

Pungier, Jean. "Guided by the Spirit in Daily Living: A Commentary on De La Salle's *Decorum and Civility*." Translated by Gerard Rummery. Edited by William Mann. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 6, no. 1 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2015).

© Jean Pungier, FSC. (Readers of this article have the copyright owner's permission to reproduce it for educational, not-for-profit purposes, if the author and publisher are acknowledged in the copy.)

Guided by the Spirit in Daily Living: A Commentary on De La Salle's *Decorum & Civility*

Jean Pungier, FSC¹, Translated by Gerard Rummery, FSC, Ph.D.²
Edited with notes by William Mann, FSC, D.Min.³

Decorum and civility are what is most missing in social life at the beginning of this new century.

To practice them assiduously would not be simply conforming
To some social code of politeness – which is necessary –
but restoring dignity to human beings.

The alternative would be to run the risk of losing the social bonds
which make it possible to live in society.

Practicing them would mean also adopting Lasallian spirituality and living according to it.

It would mean giving meaning to life and setting out on the path
leading to one's own evangelization and that of others.⁴

“Why do our contemporaries look no matter everywhere
for a spiritual doctrine except in Christianity or in a Christian author?
Is this the consequence of a too long history of seduction/deception,
the old grudges of a too old couple?

Everything appears to be too well known and yet nothing is.
Or more probably has the atmosphere of today
been turned completely upside-down”?

This good question of Jean-Claude Eslin⁵ deserves attention and reflection.

It is like the terse statement of theologian Karl Rahner:
“Tomorrow's Christian will be a mystic or nothing at all.”⁶

This essay, inspired by a reflection on
The Rules of Christian Decorum & Civility by John Baptist de La Salle,⁷
wishes to offer some particular elements for building a spiritual life
in the daily circumstances of our situations and meetings.

A literal translation of the title of this never-before-published manuscript would have been *Living Under the Guidance of the Spirit, Day after Day, According to John Baptist de La Salle in his "Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility."*

Table of Contents

- I. Living by the Holy Spirit at the Heart of Our Human Relationships
- II. The Spirituality of the Lay Person According to *Decorum & Civility*
 - A. What is the lay Christian called to live through these rules?
 - B. How can a lay Christian, according to John Baptist de La Salle, live all one's actions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?
 1. Living according to the rules of decorum & civility in our surroundings
 - a. concerning decorum
 - b. concerning civility
 2. Being governed by reason
 3. Witnessing to the virtues proper to Christian decorum & civility
 - a. concerning modesty
 - b. concerning respect
 - c. concerning union and charity
 4. A spirituality nourished by sacred Scripture
 - a. concerning *Psalms*
 - b. concerning *Ecclesiasticus*
 - c. concerning the Gospels
 - d. concerning the epistles
 5. Welcoming the Holy Spirit in the most down-to-earth moments of life
- III. An Example of Lasallian Education in Decorum & Civility

I. Living by the Holy Spirit at the Heart of Our Human Relationships

There is no need for us to exaggerate the bold pastoral plan so clearly demonstrated by John Baptist de La Salle in the preface to *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*.⁸ This preface is addressed, first of all, to fathers and mothers entrusted with the education of their children and to men and women teachers charged with the instruction of these same children. It is concerned, not with persons committed in Holy Orders or Consecrated Religious Life, but rather with lay people, “seculars,” or, as was said in the seventeenth century, with people living “in the age” or “in the world,” Christians living their Christian life from day to day. What does this preface say to them?

First of all, there is a very strongly pessimistic judgment on the way “the majority of Christians” view and live the rules of decorum and civility:

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.⁹

Thus, practicing rules of decorum and civility is in effect *practicing a virtue*, a virtue that refers to God, our neighbor and ourselves, a virtue calling us to live and to be guided by *the Spirit of Jesus Christ*. It is here that John Baptist de La Salle points out this requirement – its pastoral boldness – by saying: “Still, it is this Spirit alone which should inspire all our actions, making them holy and agreeable to God.”¹⁰

This is a truly Lasallian radicalism. “All our actions” have to be “animated by the Holy Spirit.” De La Salle insists: “This is an obligation Saint Paul points out to us when he tells us in the person of the early Christians that, since we should live by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we must also act in all things by that same Spirit.”¹¹

But what does living according to the Spirit of Jesus Christ mean in practical terms when it is concerned with faithfulness to “the rules of decorum and civility?” The preface specifies it once again with the same rigor:

According to the same apostle, since all our actions should be holy, there are none which should not be done through purely Christian motives. Thus, all our external actions, which are the only ones that can be guided by the rules of decorum, should always, through faith, possess and display the characteristics of virtue.¹²

Thus *all our actions should be holy*, that is, *done for purely Christian motives*; and when it is a question of “external actions,” the only ones that can be regulated by the rules of propriety, they *should always have and display the character of virtue*.

What could such a viewpoint of the spiritual order mean in the field of education, in the house, or in the school? There are two considerations for educators, the first being a warning:

Parents and teachers should never fail, while teaching children the rules of decorum, to remind them that they should observe these only through purely Christian motives that concern the glory of God and one's own salvation. Parents and teachers should avoid telling the children in their care that if they fail to act in a certain way people will blame them, will not have any respect for them, or will ridicule them. Such remarks can only inspire children with the spirit of the world and turn them away from the spirit of the gospel.¹³

The second consideration again demonstrates the boldness of this truly Lasallian pastoral concern. It is an invitation to live "in God's presence" and to bring through these practices of propriety a view of faith with regard to the people with whom one is led to associate. Indeed, whenever fathers, mothers, and teachers wish to lead children to *external practices pertaining to bodily care and simple modesty*,

they should carefully lead them to be motivated by the presence of God, as Saint Paul did when he made the same point with the faithful of his time, saying that their modesty should be known to all because the Lord was near to them. In other words, children should do these things out of respect for God in whose presence they are. When teaching children and training them to observe the practices of decorum that refer to their neighbor, teachers should urge them to show others those signs of consideration, honor, and respect appropriate to members of Jesus Christ and living temples of God, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

What a viewpoint of faith!

It is impossible not to agree with the author of the preface, which continues:

If all Christians make it a practice to display goodwill, esteem, and respect for others from considerations of this kind only, and from motives of this nature, they will sanctify all their actions and make it possible to distinguish, as should be possible, between Christian decorum and civility and what is merely worldly or almost pagan. Thus they will live like true Christians, for their external behavior will be conformable to that of Jesus Christ and will correspond with their Christian profession. They will thereby show themselves to be different from infidels and from those who are Christians only in name, as Tertullian remarked when he said that in his time one could know and recognize Christians by their exterior conduct and modesty.¹⁵

All these considerations of the spiritual or mystical order are, as De La Salle writes, the foundation for Christian decorum and civility. But these realities are lived within the person, in the heart, as the seventeenth century loved to say. Now both decorum and civility are also attitudes, external ways of acting.¹⁶ John Baptist de La Salle is very conscious of this, and his

preface is used to refer to the characteristics of a Christian way of acting according to the socio-cultural realities of the time:

Christian decorum, then, is that wise and well-regulated conduct which governs what we do and say. It arises from sentiments of modesty, respect, union, and charity toward our neighbor. It leads us to give due regard to proper times and places, and to the persons with whom we have to deal. Decorum practiced toward our neighbor is properly called civility.¹⁷

“Giving due regard to the times” . . . What the preface says about this is just as valuable today. Fashion and behaviors change and evolve, sometimes within a very short space of time:

In the practices of decorum and civility, we should give due consideration to the times in which we are living, because there are many practices which were in use in past centuries or even in rather recent years which are not now accepted, and whoever follows these will be considered eccentric and far from being regarded as a polite and courteous person.¹⁸

It is, therefore, necessary today:

to conduct ourselves in matters of decorum according to what is acceptable in the country where we live, or where we happen to be, for each nation has its own particular customs of decorum and civility, and it happens often enough that what is considered improper in one country is regarded as polite and courteous in another.¹⁹

Good advice, certainly, for us Europeans²⁰ who visit or conduct business in China or Japan!

The advice about being careful to places reminds us about behaviors, and how different they are between that required by those present with the king in his apartment and that expected in one's own home with persons known or unknown:

It is the same thing regarding matters which decorum requires in certain special places but which are completely forbidden in others. What must be observed in the presence of the king or even in the royal apartments must not be done elsewhere because the respect one must have for the person of the king demands that certain signs of reverence be shown when in his house which would be out of place in a private home.²¹

This same passage could be re-written in relation to the hierarchical structures and social environment of today:

Since, then, we are expected by politeness to have and to show special respect for certain persons which we not owe to others, and since it would even violate decorum to show the same kind of respect to everyone, whenever we meet or

converse with anyone of some social standing we must pay attention to rank so as to deal with him and to treat him according to what his rank calls for.

We must likewise consider ourselves and who we are, for whoever is inferior to others is obliged to show submission to those who are superiors either by birth, by official position, or by social rank. We should pay them much greater respect than we would to someone who is our own equal.

A peasant, for example, should show more respect for a lord than would a working man who does not depend upon the lord. Similarly, a working man would show greater respect for a lord than would a gentleman who happened to be visiting that lord.²²

This way of looking at persons [*le regard*] was a very meaningful expression of the socio-cultural situation proper to seventeenth-century France. Something of that is still in force today through the different relationships that need to be lived out nowadays from day to day.

After these diverse considerations of a spiritual order or peculiar to decorum and civility, the preface concludes:

decorum and civility consist only in the practices of modesty and of respect for our neighbor. Since modesty is especially shown in our deportment, and respect for our neighbor in the ordinary acts we usually perform in the presence of others, in this book we intend to treat these two separately. In the first part of this book we examine the modesty which should be shown in the deportment and care of the various parts of the body. In the second part we examine the external marks of respect or special consideration which should be manifested in the various actions of life with regard to all the persons in whose presence we may be and with whom we may have to deal.²³

At first sight, this preface neatly distinguishes the two planes²⁴ of all behavior according to the rules of decorum and civility: the plane, let us say, of the interior attitude which recalls that of the great spiritual writers and mystics; and the plane of the concrete attitudes and behaviors of life in a society.

Curiously, these two planes here appear as opposites. Nothing is said, indeed, about the particular Christian motives at the origin of this or that specific behavior. Certainly, there are many related to the culture and customs proper to time and place, but others witness to, and should witness to, a Christian way of behaving. A more lengthy contact with the Lasallian text offers the possibility of measuring to what extent the spiritual and mystical option should inform the life of the lay person, the man or woman of the age, to whom *Decorum & Civility*²⁵ is addressed.

II. The Spirituality of the Lay Person according to *Decorum & Civility*²⁶

A. What is the lay Christian called to live through these rules?

A very strong text opens *Decorum & Civility* and can, undoubtedly, challenge us. It is De La Salle's portrait of the Christian aware of being a Christian. It is an exceptionally dense text and, moreover, very meaningful culturally, as the portrait of a spiritual person very much of the seventeenth century:

In a person's deportment there must always be something sedate and even majestic. You should take care, however, that there be nothing in this which suggests pride or arrogance of spirit, for such attitudes greatly displease everyone. What will produce this sedateness is the simple modesty and wisdom that as a Christian you display in all your conduct. You are truly of noble birth, since you belong to Jesus Christ and are a child of God, the Supreme Being. Hence in your exterior, there should be nothing vulgar in his actions or behavior. Everything in you should denote a certain air of nobility and greatness, a reflection of the power and majesty of God whom you serve and who gave you being. This dignified appearance should not flow from arrogance or lead you to prefer yourself to others, for every Christian wishing to act according to the laws of the gospel should show honor and respect to all others, considering them as children of God and brothers of Jesus Christ, and himself as one burdened with sin, for which he should constantly humble himself, placing himself beneath everyone else.²⁷

This is a very carefully worked text. De La Salle has polished it carefully. See what it looks like when presented in *a binary structure*:

In a person's deportment
there must always be
something sedate and even majestic:
but you should take care, however,
that there be *nothing in this which suggests pride or arrogance of spirit*,
for such attitudes greatly displease everyone.

