lose its sense of realism. Its objective was to provide an adequate response to the needs of the children “of the working class and the poor.” Therefore, it placed the child at the center of all educational life.

Chapter 11 – A New Type of Teacher

With the diversity of schools we have just described came a great diversity of school teachers. Trying to get a clear picture of this aspect is not easy to do. However, it is in this specific area that the Lasallian schools shone the most.

1. A Deprived Group

Finding good school teachers at the end of the seventeenth century was an urgent need. This was even more true due to the increased number of schools. Several made their voices heard to demand teachers who were better trained, better selected and more competent. Let us listen to some of these urgent appeals:

“For anyone who wanted to work with education as a charity, finding teachers was one of the most acute problems. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, the unanimous complaint is about the inability and poor habits of the teachers in small urban schools. For example, this is what Charles Démia says: ‘The majority of teachers are unaware not only of the method of reading and writing well but also of the principles of religion. Among these latter there are heretics, ungodly persons and those who have engaged in loathsome professions and under whose guidance young people run the obvious danger of going astray.’ The official reports of the schools in Lyon and Saint-Étienne are filled with harsh statements against the ignorance, drunkenness and gross behavior of these men whom only need or chance has made teachers.... In 1649, Bourdoise pointed out the eminent dignity of the teaching profession as a missionary and sanctifying work: ‘As for me, I would beg from door to door to supply a living wage for a true school teacher; and like Saint François Xavier, I would ask all the universities in the kingdom for men who want to go not to Japan or to the Indies to preach to the unconverted but at least to start such a worthy [educational]

work.²⁸³ I believe that a priest who had the knowledge of a saint would become a school teacher and thus would get canonized. The best, greatest and most esteemed teachers and even the professors at the Sorbonne would not be good enough. Because parish schools are poor and maintained by the poor, they are judged to be unworthy. However, [good teachers] provide the only means of destroying vice and establishing virtue; and I defy any man whatsoever to find a better means.”²⁸⁴

Some years later, M. de Chennevières, a true prophet on this matter, authored a paper relative to “the establishment of training schools for men and women teachers in each diocese in France.” This document has been considered and commented on by several historians. We will look at the following clear and forceful passage: “Since the world began, no one has ever heard of any academy in France specifically founded to form and train good school teachers who are capable of teaching well and forming children’s minds from the very beginning. Nor has this ever been done elsewhere except for some small initiatives that no longer exist. It is quite true that some pious persons, filled more with zeal and good will than with power and influence, have taken it upon themselves to begin something of this type, but since they have not been backed up in such a high and holy enterprise, nothing has ever become of it.”²⁸⁵

One of the best known of these pioneers was indeed Charles Demia who published in 1688 an “[i]mportant notice concerning the establishment of a kind of training school for the formation of school teachers....” In it are found some very judicious thoughts: “Whatever care is taken in the establishment of schools, it will never succeed unless there are good teachers to fill them. And there will never be good teachers unless they are formed and well trained for this role.... Nevertheless, it is very unfortunate that today

²⁸³ The Jesuit François Xavier was commissioned by John III, King of Portugal, to evangelize the people of the Indies. Presumably, Bourdoise is saying that he would be as zealous in recruiting good teachers for France as François Xavier was in recruiting preachers for the Indies. [translator’s note]

²⁸⁴ R. Chartier, MM Compère and D. Julia, *L’éducation en France du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle* (Sedes : Paris, 1976), 67-68.

²⁸⁵ *Bulletin of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, no 158 and 161.

such a holy and respectful profession is made available to anyone who comes along. Because they know how to read and write, and are disabled and impoverished (even depraved), they are still entrusted with the care of youth, and this without any concern that in doing good to an individual the entire public is being harmed. Since there are no places designed for this high ideal of providing good teachers when needed, this profession is open to scorn and very often filled with misfits, unknown and worthless persons who cannot inspire piety, competence and honesty, which qualities they will never have unless they learn them by being trained in an establishment designed for this purpose.”²⁸⁶

- **Some interesting initiatives**

During the course of the seventeenth century there were, however, several interesting endeavors, some temporary and others lasting, that we must at least mention here.

Concerning the training of women as teachers for girls, we note the Sisters of Notre Dame du Puy, the Sisters of Saint Charles Borromeo (founded by Charles Démia in Lyon), Nicolas Barré’s Sisters of the Child Jesus, the Religious Sisters of Châlons-sur-Marne and a Women’s training school in Rodez.

As for the men teachers, the most effective endeavors were certainly the teachers’ training school²⁸⁷ founded by the Company of the Blessed Sacrament in 1659 in the parish of Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet in Paris, Charles Démia’s training school Saint-Charles in Lyon dating from 1671 and then the various endeavors of De La Salle to open teachers’ training schools in Rheims and Paris for those living in rural areas, including the Brothers’ novitiate which also constituted a place of pedagogical training.

Let us conclude this section with a quote from Brother Yves Poutet: “What was lacking the most in France in the seventeenth century for the education

²⁸⁶ CL 56, 154-55.

²⁸⁷ The word used here in French for “training school” is “séminaire,” a word that does not specifically denote a training school for future priests, as does the word “seminary” in English.

of the people was not the schools, even gratuitous schools, since the majority of the city parishes had them. But what France lacked was qualified teachers, dedicated and stable, eager to welcome without an increase in salary a large number of students of elementary school age. Too often those schools that did exist accepted only few students because the teachers did not wish to see an increase in the number of their nonpaying students.”²⁸⁸

2. Principal Categories of Men and Women Teachers

Whatever their training, or lack thereof, men and women teachers overall during the second half of the seventeenth century can be grouped into six categories.

