
The Educational Theory of John Baptist de La Salle

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*"To touch the hearts of your pupils and to inspire them with the Christian spirit is the greatest miracle you can perform, and one which God expects of you."
Saint John Baptist de La Salle²*

Born April 30, 1651, to a wealthy family in France, John Baptist de La Salle was privileged enough to receive formal schooling.³ By age 16, De La Salle was appointed Canon of the Cathedral at Rheims. He then went on to study at the *Collège des Bons-Enfants* and received his Master's in Arts in 1669. De La Salle then went to Paris to attend the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. In July of 1671, De La Salle's mother died, followed quickly by his father in April of 1672. De La Salle left the seminary to return to Rheims and care for his six younger siblings. He would eventually complete his seminary studies and receive his Doctorate in Theology. John Baptist de La Salle was ordained in 1678, at the age of 27.

At this time in France's history, many people lived in extreme poverty, and only the very wealthy could receive an education. Poor young girls sometimes fared better than boys and were educated at the convent schools of Teaching Sisters. This model of education greatly influenced De La Salle. He became the protector of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, who ran charity schools for girls, after their Founder, a fellow Canon at the Rheims cathedral, had died. The lack of educational opportunities for boys continued to disturb De La Salle. As a protector of the Sisters, he met the layman Adrian Nyel, who had spent many years teaching the poor of Rouen, France. De La Salle invited Adrian Nyel to stay at his home. This would indeed mark the beginning of De La Salle's gradual involvement in charity schools for boys.⁴ In conversations with Nyel, De La Salle shared Nyel's concern for boys' education and those too poor to afford any chance of raising themselves out of poverty. De La Salle gradually began training Nyel's schoolmasters. He would later reflect on this decision and wrote, "those whom I was obliged to employ as teachers, I ranked below my own valet; hence, the very thought of having to live with them was unbearable."⁵

This time spent with Nyel and the schoolmasters reached into the rest of De La Salle's life. Their challenge to his wealthy lifestyle and his increasing involvement in this work led to his decision to leave his position as Canon and leave his home to form the teaching community that would later come to be known as the Brothers of the Christian Schools.⁶

Not surprisingly, De La Salle's efforts to educate and enfranchise the poor were met with opposition from various groups. Church authorities were reluctant to accept this novel religious life, one that included laymen.⁷ Additionally, established educational institutions were not in favor of De La Salle's Brothers providing a free education to everyone.

Despite these objections, De La Salle succeeded in establishing schools that were novel in their approach to classroom instruction and educational practices. In De La Salle's schools, students were divided into groups based on their ability and were taught an integrated curriculum of religious learning along with secular instruction.⁸ De La Salle was one of the early pioneers of "simultaneous instruction," which teachers the world over would continue to use.⁹ Students at the Christian Schools were taught by non-clerics. De La Salle developed and perfected a teacher training program for them. Before this development, many male teachers had less social standing than the "town drunk." Teaching the poor was not considered a respected position. De La Salle changed this by instituting rigorous training programs, retreats, and regular reflections. Additionally, these men were required to live "in community" to deepen their faith and strengthen their vocation.

Since the time De La Salle began his efforts in the late 1600s, "the Lasallian mission is present in 80 countries around the world, with 4,000 De La Salle Christian Brothers (Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools) and 90,000 Lasallian Partners serving one million young people in 1,000 educational ministries."¹⁰ De La Salle died on April 7, 1719, in Rouen, France. He was canonized in 1900 by Pope Leo XIII, and declared the universal Patron Saint of All Teachers of Youth by Pope Pius XII in 1950. His feast day is celebrated by the Church on April 7th.¹¹

De La Salle instituted major changes in teaching and learning. Because of these sweeping changes and to better understand his mission, it is worthwhile to consider the educational theories of John Baptist de La Salle. To accomplish this, we should consider the following questions.