What will produce this sedateness
is the *simple modesty and wisdom*
that as a Christian you display
in all your conduct.

You are truly of noble birth
since you belong to Jesus Christ and are a child of God, the Supreme Being.

Hence in your exterior,
there should be *nothing vulgar*.

Everything in you
should denote
a certain air of nobility and greatness, a reflection of the power and majesty of God
whom you serve and who gave you being.

This dignified appearance
should not flow from arrogance or lead you to prefer yourself to others,
for every Christian
wishing to act
according to the laws of the gospel
should show honor and respect to all others,
considering them as
children of God and brothers of Jesus Christ.

One might wonder “would we express the way we look on ourselves and on others today in the same terms?”²⁸ First of all, we need to recall that this Lasallian text comes down to us from a culture that is not our own. The socio-cultural reality that John Baptist de La Salle knew was marked by the division into three “orders” – Clergy, Nobility and Third Estate – in which birth played an important part, especially among the nobility. To speak of “noble birth” in the seventeenth century was to refer to the royal family or to the court nobility. Speaking about “all the others,” the text refers to a culture different from our own. For the French in general, the others are at least Christians “in name,” or as John Baptist de La Salle says, the baptised. The question, then, being asked of us, is how do we see those with whom we are associated, baptized or not . . . ?

This, then, is a text to be re-written for the Christians of the 21st century by replying to these two questions: (1) who are we with reference to the God of Jesus Christ?; and (2) what are the consequences to be drawn concerning our attitude and behavior and our relationship “with all the others?” In a special way, how will we translate in the here and now, the idea that there is *nothing vulgar in our exterior* and that there *should be a certain air of nobility and greatness* with reference to the *power and majesty of God* whom we serve and who has given us being?

In order to give some direction to this reflection, here are some passages from *Decorum & Civility* which refer to this glance of faith brought to bear on oneself or on the other. The situations invoked are the most common, if not the least expected. But for John Baptist de La Salle all our actions are to be taken into consideration.

To be agreeable to others, you must not assume a stern or forbidding countenance, nor should you let anything unsociable or shocking appear, nor anything too giddy or resembling a schoolboy. The whole face should reflect an air of seriousness and wisdom.²⁹

It is disgusting to blow your nose into an open hand placed under your nose or to blow it on your sleeve or other parts of your clothing. It is very much against decorum to blow your nose with two fingers, let the mucus fall to the ground, and then wipe your fingers on your clothes. Everyone knows how repulsive it is to see

such filth on people's clothes, which should always be very clean, no matter how poor they may be, since they are the ornaments of a servant of God and member of Jesus Christ.³⁰

Since you should consider your body only as a living temple where God wishes to be adored in spirit and in truth, and as a living tabernacle which Jesus Christ has chosen as his dwelling place, you should, in consideration of these noble privileges that you enjoy, show such respect for your body. It is these considerations which should make you resolve not to touch your body nor even to look at it without an indispensable necessity.³¹

Decorum also suggests that when going to bed you keep your eyes away from your body and avoid glancing at it. This is something that parents should strive to teach their children so as to help them to preserve the treasure of purity, which they should hold very dear, and at the same time to preserve the great honor of being members of Jesus Christ and persons consecrated to his service.³²

In your clothing, negligence is not to be avoided less than eccentricity; both of these excesses are equally to be condemned. Affectation is contrary to God's law, which condemns luxury and vanity in your clothing and other exterior ornaments. Negligence in your attire is a sign either that you do not pay much attention to God's presence or that you lack sufficient respect for him. It also shows that you do not respect your own body, which you should honor as a temple animated by the Holy Spirit and the tabernacle which Jesus Christ has the goodness to visit frequently. If you wish to be dressed appropriately, follow the customs of the country and dress more or less like people of your rank and age.³³

B. How can a lay Christian, according to John Baptist de La Salle, live all one's actions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

We can often spontaneously think that living under the motivation of the Spirit leads to unusual, even extraordinary, attitudes and behaviors. Thus this again poses the question, "What is a mystic?" The whole of *Decorum & Civility* depicts the portrait, as it were from the inside, or provides the response to this question by demonstrating it through the most daily realities of personal and social life (the bearings and care of the body, rising and going to bed, clothing, table manners, meetings and conversations, ways of giving and receiving, letters that should be written...).

We will see for ourselves the weight of the rules of behavior in the socio-cultural milieu.³⁴ We will have occasion to underline their importance, if not their "oppression," in *Decorum & Civility*. But if John Baptist de La Salle knows how to point out from time to time just how "suitable" and even "reasonable" these rules can be, he does not miss the opportunity to give them a spiritual orientation, thanks to the reading of them he offers in the light of scripture, the fathers of the church and sometimes the example of the saints. It is in this way that *Decorum & Civility* can lead to three ways of living civility. All three can be lived by the same Christian

according to different circumstances by situating oneself morally and spiritually at different levels according to the following schema.

There are three ways of living the “civility” of which De La Salle writes: (1) by *observing the rules and customs* of polite society; (2) by *aiming at a wise and controlled conduct* as does a person *governed by reason*; and (3) by considering one’s body as the chosen dwelling place of God [a living temple and a tabernacle], and consequently honoring everyone as God’s children and brothers [and sisters] of Jesus Christ and *witnessing to the virtues proper to Christian decorum and civility*.

1. Living according to the rules of decorum & civility in our surroundings: It would undoubtedly be interesting to set out for oneself a list of “rules” which regulate our external attitude (“decorum”) and our behavior in the society (“civility”) of our particular milieu, supposing that there are such that oblige everyone! In any case, if they do exist, they vary depending on whether a person is alone, with one’s family, being received and welcomed, in a drawing room, at a dining table, taking public transport, etc.

Here are some passages taken from *Decorum & Civility* that are capable, perhaps, of drawing our attention to this or that attitude or form of behavior.

Concerning decorum:

To hold your head in a proper manner you should keep it erect without bending it forward or letting it lean to the right or to the left. You must be especially careful not to hunch your shoulders nor to turn your head from side to side, for this indicates a flighty mind. Furthermore, making frequent gestures with your head is the sign of a disturbed and confused person. It is also a sign of arrogance if you hold your head in an affected manner.³⁵

To be agreeable to others, you should not assume a stern or forbidding countenance, nor should you let anything unsociable or shocking appear, nor anything too giddy or resembling a schoolboy. The whole face should reflect an air of seriousness and wisdom. It is not according to decorum, either, to have a melancholy or peevish countenance, nor should your face ever reflect any passion or ill-regulated affection.³⁶

If you wish to be considered a person of humility and moderation and to appear wise and composed, you should try to keep your eyes calm, peaceful, and controlled. Those whom nature has not blessed with these qualities, and who lack this disposition, should strive to correct this deficiency by cultivating a happy and modest countenance, and must avoid making their eyes even more disagreeable through negligence.³⁷

It shows that you know nothing about decorum if you point to a place, or to the person you are talking about, or to another person at a distance. As a courteous person, never take the liberty of pulling on your fingers as though to lengthen

them or to make the joints crack. Also, it is ridiculous and suggests thoughtlessness to drum with your fingers; and it is most disgusting to spit on them.³⁸

The way to set limits on fashion in clothing and to prevent those who follow fashion from falling into excess is to submit and reduce style to a matter of modesty. This ought to be the rule of conduct for the Christian in everything that concerns external appearance. To be modestly dressed, you should not have any appearance of luxury or vanity.³⁹

Decorum does not permit you to hunt through the dish, turning up the pieces to find the one that you prefer, nor does it allow you to take the last remaining piece, nor those which are farthest away. Instead, decorum requires that you take what is nearest to you.⁴⁰

Concerning civility:

Recreation ordinarily consists in conversing in an open and frank manner, recounting interesting and pleasant things which provide occasions of laughter and entertainment for the group. You should take care, however, that these stories do not include anything vulgar or anything suggesting a lack of good education. Rather, they should be told in an uplifting manner, which should make the simplest tale striking and interesting, as well as pleasing to others.⁴¹

When three or more persons are walking together, the middle place should be given to the most distinguished member of the group. The right-hand position is the next most honorable, and the left-hand position is the third most honorable. If the individuals are of about equal rank, they can yield the middle place to each other alternately each time they turn, the one who was in the center simply stepping aside and letting his place be taken by one of those walking with him.⁴²

When you are requested to sing or to play an instrument, be careful not to keep playing too long, for you must avoid boring the audience. Finish soon so that you give no one the occasion to say or think, "that's enough."⁴³

In visits and conversations, it is a matter of decorum to conform your behavior to that of the person you are visiting and not to try to seem too different. It would be entirely contrary to the respect you should have for those present to remain seated when they stand, to keep on walking when they stop, and to read or, worse still, to fall asleep while they are talking.⁴⁴

If it happens that others do not believe what you say, you should not take it too much to heart, still less should you allow yourself to fall into fits of exaggerated impatience leading to harsh words and reproaches. People who are not convinced by your reasons will certainly not be persuaded by outbursts of passion.⁴⁵

Another fault, no less contrary to propriety and to the respect you owe your neighbor, is mockery, making fun of somebody over a defect or weakness, or mimicking him by gestures. There is not much difference between such mockery and an outright insult, except that by insulting people you attack them flagrantly, without any attempt at concealment.⁴⁶

Some people are so full of themselves that they are always telling those with whom they converse what they themselves have done, or what they are doing, letting them know how highly prized their every word and action should be. For you to carry on this sort of conversation would be most disagreeable and burdensome to others.⁴⁷

If you believe that the opinion you set forth is correct, you should defend it; but this should be done with such moderation that the person arguing against you may yield without embarrassment. If the reasons the others adduce show you that you are wrong, you should not stubbornly continue upholding a lost cause. With good grace, be the first to admit you are wrong. This is the best way to emerge from the discussion with honor.⁴⁸

2. Being governed by reason: John Baptist de La Salle scarcely ever appeals to the reason of the reader of *Decorum & Civility*. Reason, as an intellectual faculty likely to organize attitudes and behaviors in both decorum and civility, is referred to specifically on one occasion to condemn “tightrope walkers”:

Propriety does not allow you to be present at the performance of tightrope walkers, who every day risk their lives as well as their souls simply to amuse other people. They should be neither admired nor watched by *reasonable* people, since they do things which ought to be condemned by everyone, even those following the mere light of *reason*.⁴⁹

The type of *reasonable person* referred to in this passage is doubtless, in the author’s eyes, one criterion of the behavior of a Christian. It could be called *elementary*. A person should at least be *reasonable*. Two other passages include this expression, but it is always to condemn ways of acting that are thought to be ridiculous or childish:

It would show unbecoming familiarity for two persons to rub or bump foreheads, even in jest; this is something not at all becoming to *reasonable people*.⁵⁰

There are some children who make faces or bulge out their eyes to make themselves look horrible. Others imitate squint-eyed people or those who are cross-eyed in order to make their companions laugh. Sometimes you can find boys who rub their eyes with their fingers; others keep one eye shut like marksmen aiming at a target. All these ways of using your eyes are entirely impolite and rude. No *reasonable people*, no wellborn children, would fail to consider all such behavior as unworthy of persons of good judgment.⁵¹

A final text speaks of *reasonable sentiment* as follows:

When giving an opinion, you must be careful not to maintain it stubbornly, for you should not be so sure of your ideas as to think them incontrovertible. It would also be very unseemly to argue in order to make your opinions prevail because you should not be so firmly attached to your ideas that you refuse to yield to those of others. You must be very careful not to grow angry or abusive in order to force others to adopt your point of view. It is neither courteous nor wise to use emotion to make others to accept your position as *reasonable*. Nor should you blame others or ridicule what they have said. You show the characteristic of a well-mannered person when you esteem and praise the ideas of others and state your views only because you were asked to give them.⁵²

The *sensible person* closely resembles the *reasonable* one. More intuitively, he “feels” what has to be done. If John Baptist de La Salle recalls this kind of person, it is surely to condemn those behaviors that are against common sense, as in the following passage:

With regard to the defects of others, either they are natural or they result from bad habits. If they are natural, it is unworthy of a person with good sense and good judgment to laugh at them and make fun of them, since the person who suffers from these defects is not the cause of them. It does not depend on him whether or not he has them, and these same misfortunes could have happened to anyone. If the defects are due to bad habits and you use them as topics for jokes, you are acting in a manner entirely against charity and contrary to the true Christian spirit, which should lead you to have compassion on these persons and help them to correct themselves rather than take these shortcomings as something to laugh about.⁵³

But it is also to emphasize just how much *good sense* goes along with the more noble manifestations of heart and spirit:

It is a sign of a base spirit for you to be attached to clothing and always to seek striking and sumptuous apparel. If you act in this way, you become contemptible to all people with good sense, and, what is far worse, you publicly renounce the promises you made in baptism and abandon the spirit of Christianity. If, on the contrary, you despise all such vain ostentation, you will show that you have a noble heart and a lofty spirit, for you give proof that you are more concerned about ornamenting your soul with virtues than about embellishing your body, and you will show by the modesty of your clothing the wisdom and simplicity of your soul.⁵⁴

Our everyday lives are filled with *common sense and reasonable choices*. Certain already cited passages of *Decorum & Civility* can perhaps lead us to think that sometimes what we judge *sensible and reasonable* is not very down to earth. In any case, John Baptist de La Salle is not one of those *spiritual* writers lost in another world. For him, living according to the Spirit is based on the most familiar kinds of behaving.

3. Witnessing to the virtues proper to Christian decorum & civility: In his definition of decorum and civility, John Baptist de La Salle puts in relief the most suitable virtues to show this behavior of Christian decorum and civility:

Decorum
is, then, that wise and well-regulated conduct
which governs what we do and say.
It arises from sentiments of *modesty, respect, union, and charity*
toward our neighbor.
It leads us to give due regard
to proper times and places, and to the persons with whom we have to deal.
Decorum
practiced toward our neighbor
is properly called civility.⁵⁵

Concerning modesty:

John Baptist de La Salle does not specifically define the Christian virtue of *modesty*, but he does use the word in a number of different and complementary ways when he is treating of decorum and civility.

A first example concerns decorum in our external deportment:

If you wish to have a distinguished appearance and to be esteemed because of the *modesty* that marks you as a wise and well-behaved person, you must learn to control your body in the way prescribed by nature or by custom. You ought to avoid, for this reason, several defects in the way you carry yourself. The first of these defects, which is an affectation and constraint, makes you appear awkward. This is entirely opposed to *decorum and the norms of modesty*. You must also avoid the kind of negligent attitude which betrays slovenliness and indolence in your conduct and which would expose you to contempt because it indicates a meanness of spirit, as well as low birth and poor education.⁵⁶

A second example concerns self-mastery of our desires to experience, to know, and to tell:

Some people are so full of themselves that they are always telling those with whom they converse what they themselves have done, or what they are doing, letting them know how highly prized their every word and action should be. For you to carry on this sort of conversation would be most disagreeable and burdensome to others. To brag or to speak highly of yourself is something which seriously violates decorum, besides being the mark of a small mind. A wise person never speaks about himself except to answer a question. Even then he does so with great *moderation, modesty and reserve*.⁵⁷

A third example concerns controlling our way of being with others:

Another type of compliment is direct praise. This requires you to show much more circumspection and skill than do the other kinds in order to convince people of your sincerity. To make compliments of this sort acceptable, persons whom you are praising must be persuaded that you are convinced of their merits and that the compliment is sincere and heartfelt. You must not praise persons too far above their real merits and you must not exaggerate, for this is counterproductive. Praise will be reasonable if you base it on sincerity and truth, so that, thanks to the honesty, wisdom, and *moderation* which your words manifest, *modesty* may not be offended either in you who speak or in the one who is being praised.⁵⁸

A fourth example concerns cleanliness and appropriateness of dress:

You should take particular care to keep your clothes very clean at all times. *Modesty and decorum* can never tolerate soiled or unkempt apparel. If you let your shoes, hat, or clothes stay full of dust, you fail against propriety, just as do those who appear outside the home with soiled garments. This is always a sign of great negligence.⁵⁹

This *virtue of modesty*, according to *Decorum & Civility*, is, furthermore, lived in two distinct ways. It has both a private and a public aspect.

For John Baptist de La Salle, *modesty as a private virtue*, is best understood from the perspective of looking with faith at one's body:

Since you should consider your body only as a living temple where God wishes to be adored in spirit and in truth, and as a living tabernacle which Jesus Christ has chosen as his dwelling place, you should, in consideration of these noble privileges that you enjoy, show much respect for your body. It is these considerations that should make you resolve neither to touch your body nor even to look at it without an indispensable necessity.

It is proper to accustom yourself to put up with various slight discomforts without twisting yourself, rubbing, scratching, fidgeting, or assuming any unbecoming posture. This kind of behavior and these improper postures are entirely contrary to reserve and self-control.⁶⁰

The preceding two paragraphs do not really have much connection between them⁶¹ except that they concern the body, make us aware of the pastoral interests of the author, and are revelatory of a strict attitude toward everything contrary to *a sense of modesty*:

When in bed you must try to take a posture so becoming and modest that those who draw near may not be able to distinguish the form of your body. Take care also not to uncover yourself in any way so as not to show any part of your naked body or any part that is not decently covered.⁶²

Just as you should get up with much *modesty* and in doing so give an indication of your piety, so you should also go to bed in a Christian manner, doing this with all possible propriety only after having prayed to God. To act like this, you must neither undress nor go to bed when anyone else is present. And unless you are married, you must, above all, never go to bed in the presence of anyone of the other sex, for this is entirely contrary to decency and refinement.⁶³

Decorum also suggests that when going to bed you keep your eyes away from your body and avoid glancing at it.⁶⁴ This is something that parents should strive to teach their children so as to help them to preserve the treasure of purity, which they should hold very dear, and at the same time to conserve the great honor of being members of Jesus Christ and persons consecrated to his service.⁶⁵

Since baptism has made us indeed “members of Jesus Christ and consecrated to his service,” the following question can be asked. To what extent can views of faith give meaning to our private actions? What would be such Christian actions for us today?

If for John Baptist de La Salle *modesty* is a virtue which governs our most private behaviour, it must also have a public aspect; and so he also considers *modesty as a public virtue*. The preface of *Decorum & Civility* bases this requirement on an exhortation from the apostle Paul to the Philippians, “let your *modesty* be known to all.”⁶⁶ The preface, indeed, requires that parents who

wish to train children in *practices* pertaining to bodily care and *simple modesty* ... should carefully lead them to be motivated by the presence of God, as Saint Paul did when he made the same point with the faithful of his time, saying that their *modesty* should be known to all because the Lord was near to them. In other words, children should do these things out of respect for God in whose presence they are.⁶⁷

Born out of this sentiment of the presence of God throughout life, *modesty is expressed through attitudes and behavior* of decorum and civility. Such attitudes, according to John Baptist de La Salle, originate from truly mystical motives. Teachers and parents, indeed, will commit their children “to signs of consideration, honor, and respect appropriate to members of Jesus Christ and living temples of God, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁸ We can ask ourselves to what extent such educational recommendations touched the parents of the children of “artisans and the poor” of the eighteenth century⁶⁹ and throughout the nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Finally, the question can be asked. What kinds of spiritual perspectives could touch us today, adults of the twenty-first century? And if the answer is “yes,” to what extent and how?

Let us express this schematically:

knowing oneself to be in God’s presence
witnessing to others through kindness, honor, & respect
as members of Jesus Christ & living temples of the Holy Spirit

It is through this way of *giving witness* that Christian *modesty* becomes apparent to all. Thus:

If you wish to be considered a person of humility and moderation and to appear wise and composed, you should try to keep your eyes calm, peaceful, and controlled.⁷¹

This is why Saint Paul, after exhorting men to avoid the more gross vices into which they fall more easily than do women, goes on to recommend to women to dress modestly, to let reserve and chastity be their adornments, not to wear pearls, gold, jewelry, and sumptuous apparel, and to dress as women who show by their good works that they profess to live lives of piety.

After this exhortation of the great apostle, there is nothing more to be prescribed for Christians than to observe it and to imitate in this matter the early Christians, who edified everyone by the *modesty* and simplicity of their clothing.⁷²

To edify everyone . . . An invitation to become a true Christian is the meaning of the witness of a life completely impregnated by this *modesty* born from a spiritual way of looking at oneself and others. Thus it is that John Baptist de La Salle gives very great importance to this responsibility to *let our modesty be evident*. He even makes this the objective of the first part of his treatise: “the *modesty* you should show in your deportment and in the care of the various parts of your body.”⁷³

What might this *appearance of Christian modesty* mean for us today? Could it be a witness to the mystery within each Christian? If so, under what condition?

Concerning respect:

If modesty, inasmuch as it refers to control of self, one’s body, and one’s passions is the virtue proper to decorum for John Baptist de La Salle, then it is *respect controlling social behavior* that is for him the first virtue of civility. Let us recall the preface of *Decorum & Civility* that sets out the precise moral structure of the work:

In this book, we intend to treat these two [ideas] separately. In the first part of this book we examine the modesty which should be shown in the deportment and care of the body and of the various parts of the body. In the second part we examine the *external marks of respect* or special consideration which should be manifested in the various actions of life with regard to all the persons in whose presence we may be and with whom we need to deal.⁷⁴

These “external marks” are imposed by God himself. In *The Duties of a Christian to God*,⁷⁵ John Baptist de La Salle makes *respect* in virtue of the fourth commandment of God⁷⁶ one of the duties owed to persons endowed with authority. By this commandment, God in effect “orders us to honor our parents. The phrase father and mother includes everyone who has authority over us: fathers and mothers, tutors, godparents, guardians, teachers, husbands in relation to their wives, lords, magistrates, prelates, and church pastors.”⁷⁷

As for children, they must fulfill “five duties to their parents: they should love them, *respect* them, obey them, assist them during life, and pray and cause others to pray for them after their death.”⁷⁸

Children should love their father and mother because they should wish for them and do for them all the spiritual and temporal good which they can procure. They should *respect them and esteem them* greatly and should witness to this by their words, by hiding and forgiving them their defects, and by doing nothing in their presence that could shock them or cause them pain.⁷⁹

The duties of members of a diocese with regard to their bishop, of parishoners in relation to their parish priest, and of inferiors to their spiritual superiors “are to love, *respect*, and obey them as they would Jesus Christ” whom they represent, and faithfully pay them their dues and other things due to them.⁸⁰

In *Decorum & Civility*, the words *respect*, *to respect*, and *respectful* appear one hundred twenty-one times in two different theological contexts.