• Men and women teachers in Protestant schools

These teachers existed at least until the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) which officially took away from them the source of their employment, their schools. Because the opening of these schools and the work of their teachers were essentially connected to the reading and study of the word of God, their task was considered as a ministry; and naturally the preference was to assign that ministry to the deacons of these Protestant churches. This also guaranteed a better competence in the teaching of doctrine. Those men and women who were not deacons were trained for this ministry of teaching.

• Nuns in their convents

These nuns had increased in France since the middle of the sixteenth century; and the number of their schools grew constantly until the French Revolution. Certain congregations, like the Ursulines or the Daughters of Charity, established themselves rather quickly throughout the country and constituted a rather tight network of urban and rural schools.

The Sisters were trained for their profession right in their own convent during the time of their own religious formation. This formation took into

²⁸⁸ Poutet, *Genèse et caractéristiques de la Pédagogie Lasallienne* (Bosco: Paris, 1995), 89.

account that schools for girls did not have exactly the same objectives or the same programs as schools for boys. Girls were first trained for their role in family and society, and boys were trained for a profession. Documents from the time, such as the rules and constitutions of several congregations, have given us some very interesting facts about the pedagogical orientation and the organization of the schools of several congregations.²⁸⁹

- **The certified Master Writers**

We have already spoken of these teachers in the preceding chapter. They constituted a particular category like a guild. Like the Brothers of the Christian Schools, they worked only in cities where their specific clientele was strong enough and the educational needs were considerable. These cities were usually those where courts were located.

Their method of operation was similar to that of other guilds, with their new members being recruited by a system of peer election based on rather difficult admission examinations. Their training was serious and demanding.

- **Members of the clergy**

At that time, since the clergy was rather large in number, some of its members could dedicate themselves to teaching, including in the parish schools. More often they were parish vicars (assistants to the pastors) rather than the pastors themselves. The case of John Baptist de La Salle is an example of this. In Rheims after his ordination to the priesthood, he was not in a hurry to take charge of a parish although it was offered to him. He was therefore available and free to choose his options when Adrien Nyel found him in 1679. By not having to teach class himself he could contribute greatly to the creation of schools.

The parish schools where members of the clergy worked could be either charity schools for the poor or schools under the authority of the diocesan Superintendent. This situation was similar to the one the Brothers found when they arrived in the parish of Saint-Sulpice in Paris in 1688. It even

²⁸⁹ See *L'Église et l'éducation; mille ans de tradition éducative*, part I; *Pédagogie chrétienne, Pédagogues chrétiens*, part III.

appears that certain sponsors, “founders” of schools, sometimes required that their schools be entrusted to priests.

- **Men and women lay teachers**

As Jean Vial explains, from the seventeenth century on we see somewhat of a rise in the number of laity in teaching. In fact, in the Petites Écoles under the diocesan Superintendent and doubtlessly in a number of charity schools there were often men and women teachers. Those in the Petites Écoles made up a large part of the “troops” under the diocesan Superintendent who was in charge of them as their protector. This was even more true in the rural villages which were served less by priests, nuns or the Brothers.

These lay teachers were graduates of the preparatory secondary schools and either had or had not received their master of arts degree, with the latter being more probable. Since they were looking for work to earn a living, they were willing to teach the rudiments. This was also true for the schools with special permission, the boarding schools and the truant schools, all of which we have already described. According to several historians, it seems that these were often young unmarried laymen who were perhaps considering this employment as temporary while hoping for a better job at the same time. Their state in life was continually problematic with respect to their relationship with young women and also because of their often mentioned instability.

This state of affairs caused in large part the bad reputation given to the teaching profession. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, their image seemed more negative; and this would continue to be one of the principal concerns of John Baptist de La Salle. “The school teachers, whether priests or lay, are considered by the parish priest as private instructors. As such, they receive most often a very modest remuneration consisting of a bedroom above the school and sometimes a room inside the school transformed into a bedroom, which arrangement provided them heat and school supplies,” says Fosseyeux.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ M. Fosseyeux, *Les Écoles de charité à Paris* (Paris, 1912), 288.

“Essentially, teaching for profit during this period is the work of private teachers who provide a tuition-paying education for individuals or small groups of students either at their own place or at the home of their clientele.... In principle, they cannot practice without the permission of the bishop; but control over this is practically impossible in the large cities where many teachers practice without authorization. Their competence is very uneven, and so they form a rather diversified social group in which those who have learned only the rudiments are at the lowest level. At this level of ability it is not rare to find that those who are close to them (family members, neighbors, fellow workers) are called upon to help out, especially in places where literacy is already relatively developed. Their clientele is just as varied, for without compulsory education there is no specific age to start school. Thus, an adult and a young child could be seen struggling side by side over the same page of writing.”²⁹¹

• The Brothers of the Christian Schools

The Brothers constituted a new group, at first small in number, in the world of education at the end of the seventeenth century. They had neither legal status nor ecclesiastical approbation until 1724 and 1725, six years after the death of the Founder. Thus, the Brothers, members of the Society of the Christian Schools, were not religious in the canonical sense of the word and could be compared to lay teachers. Adrien Nyel, who played an essential role in the foundation of the Brothers, was a layman, as was the young assistant he brought from Rouen to Rheims in 1679. The first teachers who offered to work with Monsieur De La Salle in Rheims were all lay. Even though the subsequent teachers began very quickly to call each other Brother (but that was also the case with the teachers organized with Adrien Nyel in Rouen) and even though they lived in community, wore a recognizable habit and pronounced private vows of association, stability and obedience starting from 1686 and especially 1694, they were not religious in the strict sense of the word. Up to the time he wrote his will, De La Salle continued to use the expression “Society of the Christian Schools” to speak of them. This was new

²⁹¹ Parias, vol. II, 407.

and original in the Church and made anyone who saw them raise questions. Even the *Memorandum on the Habit*, written by De La Salle around 1691, could not resolve all the ambiguities.