1. Theory of Value

*What knowledge and skills are worthwhile learning?
What are the goals of education?*

De La Salle's greatest message to his disciples was to develop the spirit of religion in the souls of their pupils. He believed that everything learned in life must be functional, so that one would be able to use the knowledge later in life. He emphasized a practical approach to all subjects. To this end, De La Salle had his teachers teach reading in the vernacular, rather than Latin, the language of the Church or the upper class.¹² This also allowed the students to share what they had learned with their parents, extending the knowledge to more people. It suggests that De La Salle valued the dissemination of knowledge among people of all social classes. And the fact that De La Salle chose to educate lay people to become teachers suggests that he valued teachers who were well-prepared in the foundations of education.

Based on the population that De La Salle aimed to serve in the schools that he founded, his goals for education were finally socially impactful, creating eventual equity among the people of France and the world through equal education opportunities. While De La Salle valued functional secular education, religious guidance was a primary goal of education. For De La Salle, the education of Christians brought people closer to God.

2. Theory of Knowledge

What is knowledge?

When considering De La Salle's views of knowledge and belief, one must disregard the typical epistemological definition of belief. For De La Salle, belief does not refer to having confidence in knowledge (believing something to be true). Rather, for De La Salle, belief is inseparable from faith. Belief speaks directly to belief in God, salvation, and the Church. While De La Salle was not an educational theorist in today's sense, we can make inferences about his views of knowledge and belief, based on his writings.

De La Salle was ever practical in his view of education. He always had an eye on the usefulness that a particular lesson served. However, he also had an all-encompassing view of education. De La Salle believed that through education, a student could become not only educated, but also a better human. Knowledge allowed students to become better Christians.¹³

It should also be mentioned that in his time, boys of the poor and working classes were denied an education because it was thought to be unnecessary. At best, they received training in manual labor vocations. De La Salle met with continued resistance in educating these children and fought many court battles to continue providing this free education for the poor.¹⁴ The higher classes were threatened by De La Salle's providing tuition-free education, and they were also threatened by the mere fact of having an educated underclass. However, De La Salle believed that rather than undermining society, the education of the poor and working-class would lift all of society. Knowledge, in the sense of Christian knowledge, not only improves the life of the one receiving an education but also uplifts society as a whole.

In *The Duties of a Christian to God*, De La Salle writes that there are only two duties of a Christian – knowing God and loving God.¹⁵ Without the fulfillment of these obligations, a person cannot achieve salvation and, therefore, cannot be fully Christian. To accomplish these ends, students needed knowledge and, more importantly, a catechism that would both instruct them and provide the socialization that would add to their becoming “better Christians.” De La Salle charges teachers with the responsibility “to inspire them [students] with the Christian spirit” and calls this “the greatest miracle one can perform.”¹⁶

How does knowledge differ from belief?

De La Salle was very clear that the students in his schools should receive both academic and religious instruction. For De La Salle, one could not exist without the other. However, he is clear that the true purpose of the Christian Schools is to “teach the boys to lead good lives by instructing them in their religion, by inspiring them with Christian maxims, and by giving them a suitable education.”¹⁷ He believed that the ills that plagued the poor and working-class were the direct results of a poor upbringing. Children, left alone while their parents struggled to make a living was, in De La Salle's mind, the problem – the answer to which was the Christian School and the instruction that the Brothers would provide. Battersby writes, “Hence, however important it might be to teach the pupils reading, writing, and arithmetic, it was far more important, in his view, to train them to piety.”¹⁸

For De La Salle, belief and knowledge are so closely related and dependent upon one another that it is difficult to separate the two. He demonstrated an understanding of two kinds of faith. Divine faith, which is “a virtue that makes us adhere with the submission of mind and heart to whatever God has revealed and to profess with firm conviction whatever the Church proposes for our belief.”¹⁹ This type of faith specifically involves knowledge and belief working together to serve a functional purpose and leads to becoming a better Christian. If an individual believes in God and wants to properly serve him, he or she must first attain to specific knowledge and belief with all their mind and heart. The second kind of faith, as lived by De La Salle and his teachers, is a human faith. It is a faith based on one’s belief in the things that other people affirm with their lives.