First, in the proper moral context which has just been mentioned, *respect* is appears as a duty ordained by God. This *respect* is that which is due others and can be exacted socially. It is proportional, one could say, in its external manifestations to the degree of authority of the person who has the right to be shown such *respect*. The fine points of such *respect* are very much related to the socio-cultural and political realities of the period. Thus, one finds in the preface:

It is the same thing regarding matters which decorum requires in certain places but which are entirely forbidden in others. What must be observed in the presence of the king or even in the royal apartments must not be done elsewhere because the *respect* one must have for the person of the king demands that certain signs of reverence be shown when in his house which would be out of place in a private home.

We ought to act in our own home differently from the way we act in the homes of others and so, too, in the homes of persons whom we know, as opposed to those we scarcely know.

Since, then, we are expected by politeness to have and to show special *respect* for certain persons which we not owe to others, and since it would even violate decorum to show the same kind of *respect* to everyone, whenever we meet or converse with anyone of some social standing we must pay attention to his rank so as to deal with him and to treat him according to what that rank calls for.

We must likewise consider ourselves and who we are, for whoever is inferior to others is obliged to show submission to those who are superiors either by birth, by official position, or by social rank. We should pay them much greater *respect* than we would to someone who is our equal.

A peasant, for example, should show more *respect* for a lord than would a working man who does not depend upon the lord. Similarly, a working man would show greater *respect* for a lord than would a gentleman who happened to be visiting that lord.⁸¹

The vocabulary used in these paragraphs by John Baptist de La Salle is significant. He speaks of *witness* very much more than *respect* toward one rather than to the other, and to show more honor *exteriorly* to one and less to the other. In other places, he appeals to the behaviors and expressions that have become, through usage and conventions, *marks of respect* (here the expression is properly Lasallian!):

When you propose to visit some person for whom you should have much esteem and whom you would *respect*, be careful to put on clean linen and proper clothes, for this is a mark of *respect*. You should also plan what you wish to say during the visit.⁸²

As soon as you are informed that someone to whom you owe much *respect* is visiting, you should go to the door; and if the person has already come in, you should go as far as you need to, to meet him. You should show him as much honor as possible.⁸³

Letters addressed to your superiors should be very *respectful*. Those addressed to your equals should be courteous and always contain some expressions of esteem and *respect*. In letters written to your inferiors, you should give those persons tokens of affection and good will.⁸⁴

The letter of John Baptist de La Salle in 1718 to his brother, Canon Jean-Louis de La Salle⁸⁵ is a document which witnesses to the quality of family relationships and to the very strict, not to say, rigid rules that were submitted to in epistolary relationships. On one hand, John Baptist de La Salle is concerned to share in the financial aid of all the family in order to help the children of his brother Jean-Remy, “by the compassion that I have for the miserable state to which they have been reduced” after the burial of their father. He cedes and hands over a great part of the goods he has entrusted to his brother Jean-Louis. The latter, by reason of this letter, will be able to bring about the necessary steps required. On the other hand, John Baptist de La Salle structures the letter according to the rules required by the decorum of the age. The first of these rules requires that, in writing to an equal, you should always make use of *respectful* terms by treating the person to whom you write as if he were above oneself.

Monsieur, my very dear brother,

Since you have pointed out to me in your last letter that a single letter from me will be sufficient to make known my intentions concerning the property that I still own and that is in your hands, I hereby declare that, as of this day, I transfer and cede in favor of the present and future children of my brother, Jean-Remy de La Salle, out of compassion for the wretched state to which they have been reduced, the income from the principal of 2,000 francs invested in the Clergy Fund of the

Diocese of Rheims. I reserve the right to myself and to those to whom I transfer this right to resume possession of the aforesaid income as I or those to whom I have transferred this right consider it advisable and pay the sum of 2,000 francs into a fund for the profit of the said children.

I also transfer and cede to them: two-thirds of the income payable by the Association of Locksmiths of the same city, the principal being 1,400 francs invested at four percent, the said two-thirds bringing me an income of 38 francs; plus half of the income from the vineyard at Thillois near Rheims, the other half belonging to the said Jean-Remy de La Salle, my brother; together with the rights belonging to me of a house in the village of Trois Puits, near Rheims, part of the estate of a certain Mathieu Menu, deceased.

As from this day the income from the above investments and securities will belong to the said children and is to be received by you, Canon De La Salle of the Church of Rheims, my brother, to be distributed by you at your discretion without your being obliged to render any account to them at any time or for any reason whatever.

I am, with the greatest *respect*, dear brother, your humble and obedient servant,

De La Salle.

This is what John Baptist de La Salle does in this letter. He speaks to his brother as he would to someone who was “simply above him.” He addresses him as “Monsieur, my brother,” and ends his letter by “I am with the greatest *respect*, dear brother, your humble and obedient servant.” Moreover, he allows for a large white space between the title and the beginning of the letter.⁸⁶ This space “measures” in some way the difference of quality between the writer and his correspondent.

There are a number of passages of *Decorum & Civility* that set out precisely certain rules:

If you are writing to your own father, you should begin with the word, “Monsieur, my very honored father.”⁸⁷

The word “Monsieur” is written alone at the top of the page on the left, and between this word and the beginning of the letter you should leave a blank space of several lines, more or less, depending on the rank of the person to whom you write. It is better to leave more space than less.⁸⁸

The terms “Monsieur” and “Monseigneur” are also used at the end of a letter, depending on the rank of the person to whom you write. The word “Monsieur” should be written in the middle of the blank space remaining between the end of the letter and the concluding words, “Your very humble and very obedient servant.” The expression “Monseigneur” is written as far down on the page as possible; and if in the body of the letter you used a title of honor, then at the

bottom of the letter, after “Monseigneur,” you immediately write, “Your Highness” (or “Your Grace’s” or “Your Excellency’s”), “very humble servant . . . and so forth.”⁸⁹

All of this undoubtedly raises some questions, worthy of consideration, for readers of this manuscript, who are living in another socio-cultural context some three hundred years after the composition of *Decorum & Civility*.⁹⁰ However, in the context of the morality of which we have been speaking for a few pages now⁹¹ – the “external marks” of *respect* imposed by God himself in virtue of the fourth commandment – this duty concerning “fathers and mothers” pervades the whole domain of relationships of submission and authority in social and church life. The text of *Decorum & Civility* unceasingly, like some kind of refrain, refers to “persons who are to be *respected*” and to whom *respect* is “due.”

But it is *another form of respect* that has its theological foundations in *the virtue of religion*. These are the relationships we maintain by grace with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is on the level of being, not on that of morality. It is about what we have become by grace through the action of the sacraments of Christian initiation – baptism, confirmation and eucharist. Much more than very many other spiritual writers of his time, John Baptist de La Salle highlights mystical realities. Throughout *Decorum & Civility*, *self-respect*, *respect* for one’s body, and *respect* for the bodies of others is based on theological and mystical considerations. “Children of God,” “members of Jesus Christ,” “living temples of the Holy Spirit,” “living dwellings of Jesus Christ” . . . are so many affirmations of faith, capable of nourishing a profound *respect* for oneself and for a mutual *respect*. Recalling these truths in *Decorum & Civility* can appear from time to time in situations that could be judged of little significance. In fact, for the author, the entire individual and social life needs to be considered from this viewpoint.

Presence of God & respect for God: Saint Paul warning the faithful of his time that their modesty should be known to all because the Lord was near, that is to say out of *respect* for the presence of God before whom they were.⁹²

It is highly unbecoming to comb your hair in public, but the offence becomes quite intolerable if you do so in church. That is one place where you should be very neat and clean out of the *respect* you have toward God. This very *respect* makes it imperative that you are already very clean when you enter the church.⁹³

It is altogether against politeness to lean on your elbows while listening to someone talk. It is even more impolite to do so at table, and to adopt this posture while praying would be a gross lack of *respect* for God.⁹⁴

Put on first the articles of clothing which cover the body most completely, so as to keep hidden the parts that nature forbids us to show. Always do this out of *respect* for the majesty of God, which you should keep constantly before your eyes.⁹⁵

Children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ: “Every Christian wishing to act according to the laws of the gospel should show honor and *respect* to all others, considering them as children of God and brothers of Jesus Christ.”⁹⁶

Members of Jesus Christ, temples of the Spirit, and places where God lives: “Teachers should urge them to show others those signs of consideration, honor, and *respect* appropriate to members of Jesus Christ and living temples of God, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁷

Since you should consider your body only as a living temple where God wishes to be adored in spirit and in truth, and as a living tabernacle which Jesus Christ has chosen as his dwelling place, you should, in consideration of these noble privileges that you enjoy, show much *respect* for your body. It is these considerations which should make you resolve not to touch your body nor even to look at it without an indispensable necessity.⁹⁸

Negligence in your attire is a sign either that you do not pay much attention to God’s presence or that you lack sufficient *respect* for him. It also shows that you do not *respect* your own body, which you should honor as a temple animated by the Holy Spirit and the tabernacle which Jesus Christ has the goodness to visit frequently.⁹⁹

It is rare to find texts of such a profound spiritual depth in politeness manuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Once again, this undoubtedly raises some additional questions, worthy of consideration, for readers of this manuscript, who are living in another socio-cultural context some three hundred years after the composition of *Decorum & Civility*.¹⁰⁰

Concerning union and charity:

In his preface to *Decorum & Civility*, John Baptist de La Salle, speaking of the “sentiments” proper to decorum and civility notes both modesty and respect, which have been treated. But he speaks also of *affection, union, and charity* toward one’s neighbor. He is always concerned, and particularly so here, to give witness to a “Christian civility” at the heart of relationships lived according to the appropriate socio-cultural time and place. It should not be surprising to notice that, as with modesty and respect, *affection, union* [we link *affection* and *union* in this analysis], and *charity* are also to be situated in a more spiritual, even mystical context, rather than in a moral one. This means that when *Decorum & Civility*’s author speaks of *affections*, he is thinking not so much about *natural affections* as he is about *affections conformable to those of Jesus Christ*; and when he speaks of *union and charity*, the reference point needs to be those “sentiments” spread through the soul by the Holy Spirit.