For years they were misunderstood and even rejected, as we have seen in the preceding chapter. In the end, they constituted but a small number spread out from Calais and Boulogne-sur-Mer to Marseille and even Rome. Thus, they had to get themselves recognized by the profession, by the clergy, by the parents of the students and by the civil authorities, for their uniqueness caused upset. They would manage to do so little by little because of their professional competence and the example of their lives.

3. Living Conditions of Lay Teachers

What follows applies basically to lay men and women teachers who were subject to the diocesan Superintendent or the parish priest and who had to obtain from them an authorization to teach, a contract and a teaching position. It was different for members of the clergy, nuns, Writing Masters and the Brothers. Both in the country and in the city, the usual process for getting a teaching job was not all that easy.

• Choosing and naming a teacher

After the decision to create a school had been made and the necessary funds found, the initiative to approach a teacher for employment could come from various persons; but the clergy always had a say one way or another. Thus, at just the right time, a search for candidates could be initiated by the parish priest, the district authorities, an assembly of the people or a sponsoring benefactor.

According to the legislation then in force (notably the royal edicts of 1606 and 1695), candidates had to produce an authorization to teach that they had to obtain either from the parish priest, the bishop, the abbot of a monastery or the diocesan Superintendent. Some teachers tried to evade this; sometimes they succeeded, but it was rare. A teacher had to receive this authorization before a contract for a teaching position could be issued. “The parish priest often played an important role, both because of his own intellectual competence in judging the quality of candidates and because of the

power granted to him as overseer of the religious aspects of a school. The edict of 1606, repeated in 1695, declared that village teachers had to be approved by the parish priest. They also had to be approved by the bishop, who, moreover, kept the right to inspect them during his pastoral visits and to dismiss them if they taught doctrine wrongly or did not have good morals. The teacher's connection to the village community was sanctioned by a contract of one or several years, sometimes signed before a notary and ratified by the finance officer. This was not necessarily the case when it involved those 'individual' schools which were set up more or less permanently solely at the will of an individual."²⁹²

• Usual modes of hiring

"In certain cases, a large number of candidates permitted a real choice.... But very often they were forced to accept the only applicant who came along, even if it meant dismissing him later for being inadequate."²⁹³ The candidates had to first demonstrate that they were "capable and satisfactory" during a real examination they took before a board composed of those who wanted to open the school. After sending their letter of application, they came with their personal samples of reading and writing and a statement of their projected objectives prepared for the purpose of taking the exam.

They had to demonstrate in front of the board of examiners their ability in reading, writing, arithmetic and chant. That was the minimum; but their performance also determined the acceptance or refusal of their application, the terms of the contract and consequently the amount of their pay. Apparently it happened rather often that candidates were deemed unfit to teach writing and arithmetic because they were incompetent, for these disciplines were not thoroughly taught even in the preparatory secondary schools.

Professional competence was only one basis on which the examiners formed their decision. In addition, the examiners inquired about the candidate's life and good morals, for piety and morality were considered basic qualities.

²⁹² Parias, vol. II, 401.

²⁹³ Parias, vol. II, 401.

Charles Démia had some very strong words on this, with opinions on a teacher's qualities as well as on the defects he needed to eliminate. The teacher had to be an enemy of idleness, gambling, hunting and other worldly distractions and had to stay away from dating girls.

In the debate on “The Parish School” (1654) Jacques de Batencour dedicated several pages to the qualities of the school teacher, among which were the three theological virtues, the four cardinal virtues and humility. In the same vein, at the end of the *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes* De La Salle listed the “twelve virtues of a good teacher.” The teacher was expected not only to teach but also to give the children the example of a fine Christian life. Jean Vial found the text of a ruling for lay parish assistants or schoolmasters in the diocese of Amiens in 1780:

I. All those who shall apply for this job (as school teacher) shall bring a favorable recommendation of their conduct, signed by the priest of the parish where they will serve and certified by the dean of Christian living.

II. They will know their chant and the principal rubrics and ceremonies of the Church.

III. They will be able to teach youth reading, writing and the basics of Christian doctrine. They will know their catechism by heart.

IV. They will wear their hair shorter than most of the laity.

V. They are forbidden to drink and eat in the taverns of their neighborhood, to play the violin in public and to go to public dances and parties on the night before holidays under penalty of having their faculties revoked.

VI. Each year they will hand in their faculties along with certificates from their parish priest to the deans making their visits to the parish, who in turn will bring them to our chief vicars to be renewed if it is so thought fit.”²⁹⁴

• Salary and life style

The salary level is difficult to evaluate and to generalize. Some historians

²⁹⁴ Vial, 40.

state that it was enough to live on and place it between 100 and 150 *livres*²⁹⁵ per year. This was also the level of income for a vicar. De La Salle usually required 150 *livres* for each Brother. Other historians believe that teachers were on the brink of begging, which seems exaggerated or very rare. The annual salary was defined in the hiring contract and varied according to whether one was in the city or the country.

In the city, the tuition charged from families constituted the basic income. This varied according to the amount of the school fees and the number of students. We have seen that certain benefits in kind could be included, such as housing, heat and school supplies. In the country, the salary usually depended on the total number of months the students were present. We have seen that student absenteeism in order to go to work was not rare in the city. In the country, during the agriculturally productive season that could last from four to five months, the children were busy with working in the fields or tending the flocks.