*What is a lie?
What is a mistake?*

De La Salle would likely say that the difference between a lie and a mistake is the intention. This is based on something in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.²⁰ He outlines, in detail, the manner of punishment for lying and the manner of correction when a student makes a mistake. He considers lying as one of five vices that should not be excused. He writes:

Liars must be punished for their lies, even the least, to make students understand that there are no little lies in the sight of God, for the devil is the father of lies . . . Let them rather be pardoned or punished less severely when they frankly acknowledge their faults . . . they will be persuaded to ask pardon humbly of God while kneeling in the middle of the classroom.²¹

Mistakes, on the other hand, are things that are simply corrected. De La Salle goes on at great length about the correcting of mistakes. Reading through this section in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, one can see that he views mistakes as part of the learning process. He expects them to occur.

The beginners’ level for each lesson will consist of those who still make many mistakes in reading. The intermediate level will consist of those who make few mistakes in this reading, that is to say, one or two mistakes at most each time. The section of the advanced and perfect will consist of those who ordinarily make no mistakes in reading their lessons.²²

3. Theory of Human Nature

*What is a human being?
How does it differ from other species?
What are the limits of human potential?*

De La Salle answers these questions directly and indirectly in his writings. He is quite clear about the attributes and purpose of human beings. In *The Duties of a Christian to God*, he writes:

The most excellent and important creatures that God brought into being are angels and humans; in fact, he created all the rest for their sake . . . As for us humans, we are rational creatures composed of a body and a soul created in the image of God. Our principal and

primary occupation should be to know and to love God; we are in this world for nothing else. We are an image of God also in this regard: we must resemble him in this life²³

Certainly, De La Salle was greatly influenced by the surrounding social, political, and economic circumstances that derived from the late sixteenth century; particularly the circumstances that led to the French School of Spirituality. It is this school of thought that most influenced De La Salle's understanding of humanity and its innate goodness / sinfulness. France, at the end of the sixteenth century, was a very wealthy country. The upper classes wallowed in decadence. The Church in the late sixteenth century was also incredibly wealthy, with a collective worth equal to one-third of the total national wealth of France.²⁴ A Church that wealthy and powerful could potentially lead to an unfavorable climate for the monarchy. In an attempt to balance this situation, the King, in the Concordat of 1516, assigned the ownership of Church property and, in effect, did the same for Church positions of authority in France.

By assignment of ownership to those that were considered “good servants of the state,” the monarch would gain control of the Church's wealth. Positions were given to those who were not eligible to hold positions according to Church law. Young children and women were given titles and benefices, and most bishops were members of the King's Court.²⁵ The consequences of this was a clergy who become more interested in their own fortunes and positions than in the spiritual well-being of their congregations. The spiritual life of many Christians was a “for show only” endeavor with no real religious meaning, although there was a solid body of those who lived holy lives and provided genuine charity to others. The century brought about an extraordinary reform of spirituality, which led the seventeenth century in France to be called “the golden age of spirituality.”²⁶

During this period of reform, the French School of Spirituality was born. The reform was led by religious men such as Pierre de Bérulle, called the founder of the French School of Spirituality, Charles de Condren, successor to Bérulle as Superior of the French Congregation of the Oratory, Jean-Jacques Olier (1628-1657), founder of the Sulpicians, and Jean Eudes (1601-1680), founder of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary. These were leaders who were most influential on De La Salle.²⁷

In the introduction to *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, Jean-Guy Rodrigue wrote about four influences on De La Salle that came from the French School: Christocentrism, the action of the Holy Spirit, theocentrism, and the human person before God. For our purposes, we are concerned only with the latter two topics.