Decorum & Civility refers only eleven times to *affection*, but it does so always in a Lasallian context. There are *affections*, are too natural, too “singular,” condemned by John Baptist de La Salle:

In company, some persons speak only of what they like and even of things which they particularly cherish. If they are fond of a dog, a cat, a bird, or some other animal, they make these pets the constant subject of their conversation. They even speak to their pets from time to time in the presence of strangers and occasionally

interrupt conversations for this, and often fail to pay attention to what others are saying.¹⁰¹

There are *unbalanced affections* that are also to be condemned: “It is not according to decorum, either, to have a melancholy or peevish countenance, nor should your face ever reflect any passion or ill-regulated *affection*.”¹⁰²

But there are also *affections* which should have some external manifestation “in the various actions of life with regard to all the persons in whose presence we may be and with whom we may have to deal.”¹⁰³ These external marks cannot be given without, however, taking into account the rules imposed by the social milieu and the culture. Thus, it is necessary to show *affection* both to an inferior and on the occasion of receiving benefits:

Letters addressed to your superiors should be very respectful. Those addressed to your equals should be courteous and always contain some expressions of esteem and respect. In letters to your inferiors, you should always give those persons tokens of *affection* and good will.¹⁰⁴

There are several ways of giving compliments. One is by expressing the emotion of joy over something fortunate that has happened to someone you meet or visit, or by showing a person who has experienced misfortune signs of the sorrow you feel over his plight. Or you may thank someone for the benefits you have received from him and express the gratitude you feel toward him by assuring him of your *affection*, faithful friendship, and devotedness.¹⁰⁵

A *mark of affection* governed by strict rules is that of “offering the hand,” or what we would call today a handshake:

If you owe respect to a person, you are never permitted to offer your hand as a sign of esteem or *affection*. This would be to fail in the respect due to that person and to act with undue familiarity. However, if a person of high rank or in some way superior to you takes your hand, you should consider this a real honor and immediately return the honor, accepting this favor as a notable sign of kindness and good will.¹⁰⁶

Let us end this brief look at *affection* in *Decorum & Civility* with a passage that shows delicacy and *charity* for everyone:

when you hear someone spoken ill of, civility requires that you try to excuse his defects and to say something good about him by showing him in a favorable light and by speaking with appreciation of something he did. This is the way to acquire the *affection* of others and to make yourself agreeable to all.¹⁰⁷

Civility is needed . . . and the gospel as well! It is here that, in order to enter fully into John Baptist de La Salle’s thought, we should look at his catechism, *The Duties of a Christian*, where in treating of the eucharist he writes:

In instituting this sacrament, Jesus Christ has shown his love for us in a very special manner, for he unites us entirely to him in the closest and most excellent union that we can possibly imagine. He gives himself to us as our food which results in the most intimate union found in nature. He does not change himself into us, but he changes us into him, insofar as this is possible, through the reception of this sacrament. He does not change our substance, but he alters our *affections* and our way of life to make them like his. Just as bodily food provides a certain vigor to all parts of the body, so too the body of our Lord, while remaining whole within us, diffuses in our soul and body a certain spirit of divine life.¹⁰⁸

This is a spiritual perspective close to his heart. He translates it into a prayer that can nourish our life in relation to Jesus Christ and his Spirit. So, in communion with his body, Jesus Christ does not change himself into us but changes us into himself, not by changing our substance but rather our *affections* and customs. He does this to make them conform to his own. John Baptist de La Salle offers us here a mystical orientation to what is an essential part of Christian civility, *affections* and “customs.”

For a Christian moralist, the human relationships which govern decorum and civility have *charity* as their ultimate law. John Baptist de La Salle, as we have already noted, says this in his definition of decorum: “Christian decorum is, then, that wise and well-regulated conduct which governs what we do and say. It arises from sentiments of modesty, *respect*, *union*, and *charity* toward our neighbor. It leads us to give due regard to proper times and places, and to the persons with whom we have to deal.”¹⁰⁹

John Baptist de La Salle speaks of *union* and *charity*. Here again, we would remain on the surface of his thought if we allowed ourselves, to use his own language, only “natural” sentiments. For him, there is a necessary link between love of God and love of neighbor, between the *union of people with God* and their *union with one another*. Let us consult once again his *Duties of a Christian* to see his theological and spiritual choice and his most intimate convictions:

We must not be satisfied with loving God; we must also love our neighbor. This is the second commandment of the new law that our Lord proposes to us; it is like the first, he says, because it includes it. Saint James tells us that whoever does not love his neighbor while claiming to love God is a liar, for if we do not love our brother or our sister, whom we see, how can we love God, whom we do not see?

When we say that we must love our neighbor, we mean that we must love all people, our neighbor as well as our brothers and sisters, for we are all children of one Father. This does not mean, however, that we must love them all equally. Some we should love more than others, namely all true Christians who live according to the law and the teachings of Jesus Christ. They belong to us in a far more special manner than the rest of humanity; they are our brothers and sisters through the divine birth they experienced in baptism, which made them God’s children. Others are our brothers and sisters only through their merely natural and

human birth. We have contracted another *union*, a much stronger one, with Christians because we are all members of Jesus Christ and of the church, and make us but one body with them. The Holy Spirit, by giving life to the church, produces this *union* among the faithful and joins them all closely to Jesus Christ.¹¹⁰

We find again in this text the same viewpoint that John Baptist de La Salle wishes us to have toward one another in *Decorum & Civility*, a Trinitarian viewpoint. Let us, once again, express this schematically:

we are all descendants of the same Father
we should live according to the law and maxims of Jesus Christ
it is the Holy Spirit who unites us with Jesus Christ

Looking on “the other” in faith leads us to love our neighbor, to love everyone. This love inspires an even stronger love, a love that provokes an “even stronger” love, because it finds its source in this brotherhood born of baptism, a *union* called to enlarge the body of Jesus Christ which is the church.

If there is a hierarchy in this *union* it is, first of all for John Baptist de La Salle, in relationship with the quality of the spiritual life of the persons. We are obliged to love more than others “all true Christians who live according to the law and the teachings of Jesus Christ.”¹¹¹

Certainly, the priority given to *this profoundly spiritual union* in no way excludes our duty of loving those who are our own family: “We are obliged to love our parents in a special way because they gave us life and brought us up. We should show them deep gratitude for all the benefits we have received from them. God wills us to fulfil these duties to them and also to love our near relatives more than other people.”¹¹²

The word *union* is found only five times in *Decorum & Civility*. As we have already seen, it occurs, however, in the definition of decorum and civility. Other uses refer us to what are in no way exceptional circumstances but ones of deeply affective and spiritual meaning. There is the handshake given to a friend: “It is sign of friendship and special regard to place your hand in another’s as a gesture of politeness. Therefore, as a rule do this only with a person of the same social rank, since friendship can exist only between persons who are in no way inferior or superior to one another.”¹¹³

There are visits to be paid: “Christian decorum is inspired by *charity* when during a visit you contribute to the salvation of a neighbor in whatever way possible, or render him some temporal service, pay him your respects if you are of lower social rank than he is, or maintain with him a truly Christian *union*.”¹¹⁴

Let us note here these two emphases: “to contribute to the salvation of a neighbor” and “to maintain a truly Christian *union* with him.” And there is, finally, the kiss which should rediscover all its primitive Christian meaning:

A kiss is still another form of greeting, but a kiss is ordinarily exchanged by persons who are very close to each other, such as relatives or very special friends. The kiss was much used in the early church among the faithful as an outward sign of their very deep *union* and of perfect *charity*. Thus Saint Paul exhorted the Romans and all the others to whom he wrote to use this greeting.¹¹⁵

These texts are few but rich in their human and spiritual implications.

Of the fifteen references to *charity* in *Decorum & Civility*, four are inspired by the document's sources. The most profoundly spiritual are certainly Lasallian. They range indeed from the consideration of faults against *charity* to the contemplation of Jesus Christ who, through his views, words and human gestures, revealed the love of the Father for humankind.

There are occasions where there is a lack of *charity*: “faults against decorum committed when you speak against the *charity* due to your neighbor”:

Civility is so demanding in what refers to your neighbor that it does not allow you to scandalize anyone in any way and never allows you to speak ill of anyone . . . If you do not wish to say anything good about them, you should say nothing.¹¹⁶

It is also quite rude, as well as a great fault against *charity* toward your neighbor to remind someone of events in which he did not do very well, or to say things that can disturb or embarrass the person you are speaking to.¹¹⁷

An insult is most shocking to decorum as well as to *charity*. Our Lord very expressly condemns it in the gospel. Such words should never be found on the lips of a Christian, since they are extremely improper for a person who has the least claim to being well-educated. You must never insult anybody, and you are never permitted to say or to do anything that might lead to such conduct.¹¹⁸

Some behaviors are against true *charity*:

[Saint Paul] recommends that feasts should be neither extravagant nor dissolute; in other words, that there should not be too great an abundance and a diversity of food and that no excesses be committed. In this the rules of decorum are in accord with those of Christian morality, which we must never allow ourselves to forsake, not even to please or show consideration for our neighbor, for this would be an example of ill-regulated *charity* and of purely human respect.¹¹⁹

But there also attitudes which *charity* inspires:

Whenever someone has said or done something which is out of place, and you notice that this person spoke without reflecting and is already aware of it and embarrassed when he thinks of himself and of what he said, you should pretend to have noticed nothing. And if he excuses himself, it would be prudent and *charitable* for you to interpret the incident in a favorable light. Never poke fun at

someone who proposed something a little unreasonable, and still less should you treat him with disdain, for it may be that you yourself did not correctly understand what he had in mind. Finally, it is never proper for an educated person to embarrass anyone.¹²⁰

With regard to the defects of others, either they are natural or they result from bad habits . . . If the defects are due to bad habits and you use them as topics for jokes, you are acting in a manner entirely against *charity* and contrary to the true Christian spirit, which should lead you to have compassion on these persons and help them to correct themselves rather than take these shortcomings as something to laugh about.¹²¹

Let us note the gospel character of the view taken in this last text from *Decorum & Civility* with regard to the person with “bad habits.” It is not a judgment of disapproval that his moral misery arouses, but rather one of “compassion,” the relieving word or gesture, which helps to correct. Here we are at the very heart of the Christian message. Here, in a special way, there is Someone to contemplate.

The transition is from the moral attitude – practising the virtues – to the mystical. Conforming oneself to Jesus Christ is almost spontaneous with John Baptist de La Salle. Thus it is that he invites us to “follow the example” given in the gospel by Mary and Elizabeth, sacred images and, to the people who lived in the Middle Ages, the purest form of “courtesy.”

Even the Most Blessed Virgin, although she lived a very retired life, paid a visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and it would seem that the holy gospel relates this in some detail precisely so that this example may serve as a model for us. Jesus Christ also paid visits several times out of simple *charity* since he was certainly not obliged to do so.¹²²

Jesus Christ is certainly a model for us to imitate, but what we need to share are the perspectives and motives for so acting:

To understand clearly and to ascertain correctly the occasions when you should make visits, you must be convinced that Christian decorum should be governed in this matter only by justice and *charity* and that it obliges you to make visits only out of necessity, to show someone a token of your respect, or to cultivate *union* and *charity*.¹²³

It was always for one or other of these reasons and with some such motives that Our Lord Jesus Christ acted in all the visits he made. He did so to convert some soul to God, as when he visited Zacchaeus; to raise the dead to life, as when he went to Saint Martha’s after the death of Lazarus and when he accepted the invitation of the chief of the synagogue; and to cure the sick, as when he went to Saint Peter’s home and to the Centurion’s. He performed all these miracles only to win hearts to God or as a token of friendship and good will, as in the last visit he made to Saints Martha and Mary Magdalene.¹²⁴

We live in another socio-cultural context from that evoked by all these citations from *Decorum & Civility*. Once again, this undoubtedly raises some additional questions worthy of consideration.¹²⁵

4. A spirituality nourished by sacred Scripture: The basic orientation of *Decorum & Civility* is given in the very first lines of its preface. It is inspired by the letters written or inspired by Saint Paul. Let us view, then, some passages from *Decorum & Civility*. Immediately following each passage written by De La Salle will be found indented and in italics a corresponding scripture passage. In this way, we hope to show clearly the scripture that nourishes both the text under consideration and its underlying message.

De La Salle: “It is surprising that most Christians look upon decorum and politeness as merely human and worldly qualities . . . 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.”¹²⁶

Saint Paul: “*If then, we live by the Spirit, let us also work by the Spirit.*”¹²⁷

De La Salle: “Still, it is this Spirit alone which should inspire all our actions, making them holy and agreeable to God. This is an obligation Saint Paul points out to us when he tells us in the person of the early Christians that, since we live by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we must also act in all things by that same Spirit.”¹²⁸

Saint Paul: “*Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.*”¹²⁹

De La Salle: “According to the same apostle, since all our actions should be holy, there are none which should not be done through purely Christian motives. Thus, all our external actions, which are the only ones that can be guided by the rules of decorum, should always, through faith, possess and display the characteristics of virtue.”¹³⁰

Saint Paul: “*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*”¹³¹

These are a few of the explicit references to Saint Paul’s letters. These references are frequent in *Decorum & Civility*, as they are elsewhere in all the spiritual writings of John Baptist de La Salle. The context of these references could be a grid for reading the whole work and for understanding the whole of our lives as Christians. As for example, consider the following passage from the letter to the Galatians:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another . . . Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want . . . Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy,

anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.¹³²

Let us also cite here some further passages from *Decorum & Civility* that John Baptist de La Salle has enriched from biblical sources. They will tell us something about the way in which John Baptist de La Salle makes them literally his own, we could think, from his perspective of faith and his personal attitudes and behaviors.