Various other benefits in kind were added to this monetary remuneration especially in the country so that the teacher could have a decent life. Depending on the case we could see any of the following: a house made available to the teacher (which could serve at the same time as the school), food provided on a rotating basis by the parents of the students, paid extracurricular activities serving the parish or the community, contribution of wheat or wood, a garden or field made available so the teacher could cultivate it and sometimes even exemption from personal taxes.

Taken together, the teacher could not get rich even if he tried. We should not then be surprised that some (perhaps many) of them often felt like moving on in the false hope that they might find a better situation elsewhere.

• Duties of a school teacher

The clergy, who normally assigned the school teachers, expected much from them, much more in the country than in the city. The teacher could become an important part in the works of parish life and had to assist the priest in

²⁹⁵ The currency in France until 1795.

his principal liturgical functions. The following text is rather explicit on this: “Teach the students to serve Mass, assist and chant during the Divine Office, greetings and processions and generally during all religious services, assist and go with the priest in administering the sacraments, whether day or night, and act as cleric and sacristan; ring the bell for the angelus, for school and for catechism and other lessons; be responsible for the parish clock and see to it that the proper vestments are readied; sweep the choir and the sanctuary the day before Sundays and feasts and prepare the altar; decorate the altars and the church for funerals, sing in and accompany the funeral procession; teach the children how to read, write and count and teach them their catechism lessons.”²⁹⁶

In the country, the teacher was also at the disposal of the village community to do the parish bookkeeping, including taxes, to do the public reading of administrative documents received and to become the public writer for the illiterate.

These many tasks were in addition to his teaching duties. Finding a balance must not have been always easy. In addition to the basics he taught the children, he also had the responsibility as far as he was able to teach them how to sing, to educate them in civility, to get them to learn their catechism, even if he did not teach it himself, and to “keep watch over their religion,” as was stipulated in a royal edict in 1698.

• **Concluding observations**

We would like to list briefly some common characteristics that emerge from this description of the job of school teacher:

- **Harsh living conditions:** modest income, excessive number of tasks, growing fatigue that brought on sickness, inappropriate and unhealthy classroom space. Too often this necessitated an interruption in work and absence from class. Death due to these conditions has even been mentioned. There were no redeeming factors in all of this.
- **Precarious employment:** The contract was usually signed for one year, and could be renewed at the end of September on the feast of Saint

²⁹⁶ Parias, vol. II, 402.

Michael.²⁹⁷ But the teacher could be fired during the school year if he was not satisfactory or if he became capable of reprehensible acts. It has even been pointed out that some authorities in charge of a school were not in favor of a long tenure for teachers, especially the unmarried, for fear of their relationships with women and their getting stuck in a routine. They thus had to renew the contract or look for another position.

- **Mobility:** Mobility on the part of teachers has been pointed out by many documents and historians. As we have said, the teacher often hoped for a more attractive contract and left his position sometimes even before his contract expired. Some historians attribute this to the psychology of teachers in whom they see a tendency to be non-conformist, marginalized and true wanderers. We also see that some employers considered and treated them as “roamers” and “visitors passing through.”
- **Isolation:** Due to the system of the Petites Écoles, both men and women teachers were isolated. They were alone with their group of students except when they obtained the assistance of an aide, who in any case could not be of much help in the exercise of their profession. Doubtlessly visitors came to see them, such as the priest, the diocesan Superintendent or even the bishop, but these were inspection visits which hardly broke their sense of isolation. There were two important exceptions, namely the teachers in Lyon who got together monthly and the teachers of John Baptist de La Salle of whom we shall speak below.
- **Lack of previous training:** Let us restrict ourselves here to two rather explicit quotations: “The majority of teachers are unaware of not only the method of reading and writing well but also of the principles of religion. Among these latter there are heretics, ungodly persons and those who have engaged in loathsome professions and under whose guidance young people run the obvious danger of going astray.”²⁹⁸ Another author states that before the July Monarchy in 1830 the teacher “has only rarely

²⁹⁷ The feast of Saint Michael is September 29 and figures prominently in French culture and literature as a landmark date. [translator’s note]

²⁹⁸ Chartier, Compère and Julia, 67.

received specialized training. His competence is then very spotty, like the way he was recruited. We are dealing here with a local resident, sometimes sickly, whose weak constitution does not inspire confidence among the peasants. In other places, the teacher traditionally comes from a neighboring area. At the beginning of every autumn, for example, men from the Dauphiné would come down to the trade fairs in Provence or the Rhône valley to hire themselves out as school teachers during the off season. They come sporting one goose feather in their hat when they teach only reading, two for reading and writing and three when they add arithmetic, but only the four basic operations.”²⁹⁹

• Positive development

A positive development took place, however, from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. The iconography from that time reveals quite a bit on this subject.

In the seventeenth century, the iconography usually represents poorly equipped classes, idle or disorderly students, sometimes fooling around while waiting their turn to recite for the teacher. The teacher is generally “armed” with instruments of punishment (a stick, a whip or a rod) to enable him to instill a bit of order and discipline. These are not just an artist’s exaggeration. What we do know about the *Petites Écoles* confirms that this was the reality. These pictures also show us that classes were ill equipped with teaching materials and did not even have proper furniture.

In the eighteenth century, on the other hand, the iconography shows a lesser number of students, more order in the classes, teachers more correctly attired and fewer of the traditional methods of punishment. In the country during that time, the teacher was no longer always the do-it-all in the village. He gradually became a central figure in the area. His house could be the usual place for meetings and celebrations. This would be even more so during the nineteenth century and up until the middle of the twentieth century. Thus, the teaching profession gradually acquired a greater dignity and erased the negative image with which it had been associated.