Theocentrism refers to the position of God in relation to the rest of creation. Bérulle, Condren, and Olier would all agree that God is majestic; and there is nothing great save its dependence on, and an expression of, God. In fact, the basis of the spirituality of the French School stems from the greatness and majesty that is God, something that was sorely neglected during the sixteenth century when decadence and humanism ruled supreme. De La Salle lived within this conviction. Where De La Salle deviates from the general thrust of these earlier thinkers is in the adoration of God. Here, De La Salle follows Bérulle's thinking; it is completely natural for any creature to adore God, and to abandon itself to the will of God. Condren and Olier speak of a destruction / sacrifice of the creature when in adoration of the Divine – nothing but the destruction of the creature is

worthy of the glorification of God.²⁸ De La Salle's perspective is far from this. De La Salle's view of proper adoration may be seen as he described the Virgin Mary's response to God:

By a special privilege, she already enjoyed the use of reason [at the moment of her birth] and made use of it to adore God and to thank him for all His goodness. She professed her nothingness profoundly in the depths of her soul, acknowledging that she owed everything to God. She admired interiorly what God had done in her, saying to herself what she later declared in her Canticle, God has done great things in me.²⁹

De La Salle does not accept the pessimism of Bérulle nor the very dark view of Condren and Olier. In the French School, the nothingness and weakness of humans as they encounter God are central themes. Bérulle, Condren, and Olier preach a spirituality whereby we as humans, when confronted by the majesty of God, are so unworthy that the mere presence of God destroys the creature. De La Salle does not take such a harsh view. While he believes that we are sinful, he does not preach the self-destruction described by the aforementioned theologians. Instead, humans must recognize their total dependence upon God. This leads him to describe "a feeling of adoration at the thought of God's presence."³⁰ Common to De La Salle's writings are phrases such as "emptying oneself" and "stripping away" but never the language of destruction or annihilation present in Bérulle, Condren, and Olier.

All of these – the possession of rationality and a soul, the ability to adore a majestic God, and the purpose of knowing and loving God – are what, collectively, distinguishes humans from other creatures.

When it comes to the limits of human potential, De La Salle, if he were speaking today, would say that humans are self-limiting. The purpose of humans is to know and love God. Humans, De La Salle would argue, limit themselves from completing their purpose and achieving salvation by their unwillingness to abandon self-concern, pride, and sinfulness. Their refusal to abandon themselves, acknowledge their "nothingness," and realize their dependence on God limits the fulfillment of their purpose.

4. Theory of Learning

*What is learning?
How are skills and knowledge acquired?*

Despite the prevailing notions of his place and time, De La Salle believed that everyone deserved to have a meaningful, useful school experience no matter their class or social standing. For De La Salle, a meaningful, useful school experience would have taken the form of the "School as a Temple" learning model.

Learning models can be categorized into three distinct images: the "School as a Factory," the "School as a Town Meeting," and the "School as a Temple." The oldest of these three is the image of the "School as a Temple." In schools that operate according to this image, the mind and the spirit are cultivated by way of character instruction. Religious leaders are the inarguable authorities and negotiation is not usually an option. Distinct qualities of mind and feelings are developed

through character education by religious authorities. Because of his strong religious affiliation, De La Salle would most likely favor this image of schooling.

In order to promote the acquisition of knowledge in his schools, De La Salle introduced what is now referenced as the “simultaneous method.” With this method, “he transformed education into a group learning event and curtailed the great amount of time spent by the teacher in supervising the solitary recitation of individual students.”³¹ This method involved regularly evaluating students according to their learning potential and forming class rosters based on ability. Students were to listen and follow along while pointing at the words being read and reading them silently as the teacher read aloud.³² With this method, De La Salle cemented a strong teacher-student relationship as the key to learning.³³

De La Salle also seemed to agree with the current belief that knowledge is more effectively gained through authentic experience. He proposed a very practical way of learning for his students, believing that children should be taught in their own language rather than the language of the wealthy. De La Salle would agree that it was useless if a child could count to 10 in class, but failed to be able to count his 10 marbles at home or understand how to purchase something for 10 dollars in the local store. He wanted his students to be able to use what was learned both at home and in their living communities.

For De La Salle, learning was a functional tool, not only used in the classroom for the attainment of grades but used in the everyday lives of these students. They would become better individuals and better Christians. Keeping in mind the religious aspect of De La Salle’s schools, one must be aware that the ultimate goal of Lasallian education was to become a better Christian. The knowledge and skills taught in the classroom were a means for these students to become better individuals and Christians. Knowledge was a tool provided by God so that they could carry out their duties to him.