Concerning Psalms:

There are only three references to the book of Psalms found in *Decorum & Civility*. They each recommend ways of acting that touch on both decorum and civility:

De La Salle: “Since the mind is naturally inclined to want to see everything and to know everything, it is very necessary to watch over yourself and to refrain from these mannerisms. Often address God in these words of the Royal Prophet: My God, turn my eyes aside and let them not rest on useless things.”¹³³

Psalms: “*Turn my eyes from looking at vanities. Give me life by your decrees.*”¹³⁴

De La Salle: “It is quite proper both for your health as well as for the good of your soul to go to bed no later than ten o’clock, and to get up no later than six in the morning. Say to yourself the words of Saint Paul and repeat them to those whom laziness keeps in bed: The time has come for us to rise from our sleep, the night is past, and the day has dawned. Thus you may address God in the words of the Royal Prophet: O God, my God, I watch for you from the break of day.”¹³⁵

Saint Paul: “*It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*”¹³⁶

Psalms: “*O God, my God, I watch and wait for you until the dawn.*”¹³⁷

De La Salle: “In the same vein, the Royal Prophet, also instructed in the rules of decorum as he was in true piety, says that if you wish to live a life of happiness you should keep watch over your tongue so that you speak no falsehood.”¹³⁸

Psalms: “*Who is the man who looks for a happy life, and who desires to see his days filled with blessings? Guard your tongue from all evil; may your lips utter no deceptive word.*”¹³⁹

Concerning Ecclesiasticus:

There are twenty-five pages in *Decorum & Civility* that make reference to Ecclesiasticus, or the “Wise Man” as John Baptist de La Salle liked to say. There are, in all, some fifty verses taken entirely or in part from this book of the Old Testament. De La Salle does not restrain his praise when he speaks of the sacred author of this book. Indeed, the “Wise Man,” writes De La Salle, “says very well,” “speaks strongly concerning,” “says with reason,” “says very well,” “expresses in an admirable way . . .” Here the author of *Decorum & Civility* is thinking more of the expression than of the content. But perhaps, he appreciated the translation of the bible he was using. It was by one of the Messieurs de Port-Royal,¹⁴⁰ Master Sacy,¹⁴¹ who emphasizes in his foreword the “excellence and usefulness” of Ecclesiasticus:

There is no aspect of virtue which is not treated by this admirable book. It is a universal morality, combatting all the vices and leading to all the virtues which form the customs of persons of every age, sex and condition. Each can find there his duties to God, to himself, to his family, to this country, to his superiors, inferiors, friends, and enemies. Truth is made known here in a pleasant fashion in the spirit under all kinds of forms, because the author of this book presents here with wonderful wisdom, a quite divine mixture of sentences, exhortations, prayers, eulogies, and examples . . .

Here are some parallel passages from *Decorum & Civility* and Ecclesiasticus¹⁴² (“the Wise Man,” in the words of De La Salle). These Lasallian texts reveal a very close way – one might be inclined to say literal way – of reading the text of the bible.

De La Salle: “The Wise Man says that it is by the look on his face that you can tell a man of good judgment. People should try to show they are agreeable by the expression on their face, and at the same time, their exterior appearance will edify their neighbor.”¹⁴³

Ecclesiasticus: “*You know a person by seeing him, and you can tell a man of good sense from his face.*”¹⁴⁴

De La Salle: “The Wise Man gives us a number of important suggestions about the manner in which we should behave at table if we are to eat with propriety and with decorum. (1) He tells us that we should not give in to intemperance as soon as we are seated . . . (2) He adds that we should not be the first to reach for the food, leaving this honor and mark of preeminence to the most distinguished person in the gathering. (3) He forbids us to eat hurriedly. It is impolite to eat with avidity, for this is the way a glutton would act. (4) He insists that we partake of what is served like a temperate person, eating only with restraint and moderation. This still lets us take whatever we need.”¹⁴⁵

Ecclesiasticus: “*If you are seated at a great table do not allow yourself to be led to intemperance of the mouth. We should not be the first to reach for the food.*”¹⁴⁶ “*Do not eat hurriedly.*”¹⁴⁷ “*Eat what is set before you as a temperate person for fear that you make yourself disagreeable by eating too much.*”¹⁴⁸

De La Salle: “You must be particularly circumspect in your words when someone has entrusted you with a secret. It would be very imprudent to divulge it, even if you urge the one to whom you repeat the matter to keep it to himself, and even if the one who confided the secret to you has not asked you not to mention it to others. For, as the Wise Man says so correctly, if you reveal the secrets of a friend, you lose all credibility and will soon be unable to find any close friends. He considers this fault as being much worse than speaking injuriously to your friend, for, as he says, even after harsh words reconciliation is possible, but if you have been base enough to betray a friend’s secrets, there can remain no hope of reconciliation, and you will try in vain to recover the lost friendship.”¹⁴⁹

Ecclesiasticus: “*Whoever betrays secrets destroys confidence and will never find a congenial friend.*”¹⁵⁰ “*You will not catch him again . . . For a wound may be bandaged, and there is reconciliation after abuse, but whoever has betrayed secrets is without hope.*”¹⁵¹

De La Salle: “The Wise Man declares that when you hear slander you should hedge your ears with thorns, and adds that you should keep so far away from slander that you never hear an evil tongue.”¹⁵² “Thus, according to the same Wise Man’s counsel, if you have heard something unfavorable about your neighbor, you should, if you wish to act with decorum, let the story be buried in your own heart.”¹⁵³

Ecclesiasticus: “*As you fence in your property with thorns, so make a door and a bolt for your mouth.*”¹⁵⁴

De La Salle: “If you are well-informed about something you wish to talk about or someone else is talking about, you may speak or give answer appropriately; otherwise, you should keep your hand over your mouth.”¹⁵⁵

Ecclesiasticus: “*If you know what to say, answer your neighbor, but if not, put your hand over your mouth.*”¹⁵⁶

De La Salle: “It is a sign of a mean and slovenly spirit if you cannot endure an insult, and a Christian should not show any resentment or even experience any. The Wise Man advises you to forget all the slights you may experience from your neighbor.”¹⁵⁷

Ecclesiasticus: “*Do not get angry with your neighbor for every injury and do not resort to acts of insolence.*”¹⁵⁸

For both Sacy and John Baptist de La Salle, these actions are not merely a matter of decorum and civility. These actions are the means by which the Holy Spirit is made manifest in the most common actions of daily living.¹⁵⁹

Concerning the Gospels:

While John Baptist de La Salle has made a close study of the book of Ecclesiasticus, he is even more at his ease in his references to this or that passage from the gospels. His personal life and

his pastoral practice is lived out in the light of these texts.¹⁶⁰ The result is that, in the passages from *Decorum & Civility* that refer the reader to this or that action or words of Jesus, John Baptist de La Salle makes very few direct quotations from one or other translation from his time. Rather, he seems to cite them spontaneously from memory.

In the twenty or so gospel references that are found in *Decorum & Civility*, the majority refer to ways of acting that could be considered common sense or reasonable. Here are some examples:

De La Salle: “The first effect of excess in eating, according to the words of Christ himself, is that it dulls the heart.”¹⁶¹

Gospel: “*Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness.*”¹⁶²

De La Salle: “Although, as Our Lord tells us in the gospel, to eat with unwashed hands is not something which defiles a person, it is still a point of courtesy for you always to wash your hands before eating.”¹⁶³

Gospel: “*These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.*”¹⁶⁴

De La Salle: “Our Lord also invited his apostles to rest awhile with him after they had returned from the various localities where he had sent them to preach the gospel.”¹⁶⁵

Gospel: “*The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all they had done and taught. He said to them, Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.*”¹⁶⁶

Other passages from the Gospels, referred to by John Baptist de La Salle, call us to forms of behavior that are spiritual or more precisely “evangelical.” For example:

De La Salle: “You should limit yourself, as Jesus Christ advises you in the gospel to saying, ‘This is so’ or ‘This is not so.’ And if you wish to add some emphasis to your words, it is sufficient to say something like ‘I assure you, Sir, that this is how it is’ without saying anything more.”¹⁶⁷

Gospel: “*Let your word be Yes, Yes or No, No; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*”¹⁶⁸

De La Salle: “To slap a man’s cheek is to give him a grave insult. In the world it is considered an intolerable insult. The gospel urges us to endure this and suggests that Christians who seek to imitate Jesus Christ in his patience should be willing and even ready to turn the other cheek and receive another blow after having been struck. It forbids us to strike first; only some violent rage or a feeling of vengeance would lead us to do that.”¹⁶⁹

Gospel: “*But I say to you. Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.*”¹⁷⁰

De La Salle: “Since you should consider your body only as a living temple where God wishes to be adored in spirit and in truth, and as a living tabernacle which Jesus Christ has chosen as his dwelling place, you should, in consideration of these noble privileges that you enjoy, show much respect for your body.”¹⁷¹

Gospel: “*The hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.*”¹⁷²

Gospel: “*Jesus answered him, Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*”¹⁷³

De La Salle: “Jesus Christ wants you not only to pardon your enemies but also to do good to them, no matter what the wrong or displeasure they have caused you.”¹⁷⁴

Gospel: “*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you and calumniate you.*”¹⁷⁵

De La Salle: “Christian decorum is inspired by charity when during a visit you contribute to the salvation of a neighbor in whatever way possible, or render to him some temporal service, pay him your respects if you are of lower rank than he is, or maintain with him a truly Christian union. It was always for one or the other of these reasons and with some such motive in mind that Our Lord Jesus Christ acted in all the visits he made.”¹⁷⁶

Gospel: “*A man was there named Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector and he was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short of stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today.*”¹⁷⁷

Concerning the epistles:

The epistles – these “letters” addressed by the apostles to the first Christian communities – frequently concern the realities of daily life. This gives them a meaning well beyond matters of decorum and civility. Saint Paul, particularly, multiplies his appeals to live as persons of faith, as spiritual persons, as mystics, always aware of being in God’s presence and witnessing to it. A person can only be invited, as John Baptist de La Salle does in *Decorum & Civility*, to deepen the meaning of these texts. Let us cite a few passages:

De La Salle: “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.”¹⁷⁸

Epistles: “*Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.*”¹⁷⁹ “*If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.*”¹⁸⁰

De La Salle: “Rather follow Saint Paul’s advice. Lay aside, he says, the works of darkness, and walk, that is, act with decorum, as we should during the day. Make use of the weapons of light; devote the night to sleep and use the day to do all your work.”¹⁸¹

Epistles: *“The night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”*¹⁸²

De La Salle: “Since you should consider your body only as a living temple where God wishes to be adored in spirit and in truth, and as a living tabernacle which Jesus Christ has chosen as his dwelling place, you should, in consideration of these noble privileges that you enjoy, show much respect for your body.”¹⁸³

Epistles: *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God, and that you are not your own.”*¹⁸⁴

De La Salle: “This is why Saint Paul, after exhorting men to avoid the more gross vices into which they fall more easily than do women, goes on to recommend to women to dress modestly, to let reserve and chastity be their adornments, not to wear pearls, gold jewelry, and sumptuous apparel, and to dress as women who show by their good works that they profess to live lives of piety.”¹⁸⁵

Epistles: *“I wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument, also that the women should dress modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.”*¹⁸⁶

De La Salle: “It is so natural for people to seek pleasure in eating and drinking that Saint Paul, teaching early Christians to perform all their actions for the love and glory of God, felt obliged to mention eating and drinking specifically . . .”¹⁸⁷

Epistles: *“So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.”*¹⁸⁸

De La Salle: “If you wish to be agreeable to others in speaking, you should say something that may edify.”¹⁸⁹

Epistles: *“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”*¹⁹⁰

De La Salle: “It is impolite and even ridiculous for you to watch the people passing by in order to see if they will greet you. You should always be the first in offering greetings as well as in other matters of courtesy, as Saint Paul advises.”¹⁹¹

Epistles: *“Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.”*¹⁹²

Along with other people of his time, John Baptist de La Salle likes to find in the bible the “rules” of behavior, “maxims” to direct one’s conduct, meaningful “marks” of the piety one should profess.¹⁹³

5. Welcoming the Holy Spirit in the most down-to-earth moments of life: As we have said, John Baptist de La Salle, with an almost unbelievable boldness, invites lay Christians – children and parents, artisans and poor, masters and mistresses – not only to live and to be guided “according to the Spirit of Jesus Christ,” but to act in such a way that it is “this Spirit alone” which animates “all” their actions. It is from this perspective that he composes a complete work treating of the thousand and one circumstances and situations of daily life. And, yet, one could be somewhat astonished to see within the pages of *Decorum & Civility* that there is not greater reference to the presence of the Spirit, so strongly emphasized in the preface. Nothing is said, moreover, on the way of preparing oneself to receive the Spirit and to receive it effectively.