²⁹⁹ Parias, vol. II, 400.

4. The Work of Saint John Baptist de La Salle

As we have just noted, John Baptist de La Salle was neither the only nor the first in the seventeenth century to become aware of the human misery in the professional and spiritual lives of the teachers in the *Petites Écoles*. But his first biographers clearly show us that this awareness came to him immediately. He was concerned with it from the moment he met his first teachers in 1679, and it would occupy him in his work of teacher training which would last forty years. His contributions to this essential area of education were truly decisive. Historians readily recognize him today, for this and various internal studies in the Institute of the Brothers have shown this in great detail.³⁰⁰

In this volume limited to the historical context of the *Conduite des Écoles*, we will not go into a detailed study of the duties, tasks and characteristics of the Lasallian teacher; but we will come back to it in another study of the text itself of the *Conduite des Écoles*. But we can indeed state that the training of teachers was doubtless the one aspect of education in which the Lasallian school from its very beginnings would affirm its identity the strongest.

As was written by the authors of *L'éducation en France du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle*, “To offset this severe drawback [the lack of well trained teachers], two solutions are possible: either establish a tight connection between ecclesiastical training and teacher training or disassociate the two and assign the task of teaching to laymen sharing a community life.”³⁰¹

It is easy to recognize in this statement a reference to Demia in the first option and to De La Salle in the second.

The same authors explain that “in Rouen in fact from 1666 Adrien Nyel had decided to gather around himself in a community without vows the

³⁰⁰ See for example the writings of Saint John Baptist de La Salle himself and the following studies: Brother Maximin, FSC, *Les Écoles normales de saint J-B de la Salle*; Carlos Alcalde, FSC, *El Maestro en la Pedagogía de san JB de La Salle*; *Rivista Lasalliana*, (some 20 articles on this subject since the beginning of the journal); Poutet, *Le XVII^e siècle et les origines lasalliennes and Genèse et caractéristiques de la Pédagogie Lasallienne*.

³⁰¹ Chartier, Compère and Julia, 67.

teachers who were in charge of the school in the General Hospital and the charity schools in the area. These laymen, who were vowed to celibacy and chastity, living in the General Hospital in obedience to the bursar and using the title ‘Brothers,’ were doubtlessly for John Baptist de La Salle the examples that inspired the teachers of his burgeoning community.”³⁰² It would indeed be interesting to analyze the analogies between this situation in Rouen and the evolution of the Society of the Christian Schools up to the time that the Bull of Approbation of the Institute of the Brothers was obtained in 1725.

We must briefly distinguish two sorts of initiatives in De La Salle’s work on behalf of the training of teachers: those concerning the teachers for country schools and those concerning the training of the members of the Society of the Christian Schools. These two groups are clearly identified and distinguished in one writing of the Founder himself entitled the *Memorandum on the Habit*.³⁰³

- **Training schools for country teachers**

It is surprising to see how fast the reputation of De La Salle and particularly his first teachers spread outside the city of Rheims during the 1680s, first in Champagne, then in Paris and even Lyon. With the spread of this reputation also came the first requests for him to take charge of the training of lay teachers for the country schools. The thirty years which followed were marked with attempts, first in Rheims and then in Paris, to open “training schools (*séminaires*) for teachers,”³⁰⁴ which he considered as a branch of the activity of his Society of the Christian Schools. Speaking of the “Community of Christian Schools” in his *Memorandum on the Habit*, De La Salle points out that “[p]rovision is also made for training schoolmasters for rural districts in a house, separate from the Community, that we call a normal school. Those who are trained there remain for only a few years, until they are well prepared

³⁰² Chartier, Compère and Julia, 69.

³⁰³ *Oeuvres Complètes*, 53-58.

³⁰⁴ Modeled by name on the schools for training of the clergy, these “*séminaires*” were for the training of teachers.

in a religious spirit as well as for their work.”³⁰⁵ The training they are given bears a striking resemblance to that given to young candidates aspiring to be Brothers: “They dress just like ordinary people except for the black or at least dark brown color of their clothing, and they cannot be distinguished from them except by the split white collar they wear and their close-cropped hair.... They are taught to become proficient in singing, reading, and writing. Their room, board and laundry are all free. In due course, they are placed in a hamlet or a village as a parish assistant. Having secured a position, they maintain no further contact with the Community except for what is appropriate and courteous. However, they are welcomed back for a periodic retreat.”³⁰⁶

These attempts were fraught with many difficulties and doubtlessly did not have a great impact on the makeup of the rural schools, if only because of the relatively small number of candidates who benefited from this training. But several historians see in it the beginning of the Normal Schools for teachers which were created in France after 1830. In Ferdinand Buisson’s *Dictionnaire de Pédagogie*, Eugène Rendu states that this program is the one which almost a century and a half later would be the obligatory part of education in the primary schools.

• Formation of the Brothers in the Novitiate³⁰⁷

This formation was begun by John Baptist de La Salle himself in Rheims in 1679 for the good of his first teachers and was continued in the beginnings of the preparatory stage for the Novitiate. The *Memorandum on the Habit* describes it in this way: “In this Community we also provide training for young boys who possess basic intelligence and some religious disposition. When we judge them suitable and they themselves apply for admission, we accept them into the Community from the age of fourteen and over. We

³⁰⁵ OC. *Mémoire sur l’Habit*, 0.0.4; *Memorandum on the Habit*, 181; CL 5 (especially part II, 241-315) also treats the *Mémoire sur l’Habit*.