5. Theory of Transmission

Who is to teach?

During De La Salle’s time in France, the training of male teachers was the weakest link in primary education.³⁴ As stated in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, “Teaching the poor in primary schools was an unattractive, often part-time position filled by those unable to do better elsewhere.”³⁵ The lack of preparation of these teachers provoked a negative attitude about primary education amongst the French. This was a time when poor children, whom De La Salle wanted to educate, were looked upon as “dregs” who would run around the streets instead of receiving a proper education.

De La Salle wanted to train male schoolteachers with “an evangelical spirit and total dedication to the instruction and Christian education of the children of the working class and the poor.”³⁶ This was the foundation for the start of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The nature of the work of the Brothers was primarily spiritual.³⁷ With God as the true teacher, De La Salle lived and modeled a life of poverty and obedience in harmony with that of Jesus. In making God’s Word the most important kind of knowledge, De La Salle insisted that the De La Salle Christian

Brothers would maintain certain virtues. Among these virtues were community, faith, zeal, practicality, and spirituality. Fittingly, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* included school practices that showed how such virtues should be carried out, beginning with entering the school in the morning (both children and instructors) to dismissal.

By what methods?

The teaching methods of De La Salle were based, first and foremost, on modeling.³⁸ Teachers were required to be models of virtue. During the course of the day, they were to follow strict rules of conduct for themselves and for their students. For example, all took off their hats and blessed themselves with holy water upon entering the classroom. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* included rules that teachers should inculcate in children. Observing silence, not playing during meals, and requiring everyone to clean up after himself, were examples set up in the writings of De La Salle. Rewards were given to students for piety, ability, and assiduity. Assiduity was rewarded above ability, and piety always received the best award. The actual gift a child would receive was usually a religious item. Children were reprimanded when the occasion required it, but De La Salle wrote much about how children should be respected while being corrected. In *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, De La Salle noted that corrections should be timely and purposeful, and should avoid too much harshness, but also too much gentleness. At a time when corporal punishment was considered the norm, De La Salle required that his teachers use the rod or ferule sparingly, especially limiting the number of times a child could be corrected by the use of either of these.

What will the curriculum be?

An essential part of the curriculum in the Christian Schools was learning prayers and the catechism. Academic subjects included reading, writing, and practical skills. Children were required to learn prayers that would be recited at various times during the day. De La Salle taught that through prayer one could become closer to God, and it was the goal of a De La Salle Christian Brother to educate his students to love and serve God.

6. Theory of Society

What is society?

To understand De La Salle's views concerning society, one must first understand the conditions preceding De La Salle's lifetime and the changes that occurred in society during his lifetime. These changes in society directly influenced De La Salle's work and opinions.

Before De La Salle's lifetime, France's upper classes were immersed in a lifestyle of extravagance and splendor. At the end of the sixteenth century, there existed an odd relationship between religion and wealth, power, and greed. This relationship came about through an extremely wealthy Church and a monarchy that was threatened by that wealth. The monarchy, in order to maintain power, had the practice of giving away positions within the Church that were associated with property holdings and ownership. Religion in society thereby became merely a vehicle for advancement; no true spirituality was evident. This was a period of extreme humanism followed by a period of spirituality whereby God was returned to a position of majesty.

De La Salle lived during the reign of Louis XIV, a ruler known for his excess in all things fine and luxurious. At the end of 1683, Louis XIV was rumored to have married one of his mistresses, Madam de Maintenon. Mme Maintenon was known for being religious and, in turn, convinced Louis to forsake his other mistresses and lead a more Christian existence. The King acquiesced, and yet another surge in spirituality began, since the court and other nobles followed the lead of their King.