It could be thought that for this to happen, according to John Baptist de La Salle, it is enough to enter into the moral and spiritual perspectives of his treatise. And what are these perspectives? Let us present this *welcoming the Spirit in daily living* schematically:

being nourished by Scripture [*analyzing the situation according to reason*]
imitating Jesus Christ & the saints
practicing the virtues [*taking into account rules & customs*]

Even if John Baptist de La Salle wished to make *Decorum & Civility* a profoundly spiritual work, he also wanted to limit himself to the domain proper to decorum and civility. We should not be astonished, therefore, if certain essential aspects of spirituality find no echo in these pages, in particular his understanding of prayer.

Now John Baptist de La Salle, without doubt, wished to educate his Brothers and the children in the schools to a profound Christian prayer. With this in view, he composed for their reflection and use another book entitled *Religious Instructions and Exercises of Piety for Use in the Christian Schools*.¹⁹⁴ This book, among others, complemented the education and formation in Christian living that is the subject matter of *Decorum & Civility*.

Certain of the prayers contained in *Religious Instructions* are appropriate for nourishing a life lived under the guidance of the Spirit. Reflected on in leisure, they can build up a spiritual process leading to welcoming the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The following example, typically Lasallian by the direct character of certain questions (all, every, in order to...), offer the opportunity during the period of prayerful thanksgiving after receiving Holy Communion¹⁹⁵ to ask for the Spirit and for the grace to welcome it, throughout the whole day. The text, which is here presented in a form which highlights its structure and its various movements, is drawn from *Religious Instructions*.

I do not understand, O my Savior,
how I can desire you to come to me,
filled as I am with so many defects and imperfections
that you can with difficulty suffer me in this wretched state.¹⁹⁶

But when I think that my heart has been consecrated to you
and that your divine Spirit took possession of my soul in Baptism,¹⁹⁷
when I think that I am bound to live and to let myself be guided by this divine Spirit,
and when I consider that although I cannot receive Confirmation¹⁹⁸ a second time
to welcome him after losing him,
I can receive Communion many times, even daily,
so that you may pour him out upon me.

This thought, O my Jesus, keeps me from losing heart
in spite of all that is wrong with me.
*Come, then, and take possession of my heart once again,*¹⁹⁹
and leave in it your Holy Spirit as a pledge of your love.
May he govern its every motion, restrain all its passions, and
leave in it no inclination except for what is good.
I look forward to this precious moment;
I hope you will afford me this consolation,
and this is what makes me cry to you,
“Come, come, do not delay,”
For I sorely need your help.²⁰⁰

Another prayer, proposed by John Baptist de La Salle from the same source, invites the reader to enter into the attitude and feelings expressed by the priest during the Mass.²⁰¹ The following prayer, then, is suggested for the moment when the celebrant addresses God this request: “Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles, I leave you my peace, my peace I give you; look not on our sins, but on the faith of your church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom where you live forever and ever.”

My God, after begging you for peace with you,
let me also ask for peace with my neighbor,
for I will not be agreeable to you unless I am united in love with others.
I can achieve this union only through meekness and patience.
Give me, I pray you, these two virtues,
and let me speak and act with everyone only in an affable manner.
May I suffer patiently and for your love
the wrongs, injuries, and affronts that may be offered to me.²⁰²
Do not let me take to heart any mistreatment.
Do not let me be wounded by anything said or done to me;
but may I be content with whatever others do to me.²⁰³

This prayer recalls for us the key words in *Decorum & Civility* that define and characterize relationships among Christians. The words, certainly, but also the moral and spiritual climate of the work, for this prayer speaks of *union* and of *affection*, of what the virtues of gentleness and patience require, of kindness in words and attitudes, patient suffering of wrongs, curses, and insults for the love of God. It recalls also the “stoical” notes that appear here and there in *Decorum & Civility*, such as “that nothing may cause me difficulty, and that I am not shocked by anything . . .”

Pray for what you will have to live, day after day in God's presence, under the inspiration and movement of the Spirit. Such here, once again, is John Baptist de La Salle's message. This is an adventure, he proposes, to be attempted and pursued with complete inner freedom!

III. An Example of Lasallian Education in Decorum & Civility

The book that we have been considering, *Decorum & Civility*, served in the time of the Lasallian origins as a reading book for those pupils of the schools of John Baptist de La Salle who knew how to read very well in French.²⁰⁴ The following passage from *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* exemplifies, in one quite extraordinary instance, how the very practice of Christian decorum and civility proposed in *Decorum & Civility* was daily inculcated in the pupils.

Teachers should take care that the students bring their breakfast and afternoon snack with them every day. A little basket will be set in an appointed place in the classroom, into which the children when they are so piously inclined may put what bread they have left over, to be distributed among those of them who are poor. Teachers will see that they do not give away any of their bread unless they have 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 those alms will collect them. At the end of the meal, the teacher will distribute the bread to the poorest and will exhort them to pray to God for their benefactors.

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.

Students must be made to understand that it is desirable that they eat in school in order to teach them to eat with propriety, with decorum, and in a polite manner, and to invoke God before and after eating.²⁰⁵

This passage is very significant in regard to the pastoral role of the school as John Baptist de La Salle wished it to be, a place where the whole person was to be educated. Through the school – in this instance through the breakfast taken in the school – pupils learn, on one hand, to live according to “the rules of decorum and civility” in an epoch and an environment (which was not perhaps that from which the children came), and, on the other hand, to live as “true Christians” according to practical rules. Certainly there were prayers, before and after these snacks, gratitude for gifts received, but also a meal open to the other person, to the poor . . .

Take note of what is not said, that in this text, these children live as Christians under the movement of the Holy Spirit, as the preface of De La Salle's *Decorum & Civility* invites. But recall that the text itself will be read and commented on, perhaps, by a Lasallian teacher living the very spirituality of John Baptist de La Salle.

Notes

1. Jean Pungier, FSC (1920-2011) was for many years the director of a catechetical center in France and authored numerous catechetical texts. He was from 1977 to 1985 one of the principal presenters on Lasallian topics at the International Lasallian Center (CIL) in Rome. His major study of De La Salle's *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* has been published as *Cahiers lasalliens* #58, #59, & #60; and also published in English is his "Decorum and Christian Civility" in *Lasallian Themes I* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1992), 143-156.

2. Gerard Rummery, FSC, holds a doctorate in religious education from Lancaster University in England. He is the former director of the International Lasallian Center (CIL) in Rome and was twice elected to the General Council of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1986-1993 & 1993-2000).

3. William Mann, FSC, who received a Doctor of Ministry degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School (1990), serves as the president of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota since 2008. He is a former Vicar General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2000-2008).

4. Léon Lauraire, FSC. *MEL Bulletin*, 12. *The Conduct of Christian Schools: A Human and Christian Educational Plan*. (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2004), page 34.

5. *Christus* 186 (2000): 137.

6. *Theological Investigations*, XX, page 149.

7. We will make use of some passages from our study on John Baptist de La Salle's *Decorum & Civility* in *Cahiers lasalliens* #58, #59, & #60 (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools).

8. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, translated by Richard Arnandez and edited by Gregory Wright (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1990). See "Introduction" by Gregory Wright on pages xi-xxiii.

9. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.

10. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.

11. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.

12. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.

13. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.

14. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.

15. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.

16. For more about “social distinctions that governed acceptable behavior in treatises on urbane courtesy,” consult *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* by Roger Chartier and translated by Linda G. Cochrane (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pages 88-91.

17. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.

18. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.

19. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 4-5.

20. Note that the author is a Frenchman, and hence European.

21. *Decorum & Civility*, page 5.

22. *Decorum & Civility*, page 5.

23. *Decorum & Civility*, page 5.

24. By “plane” is here meant a level of existence or development, as in “we lived on a worldly plane”; or a specific identifiable position in a continuum, or especially in a process.

25. *Decorum & Civility* will be the shorthand reference used throughout the remainder of the text.

26. It is important to note the importance given to each word of the title of John Baptist de La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility*: **rules** to fix the conduct to be kept; **decorum** or the requirements of polite society with regard to the comportment of the body and the bearing of the person; **civility**, which shows mutual respect; **Christian**, a strengthening of both aspects through the movement of the Holy Spirit.

27. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 9-10.

28. Another question that could be asked is, “how can the text of *Decorum & Civility* be applied to a lay Christian of the 21st century? In its mainly spiritual dimension, it retains all its strength. Every Christian is, indeed, of noble birth because we belong to Jesus Christ and because we are children of God, the sovereign Being. As a consequence, there is nothing vulgar in one’s appearance or in one’s actions. We should, according to the gospel, offer honor and respect to everyone, seeing them as children of God and brothers [and sisters] of Jesus Christ.

29. *Decorum & Civility*, page 15.

30. *Decorum & Civility*, page 22.

31. *Decorum & Civility*, page 36.

32. *Decorum & Civility*, page 45.

33. *Decorum & Civility*, page 49.

34. So as to situate better the whole treatment of decorum and civility in the larger context of an evolving understanding of the new model of the body informing cultural practice and discourse in the seventeenth century (“the early-modern shift to a mechanical view of the body, often seen as the Cartesian view, and away from the Aristotelian-Galenic models of an organic union of body and psyche”), one might consult Erec R. Koch’s *The Aesthetic Body: Passion, Sensibility, and Corporeality in Seventeenth-Century France* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2008).

35. *Decorum & Civility*, page 11.

36. *Decorum & Civility*, page 15.

37. *Decorum & Civility*, page 19.

38. *Decorum & Civility*, page 35.

39. *Decorum & Civility*, page 50.

40. *Decorum & Civility*, page 68.

41. *Decorum & Civility*, page 84.

42. *Decorum & Civility*, page 87.

43. *Decorum & Civility*, page 93.

44. *Decorum & Civility*, page 103.

45. *Decorum & Civility*, page 111.

46. *Decorum & Civility*, page 115.

47. *Decorum & Civility*, page 119.

48. *Decorum & Civility*, page 126.

49. *Decorum & Civility*, page 96.

50. *Decorum & Civility*, page 17.

51. *Decorum & Civility*, page 21.