³⁰⁶ OC. *Mémoire sur l’Habit*, 0.0.5; *Memorandum on the Habit*, 182.

³⁰⁷ When the text refers to the training of the Brothers in a religious community, I have translated the French word “formation” as “formation” in English. When the text refers to the training of other lay men and women, I have translated it as “training.” [translator’s note]

introduce them to the practice of interior prayer and other religious observances. We also instruct them in religious doctrine and teach them to read and write competently. These young men who are formed and raised in this Community live in a separate house with their own oratory, schedule, meals, and recreation periods. Their religious observances are different and adapted to their level of mental development and to the needs of their future work.”³⁰⁸

In a text entitled *Rules for the Training of New Teachers*, which was written a few years after the *Memorandum on the Habit*, De La Salle gives more directives on the content of the training of these candidates. In addition to reading, writing, catechism and arithmetic, the text presents a global training of the person which is divided into two parts: “Things that must be removed from them and that they must not have” and what must “be given them, what they are lacking and what they must have.” These are not two successive steps in the training but rather one global process involving the whole person of the future teacher in his attitudes, his bearing, his decorum and civility. Thus we see a brief analysis of the fifteen negative aspects that must be eliminated, for they could handicap the teacher in exercising his duties. Then we see an analysis of the ten characteristics the teacher must acquire.

• A true and continuous formation

De La Salle did not merely want an initial formation that had little to do with the reality of school life. He set up his communities and his schools so that they could serve as a place of continuous formation for each Brother. Each Brother (teacher) was invited to increase constantly his knowledge, especially in matters pertaining to Christian doctrine and to perfect his competencies in the skills for which he was to be an example for his students.

This formation was also a community project of mutual collaboration, especially during the annual retreat and the meetings organized for it. The preface of the *Conduite*, as we have seen since the beginning of our study, speaks of “numerous conferences” comprising reflection, evaluation and dialogs among the participants.

³⁰⁸ OC. *Mémoire sur l'Habit*, 0.0.7 and 0.0.8; *Memorandum on the Habit*, 182.

But the most important aspect of this formation was doubtless what happened every day, one day after the next, in the life of the community and the school. That is where the mutual help among the Brothers was displayed. The young teacher was accompanied for at least six months by an experienced teacher. The director or the inspector of the school was always present and relieved from other tasks to be able to circulate in the classes and to come to the aid of those who needed it. This is described in detail in the entire third part of the *Conduite* which treats the aspects “of the vigilance that the Inspector of schools must have over the Teachers.”

As Brother Yves Poutet wrote: “An example is given. Uniformity in the manner of guiding the students is reinforced by the community life of the teachers.... This community life has a psychological and a pedagogical value.... Mutual encouragement and sharing of experiences result from it.... These experiences, along with those of Adrien Nyel and the eighteen-year teaching experience of Jacques Batencour described in *The Parish School* (1654, reedited in 1685), provided the material for the composition of the *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes* of John Baptist de La Salle (manuscript of 1705, edition of 1720).... The entire process of formation comprised of readings, self-reflection and dialog with a director, one’s confreres, those more experienced or those still in formation in order to encourage and counsel, all this nourishes the development of the necessary qualities of any good Christian educator.”³⁰⁹

- **Quality of the teacher: secret to success**

The objective of the *Conduite des Écoles* was to be an effective tool, but its author knew that the school itself would be effective only if there were competent teachers to put its directives into practice. From the beginning, the Lasallian school owed its success to the quality and training of the teachers who led it. The first printed text of the *Conduite* in 1720 ends with a list without commentary of the twelve virtues of a good teacher: seriousness, silence, humility, prudence, wisdom, patience, reserve, tenderness, zeal, vigilance, piety and generosity. We can see that this list of virtues is built on

³⁰⁹ Poutet, 92-93, 148.

three basic modalities that still are pertinent today, namely interiority, self-control and commitment to education.

In addition to initial and continuous formation, De La Salle wanted his teachers to feel a part of the same project of human and Christian education as the poor students. With them he gradually discovered the basic importance of work in association, work together and as a team. This process of discovery and deepening led them first to live in community, although not as religious, and then to express their solidarity in the three vows that twelve of them pronounced in 1694. These were private vows of association, stability and obedience, which can be also be interpreted as a solution to the teachers' difficulties described in the first part of this chapter, namely isolation, instability and capricious independence. Moreover, this is the sense in which several historians understand it.

• **How three educational historians view the situation**

Jean de Viguerie writes: “It is true that often enough these teachers were mediocre. They were not trained for their job and were occupied by things other than the school. The work of John Baptist de La Salle provided a remedy for these failings. From 1706 the Institute of Brothers formed teachers in the novitiate of Saint-Yon in the diocese of Rouen. The Founder imposed on them a very minutely detailed pedagogical regimen which took everything into consideration: progress from day to day, schedule, methods of teaching, assignments of punishments and rewards, and even the method of grouping students in class. Nothing was left to chance. The *Conduite des Écoles* was uniform. The 116 schools of the Brothers (founded between 1679 and 1789) all operated in the same way. The Brothers carried out the first national program of elementary education. Moreover, these religious were completely available. They were not in the world, but were forbidden to aspire to the priesthood. Their Founder called them ‘servants’ of the students. Their profession of teaching was integrated into their religious life.”³¹⁰

M. Fosseyeux writes: “More than any other, the Founder of the Brothers,

³¹⁰ Viguerie, 64-65.