This turn to living spiritually relates directly to De La Salle's views of society. For him, society must have a religious component to be a worthy society. Manners, civility, and decorum contributed essentially to living a good Christian life. In the introduction to *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, editor Gregory Wright writes:

He believed that although good manners were not always the expression of good morals, they could contribute strongly to building them. While he envisioned acts of decorum and civility as observing the established customs and thereby protecting the established social order, he envisioned them more profoundly as expressions of sincere charity.³⁹

In addition to the standard view or definition of society, De La Salle viewed Christians as a society unto themselves, though not separated from society at large. In *The Duties of a Christian to God*, De La Salle writes:

It [liturgy] must be public because as Christians we are a society; and we must gather together (1) to have a chance to live and act as a society, (2) to show that we belong to it, and (3) to render God our collective homage.⁴⁰

De La Salle stresses that while he views Christians as a separate society, they should serve as examples to the greater society. Gregory Wright comments:

. . . the refinement of the gentleman would become a restraint on and an antidote to self-centeredness, the root of individual moral transgressions as well as the collective evil in human society. The ideal gentleman personified the acceptance of the existing religious, political, and social order and showed how all citizens could find their places without disorder and revolution, so that all could be happy or, at least, contented.⁴¹

What institutions are involved in the educational process?

As mentioned above, De La Salle didn't seek to educate the children of the poor and working classes in standard academics alone. Without a religious component, the work of De La Salle would have been abandoned. Thus, the Church was a significant factor in the way education was seen by him. It was, however, not the only factor. Home (parents) and the school also had their roles to play. In *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* editor Gregory Wright states, "De La Salle insists that parents and teachers must teach the many details of politeness in a manner that will motivate children to be courteous and civil" ⁴²

However, it must also be pointed out that for De La Salle good manners and civility have a deeper meaning:

It is surprising that most Christians look upon decorum and politeness as merely human and worldly qualities and do not think of raising their minds to any higher views by considering them as virtues that have reference to God, to their neighbor, and to themselves. This illustrates very well how little true Christianity is found in the world and how few among those who live in the world are guided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Still, it is this Spirit alone which ought to inspire all our actions, making them holy and agreeable to God.⁴³

7. Theory of Opportunity

Who is to be educated?

Who is to be schooled?

We must here differentiate between education and schooling. Education involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills by way of instruction. Schooling involves specific learning that takes place in a school. This seems to be a subtle difference since both definitions involve learning. The differences are not so subtle, however, when we look at De La Salle's point of view.

Born to an aristocratic family, De La Salle did not experience firsthand what his students experienced. The students in his schools, the children of the poor and working classes, were accustomed to being left to roam the streets while their parents worked to provide food and shelter, often working up to eleven hours a day in the winter and up to sixteen in the summer months.⁴⁴ These children were denied both the opportunity for schooling, as ready access to primary charity schools was almost non-existent, and the opportunity for education at home since their parents had neither the time nor the background to teach them.

It is one of the principal duties of fathers and mothers to raise their children in a Christian manner and to teach them their religion, but since the majority are not sufficiently enlightened in this matter, and because on the one hand, some are busy with temporal matters and the care of their family, and on the other hand, those whose constant worry is to gain the necessities of life for themselves and their family, they cannot make time to teach them the duties of a Christian.⁴⁵

De La Salle's Christian Schools provide the opportunity for both education and schooling for the boys of working-class and poor families. He believed in providing both schooling and education by incorporating manners, civility, and most importantly, religion into the curriculum. De La Salle was well aware of the position that working-class and poor parents were in. The following, from De La Salle, explains the situation he wants his schools to address:

It is a practice . . . common with lowly paid workers and the poor simply to let their children grow up . . . like vagabonds who wander here and there while they cannot employ them in any useful way . . . being obliged to look for work away from their home, they simply leave the children to their own devices. The consequences, however, are disastrous because the children, grown accustomed to a life of idleness for several years, have a good deal of trouble settling down to work. In addition, they develop bad habits since they often mix with evil company.⁴⁶

De La Salle educated the parents through their children, especially by publishing books that served to educate not only the boys in his classrooms but their parents as well.⁴⁷

In conclusion, according to De La Salle all of society should have the opportunity to be both educated and schooled – even the lowest members. De La Salle may, however, question the value of only “schooling.” For De La Salle, this would not be advantageous to society, as schooling alone does not help a person become fully Christian and, therefore, fully human.