52. *Decorum & Civility*, page 125.

53. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 85-86.

54. *Decorum & Civility*, page 50.

55. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.

56. *Decorum & Civility*, page 9.

57. *Decorum & Civility*, page 119.

58. *Decorum & Civility*, page 129.

59. *Decorum & Civility*, page 51.

60. *Decorum & Civility*, page 36.

61. As *Decorum & Civility* was intended for use in school, the fact that it was read a few lines at a time by pupils explains this succession of more or less independent paragraphs.

62. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 36-37.

63. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 44-45.

64. So as to situate better these remarks in their proper context, one might consult J.-L. Flandrin's "Repression and Change in the Sexual Lives of Young People in Medieval and Early Modern Times" in *Family and Sexuality in French History* by Robert Wheaton and Tamara K. Hareven (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), pages 27-48. The author favors "the hypothesis that sexual repression intensified throughout the early modern period" (page 27) and notes that the "church and the upper classes had multiplied schools and colleges during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to preserve the chastity of young people" (page 41).

65. *Decorum & Civility*, page 45.

66. *Philippians* 4:5-7.

67. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 3-4.

68. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.

69. *Decorum & Civility* was printed in 1703, the beginning of the eighteenth century.

70. More than 180 separate editions of *Decorum & Civility* appeared in the nineteenth century.

71. *Decorum & Civility*, page 19.

72. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 50-51.

73. *Decorum & Civility*, page 7.

74. *Decorum & Civility*, page 5.

75. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Duties of a Christian to God*, translated by Richard Arnandez and edited by Alexis Doval (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002).

76. Cf. *Exodus* 20.

77. *Duties of a Christian*, page 75.

78. *Duties of a Christian*, pages 75-76.

79. *Duties of a Christian*, page 76.

80. *Duties of a Christian*, page 77.

81. *Decorum & Civility*, page 5.

82. *Decorum & Civility*, page 98.

83. *Decorum & Civility*, page 105.

84. *Decorum & Civility*, page 139.

85. *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Colman Molloy and edited by Augustine Loes (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1988), Letter #133, pages 254-255.

86. Cf. page 256 of *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle* to see a photocopy of this Letter #133.

87. *Decorum & Civility*, page 139.

88. *Decorum & Civility*, page 140.

89. *Decorum & Civility*, page 141.

90. What can we think about all these Lasallian prescriptions about *external marks of respect*? To what extent do they, or do they not, distance themselves from our present day customs? How would we now appropriately in our own socio-cultural milieu show *external marks of respect* in the family? between friends? at work? in public transport? And do these *expressions of respect* bear witness to our quality as Christians of the twenty-first century?

91. Cf. endnote #78, which references the fourth commandment in the context of De La Salle's catechism entitled *Duties of a Christian*.

92. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.

93. *Decorum & Civility*, page 13.

94. *Decorum & Civility*, page 32.

95. *Decorum & Civility*, page 46.

96. *Decorum & Civility*, page 10.

97. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.

98. *Decorum & Civility*, page 36.

99. *Decorum & Civility*, page 49.

100. Once again, this undoubtedly raises some additional questions, worthy of consideration, for readers of this manuscript, who are living in another socio-cultural context some three hundred years after the composition of *Decorum & Civility*. Does our way of looking upon ourselves, upon our bodies, and on other people reflect something of these spiritual and mystical Lasallian principles? On what occasions do these views of faith appear capable of modifying this or that personal or social behavior of ours? How do we acquire this view of faith with regard to ourselves? others? by prayer? by spiritual discussions?

101. *Decorum & Civility*, page 121.

102. *Decorum & Civility*, page 15.

103. *Decorum & Civility*, page 5.

104. *Decorum & Civility*, page 139.

105. *Decorum & Civility*, page 128.

106. *Decorum & Civility*, page 35.

107. *Decorum & Civility*, page 114.
108. *Duties of a Christian*, page 131.
109. *Decorum & Civility*, page 4.
110. *Duties of a Christian*, page 64.
111. *Duties of a Christian*, page 64.
112. *Duties of a Christian*, page 64.
113. *Decorum & Civility*, page 34.
114. *Decorum & Civility*, page 97.
115. *Decorum & Civility*, page 101.
116. *Decorum & Civility*, page 114.
117. *Decorum & Civility*, page 115.
118. *Decorum & Civility*, page 115.
119. *Decorum & Civility*, page 58.
120. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 117-118.
121. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 85-86.
122. *Decorum & Civility*, page 97.
123. *Decorum & Civility*, page 97.
124. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 97-98.

125. Some questions that might be considered are the following. How do I live my relationships as a Christian? With people engaged in my parish? With the priests and religious? With those who practice the Catholic religion? With those who are spiritual? With persons who are opposed to the church or indifferent to it? With the Jews and Moslems whom I encounter? How do I live the following delicate situations as a Christian? When malicious comments are made to us? When uncharitable conversations are being conducted in our presence? When we need to judge others? When people whom we hardly know need help and comfort? In all these situations that ordinary social life presents us with in public transport, travelling in a vehicle, in business? Yes, what kind of Christian perspective should I bring, in the light of what John Baptist

de La Salle has written, to people far from any of these circumstances of life in our own twenty-first century?

126. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.

127. Galatians 5:25.

128. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.

129. Galatians 5:16.

130. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.

131. Colossians 3:17.

132. Galatians 5:13-25.

133. *Decorum & Civility*, page 20.

134. Psalm 118:37.

135. *Decorum & Civility*, page 43.

136. Romans 13:12-13.

137. Psalm 63:1.

138. *Decorum & Civility*, page 110.

139. Psalm 34:12-13.

140. Messieurs” is the plural of “monsieur,” the conventional French title of respect and term of address for a man. The Abbey of Port-Royal was at the center of the Jansenist controversy in seventeenth-century France.

141. Isaac-Louis Le Maistre de Sacy was an important figure in the French Jansenist movement.

142. Ecclesiasticus is a book of the Old Testament that is also known as the Book of Sirach.

143. *Decorum & Civility*, page 15.

144. Sirach 19:29.

145. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 69-70.

146. Sirach 31:14-16.
147. Sirach 31:17.
148. Sirach 16:17-19.
149. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 110-111.
150. Sirach 27:16.
151. Sirach 27:19-21.
152. *Decorum & Civility*, page 114.
153. *Decorum & Civility*, page 114.
154. Sirach 28:24-25.
155. *Decorum & Civility*, page 117.
156. Sirach 5:12.
157. *Decorum & Civility*, page 128.
158. Sirach 10:6.

159. As people who are reading *Decorum & Civility* from the perspective of another socio-cultural context, we might ask ourselves if we believe with Sacy and John Baptist de La Salle that the Holy Spirit has to be seen to be present in our most common actions? That these actions are not simply a matter of decorum and civility? That they testify to what is inside us? To the One who is inside us . . . ?

160. Might scripture still enlighten the minds and direct the actions of the people of our day? For De La Salle, this should not be a question of an “arbitrary, superficial and mechanical application of an isolated passage of scripture to a determined action” but rather allowing oneself to “be impregnated by the Word of God” so that the habitual recourse to “scripture aims at the permanent transformation of a concrete existence” [cf. “Announcing the Gospel to the Poor: The Spiritual Experience and Spiritual Teaching of Saint John Baptist de La Salle” by Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 3, Issue 1 (2012), 24. *AXIS* has published here the two missing chapters of the 1981 English translation of the book by the same name]. And, also, recall the meditations on biblical readings offered in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* [Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994], which afforded his first disciples (as well as present readers) with this opportunity.

161. *Decorum & Civility*, page 57.

162. Luke 21:34.
163. *Decorum & Civility*, page 59.
164. Matthew 15:20.
165. *Decorum & Civility*, page 84.
166. Mark 6:31.
167. *Decorum & Civility*, page 113.
168. Matthew 5:37.
169. *Decorum & Civility*, page 18.
170. Matthew 5:39.
171. *Decorum & Civility*, page 36.
172. John 4:23.
173. John 14:23.
174. *Decorum & Civility*, page 128.
175. Matthew 5:44.
176. *Decorum & Civility*, page 97.
177. Luke 19:1-6.
178. *Decorum & Civility*, page 3.
179. Galatians 5:16.
180. Galatians 5:25.
181. *Decorum & Civility*, page 43.
182. Romans 13:12-13.
183. *Decorum & Civility*, page 36.
184. 1 Corinthians 6:19.

185. *Decorum & Civility*, pages 50-51.

186. 1 Timothy 2:8-10.

187. *Decorum & Civility*, page 57.

188. 1 Corinthians 10:31.

189. *Decorum & Civility*, page 113.

190. Ephesians 4:29.

191. *Decorum & Civility*, page 133.

192. Romans 12:10.

193. As people who are reading *Decorum & Civility* from the perspective of another socio-cultural context, we could pose some questions about this for us today. What place does scripture hold in our lives? Do we read it? What profit do we draw from it? Which of the gospel or epistle writers brings us the most benefit? Why? How do we respond before the text of John Baptist de La Salle in his *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*: “Some passages of holy scripture are often very useful to help us make reflections of this sort in few words, especially because, being the words of God as faith makes them known to us, they possess their own divine unction. Of themselves they lead us to God, and help us to keep God before our minds, and preserve within ourselves a delight for God.” Cf. John Baptist de La Salle’s *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, translated by Richard Arnandez and edited by Donald Mouton (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1995), page 66.

194. John Baptist de La Salle, *Religious Instructions and Exercises of Piety for Use in the Christian Schools*, translated by Richard Arnandez and edited by Eugen Lappin (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002).

195. The sacrament of Holy Communion, according to Catholic doctrine, is the true receiving of the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ.

196. Cf. page 12 of “Introduction” by Jean-Guy Rodirigue in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*: “The emphasis on the nothingness and the sinfulness of the human person is a fundamental characteristic of the French School of Spirituality . . . De La Salle does not accept this dark view of the creature before God, but he does insist on the need to recognize ‘the dependence we have on God and how undeserving we are of enjoying the benefits and happiness of his holy presence.’”

197. The sacrament of Baptism, according to Catholic doctrine, is “the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to the life of the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments” [*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1213].

198. The sacrament of Confirmation, according to Catholic doctrine, is when we are enriched in a special way with the life and strength of the Holy Spirit.

199. For a parallel passage for the use of the Brothers, see De La Salle's *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, page 38. "Come, then, Holy Spirit! Possess my heart and inspire all my actions to such a degree that it may be said that you rather than I cause them and that I may experience neither life, movement nor action save inasmuch as you give them to me."

200. *Religious Instructions*, pages 164-165.

201. The Catholic Church sometimes refers today to the Mass as the Eucharistic Liturgy and understands it as "the source and summit of the Christian life" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1324).

202. For a parallel passage for the use of the Brothers, see *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arnandez and Augustine Loes and edited by Augustine Loes and Francis Huether (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), page 142. "As Saint Paul says, if you do not have charity, whatever good you may do will profit you nothing. Experience brings home to us the truth of this saying. For indeed, a community without charity and union is hell: one grumbles, another slanders his Brother because of the ill-will he feels toward him, another gets angry because someone has irritated him, another complains to his superiors about what one of his Brothers has done to him. In short, all one hears are accusations, murmuring, and backbiting, which of course cause much irritation and disquiet. The only remedy for all these disorders is union and charity, because as Saint Paul says, charity is patient. This holy apostle even desires that the patience which is the result of charity should go so far as to endure all things" (#65.1).

203. *Religious Instructions*, page 81.

204. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Conduct of Christian Schools*, translated by F. de la Fontainerie and Richard Arnandez and edited by William Mann (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996), page 70.

205. *Conduct of Schools*, page 52.