John Baptist de La Salle, became conscious of the social mission of the charity schools. In this work of educating the poor class, John Baptist de La Salle can be compared only with Charles Démià, who created the charity schools in Lyon and who in 1665 had begun to compose the rules and regulations for his schools. De La Salle initiated his work in 1681.”³¹¹

Louis-Henri Parias’s research puts it this way: “The success was not unopposed, yet it continued with intensity starting in 1730. The main reason for this success was the pedagogical quality of an education for which the Brothers of the Christian Schools were specially prepared.... John Baptist de La Salle rapidly created a novitiate which was transferred to Rouen in 1705. There he basically formed young Brothers for their future job. The development of the congregation would even lead to the opening of four other novitiates....”³¹²

The important work of De La Salle for teachers was publicly recognized in the twentieth century also. In 1929 Fernand Laudet published a book entitled *L’Instituteur des Instituteurs: Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, and this expression was taken up again by Jean Vial in his work on teachers. This title seems quite appropriate to us and does not reflect negatively in any way on the work of De La Salle’s predecessors or contemporaries. It was indeed the work of De La Salle that has survived the events of history and even inspired recent government controlled projects. This title is in some way the lay equivalent of the title that the Church later bestowed on John Baptist de La Salle when in 1950 Pius XII declared him “Patron of all Christian teachers.”

³¹¹ Fosseyeux, 291.

³¹² Parias, vol. II, 410.

Conclusion – Students Served by the Schools

After what we have said regarding the development of schools for the people, especially from the sixteenth century, one would think that these schools were going to gradually become the first level of a unified system of education that includes the three levels of education we know today: elementary, secondary and university. But this is not what happened. To see where the schools of Saint John Baptist de La Salle fit in, we must add some clarifications, especially for readers who are not familiar with the French system of education.

1. First degree and Second degree: Two parallel systems

Without repeating what we have already explained in this work, we must explain the system of education that the Church put into place from the fifth century and which was intended almost exclusively for well-to-do families, namely future members of the clergy, nobles, the rich and then the bourgeois. For a thousand years, neither the Church nor the state cared for the education of the people. We have shown how the spread of printed material and the awareness that took place from the beginning of the sixteenth century brought greater attention to the people, including the poor, all of which resulted in a rise in number of popular schools.

Despite this, the different groups of people did not mix. The three Orders of the nation remained distinct, even when the upper bourgeoisie tended to come close to the nobility and belong to the dominant social categories. Likewise, there was no mixing among the student populations, nor was there any coordination among different types of educational establishments.

With some rare exceptions, the children of the common people, who went to the various kinds of schools we have described, in no way intended to con-

tinue their studies in preparatory secondary schools or at a university.³¹³ Likewise noble and rich bourgeois parents were not looking to send their children to the popular schools. They put them directly into preparatory secondary schools. When it became necessary to know how to read in order to succeed in studying the liberal arts (and this was not the case in the Middle Ages), the preparatory secondary schools needed to open “short classes” to teach reading. In time these short classes would in turn subdivide and eventually become a separate truly elementary level.

Thus, from the sixteenth century two levels of education were established, the first degree and the second degree. These involved two distinct student populations which mixed very little with no links between them. In the nineteenth century, when education was already under state control, this separation would be indicated by two groups of schools, two distinct administrations in the Ministry of Public Education and two separate educational developments. Without going into greater detail, let us simply say that this dual arrangement would last until 1937, i.e. up to the time of the government known as the Popular Front. It was this government that finally decided to unify the two degrees of education and to establish a single administration under the Ministry of Public Education. World War II, which followed almost immediately, delayed the implementation of this decision. It was not until the educational reform of 1960 that finally all students were grouped in preparatory secondary schools (C.E.S).³¹⁴ Statistical studies done at that time showed that until then only 20% of students entered the second degree of education.³¹⁵

By opting for their clientele and their type of school, John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers situated themselves squarely in the first degree. It would be useless to ask what percentage of their students went on to the preparatory secondary school and then to university. Their schools led directly out into

³¹³ Several historians have studied this question. To those we have already cited, we would like to add W. Frijhoff and D. Julia, *École et société dans la France d'Ancien Régime* (EHESS: Paris, 1975).

³¹⁴ These are the *Collèges d'Enseignement Secondaire*. [translator's note]

³¹⁵ The 1937 decision was that of minister Jean Zay, and the 1960 reform was that of Olivier Guichard.

the world of work. This in no way diminished the essential contribution of the Institute of Brothers in the eighteenth century and even more in the nineteenth century to the development of modern secondary and technical education.³¹⁶

2. Neither the rich nor the poorest

• The Rich

We do find the word “rich” in the text of the *Conduite*, but it is quite clear that the dominant social categories, of which we have spoken and in which were found the rich of the society, did not send their sons to the schools of the Brothers. They were able to send them to the preparatory secondary schools which were situated in numerous cities, small, mid-sized and large.³¹⁷

As we have also indicated, it is certain that a small percentage of parents who chose De La Salle’s schools could have paid the tuition required by the teachers in the Petites Écoles or by the Writing Masters, but even so they could not be considered as rich. Moreover, it was not a question of money that prevented them from sending their children to a preparatory secondary school since education was generally free. Researchers and historians have shown evidence of children of the common people in preparatory secondary schools. It was a matter of attitude. In the social hierarchy, the majority wanted to stay in their place. Despite some social mobility that was due to economic and political development, they remained very limited in their social ambitions. Their plans for the professional future of their children did not go beyond their social milieu and were especially limited to their own guilds.

To summarize, the rich did not want to send their children to the popular schools, and the poor (those “controlled”) did not dare send their children to the preparatory secondary schools. Each group knew its own place in the workings of the city. Of course, with such a large number of people involved, there were sure to be exceptions; and historians have taken note of them.