8. Theory of Consensus

Why do people disagree?

For this question, we will concentrate on the main source of disagreement for De La Salle – that of opening charity schools and educating the poor.

De La Salle’s schools came after the model of the Teaching Sisters who educated poor and orphaned girls at convent schools. While teaching young girls was seen as worthwhile and acceptable, poor, underprivileged boys went uneducated, with no hope of attaining higher social status.

De La Salle’s sole concern was primary schools. People who disagreed with De La Salle were aware of the success of the Jesuit-operated secondary schools (the collège) and the high-quality education that older boys received. De La Salle’s provision of quality primary education to the poor that was tuition-free would have posed a threat to schoolmasters employed at fee-driven primary schools.

Problems began in earnest at De La Salle’s school on the Rue du Bac. This school, staffed by the teachers of De La Salle, was in direct competition with area schools that were called the Little Schools. The Little Schools were not charity schools. William Battersby writes:

The charity schools of Saint Sulpice [local parish] were attracting all the children of the neighborhood, with the result that the teachers of the Little Schools were left without pupils and therefore without means of livelihood. Had every boy in De La Salle’s classes been destitute and incapable of paying the smallest fees, no objection would have been raised, but because it was suspected that there were some whose parents could afford to send them to the Little Schools, it was held that the charity school was a menace. De La Salle, in fact, had no discrimination between the pupils who came to him because he felt it was not his business to decide which boys should enter and which should not. This, he thought, was clearly a matter for the parish priest, who knew the parents and could form some idea as to their financial circumstances.⁴⁸

There was also general disagreement among the upper classes about providing an education to the lower classes. Perhaps deeply rooted there was an intrinsic fear that upper-class individuals have when thinking about the education of the lowest classes of society. Educating the lowest class would make them aware of the disequilibrium between the classes. It is not difficult to understand, and over 300 years later, we still battle this fear.⁴⁹

How is consensus achieved?

Normally, a consensus is achieved through the mutual education of the disagreeing parties. Informed people can make informed decisions. And having a common goal eases the way for consensus. In the case of educating the poor and working class tuition-free, a consensus was never achieved. De La Salle faced countless lawsuits about the charity schools. Even 300 years later we still cannot achieve consensus.

For De La Salle, a deeper sense of consensus was achieved by the submission to God's will. Despite the surges of spirituality that had come since the sixteenth century, De La Salle found himself constantly struggling to make people understand the rich concept of the will of God. To him, teaching the poor was not simply charity, but rather *imitatio Dei* (the imitation of God). De La Salle, in both *The Duties of a Christian to God* and *Meditations*, repeatedly quotes scripture about the care of the poor as being the will of God. To disagree with this would be, in De La Salle's eyes, a sin. Consensus, then, is achieved by simply living a truly Christian life and adhering to the will of God.

Whose opinion takes precedence?

It comes as no surprise that De La Salle would, when all was said and done, hold that the only opinion that matters is the opinion of God. According to De La Salle, there are only two duties of a Christian – to know God and to love God. How does one know when they have accomplished these duties? De La Salle answers with the following:

Although we cannot be certain as long as we live on this earth whether we possess true love for God, there are various signs that to some extent can give us some assurance. The first sign is when we ardently desire to do the will of God in all things. The second is when we fulfill exactly what we know God demands of us⁵⁰

Endnotes

1. Kristina Greenwood, who earned a master's degree in education from La Salle University in Philadelphia (USA), currently does private tutoring and academic advising / mentoring in the Philadelphia area. She is a former director of La Salle University's *Summit Program*, a division of the De La Salle Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning and the Office of the Provost. "The Educational Theory of John Baptist de La Salle" is a revision by the author of a paper that initially appeared online in 2010 in *New Foundations*.

2. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), #139.3.

3. "Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle" in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (n.d.). [Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/326517/Saint-Jean-Baptiste-de-La-Salle>]

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