³¹⁶ See also the work of Brother André Prévot and the volumes of Georges Rigault on the nineteenth century.

³¹⁷ See Chartier, Compère and Julia (chap. 6) and the work of Frijhoff and Julia (*passim*).

• The Poorest

In referring to poor children in his writings, John Baptist de La Salle uses words like “orphan,” “abandoned” and “vagabonds who roam here and there.” If we do not pay attention to the historical and grammatical contexts of these expressions, we might misunderstand the clientele of the Lasallian schools. We hope we have clearly shown, as the very text of the *Conduite* indicates, that the children who were enrolled in the schools of the Brothers were not “orphans” in the sense of those who were found in the orphanages of that period because children could be enrolled only when accompanied by their parents or their guardian. Nor were the children who were enrolled in the schools of the Brothers “abandoned” in the physical sense of the word. De La Salle and the Brothers certainly made the distinction between their students who were often left to themselves during the day and the children brought in every day by the Sisters of Charity to their Hôpital de la Couche, which was opened in 1640. And the children who were enrolled in the schools of the Brothers were neither “vagabonds” nor “wanderers.” These children existed in the cities, as we have shown. But quite often the police locked them up in a General Hospital, a prison or an orphanage, but not in schools.

John Baptist de La Salle is clearly speaking by analogy and in the figurative sense. Since he lived in cities, especially in Paris, he knew who the abandoned, vagabond and wandering children really were. He had certainly heard about children who ran away from home and lived from hand to mouth and by begging. On the other hand, De La Salle’s texts clearly show that he speaks of abandonment and wandering, but in the moral, educational and religious sense of the words. To get an idea of the students of the Brothers at that time, we must not resort to language that concentrates on the sordid aspects of life, which can only lead to confusion. What De La Salle deplored was the real lack of ability on the part of poor parents to care decently for their children in all areas. He wanted his schools to be truly effective instruments to make up for this lack.

Throughout this work we have indicated that the poorest did not go to school. However, it is interesting to quote the following paragraph from the *Conduite* which comes from the passage that speaks of the “visitors of absent

students”: “To demonstrate their affection and zeal for the school, they shall try to persuade the unruly students who easily and lightly miss school to come to class regularly. If they should happen on any children wandering the streets in idleness, not attending any school, they shall urge them to come to their school.”³¹⁸

• **A Certain selectivity**

A careful reading of the third part of the *Conduite* shows that some children were not admitted in the schools of the Brothers. Certainly they were in the minority, but it is a fact. We can summarize the qualifications by saying that children could be refused admission for the following reasons:

- Family reasons – those who could not come to register with one or both of their parents, or with a suitable guardian.
- Hygienic reasons – those who were carriers of contagious diseases.
- Economic reasons – those who had the means but neglected to get the necessary books and supplies for school work.
- Emotional reasons – those who had already left a school of the Brothers once or twice for being problems there.
- Pastoral reasons – those who could not commit to following the daily catechism lesson, or dissolute children who posed a moral danger for the class.
- Intellectual reasons – This is an aspect we have not yet described. These were children who seemed “retarded.” “No children shall be admitted who are so retarded and of such a low intelligence that they cannot learn anything and might thus distract others or cause trouble in the school.”³¹⁹

These were students who were clearly not teachable, as we find at all times. With respect to the time of John Baptist de La Salle, we know that a dangerous practice existed among women who assisted at childbirth, before the education of midwives became common. These matronly women would reshape the skulls of the newborn whenever they got the

³¹⁸ OC. CE 18.9.15, CL 24, 246; *Conduct*, 253.

³¹⁹ OC. CE 22.4.3; CL 24, 259; *Conduct*, 203.

chance. You can imagine the long term result of this. Louis-Sébastien Mercier describes this practice: “I wonder if the midwives of Paris still grind and knead the soft and delicate heads of the children they bring into the world. I wonder if the fingers of these inhuman matrons with their barbaric and continuous pressure on a baby’s head still destroys nature’s own structuring and the seat of understanding. And I wonder if in imposing a round shape on a human head, these ignorant women modify it forever causing imbecility and idiocy.”³²⁰

For De La Salle and the Brothers, school was a very serious thing. It had to be an effective response to the expectations and needs of the working class and the poor, and it had to be a path to advancement for these students. But it produced the expected results only if those who used it took it seriously. It was not for the shallow nor for the lazy! That is what could justify a certain selectivity among those seeking admission.

3. Privileged students

Even though they were neither orphans, nor abandoned nor marginalized in the strict sense of the word, the students in Lasallian schools were poor, however. They were poor economically; and consequently, as De La Salle states, they were poor socially, morally and spiritually. These are the poverties that concerned De La Salle, for their consequences are, as he stated, unfortunate.

But in their poverty these children were lucky on three counts.

- **They were the survivors.**

In a society in which infant and child mortality rates remained very high and the average life expectancy was so low, they were the survivors. They went through the dangers of birth, sicknesses, epidemics, accidents and famine.

- **They were the privileged.**

They were indeed privileged, for they belonged to the minority who went to school. To be sure, the percentage of educated persons was generally higher

³²⁰ Mercier, 322.

in the cities where De La Salle's schools were than in the country. But it would be more than two centuries before education in France would approach 100%.

- **They were the lucky.**

Within the educated minority, they had the luck to be admitted into a Lasallian school. There were, as yet, very few of these, but in familiar terms we can say that "it was the best there was" at the time. These were schools designed and organized for them, focused on their professional, social, educational and pastoral needs. They had at their service, from morning to evening, teachers who worked and lived only for them and who offered a complete program of training so they could have the best of opportunities to enter into the world.

This will be the subject of the next volume.

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